

CHAPTER ONE

A photograph captures one's image but is incapable of containing their essence. Before Tony lay a camera created impression of Janet Mitchell. In his mind were countless other pictures he had mentally processed. Visions of how she walked, and spoke, and smiled. The song her laughter played, the oasis of her eyes. The stuff of dreams.

Dreaming was something he did much of, not only with Janet as subject. Each day as he gazed out his bedroom window, Tony looked beyond what his eyes could see. To another place in a time yet to come. Far away from the ironclad grip of the projects.

As sweet as his dreams were, he would awaken to the sting that they were only fantasies. Pictures that in spite of their clarity, also held no essence.

Present day reality showed a greatly contrasting portrait. Long lines of brown bodies waiting impatiently at the welfare office. Equally long lines of teenage girls at abortion clinics. Food stamps serving as currency, except when it came to the purchase of narcotics, which was strictly a cash or sex business. To every side of him were faces that showed hunger and longing to be no longer filled with hunger and longing. Single mothers struggling to keep their babies fed, anonymous fathers in search of another bed. Sex, alcohol, drugs and church the most frequented routes by which one might find God and ask Him why. When a thunderous silence served as reply, it was translated as "why not". No use arguing with that logic.

Where Tony wished to be was more of an idea than a zip code, since it had not been experienced firsthand, merely glimpsed on television, in magazines, and books. Tomorrow appeared as a montage of popping champagne bottles; yachts setting sail for tropical locales; tuxedos and evening gowns twirling under chandeliers made of diamonds; luxury cars; luxury suites; the luxury of laying down one's head on a bed soft as a cloud, content that the world had been conquered and would service all needs, satisfy every desire. These things were "seen" by Tony through a shimmering haze, in the center of which one vision shone bright and clear.

"Still jerking off to the picture of that white chick?"

Tony slammed the yearbook shut as if caught leafing through a pornographic magazine by his bible toting grandmother.

"I can't believe you spent good money on that bullshit before you were even a senior. Just so you could drool over Barbie."

Tony looked up from his bed towards his younger brother, C.J. The young men were three years apart in age, possessing near identical cheekbones and matching sets of midnight clear eyes, C.J. having slightly more melanin in his skin tone, Tony with deeper waves throughout his hair. Their physical resemblance to one another was not matched by their senses of fashion. Tony was dressed comfortably in a pair of Khaki pants and a ribbed tee shirt. C.J. was clad in a plaid flannel shirt and a pair of jeans sized well beyond what his waist required. This provided a clear view of the Loony tune characters adorning his boxer shorts. Atop his head was a black bandanna decorated with skull and crossbones. The foreboding image was replicated on his right forearm by an artlessly rendered tattoo. Around C.J.'s neck were three gold

chains of varying widths and styles fighting to out-sparkle each other.

Rather than respond to his brother's prodding, Tony opened a textbook. He had a trig exam the following day. Without further studying he felt confident that he could probably get a grade in the low eighties. He intended to do considerably better than that.

On the opposite side of the cramped room, C.J. lay down and adjusted the fit of his faux diamond studded watch. It was the latest addition to a collection of timepieces that was nearly sizeable enough for him to wear a different one for each week of the year. He then began tapping on his bed's headboard to the beat of a song playing in his head.

"Do you mind?" Tony snapped after a minute. "I'm trying to study. You might try it yourself for a change."

"Nigga, please. I don't need that bullshit to get mine."

Tony tried returning to his schoolwork, but was forced to stop reading when a shadow blanketed the page he was focused on. C.J. stood directly in front of him, having approached without being detected, a neat trick that he frequently put to mischievous use. He yanked out the yearbook that Tony had tucked beneath his chest, then flipped it to the page it was accustomed to being opened to. On it was a close-up photo of Janet in her cheerleading outfit.

"Don't you get it up for sistas no more?"

"What?"

"Don't play dumb, you know exactly what I mean. I'm not saying it's bad to get with a white girl. Pussy is pussy. But

you're drooling about more than just waxing that ass, I know you are. A white girl is all you need to completely cross over, and this one, fine though she may be, is as white as they come."

C.J.'s first word on a topic like this one was rarely his last, so Tony knew that attempting to ignore him would be futile. Instead, he addressed the accusations with the best comeback that came to mind.

"You might want to wipe away the shit before talking out your ass."

C.J. snickered. He was bored and his big brother made a convenient target. Irritating Tony was as good a way to spend some spare time as any.

"Just admit it. You want to sell out completely. You want to go to some white college. You want a white suit and tie job. You want a house in a white neighborhood with a white wife by your side. Tell me I'm wrong."

Tony shook his head. "I'll give you this much, C.J. It's true that I don't have anything against being educated. Nothing against getting paid well either. And I happen to look damn good in a suit."

"Why am I suddenly in the mood for an oreo cookie?"

The wisecrack slowed Tony's momentum no more than a mosquito ramming into a windshield. If C.J. wanted to wage a verbal battle, Tony was happy to oblige him. Trigonometry could take a temporary back seat.

"You're damn straight I won't be living in the projects my whole life. And when it comes to the girl I choose, I happen to be color blind."

"Blind like hell. Your little jimmy knows exactly what color it wants." C.J. tugged lightly on the crotch of his jeans. This was done out of habit rather than a gesture intended to accompany his statement. "Don't think for one second you're fooling anyone," he continued. "I know what the real deal is. You want to prove that you're as good as them, and what better way than by having one of them on your arm? But you can't prove what people refuse to believe."

C.J. drowned out any chance of a rebuttal by turning on his boom box. The volume as usual was at maximum. Their room became filled with a thumping bass line and a rapper bragging in rhyme about the women he had bedded and the men he had killed.

Taking another glance at his watch, C.J. noticed that it was no longer running and the glass casing was cracked. The kid he took it from had surprisingly put up a fight, even managing to get a shot in. C.J.'s retaliation destroyed the very thing he was trying to obtain. He tossed his prize into the waste paper basket.

Tony reached over and lowered the radio, which had been acquired by C.J. from someone who committed the cardinal sin of being smaller and less battle tested than him, not to mention the folly of being insufficiently observant in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tony sadly understood that what C.J. didn't forcibly take for himself, he purchased with money earned on the streets by preying on the weaknesses of crackheads and other assorted addicts. This left him with very little interest or time for matters such as trigonometry.

"You got a problem with white people?" Tony asked, determined to finish what had been started. "You think they look down on you? Then don't allow the insult to ring true."

Don't trap yourself in a little box and then accuse them of stuffing you in there. The only one who can limit you, is you."

Tony was saying nothing that C.J. hadn't heard from him before, though he did manage to sound even more self-righteous than usual. This probably had something to do with the white girl in the yearbook photo. C.J. pulled a stack of bills from his back pocket and began sorting through it.

"Whatever," he said nonchalantly. "I've got better things to do than argue with you."

Tony shook his head. "So you got a few bucks on you."

"A few hundred is more like it. Better study your math a little harder."

"That supposed to impress me? Congratulations, you can rob people and sell them drugs. What's the next act in your minstrel show? Cotton picking, tap dancing, or watermelon eating?"

C.J. twirled a chain around his index finger, another subconscious habit, but this one seemed more symbolic than the others, emphasizing that he was satisfied being the person he was, regardless of approval. "It definitely ain't doing impressions, cause you'll never find me imitating Whitey like you. I'm not ashamed of who *I* am."

He put the money back into his pocket, then lay down and closed his eyes. C.J. had grown weary of the argument he'd initiated, for he believed words to be a futile method of persuasion. Two things made the world go round. Fear and money. The rest was just what people tried to be satisfied with.

Some even managed to delude themselves that they were happy. That was their choice and their lives, but not his.

"Wanting to be successful doesn't make me any less black," Tony said. "No matter what garbage Dad would have you believe. And it doesn't make me ashamed of who I am."

"Don't bother trying to convince me. Tell your little fairy tale to that white girl."

Giving up on ending the argument on his word, Tony sighed and returned to his studies, refusing to acknowledge C.J.'s self-satisfied grin.