Bling

Erica Kennedy

Chapter 1

Excuse Me Miss

"'CAUSE WE AIN'T NOBODY," LaToya said.

Lakeesha turned from peering out the window of the Chester- field Hotel, annoyed because her question—"Why they got us staying in this bum-ass hotel?"—had been a rhetorical one. There was no view. Just another hotel across Thirty-Seventh Street. And from what little she could see, the rooms over there were nicer.

"I know," Keesha said. "But still...we didn't even get a limo from the airport."

"We didn't need a limo," Mimi said, busily straightening up. "They sent a car and it was fine."

"Why are you cleaning up Kenny's room?" Keesha said, stretching out on the perfectly made bed.

"Because I already finished with ours," Mimi said. "I can't just sit around, doing nothing, waiting for the phone to ring. It's driving me crazy." They were sharing the adjoining room but they were camped out here because their manager, Kenny Hill, would get the call—at the hotel since his cell-phone service had been interrupted for nonpayment —and they wanted to be there when he did.

"Let's eat," Keesha said. "That'll give us something to do." She picked up the room service menu. "We can order food, right?" She frowned over at Toya. "They pay for that?"

Last night after their audition at the Triple Large offices they had gone to Planet Hollywood on Broadway for dinner, hoping to spot some celebrities, unaware that it was a tourist trap populated by autograph-seekers like themselves where no celebrity would ever be caught dead.

"I don't know," Toya said wearily. Keesha was always looking for a free meal, literally and figuratively, and it got under Toya's skin that she was so simpleminded. "You need to ask Kenny."

"Where's he at anyway?" Keesha said. She twirled one of her long microbraids. "It don't take that long to buy a pack of Newports."

Mimi didn't care about the low-budget accommodations or that there had been no limo yesterday. Keesha thought this whole trip was going to be like an episode of

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Making the Band—she was obsessed with that show! Kenny did nothing to dissuade her from thinking it was going to be limos, parties, and Cristal bottles popping, but why on earth would anyone do that for them? They were nobodies. But they had come here to change that.

They'd all met at Performing Arts School of Toledo. They joked they were like TLC, whose CrazySexyCool album was one of their all-time favorites. Keesha, big-boned and equipped with a razorsharp tongue, was the crazy component. Toya, a round-faced girl with a heart-warming smile and a degree of self-assurance that belied her years, was the cool. And Mimi . . . well, she wasn't wild like Keesha and she didn't possess Toya's innate confidence, so sometimes she felt she got the sexy slot by default.

No doubt, Mimi was pretty. Since she was a baby everyone had remarked on it. But in her usual baggy gear, sexy she was not. Tight jeans and midriff-baring tops invited attention, and as a biracial girl in a predominantly black school, she already stood out enough. All she'd ever wanted was to blend in. Her mother, Angela, was Italian, and Mimi couldn't remember her Haitian father. Jacques Bertrand had run out on Angela a year after their only child was born, and the annual birthday cards that had arrived (late) with no return address stopped arriving all together after Mimi's eighth birthday.

She kept the details of her home life to herself as she did most things, managing to pull straight As while dodging the taunts of "white girl" and "high-yellow heifer." As if she thought she was better than the other girls. Just like many of them, she was raised by an overworked single mother, she rode the bus to school from the bad side of town, and the clothes over which they ran a disapproving "you think you cute" eye were paid for by the after-school jobs she'd been juggling since she was fourteen. She never made her looks an issue, they did.

Toya, however, was different. She made that clear only two months into freshman year, when Nichelle Griffin had stormed over to Mimi in the cafeteria and began to lay into her for coming on to her boyfriend (even though it had been Nichelle's wannabe teenage lothario who had been coming on to a completely uninterested Mimi for months). Toya, who Mimi knew only casually, had calmly looked over her shoulder from the next table and said, "You just mad because you wish you had that long hair. Go get yourself a weave and shut the hell up." Keesha, always spoiling for a fight of any kind, had jumped up to enter the fray but Nichelle had slunk away before she could.

Toya, Keesha, and Mimi had been friends ever since.

Later that year, their group was formed. They named it Heartsong. They debated endlessly about what kinds of songs they should sing, what kind of group they wanted to be. Keesha and Toya were into hip-hop. Mimi's tastes fell more on the soul side. She idolized those female artists whose songs stirred something inside her more than an urge to dance. Her mother had harbored dreams of being a singer way back when and music was the only constant in their unstable lives. From Aretha to Alanis Morissette, Sarah Vaughan to Sarah McLachlan, Mimi would close her eyes and try

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to mimic their every inflection, pretending she was them, not a girl from Toledo who wouldn't recognize her own father if she passed him on the street.

That was how she got through performing onstage. She became someone else—whoever's song she was belting out. She was pretending to be Beyoncé on the night they met Kenny at a local talent show; Heartsong had just won the top prize and three hundred dollars for their rousing rendition of "Bills, Bills, Bills," the Destiny's Child hit.

A lanky dark-skinned man of thirty-four with droopy eyes and a seemingly permanent deposit of white crust in the corner of his mouth, Kenny Hill's name was one they recognized from flyers posted all over town. A part-time club promoter, he told them he knew every musician, nightclub owner, and DJ in Toledo. Which in retrospect, they realized, wasn't saying all that much. He proffered a business card that read simply "talent manager" and they didn't know to ask him for any credentials beyond the promises he made. He talked about getting them a "record deal" and he didn't ask them for money, and so it was that Kenny Hill became their manager.

He had arranged for them to sing backup on demos at Wildside Studios in exchange for free studio time to record their own music. He kept telling them that he was setting up auditions with labels but nothing ever panned out. And they'd graduated high school two years ago! The day after they tossed their caps, Mimi's part-time job at the discount emporium Sav-Mart became full-time, Toya was doing hair at Black Roots (without a license), and Keesha wasn't doing much of anything except hanging out with her crazy-ass drugdealer boyfriend.

They'd finished their demo, using tracks Kenny bought from a local producer and singing generic R&B lyrics that Kenny had written himself. Kenny Hill—club promoter, talent manager, songwriter. Jack of all trades and master of none.

When he finally got a callback from Triple Large Entertainment a week ago, he didn't tell the girls right away that they had a chance at a recording contract. Instead he'd gotten everything in order—wrangling four coach plane tickets to New York, two $99-per-night rooms at The Chesterfield—before he strolled into Wildside Studios and crowed triumphantly, "Pack your bags, girls. We're goin' to New York!"

CALL THE GIRL? Why did Lamont always have to be so dramatic? Daryl wanted to call the girl but he couldn't even remember the bitch's name! La-something. Lavonne? No, LaToya. Or maybe that was the other one. He'd already asked Lamont's assistant and the receptionist if they remembered the name of the "pretty one" because he couldn't find the group's bio and attached photo. With all the groups that had come through the office in the last few weeks, no one could remember a damn thing about any of them. Now Daryl rummaged through all the useless office memos on his desk in search of the package the manager had left with him the other day.

Daryl's office was tiny. So was he. But what he lacked in size he more than made up for in self-aggrandizement. He was five foot five and three-quarters of an inch, but

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whenever anyone dared to question his height he'd pull out his driver's license. Bam! Five foot seven. People always took that as gospel, as if the DMV actually measured folks.

His office would have felt larger if he'd cleared out the half dozen boxes of demos he was supposed to listen to as the A&R rep of Triple Large Entertainment. When he first got the gig he didn't even know what A&R stood for. "Artist and repertoire" he was told. He still didn't entirely understand, but he'd figured out he was expected to discover new artists and work on their development once they were signed. That he could do, although he really wanted to be a producer solely and forget the office bullshit.

He rarely got around to assessing the volumes of material that found their way into the midtown office. Most artists who got signed had already made names for themselves on the street or were affiliated with an established hip-hop clique. The next big thing rarely arrived unannounced via the United States Postal Service. Nevertheless, Paul Mankewich, the label's V.P. of A&R, stayed on Daryl's ass about listening to every single submission.

A strapping, floppy-haired white guy in his mid-thirties, Paul Mankewich made six figures and his own hours. He was nicknamed "Witchy" because he had successfully cultivated so many R&B and hip-hop acts at various record companies that people said he could work "black magic." Twenty-three-year old Daryl didn't have an official title. He was usually called "the A&R guy," which he preferred to being called Witchy's assistant. Though affable to most, Witchy cracked the whip on his departmental subordinate—mostly, Daryl believed, as a form of insurance. If Witchy failed to meet his monthly beat-up-on-Daryl quota, Witchy was guaranteed to receive a few lashes from the HNIC himself, Lamont "Fat Man" Jackson.

Daryl idolized and despised Fat Man with equal fervor. Some days he wished he were standing tall in Lamont's four-hundred-dollar shoes, making big moves and bigger bank. Other days he hoped Lamont Jackson would keel over and die from a massive coronary and spend all eternity rotting in hell.

A few months ago, Fat Man had put out the call that they'd be branching out into R&B. They were hoping to find the next Destiny's Child. In the past two months, they'd seen twenty-seven groups. None of them got past their first song. After an audition two days ago of three white girls with varying degrees of pink hair who called themselves Shades, it was obvious Witchy was digging at the bottom of the barrel. Lamont had turned to Witchy and said, "Mr. Mankewich, why do I feel like I'm a judge on American Idol?" Daryl had fallen back on Lamont's sofa and laaaaaughed. It was a joy to see Witchy catching some flak for a change, but the most hysterical part was that Lamont was beginning to resemble the fat guy on the show.

And then this group Heartsong—the worst fucking name!—had come in yesterday. Daryl had only listened to their demo as a favor to Meagan, Triple Large's certified hottie receptionist. She'd urged him to listen to it, saying the manager was a friend of her cousin's friend. "Oh well, I'll give it the VIP treatment right now!" Daryl had clowned. Like he cared. It was certain to be garbage, but if it brought him one small

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step toward getting some pussy from Meagan, it was worth a listen. And, what did you know, it wasn't bad. Not bad at all.

Witchy was heated when he found out Daryl had flown them in without consulting him. One of the girls, the one with the long braids, had to be twenty pounds heavier than she'd been when the bio picture was taken. And the manager was annoying as hell! Daryl had to shove him out of Lamont's office as he tried to sell him on two other hip-hop acts he managed. The group's audition didn't seem to ignite much enthusiasm in Lamont although he didn't say that he straight-up hated them, which was his response to most of the twenty-seven who'd come before.

This morning Lamont had called Daryl—at the crack of dawn— to say maybe they didn't need a group after all. Actually his first words were "Where the hell is Witchy?" Daryl rolled over, looked at the clock and yawned. "At home sleepin' maybe?" Lamont grunted his disapproval, then told Daryl he'd had a moment of revelation. He'd decided they needed just one girl. A solo artist. He wanted to meet with the lead singer of Heartsong. "The pretty one," he'd said.

Daryl finally found the bio picture sticking out of a stack of magazines on the floor. Mimi. That was her name. He looked at his fake Rolex. Damn! It was already 4:15 and Lamont wanted her down there by 5:00. He picked up the phone and dialed the hotel.

This chick could be his first discovery. And if a signing came out of this, he wouldn't let Witchy or Fat Man forget it.

- extract from an uncorrected book proof

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