

Prologue

Everything was shattered. In pieces and in a way that nothing could ever make it right again. The girl looked down from the bridge, at the sea of lights spread out under her, a canopy of brightness over the city. Her sneakered feet inched closer to the edge. Directly below her was dark water. Through the inky black, she could just make out the water's movement, the ripples floating across the murky surface nearly fifty feet below.

The girl's hand gripped the chest-high railing, the only barrier between her and the air and a tumbling spin to the water below. She had never minded the dark. It was a warm, womb-like place that did not hurt, did not make her tremble or afraid. Instead of hurts, the dark offered her a home to replenish herself, a backdrop for dreams and new beginnings. Even with feeling like this, she was surprised when it came. One moment, everything was promise and brightness with more than she'd thought possible. And the next, her world was a blanket of night, no stars.

"What are you doing up here, girl?!"

She gripped the railing tighter, spun to face the voice. An old man, caught between one step and the other with a fishing pole and a cooler. Leathered skin, white hair swirling over his forehead and around his face at the whim of the wind.

"Nothing." She said. Then realizing how stupid that sounded, backpedaled. "Looking at the water." The girl did not move back from the edge. It called her even more, even closer. And her body, thin and long, knew how easy it would be to climb the rungs of the railing and walk on air. The wind surrounded her. Cradled her on the high bridge.

To her right, traffic stretched in one direction toward home. To her left, the lights headed away toward one escape. The darkness in front of her offered another type of escape all together. Tears burned at the back of her eyes but she squeezed them shut and refused to let the hot water fall. She'd cried too much already. Cried at all she'd lost in just one night. She looked to her left, then to her right. Her feet moved toward the open air. Which way should she choose?

"If you don't come down here, girl, I'm gonna call the police." The old man put down his cooler and pulled a cell phone from his back pocket.

Her hands were cold. They clenched around the railing. Unclenched. Clenched. Fear quivered through her as certain as the water below her was deep.

The girl looked at him, waiting for her decision to come.

Chapter 1

“Hey, look where you’re going!”

A boy in glasses hurried through the hall with other students, bouncing from body to body like a pinball. His backpack slid off his shoulder. He bumped into Cee-Cee, his shoulder clipping hers before he mumbled “excuse me” and kept going.

Cee-Cee rubbed her shoulder, staring after the boy. “Ouch,” she muttered.

“Watch it, fool!” someone down the hallway shouted.

Poor guy. Cee-Cee remembered the look of panic on the boy’s face after he bumped into her. She knew how he felt.

Most days the halls of Temple Crest High were part of some giant obstacle course. Black boys. Brown girls. White boys. Black girls. All talking loud in their American slang, shoving each other, laughing, cursing. Sometimes a too-harsh gaze settled on her with cruel intentions. She never thought things would be like this, lonely and strange, when she once pictured her new life in America.

Cee-Cee shuffled down the wide hallway, the book-bag slapping against the backs of her thighs with the heavy weight of text books. The books were heavy but at least the classes were easy and the work wasn’t something she had to think about. It was the things she did think about that bothered her more. Fitting in. Not fitting in. Wondering what ‘normal’ felt like.

She walked past the school trophy case with its plaques, medallions, and trophies standing neatly upright and surrounded by tall glass. An image of her reflected back: barely five feet tall, skin that her mother always said was the color of a dark red kidney bean. Her Afro bobbed as she made her way past, big as she was able to make it and pushed back from her forehead with a bright yellow headband. Normal, right?

“What’s up with that girl?”

Cee-Cee heard the question before she recognized who asked it. But as sure as she didn’t know who spoke, she knew that person was talking about her. She trailed her gaze over the wall of red lockers, past other students making their way to and from class, and focused when she found the right smirking face. Tavaris Jackson. One of the jocks who ran with Tala Murphy and what Cee-Cee called her “wolf-pack.” It had to be him.

Tavaris was pretty and built, athletic without the cartoon bulging muscles that some of the guys on the wrestling team stumbled around with. He wrestled but, like everyone else in the pack, he also played soccer.

When Cee-Cee first came to Temple Crest, she thought Tavaris was cute. His long dreadlocks and strong face reminded her of the boys in Jamaica. But she soon found out he was very out of reach. As a member of the wolf-pack, he was popular. Rich. And a first class asshole. It wasn’t long before he and the others pounced on Cee-Cee’s otherness and tried to tear her apart.

Tavaris came down the hall toward Cee-Cee, walking next to Shawn, the other boy from the wolf-pack.

“Yeah, what *is* up with that girl?” Shawn laughed long and loud, jerking his chin toward Cee-Cee.

“I bet she can’t even see past those nappy naps on her big head,” Tala Murphy said, touching the length of her own smooth ponytail bobbing in the air just above her shoulders.

Her hair was dyed a light, dusty brown to match her skin and her eyes. Until she spoke, Cee-Cee hadn’t seen her. Just assumed that it was the boy half of the wolf-pack that roamed the hall. This semester, her classes were as predictable as the sadness. Her 4th period class was in the same unfortunate hallway as Tavaris’ locker. Cee-Cee was always guaranteed to run into at least two of the pack in this hallway. Never one. Never just Tavaris.

He had his back turned to the hallway and to the constant stream of people walking to and from class. His long dreadlocks moved against the pale blue of his soccer shirt as he rummaged in his locker. Cee-Cee bit her lip and looked away. At his side, Tala Murphy shifted restlessly.

Tala had thrown out what she had to say. Now she was ready to move on. Unlike the others in her pack, Tala’s cruelty was casual and fleeting. She sank her teeth in, ripped out her chunk of flesh, and moved on. The others in the pack tended to play with their prey until blood splashed all over the walls.

As leader of the wolf-pack, goalie of the girls’ soccer team, and a sure thing for this year’s homecoming queen, Tala had something that Cee-Cee never had—everything. Even a car that was better than her mother’s temperamental old VW Rabbit.

Cee-Cee continued on to her locker, the pack’s snickers the soundtrack to her flight. Her book-bag stung the backs of her knees with each step.

Assholes.

“Hey, Carlene.”

Naisha Gonzalez, the girl with the locker next to hers, greeted Cee-Cee with a quick wave, shoving her over-sized calculus book into the already crowded locker. Her head of short, pixie hair disappeared behind the red locker door. A bright orange bottle of Gatorade tumbled out and fell on the ground.

“Shit!” Naisha grabbed at the two granola bars that threatened to follow the Gatorade. Her red cat’s eye glasses tilted on her face, suddenly in danger of falling too.

Before the bottle could roll away, Cee-Cee snatched it up and handed it back to Naisha. She grunted her thanks and shoved the unopened bottle back inside the locker.

“Do we have a test in Physics today or is it just going over the homework like usual?” Naisha asked, peeking sideways at Cee-Cee.

“Homework. The test is Friday.”

“Cool. Thanks!” Naisha grabbed two smaller books from the haphazard pile in the locker and slammed the red door shut. “See you in class, Carlene.”

“Okay.” She watched Naisha disappear down the hallway among the anonymous bodies. “See you in class.”

Cee-Cee finished up in her locker and closed the door. A piece of bright orange paper under Naisha's locker caught her eye. She must have dropped it. Cee-Cee picked up the paper. It was an invitation to a party. An old one from last year. She quickly read the words cascading from under a small hand-made map with directions.

Party at Tala's house

Saturday, April 10th

B.Y.O. beer, booze, and booty

9 until 2.

Cee-Cee tucked the invitation into her folder to give back to Naisha when she saw her again. With a sigh, she put on her school mask and headed down the hall to her class.