



Prologue

If two-thirds of us are sisters, then why are we still called college freshmen? At least that's the sister-brother ratio where I go to school—Houseman University, the historically black college in the Dee Cee, a city otherwise known as Washington D.C., our nation's capital.

Hi. Sorry for that little rant. I'm Ronette Bradley. It's good to be writing again.

Last time I checked in was six weeks ago, in mid-September. I wrote then how I wasn't ready to get back together with my hometown ex-boyfriend, Jayson Jones. Not after he'd just about hit it with my roommate. I sort of believed Jayson when he said it wasn't his fault, but that didn't make a difference. I wanted to fly solo for a while. There was another Houseman brother interested in me

too. Cornell London, who was head of the campus literary magazine. A senior. But I wasn't ready to make Cornell my man either.

I felt good about being single, even though the sister-to-brother ratio at Houseman (which everyone called “da House”) was ridiculous. If a man at da House wanted a sister to keep his bed warm at night, the odds were—umm, sorry, Katniss—forever in his favor. Even the funny-looking Houseman brothers with stick-out ears and nose hair had girlfriends.

Fact was, at that point in my freshman (there's that word again!) year, I was doing my best to do right by myself. I was the daughter of a hotel desk clerk, and my roommate was the daughter of America's most famous afternoon TV talk show host. Chyna, daughter of Crystal. Yes. *That* Chyna and *that* Crystal. I know. Lucky me.

The schoolwork was kicking my ass, but my new bestie, Marta Cruz, was teaching me how to keep up. I was also the only freshman enrolled in a writing seminar taught by my favorite poet in the world, Shaaban Lowe. My poetry was getting a lot better. Chyna had gotten her hands on one of my poems and rapped it as her own in public. Then she rapped another poem without my permission at a huge sorority event. It put us on the verge of a hip-hop deal. No lie.

One more thing that's relevant. Da House has a huge BGLO thing happening. BGLO stands for Black Greek Letter Organization. Sororities and fraternities. BGLOs have a lot to do with what I'm about to write. We pick up the action in da House in the early part of November.

Fasten your seat belt. Here comes the latest campus confession.



Chapter One

Yo, yo, yo! Come in! Come on in and make yo’selves at home!”

The guy standing at the front door of the hotel suite was just a little older than Chyna and me, but a total shrimp. Maybe five five. Slim, maybe a hundred and fifteen pounds. He had huge glasses and a little goatee. Besides the glasses and the goatee, he wasn’t wearing much. Just a white terry cloth robe monogrammed with the logo of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in downtown Dee Cee.

It was a Monday morning in early November. The guy in the robe was Treyman Brown, head of A&R—artists and repertoire—for the big Los Angeles hip-hop label Brownout Records. Brownout was *way* famous. Their artists won Soul Train and Grammy Awards every year,

and Treyman was the guy in charge of finding and signing new talent to the label. His father, Heyman Brown, owned the company. Treyman had graduated from da House a few years before. That's why he attended a post-football game party several weeks ago and heard Chyna rap a poem I'd written called "You Ain't Dat Special."

That she'd performed it without my permission didn't bother Treyman. The only person it bothered had been me. I'd lanced Chyna a new one afterward, but not before Treyman tracked us down and said he wanted to meet with us to talk about a deal at his label.

That's what this morning's meeting at his hotel suite was going to be about, presumably. Luckily, my first class wasn't till noon. As for Chyna, she had Spanish and a biology lab on Mondays. Being Chyna, she cut them without a second thought.

Chyna and I had come downtown by cab. As usual, she out-flew me in the looks department. She's five eight and more than just fly. She's got long black hair to her butt; mine goes a little beyond my shoulders. I'm allegedly cute in a girl-next-door kind of way, with a thin nose, long neck, brown eyes, and a better back than front. All my threads can fit in two suitcases. Chyna is drop-dead, stop-traffic, planes-crashing gorgeous. Caramel skin, no need for a Wonder bra for her substantial

attention-getters, and has more designer clothes than can fit in a dorm closet.

I was in worn jeans and a Houseman T-shirt. Chyna wore a crazy print dress from Roberto Cavalli. Guess who looked better.

Treyman, though, proved to be an equal-opportunity ogler as he welcomed us into his luxury suite.

“Yo, yo, yo!” he repeated. “Come in, ladies! Come in and make yo’selves at home!”

Chyna, as usual, spoke first. “Thanks, Treyman. I’m glad you could set this up.”

“Nah, nah, sorry it took so long. Almost two months, I know. Busy being successful, you know how it is.”

He ushered us down a long hallway and into a gorgeous white-on-white living room. We passed two bedrooms. In one of the beds I saw two hot girls. Neither wore a stitch. I forced myself not to pass judgment. It wasn’t easy.

The room was filled with the fallout of a night of partying, but there was a sumptuous buffet laid out on the living room coffee table. Crystal glassware, fine china, a gorgeous coffee carafe, plus trays of croissants, brioche, scrambled eggs on a silver platter that steamed over a gentle Sterno flame, eggs Benedict, and sliced fresh fruit. I wasn’t at all hungry, though. I’d run three miles after I woke up—I’d been running every morning since

September, though I'd never really done anything athletic before in my life—and eaten a healthy oatmeal breakfast at the McMaster dorm cafeteria.

We sat on the plush white couch and expected Treyman to join us. I hoped he was wearing something under that robe. Otherwise, Chyna and I might have been treated to an exhibition of the Treyman crown jewels, which I was not interested in. That's not what happened. Instead, the Brownout records dude moved to the center of the living room and started to rap, shaking and pointing like he was on stage at the Apollo.

*You—you crying in your pillow
 'bout the day you had
 You feel sad, been had,
 walked over by a cad!
 So alone, no one to talk to,
 all the good parts are through
 Like you're the only one in the world
 this ever happened to
 But you know that's not true,
 boohoo, boohoo!*

I grinned despite myself. That was one of the verses from “You Ain’t Dat Special,” the piece that had gotten

him so excited at the party. I'd written it. I was damn proud of it too. Best thing I'd written, for sure. It had come from my heart after a long talk I'd had with my writing teacher, Shaaban Lowe. I'd been in a bad way, with a lot of tough stuff going on in my life. Shaaban had said my problems were real, for sure. But they weren't that special. Plenty of other people were suffering too. That's what I'd written the poem about.

"I love it, love it, love it," Treyman declared. "I can't believe it's taken me so long to get wit'chu all."

He finally sat. Fortunately, he wore boxer-briefs under his robe. Unfortunately, they were red-and-white polka-dots. I had a hard time not giggling. "What you think of the suite, Ronette? Sweet suite, right?"

"It's ... really nice," I ventured.

Treyman didn't know that before I'd come to Houseman, I'd cleaned hotel rooms at the same place where my mother worked, the Apex Airporter out by O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. The Airporter is several levels down from the Ritz-Carlton. I mentally calculated how long it would take to clean this suite as I took in the aftermath of Treyman's night before. Champagne and beer bottles. Overturned glasses and cups. Cigarettes in ashtrays. Random articles of clothing. I shuddered. It made me want to put a towel between me and the fancy white couch.

“You better get used to it.” He pointed at me. “Because when Brownout is done wit’chu and Chyna here, you gonna be livin’ in places like this. I mean, livin’!”

“I like that idea,” Chyna chimed in.

There was a rustle from behind Treyman as the two girls from the bedroom scampered across the hallway and into a bathroom. We could hear laughter as the door shut behind them.

Treyman laughed. “Well, not ’zactly like this one. When you be Treyman Brown, you get some fine perks!”

He laughed again at his own lame humor. I was not impressed. Not by the girls and not by the way he talked. That was what a Houseman education had done for him? Chyna saw my discontent. She flashed a look in my direction that told me to keep my opinions to myself.

“So, tell us, Treyman,” she asked. Her voice was soft, almost seductive. “What do we need to do to get there?”

“It’s easy. Just do ’zactly what I say,” the record exec said.

I noticed that the food and beverages were going untouched. What a waste. It would all get tossed. I picked up a slice of apple and nibbled it, just for something to do.

Treyman leaned forward. “Okay. Lemme be more specific. Ya’ll know Club G?”