

CHAPTER I

With an Angry Birds backpack full of books strapped to her back, a pretty brown-skinned fifth grader raced out of the school building at the sound of the dismissal bell. Her bag of books bounced against her as she dodged other students who were just as excited about the last day of school.

Lyric stood at the sidewalk and scanned the student pickup line for her mother's navy-blue Hyundai. Her mom was never late so it didn't take long for Lyric to spot the familiar car. She took off towards the car then yanked the front door open.

"Hi Mommy! Guess what Miss Banks gave me!"

Kendra smiled at her young daughter's enthusiasm. Since birth, Lyric was a ball of energy. She never stopped moving and she developed quickly. She was crawling at six months, walking at seven, and said her first word at nine and a half months.

Lyric was tall for her age. Her stepfather wanted to get her into sports at an early age, but Lyric was more interested in indoor activities. She was a girly-girl from the start. She hated getting her hands dirty, and the idea of skinned knees horrified her. Lyric was more content reading a book from her growing collection or continuing her school learnings by watching videos on YouTube.

Kendra nurtured her daughter's yearning for knowledge. They spent hours every weekend at the local library or visiting museums, but she wanted to make sure her daughter was a well-rounded kid, a well-adjusted child that got along well with other kids. She wouldn't allow Lyric to be cooped up in her room all day reading books way above her grade level.

"What did Miss Banks give you?" Kendra asked while pulling out of the pickup line.

"Look!"

Lyric opened her backpack wide enough for her mom to view the dozen paperback books stuffed inside.

"Wow! She gave you all of those?"

"Yup," Lyric nodded emphatically. "She said she had to get rid of the old books to make room for the new ones the library is getting next year."

Lyric was beaming with joy over her book haul, books written by Hemingway, Salinger, Toni Morrison. These were upper grade books that the seventh and eighth grade Honors Students were reading at her middle school. Most fifth graders wouldn't have picked up a single one of those books. Lyric was proud to add them to her collection.

Despite her own joy, she noticed her mother didn't share her same enthusiasm as she normally would. For the last few weeks, Kendra's mood had been sadder than usual. Lyric knew it had to do with

her trip to the emergency room but Kendra refused talk about it with her young daughter. Kendra tried her best to hide her sadness from her child, but Lyric always could tell when something was wrong with her mother. They were too close for her not to notice. Lyric decided to change the subject. Maybe talking about her upcoming vacation would cheer Kendra up.

“Mommy, did you talk to Daddy yet?”

Kendra continued to keep her eyes on the road, staring at the small bit of traffic starting to build up on the city streets. Her head nodded slightly. That slight movement sent Lyric’s ten-year-old hopes soaring.

Lyric’s father, Legend Harrington, lived in New York City. She’d never been there in person but she travelled there often through books, movies, and music. New York City sounded like a magnificent place, so full of excitement and energy. New York City was the birthplace of hip-hop, based on what Legend told her. Both of her parents were born there. A lot of Lyric’s family members still lived there, cousins she hadn’t met in person yet.

When he could get the time off work, Legend drove from New York to Washington Heights, Ohio to spend time with his daughter. Their visits were usually two-day visits and a whole week in the summer. Lyric adored her father and longed for more time with him. He was such an interesting person. A military man who travelled the world with the Army. He liked to read and listen to music just like her. He liked to go fishing and their summer vacation would usually be to some place where he could rent a boat and they could fish on a lake together.

Lyric had friends who got to see their fathers way more often than she did, but she was the only one who could say that her father lived in New York City. To her group of friends, New York seemed like a far-off fantasy place. Now, if she got her way, she might just get to visit her dad this summer instead of him coming to her. Kendra married her long-time boyfriend, Aaron Hawkins, about a year ago. They didn’t get to take a honeymoon. After the emergency room visit, Aaron suggested they take that trip to Europe and let Lyric stay with her father for the summer. Lyric had already started planning the trip in her head without knowing her father’s answer or if Kendra would actually agree to let her go.

“Did he say I could come?”

Kendra didn’t answer until the car rolled to a stop at a red light. Then she turned her head towards her eager daughter.

“Why do you want to go to New York? You don’t know anything about where your dad lives. It’s nothing like here.”

“Is it a bad place?” Lyric asked.

Her mother’s answer was quick and sharp. “Yes. I worked extremely hard to get out of there. You were just two years old when we were able to move to Washington Heights so you don’t know how bad it

was. Your father doesn't live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood like ours. Do you know what the projects are?"

"Yes, ma'am. Dominique and Andre live in the projects on the southside," she replied, naming her two best school friends.

"Oak Park is nothing compared to Bittman," Kendra scoffed. "I don't know why he still lives there. He can afford to move. He makes enough to live somewhere else. If you go there and hate it, you won't be able to come home any time soon since Aaron and I will be in Europe."

"So, Daddy said yes?"

"Of course, he said yes. Legend wouldn't turn down a chance to spend the entire summer with you. Do you really want to go up there?"

Despite her mother's warning, Lyric wasn't budging. Her daddy wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. She frowned at the way her mother talked about Legend living in the projects. It wasn't fair for her to think less of him because he didn't make as much money as Aaron. Everybody knows that people who work at the banks make more money than the people who work at the post office.

Her teacher, Mrs. Gordon, always told the students that all jobs are important, even the ones that don't pay that well. Lyric was proud that her daddy worked for the post office. She loved Miss Tammy, the lady who delivered their packages and mail. People at the post office were nice. Besides, how would Kendra get all the stuff she ordered from Amazon if people like Legend didn't deliver them? She was smart enough to not say that out loud though. If she made her mother mad, she might not get to go to New York City. She promised herself to be on her best behavior until she was safely inside her father's house.

"Mommy, I really want to go. I don't get to see Daddy a lot."

"Fine." Kendra sighed in defeat. "I guess you'll be fine. You can fly to New York with us then. I'll book your ticket when we get home."

A week after school ended, Aaron, Kendra, and Lyric arrived at La Guardia Airport. Lyric could barely sit still during the ninety-minute flight. More than once, Kendra had to place her hand on her daughter's knee to keep her from shaking it or jumping up mid-flight. After deboarding, Lyric was a good thirty feet ahead of them as they walked to baggage claim. Kendra and Aaron were spending the night in the city to kick off their honeymoon after Legend picked up Lyric.

In the backseat of the Uber, Lyric leaned across Aaron and Kendra to get a better look at the sights of Manhattan. She gasped in awe. Manhattan looked exactly like it did in the movies! Yellow taxi cabs and a sea of people on every street.

"Mom! Look at that! That's the Radio City Music Hall! I saw that on TV!"

“Look, it’s FAO Schwarz! Do you think Daddy will take me there? I don’t want anything; I just want to go inside.”

“Mooommm! Is that Central Park? Please tell me that’s Central Park!”

“Lyric,” Kendra scolded her after ten minutes of rapid-fire questions. “You’re going to be here for ninety days. Chill out, please. You’ll have to ask your father to bring you back here. Enjoy it while you can. Queens isn’t anything like Manhattan.”

“I know,” Lyric replied, not affected at all by her mother’s negativity.

Lyric knew about Queens. Her favorite rappers were from Queens. Nicki Minaj, Nas, and 50 Cent were the most played music on her iPod. Before leaving Ohio, Lyric watched a video about Bittman Housing Community on YouTube. She understood why her mother was apprehensive about sending her ten-year-old to live there for three months. Lyric wasn’t afraid. Legend told her there were a lot of girls her age in his building, girls she could make friends with. She couldn’t wait to meet them. Plus, her dad had bought a new bed for her and painted the second bedroom in his apartment for her. He bought a bookcase and stocked it with books he got at a library sale. He even got Wi-fi for her. Legend was just as excited to have her there as she was to be there. It didn’t matter that Queens wasn’t like Manhattan; she’d never been to Queens either.

Lyric would have liked to go directly to her father’s place when the plane landed but Legend was at work. Even though he was only working half a day, it would be awhile before he met them at the hotel. While Aaron and Kendra checked into the hotel, Lyric rummaged through her carry-on and found the box containing her brand new, her very own iPhone. She didn’t know any kid her age who had an iPhone, but Aaron and Kendra insisted that she have a way of contacting them if anything happened. Kendra was sure that she wouldn’t be able to make an international call from her dad’s apartment.

Lyric hadn’t gotten a chance to set up the phone yet. They stopped by the Verizon store on the way to the airport where Aaron bought three of the new iPhones. She couldn’t wait to turn it on. The commercials made the phone seem amazing, much better than her mother and stepfather’s Blackberries. They didn’t even have games on their phones.

“Lyric,” Kendra hissed through clenched teeth. “Put that phone back in that bag. Wait until we get to the room.”

But when they got to their room, it was wait until after lunch then right as they were finishing lunch in the hotel restaurant, Legend showed up and the iPhone became an afterthought. Lyric practically flew into his arms like Supergirl.

As with most people of color, Legend’s skin was the first thing noticed when he walked into the room. He and his daughter shared the same skin tone, the rich chestnut brown with red undertones was

passed down from his very “light but all the way black” mom and his dad who never let his deep brown skin be seen as a hindrance.

Legend was the type of man that made people take a second look when he past them. The Army had instilled a confidence in him that allowed him to walk into any room with his head held high. His height and air of confidence is what attracted women of all shapes, sizes, and ethnicities to the ruggedly good-looking man.

Legend had a way about him that turned smart women stupid...that’s what Lyric’s grandmother always said about him. Kendra always laughed and agreed with her mom. She knew that Legend was attracted to smart women because he was the most intelligent man she’d ever met. When they were together, they had deep conversations about the world, politics, society, relationships...everything. His opinions were always well researched. He wasn’t the kind of person who followed the pack. He was a natural leader. Lyric’s thirst for knowledge came from him. It was one of his best traits.

“Baby girl!” Legend exclaimed and swung his daughter around. The smile on his face lit up the already bright restaurant as he kissed her forehead.

“I am so glad to see you!”

“Me too! And I get to stay all summer.”

“That’s right.”

Legend put Lyric down and smiled at Kendra, who refused to smile back. Instead, she reached under the table and held Aaron’s hand. It bothered her that seeing her ex always brought back the memory of what they used to have.

“How are you, Kendra?”

“We’re fine. Really excited about our honeymoon. Aaron, this is Legend.”

Legend reached out to shake Aaron’s hand. Aaron was the polar opposite of the father of Kendra’s only child. Half-black and half-Hispanic, Aaron wasn’t as tall as Legend and didn’t exude the same confidence. Legend took a minute to size up the man who called himself Lyric’s stepfather and quickly concluded that Kendra had found the man she always wanted, a man that she could boss around, a man that loved her more than she loved him.

“Nice to finally meet you, brother,” Legend stated.

“Same here. Lyric’s always talking about you. Thank you for allowing her to stay the summer. She’s really excited.”

“Well, I’ve been wanting her to come up here for years but...” He broke off the sentence because everyone at the table knew why Kendra didn’t want Lyric in New York.

“Do you want to stay and have lunch?” Aaron asked.

Legend shook his head. “No, but thanks anyway. Gonna swing by my mom’s crib. She can’t wait to see her grandbaby.” He looked at the half-eaten cheeseburger and fries on Lyric’s plate. “You want to finish that, Little Lady?”

“I’m full,” Lyric answered even though she wasn’t. “Mommy, can I go get my stuff?”

Kendra nodded and handed Legend the room key. “You can take her up to the room. Come back in here so we can say goodbye though.”

As soon as Legend and Lyric were out of earshot, Aaron sat back down and looked at his wife.

“So, that’s him, huh?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

“Did you tell him what happened?”

“He knows. I told him not to tell Lyric. You know how bad she wants a sibling. Telling her that she almost had one will just make her upset.”

“She’s almost eleven, Kendra. She’ll be able to handle it. You know she worries about you.”

“She doesn’t worry about anything when she’s with her father. I’ll tell her when I’m ready.”

Aaron knew from his wife’s tone to let it go. They’d had the same discussion two other times and Kendra wasn’t changing her position. If she could avoid it, she’d probably never tell Lyric about the miscarriage.

When Lyric and Legend returned to the restaurant dragging Lyric’s two suitcases, Kendra wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her tightly. Her eyes welled with tears at the thought of leaving her daughter in New York for three months, the longest they’d ever been away from each other.

“Don’t cry, Mommy. I’m going to be fine.”

“I know. I’m just going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you too. But we can use Facetime now that we have new phones.”

Kendra tearfully looked up at Legend. “Please don’t let nothing happen to my baby.”

“She’s my baby too. I will never let anything happen to her.”

“By Mommy. Bye Aaron!” Lyric called as she dragged her father towards the restaurant exit. She couldn’t wait to get in his car and travel through the city she dreamed of all the time.

CHAPTER 2

Legend sat at the kitchen table watching his daughter. Her long legs stretched out on the sofa. She showered and put her pajamas back on. After scarfing down a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Lyric grabbed a book and laid out on the sofa with her headphones on and started reading.

Lyric had made herself comfortable in his modest apartment in just two days. Her mother had warned him that if she got her hands on some books, she'd never leave the apartment. So far, Kendra's warning seemed true. Legend had just put *Slaughterhouse Five* back on the bookshelf when Lyric discovered his Vonnegut collection. Vonnegut was advanced reading for a ten-year-old but so was the Koran and the Holy Bible, which Lyric had finished last year. It took her a year to finish each one because she had many questions. When her mother couldn't answer them, she called Legend and they would spend hours discussing the prophets and disciples, the teachings of Jesus, and the commandments.

But it was Saturday and time for Lyric to get out of the house. He had errands to take care of and Courtney across the hall had volunteered to let Lyric hang with her little girl Giselle. Lyric needed little girls to play with, girls her age that didn't go to the same school as her and did not share the same lifestyle. Legend suspected that Lyric was being too sheltered by her mother and stepfather. Moving out of Queens had turned Kendra soft. Growing up black in America was hard for girls and boys. Legend may not be able to teach Lyric how to be a woman, but he could definitely toughen her up and teach her about being black in America.

Courtney's daughter, Giselle, was the perfect influence that Lyric needed during her stay Bittman. Giselle, was a couple months older than Lyric and had just turned eleven. Despite her age, she knew how to navigate the projects. She could keep Lyric out of major trouble and still teach her a few things.

"Lyric," Legend said from across the room. "I gotta run some errands for a few hours so I'm gonna take you over Courtney's house. She's gonna keep her eye on you while I'm out and you can hang out with Giselle. You met her the other day. You cool with that?"

Lyric looked up from the book she was reading and sat up on the couch. Her face was scrunched up as if she smelled something funny. She didn't want to complain but she was really into her book and doubted that Miss Courtney or her daughter could or would appreciate Kurt Vonnegut.

"I can't just stay here?" Lyric asked. "I mean, Mommy lets me stay home for a couple hours while she runs errands."

"Your mother lives in the suburbs in Ohio," Legend replied. "Y'all probably don't even lock your doors. This is the projects in Queens. I'm not leaving my ten-year-old home by herself in the projects. You ain't even allowed to walk around this motherfucker without me. You hear me?"

“Mommy said that you don’t have to live in the projects. She said that you make enough money to live somewhere else nicer.”

“That may be the case,” Legend said. “But my plan is my plan. Your mother and her opinion don’t matter to me. When I get ready to leave Bittman, I’ll leave. Until then, get dressed.”

As her father ordered, albeit reluctantly, Lyric closed her book and went to her room to change out of her pajamas. Her bedroom at her dad’s was much smaller than her bedroom in Ohio. For Lyric, it was just as nice. Legend had painted the walls light blue, no girly girl pink for her. Framed black and white prints of the works of his favorite photographers hung on the walls. Gordon Parks’ American Gothic, Gandhi and the Spinning Wheel by Margaret Bourke-White, Neil Leife’s infamous photograph of Muhammed Ali when he knocked out Sonny Liston, and of course, John Dominis’ Black Power Salute graced the four walls of Lyric’s bedroom and she loved it.

Her bedroom window gave her a view of the courtyard that was more brown dirt than green grass. The grass grew in trampled patches. The playground with a rusty swing set and monkey bars that had seen better days didn’t appear safe for children to play on. Night or day, there was always a lot of activity in the courtyard. Bittman, she learned from YouTube, was one of the largest housing projects in the city. That’s why there were always people outside, always loud conversations in the hallways and outside. Kids everywhere. Teenagers hanging out on the courtyard and on the unkept basketball court. Lyric saw all of this from her bedroom window. She’d only been in New York for a little over forty-eight hours and had spent most of that time staring out the window, fascinated by the new world she was now a part of, at least for the next three months.

At home in Ohio, her bedroom was pretty and she wasn’t too young to understand that the color and cheeriness of her bedroom reflected the environment in which her mother was raising her. Here in Queens, her bedroom reflected her environment too...a little less cheery and a lot more serious.

Sitting on her dresser were two framed 5x7 photos. One was of her when she was just a baby, sitting on Legend’s lap with her mother standing beside them. Lyric thought Legend and Kendra looked good together, but Kendra looked much happier in pictures with Aaron.

The other picture was of Legend and two young boys standing in front of Legend’s Deuce & a Quarter. It was an old raggedy car in the picture, but Legend had a knack for fixing broken things. The same pale beige non-running Buick Electra was not the same Electra that he drove around the city three years later. Everything under the hood had been rebuilt or restored. Now the “Deuce”, as Legend affectionately called his ride, was a shiny black hood celebrity, protected by the boys who hung outside by the Bittman entrances and parking lots making sure no one messed with the Deuce.

The two boys in the picture were more intriguing to Lyric than the story of an old car. Legend told her that the boy in the Mets cap was his son Sincere. The kid in the 2Pac t-shirt was Sincere’s best friend,

Knight. They were about twelve or thirteen then. Sincere resembled Legend more than Lyric. She wasn't surprised by seeing her brother in picture. Lyric was aware that she had a big brother. From what she overheard from her grandmother and aunts' conversations when they came to Ohio, Sincere was one of the reasons Kendra packed up and left Bittman.

Sincere and Lyric had never met. Sincere wasn't ever allowed to go with Legend when he went to visit Lyric in Washington Heights. Since Kendra wouldn't allow Lyric to visit Queens, this summer would be the first time the siblings would be in the same vicinity. Lyric couldn't wait to see him. At least, she hoped she'd get to see him.

Sincere lived with his mother Cherice in the 400 Building on the north side of Bittman, about a quarter of a mile away from the 700 Building where Legend lived on the east side of Bittman. Legend told Sincere that Lyric was coming to stay for the summer but hadn't heard from the boy. He'd been calling his cell phone and leaving messages for Sincere for two days and he still hadn't returned any of his father's calls.

Cherice said she hadn't seen Sincere or Knight in a couple of days. When Legend hung up the phone, Lyric could see the worry in his tight eyes. She knew her dad was bothered by the fact that Cherice hadn't seen her sixteen-year-old son or his best friend. In Bittman, a teenage boy going missing for two days meant he was either lying dead somewhere or locked up. With Sincere and Knight, either one was a viable option.

At sixteen, Sincere didn't know anything except life in the projects. Cherice was a project chick with a project chick mentality, unlike Kendra. Legend did what he could to help with Sincere, but his mother was headstrong and unwilling to think of a world outside of Queens, New York. She didn't like Legend filling her son's head with ideas of college and traveling the world because she didn't have those same aspirations.

Sincere didn't have the same mentality as his mom and her side of the family, but he believed what Biggie said. "Either you sell rock or you have a wicked jump shot." Too bad neither Sincere nor anyone in his little crew were athletically inclined.

One of the errands Legend had to run was finding out where his son was. In fact, that was the only thing important on his To-Do list. He'd sell everything he owned if Sincere needed a lawyer and turn Bittman into a war zone if his son were not alive. Someone knew where Sincere and Knight were and Legend had ways of getting information out of people.

Ten minutes after he told her to get dressed, Lyric and Legend were standing inside Courtney's apartment. The apartment smelled like weed and fried chicken, with Money House Blessing incense barely masking the smell. Courtney's oldest boys were playing Call of Duty loudly in the living room.

Music blared from the third bedroom down the hall. The door was closed but all the walls and doors in Bittman were thin.

“Giselle!” Courtney yelled over the music. “Lyric’s here. Come out that room. And turn that shit down! Don’t nobody wanna hear that lil boy all damn day!”

Courtney smiled at Lyric. “You like that lil rapper, Soulja Boy too?”

Legend burst out laughing. All the kids like Soulja Boy but like Courtney, he found the music that kids liked annoying and without merit. Give him a little Nas or Rakim any day of the week. That was real hip-hop.

“He’s alright,” Lyric shrugged. “I like Nas and DMX better.”

“Girl! What you know about DMX and Nas? You too young for that. You know what,” Courtney grinned. “You sound just like yo’ daddy and brother. Bet you won’t catch Sin listening to no damn Soulja Boy. Where Sin at anyway?” she asked Legend. “I need him to come get Lil Josh the hell out of this house, hoggin’ my TV all the damn day.”

“That’s what I’m planning on finding out,” Legend answered.

The door to the third bedroom opened and Giselle walked down the hallway, sizing up the girl from across the hall as she approached. Legend chuckled as Giselle came closer. She was Courtney’s mini-me. It didn’t look like Courtney had any help making Giselle. Everything about them, from facial features and mannerisms to their personalities were identical. He was so happy that Giselle wasn’t his daughter because Courtney had her hands full with that one.

“Mr. Legend, you always laughing when you see me? What’s so funny?”

“I laugh because I don’t see any of yo’ daddy in you. You definitely Courtney’s child.”

“Well,” Giselle shrugged. “Maybe if he was a real daddy, then I’d be a little like him.”

Courtney shook her head. “She is so damn grown. You wanna trade daughters, Legend? Lyric is so quiet.”

“I’m not that quiet.”

“See Ma! You always tryna trade me with somebody else’s kid. You gon’ give me a complex and we can’t afford therapy. Come on, Lyric. Let’s go outside and see who’s on the court. Jenae said they’re off punishment. Ma, can I have some money to get some snacks?”

“You don’t need no snacks.”

“You act like I’m fat or something.”

“It’s food here in the house.”

“You always say that but it don’t be true.”

“Yo’ mouth is the reason you ain’t getting’ no snacks. How ‘bout that?”

Legend pulled out his wallet and handed Lyric a twenty. “Get y’all some lunch since Courtney’s being stingy. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Stay with Giselle. Don’t go wandering around this place by yourself.”

“She’s goin’ to be fine, Mr. Legend,” Giselle said. “I ain’t gon’ let nobody do anything to her. We just gon’ hang out at the basketball court like we usually do.”

“Fast ass little girls,” Courtney mumbled. “Always lookin’ at those boys on the court. You need to be inside reading a book or something.”

“I don’t ever see you reading a book,” Giselle laughed at her mother then ducked to avoid Courtney’s hand swatting at her. “I’m just playin’, Ma! You know I love you.”

“Girl, get out of my house. Take your new friend and go play with the twins. Bring me a fish sandwich when you come back.”

Giselle grabbed Lyric’s hand and started running towards the front door. “You don’t need no snacks! It’s food in the house!” she called over her shoulder then shut the door behind her.

“Why you get a whole bunch of banana ones?” Jenae complained while digging through Lyric’s bag of candy to find a suitable Now N Later flavor.

“Why are you complaining about what she bought with her money?” Jenae’s twin sister, Denae, fired back.

The girls had been sitting on the same bench by the basketball court for hours, only leaving to walk to the store down the street to get chips, pop, and candy. Giselle, Jenae, and Denae were unlike any of the girls that Lyric usually hung around during the summer. They reminded her of her friend Dominique in Washington Heights, but they were more fun because Dominique always had an attitude.

After answering a million questions, Giselle, clearly the leader of the pack, deemed Lyric worthy to hang with her friends and declared that Lyric was part of their crew now. Apparently in Bittman, having a crew was important. People needed to know that you weren’t alone.

“You can’t be walking around here without us,” Giselle schooled Lyric. “These people are shiesty. They will try to take your money, your phone, all your stuff if they think you don’t have people. So, now you got people. And we fight. So, you gon’ have to learn how to fight. I’m sure Sin will teach you.”

Lyric had just shrugged her shoulders and focused her attention on the boys playing basketball on the cracked basketball court. She knew how to fight; she didn’t need to be taught. People kept mentioning Sincere, which made Lyric uncomfortable. She didn’t know her brother but whenever she said something or got caught staring off into space, one of the twins would say she was just like Sincere. Apparently, everyone in Bittman knew her brother except her.

“Lyric, what time is it?” Giselle asked, ready to move on to doing something else.

“It’s a quarter after five.”

“Oh shoot!” Denae shouted. “We gotta go. Mommy will be home in a minute.”

“I knew y’all weren’t off punishment! Lyin’ asses!” Giselle laughed. “Y’all better run before Ms. Sharon get off the bus and see y’all out here. Call me when you can!”

The twins, laughing, took off running across the courtyard to the 800 Building. Lyric smiled watching them while Giselle just laughed too. From the way they dressed to the way they talked, the girls in Bittman seemed a lot older even though Giselle and the twins were only a few months older than her. Her grandmother had once said that living in the projects made you grow up fast. Maybe she was right. Jenae, Giselle, and Denae even cursed like the older girls. Lyric had never uttered a curse word in her life.

“Let’s go and see if my brothers are still hogging the TV,” Giselle suggested. “Hopefully, they’re done. I’m trying to watch the news.”

“The news?” Lyric questioned with raised eyebrows as they walked towards the building. “Why do you want to watch the news?”

“Because that’s what I’m going to do one day. I ain’t gon be one of hood rats out here having babies by corner boys and living in these same projects. I’m going to go to college and be a journalist. I’m going to start as a news anchor then I’m going to get my own TV show. I’m going to be the next Oprah. So, I try to watch the news every day so I can learn how to do it.”

Lyric was so awed by Giselle’s answer that she stopped walking as her mouth hung open. She’d never heard another kid express the same interest in journalism as she did. Lyric wanted to be the next Oprah too.

“Are you serious?” Lyric asked.

Giselle stopped walking and turned around. “Yes, I’m serious. I can do it too. I know I can. What you gon’ be when you grow up?”

Lyric grinned and put her arm around Giselle’s shoulders and started walking. As they entered the building, she replied, “The next Oprah.”

“Girl!” Giselle yelped. “I knew there was a reason I liked you. You’re the first person to believe me. All these people around here don’t think I’m serious. We gon’ do this together. Watch and see.”

“That’s why I read so much,” Lyric explained. “My mom wants me to read stuff that’s more for our age group but I need to read more important stuff than *Twilight*.”

“Exactly. That’s why I be goin’ to the library and yo’ daddy be lettin’ me read his books. Did you read *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander?”

“Not yet. My mom thinks it’s too advanced for a kid. But I want to. I saw it on my dad’s bookshelf. Maybe he’ll let me read it. I’m reading *Slaughterhouse Five* now.”

“Yeah, that’s a good one. But you gotta step your non-fiction game up. They be teachin’ us more than what these white teachers do.”

“There’s a lot of good fiction that we can learn from too though. I read *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* twice. It’s that good.”

“It is! I cried when I read it.”

The girls stopped walking when they realized that the stairs leading to the fourth floor were blocked by four older boys sitting on them. One of them was rapping lyrics from a composition book he was holding. The other boys were listening contently while stopping him every couple of bars to comment.

“Ooh, you are in trouble,” Giselle said to the boy sitting next to the one with the notebook. “Yo’ mama told yo’ daddy you ain’t been home in two days. You know Mr. Legend ‘bout to get this whole block poppin’ lookin’ for you. Where you been at?”

Lyric gazed at the boy Giselle was talking to. He didn’t look much different from the pictures she’d seen, a little older. Sincere really did look just like their father.

“Lil Josh, why yo’ sister always up in my business?”

“She nosy as hell, that’s why,” Giselle’s brother answered. “Y’all go somewhere else. We busy.”

“Busy?” Giselle scoffed. “All y’all doin’ is sittin’ here gassin’ Knight’s head up like he’s the next Nas or somethin’.”

“Yo’ shorty, why you lookin’ at me like that?” Sincere said to Lyric.

For a minute, she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t realize that she’d been staring at her big brother. She expected their first meeting to go differently. She certainly expected her only sibling to recognize her. If Legend was always talking to her about Sincere and showing her pictures of him, surely he talked about her and show pictures of her to Sincere.

“What’s wrong with yo’ friend?” he asked Giselle.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with me,” Lyric spoke up. “You don’t know who I am?”

“Should I?”

“Hell yeah,” Giselle shouted and shook her head, admonishing the sixteen-year-old with just the disappointed expression in her eyes. “Sincere, Sincere, Sincere, you are so disrespectful.”

“I’m Lyric. Your sister. But I guess you don’t care about that.”

“I was just fuckin’ with you,” Sincere snickered. “I know who you are.”

“But you ain’t think it would be nice to come by and meet me when Daddy kept calling you? I know you knew I was coming here.”

“I had other shit to do. I ain’t nobody’s welcoming committee. You gon’ be here all summer, right?”

“So! That’s beside the point. I’ve called your phone too and you don’t ever call me back. You don’t want to talk to me. You don’t want to meet me either. I’m your sister and you don’t even want to know me.”

“Yo’, you buggin’. I got better things to do than talk to a ten-year-old. You act like you the only kid in the world who got a brother they ain’t never met.”

Lyric wished she understood her anger at Sincere so she could express herself better. Her feelings were hurt but she couldn’t pinpoint why. Seeing him just casually hanging out with his friends and acting like she was bothering him made her want to run up the stairs to the apartment and cry.

“Can y’all get out of the way so we can go upstairs?” she asked. “I don’t need to talk to you since you obviously have nothing to say to me.”

“You’re just ten, right? What we got to talk about, shorty?” Sincere asked. He was genuinely taken back by Lyric’s reaction to seeing him. She was talking to him like an adult, like he messed up or disappointed her. Coming from a ten-year-old, that was off-putting to say the least.

“Just move,” she said.

“Oh, you mad now? I don’t know why you’re trippin’. I was gon’ come by when I got finished doin’ what I had to do.”

“Then you should have just said that. Or answered your phone when I called.”

“Girl, who you think you talkin’ to?”

Lyric rolled her eyes and stood her ground. “I’m talking to you.”

“Man, listen-”

“Come on, man. Let them pass,” the boy with the notebook interrupted. “You can’t be out here arguing with little kids, Sincere. You sound stupid as fuck.”

Sincere and the other two boys stood up and moved out of the way so Lyric and Giselle could pass.

“Lyric,” Sincere called as the girls climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. “I’ll holla at you later.”

“Don’t bother!”

Giselle burst out laughing and they ran up the next three flights of stairs.

“You really don’t like him,” she laughed as she unlocked her apartment door. “Sin is cool though.”

“I’ve heard,” Lyric grumbled. “Who were those other boys?”

“That’s their little crew. My brother, Josh. Big Red...that boy dumb. And the other one is Knight. He lives in the same building as your brother. They think they’re rappers but the only one who can rap is Knight. Knight is cute and can rap and all, but he think he’s the next Nas or something just because Nas is from Queens too. Like boy, you ain’t hardly that good yet and definitely not as cute as Nas.”

“I love Nas,” Lyric smiled. “My daddy had me listening to *Illmatic* when I was a baby. He is so cute too.”

“I know, right?!” Giselle exclaimed. “My mother used to hang out with his babymama. I wish he would come by Bittman and say hi.”

“I wish,” Lyric murmured. “So what else do they do all day besides rap?”

“The only thing the other ones do is get in trouble, sell dope, and get arrested. You’ll see. They always running from the cops. Triflin’,” Giselle muttered.

“Sincere sells drugs?”

“They say they don’t, but everybody out here knows they do except Mommy and your father. Miss Cherise knows what Sincere is doing but she don’t care. But let me tell you this, if your dad ever finds out that Sincere be sellin’ dope, you might as well go back to Ohio ‘cause Sincere will be dead and your dad will be in jail.”

“Yeah, my dad isn’t too big on people who do that. He has no respect for people who contribute to ruining the black community.”

“It’s stupid,” Giselle answered. “They’re old enough to get real jobs. It ain’t like they’re using the money for clothes and sneakers. They all still look like bums.”

She unlocked the door to her apartment. “Come on, the TV is free.”