

PREMATURE PLEASURES

Chapter One

I wanted some attention, so I hooked up with the 'ho clique'. I thought I could handle it. But I grossly miscalculated the costs. As I face the consequences, I'm hopeful brighter days lie ahead.

Here is my story.

One day my daddy came home and loved my mama with harsh words and clinched fists. That night we left to make a home in South Park Village, Houston, Texas. As mama searched for a parking space, I caught a glimpse of our Savior leaning over the balcony smoking a cigarette. Carefree was her first, middle and last name. We called her Aunt Sis, or Auntie for short.

"Hey!" she yelled wildly waving her arms like we hadn't seen her before now.

Her strong, throaty voice caught a group of passing teenage boys off guard.

"Damn, she loud."

Mama lightly tooted the horn. "Tre, grab your things. Ned, wake up, boo."

Auntie came downstairs dangling the cigarette between her lips. "Hey, lil' mama." I rushed toward her and fell in her arms. Finally, a secure place.

"Hey, man." Auntie reached for Ned's chin and kissed his forehead while I continued to cling to her for dear life.

"Mmm," he mumbled, rubbing away just enough sleep to see his way clear to the stairs.

"Hey," mama said.

"You all right?" Auntie spoke softly.

"I am now." They embraced briefly. Melodrama wasn't their style.

After we carried our luggage upstairs, I joined Ned in Auntie's spare room.

Mama placed an ice pack on my forehead. "Go to sleep." Her swollen, busted lips hindered the usual flawless annunciation of her words.

"But I'm not sleepy, mama."

"You will be. Just close your eyes and lay down."

"Please let me stay up and take care of you, mama. I don't want you hurt any more."

"ShhhÉI'm okay. We're okay now. Don't worry about anything." I studied her eyes for reassurance, trying to look past the puffy, black and blue areas surrounding both of them.

"Can you see your way to the door? If not, I can help." The red slits between her eyelashes that use to be big, brown, clear eyes couldn't have offered enough space for her to see.

Exasperated, she placed a finger in front of her mouth. " 'night, Tre." She kissed Ned and me and left the room, closing the door behind her. I sat in bed debating whether to disobey mama and go to the hallway where I could hear better. My heart finally settled when Auntie laughed and mama joined in. Their giggles were a lullaby to me. Only then was I sure she was okay.

We stayed with Aunt Sis' for about two weeks before moving into Foxwood, a neighboring complex.

On the first day in our new home, I stood under the breezeway looking out wondering what circumstances led my new neighbors to South Park before me.

Hundreds of kids. Thirty women. Three men.

No invitation came from the girls to play jacks or hopscotch. The boys on bikes ignored me, too. So, I hung out alone praying for the day when the kids in the square would enjoy the pleasure of my company.

The Village could hardly be described as "project living." I mean, we had it a heck of a lot better than James, Florida, JJ, Thelma and Michael. We took cover from the blistering Texas heat under medium-sized elm trees. We swung and seesawed in

complex parks. Swimming pools accommodated the least advanced to the most advanced swim skills. Lighted tennis courts provided us a smooth surface for skating. Each home, I think, served three meals a day. All the kids wore decent clothes and shoes even though most of us only had a mama.

Each of the twelve sections in Foxwood formed a square. The enclosed sections created a play area for everyone in that square. It was hard to pass through without being noticed.

I would eventually grow to hate all of the eyewitnesses.

Chapter Two

"Quit hogging the ball, girl. Dang. You always take too long to throw it back," Lisa said. She and Ned were my only two playmates. Of the two, she resented me the most for acting like a girl.

"Yeah, Tre. Keep the game going," Ned added. He never challenged her on anything. At their request, and with all my might, I hurled the ball back towards Lisa. She ran in towards where she thought it would fall and still missed the catch.

"Ugh!" Lisa grunted, rolling her eyes up. Ned put his head down. "Trekela, why don't you go play with somebody else," Lisa ordered.

That's fine with me. I preferred watching TV to playing Lisa's rough and tumble games anyway. The preparations to fulfill her dreams of being a linebacker or quarterback were brutal on my body.

Heading back towards the square, I bumped into my next door neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson with their two kids Kayla and lil' Mike.

"Careful!" Mr. Wilson shouted as I turned around in time to miss running into his front. Always dressed business-like, he was one of the three men in the square.

"Sorry," I said.

Lil' Mike favored Mr. Wilson, while Kayla looked like him around the eyes, but had her mama's pooched mouth.

"Hi Trekela! How's your mother?" she asked, sounding like Mrs. Howell from Gilligan's Island.

"She's okay."

"Tell her 'hello' for me, darling."

I walked in the house. "Hey mama."

Staring intently at the television, she ignored me. Reaching for the box of tissues behind her head situated on the end table, she accidentally knocked over her glass of wine.

"Damn!" She turned the glass back up in its upright position.

"I'll get a towel. You want me to pour some more wine for you?"

"No no, Tre. Thanks anyway." She smiled faintly and focused back on her program. Before the spill caused the wooden table to buckle, I sopped it, trying not to smudge the beveled-glass top. The purple wine looked a lot like grape juice. I wondered if it tasted the same. There was enough wine still in the glass to see for myself.

Just as I lifted it to conduct my own taste test, without warning mama sat up from her lounging position on the sofa, screaming to the top of her lungs. I jumped up and dropped the glass, afraid of what she'd do to me for drinking alcohol.

"I'm sorry, mama."

"Burn him up! Burn his ass up!" She wildly encouraged a black-eyed Farrah Fawcett to pour gasoline on the bed where her adoring husband lay totally at peace.

"We'll return in a moment to 'The Burning Bed' after these messages," the TV announcer said before cutting to a commercial. Mama rushed past me into the bathroom. I fell on my hands and knees to scrub the brown shag carpet. From the living room, I could hear her crying.

After placing the wet towel in the dirty clothes hamper in my bedroom, I went to the bathroom and tapped lightly. "Mama, I'm sitting right outside the door if you need me,

okay?"

More time passed, yet I still had no friends. Ned seemed in great company with Lisa. The more I got to know her though, the less I liked her. She always had to have her way. Whatever games we played, she picked. The toys we played with required her blessing. I now understood why the other kids hated her. Since she was bigger than Ned and me, and carried herself like a boy, we didn't want trouble. I mean, we were still the new kids in the square.

But that got old.

One day while sitting on Lisa's steps shifting my focus back and forth between Lisa and Ned to my left and the kickball game in the center of the square in front of me, I noticed Lisa's behavior changed for the worse.

"Ned, I told you to kick it straight," she fussed as she got down on her chest to reach for the ball under the car. "I can't get it. My arm's too short."

And belly too thick.

"Quit standing there looking stupid. Come get this ball. Dang, it's your fault," Lisa ordered. Ned obeyed.

"Crawl underneath, stupid. You're shorter than me. I hope you do better next time. 'Cause if you don't, you'll be right back in this position." She shouted her commands at Ned, bending forward to direct instead of kneeling down to assist.

From where I sat, I strained to hear if Ned defended himself. It didn't matter. I refused to sit by any longer letting her talk crazy to my little brother. I knew Lisa was mean, but could she top the drama I'd bring?

Where is my cake knife?

"Lisa!" I yelled.

From the corner of my eye I saw the pitcher hold the kickball, temporarily halting the game. "Hold up, y'all," he loudly whispered.

"What? Why you screaming my name like you losing yo' mind, girl?"

"Look, cow, I don't appreciate you messin' with my little brother!" I stood defiantly on her steps daring her to make the next move.

"Who you callin' a cow?" She challenged my unspoken dare with quick steps toward me.

"I'm callin' you a cow, you fat, yella' heifah!" I screamed walking toward her, too. In order for me to save face, I had to at least give the appearance that I was the craziest.

"Uh-oh." The crowd murmured as they followed and eventually surrounded us. We stood face to face, shouting and cussing each other out. Some of the teenagers held our arms behind our backs so we couldn't get to each other before time. They wanted drama, intense and satisfying. There was no telling when the next 'tete a tete' would happen. So this had to last as long as possible.

"Hold up, y'all. Let's go 'round the corner," one of the older kids suggested.

"Yeah, 'cuz we don't want nobody's mama tryin' to stop this," said another one as she held out her hand for her friend to give her five.

Everybody was pumped. They lead us around the corner, on the other side of the washateria. I'm finally getting some attention. And I wanted to make sure to give them their moneys' worth. This could be my ticket in finally.

Once in position, they pulled two leaves off the bushes by the washateria. They placed one on my shoulder and one on Lisa's. "Okay, whichever one a' y'all is the baddest, knock the leaf off the other's shoulder."

Before she could finish giving the instructions, I knocked the leaf off Lisa's shoulder and went straight into a "windmill" all over her. Madness enveloped us. Because I was so out of control, I couldn't see a thing. Occasionally I felt my fist hit firm flesh. Her body was like a microphone, sounding off with each punch landed. When my licks came across more air than body, I looked up to check my position only to see people

rolling on the ground holding their stomachs laughing as Lisa sprinted home in tears. At first, I felt sorry for her and ashamed of what I'd done. But that was short lived, especially after I realized there were hands all over me, patting me on the back, trying to give me high five and so on.

"Trekela, you can fight girl!"

"I bet that bitch won't bother you no mo'."

How'd they know my name?

"Trekela, where you from?"

"What grade you in?"

"You know how to play jacks?"

The questions came faster than I was able to respond. So I said nothing, just continued to huff and puff, relishing in the moment.

Eventually, the crowd broke. Surprisingly, the older girls stayed around. Keisha and Erika were the ringleaders.

"Come on, Trekela. Let's go sit on yo' steps," Keisha said.

"Wait a minute." Erika stood in front of me straightening my clothes and stroking my hair back into place. "There you go. We don't want any evidence of your wild side to show through." She smirked.

We sat outside and talked for what seemed like hours. In that one conversation though, I got the skinny on everybody. Talking to them made me see how nothing in this complex is a secret. Eventually, it all comes out.

"Ooh, it's hot as hell out here. Trekela, can we come in yo' house?" I couldn't believe they wanted to come and hang out with me.

"Hold on. Let me ask my mama." I ran in the house all excited. I couldn't tell her about the fight though. She didn't approve of fighting, even in self-defense. But that policy wouldn't work in the Village.

I knocked on her bedroom door and walked in. "Mama, can my friends come inside to play some of my games?"

"Unh-unh, Tre. Y'all stay outside. I don't feel like all that noise." She pulled the covers over her head.

"Well, can I go to their house then?" I asked desperately searching for middle ground. Now that some of the older girls accepted me, I needed to find a way to stay down.

"No. You don't know those people," she said, not bothering to lift her head from underneath the covers to see in my face how important this was to me.

"Mama, please?" I begged, jumping up and down in the doorway of her room, almost in tears.

"Tre, I said 'no'. Now go sit down somewhere."

I went back outside embarrassed. "Y'all I can't have company right now. My mama don't feel good."

"Damn. Well, you wanna come to our house?" Keisha offered.

"No, I can't do that neither."

"Yo' mama mean. But that's cool. We'll see you later." They all walked away. I couldn't tell if they felt sorry for me because of mama or because they couldn't spend more time with me. Either way, things were looking up. I was finally in.

Chapter Three

Keisha and Erika proclaimed themselves "queens" of Foxwood. While Keisha lived one section over from me, she always hung out in my square. Erika lived in a whole other complex. I wondered why she stayed with Keisha on and off at times. Looking at them you couldn't tell they were cousins. Keisha, with skin the color of midnight, reminded me of the African dancers that perform every year at Palm Center. Chocolate, graceful and curvaceous. Erika, on the other hand, reminded me of a tomboy,

slightly on the thick side. Despite her blotchy light skin and glossy cat-eyes, she was still easy to look at. Everything they did, I wanted to do. Everywhere they went I wanted to go. We mostly hung out in my square, doing each other's hair, listening to Love 94.1 FM and talking. I learned so much from them, mostly about boys.

Both of them had boyfriends they talked about all the time. Shedrick and Milton. Shedrick lived in the front part of our complex. Him and Keisha had been going together since school started. Erika's man Milton lived in Crestmont. I liked him the best. He was cool with me, always treating me like I was part of the crew.

Now whenever Keisha or Erika put on lipgloss, that meant Shed or Milton would be in the square some time that day. Watching them walk up was an event by itself. As soon as they knew we noticed them, they'd break into their pop-locking routine, throwing the wave back and forth to each other so they each had a moment in the spotlight. When the routine got old and the spotlight dim, they'd laugh and give each other five, trying to play off their little act.

"Look at them. Always showing out," said Keisha.

"Unh-huh. But you know them niggas can dance!" Erika said turning to Keisha and me with both her hands out. We slapped them in agreement.

"Wait y'all, here they come. Act like you don't see 'em." We all stared into space, looking around like nothing was happening.

"Oh so you gon' act like you don't see a nigga," Shedrick asked with his arms extended. "Keisha, brang yo' fine ass over here and give me some sugar."

At first she looked at him like he was crazy. Who did he think he was talking to her like that? Make his behind come to you, Keisha, I thought. Before my thought was complete, she was in his arms, tongue kissing like nobody's business. Milton, Erika and me looked on wondering how long they were gonna act like we weren't there. Milton took Keisha's seat on the steps, kissing Erika on the cheek, then reaching out to give me five.

"What's up, cuz?"

"What's up, Milton," I shot back cool posed, trying to play down my giddiness.

"What's up with you, lil' mama? Over here actin' all quiet and stuff. You ain't happy to see a brotha?"

He called it right. She was acting. When he's not around that's all she talks about. Now that he's in her face, she's playing that role. Whatever.

Keisha and Shed finally came up for air from that sloppy looking kiss he planted. Keisha wiped the smudged lipgloss from around her chin and up under her nose.

"What's up, Shed," I said trying to sound cool and see if on this visit I had grown on him, too.

"Hmmm? Oh yea, what's up lil' bit," he offered like he didn't want to be rude, but still didn't wanna speak. Punk.

We sat on the steps for a while talking to each other. Well, Keisha, Erika and me talked to each other, while Shed and Milton clowned amongst themselves. What was the purpose of us sitting together if we didn't share the same conversation? From the looks of things, I was the only one concerned. Shed and Milton were cracking up over something. Keisha and Erika ignored them.

"Say, why don't we walk to the store? A nigga' is thirstier than a mug, man." Finally something smart from Shed's mouth. I was tired of sitting on the steps anyway. My butt hurt.

We walked to Sunny's. Shed walked with his arm around Keisha's neck and his mouth in her ear the whole time, probably talking nasty. Erika and Milton walked real close to each other, but didn't touch. I felt like an outsider since I didn't have a man. Come to think of it, did they even ask me to tag along with them on their date? Dang. When we got to the store, I realized I didn't have any money. Keisha and Erika were covered. But who'd cover me?

Oh well. I hung out in the front of the store by the cashier until they were ready

to go. The cashier looked familiar. I wanted to get a closer look, but I could see through the big, round security mirror by the door that he was staring at me. Apparently he thought he knew me, too.

"Want anything, Trekela?" Milton startled me from behind.

"That's okay. I don't want anything," I lied.

"Alright nah." He winked at me then walked off.

Erika was so lucky. I wanted a boyfriend like Milton. Tall, pecan-brown colored-skinned, with thick, curly hair crowning the top of his head, he was what Auntie called "easy on the eyes". He walked so tall and strong, like nothing could take him. Above everything else though, he was just so nice, a real gentleman.

As we walked back, they discussed their plans for the evening.

"Say, there's a party at SPN tonight. KJ from Love 94 is deejaying. You know we gots to be there."

Leave it to Shed to plan something I couldn't go to. He probably did it on purpose. Didn't seem to bother anyone else though. They lit up when they found out KJ would be there.

"Ooh, Erika, let me wear yo' black jeans with the matching tank."

"Nope! I ain't even wore 'em yet."

"Come on, Erika. Do me this one solid," Keisha begged.

After further negotiations, Erika consented. Keisha couldn't contain her excitement. She danced around doing booty movements.

"You so fast, Keisha," Erika said, shaking her head. "What am I gonna do with you?"

"It's getting late. We need to go get our stuff together. We'll meet y'all at Keisha's place by 8:00 PM," Shed said. "Y'all better be ready on time, too."

"Unh-unh. Wait a minute. Hell no, you can't come to my house. My mama'll be there," Keisha said remembering she wasn't as grown as she thought. "We'll meet y'all at the front section. Then we'll walk over to SPN together."

Shed sucked his teeth and looked at her, suddenly remembering the seven-year age difference between them. "Damn. All right. We'll see y'all at eight. You betta' be there on time, too. I don't wanna have to kick yo' ass." With that, he turned on his heels, threw his hand in the air dismissing everybody. "Let's roll, Milt." The two of them disappeared with less buffoonery than earlier. It didn't matter. The brothers still had style.

"Why you let him talk to you like that," I overheard Erika ask Keisha as they walked off to prepare for their evening.

"Shut up, Erika."

"Bye y'all," I yelled. They obviously forgot I was standing there. Neither of them said anything back. I could see they were arguing. Later on they'll kiss and makeup. I know them. I went back in the house, dreaming of the day I'd be old enough to go out. It wouldn't come soon enough.

I turned the TV on. "What's Happening" was almost over. Handsome, yet slightly on the goofy side, Dwayne was my ideal man. I fantasized about never feeling threatened with him as my boyfriend. I couldn't picture him ever hurting a woman. After "What's Happening" went off, some white TV show came on. I don't know why the studio audience laughed so hard. Nothing they said or did was that funny. I turned the TV off and went to the kitchen where mama cooked dinner. The frown on her face indicated her head still hurt. Or, maybe she missed daddy.

I watch my world unravel from under the small opening outside the kitchen. Daddy stumbles into the house, walks into the kitchen and whispers something to Mama as she stands at the stove heating grease to fry chicken. I'm glad to see him acting like he loves her.

"Leave me alone, Sylvester," mama said.

That's a strange response. My signal goes up. Then he approaches her again,

whispering in her ear. This time she screams out through tears, "LEAVE ME ALONE!" That which before quietly brewed underneath finally surfaced.

"Mama!" I scream.

Daddy punches her in the stomach. She falls forward. My world fell apart. He grabs her by the hair and pulls her into their bedroom with mama screaming and crying out in pain, but not fighting back. He locks the door behind him so I can't follow them. Mama continues screaming, at times getting louder.

What is he doing to her? And I can't help her. I kick the door, screaming and crying until my stomach started hurting.

"MamaÉ pleaseÉdaddyÉ noÉ" I cry over and over. I am helpless.

I run to my room to get Ned. He sleeps carefree on the top bunk, unmoved by the drama going on between mama and daddy.

I go back to their door, but can't hear anything. I panic.

"Daddy, please let me come in!!#", I scream. The door opens. His clothes are all messed up, self-inflicted no doubt. He is sweating up a storm and never looks at me. I can tell the pitbull rage hasn't left. I lunge in front of him trying to get to the bathroom to check on mama. She sobs quietly, sitting on the edge of the tub, her face buried in her hands.

"Ma-ma?" I approach her slowly, my vision blurred from the tears, my words broken by hiccups. As she lifts her head, I hardly recognize her. Black and blue bruises, traces of blood are all over her face.

"Ma-ma, your faceÉ" I touch her. She pulls me close to her and puts her finger over my mouth. Tears still stream, but we try to keep it to a minimum. We don't want to upset the demon now possessing the man I call 'daddy' and mama call's 'sweetie' anymore than he already is. Softly sobbing but more at ease now that I know mama is okay, I think about how different this scene could be right now if mama had allowed that hot chicken grease to be her defense.

"Shut up all that goddamn crying, both of you!" Daddy yells. But I can't help it. Mama tries to console me, but I only cry harder. In a fit of rage, daddy jumps up, grabs me by the arm as mama looks on in horror. Effortlessly, he tosses me into the wall in the hallway and re-locks the door.

"Please GodÉplease GodÉplease GodÉ" I plead as I camp outside their door, waiting on Him to answer. Eventually, daddy walks out the bedroom, then out the apartment and slams the door. I rush to mama's side to console her.

"Mama, are you okay? Mama, let's leave before he comes back. Let's just go." She looks in my eyes, tears streaming. As she strokes my hair, she lifts her head and closes her eyes for a few seconds. She looks back in my eyes and smiles.

"Mama, you need some help?"

"No," she said, not looking up.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she said dryly, again, not facing me.

It seemed like forever since we left him. I wondered what was he doing right now? Did he know where we were? If so, why didn't he call?

Ned came in breathing hard, sweat pouring down his face. He'd just finished racing. Knowing him, he came in last place. But that never stopped him from trying. He went straight to the kitchen.

"Hey mommie," he smiled.

"Hey man," mama smiled back looking down at him. She hadn't seen him all day. "You hungry?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, rubbing his stomach. Mama was amused by his gesture. Watching them interact made me wish I had someone who thought I was special, too. I missed Sis. Lightner. She was the only person I could think of who made me feel treasured. When I entered a room she'd lean over to whoever was close and say 'See there, now here comes my baby!'

Sis. Lightner was an old lady who picked me up for Sunday School and church every Sunday when we lived with my daddy. She wore a white nurse uniform with the matching hat. I don't know how she knew mama. She didn't live in our complex and she looked too old to work. Yet each Sunday, she'd come get me. Before walking into church, she'd give me a peppermint candy.

"Don't eat ya candy in church, baby, okay? You look so beautiful this morning. You're God's special angel, you know that?" she said to me each Sunday.

And I believed her. There was something about the way she looked at me. She had a real relationship with God. I wanted that for myself. I wanted that for my family.

Chapter Four

Erika went back home. No telling when I'd see her again. But she'd be back. So, Keisha and I started hanging out. I loved Keisha so much. I wished I could be just like her. As we walked home from the store one time, we passed by Shed's apartment in front of the tennis court.

"Hold up, Trekela. Let's stand here for a minute. I wanna see if Shed is gon' come outside or not." We squatted behind some tall shrubbery, looking crazy. The silence didn't help. We were so obvious.

"What do you like about Shed?" I asked, wanting to know how someone as beautiful as Keisha could settle for someone as trifling as Shed. He didn't seem anywhere near her level. Looking at them you couldn't tell they'd have anything in common, except their environment. Maybe that was enough.

"He's sooo fine. Plus, he kisses real good. He's the one who taught me how to kiss. The boys at my junior high school are so immature. Their asses are still into Matchbox cars. No ma'am. I need a real man. Everybody wants Shed. But he only wants me."

I'd hoped for a more meaningful answer. You know, something that would explain why we're camped outside this nigga's apartment hiding in the bushes. I still wasn't over him threatening to kick her ass for something as simple as being late to their meeting spot. Even if she was late, she was worth the wait. But maybe he didn't think so. Or worse, she didn't.

Shed built quite a reputation for himself with the ladies. Every baseball cap he owned was branded with the playboy symbol. I never saw him with anyone other than Keisha. But there were lengthy periods when we didn't know where he was. Take for instance, right now. Keisha was trying to play cool about it. I could tell she was bothered, no hiding that. Moments like this reminded me Keisha was still a little girl herself, trying desperately to play like she was grown. Right now, she was failing with a capital "F".

"Trekela, I wanna tell you somethin' because you're like my best friend now." Really?!# I went crazy with excitement on the inside, but I played it cool.

"Sure, Keisha. What's up?"

"Chile, guess what Shed asked me?" she said with her mouth pursed and twisted. Whatever it was, she wasn't having it.

"That fool had the nerve to ask me when was I gon' 'prove' my love to him. And you know what that means."

Unh-huh. She was about to be grown for real.

"What should I do?"

"The way you was looking just a second ago, I thought your decision was made," I said attempting to sound mature. I gave my effort an "A".

"I don't wanna lose him. I've never done it before, not all the way. I mean, I've let guys grind on me. But you can't get pregnant from that."

This conversation was getting deep, too deep for me. My knees hurt from squatting in the bushes. I took a seat on the dirt. Hopefully, it'll wash off my clothes.

Being here with Keisha gave me another view of relationships. At this moment, they didn't seem worth all the trouble. Most of the time everything appeared cool. I wonder how her mama feels about it. Never mind. I don't even need to take that thought any further. Hollywood lied to us everyday on TV with images of mothers and daughters being able to talk openly. Humph.

Keisha joined me on the ground. I knew Shed wasn't worthy to receive what Keisha could only give once in her life. Keisha was smart enough to see through him. Why was this decision so difficult for her? I hated being the one to tell her the right thing to do.

"In my opinion," I said, "you should go ahead and do it." Far be it from me to do what I hate.

"Really?" Keisha asked, holding on to every word that came from my lips.

"Unh-huh. I would," I lied.

She let out a sigh of relief. We looked at each other, looked up at our immediate surroundings and fell out laughing. Enough of this mess. We got up from the dirt, dusted our shorts off, and walked back to the square chatting about nothing. As we cut through the parking lot, a car came up slowly alongside us, blasting music. We tried to play it off, but whoever this was wanted us to notice. The car pulled up enough for us to sneak a peek through the passenger window. We looked inside on the sly. It was the cashier from Sunny's, the corner store. I knew I recognized him. He lives in the back section of the complex. He exchanged knowing glances with Keisha. There was history between them.

But I didn't wanna know it.

Secret Shame by Alexis Rhone

Chapter One

I opened my locker. The only thing that lay crisp on the dusty locker floor was a flier. It read, "B-Jobs available for 5¢ totally able to satisfy nothing ventured nothing gained by the case you know the place."

I blinked repeatedly not believing what I was reading. I'm still mad at mama for moving us from South Park clear across town to Missouri City with these bourgie Negroes. Here in this brand new school that looks almost like a downtown business office, some mother's precious baby girl or some father's special little angel was offering a first day of school sale on "on puff work".

Now I'm convinced that all of us - rich and poor - are raggedy like roaches. But the rich play in newer buildings.

As I stood at the locker wondering how many others had received this coupon, a girl walked up on me and snatched it.

"Aye hah!" she laughed. "Where'd you get this from?"

"It was in my locker." I tried to not look phased by it. She obviously wasn't.

"You the new chick who lives down the street from me. Spring Briar Street, 4th house on the left, right?"

Amused and a little afraid of this stranger who knew so much about me, I answered, "Yeah yeah, that's me. I'm Trek."

"What's up, Trek. They call me Rhodee." She shook my hand like a dude dappling, slapping, pounding and snapping but yet she was all woman. A lycra-clad, Chinese-shop outfit wearing, confident hoodrat. She used the inch-long nail glued to her index finger to scratch underneath the hair tracks piled on top her head. "You know how to get around the school? Where's your first class?" I handed her my schedule. "Damn, you kinda smart, huh?"

Before leaving my locker, I stuck the only locker decoration magnet I had inside the locker door and slammed it closed real fast.

I followed her down the hall and up the stairs, stumbling through the crowd of designer labels, watching Rhodee show crazy love to the fellas while ignoring the whispering girls lining the hall. There was one dude in particular she gave a whole lot of hallway love to. Judging from the way his girlfriend rolled her eyes at both of us, Rhodee must've given him love in other locations, too.

I tried to not look at anyone for too long. This one girl, however, was way out of order in a backless shirt with slits under both breasts. She walked alone, head held high, silently daring anybody to say anything to her. Rhodee gave her a hug.

"What's up, girl? I love that top. Don't take your eyes off it!"

Rhodee and I were temporarily separated when I stopped in front of the TV monitors to watch Communications students give pre-recorded video announcements. They dressed in suits and ties and everything. They looked like professionals. I couldn't hear what they were saying because of all the screaming and hugging and jumping up and down going on around and in front of me.

I got closer to the TV, but still couldn't hear. I reached up to adjust the volume.

"Keep your filthy paws off the technical equipment!"

I looked around to see who had a microphone to their mouth and who they were talking to. I spotted a woman with tight curly hair holding a bullhorn to her lips.

"I'm talking to you, young lady, in the blue jean skirt. Read your school manual. You might learn something."

The kids closest to me snickered. I let my backpack fall to the floor as I raised both hands in front of my face. I frowned and repeatedly flipped them back and forth from palm to backhand, studying them carefully. "I know this mophead hooker didn't just call my hands 'paws' like I'm some animal," I said louder than I intended to.

Suddenly the crowd was silent. Bullhorn lady redirected her attention in my area. "Is there a problem I can fix?" By now, everyone stood still and focused in on me, 'the new girl'.

Out of nowhere someone grabbed my hand. "Yes, Ms. Ritchie, you can fix our problem by clearing these hallways. We can't hardly get to class for them standing around like dummies." Rhodee lifted my backpack from the floor and placed it on my shoulder. "You gon' do jus' fine in this camp," she whispered. I glanced over my shoulder at Ms. Ritchie staring at me. "People, move your asses out the way!" Rhodee yelled. Like Moses and the Red Sea the ocean of students parted and we walked on dry ground.

My first class was Algebra with an old white teacher named Mr. Dinks. He stood outside his class each period before the bell rang. "Hurry along to class and stop standing around acting like idiots!" The moment he closed the door to share time and space with "the best and the brightest" (as he called us), he turned on the charm. When the bell rang, the madman returned. "Get to your next class and quit standing around the hall like idiots!"

Second period was Homeroom, a 50-minute study hall I shared with the other students in my grade whose last names began with a "B". I took a seat close to the front behind Amber and across from Hilary and Tracy. Tra, Hil and Am, as they called themselves, had been best friends and neighbors in Chasewood since kindergarten. They were very easily the prettiest girls in the school. They chatted amongst themselves like little black valley girls.

"Tra, I see your mom bit the bait, or did Saks Fifth Avenue have a sale?" Hil asked.

Tra crossed her legs and flexed her left foot. "Sale? As if. No, daddy told her \$250.00 was a great price for Italian leather shoes. He said to get shoes like this any

cheaper we'd have to travel to Italy."

I tucked my Payless shoe covered feet under my chair.

"What did your mom say?"

"Nothing to him. She just called our travel agent to book her winter vacation in Italy."

"Well, your shoes are fabulous. I mean truly fabulous," Hil said.

"As opposed to 'ghetto fabulous'?" Amber asked. They giggled. I couldn't put my finger on it, but the sounds of their giggles reminded me of something. To focus, I closed my eyes for a few moments. Then it hit me. I remembered where I'd heard those sounds ð The Flintstones cartoon. The little princesses giggled like the one outfit dressing, no-shoes wearing, pupil-only eyed Wilma Flintstone and her homegirl Betty Rubble.

"Trek, I like your skirt. It fits really cute around your hips," Tra said.

"I tried on one just like that, except the slits were on the side, not the front." Amber used her index fingers to draw the imaginary slit lines.

"Who made your skirt?" Hil asked.

"My auntie bought it at the store," I said.

They cartoon giggled. "No," Amber said. "She means who's the designer?"

I cleared my throat. "Guess?"

"Cool. Guess has a great line," Tra said.

I meant for them to 'guess' the designer. Actually, my Aunt Sis' bought it for me off the clearance rack at LaTrice Fashions For Under \$7. "Tre, if you work your jelly with the right attitude, then you won't need to spend all your money on overpriced designer clothes."

Spoken like someone with no money who needs to drum up an excuse for shopping on the 75% off rack of the \$7 store.

"You know what, Trek? You're really pretty for a dark-skinned girl," Tra said.

I smiled and frowned at the same time. "She's not that dark, Tra," Hil said as she placed her black notebook binder next to my face. They cartoon giggled, but I shook it off.

"So, Trek, where'd you go to school last year?"

"I attended a magnet arts school. I played in the orchestra."

"Ooh, the orchestra!" Tra nodded her head in approval.

"Why didn't you go back this year?"

"We moved to Missouri City. When I lived in South Park, I caught the bus andÉ"

"SOUTH PARK?!" Amber asked. Hil and Tra snickered.

"Yeah, South Park. Do you know where that is?"

"Uh, I know about South Park. But it ain't nothing to write home about.

Trust." Amber rolled her eyes and turned her back to me. Tra and Hil faced forward, too.

On the other side of me sat Candace, a shy, quiet girl who rides my bus and lives in my neighborhood. Her twin brother Cayman (aka, "Candyman") was the class clown. Him and his boys cut up the entire class time in the back of the room. Behind Candace sat Staska and Sharon, who passed notes back and forth to each other usually written in Spanish or shorthand so that no one could read their message.

I looked around the room desperately searching for one friend. Just one.

Right as I wished for a new Homeroom assignment, in walks a 5'6" chocolate slice of heaven. Not only was he fine, this brotha' also had the kind of smile meant for selling toothpaste.

His name was Jay, but it should've been "Kodak" 'cause he was made to be in pictures. He looked my way and smiled.

When the bell rang dismissing class, I took my time gathering my stuff.

"Please, God, let him come talk to me," I prayed. Jay seemed to be trying to pace himself with me, too. The climate was perfect for a chance meeting at the back of the class.

That is, until a Force 5-level hurricane blew through. Her name was Lena. She was Jay's part Asian, part African-American girlfriend. "What the hell is taking you so long?" She stood with both hands on her hips. Her two homegirls snickered behind her. "You shoulda been outside the classroom waiting on me. Why do I always have to come in your class to get you? I told you this summer I wasn't puttin' up with your shit this year."

"Here I come, Lena, damn." Jay moved at turbo-speed.

Behind Lena were her two girlfriends, standing there like oversized ogres laughing at Jay, looking like circus clowns with all that makeup. "Oops. Jay got clowned in front of the new chick."

Next, I went to gym class. Lena and I have the same gym class, except she arrived 20 minutes after the tardy bell rang, dragging her feet like going to class unnecessarily interrupted her school day. The coaches were in the middle of telling us what to expect for the year when she waltzed her happy behind right in front of them. As she walked up the steel bleachers, the clunky heels on her shoes made noises like a galloping horse. No one said anything to her, just waited for her to get settled before continuing.

We went downstairs to check the combinations on our gym locker, the extent of our hard labor the whole class period. However, when the class dismissal bell rang, we all passed Lena standing in front of the mirror wrapped in a towel, blow-drying her long, silky, black hair, and baby-powdering her body. Maybe she's having a day when she doesn't feel, umÉfresh.

At lunch I spotted Tra, Hil, and Am sitting at a circle top table alone. I headed in their direction. Standing 20 feet from them, they didn't look up. Fifteen feet, ten feet, nothing. They never flinched. I decided to get bold and ask the question I'd seen played out a thousand times in the movies, usually when a man tried to 'mack' a woman sitting alone at a table in a bar, "May I join you?" Standing less than five feet away from making a fool of myself, Rhodee intercepted me. She grabbed my arm, pulling me in the opposite direction. As we walked away from Tra, Hil and Am, the girl Rhodee I spoke to earlier that morning was now wearing a wrinkled, white sweatshirt. Rhodee shook her head and led me to the patio where a dread-locked, au-natural, "fight the power" group gathered around a radio sampling beats, rhymes and dance steps. "Hey y'all. Meet Trek."

"What's up, Trek?" they greeted.

"Hi." I tried to not stare at them. They had a totally different fashion thing going on. I kept my eyes to the ground.

They formed a lopsided circle where everyone had a turn in talent-sharing. Rhodee lead off with lyrics. One of the guys blew beats in his hand making music with his mouth. Another one crooned like Luther. A girl picked up two spoons and drummed against the table edge. One after the other joined in. Before I knew it, I dropped that "shy girl" bit and cheered from the sideline like a hype man.

One of the girls had a camera dangling from her neck. She stood on benches and knelt on the ground taking pictures.

The talent-share made its way throughout the circle, eventually winding around to me. Without hesitation I bounced, twirled and dropped it, all according to however the beat drove me. During my time in the circle the energy was like gravity É no one could resist its pull. As a result, the circle grew tighter and tighter.

"What's going on?"

"Yeah, what ya'll lookin' at?" they asked as they fought their way into the group.

Rhodee laughed. "Damn. Ya'll gon' make me start chargin' a cover. At

least you'll get your money's worth."

Someone yelled from the crowd, "Show 'em how to do it, Trek!" I looked in the direction of the male voice just in time to see Jay get hit in the stomach by Lena. She bawled his shirt in her fist and yanked him out the circle. Yet, no one seemed phased. They were too busy grooving with me, the show-stopper. However, Ms. Ritchie, the vice-principal, was the show-terminator. When she arrived with her bullhorn, the crowd scattered. Like roaches in the dark, they all ran back to their corners when she came through masquerading as light. Everyone ran except for 'the talent'. She circled around us looking each of us in the eye. She then stood in the center of the circle. She motioned with her pinky finger for us to come closer. The group gathered around her. "Listen to me and listen good," she whispered. "Leave that 'ghetto shit' for street corner entertainment at your big mama's house in the Third Ward, Fourth Ward or Fifth Ward. I don't want you causing another commotion like the one we just experienced. Do I make myself clear?"

No one said anything. When she walked off she bumped into Rhodee, causing Rhodee to stumble backwards. Ms. Ritchie never looked around.

"I hate her," one of the guys said as he helped Rhodee.

"She always wreck our flow," said another one.

"We're not even halfway through the first day of school and she's already starting shit," Rhodee said.

"I can't believe she called us 'ghetto'. I've never heard a principal cuss before," I said.

Everyone eyeballed me like I'd just said water ain't wet. Rhodee chuckled. "Get use to it."

The bell dismissing us from lunch was about five minutes longer than the others. Since my next class was in the first room on the hall next to the cafeteria, I stood off to the side and people watched. I laughed to myself at the girls with 'toothpick figures' walking around with their chest and butts stuck out trying to show-off their frontal and rear "bumps".

The plain, naked baby faces that got off the bus this morning were now ornate, fully-dressed little women, thanks to the one Maybelline velvet black liner they passed around the restroom for everyone to share before first period. "Pretenders and fakers," I thought as they passed by me, all of them wearing the same style clothes, same hairstyles and speaking the same loud language.

"Kiss my ass!"

"Go to hell!"

Amongst the pack were a couple of world-shakers, as I called them, because they had a totally different swerve happening. Take Tina. Standing only about 5'4" or 5'5" like me, she still towered over everybody. I don't know how she managed to get her two shoes to match because I swear she never looked down, only up. Even if she did ever look down, she'd have a hard time looking passed the mountains growing out of her chest. "Tig ol' bitty Tina," the boys mumbled as she got on our bus this morning and strolled down the aisle in search of the last available seat. In the restroom before school started, everyone was rushing to take their turn with the Maybelline pencil. Tina walked in, her face completely made up. A space was immediately cleared for her at the mirror. She reached in her backpack and pulled out a Fashion Fair makeup pouch. She unzipped it, shuffled through her foundation and collection of blushes and eyeshadows, and removed her compressed powder and mascara. We all watched as she meticulously dipped the mascara stick in the slender, metallic gold container and carefully lengthened each lash. To Tina's left were three girls whispering to each other. One of them nodded her head to the group. She turned to Tina and asked, "Can we borrow your

mascara?"

All eyes were on Tina, anxious to see if she'd help them diversify to two forms of makeup instead of the one dual-purpose Maybelline pencil they used for lining their eyes and lips. This could be their big break. If she agreed to share her mascara, maybe she'd also share her eye shadows, lip-liners and colored lip-glosses, too. Before they got too excited about the prospect, she dashed their little hopes with one slow head turn to the left, followed by a second one to the right.

Tina shared a locker with her boyfriend, Todd, the boy Rhodee was all over earlier. Whenever you saw them together, they were always holding hands or walking with their arms around each other. After he walks her to class, he always kisses her goodbye.

The school hallways were the perfect place to practice being grown.

My next class was English with Mrs. Smithers. "Good afternoon. Welcome to my world. I'm honored to share it with you. You're privileged to be invited," she greeted each student. As we walked past her, she gave us a soft pat and circular rub on the back. At barely 5'3", her sandy-brown cropped cut fit her porcelain doll features to a tee. On the wall to my left, a banner read, "Today is a gift; that's why it's called the present." The right wall read, "Destiny calls. Go to it!"

Right before the tardy bell rang, Jay walked in with two other boys. There were three open seats. He hurriedly grabbed the desk behind me. My stomach fluttered.

Mrs. Smithers opened the class by reading an excerpt from Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". After the reading, she laid down the laws. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is important we remain respectful of one another's ideas and views if we collectively want to foster a productive learning environment. I also think it is important to have at least one other person to whom you are accountable for completing all assignments and just basically sharing with inside and outside my classroom. I pray the dialogue continues beyond these walls. I pray the reading material I've carefully selected for you this year sparks a revolution towards the love of books. Your first assignment is to dissect the title "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". Tell me what do you believe to be the significance of that title. Talk to me about what you expect the story to be about, how you can or cannot relate to it and so on. I won't require a certain format for this report, because I'm more interested in evaluating your critical thinking skills and your ability to express concise thoughts and present your arguments in writing. This assignment is due tomorrow.

"Now, I can either pair you off myself, or trust you're mature enough to select an accountability partner on your own."

Several bold voices yelled out, "We can do it on our own!"

One of those voices came from directly behind me. Afterwards, I felt a tap on my shoulder. As I turned around, the voice whispered, "I pick you."

Jay picked me, and my world couldn't have been brighter.

Chapter 2

After school, I boarded the bus. Parked behind it was a sky blue Cutlass bassing loud music. As two girls walked by, the driver stuck his head out the window. His moustache was full and his chin was covered with bumps. He looked old in the face, yet he wore his baseball cap cocked to the side like the bruhs from my old neighborhood.

I sat up front next to Candace who was quiet on the bus, just like she was in homeroom. Right before the doors closed and the bus pulled off, Jay hopped on.

"Jay!" the voices from the back of the bus yelled. As he headed towards the back, he did a double-take in my direction. I pretended to scribble in my notebook, not looking up at him.

"There's my boo," he said as he passed Candace and me, walking to the back

of the bus and joining Candyman and crew in the "Roll Call Boogie" chant.

"I say roll call boogie, check-check
I say roll call boogie, check-check
I say roll call boogie, check-check, say checkÉme out
My name is CandymanÉwhatÉ
I'm superfineÉwhatÉ
Just ask yo' mamaÉ'causeÉ
I blew her mindÉcheck-check-checkÉ
Roll call boogie, check-checkÉ"

Forty-five minutes later, there were only four of us remaining to be dropped off Ð me, Candace, Candyman and Jay. I got off the bus, second to the last stop. As it pulled away from the curb, I looked back. Jay stuck his head out the window, smiling as the bus drove off.

When I turned back around to head down my street, I spotted the sky blue Cutlass in the cul-de-sac. By the time I changed clothes, finished my homework and went back outside to sit in my yard, the Cutlass crept back down my street blasting music. "Turn that shit down when you're coming down our street, son!" shouted one of the men across the street hanging out with his buddies.

Eventually mama drove up from work. When she stepped out the car, she was dressed to the nine as usual. The men at the truck got quiet. She walked to the mailbox at the end of our driveway and waved to them. "Good evening."

"Hey there, Ms. Ann. Did you earn your keep today?"

"Huh, I earned that plus some. Still, somehow it all shakes out the same on the 1st and 15th." They all laughed hearty, too hearty, I thought. I walked close behind her to keep them from looking at her butt, just in case they were watching it. I followed her into the house telling her about my first day.

"I told you the schools in Fort Bend are much better than the other districts. Tre, you are now in an environment with other people who place a priority on education." I thought back to all the kids I saw grinding on each other behind the gym and the confrontation with the vice-principal calling us 'ghetto'.

I didn't say anything. I just listened quietly.

Afterwards, I went to my room to organize my calendar, pens, pencils and classroom binder. Someone knocked on the front door. A minute later, mama knocked on my bedroom door. "Tre, you have company."

In walked Rhodee wearing a pink, too-short miniskirt with the matching top. Mama eyed Rhodee like she didn't like what she saw. "Mama, I'd like you to meet my new friend Rhodee. She helped me find all my classes today," I exaggerated. Still looking suspicious, she said, "It's nice to meet you, Rhodee. Thanks for helping Tre today."

Once mama closed the door, Rhodee plopped down on my bed.

"Why are you organizing your stuff like you really plan on going to class or something? I'm telling you, Trek, you'll be the only one sitting in the class Ð you and the teacher."

"Fine with me. I like special attention," I said.

Rhodee walked to my closet and opened the doors. She fumbled through my clothes. "Damn, Trek, are you planning to outgrow Osh Kosh B'Gosh any time soon? You're too cute to be dressing like a little girl." She found an outfit she liked.

Holding it up to herself in front of the mirror, she said, "Let me borrow this one."

Right then, mama walked in. "Where do you think you're going with Tre's clothes?"

"Mama, she was just comparing my size with hers." I snatched the dress from Rhodee and put it back in the closet.

Mama left the room and Rhodee plopped back down on my bed. "Do you

have a boyfriend?"

"No. I used to."

"Well, I'ma see if my man Big Mike has a friend he can hook you up with."

"Big Mike?"

"Yeah, girl. And believe me, his name is well deserved. He is so sweet, Trek." She closed her eyes and clutched my teddy bear to her chest. "He takes me to school everyday and picks me up every afternoon. We'll stop and pick you up tomorrow morning, okay?"

"How old is this boy that he has a car already?" I asked.

"First of all, he's not a boy. He's a man."

"Okay. Then what are you doing to or for a man old enough to own and drive a car?"

She grinned, but didn't answer me. "We'll be here at 7:15 AM."

"I think I'd better ride the bus. My mama wouldn't like me riding to school with some strange man."

"We can wait 'til yo' mama goes to work. We'll pick you up after she leaves. Then, I'll be able to get the outfit, too."

Chapter Three

"Hey, Trek." Rhodee arrived bright and early. She slipped past me at the door. I looked outside and saw the sky-blue Cutlass parked in my driveway. The driver sat slouched down behind the wheel. The heavy bass from his radio rhythmically shook the entire car. When Rhodee returned, she was holding the outfit she picked out yesterday. "Let's go before we're late."

In the car, Rhodee and Big Mike passed a joint back and forth. After her third hit, Rhodee looked back at me. "You probably don't get high, huh?"

"Nope," I said, praying that my clothes wouldn't smell like weed.

Rhodee rambled on and on about nothing as Big Mike bobbed his head to the music, with his seat leaning back almost touching the backseat. I wasn't sure if he drove 30 miles per hour in a 55 mph zone because he thought it was cool or if his raggedy car didn't go any faster.

When we finally got to school, it was obvious Rhodee liked for everyone to see her get dropped off by her boyfriend. "Baby, pull up by the crowd," she ordered.

In front of us, Tra, Hil and Am stepped out a shiny black big-body Benz. Their hair bounced with each step they took and swung with each slight movement of their head.

Rhodee kissed Big Mike. "I'ma call you at my lunch period, okay, baby? Be by the phone waiting on my call. I'll see you after school." She pulled down the visor using the vanity mirror to reapply her lip-gloss. She blew Big Mike a kiss and stepped out the car. "Don't forget to be by the phone, baby."

At lunch period, I went looking for Rhodee. She stood at the pay phone holding the phone to her ear. A line of girls waited patiently behind her. With only a few minutes left in our lunch period, she hung up the phone and retrieved her money from the call. "He must be sleep and can't hear the phone ringing," she reasoned.

After lunch, Rhodee sipped a Clearly Canadian and walked with me to my locker. When I opened the locker door, a folded piece of paper was stuck in the vent-like slot. I tried pulling it out. "Dang. My fingernail's too short."

"Dang? What the hell is a 'dang'?" Rhodee asked as she removed a hairpin from the back of her head. "We gotta work on your vocabulary." Poking at the scripture magnet posted on the inside of my locker, she said, "If you gon' violate this, at least use the right four-letter words. Damn." From outside the locker door, she jabbed the end of her hairpin under the slot. It finally fell to the floor. She picked it up, and opened the letter.

" 'Dear Trek, I think you are so fine. Tell me how can I get yo' digits and spend time getting to know you before I rock your world with my goodies and make you scream my name over and over and overE" Rhodee flipped the page. "And over again."

I snatched the letter from Rhodee. I noticed how unusually quiet my locker neighbors were all of a sudden. I read a few lines to myself. "Rhodee, this letter doesn't say any of that crap you just said," I broadcasted. The rowdy noise level resumed.

"Crap?" Rhodee asked, her lip snarled at the right corner. "Shit, Trek, shit. The right four-letter word is 'shit'."

I looked down to the bottom of the page and gasped. "Girl, this note's from Jay."

Rhodee choked on her drink. She stood shoulder to shoulder with me looking at the letter. " 'All I want to do is give you my love,'" Rhodee read. She chuckled and shook her head. "I'd tell him to 'keep it!'" she sang, extending her right arm with the palm facing out.

"Jay is beautiful, girl."

"Yeah, well I think he's undercover, know what I'm sayin'? On top of that, he ain't got no print." She put her empty Clearly Canadian bottle in my locker.

"Meet me here when school's out," Rhodee said and walked off.

I continued to read the letter while heading to my next class.

"Dear Trek,

From the first time I laid eyes on you, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. I know you probably have all the fellas losing they mind like me. Do you have a boyfriend? If not, where can I obtain an application? I want a chance at the job. My qualifications include I'm handsome, I'm smart, and I'll treat you better than anyone has ever treated you before. If you don't have an opening for a boyfriend, I'll take anything you have to give. As for me, all I want to do is give you my love. Do you want it? Come and get it.

Jay"

All around me people rushed to their classes before the tardy bell rang. I looked up and smiled after finishing the letter. I refolded it and place it next to my heart.

I reached behind me to unzip my backpack to place the letter in it for safe-keeping. I accidentally bumped into someone.

"Watch where you going!"

I turned and looked down towards the voice. "Excuse me, Lena," I said.

With her hands on her little hips, she refused to move from her spot in front of the boy's restroom. I stepped around her to get a drink from the fountain. Before drinking the water, I tasted it and found it to be warm and bitter, pissing off both my tongue and my throat. I swallowed it anyway. I couldn't bare the thought of my spit going down the drain only to be recycled as someone else's thirst quencher.

If nothing else, at least the fountain provided me the perfect excuse to scope out the poor victim Lena stalked now that Jay had thrown her overboard for a chance to get with me.

I remained stooped over allowing the spouting water to shoot against my lips, but keeping them tightly pursed so that the nasty water didn't get back into my mouth. Her victim brushed passed me tucking his shirt in his pants. I tilted my head and twisted my neck to follow his every move, not believing what I was seeing. Water dripping from my ear brought me back to reality. I quickly let go of the fountain knob, but not before turning my head and accidentally giving myself one final squirt to the nose. Wiping my face, I watched for a few seconds longer as Lena and her victim stood in the center of the hall kissing. I dropped my bag to the floor.

The heavy books sounded off like a bomb in the empty hallway when they hit the tile. Lena jumped back and looked in my direction. The victim pulled her back in his arms. "I got you. You safe with me." Lena smiled and resettled in Jay's fickle embrace.

I dug through my bag, found his letter, balled it up and tossed it towards his fat head. He opened his eyes as the paper ball whizzed passed him. Jay stopped kissing Lena long enough to stoop down to pick up the paper. Lena tried to playfully get it from him. Jay quickly reached the balled paper over his head.

"If you want it, jump for it," he said. Lena jumped up, reaching as high as Jay's extended elbow. They continued their basketball game with the paper ball that would expose Jay for the player he wants to be. Lena finally stopped trying to retrieve the ball by jumping for it, and instead went for the clawing-the-crotch approach. She reached up and under, seizing his 'public'. Jay folded his upper body downward. Lena knocked the paper out of his hand, causing it to sail towards the entrance of the boy's restroom. She ran to the opening as Jay dove towards the paper. Lena fell on top of him, holding him around the waist.

"Why you trying to keep me from that paper?" Lena asked in between breaths.

"Pretty lady, your hands are too precious to touch trash." Jay, still holding the paper ball behind his back, used his head to maneuver Lena's right hand towards his mouth. He sounded off each kiss to her five fingers. Lena giggled. He lifted her off him and walked backwards into the boy's restroom. Seconds later, the toilet flushed and Jay walked back out.

"Lena," I said, "if you see the janitor tell him the toilets aren't working properly."

She frowned. "Which toilet?"

"The toilet that returned that turd," I said pointing to Jay.

Jay looked nervously back and forth between Lena and me. Finally, he laughed out loud. "Trek, quit playing. Girl, you so crazy." He came behind me and playfully massaged my shoulders. "Are you going to English class? If Mrs. Smithers ask for me, tell her I'm right behind you."

I broke loose from his brotherly grip to my neck and walked off without saying anything.

After school, I tried my hardest to avoid Rhodee. I did not want to ride home with her and Big Mike and 'Mary Jane'. Just as I was about to get on the bus, someone pulled my shirt. The person pointed towards Rhodee who waved me towards her. I acted like I didn't see her and got on the bus anyway. I placed my backpack on the seat and looked to my right. Jay was seated directly across the aisle from me. He was leaning forward with both arms stretched over the top of the seat in front of him.

Candyman got on the bus. "Say, man. Why the hell you up here? Come on to the back with e'erbody else."

"I got business up here to tend to first," Jay said.

Candyman looked at me then back at Jay. He grinned. "Ah-ight then. Handle it."

Immediately I picked up my bag to get off the bus. Jay stood up. "Trek, where you going?" I ignored him.

I stepped off the bus and on to the sidewalk. The bus driver took a long drag from her cigarette. "Young lady, my bus will be pulling out in ten minutes."

"I'll be home in fifteen," I said.

"TrekÉTrek? Where you going?" Jay kept calling out to me from the bus window. Suddenly he stopped. I turned around in time to see him duck his head back in the bus as Rhodee walked up.

"You didn't see me waving at you? I went by your locker. Let's go home."

She looped her arm through mine and led me to Big Mike's car.

Big Mike scooted his seat as far up as it would go and pulled it up for me to get in. That's when I noticed another dude in the back sitting behind Rhodee.

"Trek," Rhodee said, "that's my brother, Gee. Gee, meet Trek."

"S'up, Trek, wit' your cute ass." Gee latched on to my hand to help me in the car then wouldn't let go. I let him get his kicks for a minute, massaging and poking the palm of my hand. Eventually I freed my imprisoned hand from Gee's, faking like I had some important papers to review in my bag. I maintained the charades until we got to my house.

Big Mike stopped in front and left the car running. "Trek, come hang out at my house for a little bit," Rhodee said.

"Hell yeah," Gee said. Before I could say no, Big Mike pulled off.

When we arrived at the house, I was surprised by the fancy decorations.

Glass figurines. Colorful blow art. Track lights on the ceiling. They even had the kind of carpet that doesn't leave tracks when you walk in it.

Rhodee's room upstairs certainly didn't fit her "baby-doll-bangs-to-the-front, ocean-sized-finger-wave-to-the-side, spritz-curls-down-the-back" thing-thing. The walls were painted a pale pink. Her room was decorated with white, oversized Barbie-doll looking furniture, including a canopy bed with a white spread and white lacy ruffles all over it. Of course she had to scandalize Barbie's little playhouse bedroom with an almost life-size poster of a bare-chested Barry Redmon sporting a red jock cup over black tights, licking his big lips. "Girl, my daddy still think I'm a little girl. Huh, he must be blind if he can't see that I AM WO-MAN!" Her hands and arms shot out to the side as she tilted her head back, looking like a short, big-booty Diana Ross.

I lay across the bed doing homework while Rhodee played in her hair. "I'm so sick of this mess on top my head. I should cut it all off." She sighed. "But then Big Mike won't have anything to walk his fingers through."

"Tell Big Mike to walk his fingers through the Yellow Pages. If you wanna cut your hair, do your thing," I said.

"Can't do that, Trek. I gotta please my man." She began undressing to go shower and wash her hair. When she removed her bra, a wad of \$5.00 bills and \$1.00 bills fell to the floor.

I sat up from the bed covering my mouth. "Where'd you get all that money, Rhodee?"

"Oh, uhÉit was given to me." She went into the bathroom wrapped in a pink towel and closed the door.

While Rhodee showered, I walked over to her dresser for a closer look at all the pictures taped to her mirror. Of course, Big Mike's bubble-head was plastered all over the place. There were also pictures of the girls we ate lunch with today and more pictures of Rhodee as a little girl.

On the right corner were three pictures of the boy Rhodee loved on in the hallway. Two of the pictures were school pictures of him as a young boy. The other one looked like a more recent photo taken at a professional studio, except it was a cutout.

Rhodee came out the shower wearing a pink terrycloth bathrobe and towel drying her hair. She walked over to get a closer look at what I focused on. Stroking his lips with her index finger, she said, "That's Todd. He is my innocence, forever my boo."

"He's Tina's boyfriend."

"He's Tina's clichŽ completed. Damn 'T-N-T makes dynamite'", Rhodee mocked.

She shook her head and removed the towel from her hair. I did a double take. She looked like a completely different person. Her hair was shoulder-length,

naturally wavy and soft looking. She caught me staring at her with my mouth slightly gaped open.

She looked down and all around her body. "What? What's wrong?"

I coughed to clear my throat. "Nothing. I mean—you are so beautiful." She looked back at the mirror. She frowned, rolled her eyes at and walked off from her image.

She asked about the homework Mrs. Smithers assigned in English class. I told her we were to write our thoughts on the significance of the title "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". Rhodee picked up the spiral notebook on her dresser and flipped through the pages. She tossed it over to me. "Read this."

Life will pass you by
that's what the old lady down the street say
she say 'time waits for no one, lil' bit.'
And that I must not let the world leave me.
And I do
I keep up with all my might
I do things now
Because I might not be here later
I run with older kids
Do older things
What things?
Well, let's say that
If my past were worth money
For all I did
Hell, I'd be paid
I have no regrets
My life has been great
I've done it all and
There's nothing new here
Nothing to look forward to
And all I have to do
Is wait and die.

I glanced back and forth between Rhodee and the poem. She looked over at me waiting on feedback. Only one word came to mind. "Wow."

"You like that, huh?" Rhodee asked.

I shook my head yes, sitting there like a retard with no vocabulary. Looking at her mile-high hair and sausage-stuffed fitted clothing, you'd never know she was this deep.

"Rhodee, when you look in the mirror, what do you see?"

She studied herself, frowned as she tilted her head. "I see someone with a super fine body. I see someone in desperate need of a relaxer," she said as she ran her fingers through her hair. From the mirror, Rhodee looked at me and asked, "What do you see?"

I saw this as a golden opportunity to share with my friend about how valuable she was in God's eyes and how much He loved her and how she was too smart to blow off school and how she shouldn't smoke weed, even if it is from the Earth. This was the chance God had given me to share the good news with my friend. But I froze. I was afraid. I didn't want her to look at me like I was a Jesus nutcase and start avoiding me.

Right when I decided to go for it, someone lightly tapped on the door. It creaked open before Rhodee gave permission for whomever to enter. She turned around. I couldn't see the person at first. She jumped on the bed close to me and pulled her robe tighter around her. She opened one of my textbooks and started

skimming the upside-down pages.

A man peeked his head in, grinning from ear to ear, until he saw me. He was fair-skinned, medium height for a man, and sported a processed-wavy hairdo. He cleared his throat. "Young ladies, are you up here doing your homework like you're supposed to? Or are you in here playing?" He tried to act friendly, but something about him made my flesh crawl. "I'm Rhodee's dad's friend, Marcus. What's your name?" he said extending his hand to me.

"I'mÉI'm Trek."

"Cute name for a cute girl," he said, holding my hand one second longer than was decent. "Rhodee, do you need any help with your math homework today?" He gently pulled the textbook from Rhodee's grasp, turning it right-side up.

"No, IÉI don't have math homework today," she said.

He took a seat on the edge of the bed. Rhodee tucked her bare feet underneath her butt. Marcus leaned across the bed on his left elbow. "Trek, I want to offer my services to you, too." He used his index finger to trace my sock-covered toes. "If you ever need any help with your homework, call me. I was great in school. Rhodee'll fill you in." I looked over at Rhodee who stared at the ground. I also noticed that she hadn't let go of her robe since Mr. Marcus entered the room. "Oh, by the way, Trek," he continued, "I believe in rewarding good grades. Twenty dollars for every 'A' in every class except math, where I give \$50. It's going to be extremely important you do well in math so that you'll be able to count all them dollars you'll make!" He peeled off two twenty dollar bills and left them on the bed. "We're about to place an order from Pappadeaux's. Big Mike and Gee are going to pick it up. What do you want to order?"

Rhodee perked up and so did I at the thought of Pappadeaux's for dinner. I had only been to Pappadeaux's once in my life, when one of my mama's coworkers took the whole family out for dinner to celebrate her promotion. I ordered the Shrimp Brochette. When we got home, mama fussed at me for picking one of the most expensive dinners on the menu. "Next time order from the children's menu."

"But, mama, I'm not a child."

"Rhodee, I need to call home. I didn't mean to be down here this long."

"Trek, please stay for dinner. Here, use my phone," she pleaded.

I dialed my number and mama answered on the first ring. "Mama, may I have dinner with Rhodee and her family? They're doing carry-out from Pappadeaux."

"Tre, where have you been? Come home right now," she said frantically.

"I'm just down the street at Rhodee's where I've been since we got out of school. What's wrong?"

"Tre, don't ask me anymore questions, just come home now."

"Is everything okay?"

"TRE, BRING YA' ASS HOME NOW!" she said before slamming the phone down.

I was scared and wishing I'd called home sooner. I gathered my papers, not caring if they got crinkled. I said goodbye to Rhodee who stood there as confused and concerned as me, leaving her and Mr. Marcus in the room alone.

I raced down the stairs and walk-trotted down the street to my house. As I drew closer, I spotted a black four-door sedan parked in my driveway. My heartbeat raced as I thought of all the possibilities and wanted to know if the owner of this vehicle was the reason my mama was so frantic. I sprinted towards my house and busted through the front door. Ned sat on the sofa next to a man whose back was facing me. His voice sounded eerily familiar as he read one of Ned's stories out loud while Ned helped him with the words he couldn't read due to Ned's sloppy handwriting. Ned looked up with sheer delight all over his face and said, "Look who's here, Tre?" The stranger turned to face me. He smiled and tiny needles poked down my

spine. "Hey, baby girl. Come give your daddy a hug."

Chapter Four

I ran to the kitchen to find mama heating grease and flouring chicken to fry. I rushed towards her and stopped short. She totally caught me off-guard with the tight jeans kissing her butt and the knit top hugging her titties. Together, they proudly showcased her sexy figure, deceiving you to think she is both childless and 5-10 years younger than her age. Her makeup was flawless. Her hair was shiny and bouncy like she'd just stepped off the beautician's chair. There was no sign of the lunatic yelling at me and hanging up in my face five minutes earlier. "Mama, you okay?"

"I'm fine. I was just scared not knowing where you were."

I looked over at the dad putting a dent in our couch with his sorry ass, then back at mama. "You sure you're okay?"

She gripped my chin, forcing me to look her in the eyes. "You'll never have anything to fear from anybody in our home, understand?"

Right then I knew that no drama would go down in our house tonight. Mama kissed my forehead. "Go back to the living room while I finish dinner."

I took a seat on the far-side of the couch. The dad tried to make conversation with me. "Baby girl, how's school going?"

"Fine."

"Do you like it out here in Mo. City?"

"Sure."

"We were worried about you when you weren't here when we got home."

"We?" I asked. "Who is we and what do you mean 'when we got home'?"

"Tre, come help me set the table," mama called to me from the kitchen. I pushed myself off the sofa and threw the decorative pillow to the floor by the dad's feet. Ned quickly picked it up and placed it back on the couch before mama saw it lying around on the floor. He also straightened my side of the sofa before going back to sit next to the dad. I rolled my eyes at both of them and switched my little hips to the kitchen.

From the cabinet I pulled out three plates, three glasses, three sets of silverware and sat down at my usual spot at the table. Mama looked at the place settings. "Tre, you forgot one." I looked around the table and counted out loud, "OneÉtwoÉthree," pointing at the settings. I stood up and pointed to myself. "One," I counted. I pointed towards mama. "Two." Glancing through the opening where you can see the living room from the kitchen, I stretched my neck to see passed the tall, silk tree. "And Ned makes three." I sat back down, folding my arms across my chest. Mama stood by the oven, thumping her foot against the tile. Neither of us moved or said anything. I wondered to myself how long our stalemate would last. At that moment, she slammed the big spoon on the stove-top and charged towards me. I narrowly escaped her hands from around my throat by jumping up and running around to the other side of the table. Reluctantly, I pulled one more plate, one more glass and one more set of silverware.

Mama let out a long sigh. "You're testing me, Tre."

As I rinsed off the plate, Ned and the dad came in the kitchen. "Ummmm, smells like you still know how to handle bidness in the kitchen, Ann." The dad sat down in my chair.

"Uh, excuse you, but that's my seat. Visitors have a special spot right here." The plate hit the table with a loud thud in front of the usually empty chair that sits across from mama.

"Tre, it don't matter where anybody sits. We're not in school with assigned seats," Ned said. The dad looked back and forth, unsure of whether to move to keep the peace, or stay put.

He foolishly chose to stay put. And that pissed me off.

I spent the whole meal playing with my food, refusing to eat.

"This meal is dee-licious, Ann."

"Yeah, mama, this chicken is good," Ned chimed in. I sat silent, stewing over the fact that no one else remembered or cared about our history with this man.

Throughout dinner, I caught the dad staring at mama and smiling.

"Damn baby, you lookin' too good."

Mama grinned. "I know."

She seemed to be enjoying his attention too much. The time had come for me to stir it up. "We hadn't heard from you in a while," I said. Everyone froze. I pulled a

piece of skin from the chicken leg. "So, where ya been?" I nibbled on the meat.

The dad cleared his throat. Before he could answer, Ned rescued him. "Tre, why are you so mean?"

"And why can't you let him answer my question, you runt?"

"Tre, don't talk to your brother like that," the dad said.

I jumped up. "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TO CORRECT ME?"

"Tre, go to your room!" mama ordered.

"Oh, okay. So, I have to miss dinner because of this stranger in our home?

Fine!" I ran to my room and slammed the door. Mama instructed Ned to go to his room, too. As he passed by, I heard him stop in front of my door for a few seconds.

Finally his door opened, then shut closed.

Forty-five minutes later, mama tapped on both our doors. "Come to the living room for a minute," she said.

When we got there, the dad stood in the doorway of the kitchen, reaching up to rest the palm of his hand on the top of the frame. Mama stood next to him. He couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"Tre, Ned," mama began, "let me start off by saying everyone makes mistakes and your dad admitted his mistakes to our family. He says he's very sorry for everything he's done and hasn't done for us."

She turned the floor over to him. That ignoramus fumbled over every word, never completing a full sentence and never bothering to look at us when he talked.

"WellÉuhÉNed, BabygirlÉyou know grown-ups, weÉwell sometimesÉ," he babbled. Only when he looked at my mama could he seem to find subject/verb agreement in his sentences. "Your mom and I love you very much," he said, stroking the length of mama's arm, beginning at the shoulder.

If she thinks he's coming back into our home, I got a trick or two to show them. I twitched in my seat, hardly able to contain the rage boiling under the surface, ready to explode. Suddenly, in one fell swoop mama brushed his hand off her like she was thumping a pesky fly. She filled in the missing blanks for him. "Your dad wants to spend more time with you starting this weekend. He's going to pick you up Friday after school and take you to the home of his new wife and daughter." Mama smiled as she put emphasis on the wife and daughter part.

"You mean ex-girlfriend and her daughter," the dad corrected.

"Whoever and whatever," she said as the dad stood there trying to explain his living situation to the palm of mama's hand.

He looked at his watch and jumped. "I gotta go. Trudy has to go to work."

As he said his good-byes and rushed out the door, I thought, How pathetic. He doesn't even have his own car.

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 Ð 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? WhatÉwait, 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 Ð getÉyourÉstankin'ÉassÉinÉtheÉbackÉseat."

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. ð tear yo' ass," Ned said. Mama missed his comment.