

CHAPTER 1

I shouldn't have come to this party.

I'm not even sure I *belong* at this party. That's not on some bougie shit, either. There are just some places where it's not enough to be me. Either version of me. Big D's spring break party is one of those places.

I squeeze through sweaty bodies and follow Kenya, her curls bouncing past her shoulders. A haze lingers over the room, smelling like weed, and music rattles the floor. Some rapper calls out for everybody to Nae-Nae, followed by a bunch of "Heys" as people launch into their own versions. Kenya holds up her cup and dances her way through the crowd. Between the headache from the loud-ass music and the nausea from the weed odor, I'll be amazed if I cross the room without spilling my drink.

We break out the crowd. Big D's house is packed wall-to-wall. I've always heard that everybody and their momma comes to his spring break parties – well, everybody except me – but damn, I didn't know it would be this many people. Girls wear their hair colored, curled, laid,

and slayed. Got me feeling basic as hell with my ponytail. Guys in their freshest kicks and sagging pants grind so close to girls they just about need condoms. My nana likes to say that spring brings love. Spring in Garden Heights doesn't always bring love, but it promises babies in the winter. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of them are conceived the night of Big D's party. He always has it on the Friday of spring break because you need Saturday to recover and Sunday to repent.

"Stop following me and go dance, Starr," Kenya says. "People already say you think you all that."

"I didn't know so many mind readers lived in Garden Heights." Or that people know me as anything other than "Big Mav's daughter who works in the store." I sip my drink and spit it back out. I knew there would be more than Hawaiian Punch in it, but this is way stronger than I'm used to. They shouldn't even call it punch. Just straight-up liquor. I put it on the coffee table and say, "Folks kill me, thinking they know what I think."

"Hey, I'm just saying. You act like you don't know nobody 'cause you go to that school."

I've been hearing that for six years, ever since my parents put me in Williamson Prep. "Whatever," I mumble.

"And it wouldn't kill you to not dress like..." She turns up her nose as she looks from my sneakers to my oversized hoodie. "That. Aint that my brother's hoodie?"

Our brother's hoodie. Kenya and I share an older brother, Seven. But she and I aren't related. Her momma is Seven's

momma, and my dad is Seven's dad. Crazy, I know. "Yeah, it's his."

"Figures. You know what else people saying too. Got folks thinking you're my girlfriend."

"Do I look like I care what people think?"

"No! And that's the problem!"

"Whatever." If I'd known following her to this party meant she'd be on some *Extreme Makeover: Starr Edition* mess, I would've stayed home and watched *Fresh Prince* reruns. My Jordans are comfortable, and damn, they're new. That's more than some people can say. The hoodie's way too big, but I like it that way. Plus, if I pull it over my nose, I can't smell the weed.

"Well, I ain't babysitting you all night, so you better do something," Kenya says, and scopes the room. Kenya could be a model, if I'm completely honest. She's got flawless dark-brown skin — I don't think she ever gets a pimple — slanted brown eyes, and long eyelashes that aren't store-bought. She's the perfect height for modeling too, but a little thicker than those toothpicks on the runway. She never wears the same outfit twice. Her daddy, King, makes sure of that.

Kenya is about the only person I hang out with in Garden Heights — it's hard to make friends when you go to a school that's forty-five minutes away and you're a latchkey kid who's only seen at her family's store. It's easy to hang out with Kenya because of our connection to Seven. She's messy as hell sometimes, though. Always fighting somebody and quick to say her daddy will whoop somebody's ass. Yeah,