

Joyce E. Davis

Can't Stop the Shine



To Yanick Rice Lamb

Thank you for the continuous encouragement. Your example, guidance and unwavering belief in me have been instrumental in both my professional and personal development. I'm so blessed that God put you in my life. Love you always, jd

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There are many people in my life who have helped me along the way to this first novel, and it would be impossible to acknowledge them all. First, I must give thanks to my parents, James and Mary Lee Davis, for literally sacrificing twenty years of their life (and still some) to put me on the right path to independence, self-worth, righteousness and a lifetime appreciation for learning.

Being a Kimani TRU author was a perfect fit for me because it has always been important for me to communicate, relate and be a mentor to young people without them feeling like I was preaching to them. My mother, who kept a book in my hand, nearly from birth, first taught me this. So a heartfelt thank-you to Ma for making brother Rayford and me participate in library summer reading programs, limiting our television time and not ordering me to sleep when I wanted to stay up late and finish a book. Because of you, I fell in love with reading—the greatest gift you could have ever given me.

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Kalia looked around the room slowly, realizing the significance of the moment. Everybody she knew and loved was there. Her mother, Elaine; her father, Ronald; her crazy sister, Mariama; and her best friend, Dewayne. In fact all of her friends were there and so were all of the other folks who made up her world. For a hot second she let this special moment eclipse her anger. She knew she would go off if she didn't get away for a minute.

The object of her venom came up behind her as she walked into the kitchen.

"What's up, sis?" said Mari. "Happy birthday!"

"I wish it was," said Kalia, whipping around, "but it's not because you messed it up!"

"What are you talking about? Everybody is kickin' it."

"Yeah, they sure are, but that's not what we agreed on. It wasn't just supposed to be a kick-it party. It was supposed to be special, but as usual you went ahead and did what you wanted to do. Why do you have to be so selfish?"

"K, it's hot outside. I'm burning up. Don't get on my nerves today, okay? It's my birthday," said Mari, getting a bottle of water out of the refrigerator.

"It's my birthday, too, Mari, and you're turning it into a straight hip-hop party. We said we'd compromise."

"I can't help what the deejay is playing," Mari said, smirking.

"If you'd hired DJ Spin Nice like we talked about you wouldn't have to help what he was playing. It'd be a mix, just like we said. You make me sick, Mari. You always have to have your way," said Kalia, pointing her finger at her smug sister.

Mari moved closer to Kalia.

"I know you're not talking about somebody having to have their way, Miss Priss. You're the queen of selfishness. I told you earlier, DJ Spin Nice costs too much. We didn't have enough money for him. So that's right, I got my way this time, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"You think so? You think there's nothing I can do? *Phhh*," said Kalia, folding her arms across her chest.

"Look, I'm sixteen. I'm getting my license next week. You're eighteen. You can...uh...vote.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that the food is great, we look good, it's our birthday party. Let's just have fun," reasoned Mari.

"I'm not hanging out there with you and your little ghetto friends."

"Fine. Stay in here and be a crab at your own birthday party," said Mari, turning on her heels. "God. You must be on your period or something," she mumbled, walking out of the kitchen.

Enraged, Kalia stamped up the back stairs and into her room to look at the party through her huge open windows. *Who the hell does she think she is?* Kalia thought. *This is probably my last birthday home, and it looks like a hip-hop video.* She surveyed the teenage crowd in her backyard, spotting Mari and her crew of girls up front near the deejay table. They were with some thug-looking guys, bouncing around in their baby T's, low-riding jeans and sneakers, and were shaking their behinds to the empty boasts of some rapper claiming he had a girl in every city in the world.

The beat is hot, Kalia thought, tapping her fingers in time with the baseline against the ledge. She spotted her friend Dewayne staring at her and motioned for him to come up to her room. Sitting at her desk, Kalia logged on the Internet to find her horoscope, wondering every year like always if her parents had planned to have her and her sister in the same month so they could always knock out both birthdays in one party. At least they came correct, ending the summer with blowouts every year.

Their birthday parties were the best. Anything could happen and anybody could show up. They had in-home puppet shows and cartoon-themed parties when they were little. When Kalia and Mari were ten and twelve, Elaine, a yoga instructor, used her connections at the National Black Arts Festival to arrange for an African dance performance with live drummers. A few years later, for their fourteenth and sixteenth birthdays, Elaine and Ronald blew their kids' minds when they threw them a Caribbean-themed party with a steel pan band, Carnival decorations and Caribbean-prepared food.

And this one would have been the best ever, thought Kalia. This party was the only one that their parents had let the Jefferson sisters plan by themselves. Kalia wanted something a little more sophisticated and formal, while Mari just wanted a good hip-hop deejay, so she and her crew and all their friends could sweat it out on the dance floor. Kalia had envisioned high heels, dresses and finger food in the living room around their piano, not hot wings and crunk.

"Everybody looks like they're having a great time," said Dewayne, entering Kalia's spotless room. "What are you doing hiding out in here?"

"I cannot believe that Mari got DJ Love. He's played the same five songs all night," said Kalia, getting up from her desk and looking back out the window.

"Aw, girl, ain't nuthin' wrong with a little hip-hop—a little Jay-Z, a little Ludacris, some OutKast," said Dewayne, bouncing his shoulders a bit.

"You know I like hip-hop, but just not 24-7."

"Stop pouting," Dewayne ordered, sliding his lean body halfway out of the massive window next to hers. "The only reason you listen to other stuff besides hip-hop is that you sing and play the piano. That's your gift. She's just listening to everything everybody else is listening to."

"What are you doing? Defending her now?" snapped Kalia, walking herself out of the window.

What are you doing? Derending her now? snapped Kalia, yanking herself out of the window and sitting down on her well-made bed.

“What you need to do is go out there and show them young girls how it’s done,” said Dewayne, looking down at Mari and her girls dancing, and ignoring Kalia’s question.

“I’m not putting one foot in that yard,” said Kalia, stopping her head from nodding to DJ Love’s hip-hop beats.

“Come on. You know you want to walk it out. I’ve seen you shake it like a saltshaker before,” teased Dewayne. “You’d probably cause an earthquake if you got to trippin’ on the dance floor.”

“I told you, Dewayne Craig, I am not dancing to that deejay. I wanted some variety in the music. Mari just had to have her way. She is so selfish.”

“Well she may be selfish, but she’s the one having a blast at y’all’s birthday party. There’s nothing you can do now,” Dewayne reasoned, “so you might as well go on downstairs and get your dance on.”

Kalia looked hard at her best friend. He always knew how to reason with her and make her see the logical and practical sides of situations. He was the calm yin to her high-strung yang, and so their friendship was a natural fit.

“All right, well I guess you’re right,” acquiesced Kalia, combing through the stylishly funky flip in her hair, which she’d been wearing ever since her mother let her get a perm at age twelve. “We can go downstairs, but I’ma get Miss Mari. Believe that.”

“Cool, but let me check my e-mail first since we’re up here,” said Dewayne, scrunching his long legs underneath her computer desk.

“Okay, Dewayne, but as soon as you sign in, I’m turning the timer on,” warned Kalia. “Ten minutes and that’s it. I think I’ll change clothes while you do that.”

Standing in front of her closet, Kalia knew she needed to cheer up if she was going to get the happy back in her birthday. Surveying her conservative but cute wardrobe, she glanced back at Dewayne, who’d already gotten sucked into the Internet. Ever since a drunk driver had killed his older brother, Spencer, five years before, Dewayne had been obsessed with anything animated and technology oriented. He’d even started referring to himself as the Chosen One, a character he’d created.

“I’ll be right back,” she said to Dewayne, grabbing a change of clothes, kicking off her high heels and flouncing out the door in her lace dress. Minutes later when she reappeared in a pale yellow sleeveless blouse, lime green Capris and matching lime flip-flops with yellow rhinestones, Dewayne had that same engrossed expression on his face.

“I’m back,” she announced.

“Kalia, come over here and check out this site,” he beckoned. “I’ve been looking for something like this for a—”

“Time’s up,” interrupted Kalia, speeding the timer up until its bell rang.

“For real? Okay, just let me—”

“I’ll see you outside.”

“I’m coming right now,” he said without budging from the computer.

Dewayne could hear Kalia’s “umm, hmm” moving down the hall. “The Chosen One is left alone again to save the world,” he said to no one in particular.

The next voice he heard a few minutes later was Mari’s. “Boy, you need to come downstairs and dance with one of these ladies,” Mari said, thumping him on the head.

Grabbing her wrist without turning around, Dewayne said, “You’re right, ’cause there sure aren’t any ladies in this room.”

“Whatever, man,” said Mari, rolling her eyes and thumping him again with her other hand. “I’m a grown-ass sixteen-year-old woman. Did you hear me? Woman!”

“Real women don’t hit men on the head, and they definitely don’t get themselves in situations they can’t get out of,” said Dewayne, standing up from the desk and tightening his grip on Mari’s wrist.

“Stop playing, boy! You’re gonna make me hurt you,” Mari said unconvincingly, even to herself. She caught a glimpse of her five-foot, petite frame next to his lengthy six foot two and felt the ridiculousness of her empty threat. Squirming to break Dewayne’s hold, she knocked over one of Kalia’s glass-blown picture frames, breaking it.

“Ooh. You’re in trouble now.” Dewayne laughed, letting her go and backing toward the door. “You know how Miss Perfection is about her room. You’re not even supposed to be in here, right?” With a “See ya, wouldn’t want to be ya,” Dewayne left the room.

Mari picked up the now unframed photo and glared at a Kalia who was a few years younger in the picture, but still had that same flip in her hair and self-satisfied look on her face, like she knew exactly what her life was going to be like. She kicked the broken glass under Kalia’s bed, making a mental note to clean up the mess later and to try and replace the frame before Kalia knew it was missing. But that was going to be hard, she thought, looking around her sister’s room, which was more a work of art. Kalia had her music keyboards in the corner, schoolbooks stacked neatly on her desk, an unwrinkled spread on her bed and a ridiculously color-coordinated closet with all of the clothes hung on hangers facing the same direction.

Envy washed over Mari as she left Kalia’s neat-freak room and shoved open the door of her own which looked like it was arranged by a hurricane. Stepping over almost every item of clothing she owned, Mari threw Kalia’s picture on her dresser. Sometimes she wished she had some of the same characteristics as her big sister. It would be nice to be organized and talented, but that just wasn’t her.

Mari smoothed the building oil off of her cocoa-colored skin, pulled her ponytail tight and slid

some gloss across her thick lips. She admired her well-toned athletic build in her full-length mirror. ~~She worked hard, running year-round, to perform well during track season. She winced at the thought of running cross-country in the fall, as all track athletes were required to do at East Moreland, the private, mostly white high school she attended.~~ She loved running, but anything over two miles was just a waste of time to her. “It is time for him to notice me,” she said aloud, spraying a little Tommy Girl behind each ear and bounding down the back stairs to find one of her girls, Colby, in the kitchen

“You know Qwon’s here, don’t you?” asked Colby, reading her mind.

“Yep. Shauntae told me he was on his way with one of her boys. Have you seen him?”

“Umm, hmm. He just got here with like a gang of fine guys.”

“Girl, you might catch a holla tonight, but stay away from Qwon. He’s mine,” Mari half joked.

“You don’t have to worry,” said Colby. “Those type of guys never even look my way.”

“What are you talking about, Colby?”

“I’m too skinny. Those guys either go with the dance team girls, ones with curves like Shauntae or the kind who wear that expensive designer stuff—Baby Phat, Coach—and get their hair and nails done like every other day. You know, the popular kind.”

“That’s not always true. And it sure ain’t true tonight ’cause I’m none of that, but Qwon is going to kick it to me—tonight,” said Mari.

“I hear ya. He does look good, and Shauntae did say he asked about you when he came in.”

“For real? Where is he? Wait, what did he say? What’s he got on?” demanded Mari, taking Colby by the shoulders and shaking her.

“Girl, you’re so crazy. Let me go,” said Colby, backing away from her excited friend.

“Well?” said Mari, putting her hands on her hips expectantly.

“He’s all geared up. Got on a light blue hoodie and some Girbauds. He’s rocking some of those new Carmelo Anthony Jordans, too.”

Mari let out dreamy “oohs” all through Colby’s description. “What’s going on with his hair? It’s always so tight,” said Mari.

“He’s got one of those old crazy braided styles that you dig, going every which way, all symmetrical and stuff,” said Colby, squinching up her face. “And he’s got his full shine on. His neck, his wrists and his ears are all iced out. I don’t know if it’s real or not, but he’s probably out there blinding everybody at your party.”

Mari clapped her hands in glee.

“I gotta go find him,” she said, heading out of the kitchen. “Oh wait.” She stopped. “What did he

say :

“I don’t know, Mari,” said Colby. “Shauntae just told me he was here. You better go find him, too, ’cause she was getting that look on her face. You know how she gets when she sees a dude she wants to get with.”

“*Please*,” dismissed Mari, “Shauntae knows better. She can get with, and probably has got with every dude at Crunk High, but she betta keep her hands off Qwon. She ain’t no fool.”

“Whatever you say. Anyway, he’s probably out back. Come on. I’ll go with you,” said Colby.

Outside, the party was jumping. DJ Love was putting it down, and about a hundred teenagers were working it out on the grass dance floor. Mari and Colby stood against the back of the house, craning their necks, looking for Qwon. Spotting him, Colby pulled Mari toward the side of the house. “There he is. Over there by the cooler,” she said.

As they walked up behind Qwon, he and his boys were crowded in a circle around something.

“Haaay, Qwon,” said Mari, tapping him on the shoulder.

Qwon turned around and grinned a crooked smile. “What’s up, birthday girl? Happy birthday,” he said, bending down and giving her a peck on the cheek.

“Thank you,” said Mari, wrapping her arms around his neck so he couldn’t get away.

“Dog, girl.” Qwon laughed and disengaged himself from her. “Don’t choke a brother.”

“Oh,” said Mari, slightly embarrassed.

Spying Colby, Qwon said, “What’s up, slim?”

“Hey, Qwon.”

“Girl, when are you gonna gain some weight? Mari, you need to take your girl to IHOP and get her two big stacks of pancakes.”

“Shut up, Qwon,” said Colby.

He laughed, rubbed one hand over his intricately woven braids and started to turn back toward his boys. It was then that Mari saw Kalia in the middle of the group, looking slightly guilty. When she spotted Mari, she looked at Qwon and started smirking.

“Your sister is looking kind of tight tonight,” Qwon whispered in Mari’s ear.

“You think so, huh?” she said, seething.

“I’m thirsty. I think I’m going to get something to drink,” she heard Kalia say.

“Aw, baby, I’ll get it for you,” said one tall, gangly guy.

“Hold up, man. I got it,” said another, dipping his hand in the cooler for a soda.

hold up, man. I got it," said another, tipping his hand in the cooler for a soda.

"Oh, I think I want some water. I'ma go inside," said Kalia, satisfied with the heated look on Mari's face.

"Can I come with you?" asked Qwon as she sauntered away.

"Have a few more birthdays and maybe," she threw over her shoulder.

Mari balled up her fist and Kalia stuck out her tongue at her sister.

"She gets on my nerves," said Mari to Colby.

"Your sister can't help that Qwon 'n 'em like her," said Colby.

"You gettin' on my nerves, too," said Mari, stepping away from Qwon and his boys. "Where's Shauntae? I wanna know what Qwon said about me."

"I saw her trying to push up on Dewayne earlier."

"For real? That's like a waste of time 'cause Dewayne is so gone over Kalia that it ain't even funny. Plus, he's like the biggest nerd *evah*."

"He is kinda cute though," said Colby.

"Who? Dewayne? You must be joking. There that fool is now. Him and Shauntae," said Mari, waving her over.

"I gotta give it up to you, Mari. Your party is *the party* of the summer," said Shauntae, walking up.

"Thank ya very much." Mari grinned. "So what's up with you and Dewayne?"

"Ain't nuthin', girl," said Shauntae, wiggling her hips and throwing her arms in the air as DJ Love cranked up T.I.'s latest hit. "This is my song."

"It's mine, too," said Qwon, turning around. "Come on. Let's make it happen."

Before Shauntae could even answer, Qwon pulled her into the dancing crowd. Mari stood by, stunned.

"What the hell just happened here?" she said. "How is she gonna..." Mari couldn't even finish her sentence and Colby didn't know what to say. Helpless, they watched Shauntae get into a groove with Qwon. They hadn't been on the dance floor two minutes before they were bouncing up against each other, Shauntae's arms around Qwon's neck and her massive breasts bumping against his chest. Mari thought she was going to throw up at the totally enthralled look on Qwon's face as his hands slid up and down Shauntae's back.

"I know he is not rubbin' on her butt at *my* party," said Mari.

“I don’t think so. That’s kinda like her lower back,” said Colby.

Mari swung around and glowered at Colby, opened her mouth to say something smart, but then realized it wasn’t Colby who had her angry.

“I’m going inside,” she said and walked off. Colby followed. Passing through the dining room, they stopped to look at the humongous triple-layered red velvet cake, inscribed in red frosting with Happy Birthday, Kalia and Mariama.

“At least the cake will be good,” said Mari.

“Umm, hmm,” seconded Colby.

Just then they heard a familiar tune coming from the piano in the living room. Someone was playing some Stevie Wonder. She couldn’t tell until she got around the corner what song it was, or that, to her surprise, it was her mother playing. Colby was still following, and behind her, streaming from outside, was more than half of the party, drawn in by Elaine’s singing. After he was told, DJ Love took a break.

It had been years since Mari’d seen her mother sit down at a piano, and she was playing her favorite Stevie song, “As.” Also standing in awe around the piano were Dewayne, her father, Kalia and lots of other family and friends of their parents. As soon as Elaine got to the chorus, everybody who knew the words started singing. Old and young alike were rocking back and forth and dancing.

There was a thunderous applause when Elaine finished, and Mari went up to her mother and hugged her. Kalia just stared at Elaine, dumbfounded. Mari dragged her mom over to Kalia, screaming, “I told you Mom could get down! I told you! I bet you can’t get down like that.

“All you play is that classical stuff,” she added. “I wanna see you rip it.”

People were still hugging Elaine and clapping.

“Is that a challenge, Mari?” demanded Kalia.

Kalia marched over to the piano, sat down and started one of the longest, most elaborate runs of the keys that she’d ever attempted. Whatever song she was playing was ominous in its introduction. She slowed her pace, segueing into a slower R & B flow, and by the time she started singing, she knew where she was going.

Kalia sang the words from Alicia Keys’s “If I Ain’t Got You,” dripping with emotion. As she progressed, she threw her everything into it. Her fingers were flying over the keys, and she was belting out the chorus. No one was talking. The whole party had moved indoors and was wrapped up in her performance.

Mari loved to hear her sister sing and play, but she was really surprised to see Kalia performing for a crowd. Besides competitive or official school concerts, Kalia did not sit down and play for anybody, and she certainly never sang for just anyone. It took them years to convince her to join her junior high school chorale. Though she always seemed nervous before her group had to sing in front

the entire school, that night she was totally confident.

Mari looked across the way at her dad, who surprisingly had his arm around her mom's shoulders. Ronald was grinning at his elder daughter and proudly nudging folks around him. Pangs of jealousy set into Mari's heart. He rarely looked at her like that, she thought.

Ronald Jefferson was hardly ever at home. The owner of three fast food restaurants, The Fish Frys, he was always working. Between worrying about the competition from the more established Captain D's and Long John Silver's to being a microman-ager of his own locations, the forty-four-year-old was barely able to support any of his daughters' extracurricular activities, and he certainly hadn't attended any of the yoga classes his wife taught or the events she helped organize as a part of the committee for the National Black Arts Festival.

Turning her attention back to Kalia, who was jazzing up the bridge of Alicia Keys's hit, Mari couldn't even remember the last time she saw her parents get dressed up and go out anywhere together. She recalled when she and Kalia were children how her parents used to leave them with family or babysitters at least once a month and get fly and go out to plays or dances or even just dinner with friends. Their house was always filled with people for card parties and get-togethers, and there were family vacations to Disney World, Busch Gardens and Savannah.

Mari missed those happier, carefree times. And she knew her mom did, too, even though she couldn't tell it that night. As Kalia crescendoed toward an impressive ending, a petite Elaine hugged her husband's waist. Mari pictured her parents back when she was in elementary school. A former dancer, Elaine, now forty, was a beautiful young mother and a fabulous host. Every once in a while, Elaine would perform with a dance troupe. A slight woman, extremely graceful, always with her head held high, she could do it all—ballet, modern, jazz and African dance.

Her parents were acting like they did when she was young. Ronald and Elaine were being loving and supportive parents. The only problem for Mari was at the moment all of the love and support was focused on Kalia, who was receiving a standing ovation, applause and cheers for her performance. Half-heartedly clapping, Mari walked over toward where Shauntae and Colby were standing.

"I guess y'all are all caught up in my Alicia Keys wannabe sister, too?"

"Don't hate on your sister, girl," said Colby. "She sure can blow—and play, too."

"But she need to let them lime-green pedal pushers go. She looks like she's been fishing in those high-water pants," Shauntae snickered.

"I know you are not talking about my sister," warned Mari.

"You were," said Shauntae, the penciled-in eyebrows on her smooth fair skin arching in attitude.

"She's my sister, so I can."

"Stop being so protective about your prissy-ass sister," said Shauntae. "She ain't all that now. So what, she can sing and play the piano? A lot of people can do that."

"Well, I think she's tight," said Colby. "She's got skills."

“Who asked you for your opinion? You always got something to say,” said Shauntae to Colby, who looked away to hide her hurt feelings.

“Why don’t you leave her alone?” Mari said to Shauntae.

“For what? I can say what I want,” said Shauntae, adjusting her ample chest in the too-tight blue halter she was stuffed into. She smiled at a couple of guys who were staring at her thick hourglass frame and shoulder-length sandy-brown naturally curly hair that kept her the center of male attention wherever she went.

“Not at my party you can’t,” said Mari, moving closer to Shauntae.

“You just think you all that because your sister can sing. *She* can sing. You can’t.”

Mari heard a bunch of “oohs” from around the room and realized that all eyes were on her and Shauntae.

“What is your problem? Why are you always roasting on people? That is so childish,” said Mari.

“No, what’s childish is you trying to front on me because Qwon is all up on me and not paying you any attention—at all.”

More “oohs.” Louder this time.

“Now what are you gonna say?” challenged Shauntae.

Mari was on fire. She could feel the heat rising up the back of her neck. She wanted to knock Shauntae down, but she settled for something just as satisfying.

“The only reason Qwon is on you is because he knows you’re the biggest freak at Crunk High.”

Hoops, hollers and laughter erupted. People slapped palms and gave one another dap. Embarrassed, Shauntae tried to play it off with a “Whatever,” and a flip of her hand. She ended up rolling her eyes and walking out of the room.

Mari was satisfied. She hated the way that Shauntae treated Colby, but she also felt that Colby needed to stand up for herself. She’d been letting Shauntae run all over her since Mari met them both five years ago at a YWCA sleepaway camp. When they got back from their two-week stay, they found that they lived right across town from one another. Shauntae lived in a mixed-income apartment complex, Colby stayed with her grandparents in a shabby house not too far from Shauntae, and they both were juniors at Samuel Odette Williams “Crunk” High, where Kalia was a part of the magnet performing arts program.

“Let’s take a group picture,” said Kalia, walking up. “This may be the last time we have a joint birthday blowout ’cause who knows where I’m going to be next year.”

“Mom and Daddy are outside,” said Mari, reflecting on Kalia’s words. Kalia was right. This was probably their last birthday party together. Mari hadn’t even started her sophomore year yet, and she was already wondering what her junior and senior years were going to be like without Kalia around.

True, her sister annoyed her, but it was an annoyance that she'd gotten used to having around.

The four of them—Mari, Kalia, Elaine and Ronald—hugged up together under a big Happy Birthday banner. Flashes were popping and the summer was ending. There was a good vibe in the air, and everyone was having fun. It would be a long time before all of the Jeffersons were this happy again.

Mari walked into Greenbriar Mall in her normal gear—a denim miniskirt, white sneakers and a too-tight white baby T that screamed It’s All About Me! in red across the front. Bopping down the mall, she slathered on lip gloss and pulled her ponytail tight. She was supposed to be meeting Colby for some back-to-school shopping, but her heart wasn’t really in it. Peering at the latest styles in the store windows while navigating the massive number of black teenagers kicking it at the mall, Mari realized she wasn’t ready to go back to school, especially since she’d just passed her driver’s test. She wanted a little more time to get her skills up before she had to get back in the grind. Even though Shauntae had acted a fool at her birthday party, she’d really enjoyed her summer, hanging out with her girls.

In the beginning of the summer her mom had her in a local leadership development program for a few weeks with a bunch of nerds, and she also went to a cool summer camp for track-and-field athletes for about ten days. She’d been to like five or six hot parties with kids from public school in the past two and a half months.

Mari wished she went to Williams High with her friends. She’d hung out with the Crunk High crowd all summer, and now she was going to have to go back to boring, stuffy, mostly white East Moreland. Even Kalia got to go to the livest high school in the city, Mari thought as she spotted Colby standing in front of their favorite shoe store.

“What’s with the grumpy face?” said Colby as Mari walked up.

“Hey,” said Mari. “I am so not ready to roll back to the most uppity school in the city.”

“Well, at least you get to do cool stuff at your school,” said Colby. “I wish we got to go to plays and the symphony and go out of town like y’all do.”

“Well, that’s what rich people do,” said Mari, walking into the shoe store. “But y’all ain’t just sitting around over there at Williams. You’ve got the best football and basketball teams. Our games are so boring, and we lose every time. Your parties and talent shows are tight, and everybody says your proms are off the chain. I don’t know why Kalia didn’t go to her junior prom, but you’ll get to go this year.”

“Yeah, if somebody asks me,” said Colby, twisting her long braid extensions into a messy bun.

“Somebody will and you’ll get to go. You’ll probably end up being the queen of the hypest prom in the city. I don’t know why my parents put me at East Boredom anyway.”

“Uh... ’cause you’re smart. Smart enough to get that full scholarship to go to that private school,” said Colby.

“Everybody knows that Mari’s got some big brains,” said Shauntae, walking up behind Colby.

Everybody knows that Mari's got some big brains," said Shauntae, walking up behind Colby. "You don't need to remind us."

Mari opened her mouth to say something, but was stunned into silence when she saw who was with Shauntae.

"Hey, look who I found," said Shauntae, grabbing Qwon's hand.

"What's happening, ladies? What are y'all doing up in here?" said Qwon, slipping his hand from Shauntae's grasp.

Seeing that Mari still wasn't able to find her voice, Colby stepped in. "You know, trying to get some new gear for school. Catch some of these sales."

"Me, too. Check out my new kicks," said Qwon, stepping one foot forward.

"Those are hot, baby," cooed Shauntae, tightening the belt on her hot pink Apple Bottoms jeans, which accentuated her Coca-Cola bottle shape. "You should get me the ladies' version and then we'll be matching. That would be so cute."

"What's up with your money, chicken?" asked Qwon, eyeing her.

"You weren't calling me that a few minutes ago when you were all up on me in the movies," said Shauntae.

"That was different," said Qwon, glancing around the shoe store. "Look, I'm about to be out. I just came over here to check out what they had in here."

"Ain't nuthin' in here for you." Shauntae smirked with her hands on her hips.

"Cool, 'cause I know everyone else been up in it anyway," Qwon threw over his shoulder as he left the store.

"Whatever," said Shauntae, eyeing some hot-pink stilettos.

Mari hadn't said a word through their whole exchange. She didn't know if she was more disgusted with her choice of men or how Shauntae could let herself be so insulted by a guy.

"What's wrong with you, girl?" said Shauntae, snapping her lime-green freshly painted inch-long acrylic nails in Mari's face. "I know you ain't trippin' over Qwon. He ain't even got nuthin' goin' on."

Mari regained her voice. "How do you know?"

"Didn't you just hear me say we were in the movies? He can't kiss or nuthin'. He don't even know what to do with his hands."

"Just shut up, Shauntae," said Mari, raising her voice and her hand. She was more disgusted at Shauntae's behavior.

"What are you getting loud with?" Shauntae demanded, rolling her eyes. "I can't help if Qwon

who are you getting loud with? Shauntae demanded, rolling her neck. I can't help it Qwon knows what he likes, but like I said, he ain't about nuthin' no way."

Well, they did agree about that, thought Mari, watching Shauntae pick up the stilettos.

"Colby. Girl, I bet you couldn't even walk in these." Shauntae laughed, holding up one shoe by the heel. "Your skinny foot would probably slip out of the front and you'd bust your butt."

Mari had totally forgotten that Colby was even with them. She walked over to where she was sitting and plopped down beside her.

"I thought y'all were gonna throw some blows for a minute there," said Colby.

"I ain't trippin' over that girl."

"But you were trippin' over Qwon."

"So," Mari said a little too harshly.

"I'm just saying, you should be happy that Qwon got with Shauntae. At least you know what kind of girl he likes," said Colby.

She didn't see Shauntae behind her.

"If you've got something to say to me, Colby, you need to go on and say it," said Shauntae. "Personally I think you're just hatin' 'cause you couldn't catch a holla if you walked through this mall butt-ass naked."

"Well, at least half the dudes in this mall haven't seen me butt-ass naked," said Colby, shocking both Mari and Shauntae. Colby rarely stood up for herself.

"Whatevah, trick," said Shauntae, with a wave of her hand.

"This is ridiculous. I'm tired of arguing, and I need to get some new clothes," said Mari. "I'm going to Rainbow."

They all had attitudes with one another as they walked out of the shoe store. Mari was thoroughly annoyed and considered ditching her friends to finish her back-to-school shopping alone. As they walked through the mall, Shauntae did get the most attention, but Mari and Colby were used to it. Shauntae had had a grown woman's body since she was thirteen and she knew how to handle it. Mari did wish she would slow up on the number of guys that she got with, but Shauntae was headstrong, and it was hard to tell her anything.

"I'ma dip into Rich's," said Shauntae, finger-combing her curly hair and slinging her empty backpack over her shoulder. "I'll catch up with y'all."

"Get something for me," said Colby as Shauntae walked off. They knew the next time they saw Shauntae that her backpack would be full, but she wouldn't have spent a dime.

"Does that girl ever pay for anything?" asked Mari, already knowing the answer to her question.

Does that girl ever pay for anything?" asked Mari, already knowing the answer to her question.

"Nope," said Colby. "She's got that thing down to a science. She racked up at the jewelry spot last week. Check out these silver hoops she got me. I hope she doesn't get caught again."

"Don't be putting that bad energy out there, girl," said Mari.

"Well, we won't be minors anymore in a couple of months when we turn seventeen," said Colby "and if she gets caught stealing as an adult, she'll probably get in some real trouble, not juvenile stuff anymore."

"Aw, you just said Shauntae had skills," said Mari as they walked into Rainbow. "The only reason y'all got caught before is because she forgot about the cameras in the dressing room, right?"

"Yeah. Anyway, I've boosted for the last time. I'd just rather pay for my stuff and not risk it again," said Colby.

"That'll probably keep you out of jail, which is good," said Mari, "but I won't front. I loved that CD player y'all got for me that one time. I still use it."

Colby stopped at the tennis dresses, picked one up and placed it in front of her thin frame in the full-length mirror. At nearly seventeen, she still had the underdeveloped body of a twelve-year-old, and her glasses sometimes made her look just that age.

"This would be cute if I had something to fill it out with," she said. "Shauntae would look like a Barbie doll in this."

"Nothing's going on in here," said Mari, ignoring Colby's comments. "Let's hit the food court. Shauntae knows we always end up over there anyway."

A half an hour later, Shauntae flopped down at a table with Mari and Colby and dropped her bursting knapsack on the floor.

"I guess you racked up," said Colby. "What did you get me?"

"Now you know I don't discuss the goods before I go home and check them out," said Shauntae, grabbing one of Colby's French fries.

"You could have asked," said Colby.

"What are you going to say? No?" dared Shauntae, taking another fry.

"Maybe," said Colby, scooting her plate over. "Get your own food, greedy."

"With your string bean of a body I guess I should leave your food alone. That's why I didn't get your stingy butt anything," said Shauntae. "I had a close call up in there, but I worked it out. I think this'll be my last time for the summer. I basically got all the gear I need anyway. I'ma sell some of this stuff and get me a little dough to get some smoke, too."

Colby looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening to their conversation. "I wish you

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