
[chapter]

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Sherise stared down at her textbook. She felt that old, familiar feeling. The feeling you get when you have no idea how to even begin to solve a math problem. If she couldn't solve the first one, how would she solve the other nineteen that were due tomorrow?

So there she sat. Pencil in hand. Scratch paper in front of her. Math book open. But the problems on the page all blurred together into one big mess of numbers, letters, and weird symbols. Sherise hated algebra. *Hated* it. What the hell did letters have to do with math anyway?

Sherise looked across the library table at Tia. Tia didn't seem to have any issues with the problems. She sat there, furiously scribbling with her pencil and solving the problems with ease.

It didn't help matters that Marnyke was in the room, flapping her jaws. Marnyke had the biggest mouth of any girl in school. She talked nonstop. And she usually was talking about herself. Marnyke didn't seem to care that she was sitting in the middle of the library during study hall. She yelled out her story like she was telling it to someone standing right next to a speaker at a concert.

"That's when I knew," Marnyke hollered, "*knew* I had to have him. Any man that can handle himself on the street *and* on the court, he's all mine. For real."

Sherise slammed her pencil down dramatically. Why did Marnyke have to be such a big-mouth all the time? Why

was she always yelling and being so annoying? Tia noticed that Sherise was frustrated.

“Doing okay on those problems?” Tia asked Sherise.

Sherise exhaled. “It’s just hard to focus in here.”

Tia nodded. “You got that right,” she said, glaring over at Marnyke. “Who is she talking about anyway?”

Sherise looked over her shoulder to see if Marnyke was listening. Then she whispered, “I think she’s talking about Darnell.”

Sherise liked Darnell. He lived in the same high-rise apartment complex she did. Sometimes Sherise was jealous of Marnyke. She got to run wild, do whatever she wanted. That’s why she got to hang with Darnell. Darnell got to do whatever he wanted too. Sherise, on the other hand, was on lockdown. Her

stepdad kept her on a tight leash. She never got to do anything cool.

Sherise sighed and looked back at her book. “Did we even go over these kinds of problems in class, Tia? I don’t remember a thing that looked like these. I mean, I get number one. But what about number two? It’s like a foreign language!”

Tia moved her chair closer to Sherise’s to help her. But as she did, the bell rang. The school day was over. “I can help you with these tomorrow if you want,” Tia said. “Or, I bet your sister knows how to do them.”

“Oh, I’m sure she does,” Sherise said sarcastically, packing up her things. “No way I’m askin’ her for help.”

Tia gave Sherise a kind look. “You coming to YC tomorrow?” Tia asked. “Or do you have to work?”

“I’ll be there,” Sherise said, pulling out a compact from her purse. She checked