

Damn that Jackson Beauford,” Nishell Saunders muttered to herself as she walked down the hill to the river’s edge. Her treasured Nikon Coolpix digital camera clomped against her white peasant blouse; she felt a bead of sweat roll down her tawny forehead.

It was so hot on this late Tuesday afternoon in June that her sandals seemed to stick to the sun-baked asphalt path. Right before Nishell had left the day-care where she was working as a summer counselor, she’d checked an outdoor thermometer. Ninety-two in the

shade. Waiting for the bus that brought her here, it had felt like two hundred and ninety-two.

“Damn that Jackson,” she repeated. Most days, the asphalt path along the river was filled with people walking, bicycling, rollerblading, or just tossing bread to the ducks. Not this day, though. Just too hot. “He makes me mad. Why’d I even show up?”

“Yo! Nishell! Yo! Up here!”

Nishell turned and saw Jackson standing under a weeping willow about fifty yards away. He looked better than any eleventh-grade boy should, in baggy khaki shorts and a white-ribbed undershirt beneath a paisley short-sleeve shirt. Nishell knew that his handsome face framed startling blue eyes—not so common for a brother.

Nishell thought of all the reasons she had to stay angry at Jackson. He’d

flunked all his classes last semester at South Central High School. She'd told him that he could forget about hittin' it with her if he couldn't even manage D-minuses. Jackson had taken Nishell's declaration badly. He'd—

“Hey!” Jackson called. “Whatchu wanna do, Nishell? Stand there and melt into a pool of the sweetest chocolate in America? I wouldn't mind a honey dip, but I think I want you whole, you know what I'm sayin'? Come on up here, you fly girl!”

Nishell grinned.

“There's nothing finer than a man who makes you laugh,” she thought. “If a man can make you laugh, you can't stay mad.”

“Okay, okay.” She made her way through some tall grass up to where he was standing. When she got there, she saw he'd set out a fancy picnic under the cool—well, cooler—shade of the willow.

There was even a pillow for her with a rose atop it.

“Hey. I’m glad you came,” he said softly when she reached him.

She took in the picnic and cocked an eye at him. “If you worked half as hard on algebra as you did on this, you might have passed.”

“Maybe,” he allowed. “Course, settin’ this up didn’t put me to sleep like all that A -squared plus B -squared equal C -squared bull-dinky does.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Nishell retorted. “You just have to pass it.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You know how fine you look when you throw shade at me like that? Course, you look fine anyway.”

Aww ...

Nishell loved it when Jackson complimented her looks. She knew she wasn’t as skinny as the rest of her friends. Her