



## Chapter One

*If* Jayson Jones hadn't had such damn fine guns, my life would have been a whole lot easier.

I'm Ronette. I have a last name—Bradley for what it's worth—but my hotel nametag just says Ronette, because last names don't matter when you're an eighteen-year-old high school graduate cleaning rooms to make a little chip. All my boss wanted was for me to do my quota of rooms as fast as I could so the Chicago Apex Airport Express didn't have to cough up any extra hours at minimum wage.

Let me say this: it sucked to be cleaning rooms at a two-star hotel when my fine boyfriend with the amazing guns was headed off to college the next morning. He wasn't going to just any college either. He was going to Houseman University in Washington, D.C. Houseman is

what they call a “historically black college and university,” also known as a HBCU. It’s a great school with a mostly-black student body. I applied there and didn’t get in. More on that soon.

I was proud that he was going to Houseman, but it was also scary. The Houseman University girl-to-boy ratio is two-to-one. Two sisters for every brother. It’s that way at a lot of HBCUs. If our men paid more mind to their grades and less mind to getting into a sister’s pants, that ratio might equal out. Not that I was in any position to talk about minding my grades. I’d finished Corman High School in the bottom third of the class. I know. Pitiful.

My GPA didn’t get me into Houseman. In fact, it barely got me into Chicagoland Community College, where I was to start in three weeks. Everyone says CCC got its name because C is a high grade for the kids who end up there. My mom, Kalina—I don’t have a dad or brothers or sisters, just Kalina and me—wanted me to study dental hygiene. I wanted to take writing. Kalina said writers starve. Since Kalina knows a thing or two about starving, there was good reason to listen to her.

Meanwhile, my boyfriend with the killer guns was heading to college two weeks early. He had a football scholarship and the players arrived early for practice. Jayson is six foot two and built like the star running back

he is. In contrast, I'm short and skinny, with a cup size that would be a letter between *A* and *B*, if such a letter existed.

Jayson is caramel. I'm lighter. His eyes dance. Mine are dark pools. He keeps his hair buzzed. Mine is long and brown and goes with my swooping neck that makes people wonder if I'm from East Africa. His face is square. Mine is long. His voice rumbles. Mine is musical.

He's rich. His daddy is a Chicago alderman who some say will be mayor. His family lives in a penthouse north of the Chicago River. I'm far from rich. My mother works for the same hotel chain where I am a maid. She is a desk clerk and has done it long enough that her last name is on her badge. We have a furnished two bedroom near the O'Hare International Airport, one of the busiest in the world. All my life she'd worked for airport-area hotels. I had lived near takeoff and landing flight paths for so long that when I needed to fall asleep, I counted engines roaring the way other people counted sheep.

So, about that last night with Jayson before he went to Houseman ... if he hadn't had such damn fine guns, it would have been a lot easier. Heading into last night, I'd sworn I'd stay a virgin until at least my eighteenth birthday. Maybe longer.

Ha. Lead me not into temptation. I can get there by myself.

Everyone says your first time is supposed to be wack. Either it hurts, or you don't feel anything, or the guy drools, or his member didn't remember what to do. It happens in a backseat or a locked room at a party where Pac Div pounds and your man's boys laugh in the hallway and wait for the blow-by-blow. So to speak.

It was not that way for Jayson and me. I hate reading sex scenes and can't imagine writing one, so I'll sum up my first time with Jayson in four words, and make them all-caps for emphasis.

IT WAS DA BOMB.

I loved it. Jayson did too. For the record, protection was used. This is not a teen pregnancy story.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I will say this for Jayson: he did it up right. We went to L20, the super-fine restaurant at the Belden-Stratford Hotel near Lincoln Park. I'm a girl who never dresses up. Not only couldn't I afford nice threads, but when a person has moved as much in their life as I have, you learn to travel light. All my clothes could fit easily in two suitcases.

Remember that fact. It's important later.

Imagine my surprise when the doorbell rang that last afternoon Jayson was in Chicago. I opened it to a white delivery guy in a gray uniform. He held a wrapped box.

"Ronette Bradley?" he asked.

“That’s me last time I looked.”

“For you.”

He handed me the box. I was puzzled but signed for the package and tipped him two bucks. When you clean rooms, you learn that the eleventh commandment is, “Thou Shalt Tip Your Service Person Because, Dammit, They’re Getting Paid Doodly.” Etch it on a stone tablet.

The box was from Brooklyn Industries, a hip clothing joint on Milwaukee Avenue. It held a black silk dress with red trim that plunged low in both front and back. Also a pair of heels. Red with black trim. Plus a note: “Hot clothes for the hawt girl. C U tonight.”

Yes. I melted a little. I melted more when everything fit like it was made for me. My mother actually yelped with happiness when she saw me come out of my room for the date.

“Baby girl, you’re in a dress!”

I had to smile. She made it sound like I’d cured cancer.

“Do I look a’ight?” I asked her.

“Baby girl, I’m your mama, so I’d tell you that you looked a’ight if you were wearin’ a garbage bag with a duct tape belt. All I can say is that if I was your Jayson, I wouldn’t be goin’ away to Houseman. I’d be stayin’ right here at Northwestern.”

I frowned a little. Jayson had been recruited by a bunch

of big schools, including Northwestern University up the road in Evanston. He'd decided on Houseman, mostly because his daddy, James, (not Jim, do not ever call him Jim) had gone there.

But still.

I pushed that thought from my mind. People went to college all the time. It's part of life.

The thought roared back at me in italics.

*Yeah, babe. But how many of those people stick with their hometown honey when they go to a place where the girl-to-boy ratio is two-to-one? Don't you know that those college girls are gonna be fightin' over your man?*

I told the thought to shut her face. This time, she listened.

The date was a dream. Jayson fetched me in a limo and brought me roses. We talked and laughed all the way downtown. He wore black pants and a black cashmere V-neck sweater with the sleeves pushed up. In the restaurant, we sat next to each other instead of across. When we weren't using our forks and knives, we held hands. We ate seafood bisque, salad with blue cheese dressing, a Kobe beef filet with baby new potatoes and glazed carrots, and hand-cranked mango ice cream for dessert.

We talked more and looked into each other's eyes.

"I'm gonna miss you a lot," Jayson said when the last

dish had been taken away and he'd given his daddy's credit card to the waiter.

"I'm gonna miss you too."

"We gonna text, and Skype, and all that," he promised.

"Works for me," I told him.

He scrunched up his face. "Okay, there's something I gotta say, so I'm just gonna say it."

I had no idea what was coming, but I motioned with my hand for him to bring it.

"I just—I wish you'd gotten the grades to get into Houseman," he declared. "This'd be all different. We could be goin' there together."

I cast my eyes down at the white tablecloth, unable to meet his gaze. I felt a little ashamed at how crappy I'd done in high school. Okay. A lot ashamed.

"I know," I murmured.

"Why, Ronette?" he asked me. "You read more books than anyone. You write great. You even got better SATs than me. Why'd you have to mess up your GPA?"

I shook my head. A lump rose in my throat. "I don't know really. High school just felt like prison."

He cupped his hand under my chin and slowly turned my head. We were looking directly into each other's eyes.

"Do good at CCC," he told me. "Then you can transfer next year."

Next year. That felt like next century. Meanwhile, in twelve hours, he'd be on the way to the Dee Cee.

He signed the credit card slip. We went back to the waiting limo. It was in his arms in that limo that I made the decision. His parents were away for three weeks on Martha's Vineyard. His older sister lived in New York; his big brother worked for a movie company in Los Angeles.

The penthouse would be empty. We'd be alone. I wanted Jayson to know I really loved him. He wanted the same for me.

I called Kalina to tell her I wasn't coming home. She didn't argue.

Let me repeat: it was da bomb. I'm not sorry we did it. It kind of sealed us with him going away and me staying in Chicago.

I stayed overnight. We slept in each other's arms. I was with him in the morning when the cab arrived to take him to O'Hare and drop me at my place. We kissed again and again on my doorstep. I was strong and did not cry. Not even at the last, "I love you."

Not until the cab rolled away. Then, I wept.