

Chapter 1

I've never been one for all the girly shit. You know, lip gloss, extensions, jeans so tight they make your ass look like Nicki Minaj's. I put my hair in a ponytail, throw on some sweats, lace up my ball sneaks, and I'm good to go. Not to mention, all that primping just to impress the guys—nah, I'm good.

So why did I even agree to hit up the corner store with Britt today, knowing damn well she's a klepto with the fashion sense of a broke Kardashian? Because I'm an idiot and really wanted a Kit Kat to eat after our first game. Processed sugar is the perfect postgame snack—win or lose. Also Britt fed me some bullshit line about wanting to meet the new owners. But what she really meant was: “New ownership! Ooh, I know, let's rob the place!”

Britt nudges me with her pointy-ass elbows and looks over her shoulder to make sure no one's watching. Two Black girls in a corner store, one of them wearing a hoodie—oh, they're watching.

“Here, slip this in your hoodie,” she whispers.

Told ya. She's about that klepto life.

I look around the store. The aisles are empty, other than a Muslim girl—this isn't racist because (A) she's dressed in traditional Muslim garb under her blue Super Mart apron, and (B) I'm pretty sure she's the owner's daughter, who I'm certain is Muslim because everyone on the block was talking about the Muslim family that bought the Super Mart. People don't buy businesses in the hood, especially in Hargrove Projects, and go unnoticed. The girl's restocking the milk, while the guy behind the register (probably her father) is breaking his neck to keep an eye on us. In his defense, we do look suspicious as fuck. There has to be a joke in there: *Two Black girls walk into a corner store . . .*

Anyway, I used to think stealing things we can't afford was cool (yes, Kit Kats are on that list). We were Robin Hoods balancing the injustice of poverty-stricken households everywhere. Now we're more like shitty martyrs, just playing into the stereotype that every Black kid in the hood is constantly banging Kendrick Lamar and on the prowl to jack someone's shit.

“Fuck you. You steal it,” I whisper back. “I’m not trying to get kicked off the team because you need a new weave to impress Jordan. He’s corny, anyways. And his jump shot’s all kinds of broke. Dude’s got no range.”

“I can’t,” she retorts, moving in closer to hide from Muslim Girl who’s moved on to stocking ramen. “I already got three tubes of lip gloss, a bag of Hot Cheetos, and a frozen pizza under here.”

Ah, a frozen pizza. I was wondering how her stomach suddenly became so flat. Britt’s never done a sit-up in her life. Shit, she spends every gym class eye-banging the boys.

“Now do you want to eat tonight or not?”

I shrug. “I mean, yeah.”

“A’ight then. So stop bitching and take it.”

She tries to shove it up my hoodie.

“Chill,” I say, swatting the weave away like I’m Joel Embiid. We start slap fighting in the aisle because, you know, that’s not making things worse. I do want to eat, though. Especially since Mom doesn’t actually buy food with our food stamps.

The bell above the entrance chimes and in walks a fat-ass white cop who makes his way to—and I’m not making this up—the donuts and coffee.

Well, now we’re officially fucked.

Muslim Girl (I really have to come up with a better and more woke name for her) looks up, daring us to try something with the cop here. She clearly doesn’t know who she’s grilling. Cops don’t scare us.

Officer Tubs—as he henceforth shall be named—starts chatting up the owner while running a train on a bear claw.

“Okay, damn. Just chill before you get us caught,” I say out of the side of my mouth. “Ol’ girl over there keeps grilling us.”

“If you had any sense you’d jack one for yourself. Because your hair stay nappy.”

I suck my teeth. “Whatever,” I dismiss. “I know you’re not talking; hair looking like The Weeknd. Just give me the damn thing.”

I stuff the weave under my hoodie. (Yes, I realize how ridiculous that sounds.)

We nonchalantly stroll to the front of the store as though we’re unimpressed by the selection and are looking to take our business elsewhere. As we pass the Muslim girl she looks

up at me with these big, soft brown, judgmental eyes; a sneer of disapproval etched on her face. Her skin's a half-shade darker than mine and she has wavy black hair that runs past her shoulders. The chill from the open freezer sweeps out as she restocks the Hot Pockets. I can tell she knows. So I mean-mug her hard, imploring her to mind her own damn business.

We're almost home free. No going hungry tonight with nappy heads. But then the girl grows a pair and says something in Arabic—or what I assume to be Arabic (clearly I have no clue what Muslims speak)—to her dad.

“Hey, you!” the man reprimands. He points at Britt as if picking her out of a lineup. “What do you have under your shirt?”

Britt cups her hand to her ear. “Huh?” she patronizes, trying to buy us some time. “Speak English. You're in America now.”

I have no excuse for Britt. That was mad racist.

Officer Tubs puts down his second bear claw. “Lift up your shirt. And do it slowly. Keep your hands where I can see ‘em.”

Britt's head snaps back in resentment. “Why, because I'm Black? I ain't lifting up shit.”

No, I think. Because we're thieves, that's why.

Tubs grips the handle of his sidearm. “Just do it and shut up.”

Britt gives me a cool smirk.

I dread what's coming next. It involves being a cliché, and it's the reason our friend Nassir got shot last year.

Why did I come here with her? No Kit Kat is worth this.

Britt's not as fast as me and needs to lose some of the added weight, so she opens the bottom of her shirt and lets everything except the pizza fall out. As the last piece of contraband hits the floor, Britt and I book it through the front door. The bell jingles and slams against the door behind us.

Tubs pulls out his gun, but fumbles it to the floor, giving us an even larger head start. Thank baby Jesus he was going ham on that bear claw.

And can I just point some messed up shit out? Two high school girls stealing a frozen pizza and hair extensions, and this guy feels it's necessary to draw his weapon. And they wonder why there's a new hashtag against the police every week.

By the time Tubs retrieves his gun from the floor, I'm well in front. I actually turn and start running backward just to mock him. I know, how mature of me, right? Then again, I am in the midst of stealing horse hair, so I don't think anyone was thinking of using the word "mature" to describe us.

What Tubs doesn't realize is I can do this all day. I've been running my whole life; whether it's from the opposing team's point guard or one of the many gunshots that go off on my block every hour like church bells. No matter what—I run. And I'm hella fast. If you don't believe me, Google me—Alexis Duncan, senior, All-State point guard three years running.

I whip around in one smooth motion and start running forward again. Now's not the time to fuck around. And if he does decide to pop off, I'll be well out of range.

I glance back to assess the situation. I see Britt who's keeping pace, and the blurred mirage that is Tubs way off in the distance. Damn, he's slow as fuck. You'd think they'd require some level of fitness to become a cop. I guess the only requirement is hating Black people.

"Plan D!" I shout back to Britt, using the commanding voice I call out plays with.

Two things you should know: (1) D stands for Devon's apartment building, and (2) We've had to ditch the cops so many times that we have devised a playbook for each scenario. That's not a brag. It's the sad truth. Coach always says, "Preparation is the first step to success."

I hang a left at the corner and duck down the alley behind the Chinese restaurant, only a block away from Devon's. I almost bust my ass tripping over Moe—one of the local homeless guys who makes his home in the alley—but my reflexes are Black Panther fast and I dodge him.

"My bad, Moe!" I shout back to him. "Cop's on my ass!"

He looks up from his crusty sleeping bag and shakes his head in disapproval.

I shrug like, *What do you want from me? A girl's gotta eat.*

And even if I did bust my ass it wouldn't matter, because I'm basically lapping Tubs at this point.

Once I'm back on the street I weave around some people on the sidewalk and then Rock in *Fast and Furious* slide over the hood of a parked Mazda.

You'd think with such a lead I'd dip into a McDonald's bathroom or something and hide out until the danger passes. But that would be the smart and not fun thing to do. Plus, I want Tubs to suffer for pulling out his gun on us. It'll serve him right if he catches a heart attack chasing us.

I see Devon's drug-infested building.

A horn rings out. My life/basketball career flashes before my eyes as a Jeep nearly clips me. I take a second to thank Jesus, and then I'm back to running.

I'm nearly across the street when *pop! pop!* echoes through the air. Two gunshots. I don't flinch. But then I remember Britt's slow ass and turn mid-stride to make sure it wasn't Tubs firing at her. Next thing I know, a guy the size of Shaq on a bicycle smacks into me. I hit the pavement. Or rather the pavement Ali uppercuts me, because the back of my head slams against the gravel. Seconds later, I'm laid out like Sonny Liston.

And can I just say: What grown-ass man rides a bike?!

Then it all goes black.