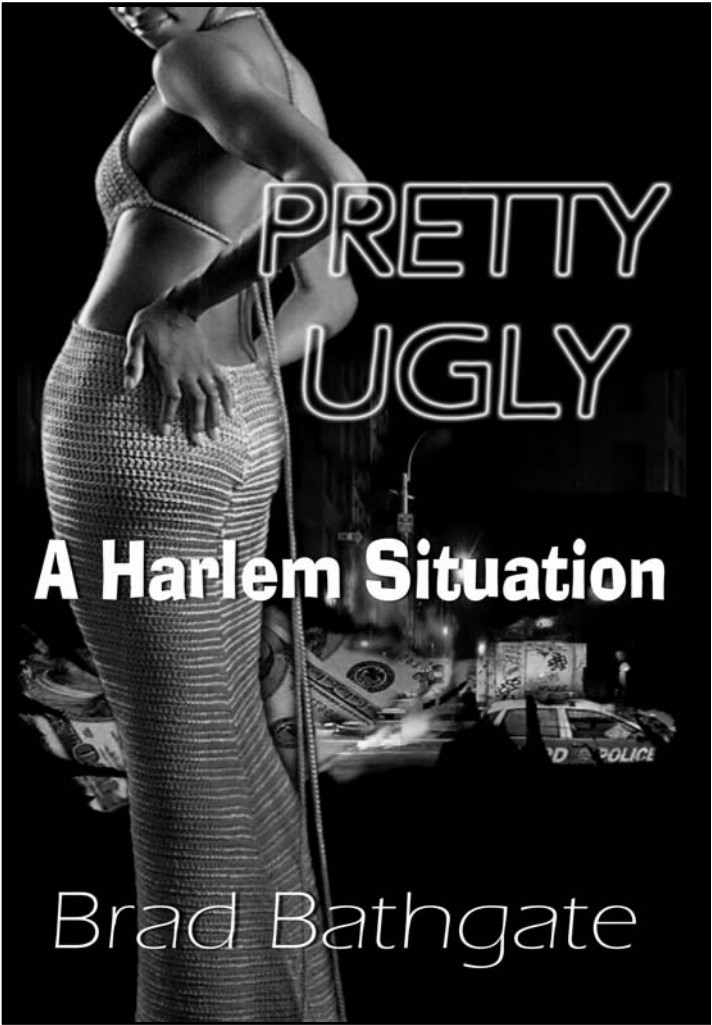




PRETTY UGLY

A Harlem Situation

Brad Bathgate

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“Brad Bathgate has constructed a first time novel
that is fun, sexy and full of
surprises.” -*Talent In Motion Magazine*

Most New Yorkers
are bad actors... playing crazy

Chapter 1:

Even at the bottom of the low, the sun shines in a pretty ugly kind of way - yet those summer days in Harlem were still sweet. That's when the hustlers got their exotic cars washed on the city sidewalks, and then drove off with their rims shining from the Armor Oil that made their tires look like they were dipped in hot grease. The merry old men wore their straw hats slightly tipped to the side, anxiously anticipating the next number as they talked trash around their game of checkers.

Once the basketball tournaments got started uptown, some of the guys would head up that way to meet some of the prettiest girls on the planet, while others would just hang out and socialize. You could catch a glimpse of motorcycles racing up and down the avenues, doing dangerous stunts and revving their engines for every girl with a big butt and a nice smile.

And there was Chuck Love, looking older than his twenty-three years. You could see it in his body language, his demeanor and the people he chose to associate with.

It was early in the afternoon when Chuck headed uptown to check out the Rucker basketball games, and since he had to pass by Mr. Ray's barbershop on the way there, he decided to stop by and say hello. The barbershop was a neighborhood watering hole that had been in the same location for years. Mr. Ray had given Chuck his first haircut and his first job - when Chuck was only nine years old he would go by the shop on Saturday mornings to sweep up.

This was an old-fashioned barbershop, where photographs of boxing legends and a pair of ancient boxing gloves adorned the plywood walls along with a few trophies that belonged to Mr. Ray. He had been a good amateur boxer in his younger years, though he couldn't cut it as a pro. But if you wanted to talk about boxing, Mr. Ray was always ready. He could go on for hours, walking you over to his wall of fame, showing off his boxing gloves or the photos of his favorite fighters and their best attributes. Mr. Ray was tall with bushy gray hair and good eating habits that keep his skin clear and his bones in good working condition.

Today when Chuck dropped in it was general small talk as usual, until Mr. Ray asked him how was he doing in school. Chuck had mostly good news to tell, but when he came to the part about the recent drug bust on the college campus, that started Mr. Ray's mouth right off.

"Listen Chuck, anybody that needs a drug to change the way they think, in orda ta have a good time... can't be too bright. You got a good head on ya shoulder's Chuck, an' I know that you know betta'. Now all you gotta do is finish school like ya daddy wanted, an' come on back ta New York wit a diploma, an' start that magazine thing that you always talkin' 'bout. Anything as long as it's sump'n bigga an' betta' than the bullshit these young dudes out here waste they time on. They always thinkin' small. Not you Chuck, that's why I like you," Mr. Ray continued. Then he looked around the shop to make sure there were no children present before he went on. "Whateva you do Chuck, just don't mess aroun' an' end up in jail like these bottom-shelf fools out here, somewhere makin' collect calls back home ta ya mama an' worryin' her half ta death."

"You got that right," Mr. Allen testified from the back of the shop. He was Mr. Ray's co-worker, a good-humored guy from Akron, Alabama. He and Mr. Ray were old friends and had worked together ever since their late twenties. The regular customers always enjoyed chatting and laughing with him, and there were days when some of them would just stop by the shop to sit around and laugh with Allen all day, whether or not they needed a haircut.

Mr. Ray then turned around to face Chuck and said, "You know Chuck, women always sayin' that all men are dogs... but who raised those dogs? Women!"

"Ya got that right," Allen said again.

"Every time one of those grown-ass boys get into some kinda trouble, da first thing they do is run to they mama's house ta hide - dat's cause they mama excuses all her baby's wrong-doin', and calls dat "love." Da main reason you got a bunch of grown-ass men still livin' wit they mama, an' walkin' aroun' the apartment wit they unda'wear on, n'shit... is cause they mama don't know when ta let go."

"Ya got dat right!" Mr. Allen vigorously agreed. He was cutting a customer's hair and he stepped a few feet away to finish off Mr. Ray's rant, "Da apple tree knows when ta let go of da apple. If it holds on to too long, it'll get spoiled."

"Dat's right," Mr. Ray testified as if he were in church.

"Da mama lion knows when ta let the huh, huh, huh! What'cha call da baby lion?" Mr. Allen asked.

"A cub," Chuck said.

"Yeah, a cub. Da mama lion knows when ta let go of da cub. The womens, they is da only ones dat don't know when ta let go of these grown-ass men."

"Every time one of they sons do sump'n wrong," Mr. Ray added, "Da mama is da first one ta run ta her boy's defense... call-in' her grown-ass son her baby."

"When I was comin' up... my Daddy ain't play dat shit!" Allen yelled.

"Mine either."

Chuck stood there for some time, laughing with the older men, feeling right at home. Eventually he made his way uptown, and he was leaning up against a parked car with a couple of friends when a brand new 1985 pearl-white M3 BMW drew up and parked a few feet away from them. It was Zachary, Mr. Ray's nephew. A light-skinned man who stood almost six feet tall, he had a nice smile and a nasty disposition. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy who was "not afraid of nothin'." He had just come out after another small stint, and it was obvious from his demeanor that he was pleased to be back on the streets. It was in the way he greeted everybody with hugs and slapping fives.

Zachary was a hustler in the truest sense of the word, a player with his hands in everything. At one time he had sold drugs, but he stepped away before it cost him his life. He claimed that it was a shady business with too many bad characters involved. Once he'd left that behind, he started driving a couple of girls down to the Philadelphia strip clubs, and he was making good money off of it for a while. But when he got tired of driving up and down the turnpike he went back to playing Three Card Monte. The money was not as fast as it was with selling drugs, but it didn't come with the same kind of risk or the endless headaches.

It takes a certain kind of character to be a player like Zachary was. He had charisma as well as all the necessary skills, and he was a good talker. He kept his crew in line, and whenever you saw him, he always had an attractive girl by his side. Mr. Ray called his nephew's female friends "high-maintenance chicks," or "drama queens." But that didn't matter to Chuck, because he thought they were fine as hell. Even though Zachary and Chuck had never formally been introduced, they remembered seeing each other a couple of times back at the barbershop.

Chuck was quietly drooling over Zachary's car when he caught sight of Apple, a girl he'd been crazy about ever since high school. Back when she and Chuck were younger, they'd passed love letters and kissed once, but Apple was just too fast for him. She

admired Chuck's wit and sense of humor, but she felt there wasn't anything he could do for her.

When Chuck saw Apple go by that afternoon, he quickly slid away from his boys to try and get her attention, and just at that moment Zachary was doing the same thing, but he had to jump out of his car first. They'd both seen Apple simultaneously, and just that quick, Chuck was on the right side of her and Zachary was on her left, and that's how the two men officially met. They both knew the same girl, and when Chuck realized this, it was like a dose of self-confidence for him. They took turns speaking to Apple, Chuck going first, and then they took turns introducing themselves to each other. Zachary went first this time. Then the two men began talking together, and unconsciously they stepped away from Apple. One way or another, word had gotten to Zachary that Chuck knew his way around certain parts of Kentucky, and that he was able to run guns up the highway.

"So you're Chuck?" Zachary smirked, "I heard some interesting things about you."

"Yeah, from who?" Chuck smiled back at him, non-committal.

"That ain't important," Zachary chuckled.

"Well... whatever you heard I hope it was good."

"Yeah, it was. It was all good!" Zachary smiled. He had his left arm folded across his chest with his right finger held up to his chin like a deep thinker. It was evident that this was an awkward moment for him, approaching Chuck without really knowing him - so Zachary complimented Chuck on the chain that he wore around his neck. It was small, with an odd-shaped ornament hanging in the middle of it, and it was clearly inexpensive - but its symbolic value made it priceless. Chuck quickly told the story behind the chain, and then he and Zachary began to talk business.

"Listen Chuck," Zachary started calmly, "from what I understand... I heard that you're a man who can get ya hands on some joints?"

Chuck wasn't surprised that the word was getting around so fast, but he'd never expected to be approached by Zachary. He was a little apprehensive about this conversation, but he didn't want to pass up an opportunity to make some money. He cleared his throat and replied, "Yeah, that's true... any kinda guns you want, I can get 'em! I can't get no grenades n'shit. But I can get'cha semi-automatics, an' revolvass." He made sure to talk slow and throw in a little humor so he wouldn't seem too anxious about working with the big-timers.

"How difficult would it be for you to get'em up here to the city?" Zachary asked, as he rested his back against a nearby tree with his arms still crossed. The tree shaded one side of his face while the sun bounced off his gold medallion. "I know a couple of people that's been askin' aroun', plus I got these dudes on 8th Avenue that's been buggin' the hell outta me about this shit. I told'em that I know somebody, an' luckily I bumped into you. Ya know what I'm sayin'?"

"I feel you, I feel you. It wouldn't be no trouble at all. Just let me know when you're ready, an' we can talk... But first you gotta teach me some of those card tricks that you do," Chuck teased, feeling him out. He made lazy hand gestures, pretending to shuffle cards. "So when it's time for me to go back to school an' I need some cash... I'll be able to beat those country cats outta' they lunch money."

Chuck's lighthearted behavior made Zachary smile - it was as if he had researched a craft that Zachary perfected, and he seemed sincere about learning it.

"What'chu know 'bout my hustle?" Zachary laughed, "That shit take years to learn. You can't just go an' try that shit anywhere. Somebody will try to hurt you. Ya know what I'm sayin'... That shit takes a lot of practice, word up!"

There was a slight chuckle between the two men and they got so deep into their common ground that twenty minutes passed without either of them noticing. It wasn't until Zachary turned around to ask Apple for a pen that they both realized she had moved

off down the street. It was a missed opportunity for Chuck to rekindle an old flame, and when he looked around all he could see was her back disappearing.

"Damn," was all he could say, in a low voice. He wanted to run and catch up to her, but he feared embarrassing himself in the presence of his friends. By then, Zachary had gone to his car to tell the girl in the passenger's seat to hand him a pen. She let down the window and the music that she'd been gyrating her body to got a little louder. The car's leather interior smelled like new money to Chuck, and he caught himself daydreaming. He longed for a taste of the fast-paced life that Zachary wore so well.

The two men exchanged numbers, slapped five and then continued to talk while walking backwards away from each other, promising to keep in touch about their business plans.

Chuck turned around to rejoin his friends, and his college classmate Tone met him half way. He shrugged his head, gesturing toward Zachary to find out what he'd wanted, and Chuck told him that it was nothing much. He didn't want to share his plans with anyone yet, for fear that someone might try cutting in on his chance to make some money.

Chuck wanted the cars with the butter-soft leather seats, the respect on the street and the attractive women that Mr. Ray considered "high-maintenance chicks." But more than anything else he wanted the money to jumpstart his sports magazine - and all he had to do was start bringing guns from the South to the city, and build a relationship with Zachary.

Chapter 2:

Things had slowed down back at Mr. Ray's barbershop - the haircutting business was unpredictable like that. One minute there would be standing room only, then all was calm and quiet the next. The radio was playing music with brief intermissions of news. Mr. Allen had just gotten off the telephone with his wife, and he was wiping down his station while Mr. Ray took advantage of the free time to lather his own face and shave.

Just then a customer walked in, greeted Mr. Ray and began to take off his hat and jacket, telling Mr. Ray that he'd just seen his nephew hanging out uptown.

"Yeah?" Mr. Ray replied without much interest. He acknowledged the customer with a simple hello, and then continued shaving, "I'll be right wit'chu, young man."

"He was dressed nice," the customer grinned, "but that's Zachary for ya... He always dressed nice."

"Big deal," Mr. Ray replied. He knew Zachary was back on the streets the same way he knew when he was in jail. "I'm tired of talkin' to Zachary. He a grown-ass man... twenty-nine years old, an' he still goin' back-n-forth to jail..." Mr. Ray then turned around with the razor in his hand, waving it like a wand as he spoke, "It ain't gon' be long before he go back... you mark my word. I don't know what's wrong wit him. But I'll tell you what, I ain't gon' waste

my time tryin' to figure him out. Every time I turn aroun' he's in some kinda trouble." Mr. Ray turned in Mr. Allen's direction, and Mr. Allen nodded his head to show that he agreed. Mr. Ray looked as if he had a bad taste in his mouth as he continued, "I don't know what's wrong wit dat boy. Maybe he like takin' showers wit men... who knows!"

The comment caused a loud snicker from Mr. Allen. He had the biggest smile on his face when he yelled from the back of the shop, "All these years we done worked togetha... an' you still say some of the funniest shit." He shook his head, still smiling as he continued wiping down his station.

Mr. Ray still had a little shaving cream under his nose, and he shrugged his shoulders as he repeated, "The boy knows hangin' out uptown is the wrong place for'em to be, but I ain't gon' worry. He'll be happy when somebody kill his yella ass." After he finished shaving he splashed on a little barber's lilac, and then cleaned his chair with his barber's cape.

Once Mr. Ray had started cutting the customer's hair, he began reminiscing about Zachary when he was only five years old and his mother would bring him in for a haircut. "He was so small, I needed to sit'em on telephone books," Mr. Ray said. "He was a cute little guy, but mischievous as hell! His mama would stand over me like an inspector. Followin' me aroun' the chair, gettin' huh foot crossed up in the cords. Stoppin' me to kiss Zachary, wipin' his face, an' tellin' me, 'Don't cut his baby hair!'" Mr. Ray sucked his teeth in aggravation. "That boy wouldn't sit still for shit. He'd start cryin' an' beggin' for shit he didn't want, an' soon as I finish his haircut an' put'em on the floor, he start playin' an' runnin' aroun' the shop again."

Mr. Allen stood a few feet away from Mr. Ray's chair, and it seemed like every bit of his 5'5" height could fit into his thick mustache. His Alabama accent could make the most serious situation seem humorous. "I been cuttin' hair for twenty some-odd years," he said, "an' I done seen all types of hair, an' till this very

day, brotha, I's still ain't neva seen no baby hair! Somebody please tell me what that shit is?"

"It's just some meaningless bullshit dat some brain-washed negro done made up," Mr. Ray griped.

The customer was just sitting there between the two barbers, smiling and absorbing the barbershop harangue, forgetting all about his haircut.

"She's my own sista," Mr. Ray added, "an' I use'ta hate seein' huh come through that front door of this barba'shop."

"You ain't the only one," Mr. Allen said, "I use'ta hate cuttin' dat boy's hair when you wasn't aroun'."

Mr. Ray went on to describe how his sister would always nitpick about the haircut before he was even finished, "It ain't how you start the haircut; I use'ta tell huh... It's how you finish. The end result is what counts... She use'ta be on one side of me, askin', 'How come this side don't look like that side?' An' afta all dat hard work she an' dat boy put me through, she ain't wanna pay me, just 'cause she my sista. I use'ta tell huh, 'Nancy, I got bills to pay just like you do.' She'd have ta pay for Zachary's haircut if she took'em somewhere else. But once she realized I wasn't gon' put up wit huh bullshit no mo', she stopped bringin' Zachary by here. I knew dat boy wasn't gon' amount to shit, 'cause my sista spoiled'em. She'd bring Zachary in here wit eighty-dolla tennis shoes on his feet when he was only ten years old!"

The customer sat there laughing, following the conversation like a spectator at a tennis match.

"Eighty dollars," Mr. Allen yelled with his croaky voice. He looked down at his shoes and said, "What ten-year-old boy need some eighty-dolla sneakas fo'? Hell I can buy two pair of shoes for that price."

"Ya ain't lyin'," Mr. Ray concurred, "She'd have dat boy dressed in all of da latest styles, wit a big-ass leatha jacket hangin' off his shoulder n'shit. Name brand jeans an' a earring in his damn ear. Right away I knew he was gon' be trouble. She was showin' more concern for dat boy's clothes an' hair instead of what was

goin' on in his damn head. I try ta tell huh, when ya spend money on clothes wit all kinda logos goin' across da chest an' all that otha shit, one day it's gon' be outta' style, an' den you gon' be stuck wit a buncha ugly name-brand shit! But she neva listen to me. She use'-ta tell me, 'T'ma buy my baby things we couldn't afford when we was growin' up.' An' I told her that she need'ta go an' find da man that got huh pregnant, so he can teach that boy how to piss standin' up! An' stop sittin' on the toilet like a little girl. But' afta I told huh that, I ain't hear from huh since. She called it bein' mad at me... But I'll tell you what, I ain't have'ta put up wit that bad-ass boy no mo'."