



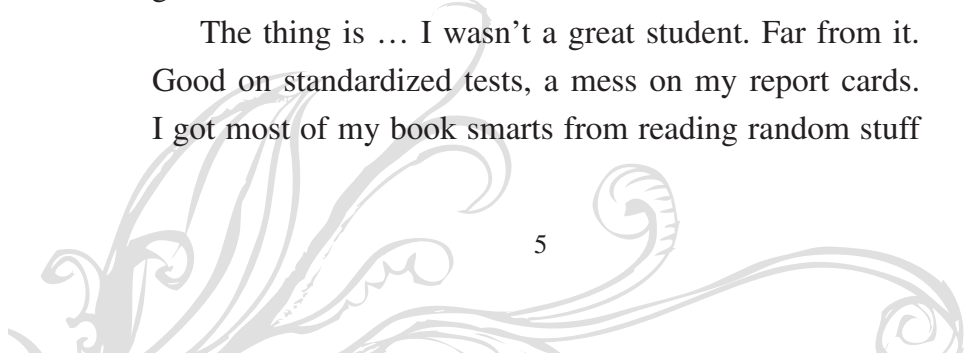
Prologue

I'm Ronette Bradley from Chicago. Hi.

I grew up a bunch of different places because my mom, Kalina, works for a hotel chain. It's just her and me. No dad. He was gone before I was born. I've worked in hotels too, cleaning rooms. That's what I was doing in late August when I got the surprise call letting me know that I was accepted to Houseman University, the historically black college in Washington, D.C. My boyfriend, Jayson, was already at Houseman.

If there was ever a scream of joy, it was mine when I got that call.

The thing is ... I wasn't a great student. Far from it. Good on standardized tests, a mess on my report cards. I got most of my book smarts from reading random stuff



that appealed to me. I generally ignored everything else. I was a whiz on black poetry and a dunce on the American Revolution. Still, Houseman took a chance on me. They offered a partial scholarship if I could come up with the rest of the chip. My mama assured me that she could pay it, so off I went to the Dee Cee. I was psyched, especially because my fave poet in the world was and is a Houseman professor.

Great, right? Oh-so-wrong-o.

My roommate turned out to be an unbelievable horror show, who thinks she's all that because she's the daughter of America's most famous black talk show hostess. Even worse, within five days of my coming to Houseman, I found Jayson in bed with her on the night of what I've come to call the Day From Hell.

Let me repeat that in case it somehow got by: I found Jayson in bed with her!

My mom didn't actually have the money for my tuition, but somehow she convinced my roommate's famous mother to pay it. I found that out on the Day From Hell. As for my runaway dad, I got his phone number on the Day From Hell too. I just had to decide whether to use it.

We'll pick up the story the morning after the Day From Hell. Day Six. Like I said, I'm Ronette Bradley from Chicago. Here's my campus confession.



Chapter One

The Day From Hell started sane. At lunchtime that day, I was just another Houseman University college freshman: out on the quad having lunch with her bestie, who in my case is Marta Cruz. It was great to be at Houseman, one of the two HBCUs—historically black colleges and universities—in Washington, D.C., and extra great because my boyfriend, Jayson Jones, was a freshman too. Like so many HBCUs, Houseman was two-thirds sisters, one-third brothers. I'd been worried sick that with him in the Dee Cee and me in Chicago, I'd get kicked. Now I was in the Dee Cee too. How cool was that?

Oh, I had some problems. First, my tuition was due at five o'clock. But I hadn't heard from the bursar, so I figured everything was cool. Second, my roommate was

Chyna. Yeah. *That* Chyna. Daughter of famous TV talk show host Crystal. Yeah, *that* Crystal, who's better known than Michelle Obama. Chyna and I hit it off like a Tomahawk cruise missile and a munitions factory. When she'd rapped one of my poems at a party and passed it off as her own, I was ready to kill her. I was also pretty sure that she'd gotten hold of my private poetry notebook, which I'd stupidly left on the Houseman quad.

The Day From Hell kicked into gear by mid-afternoon. By midnight, here's what had happened:

- I found out that my mother never had tuition money. She was lying.

- My mother had called the father I'd never spoken to, to ask him if he could pay it.

- He said no. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with me.

- My mother had called Crystal to ask if Crystal would pay my tuition. No lie.

- Crystal said yes.

- I'd found all this out by surprise. No one was planning on telling me anything.

- I'd walked in on Chyna and Jayson in my dorm room. Jayson said it wasn't what I thought, but what else could it be?

I got sick after finding Chyna and Jayson. Literally. Barfed my guts out. At least Chyna had the courtesy to

sleep somewhere else that night. She'd left the room after telling me I should fight for Jayson. Ha! I couldn't even think of doing that when her sheets were still warm. And when I breathed deep, I could smell the mix of Chyna and Jayson. The malodor led to another donation to the bowl. But I had decided to stick it out. Not to leave Houseman.

Say what you will about me, but I am a stubborn-ass black girl.

I brushed my teeth, washed my wrecked face, and took a quick look at my phone. There were a slew of texts and voice mails. From Jayson and my mother mostly, but others too. *Fokken* that. (*Fokken* comes from an old-Dutch word meaning "to thrust." Guess how we use it *now*.)

I got ready for bed. What else was I going to do? Write a poem? I didn't think I could even hold a pen. I had just pulled on an old Chicago Bears T-shirt when there was a knock on the door.

Rap!

Then two more. *Rap! Rap!*

My stomach lurched. Who could it be? Jayson? Oh God. Not him. Please, not him. I couldn't see him, let alone talk to him.

"Ronette? You in there?"

Female voice, which meant unless Jayson had undergone an appendage amputation, it wasn't him. I knew who

it was. My bestie, Marta. I'd bumped into her after discovering the Chyna-Jayson two-backed beast.

"Coming!" I called.

I opened the door. There she stood. Marta is petite—no more than five feet tall, with wild curls, dark eyes, and the whitest smile you'll ever see. She's black but with a spicy mix of Cuban. She grew up all over the world since her father is an army officer. She wore red pajamas and fuzzy slippers. In her right hand was a container of Haagen-Dazs butter pecan. In her left hand, two spoons.

"Figured you'd be awake," she said. "Figured you needed sugar therapy. Where's your bee-yotch roomie?"

I shook my head. "Dunno. Maybe she and Jayson are off doing an encore."

"Don't think about it," she ordered. "Just invite me in."

I did. She thrust the ice cream container and a spoon at me. "Eat. You don't want dry heaves."

"How did you know I was barfing?"

"You think you're the only girl in the world who ever found out her boyfriend was cheating?" she asked rhetorically. "And no, I don't want to talk about me now." She folded her arms. "I'm not sitting down till you take a bite."

Marta Cruz comes from a military family. She is not one to be crossed. When she says eat, the only proper response is, how much?

I opened the ice cream and took a spoonful.

“Great,” she pronounced, and then plopped on Chyna’s bed. When she realized who had been there, she bounced up. “Ewww!”

I didn’t smile.

“Can I tell a joke?” Marta asked.

“Is it funny?”

“Well. Here goes. A skeleton walks into a bar. He goes up to the bartender and says, ‘Gimme a beer ... and a mop.’ ”

I made a face. “That isn’t funny.”

“Neither is what happened to you,” Marta told me. “I’m not here to give you advice. Or even make you laugh. I just want you to know if my bestie can’t sleep because of bull crap, I’m not sleeping either.”

Her words touched me big-time. I started to cry. At first, little spits of tears like raindrops in an April shower. Then the skies of my soul opened up. I’m not sure when Marta wrapped her arms around me. But I just let go. I cried. I cried until I had no tears left. It was too much. But it was not too much for my bestie. Even in my sadness, I hoped there would be a time when I could be the rock for her that she was being for me.

I sat back and wiped my puffy eyes. “Is there any more ice cream?”

She handed me the carton, now full of butter pecan slosh. I took it, walked to Chyna's bed, and dumped the ice cream goop onto her custom-made, Ikat-print silk pillows and pink 1,500-thread-count sheets.

It was an empty, childish, and futile gesture. Dammit if it didn't make me feel better.



Chapter Two

To my shock, I slept till ten thirty Thursday morning. Good thing I didn't have any morning classes.

I had a blissful four seconds of bleariness while I got my bearings. Then the memory of the Day From Hell came flying in like five rounds from a Glock. I staggered to the toilet and retched again. At least I didn't have to deal with Chyna. She hadn't come home the night before. There was now a dry riverbed of butter pecan ice cream on her pillow and sheets.

I pulled it together enough to look at myself in the mirror. In the best of times, I can be cute. Light skin for a black girl, dark eyes, and a long swoopy neck that makes folks think my people come from Ethiopia. My nose is