

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 bourgeois 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 '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 dapping, slapping, pounding and snapping 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." Rhodée 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!" Rhodée 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 ð 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  $\text{\textcircled{D}}$  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 overÉ" 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.

"Trek? Trek? 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, uh? It 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 cliché 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."

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 doorframe 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.