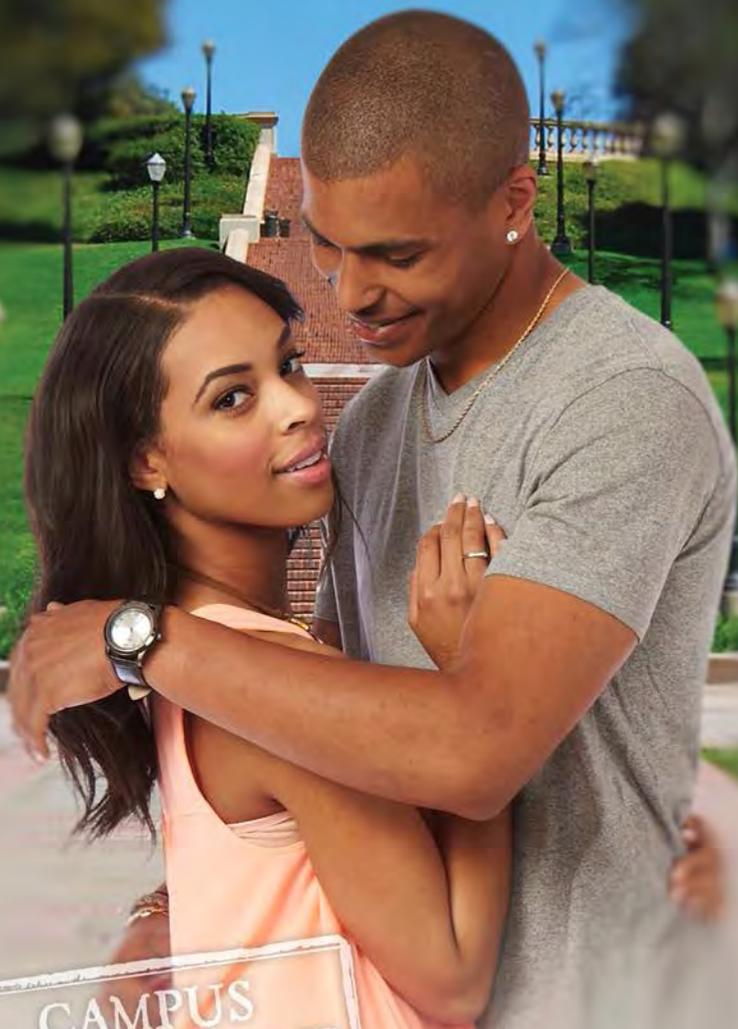


J E F F G O T T E S F E L D



CAMPUS
CONFESSIONS

xa Ranette

Book 1



Chapter One

If Jayson Jones hadn't had such damn fine guns, my life would have been a whole lot easier.

I'm Ronette. I have a last name—Bradley for what it's worth—but my hotel nametag just says Ronette, because last names don't matter when you're an eighteen-year-old high school graduate cleaning rooms to make a little chip. All my boss wanted was for me to do my quota of rooms as fast as I could so the Chicago Apex Airport Express didn't have to cough up any extra hours at minimum wage.

Let me say this: it sucked to be cleaning rooms at a two-star hotel when my fine boyfriend with the amazing guns was headed off to college the next morning. He wasn't going to just any college either. He was going to Houseman University in Washington, D.C. Houseman is

what they call a “historically black college and university,” also known as a HBCU. It’s a great school with a mostly-black student body. I applied there and didn’t get in. More on that soon.

I was proud that he was going to Houseman, but it was also scary. The Houseman University girl-to-boy ratio is two-to-one. Two sisters for every brother. It’s that way at a lot of HBCUs. If our men paid more mind to their grades and less mind to getting into a sister’s pants, that ratio might equal out. Not that I was in any position to talk about minding my grades. I’d finished Corman High School in the bottom third of the class. I know. Pitiful.

My GPA didn’t get me into Houseman. In fact, it barely got me into Chicagoland Community College, where I was to start in three weeks. Everyone says CCC got its name because C is a high grade for the kids who end up there. My mom, Kalina—I don’t have a dad or brothers or sisters, just Kalina and me—wanted me to study dental hygiene. I wanted to take writing. Kalina said writers starve. Since Kalina knows a thing or two about starving, there was good reason to listen to her.

Meanwhile, my boyfriend with the killer guns was heading to college two weeks early. He had a football scholarship and the players arrived early for practice. Jayson is six foot two and built like the star running back

he is. In contrast, I'm short and skinny, with a cup size that would be a letter between *A* and *B*, if such a letter existed.

Jayson is caramel. I'm lighter. His eyes dance. Mine are dark pools. He keeps his hair buzzed. Mine is long and brown and goes with my swooping neck that makes people wonder if I'm from East Africa. His face is square. Mine is long. His voice rumbles. Mine is musical.

He's rich. His daddy is a Chicago alderman who some say will be mayor. His family lives in a penthouse north of the Chicago River. I'm far from rich. My mother works for the same hotel chain where I am a maid. She is a desk clerk and has done it long enough that her last name is on her badge. We have a furnished two bedroom near the O'Hare International Airport, one of the busiest in the world. All my life she'd worked for airport-area hotels. I had lived near takeoff and landing flight paths for so long that when I needed to fall asleep, I counted engines roaring the way other people counted sheep.

So, about that last night with Jayson before he went to Houseman ... if he hadn't had such damn fine guns, it would have been a lot easier. Heading into last night, I'd sworn I'd stay a virgin until at least my eighteenth birthday. Maybe longer.

Ha. Lead me not into temptation. I can get there by myself.

Everyone says your first time is supposed to be wack. Either it hurts, or you don't feel anything, or the guy drools, or his member didn't remember what to do. It happens in a backseat or a locked room at a party where Pac Div pounds and your man's boys laugh in the hallway and wait for the blow-by-blow. So to speak.

It was not that way for Jayson and me. I hate reading sex scenes and can't imagine writing one, so I'll sum up my first time with Jayson in four words, and make them all-caps for emphasis.

IT WAS DA BOMB.

I loved it. Jayson did too. For the record, protection was used. This is not a teen pregnancy story.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I will say this for Jayson: he did it up right. We went to L20, the super-fine restaurant at the Belden-Stratford Hotel near Lincoln Park. I'm a girl who never dresses up. Not only couldn't I afford nice threads, but when a person has moved as much in their life as I have, you learn to travel light. All my clothes could fit easily in two suitcases.

Remember that fact. It's important later.

Imagine my surprise when the doorbell rang that last afternoon Jayson was in Chicago. I opened it to a white delivery guy in a gray uniform. He held a wrapped box.

"Ronette Bradley?" he asked.

“That’s me last time I looked.”

“For you.”

He handed me the box. I was puzzled but signed for the package and tipped him two bucks. When you clean rooms, you learn that the eleventh commandment is, “Thou Shalt Tip Your Service Person Because, Dammit, They’re Getting Paid Doodly.” Etch it on a stone tablet.

The box was from Brooklyn Industries, a hip clothing joint on Milwaukee Avenue. It held a black silk dress with red trim that plunged low in both front and back. Also a pair of heels. Red with black trim. Plus a note: “Hot clothes for the hawt girl. C U tonight.”

Yes. I melted a little. I melted more when everything fit like it was made for me. My mother actually yelped with happiness when she saw me come out of my room for the date.

“Baby girl, you’re in a dress!”

I had to smile. She made it sound like I’d cured cancer.

“Do I look a’ight?” I asked her.

“Baby girl, I’m your mama, so I’d tell you that you looked a’ight if you were wearin’ a garbage bag with a duct tape belt. All I can say is that if I was your Jayson, I wouldn’t be goin’ away to Houseman. I’d be stayin’ right here at Northwestern.”

I frowned a little. Jayson had been recruited by a bunch

of big schools, including Northwestern University up the road in Evanston. He'd decided on Houseman, mostly because his daddy, James, (not Jim, do not ever call him Jim) had gone there.

But still.

I pushed that thought from my mind. People went to college all the time. It's part of life.

The thought roared back at me in italics.

Yeah, babe. But how many of those people stick with their hometown honey when they go to a place where the girl-to-boy ratio is two-to-one? Don't you know that those college girls are gonna be fightin' over your man?

I told the thought to shut her face. This time, she listened.

The date was a dream. Jayson fetched me in a limo and brought me roses. We talked and laughed all the way downtown. He wore black pants and a black cashmere V-neck sweater with the sleeves pushed up. In the restaurant, we sat next to each other instead of across. When we weren't using our forks and knives, we held hands. We ate seafood bisque, salad with blue cheese dressing, a Kobe beef filet with baby new potatoes and glazed carrots, and hand-cranked mango ice cream for dessert.

We talked more and looked into each other's eyes.

"I'm gonna miss you a lot," Jayson said when the last

dish had been taken away and he'd given his daddy's credit card to the waiter.

"I'm gonna miss you too."

"We gonna text, and Skype, and all that," he promised.

"Works for me," I told him.

He scrunched up his face. "Okay, there's something I gotta say, so I'm just gonna say it."

I had no idea what was coming, but I motioned with my hand for him to bring it.

"I just—I wish you'd gotten the grades to get into Houseman," he declared. "This'd be all different. We could be goin' there together."

I cast my eyes down at the white tablecloth, unable to meet his gaze. I felt a little ashamed at how crappy I'd done in high school. Okay. A lot ashamed.

"I know," I murmured.

"Why, Ronette?" he asked me. "You read more books than anyone. You write great. You even got better SATs than me. Why'd you have to mess up your GPA?"

I shook my head. A lump rose in my throat. "I don't know really. High school just felt like prison."

He cupped his hand under my chin and slowly turned my head. We were looking directly into each other's eyes.

"Do good at CCC," he told me. "Then you can transfer next year."

Next year. That felt like next century. Meanwhile, in twelve hours, he'd be on the way to the Dee Cee.

He signed the credit card slip. We went back to the waiting limo. It was in his arms in that limo that I made the decision. His parents were away for three weeks on Martha's Vineyard. His older sister lived in New York; his big brother worked for a movie company in Los Angeles.

The penthouse would be empty. We'd be alone. I wanted Jayson to know I really loved him. He wanted the same for me.

I called Kalina to tell her I wasn't coming home. She didn't argue.

Let me repeat: it was da bomb. I'm not sorry we did it. It kind of sealed us with him going away and me staying in Chicago.

I stayed overnight. We slept in each other's arms. I was with him in the morning when the cab arrived to take him to O'Hare and drop me at my place. We kissed again and again on my doorstep. I was strong and did not cry. Not even at the last, "I love you."

Not until the cab rolled away. Then, I wept.

J E F F G O T T E S F E L D



CAMPUS
CONFESSIONS

Frenemies

Book 2



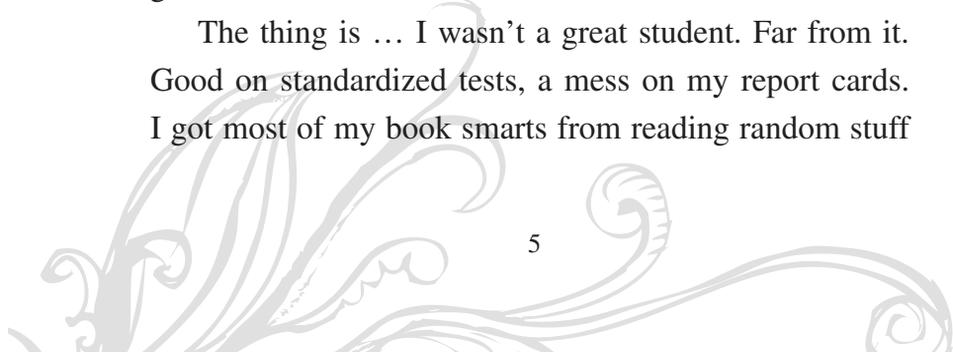
Prologue

I'm Ronette Bradley from Chicago. Hi.

I grew up a bunch of different places because my mom, Kalina, works for a hotel chain. It's just her and me. No dad. He was gone before I was born. I've worked in hotels too, cleaning rooms. That's what I was doing in late August when I got the surprise call letting me know that I was accepted to Houseman University, the historically black college in Washington, D.C. My boyfriend, Jayson, was already at Houseman.

If there was ever a scream of joy, it was mine when I got that call.

The thing is ... I wasn't a great student. Far from it. Good on standardized tests, a mess on my report cards. I got most of my book smarts from reading random stuff



that appealed to me. I generally ignored everything else. I was a whiz on black poetry and a dunce on the American Revolution. Still, Houseman took a chance on me. They offered a partial scholarship if I could come up with the rest of the chip. My mama assured me that she could pay it, so off I went to the Dee Cee. I was psyched, especially because my fave poet in the world was and is a Houseman professor.

Great, right? Oh-so-wrong-o.

My roommate turned out to be an unbelievable horror show, who thinks she's all that because she's the daughter of America's most famous black talk show hostess. Even worse, within five days of my coming to Houseman, I found Jayson in bed with her on the night of what I've come to call the Day From Hell.

Let me repeat that in case it somehow got by: I found Jayson in bed with her!

My mom didn't actually have the money for my tuition, but somehow she convinced my roommate's famous mother to pay it. I found that out on the Day From Hell. As for my runaway dad, I got his phone number on the Day From Hell too. I just had to decide whether to use it.

We'll pick up the story the morning after the Day From Hell. Day Six. Like I said, I'm Ronette Bradley from Chicago. Here's my campus confession.



Chapter One

The Day From Hell started sane. At lunchtime that day, I was just another Houseman University college freshman: out on the quad having lunch with her bestie, who in my case is Marta Cruz. It was great to be at Houseman, one of the two HBCUs—historically black colleges and universities—in Washington, D.C., and extra great because my boyfriend, Jayson Jones, was a freshman too. Like so many HBCUs, Houseman was two-thirds sisters, one-third brothers. I'd been worried sick that with him in the Dee Cee and me in Chicago, I'd get kicked. Now I was in the Dee Cee too. How cool was that?

Oh, I had some problems. First, my tuition was due at five o'clock. But I hadn't heard from the bursar, so I figured everything was cool. Second, my roommate was

Chyna. Yeah. *That* Chyna. Daughter of famous TV talk show host Crystal. Yeah, *that* Crystal, who's better known than Michelle Obama. Chyna and I hit it off like a Tomahawk cruise missile and a munitions factory. When she'd rapped one of my poems at a party and passed it off as her own, I was ready to kill her. I was also pretty sure that she'd gotten hold of my private poetry notebook, which I'd stupidly left on the Houseman quad.

The Day From Hell kicked into gear by mid-afternoon. By midnight, here's what had happened:

- I found out that my mother never had tuition money. She was lying.

- My mother had called the father I'd never spoken to, to ask him if he could pay it.

- He said no. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with me.

- My mother had called Crystal to ask if Crystal would pay my tuition. No lie.

- Crystal said yes.

- I'd found all this out by surprise. No one was planning on telling me anything.

- I'd walked in on Chyna and Jayson in my dorm room. Jayson said it wasn't what I thought, but what else could it be?

I got sick after finding Chyna and Jayson. Literally. Barfed my guts out. At least Chyna had the courtesy to

sleep somewhere else that night. She'd left the room after telling me I should fight for Jayson. Ha! I couldn't even think of doing that when her sheets were still warm. And when I breathed deep, I could smell the mix of Chyna and Jayson. The malodor led to another donation to the bowl. But I had decided to stick it out. Not to leave Houseman.

Say what you will about me, but I am a stubborn-ass black girl.

I brushed my teeth, washed my wrecked face, and took a quick look at my phone. There were a slew of texts and voice mails. From Jayson and my mother mostly, but others too. *Fokken* that. (*Fokken* comes from an old-Dutch word meaning "to thrust." Guess how we use it *now*.)

I got ready for bed. What else was I going to do? Write a poem? I didn't think I could even hold a pen. I had just pulled on an old Chicago Bears T-shirt when there was a knock on the door.

Rap!

Then two more. *Rap! Rap!*

My stomach lurched. Who could it be? Jayson? Oh God. Not him. Please, not him. I couldn't see him, let alone talk to him.

"Ronette? You in there?"

Female voice, which meant unless Jayson had undergone an appendage amputation, it wasn't him. I knew who

it was. My bestie, Marta. I'd bumped into her after discovering the Chyna-Jayson two-backed beast.

"Coming!" I called.

I opened the door. There she stood. Marta is petite—no more than five feet tall, with wild curls, dark eyes, and the whitest smile you'll ever see. She's black but with a spicy mix of Cuban. She grew up all over the world since her father is an army officer. She wore red pajamas and fuzzy slippers. In her right hand was a container of Haagen-Dazs butter pecan. In her left hand, two spoons.

"Figured you'd be awake," she said. "Figured you needed sugar therapy. Where's your bee-yotch roomie?"

I shook my head. "Dunno. Maybe she and Jayson are off doing an encore."

"Don't think about it," she ordered. "Just invite me in."

I did. She thrust the ice cream container and a spoon at me. "Eat. You don't want dry heaves."

"How did you know I was barfing?"

"You think you're the only girl in the world who ever found out her boyfriend was cheating?" she asked rhetorically. "And no, I don't want to talk about me now." She folded her arms. "I'm not sitting down till you take a bite."

Marta Cruz comes from a military family. She is not one to be crossed. When she says eat, the only proper response is, how much?

I opened the ice cream and took a spoonful.

“Great,” she pronounced, and then plopped on Chyna’s bed. When she realized who had been there, she bounced up. “Ewww!”

I didn’t smile.

“Can I tell a joke?” Marta asked.

“Is it funny?”

“Well. Here goes. A skeleton walks into a bar. He goes up to the bartender and says, ‘Gimme a beer ... and a mop.’”

I made a face. “That isn’t funny.”

“Neither is what happened to you,” Marta told me. “I’m not here to give you advice. Or even make you laugh. I just want you to know if my bestie can’t sleep because of bull crap, I’m not sleeping either.”

Her words touched me big-time. I started to cry. At first, little spits of tears like raindrops in an April shower. Then the skies of my soul opened up. I’m not sure when Marta wrapped her arms around me. But I just let go. I cried. I cried until I had no tears left. It was too much. But it was not too much for my bestie. Even in my sadness, I hoped there would be a time when I could be the rock for her that she was being for me.

I sat back and wiped my puffy eyes. “Is there any more ice cream?”

She handed me the carton, now full of butter pecan slosh. I took it, walked to Chyna's bed, and dumped the ice cream goop onto her custom-made, Ikat-print silk pillows and pink 1,500-thread-count sheets.

It was an empty, childish, and futile gesture. Dammit if it didn't make me feel better.



Chapter Two

To my shock, I slept till ten thirty Thursday morning. Good thing I didn't have any morning classes.

I had a blissful four seconds of bleariness while I got my bearings. Then the memory of the Day From Hell came flying in like five rounds from a Glock. I staggered to the toilet and retched again. At least I didn't have to deal with Chyna. She hadn't come home the night before. There was now a dry riverbed of butter pecan ice cream on her pillow and sheets.

I pulled it together enough to look at myself in the mirror. In the best of times, I can be cute. Light skin for a black girl, dark eyes, and a long swoopy neck that makes folks think my people come from Ethiopia. My nose is