

We count on God's mercy for our past mistakes;
...God's love for our present needs;
...God's sovereignty for our future.

St. Augustine

Cover the Coo

By

Alexus Rhone

Prologue

I arrive home by 4:45, and sit by the phone. Ring-ring. I snatch the receiver from the base before my brother Ned can get it. "Hello," I say hurriedly.

The voice on the other end announces, "THIS is a call coming from the Harris County Jail. Will you accept the charges?"

I take a deep breath and answer, "Yes."

Several clicks later there is still silence, and I'm afraid we were disconnected. "Hello?" I ask frantically. "Hello??"

"Hey, boo, I'm here," my boyfriend Ferris answers softly, one part of him trying to be romantic, the other part trying to keep his jail-mates outta our conversation. His too soft whispers fail to drown out the 100+ times someone yells from the background, "Hurry up and get off the phone, nucca! We gotta use it, too."

I don't care about them, just happy to hear his voice. And he's happy that the charges of robbing the Stop & Shop were dropped. Turns out the cameras behind the register were just ceiling decorations. "Gina, 'Vay, Tia...baby, e'erybody kept they mouth shut."

Tia - his ex-girlfriend - covered for him. Now he owes her. He's still gotta serve time on the lesser crime - being a convicted felon, running from the cops in a high-speed car chase. "How long this time?" I ask.

"Twelve months max. Least it's in the County...cuz' I don't want no part of that farm," he says, referring to Huntsville Prison. "I'ma get my mind right...finish my GED...get ready for Franklin Barber College." It's amazing that he can be so positive about his future while on lockdown. Good to hear he's got a plan...cuz' we've got a situation. The line starts clicking again, our one-minute warning. "Sweetie ..." I start, but he interrupts me. "I put you on my visitor's list. When you comin' to see me? It's past the time to see that pretty face." He lowers his voice to the point where I can barely hear him say, "And my sweet dreams need a B-12 shot." Right then I smile, remembering why I still love him. He can be so sweet and so smart, too smart to be locked up with dudes whose crowning accomplishment is the creation of the word "nucca" - a new way to say nigga. "Keci said she'd bring me when I..." The line goes dead, but I finish my sentence anyway. "...when I give her gas money." I stand in the kitchen a few moments longer holding the receiver. The one-minute warning was more like an 8-second wrap-up. He didn't get to say he loves me, and I didn't get to tell him my news. It would be better to talk to him in person anyway. But my worries are multiplying by the hour. When I got home from school today, the Southwestern Bell phone bill was tucked in the center crease of the Briargate Neighborhood Association newsletter. Man, as soon as my mama gets home and opens that bill, I'm in real trouble. She jam-packed my after-school schedule to keep me out of trouble. Apparently the fifteen minute-window between when I get home and when she pulls into the garage is all I needed. But there's also an envelope from the University of Texas addressed to "The parents of Trek Baden, Texas Scholar." My hopes were set on going to Prairie View A&M. "Not with my money," mama had said. Twenty-years of being surrounded by white boys with degrees from either Texas A&M or UT had jaded her perspective of black colleges.

Or maybe she wanted to join in on the Aggie/Longhorn rivalry at her job through me. All I know is there'd better be some good news in that UT envelope. I need a strategy to keep her foot out my butt. So I place it on top of the phone bill.

As soon as I hear the humming of our garage door rising, I dash to my bedroom. She's gon' flip when she sees all those collect calls. It's only been a month since she let me come back home. A few months ago, she put me out for sneaking out my window in the middle of the night to be with Ferris. Now he's in jail and I'm still getting in trouble 'cuz of him.

Minutes later, mama shoves open my door, holding the phone bill and what looks like a job application. She's got that same stale look on her face, the one she's had since I came back home, like she's being forced to love me. "I'm putting

a collect-call block on my line," she states matter-of-factly, and then tosses me the opened envelope. "UT has more scholarship monies available for you Texas Scholars. I need to see a rough draft of your personal statement by Friday evening. Thank you," she says, and leaves.

You Texas Scholars, she calls it. I'm a Texas Scholar being treated like a Texas inmate. She acts like it's no big deal, even going so far to tell me that I received this honor only because I did what I was supposed to do. So, because she didn't honor it, neither did I, even though it entitled me to a full-ride to any state university. God, this house is like a prison. Ferris and I are both serving time. A college admissions letter might be my Freedom Papers.

I've gotta get outta here.

My dad had just pulled back into town after spending the weekend at the Louisiana casinos. He drops in on me before heading home to his frumpy wife, Trudy. "Here ya go, babygirl...a little pocket change." He hands me \$40, which means he probably hit for \$1,000. Whenever he doesn't have money, he's MIA. I think it's my mama's fault; she regularly punks him. "Don't come empty-handed," she always says. And he doesn't. If his hands are empty, it's because his pockets are empty, too, and, therefore, he's ghost. But when his pockets are full you can't miss him, like pink lips on charcoal skin. Doesn't matter though. I still love him. Yeah, he's selfish, but I feel kinda sorry for him. With money, he might've been a halfway decent man. One time I heard comedian Chris Rock say that when his daughter was born, life became all about her. I was so jealous. Then I thought, nucca, you rich! Humph, money changes the game. With it, my daddy would have respect, too. Without it, he's one woman's boy-toy, and another woman's bitch. It's been interesting to watch the power-shift over the years. At first his fists in my mama's mouth meant he ruled. But when we left him and Uncle Sam swiped his paycheck for child-support, there was clearly a new sheriff in town. Not to be undone, my dad quit that job, and hadn't worked regularly since then. The only money we ever get from him is a little pocket-change. He used to be "Mr. Black Pride." But it's hard to be "Mr." when one woman gives you money, and "proud" when another woman takes care of your kids. So he's left only with "black," which, without money, ain't much more than the color of a woman's dress or a man's suit at a funeral. Tragic setup. I decided a long time ago I want a better life.

But the next day, I hand my girlfriend Keci \$10 gas money to take me to the Harris County Jail. I also promised her lunch at Luby's. Reluctantly, she agrees. "Seriously, Trek," she starts in, "Ferris is beneath you. Everybody knows that, including him and..."

I lift my hand to interrupt her lecture. "And I'll throw in dessert with lunch if you shut up now." She swallows the rest of her speech. I am in no mood to hear the truth, especially when I'm paying cash for a ride.

Keci drops me off in front of the building. "I'm not going near a jail for nobody."

"You weren't invited." I check my makeup in the visor mirror. "Wait in the car. I won't be more than an hour." I close the car door and pivot around expecting to see cylinder blocks and barbed wire, not an eight-storied, red-bricked building that looks like a college library. I grow more nervous with each step I take along the matching red-bricked pathway. If the inside of the county jail is as nice as the outside, no wonder Ferris keeps coming back.

They have strict rules about what female visitors may wear. I didn't want my desire to look desirable to keep me from seeing Ferris. So I dressed down, way down. In the mirrored tint on the glass door, I peep my reflection. "Top-Model butch," I murmur, before crossing into the lobby. I should've grabbed my compact out of my purse instead of just my ID.

The shellacked floors carry the faint scent of Pine-Sol. Everything is pristine and clean, like the staff has scrubbed every inch of this building hoping I'll forget I'm at the jailhouse. OMG - I'm at the jailhouse to visit the man I love! How sad is that? Every type of woman fills the waiting area, seated in chairs bolted along the wall - mothers, wives, girlfriends, daughters, aunts, sisters, cousins. You can tell the girlfriends from the others by the makeup spackled on their faces. They look like seductive rodeo clowns. I'm different from all of them. Yet I'm still here. My man eats, sleeps, and shits right next to theirs. Keci's words ring in my ears. "Ferris is beneath you...you're too good for him..." "Yes?" the woman behind the tall, elevated, mahogany counter asks without looking at me. "Who you here to see?" I give her Ferris' full name. She pecks at her computer and frowns. She then pulls the clipboard from the counter's edge, flipping pages, tracing her finger down the chart. She shakes her head. "He's only allowed one visitor a day."

Ugh! I should've checked with his mom before driving all the way downtown. But I didn't figure she'd visit him. I didn't think she ever left her porch in South Union.

"Thank you," I tell the clerk. As I shove my ID into my back pocket, a young woman walks by with wild, familiar, Chaka Khan-like hair.

It's Tia, wearing blue jeans, not her usual coochie-cutting shorts.

She nudges her friend and snickers when she looks back at me. I can't believe I'm bankrupting my household accepting Ferris' collect calls, while Tia is seeing him face to face!

I follow them from a distance outside the door; close enough to hear her comments. "My baby is looking too good...I don't want him to cut his hair though...He better keep doing them push-ups...they make him strong enough to..." she whispers in her friend's ear, before pulling away to fan her smiling face.

Two days and \$20 later, Keci gives me another ride to the County. One look at Ferris and I had to admit Tia was right. Lockdown does a body good! But I didn't come here to dote on his pecs.

Ferris' eyes are closed; he massages his forehead with one hand and holds the phone with the other. "Ba-by, I can't control Tia from inside this jail cell." I know he's frustrated. He wants to walk to the store for a pack of smokes, but can't; and take me to the movies and hold my hand, but can't; and snack on a three-piece chicken and biscuit meal from Popeye's...but can't. I try to understand him, to give him some peace in the war. More than anything I try to make sense of why Tia sticks so close to him.

But I can't.

"Trek, I know you could never understand what Tia did for us at the Stop & Shop." Now he is looking me in the eyes, firm but compassionate.

"For us?"

"Yes...us!" He leans in closer. His forehead is smashed against the glass that separates us. Whispering, he says, "Don't forget, you were with us in the store that day. If Tia really wanted to be a bitch, she'da dropped your name faster than panties on a stripper at Harlem Knights." I thought back to that day, his last day of freedom. It started off crazy and ended crazier. I was upset that he was going to the store with Tia, her girlfriend and his homeboy Suavay, and trying to make me stay at his house. I was tired of Tia being around him without me, so I forced him to take me, too. Tia and her girlfriend started a fight in the store. They were shoving each other back and forth into the shelves, knocking over displays. The clerk jumped from behind the counter. Ferris pecked feverishly at the cash register until the drawer popped open. "Jackpot," he mumbled, and kissed my cheek. We drove around the corner to Yellowstone Park where he and Suavay split more than \$600. Tia's cut was \$20. He lied to her, saying there was no money in the register. That idiot believed him.

"Trek." Ferris's voice brings me back. "Everybody went to jail...except you. That's how much I love you. I made sure your name never came up." He looks around nervously; suddenly aware he'd just confessed to a crime with a sheriff seated a stone's throw away from him. "Don't matter how Tia feels about me, you gon' have to ignore her silly ass games and be just a little grateful."

"Grateful?"

"Yes, grateful, princess." His voice softens. "Don't you see this is a chance for us to start new? I'm working on my GED. When this nightmare wraps, it's gon' usher me right into my dreams of finishing Franklin Barber College and getting crazy paid working with my man Kite." He places the palm of his hand up to the glass, waiting for me to place my hand on top of his, a sign of solidarity.

But I hesitate.

"Look, baby-girl, Tia didn't snitch on us. So, I'm only doing time for evading arrest. And you're back home and in school, preparing for college... with a clean record."

I chuckle at the irony of it all. Shakespeare couldn't have written this any better.

"I love you, Trek. No woman can ever make me feel like you do." He pauses for a couple of seconds, before adding, "but if Tia wants to come visit me, that's a itty-bitty price to pay. We owe her, Trek. You don't have to like her. Just understand she is my friend."

I'm furious right now. But my skin is too dark to turn red. Instead, it's tingling like a million tiny needles are randomly pricking me. "Your friend?"

Not backing down or trying to smooth things over, "Yes," he says, "...my friend." He's eerily honest, and it's breaking my heart. But I don't wanna cry. I wanna jump through the phone and scratch his freaking eyes out. I wanna put my fist through the window, toss a chair across the room and run screaming down the hall. But every one of those actions would guarantee I'd be locked up, too. So, I play it cool by simply placing the receiver back on the wall. Using my right calf muscle, I shove my chair backwards; it slides from underneath me when I stand. I kiss my right hand

"deuce," and afterwards hold it up to the glass, turning away from Ferris' panicked facial expression and bulging eyes floating around in watery sockets.

Just like Christ when He was dying on the cross, I take one final breath in my relationship with Ferris and declare, "It is finished."

A trail of teardrops marks my footsteps along the floor of the Harris County Jail. I allow myself this rare display of emotions in front of strangers. My face is scrunched by pain. "Tia's my friend...we owe Tia...be grateful to Tia..." Ferris' words ring in my ears, breaking me down me like an iron bat that whacks me in the back of my head, and sends me crashing to my knees. Truth is, I'm no match for Tia's open arms (and probably open legs and wallet, too). I don't love like that. My strength lies in my ability to walk off into the sunset. I take a seat in the lobby, trying to pull it all together, to get all the crying out of my system in order to "soldier up" before getting back into Keci's car. It feels like my whole world has been destroyed. Suddenly I look up. A stray spark of hope re-ignites in my heart. I lift my chest and straighten my back, thinking about Jesus' death. But He didn't stay dead.

"Resurrection," I mumble. Or maybe I'm praying. Whatever's going on, I have finally reached the point where my common sense connects with my courage. Between Ferris' verbal abuse, his grabbing my arms and shoving me, not to mention all the drama with Tia, I'd finally had enough of him. I am a Texas Scholar. My new life in college is just around the bend. So, there is no more fear, no more sadness, only basic arithmetic - addition and subtraction. Add new life plus new love. Subtract one felon...and every thing connected to him.

I still love Ferris. But I'm moving on.

Chapter 1

MID-MAY

I graduate high school in two weeks. To commemorate the occasion, the State of Texas purchased a "Congratulations, Texas Scholars" ad in the Houston Chronicle and in other newspapers around the state. It's one of my proudest moments - to see my name in print (right next to my cute graduation picture, thank you!) - announcing to the world I will attend the University of Texas at Austin in the fall. For some of my peeps, going to UT is not a big deal, especially when you got my girl Candace heading to Howard in D.C., my boy Stilts rolling to Hot-lanta - officially a Morehouse man - and my boy Jackson, who started packing for Fisk soon as he got his acceptance letter four months ago. Howard, Morehouse, Fisk - all of 'em got a strong legacy and a proud history. "What UT got for you, Trek?" Stilts jabbed. "Sniper in the tower? Five-year-playing-no-degree-earning football players?" I shut him down with, "A free education." BAM!

I read the profiles and scope pics of the other black student Texas Scholars, looking to see who'll be at UT with me. Woof! Talk about a kennel club, I mean the dogs you tie to a tree in the backyard and leave 'em there - through rain, sleet and snow. Maybe you remember to pull them inside before a hurricane hits...maybe. Hideous! This one girl looks like she was startled by the flash. I'm deep in thought about why she didn't make them retake her photo when suddenly my phone rings once, then stops. Moments later it rings again.

Uh-oh.

Mama is seated at the kitchen table scribbling on her yellow notepad, stressing over my graduation party plans. She leans left in her chair to grab the phone without having to get up from her seat. But she misses and the phone crashes to the floor. "Shit!" she yells, but follows it up quickly with, "O Lord, please forgive me." She pushes away from the table, and stoops down to pick up the phone. "Hello?...Hel-lo?" After a brief pause, she cocks her neck, pulling the phone away from her ear. She looks at me as she yells back into the phone, "FUCK NO!"

What the...? My heart rapidly thumps the beat of that old, forbidden tune. Behold the church-lady: Sunday School teaching, wide-brim hat-wearing, scripture quoting, "Jesus is Lord"/"Have a blessed day" spouting, running around the sanctuary in exuberant praise, able to leap a pew in a single bound...on Sunday morning, that is.

But this is Saturday night, and she's dropping F-bombs. I know it's him. He's the only person who can drive my mama to cuss and not ask for Jesus' forgiveness. She'll call Jesus later. Right now, Southwestern Bell is her target and they better have a good excuse for why her phone line is not still blocked.

Peace reigned for about a week. I'd heard that a dude can sniff out "an invasion of his territory." Yet that same cat, on the other hand, can't read his woman's feelings and is clueless about, for example, why she cries all the time. But let somebody else creep into the space he left empty, and watch him claw, beg, steal, do whatever it takes to get back in. So, what happened next had to happen.

But why on the night of my senior prom?

My date Randy stands posed behind me waiting for mama to finish dusting bronzer on my chin and cheeks before she takes our picture.

Rrrring. Then it stops. Seconds later, rrrring...rrring...rrring. Mama is slightly panicked because she's holding makeup in one hand and a makeup brush in the other. I try to help her. Before I can step out of Randy's embrace, she yells, "No! I'll get it." Rrrring...rrring. I hear the makeup fall to the counter. "Hello?...Hel-lo?" There's a brief pause followed by her foot thumping against the vinyl tile in the kitchen. I knew then that the 'sh' was about to meet the 'it'. "Yes, I'll accept," she answers tersely. "Hello, Ferris...No, this is not Trekela. This is her mother, the one who pays the phone bill." Mama has lost it - it being her calm, cool, rational thinking, godly character. She must have forgotten the Sunday School lesson she taught last week on being aware of the devil at all times trying to destroy your peace, because she

continued with, "Listen to me, you dick-in-the-booty piece of shit..."

Did my mama just say "dick in the booty" in front of us? My date Randy and I look at each other with deer-in-the-headlights shock. I'm horrified that this scene is playing out in front of company. "I don't know why you keep calling here, but there's no one in this house interested in speaking with you, got it?" Randy and I peer around the bookshelf to watch this train wreck. When mama turns around and catches us, we jump back in place and instantly her tone changes. She lowers her voice. "Now, I'm asking you nicely to not call here again. You obviously are not good with clues. So I'm telling you straight out do not call here again. Got it? Thanks." Click.

"Uh, mama, let's go outside have you seen Randy's car A convertible CLK." I skip the punctuation in my sentences and let them crash into each other. No time for proper grammar. We've gotta get out of this house...now! "Let's take some deep breaths first and then a few pictures by the Benz," I suggest.

Randy opens our front door. When mama steps on to the porch her jaw drops. "Is that your car?" she asks.

"No, ma'am. It's my mom's birthday gift from my dad." She walks around the car, nodding and smiling curtsy. I can't read her expressions, but they sure as hell ain't stale no more. I wonder what she's thinking. Does she wish she had a man to buy expensive cars for her birthday? Or does she just wish she had a man? Not that a woman needs a man to be happy. But...damn, it helps. Well, not all the time. Sometimes I eavesdrop on her and her girlfriends. They never sit around like the tricks in the movies, waiting on Prince Charming. Mortgages, kids, and the occasional glass of wine - that's their life. They ain't got no room for bull-shigidy.

To lighten the mood, I clasp Randy around the waist making goofy faces. "Here ya go, mama." Randy laughs then joins in. Mama's smile widens and she snaps our picture. Yep, this is going to be a good night. And every time I think about her calling Ferris a "dick-in-the-booty piece of shit," I burst out laughing, mostly because mama is so prim and proper, so Christian-ish. That comment was raw as hell! I've never heard that type of language come outta her mouth...ever.

But he's picked up a scent; so the phone rings again and my dad pulls up to the driveway. Both events dog mama's mood. She rushes into the house to answer the phone while my dad takes shots of Randy and me with his Kodak disposable camera. I introduce them after we'd posed for a dozen shots. They shake hands.

"That's enough pictures." Mama reappears in the doorway and shoos my dad off. "They got dinner reservations."

"Babygirl, let me holla' at you right quick," he says, ignoring her. He intentionally walks to the other side of his car so that no one can see what he's about to do. He looks behind him while shoving a \$50 bill in my hand. "Here's a little pocket change. Put that in your purse," he says. "You ain't at nobody's disposal tonight, hear me? You can keep that nucca on the line, or toss his ass. Your call."

I grab him around the neck and kiss his cheek. Playfully I whisper, "Tell the truth. You mad cuz his car look better than yours, huh?"

My dad turns up his nose. "That ain't his car; that's his mama car. Shit, my mama got a nice car, too." I lift my dress and high-step to the passenger's side of Randy's mama's car. He opens my door. Just before climbing in, I hear the phone ring again and shake my head.

Chapter 2

AUGUST 27

I spent the entire summer prepping for my first year of college. It came and went faster than an ice cube melting on a mid-July sidewalk. Now I'm finally on the way to the University of Texas.

Driving down 290-West heading to Austin, my thoughts drag race through my head, and I can't sort them. In the backseat of my Auntie's Lincoln Town Car, my personal space is crowded by all the items on my freshman checklist. I rotate my wrists, massaging the numbness from my right arm. It's been smashed against my trunk for the past 100

miles. I adjust my position to lean left for a while.

Mama catches me shifting again. She's watching me too closely. For the past two hours I think she's looked back at me 30 times, every glance full of pride, and giddy like she's the one going off to school. Misreading my actions, she says, "Don't be afraid, Tre." In keeping with her new or re-newed sense of spirituality, everything out of her mouth is inspirational. "God hasn't given you the spirit of fear." It just springs up out of nowhere. Maybe she sees me in the future talking to large audiences and wants me share stories about her. "Like mama always said, 'If you dream it, you can achieve it.'"

I'm not afraid. I'm cramped, cocooned by a gold-trimmed, royal blue metal trunk on one side, and a duffle bag on the other. Still, I smile at her and nod.

We pull into a gas station 25 miles east of Austin. To my left is a black woman with no physical flavor to highlight, sporting a dark blue blazer over a pair of khakis. Her unpainted fingernails curl around the gas nozzle like a bear claw, pumping octane into her Lexus Coupe. Her hair is pulled back into a pigtail held by a rubber band - not a black ponytail holder or even a scrunchy - but a rubber band. You can't get more un-interested in fashion than to jack your company's office supplies cabinet for hair accessories.

Even with the obvious fashion faux pas I still look at her and speak one word. "Paid."

I watch as she places the nozzle back in the pump, and walks around to the passenger's side, tussling through her Burberry overnight bag then tossing it behind the driver's seat. I guess that's what the backseat of a Lexus Coupe is meant for - designer luggage. Lord knows a baby-seat won't fit. Guess that means she ain't got a baby. How does she make her money, I wonder. What did she give up to roll out in a Lexus Coupe? WHO did she give up?

As she pulls out of the station, my mind clears. That's the life I want - luxury cars and designer luggage. Benzes, Beamers and Burberry, baby. Lots of cute girls who want that life go digging for somebody else's gold. Not me.

I want my own.

Chapter 3

We pull into the loading area in front of Jester West dormitory, parking at an angle. Auntie's Lincoln sticks out like a too-big booty in the only available parking space between a Jag and a Range Rover. I feel country as hell stepping out of the backseat carrying my brand new panties, bras and sleeping tees in a duffle bag that had been stashed in the back of mama's closet. She'd already bought me a new trunk. When all my clothes didn't fit, she said we'd have to "use what we got." Most of the other students tote matching luggage, their suitcases and bags branded with a "G" for Gucci, or "F" for Fendi. Mine says "Standard Oil Company Fitness Center." But, hey, we're all here together, grasping for the same brass ring. I just don't like looking country.

We scurry past the countless rows of tables lined side-by-side in front of Jester promoting everything from campus parties to campus rallies, with VISA and MasterCard reps dispersed in between them offering "financial aid." Inside the dorm lobby I check in at the registration table. A Barbie-doll in Longhorn-sweats ticks my name off the list and hands me my room assignment.

I mistakenly pick-up my bag by a loop stitched at the corner. The thread is loose, and my grip is weak. But I can't stop walking. I've gotta get out of sight. If all the world's a stage, right now I'd prefer to be behind the curtains. Walking awkwardly towards the elevator, holding on to the stuffed duffle and trying not to look at anyone, I hear a baritone voice. I smile.

Chocolate is near.

Can't be a white boy. In fact, I've never heard a white boy with a deep voice. Nah. God saved that treasure for the brothas - the sweet, tall, chocolate Hershey Bar that is the black man. I glance in the general direction of the voice. Suddenly the loop breaks on my duffle bag. Upon hitting the ground, the zipper busts loose and all my panties and bras spill out everywhere!

The curtains have lifted and I'm now front row center, all eyes on me. The sultry-voiced one, who had been talking to a couple of white girls before then, breaks away from the pack, and joins me on stage. I want to look up so badly. But I can't. I got pink, white and purple drawers scattered all over the floor. I wish this were more like a BET love story. Two beautiful black people trapped in a sea of white folks spot each other from across the room, fall in love and live happily ever after. Instead, I lift my head to see his eyes shut tightly, squatting next to me holding open my busted bag.

"See, mom," he says to mama, "I'm not looking."

Everyone dies laughing. At first I just wanted to die. Then I thought, Hey, it's just drawers. Everybody's got 'em.

I race around the lobby, chasing down my panties. But it was one pair in particular I didn't want anyone to see, especially mama. They were red-laced. I bought 'em after reading that every woman should own a pair (the article also said every woman should know how to sew and grow food - I'll hit those later). They suggested buying them from Victoria Secrets, but the ones at Wal-Mart looked the same, plus they were cheaper.

I'd collected all my drawers, except for the forbidden pair. To my horror, I spot them resting near dude's left foot. He opens his eyes as I'm balling them tightly in my fist to stuff underneath the others.

"Victoria can't keep a Secret to save her life," he mumbles, keeping his eyes to the ground, his mouth barely moving.

"Neither can Sam Walton," I say. He looks up at me smiling, completely caught off guard by my reference to Wal-Mart's founder.

Ah-ight, Sexy Caramel, you know a lil' sump-in sump-in, and I know a lil' sump-in sump-in. Now what?

He hands me the duffle and takes the trunk from mama and Auntie. He escorts us all the way up to the 13th floor. The elevator creaks louder and shakes harder the closer we get. Maybe #13 really is unlucky. Maybe this is a sign of what's coming. Auntie and I nervously latch on to the rail, but mama chats up Sexy Caramel, getting all his business - he's a Mechanical Engineering third-year student from Georgetown, Texas. His hobbies are flag-football and cycling, and he's on academic scholarship. "Texas Scholar," he says proudly.

"So is Trekela," mom volunteers.

His eyebrow lifts. "Well then I guess I'll see you later on at the reception. It's at the Texas Exes Alumni Center."

"Maybe," I answer coyly. Truth is I've been plotting how to get out of it since receiving the invitation. "I need to unpack and get settled in."

"Definitely!" mama corrects me. "We'll be there."

The elevator doors open onto a lobby with floor to ceiling mirrored walls, forcing you to look at yourself even if you don't want to. Like me right now with my hair sticking up in the back. Two halls run perpendicular to the elevator lobby - one hall with rooms for the boys and the other for the girls. We hook a left turn down the girl's hall, passing the burnt orange sofa-lounge where the two halls intersect. Guess it's where we're supposed to entertain our guests.

"I'm so glad to see beautiful, smart black American women attending college," he says. He places the trunk next to my door, lightly touching the room number plate nailed to the trim. "Welcome to UT, Trekela."

"Trek," I insist.

Mama thanks him for helping us.

"No problem. Besides, my mom would knock me upside my head if I didn't help a beautiful black sister get moved into her new home. By the way, I'm Cameron." He extends his hand, giving each of us that firm business handshake I learned in my professional etiquette class at Willowridge.

No secret that mama was swept up by his charm. But I didn't like how comfortable he looked with all those white girls in the lobby. And Auntie hated the whole "black American" thing. "Hell, we ain't black. We Afro-Americans."

And that's why I don't wanna attend the reception tonight.

Even though I have a key to the room, I instinctively knock on my dorm door. No one answers.

"Wait a sec." Mom pulls out her camera. "Smile." I lift my eyebrows and tilt my head. "Can I get a real smile, please?" she asks.

I oblige her. She snaps a few shots with Auntie posing behind me. "Can I turn the key now?" I ask.

"I don't know. Can you?" she says.

"Mama, please."

"You're in college now. Remember 'as a man speaketh, so is he'."

"'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.' Proverbs 23:7. But James Allen paraphrased and popularized it back in 1902 when he said 'A man is literally what he thinks,'" I say correcting her.

Auntie turns to mama, and, with a crooked smile, says, "You right. She in college now."

I continue standing at the door waiting to see if she had any other criticism. "You may turn the key," she says.

Countdown to freedom begins...3...2...1...now! I twist the knob, gently pushing open the metal door. We step in one by one and immediately cover our noses.

"Somebody step in something?" We each lift our feet to check.

Auntie presses both hands over her nose and mouth, muffling her words. "Smell like the toilet backed-up."

I walk to the bathroom. Mama sifts through the Wal-Mart bag.

"Ugh!" I yell, gagging before flushing the commode.

"Leave the room door open," mama says, spraying the can of Lysol over and around her head in a circle.

The air finally clears and we unpack. My roommate has already moved in. Her side is decorated with symbols that remind me of a 1960's hippie van - painted daisies on a corkboard, a Yin/Yang sign that looks like black and white cashew nuts connected at the belly. There's a pencil sketch of two-fingers chucking the deuce, and something written in Chinese lettering. Also, plastered on the window, is a wall calendar. "Lake Travis!!!" is marked on Labor Day. I smile at the prospect of spending a holiday lying out on the lake. Oooh - or maybe cruising it! White folks know how to live. I mean, I think she's white. When have you heard of black people going to the lake for a holiday? Unh-unh. We go to the park! I was sure that she was white until I spot her one and only picture - of Queen Latifah - autographed and in a gold-plated frame. Who does that? Plus, there are smudges all over the glass. I hope she's cool people. I can usually get a good feel for folks just by looking at 'em. But there are no photos of herself or her family. Nada. Only the Queen.

"Hi ya'll!" a voice calls out from the door. "Welcome to Jestur Weyest. I'm Erin, your R.A." The petite brunette with the dimpled-smile clutches my hand like a vice grip and I wince slightly. She didn't learn that handshake in a class like me. This heifah wrestled calves growing up. She hands me a form with the dorm rules. "Read this, sign it and ree-turn it soon as possibill, 'kay?" Without waiting for my reply, she exits.

"kay," I mock her. Auntie chuckles, leaning back on my bed.

"Be nice." Mama bends down to collect the empty plastic wrappings that used to hold my blanket and sheets. She checks her watch. "We gotta wash up and change clothes for the reception."

"I don't feel like going," Auntie says. Not surprised. I don't know what white people did to her when she was growing up in Matagorda County, but whatever happened then still affects her today. She's the only black person I know who still calls them "crackers." "I'm tired. Plus, we driving back tonight. I'ma take a nap while you and Tre go." We know better than to force her to do anything she doesn't want to do; she can act real ig'nant.

"Mama, I don't feel like going either."

Without looking up, "You're going," she says.

We were among the first to arrive. The Alumni Center is Texas-decadent, with big leather sofas and polished hardwood wall paneling. Thank God there are no guns or moose-heads hanging 'round as art. Only longhorns, which is fitting, I guess. The other Texas Scholars trickle in, sandwiched between a mommy and a daddy. Great. First, it was the matching luggage. Now it's the matching parents, who probably met at UT 25-years ago, and write big fat checks every year. That insecure "I-don't-belong-here" wind blows hot air directly into my face again, and I'm ready to run for the 'hood. Then mama starts working the room. She is fierce! I stop checking my watch and start taking notes on how she makes small talk with total strangers. The most I offer is a polite hello with a firm handshake, always the firm handshake. That's it. Not her. Her tool-box is stocked to the brim. In addition to firm handshakes, she makes direct eye-contact when talking; she laughs on cue; she asks open-ended questions on subjects related to the person's profession or hobby; and she makes sure to stand next to and look mostly at the wife when engaging a couple. The executive suite at the Standard Oil Company has polished her etiquette skills quite nicely. I beam with pride then suddenly contract a case of the giggles. "Dick-in-the-booty," I whisper. While she talks to an English professor, I fade into the background, scanning the crowd for Cameron, but don't see him.

One hour later, we're walking back to Jester, and mama is still chatty. Across the street I spot Cameron walking side-by-side with a white girl. They're not touching or anything. But damn. I grab mama's arm and point in the opposite direction to a dorm window with Longhorn curtains. "Ooh, I want some of those."

Back in the room, mama and Auntie are preparing to leave. It's six o'clock, and the sun is still up. Auntie is standing in the hallway with the car keys in her hand, anxious to get back on the road before it gets dark. Mama keeps finding excuses to put off walking towards the open door. She must want to say something; it's not like her to dawdle. She finally comes toe-to-toe with me, and stands there holding my hands, not saying anything.

OK...uh...well...any day now...

You know this whole 'heart-to-heart mother-daughter moment' thingy really rattles me. For most of my life important events have been met mostly with half-ass one-liners.

My first menstrual period: "Don't be letting no lil' boys play in your coo."

My first boyfriend: "You too young to have a boyfriend."

My first date...well, that one was different. She loved Jon-Jon. Of course that's 'cuz she didn't know all he wanted to do was be my boyfriend so he could play in my coo.

She starts out expressing to me how she always knew this day would come and how she thanks God for blessing her through me. She then goes on about the power of positive thinking. "Remember, belief brings success." And God's favor, she says, is mine. Clutching my chin with her right hand, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life," she says. Her final instructions are for me to use the bible to help myself when I get in a tough spot. You'd swear she was an evangelist - as long as you never call her collect from the Harris County Jail. It always strikes me as awkward when people pull God down from heaven whenever they want to be deep. I like her better when she just talks straight. It's a more honest place, a place I know, a place I trust.

My crazy auntie cuts to the chase with, "In other words, 'Keep hope alive.'"

Before they leave, Auntie tells me to "learn what they know so you can get what they got." Then she points to the corner of my desk towards a plastic grocery sack tied in a knot. "That's \$50 in quarters. Use them if you need them, hear me?" She kisses my cheek then gives me a message for my roommate. "Tell that ho to close the door when she shits. I can't stand tail-stank."

Mama hands me her ATM card with the strict warning to "use only for emergencies." Afterwards they grab me in a bear hug, lavishing me with kisses and kudos. Then they're gone.

Most of the food served at the reception had a mayonnaise-base. I hate mayonnaise! I reach in the sack for a couple of quarters to go get chips from the downstairs vending machine. I pull out three quarters...and two condoms. Condoms? I look in the bag and there they are, reaching up like weevils in a sugar bowl.

My new life begins.

Chapter 4

"Wanna join a sorority?"

"We need your help to save the environment!"

"Can you spare two hours a week to tutor kids in East Austin?"

"Join us for Spring Break. We're building schools in Mexico!"

Whew! Clearly you can't be your own person at UT. There's a fierce requirement to fit-in somewhere...anywhere. Bombarded by all my passionate, fellow Longhorns, everyone insisting their cause is the most important, I pick up fliers from all the tables and keep it moving. It's the end of the day, so most of them are packing up. But the VISA credit card rep hands me a pen first, then an application. "I can qualify you on the spot for money to help with your school expenses," he promises.

Money?

Ten minutes later he says, "Congratulations, Ms. Baden! You're approved - \$500 limit."

Skipping past the History and Cycling Club tables, I spend a couple of minutes filling out a MasterCard app just to see what happens. Ten minutes later, "Congratulations, Ms. Baden!" Whoa. In less than 30 minutes I got an extra

\$1,000!

The last table I visit is for an on-campus student bible study. I figure mostly black students attend it since a black girl mans the table. She's powdering her nose when I walk up. "Oops," she says. "Didn't see you there." I have this really bad habit of nicknaming people based on my first impression. Cameron, with caramel-brown skin and a deep, sexy voice, is Sexy Caramel. This sistah has perfectly formed reddish-brown spiral curls crawling down her back, and hell-fire red lipstick. And what kind of woman in the middle of the day attaches eyelashes so thick that they look like mini-blinds opening and closing every time she blinks? Crazy high-maintenance. The Princess slides her compact into the side-pocket of her purse. When I reach for a flier, she says, "Love those nails." Her eyes then travel up and down my body, peeking around the table to size up my shoes. Upon winning her approval, she stands to her feet and invites me to the bible-study featuring Rev. Rick. "He is a great teacher...and not bad to look at either," she says then sista-snaps two times. "You're a freshman?"

"Yes."

"From Houston or Dallas?"

"Houston," I answer quizzically.

"I knew it. I'm from Dallas. Between the two, we got the market cornered on swag, o-kay?" She sista-snaps again.

Swag, huh? "Well, alright," I mumble, walking off and sista-snapping. A couple of girls in Tri-Delta t-shirts stare at me from under a tree. I stare back at them thinking, You not used to seeing black people? They look the other way and I smile. That's right - I'm here to get it done. One block later it hits me they may have been watching and wondering why was I walking around snapping my fingers in the air.

White cotton-ball clouds stick like Velcro to the powder-blue skies. In this strange place, in this new city, I'm surrounded by beauty. I head north on Speedway to explore the campus. Magnificent limestone buildings and larger-than-life statues of great historical figures spark my imagination. Am I marking the same steps as these heroes of history? Did destiny drive them forward? Or were they scared stiff like me? Not sure why, but I have this bizarre desire to read and to learn everything written on the landmark posts. I dunno. Might help me to feel like I have more control, like it's possible for me to tame this mammoth institution, 'cuz right now I feel small, unprotected. Imagine a rabbit about to hop through the dense forest with predators hidden by the darkness. That's how I feel. Like an innocent, cute lil' thing just trying to get to the other side and feast on the buffet of carrots. What I don't know weakens me. Knowledge is power, right? That's why I wanna know everything, as much as I can. But no one else is reading the posts. So, like them, I skim the high points and keep it moving.

I finally reach a wide-open grassy area and veer to the right. The numerous trees lining the sides of the open space creates an elegant frame around the vast parcel. In the center of this portrait, one group tosses a football back and forth, while several others sit in lopsided circles. I always thought college was where you met your lifetime friends and lifetime mate. But I don't see a friend or a husband in either of these groups. In fact, one of the circles looks suspiciously "alternative" with bald-headed white girls and two sistas rocking low-cut fades.

I clearly am outside of this frame. As I pray, "God, is there a place for me here," I miss the approaching squirrel, not seeing it until it's bushy tail waves close by my left foot. "AYE!" I scream and jump on a bench. The circles fall back laughing. Crotched down and clinging to the bench, I decide I like Houston squirrels better - they're scared of people. I'm used to them running away, not holding me hostage. The squirrel eventually races up a neighboring tree and I make my getaway.

About 100 yards up I spot a group of brothas gathered around a light post next to the side door of Jester West.

Will they say hello, or say something cross? You never can tell with brothas. Sometimes they can be real gentlemen. Other times they can be real special. This is my first day of college; I hope I don't have to clown. I've always had great male friends though, even as a young girl. From Milton in South Park to Jon-Jon in Mo. City, I know firsthand the benefits of just being cool with dudes. No pressure to doll-up or dumb-down, I know what it's like to just be. But the closer I get to this group, the stranger I feel. I'm not getting friendly vibes. Four of them are dressed alike in purple and white Gamma Epsilon Omega shirts. The fifth guy, towering over the others like a tree, is the odd man out wearing a Longhorn jersey. The smallest one - I'm talking only inches from the ground - has his back turned to me. The wind carries part of his conversation.

"...Coming at cha' like raw oysters - I'ma either get some pussy or a pearl."

Ooooh...I seriously doubt if he'd get either, standing there yapping like a Chihuahua. The tall guy in the jersey, or Tree as I nicknamed him, signals Chihuahua - "Huahua" for short - and he turns around. All at once their laughter dies. I cross in front trying to not look anyone in the face. Even when I'm a stone's throw past them they're still silent. I look back and - just like I feared - they were all watching me. Huahua winks and blows me a kiss. All the GEOs laugh, but Tree rolls his eyes, angrily fixing them on Huahua, who throws his hands up. "I'm just messing with her. She sexy as

hell." Tree is not amused.

And neither am I. Hate to do this, but this fool is gon make me cuss him out and talk about his mama.

When I double back towards the group, all their jaws drop. Easy to be cocky when you think you're in control. But they don't know what I'm about to do. I sense their uneasiness and love E-V-E-R-Y minute of it!

Huahua tries to jump bad. "Whazzup, Sexy?" he asks, standing there looking like he eats a slab of beef for dessert and washes it down with a pitcher of giblet gravy.

Lifting my hand above my head then dropping it to my waist, I say, "Not you." A brief chuckle by one of the guys draws an angry glance from Huahua. I walk up next to Tree, standing to the right of him so that I can see the expressions of the others. "Here's the scenario," I state, very grand, very dramatic. "A young sista walks onto a mostly white college campus. She wants three things - a degree, a good friend and a great man." I raise one finger for each desirable. Tilting my head up, I ask, "What does she have to do to get it?"

The group focuses on Tree. He smiles, and says, "Go to class, sift through the bullshit. Join a club, and sift through the bullshit. Third, well...just sift through the bullshit."

"It's that easy?" I ask.

"Occam's Razor," he answers. "The simplest solution is the best." He extends his hand to me. "Welcome to UT, lil' sista." When I grab it, he pulls my hand to his lips and kisses it. I throw a glance at Huahua who's squinting at something down the street towards the stadium. I then exit the stage.

At ease, bitches.

I enter Jester West through the side door, passing a group of empty offices with Multicultural Department painted on the windows. "What do they do?" I wonder aloud. As I continue through the maze of this isolated corner of Jester, I bump into Cameron. He's still wearing the navy blue suit he wore to the reception earlier. He shakes his head disapprovingly. "No roaming the campus without an official Longhorn guide."

I finally get a close up look at him. Shame - I don't see a future in Hollywood...well...on-screen anyway. He's about 6'1", medium build, with nothing physically spectacular, except for the thick eyebrows crowning his light-brown eyes; they create intensity with a mere 1/2 second glance in your general direction. They got me roped, tied and twisted!

I try to free myself from the magnetic grip of his gaze, not wanting to get caught slipping my first day in college with the first dude I meet. I step back and ask, "Who are you?" But I say it with more sista-girl attitude than intended. I actually tried issuing my sista-girl persona a pink slip before arriving to college, in favor of a more collegiate-type. Even thought about buying eyeglasses. But sista-girl refused to leave the building. So we agreed she'd sit quietly in the corner and would only come out when I needed to fight.

"I'm Cameron, your marquee player," he says.

"My marquee player? Didn't know I had a vacancy on my team."

"A team, huh? I predict you'll make one or two cuts soon, real soon."

I smirk at his psychic attempts. As for team cuts, there's only Ferris. He's out of my head. Maybe God sent Cameron to help work him out of my heart.

"Got plans tonight?" he asks.

"Yes. I have a team meeting this evening," I tease, jacking his metaphor. "Some of my players are not performing. Fumbling all over the court."

He laughs. "You mean the field...fumbling all over the field." And then his smile broadens. It's the same smile Ferris gave me years earlier the moment he realized I was different, special.

Gotcha, Cameron.

"Later on tonight," he continues, "you should swing through the Texas Union. Big party." He leans in closer, even though it's just the two of us. "Besides, I'd love to see what you wear over your red panties."

I playfully cover the side of my face. "Gotta go, Cameron." I rush past him.

When I return to my room, my roommate is there finally. "Hi, roomie. I'm Ari." She extends her hand like we're in an interview. I take a firm grasp of her hand and look her in the eyes. She is gorgeous. Vanessa Williams classic beauty queen features with old-school Angela Davis bold style. She's draped in Bohemian-chic attire that swallows her petite frame.

Extending my hand, I'm slightly embarrassed by my child-like glee. No doubting my social life will be crazy off the charts. In Texas, all the light-skinned, cat-eyed pretty girls get VIP treatment on the party set, not that I'll do all that much partying. But it's nice to know that if she and I become good friends, when I do party it'll be done at a whole other level.

Wanting to make a good first impression, I try on my collegiate-girl persona. "Good afternoon, I'm Trek. It's a

pleasure to meet you."

She lets go of my hand and drops to her bed laughing. I no longer feel we're young college-aged women preparing for our futures. I now feel like we're little girls on the playground and I'm about to whoop her ass for making fun of me. "I'm sorry," she finally says. Through the remaining giggles, she adds, "Relax, roomie."

"No problem," I say. I go to my side of the room, putting away clothes, deducting cool points from Ari.

"Really, Trek, I'm sorry for laughing." She combs her fingers through her blond, curly tresses. "I sense you're offended."

"No, I'm not."

"Uh, trust me, Trek. You're offended. I know women."

"Of course you know women. You are one."

She takes a swig of her Coke. "I know women...Trek."

I know women? I know women? AYE! Ari knows women! I went from 10 to 60, tearing through my drawers looking for oversized sweat pants and a ratty t-shirt. I admit - I don't know jack about lesbians. But I do know I got beautiful flesh and this chick won't ever get to it.

"I'm glad you're here," she says. "My girlfriend and I broke up last spring. Blond-haired bitch." She belches from the gut then reaches for her picture of Queen Latifah. "I'm doing time 'til I can get to you, Your Highness," she says and kisses the picture.

Do Jesus.

"It's lonely on campus during the summer. Glad to see things coming to life again. Maybe my next lover is in this new wave."

Lord Jesus.

"You have a cute figure. You work out?"

No, Jesus!

"I...I gotta go downstairs for something. I'll be back." I jet out the room, racing for the elevator. I squeeze between the crack just before the door closes. Jumbled thoughts crowd my head. I step off the elevator and into the lobby, finally free to speak my mind.

"What the hell?" is all I can manage. How will I deal with a gay roommate for two semesters? I don't want to walk around in size XL sweats to hide my "cute figure," as she called it. I'm tempted to switch rooms. But as I approach the Administration Office window, I pre-play the conversation in my head with the dorm director. "May I help you?" "Yes, I need a new roommate." "Why?" "Because my current roommate wants my coo."

"May I help you?" the student clerk asks. She reminds me of a brown-haired Ellie Mae from The Beverly Hillbillies - country sweet.

I cover my laughter with a fake cough into my fist. What a dumb conversation, I think. Ari might be the best roommate in the world. If I try to change now, I could end up with a hetero-roommate that'll steal my clothes and bang my man. Ari is too small to wear my clothes and she definitely won't go near my dude. "Where are the student mailboxes?" I ask.