

## Chapter One

**D**estini Fletcher shut off the alarm and turned onto her side. She wasn't going to school today. Or maybe ever again. She snuggled deeper under the blankets and tried to recover the wonderful sleep that the shrill alarm had taken from her.

“Destini!” Her mother's voice—almost as shrill as the alarm—came at her. “Are you up yet, girl?”

“I'm sick, Mom,” Destini wailed. “I can't go to school today.”

Mom appeared in the doorway of the bedroom like an angry witch. “Destini Fletcher,”

Mom yelled, “you are no more sick than I am. Get your lazy body out of that bed and take your shower and get moving. I am sick and tired of having this fight most every day.”

“Mom, my head hurts and my stomach hurts and—” Destini began reciting her ailments, but her mother came over to the bed and ripped off her blanket.

“Nothing hurts and you know it,” Mom scolded. “You just don’t like school and you think it’s okay to skip going just because you have a fancy to. You are just like your no-good father who never would go to work because he just didn’t like working. Well, I’m not letting my only child go down the drain because she has her father’s lazy genes. You are getting out of bed and into the shower if I have to drag you by your hair, girl.”

Destini dropped her legs over the side of the bed. “Nothing ever goes on at that stupid school anyway,” she whined. “We have really crummy teachers, and everything we learn is

stupid and boring. I'm not learning anything I can use. I mean, who cares why some old men who've been dead for two hundred years wrote some dumb laws?"

"Other kids are learning and getting good grades, and getting set for college and making something of themselves, girl," Mom chided. "You are sixteen years old. You're not some day care baby. You got to have some responsibility. School is what you make it. All you want to do is watch TV or play on the computer looking for pictures of boys. You are boy crazy, Destini."

Destini laughed bitterly. "I don't even have a boyfriend. That's a big laugh, Mom. I don't have a boyfriend. I never had a boyfriend. Every other junior has a boyfriend, but the boys won't look at me because I dress so awful in such old-fashioned clothes," Destini complained, walking toward the bathroom. Destini was saving up to buy the newer styles, but in the meantime she was stuck with what was in her closet.

“You don’t look no worse than most of the other girls except those who dress trashy—which I won’t allow,” Mom asserted. “Now get your shower done and get dressed. You got to eat breakfast and catch the bus to school.”

Destini hated Harriet Tubman High School from the moment she started as a freshman. She was not as pretty or as smart as the other girls. That’s what she thought anyway. Now that she was a junior, things were worse. Now it seemed that *all* the girls were cuter than she was. There was a girl in American history named Sereeta Prince who was so beautiful she looked like a model. Sometimes Destini felt like slapping Sereeta in the face because she was so pretty and because she had a handsome boyfriend. But, of course, it wasn’t Sereeta’s fault.

After her shower, Destini walked leadenly toward the breakfast table. Her hair was still wet. She tugged at it bitterly. “Look!” she exclaimed. “It’s all frizzy and horrible. I look

like some clown or something. I hate my hair. I wish I could get it straightened or something. I know girls who do that.”

“Nothin’ wrong with your hair, girl. It’s perfectly all right,” Mom assured her. “You don’t need to change what you got. What’s wrong with you, girl?”

Destini looked at the scrambled eggs and the little brown sausages. “I hate eggs and sausage,” she complained. “They make you fat. I’m already too fat.”

“You are not in the least bit fat,” Mom said, busy around the table. “You weigh just what you’re supposed to, Destini. Now eat your breakfast and stop givin’ me grief. I’m tellin’ you, girl, if I’d known the kind of grief you were going to cause me, I woulda sent you down to the county home to raise you when you were a baby.”

Destini picked at her food, finishing only her orange juice. She nibbled on a bran muffin, ate half a sausage, and then got up from the table. “The stupid bus will be at the corner

in a minute,” Destini grumbled. “If I miss it I gotta wait for the next one. Our stupid old school doesn’t even have a school bus. We gotta ride the stinky city bus, and the drivers hate us kids when we get on with our backpacks.”

Destini walked down to the corner of Seminole Street to the bus stop. Already some kids were waiting there. They were not her friends, but they were in some of her classes. Destini did not make friends easily. She thought most of the kids at Tubman High were better off than she was. To her, either their families had more money or they were more attractive or popular. Some of the parents had good jobs, but Destini’s mother was a housekeeper at the local hospital. All day she pushed carts filled with dirty laundry in blue bags. Some of the kids had parents who were teachers or nurses. Their homes were nicer too. And Destini hated the cramped little two-bedroom duplex where she lived with Mom.

A girl named Carissa Polson got on the bus at the next stop. She saw Destini and smiled. “Hi,” she nodded.

“Hi,” Destini replied. Carissa was pretty too. Her mother didn’t work but her father was in sales. Several boys wanted to date Carissa, but she settled on a good-looking athlete on the track team, Kevin Walker.

“Are you ready for the test in English?” Carissa asked Destini from the seat behind her. Destini supposed Carissa was all right. She was nice enough, but Destini was jealous of her. She was too pretty and her boyfriend was too cute. “No,” Destini replied, “I never learn anything in English. Mr. Pippin is a terrible teacher. I don’t know what those stories we have to read are all about.”

Two boys got on the bus at the next stop. Destini thought one of them was really good-looking. He had broad shoulders and a nice face. There was an empty seat next to Destini. She slid closer to the window and pulled her backpack under her feet to make room. But

the boy was looking at Carissa. Even though he had to sit with his feet in the aisle, he sat next to Carissa. “Hi Carissa,” he said warmly.

Destini took a long, deep breath. “It isn’t fair,” she thought. “Why do some girls look so cute, and why do I look so plain?” It’s not that Destiny was awful looking or anything, but she just wasn’t pretty in the way Sereeta and Carissa were. Boys looked at her as if she was a dull brown gingerbread cake and all around her were lemon meringue pies and strawberry shortcakes. The boys would glance at her and then go on to something tastier looking.

The boy with the broad shoulders was trying to engage Carissa in conversation, but Carissa wasn’t saying much. She already had a great boyfriend. She didn’t need this boy’s attention.

“Not fair!” Destini thought again. Carissa did not need this boy fawning over her. She wasn’t interested in him. Why didn’t he come and sit by Destini, who made room for him and who would have loved to talk to him? It



would have made her morning if he had just sat next to her and exchanged a few words. But, no, there he was bothering Carissa who didn't want or need him.

Tubman High loomed in the bus window and Destini sighed deeply again. She hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders and headed for the door. Students were passing by the statue of Harriet Tubman, for whom the school was named. When Destini first came here, she stopped and took a good look at the statue of Tubman. She had such a plain face. Actually, she was homely. She did many wonderful things, leading black men, women, and children out of brutal slavery and into freedom in Canada. She was a good and brave and wonderful woman, but men did not like her either.

Destini felt a kinship with Harriet Tubman. Her husband had left her for a prettier woman—it was said—but she didn't care. Destini thought she probably *did* care but she was too proud to say so. Destini read a biography of Tubman,

who said of her husband who left her that he had dropped right out of her heart. She said if he could live without her, then she could live without him. And so she did.

Destini wished she could feel that way about the boys at Tubman High. If they didn't want her, then, fine, she could do without them too. But she wanted a boyfriend. She wanted to go on dates, as Carissa and Sereeta did. She wanted to walk, hands linked, across the campus with a boy.

It just wasn't fair.

Destini went into English. Mr. Pippin was handing out the quizzes, and Destini took hers without much hope. Mom kept telling her if she didn't study she couldn't make decent grades and couldn't go to college. Mom warned her that if she didn't buckle down, she would end up in a hospital pushing carts filled with dirty laundry in blue bags.

“Don't you depend on some man coming along and putting your life in order girl,” Mom often preached. “There ain't no Prince Charmings