



Prologue

There's nothing like Chicago in early January. The icy wind that starts in Alaska blows west across the plains with nothing to stop it. By the time the wind reaches Lake Michigan, it shreds like a serrated-edge shiv. If there happens to be moisture in the air, snow and ice fall sideways. Chill penetrates like the Devil. Even inside a room at the Apex Airporter Hotel, a quick look out the window can give a girl the shivers. It seems like spring will never come.

Hi again. I'm Ronette Bradley from Chicago. There is good news and bad news to my starting this story at the Apex Airporter. The bad news: I was cleaning rooms, which is how I had earned extra money before I went off to college at Houseman University in Washington, D.C. My mother, Kalina, worked at the Apex front desk, so we

were kind of a package deal. The good news: I didn't have to clean rooms for the rest of my life. By the end of the second week of January, there were just a few more days before I went back to da House in the Dee Cee, which is what everyone who went to school called Houseman and our nation's capital. Houseman is a historically black college and university (HBCU). I felt lucky to be a freshman there.

There is more good news. My bestie from da House, Marta Cruz, had come to Chicago for part of winter break. I got her outfitted in a housekeeping uniform so she could join me on my room-cleaning detail. Marta had a Latino last name but looked African American. Petite, with a tight body and wild curls, I was used to seeing her in one of her endless supplies of short skirts or dresses. So it was pretty funny to see her in a hotel maid's uniform complete with old-lady hairnet and sturdy shoes. I kept threatening to take pictures and send them to her boyfriend, Kevyn. Me? I was used to the housekeeping uni from having worked at the Apex Airporter so much. Marta? Well, let's just say it made her want to stay in school.

It made me want to stay in school too. But staying in school was not guaranteed. Neither of us had received our first semester grades. Admin, which is what everyone called the Houseman administration, had announced that when

first semester grades were prepared, we'd get a robo-call. Then we could go online to campus e-mail and download those grades in a PDF file. Marta wasn't much worried about her grades, but she didn't have to be. She was a kick-ass student. I couldn't say the same for myself. I knew I'd been lucky that Houseman had accepted me at the last minute. My high school GPA had been a disaster; Admin had made it clear that they were taking a chance on me.

I was dreading the robo-call. It would come, I knew. I just didn't know what I'd see when I opened that PDF. I'd taken freshman English, French, American history, psychology, and an upper-class creative writing seminar. The only grade I felt confident about was in creative writing. Finals had been a bitch. I had been so keyed up it was hard for me to eat. I'd actually lost a few pounds. Since I hadn't gained the "freshman fifteen," the Finals High-Anxiety Diet Plan had left me with loose jeans, zero cleavage, and a neck that appeared to be a little too long.

In case I'd totally bombed my classes, I did have a slim possibility at an alternative career path that didn't involve rags, cleaning supplies, and vacuuming crumbs off hotel room floors. At da House, my assigned roommate had been Chyna. Yes, *the* Chyna, daughter of TV talk show host Crystal, who's just about the most famous black woman in America, Michelle Obama or no Michelle Obama. Chyna

is my total opposite. She is a party girl; I'm not a big partier. Chyna is outgoing; I'm fairly shy. Chyna drinks like a fish and gets herself addicted to various narcotics. For me, sparkling wine at New Year's is a big deal. Even when she was in high school, Chyna was a tabloid queen. I liked my low profile.

It had been hate at first sight.

But a couple of big things had happened with Chyna during our first semester. Again, it was that mix of good news and bad news. The bad news was that I caught her in bed with my then-boyfriend, Jayson. Jayson claimed that nothing happened, and Chyna backed up this claim, but the incident had been enough for me to kick Jayson to the curb. The good news was, after proving herself to me, I was able to work with her in a hip-hop duo, where I was the main writer and she was the main performer.

Okay. I get it. That Sister #1 would join forces with Sister #2, who she suspects had hit it with her then-boyfriend, sounds wack, I know. Stick with me for a while. It will all make sense, I guarantee it.

Anyway, Brownout Records got interested in our act and promised us a showcase in front of Heyman Brown, the dude who runs the label. So, if I wrecked my finals, maybe music would be my way out of cleaning toilets and nasty bedspreads for the rest of my life.

I knew exactly what to do with all these feelings. I wrote about them. That's what my writing professor at Houseman, Shaaban Lowe, always told me to do. He was my favorite poet, and I'd been blown away to learn he was teaching at Houseman. I'd talked my way into his writing class—that wasn't supposed to allow freshmen—and I was thrilled to see he was offering it again. I signed up immediately—with Shaaban's permission. As a result of working with him, I'd been accepted into the group that produced the Houseman literary journal, *The House*, and even had one of my poems published when the journal came out in December.

Writing is what I really loved to do. That I could study with him was da bomb. Call 'em poems, call 'em rhymes, call 'em whatever you want. Shaaban—he insisted that we students call him that instead of something stuck up like Professor Lowe—had made me a much better writer.

There were a lot of *ifs* in my life. There was one definite *then*. If I flunked out, and if the hip-hop thing didn't work out, *then* I'd be right back here at the Apex Airporter. My hands would be raw from cleanser, and I'd have nasty thick-soled shoes on my feet so they didn't get soaked when I scrubbed down showers and tubs. Once again I'd have my own personal cleaning cart.

If I flunked out, I would major in dusting and minor in vacuuming. Most likely for the rest of my life.

So that's where I was at three days before classes began again at da House. There was a lot I didn't know. What I also didn't know was that the weeks that followed would be some of the craziest of my life. As I always say, fasten your seatbelts and put on an extra pair of panties. Or Depends, if you don't feel like doing laundry. Here comes the latest campus confession.



Chapter One

That Friday before Marta and I were to fly back to da House, assuming that my grades were good enough to pass, I pointed at the shower floor in room 210 of the Apex Airporter. The pink tiles were covered by an unholy mess of hair and soap scum. I didn't want to think about what went on in that bathroom. All I knew was that the couple who had checked out had left a ten-buck tip on their bed for the housekeepers, and that I was a trained professional. Marta and I were going to leave 210 spotless.

"Clean that," I ordered.

Marta blanched. "Do I have to?"

"Low girl on the totem pole gets the grossest jobs," I said. "I was that girl for years. Now it's you. So do it."

“Is that any way to treat your bestie?” Marta flashed me her best smile.

“I’m going to have to do the bed,” I reminded her. “No telling what is under that plaid comforter.”

Marta nodded. “You have a point. Is that why they make them plaid? So you can’t really see the ... um ... dirt?”

“Now you’re thinking like a pro. Just remember that no one who works in a hotel ever sits on the bedspread.” I bent down to retie one of my sturdy shoes.

Marta took one more look at the shower floor fallout and scrunched up her face. “Can we just call in the National Guard and let them take it out with a tank shell?”

I shook my head. “There’s a better way. It’s called *your two hands*.”

“Got it.”

God bless Marta. She grabbed her scrub brush, sponges, and cleanser, and waded—I think that’s the right word—into the shower stall. Me? I went back into the bedroom and yanked back the bedspread. I almost jumped for joy. The bed didn’t even seem slept in.

The Apex Airporter was a long way from the Dee Cee, a city that has a lot of international visitors and many amazing hotels. I’d been lucky during my first semester to have visited a few of them. The Gamma sorority, which was making a play for Marta, Chyna, and—shockingly!—me,

had put on a party after a big football game in one of the nicest ballrooms at the InterContinental. I'd also met Chyna's mother in a penthouse suite at the Four Seasons, and Treyman Brown, the head of A&R (artist and repertoire, which is a fancy way of saying he was in charge of searching for and maybe signing new talent) at Brownout Records, in a similar suite at the Ritz-Carlton.

The Apex could not compete with any of these. We claimed to be designed for the business traveler, but most of the people who came through were weary tourists looking for a place to nap and shower between flights. At this price point, tips for the maids tended to be overlooked. That's why the money that had been left for Marta and me was so welcome.

I tackled the bed, changing the unused sheets in no time. Other maids might have let them ride, but the tip had motivated me. I squirted generic cleanser on all the surfaces and wiped them down, then made sure that the desk was stocked with a yellow pages phone directory (did anyone even use them anymore?), a Bible, a small notepad, and a pen. I wiped down the TV set and the remote (it is amazing how many germs take up residence on the keypad), the mirrors, and the windows. I dry dusted the woodwork, the lights, and the outlets, emptied the trash, and then broke out my vacuum.