

## **Chapter 1**

Roylin Bailey flipped on the bathroom switch and yelled, “Mom, the switch still don’t work! Didn’t Tuttle fix it yet? This dump is falling apart!”

“Roylin, that man don’t do nothin’ around here. All he wants is to go to that racetrack and bet on horses. He’d keep gamblin’ even if the ceiling fell down on us! Yesterday I had to wash the baby in water I heated on the stove ’cause we don’t have enough hot water to fill a teacup!” Mrs. Bailey called back. She had complained many times, but Tuttle, the building manager, was a sour-tempered little man who always had several days’ stubble on his face and a greasy Dodgers cap on his head. Requests from the tenants fell on deaf ears. But with five children, Mrs. Bailey had few choices of where to live in this neighborhood.

Roylin was almost seventeen, and he had a pretty good job as a waiter at the Golden Grill restaurant. He worked three days a week and could bring home decent money in tips, especially on Saturday nights. But most of his earnings went to pay for insurance on his mother's Honda. Because he paid for the insurance, his mother allowed him to drive the car to work and school. Between gas, insurance, and clothes, there was no way Roylin could afford to help his mother pay for a better place to live.

"Man, this place ain't fit for the roaches on the walls," Roylin yelled, kicking the bathroom door shut.

"Don't take it out on us," said Amberlynn, Roylin's fourteen-year-old sister.

"Shut your mouth!" he snapped from behind the closed door.

"Don't talk to me like that," Amberlynn yelled back. "I need a ride to school this morning," she added. "Can you take me?"

"No!"

"Mom, Roylin won't drive me to school!" Amberlynn whined.

"It's outta my way. Take the bus or walk," Roylin snapped, stepping out of the bathroom.

“What’s your problem?” Amberlynn said. “You’re just like Dad—mean and ugly.”

Roylin turned sharply and glared at his sister. “Don’t you *ever* say I’m like him! You hear me? I’m nothin’ like him, nothin’!” Roylin’s father used to beat him regularly, using a heavy leather strap to turn Roylin’s back into a mass of tender bruises. The slightest offense was enough to enrage the muscular man. He would stand Roylin against the wall and administer blow after blow. That was why Roylin’s mother finally divorced him. Even being alone with five children was not as frightening to her as living with a man whose wrath was dangerous and unpredictable. Nobody ever knew whose turn it would be to be beaten. Would he use the strap on Roylin, would he crack Amberlynn across her face, splitting her lip, or would he shove his wife so hard against the sink that she would ache for days?

“Drive your sister,” Mom said crossly. “You can do that much, Roylin Bailey. It’s startin’ to rain, and it’s a long walk to the middle school, and the bus is runnin’ late as usual.”

Roylin hiked his backpack onto his

shoulders. "Hurry up if you're comin' with me, Amberlynn. I don't wanna be late for my first class and get locked out."

Amberlynn stuffed one more book into her backpack and ran after her brother as he headed for his Honda. Once inside the car, Amberlynn said, "I made it onto the cheerleading squad, me and Jamee Wills. Granelli's Paint Store is paying for the uniforms. They're so nice! I'll be so good at cheering that when I get to Bluford next year I can be on the cheerleading squad there."

"Like I care," Roylin muttered.

"Hey, ain't that Bobby Wallace, that wannabe thug who was hangin' out with Londell James when you got shot?" Amberlynn asked. "How come he ain't in jail or something?"

"That punk copped a plea, and now he's back in school. They got Londell for that drive-by, though. He's the one who pulled the trigger," Roylin said, remembering the day in the park when he was shot. The memory of it still made him tremble.

Roylin pulled up at the middle school and said, "Get goin', girl. I gotta make it to Bluford before the first bell, or it's my

neck. Eckerly is the meanest teacher in Bluford, and she'd just love to mess me up."

Amberlynn rushed out of the car, and Roylin drove on to Bluford High School. Steering the teal-blue Honda through the morning drizzle, he pulled into the parking lot, bolted from the car, and sprinted into the school, careful to avoid the shallow puddles that had formed on the cracked asphalt.

"Hey man," Cooper Hodden laughed as Roylin skidded into the classroom, "you always tryin' to get in under the wire. Why don't you just get up a little earlier, man?"

Roylin ignored the comment. He was sitting down when he saw a new girl sitting a desk away. She was the most beautiful girl Roylin had ever seen, even in his dreams. Her skin looked like satin, and she had huge dark eyes shadowed by long lashes. Her slightly pouting lips were smooth, full, and red.

"Man," Roylin whistled softly, "who is *that?*"

Tarah Carson sat behind Roylin. "Fool," she whispered to Roylin, "don't even *think* about that girl. Her name is Korie Archer, and she thinks she is *all that!*"

Roylin paid no attention to Ms. Eckerly's lecture on Civil War battles. He kept staring at Korie, at the way she tilted her head when she was puzzled, at how her smooth hand rubbed her neck when she grew tired of looking at the chalkboard. Roylin had dated other girls, and some of them were pretty, but no girl he had ever seen measured up to Korie. She was somebody he expected to see on the cover of a magazine, not sitting in his classroom. She had one of those incredible faces and bodies that do not seem to belong in the real world, especially the world Roylin Bailey lived in.

Roylin watched Korie glide from the room when class ended. Her perfect figure swayed through the crowd of students in the hallway. He jostled past several others to catch up to her. "Hi," he said nervously. "I'm Roylin Bailey. Today's your first day here, huh?"

Korie turned and flashed a big smile. "Yeah, I'm Korie Archer. I'm a transfer from Hoover. Do you like it here?"

"Yeah, I mean, it's okay. I'll show you around. What's your next class?"

Korie hesitated for a minute and then dug in her overcrowded purse. "I don't even know. I am so confused . . . Let's

see, where's my schedule?" A lipstick and small compact fell from her purse as she rummaged around, and Roylin dove to the floor to recover them for her. When Roylin returned them, her hand brushed his, and electricity seemed to pulsate through his body. "Oh, here's the schedule. I got science next."

"I'll show you where it is," Roylin volunteered as they walked on.

"Thanks," Korie said in a musical, breathy voice.

"You got biology with Reed. She's tough. There's Room 112, right there." Roylin pointed to an open door with students streaming in.

"Well, thanks a lot, Roylin. You've been really sweet," Korie said, smiling. How could Tarah have said Korie thought she was hot stuff? She seemed as nice as she was beautiful.

"Uh . . . Korie, you and I are both in the same lunch period," Roylin said, studying her schedule carefully. "I can meet you after your algebra class, and we can go to lunch together, okay? If the rain stops, we can even go outside and eat under the trees."

"Oh, that'd be great 'cause I don't know anybody here, and I hate eating

alone. You're a really nice guy, Roylin. I'm so glad I ran into you," Korie said.

"I'll meet you outside your classroom, and we'll go over to the cafeteria together," Roylin babbled on, his words tumbling over one another. "And I'll show you what's good to eat, too, 'cause some of the food here is nasty."

"Thanks," Korie said, as she headed toward class. She paused at the door and gave Roylin a little wave before disappearing into the lab classroom.

*This can't be real*, Roylin thought. He must be asleep in his run-down apartment having an incredible dream about a fantasy girl who actually treated him like a winner instead of the loser he really was. A guy like Hakeem Randall who could sing and play the guitar—who could make students cheer because they liked and respected him—that is the kind of guy a girl like Korie would date. Nice, pretty girls like Korie never had anything to do with the Roylins of the world. Roylin was the kind of guy girls made fun of when they gossiped about boys.

Sure, it was partly his own fault. Sometimes he taunted kids so they would feel as bad as he did. He was often



rude too, but he never wanted to hurt people the way his father did. He remembered hating how his father acted, and yet he often found himself doing the same kinds of things, like he was following a script his father had written for him. Sometimes he felt trapped inside his own skin. But recently things seemed to be changing.

Since the day Roylin was grazed by a bullet at Tarah's party, people had been treating him differently. Several times over the past month, Cooper Hodden threw an arm around Roylin's shoulders and called him, "Roylin, my man." Even Hakeem invited him to join the Bluford Park Crew, a group of students who worked to keep a nearby park free from beer bottles, graffiti, and trash.

It was hard to be mean when everyone was being so nice, but Roylin knew better than to trust what was happening. He figured Cooper and Hakeem felt sorry for him, that being nice to him was just a form of charity.

But Korie was different. If she liked him, maybe things really would change. Roylin felt as if his morning classes would never end. All he could think about was having lunch with Korie.

When the bell finally rang, Roylin leaped from his desk and raced to the lab classroom so he could meet Korie.

“Hey, Roylin,” Hakeem called. “Wanna study algebra with me at lunch? The quiz is coming up, and you said you wanted to work together.”

“No, not today. I’m busy, real busy,” Roylin said, rushing past Hakeem. As he neared the science room, he noticed Korie had already come out and was talking to Steve Morris, a varsity running back for the Bluford Buccaneers.

“No, no, no,” Roylin muttered to himself, “get away from her, man. I’ll bust your head! I seen her first. Don’t you move in on her now!”

Roylin came up to Korie, turned his back to Steve, and said, “Let’s go, Korie. We want to get in the front of the line at the cafeteria.”

“Hi, Roylin. Steve was just telling me about the Bluford Buccaneers and how good you guys were this year . . .” Korie said.

“I played with the Buccaneers too,” Roylin said, omitting the fact that he was a mediocre player who quit so he could work more hours. “Come on, Korie. Let’s go.”

“Bye, Steve,” Korie sang out as she

fell in step beside Roylin. “Everybody is so nice here. I love Bluford already, and this is only my first day!”

Roylin cast a nervous glance at the girl who, miraculously, was walking with *him*. The vultures were circling. Guys like Steve were ready to pounce on every pretty girl. But not Korie, Roylin thought. Korie belonged to him.