

BALANCING ACT



PAULA
CHASE



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor, The Liffey
Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, DOI YC43

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Printed in the United States of America. For information, address
St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman
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The Library of Congress has cataloged the
hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Chase, Paula author
Title: *Balancing act* / Paula Chase.
Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2025.
Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 13–18
Identifiers: LCCN 2025014599 | ISBN 9781250809391 hardcover
ISBN 9781250809407 ebook
Subjects: CYAC: Charter schools—Fiction | Schools—Fiction
Gymnastics—Fiction | Interpersonal relations—Fiction | Family
problems—Fiction | LCGFT: Sports fiction | Novels
Classification: LCC PZ7.C38747 Bal 2025 | DDC [Fic]—dc23/eng/20250407
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025014599>

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Directive 2019/790.

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First Edition: 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

MEET THE CREW— SOUTHSIDE'S REALEST

- Chyna Thomas (@ChynaTee)
- Jamaal Henderson (@Maal_MaalHenderson)
- Pierre “Pee” Fontaine (@PierreRealBaller)
- Nyla Jenkins (@NylaLuvsGirls)
- Jacquees Henderson (@JaqEmUp)
- Bronson “Bronny” Washington (@BronnysBack)

P6 POWER PANTHERS GYMNASTICS TEAM

- Alicia “Leesh” Swanson (@LeeshDaBeast) Product of two local celebrities, will flex on 'em without hesitation, champion-level gymnast
- Selena Torres (@SelenaNevahQuits) Afro-Latina cutie who takes no stuff, bestie of Leesh since birth
- Gina Yang (@GinaBeamMeUp) Beam champion looking to carve a new path using the Heights as a stepping stone
- Melanie Cawthorne (@MellyMelanie) Champion on the floor, insecure off. Desperate to prove herself to Leesh, happy to be the triplet for Leesh and Selena's duo

THE HEIGHTS STAR BALLERS

- LaKendrick “Bear” Tomlinson (@KenBear32) Big man with a big personality, proud to be from the northwest side of Diamond Falls, rolls deep with his boys from Milly Tech, loyal to the game
- “Rich Boy” Paul Benton
- Dirk McKenzie
- Travis “Boo-Man” Nelson
- Lincoln Gillis

THE A-DULTS

- Whitney “Momma Whit” Thomas—Chyna’s mom
- Tamara/Aunt Tam—Whitney’s younger sister
- Terrell “Black Swan” Swanson—Alicia’s father
- Rodecia Taylor—Alicia’s mother
- Jazmine Torres—Selena’s mother
- Dr. Timothy Walker—Founder of The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts

—AND INTRODUCING

- Hot Lipz—Anonymous accountholder on Chatter

CHATTER



@HotLipz

Icy City Influencer. Knower of all. Unofficial home of all the city's bossip. Lover of Even Numbers. This is all just speculation and innuendo 'cuz my lawyers said so. 🗨️

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 16 Followers 562

I know the dirt before it hits the ground. Watch what you say, b/c you never know who's listening. Who wants to join my #LipMob? I promise it'll be a fun ride.

Blurts 🗨️ 15 Boosts 📌 15 Beats 🗨️ 102

CHATTER

@PierreRealBaller No thanks. Playing get you hurt

@HotLipz Only if you play wrong. 🗨️

@NylaLuvsGirls Ayy s/o to my boy got that number one comment!
I'm in! *follows*

@LeeshDaBeast Once a thirsty heaux always a thirsty heaux lol

@NylaLuvsGirls I learned from the best, Leesh. 🗨️

@MasterofDstruckshun Aww shit. This bitch fittinta start doxing
muhfuggas



@HeightsSchool

The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts

An innovative charter school empowering today's students to own tomorrow. Global and inclusive in approach, we will change our city, our state, and our nation, one Power Panther at a time. Founder & Executive Director: Dr. Timothy Walker, PhD, Son of Diamond Falls

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 100 Followers 1500

A first-of-its-kind experiential education initiative, building what is not yet there to prove there is more than a single path into the future's workforce. 1,000 students have received an invitation to apply to what will be the newest jewel in the crown of the nation's education system.

Thank you to the Board of Trustees, corporate sponsors, and media partners @RadioWorld @WSHNBroadcasting

Blurts 🗨️ **812 Boosts** 📈 **5K Beats** 📊 **2.5K**

CHATTER

@WinstonAlum62 In other words, a brand-new school with no accomplishments and very little local regulation is suddenly the best thing to happen to our city because they and their "partners" said so. #InvestigateTheHeights

@EaglesSoar Pay attention! The two largest media outlets who control local radio and news stations are in bed with a public school. Suspicious at best. Illegal at worst.

@BlacksBeautiful Dr. Walker funded #TheHeights charter school w/his own money. Let that man do something good for the city, damn.

@WinstonAlum62 But can he build a school that's competitive w/o decimating the rest of our local schools? Everything shiny is not golden.



@HotLipz

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Diamond Falls, MD

Following 72 Followers 1.5K

*In the age of the transfer portal . . . these hos ain't loyal.
Did your favorite athlete get an invite to the Heights?*

Blurts 🗨️ 128 **Boosts** 📈 583 **Beats** 🏆 700

CHATTER

@SouthsidesFinest New school same story. Don't fall for it y'all.
Stay rooted at home

@JaqEmUp You on some crabs in a barrel shit. Anybody who got an invite, get yours!

@MasterofDstruckshun I hope you ain't saying your lil bro jumping camp from Dub

@RickDaRuler My boy @Maal_MaalHenderson ain't going nowhere

@SouthsidesFinest Then why he ain't jumping in the TL to speak up?

@BronnysBack Maybe because y'all out here speculating. Let my man's live



@HotLipz

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Diamond Falls, MD

Following 100 Followers 2K

Word is two key Dub Wolves players got an invite and are planning to defect to the new charter. Sounds like Dub got a new rival. #HeardItHereFirst

Blurts 🍷 329 Boosts 📢 614 Beats 🍷 900

CHATTER

@BlackIsBeautiful It gotta be @RickDaRuler and @Maal_ MaalHenderson. The rest of them dudes only good because of them

@MasterofDstruckshun Our team is solid. Dr. Timmy Twenty Point can kiss our ass. #SouthsideForLife

@SouthsidesFinest Why would anybody leave a team that is the school's best in history? If these cats stay together they can sweep States for the next four years. Let's go #Wolves!!

@BronnysBack Sweeping States or setting your future up to do something bigger? Which would you pick?

@SouthsidesFinest These cats need to stop letting dem Winston Prepholes and Dr. Twenty Point's cult whisper sweet nothings to 'em.

@MasterofDstruckshun Whoever wanna go, ain't nobody stopping 'em.

@SouthsidesFinest Fuck that. Whoever leave dead to me. *pow*

@RickDaRuler I don't got no secrets from the streets. I ain't going nowhere. How 'bout you @Maal_MaalHenderson?

@MasterofDstruckshun Called out! #WolfNation want know what's up @Maal_MaalHenderson?



@DocWalkerOfficial

Entrepreneur. Philanthropist. Founder & Executive Director of The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts.

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 1.5K Followers 1M

I consider speculation about prospective students of the Heights the best form of flattery. But a student's education choice is a private matter. Please allow prospectives the anonymity required to make the best choice for their future. Those who do me the honor of accepting an invite, will be on the fast track to success.

Blurts 🗨️ 0 **Boosts** 📈 2K **Beats** 🏆 3K

CHATTER

Comment feature disabled by account owner.



@HotLipz

Icy City Influencer. Knower of all. Unofficial home of all the city's gossip. Lover of Even Numbers. This is all just speculation and innuendo 'cuz my lawyers said so. 📍

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 100 Followers 2.5K

Looks like I have the city's attention. And I won't ever disappoint you, #LipMob. Ride with me and you'll know everything I know including the reality that @Maal_ MaalHenderson, All-City freshman is definitely taking his talents from #1 State Champs Dub High School to #TheHeights. This is not a drill. If I'm lying, I'm dying.

Talk amongst yourselves.

Blurts 🗨️ **329 Boosts** 📈 **614 Beats** 🎵 **900**

CHATTER

@EaglesSoar At least he won you guys a championship before he left. 😊

@MasterofDstruckshun We don't care who jump ship. We outcheat! What you know 'bout them W.E.B Wolves?

@SouthsideStrong71 I mean, is there still a ship without a captain though?

@SouthsidesFinest Y'all stay believing randos. @Maal_ MaalHenderson not going anywhere.

@BlackIsBeautiful He hasn't said a word this whole time. I think he's leaving and good for him if he does. Get the bag!



@HeightsSchool

*The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts
An innovative charter school empowering today's
students to own tomorrow. Global and inclusive in
approach, we will change our city, our state, and
our nation, one Power Panther at a time. Founder &
Executive Director: Dr. Timothy Walker, PhD, Son
of Diamond Falls*

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 100 Followers 1500

300 students answered our call and exceeded our expectations of what a Heights Power Panther should be. After an intensive admissions process, we are thrilled to introduce you to the inaugural student body, starting with the cornerstone of our program—our winter athletes.

BASKETBALL

1. Jamaal Henderson
2. Pierre Fontaine
3. LaKendrick Tomlinson
4. Dirk McKenzie
5. Paul Benton

GIRLS' GYMNASTICS

1. Alicia Swanson
2. Chyna Thomas
3. Selena Torres

4. Melanie Cawthorne
5. Nyla Jenkins
6. Gina Yang

For full list of student body and our Fall and Spring sports, visit our website.

Blurts 🗨️ 0 **Boosts** 📈 2K **Beats** 🏆 3.5K

CHATTER

Comment feature disabled by account owner.



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Diamond Falls, MD

Following 100 Followers 3K

Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who's the best gymnast of them all? My sources tell me that you might be surprised at the answer.

Blurts 🌟 95 Boosts 📈 150 Beats 🗣️ 420

CHATTER

@LeeshDaBeast Is that a trick question? 🗨️ #BlueToDaBone

@JaqEmUp If you up on game then you know it's **@ChynaTee**

@LeeshDaBeast Show me the stats! She's a nobody.

#SorryNotSorry

@NylaLuvsGirls Un-uh you need to fall back, Leesh. Don't come for Chyna like that

@HotLipz My Bossip Crystal Ball says that "nobody" is the #1 prospect among the Heights admissions board. I don't make the rules

@LeeshDaBeast Either your crystal ball is broken or your sources effing with you. But be blessed

LOSS

CHYNA

T trampolines give life. They thrust you out of a chute and into air that not everyone gets to breathe. For a few seconds, gravity doesn't mean anything. It's not like flying. It IS flying. And once you learn to fly, you want to do it all the time.

March is being fickle and can't decide whether to change over to spring or hold on to winter with a grip. The wind is cold in my face as I bounce past the top of the tramp's rails, nearly flying out of the net onto the scraggly grass of my tiny backyard.

I push off, again and again, enjoying the milliseconds when my body leaves the earth, and the wind gets caught in the puff of my hair. My calves tense hard as rocks as I bounce off my toes high, high, higher until there's enough space beneath me to curl my knees to my chest and spin once.

Sitting in the corner of the trampoline, watching, Jacque's eyes ping-pong with my body. Watching him watch me gives me chills. I'm not sure if it's because he's my best friend's brother and we haven't told Jamaal about us yet or because winter is wintering.

"Go for two," he says.

"It's not enough space for two tucks," I say even as I calculate how true that is. If Jacque thinks I can do it, I probably can. He

says watching me bounce makes him feel free. Still, the trampoline is old. It creaks like its joints need to be oiled. If I thought too hard about it holding my weight, I wouldn't even do one tuck. But being on the tramp isn't about thinking. It's about doing. Flying. Living.

Even through the darkness I see the outline of Jacque's head shake in disappointment. "Play to win or don't play," he dares me.

Before I can back out, my body ignores my mind and revolves once then twice like it was waiting for the right moment.

He grins, the proud coach, teeth lighting my way to him.

I plop down, heart racing. "Geezus, boy. Are you trying to kill me?"

"Nope. Just getting you ready to run with the A-Team."

The A-Team. The Heights gymnastics team. I'm still getting used to being connected to something that has the entire community talking. Divided. But talking.

Everything I know, I learned from Soar summer camp and testing flips on this rickety tramp. I'm still wondering how I got an invitation to apply to the school. I can't say that to Jacque. He'll say I worry too much. But sometimes worrying is all I have.

Joining the team is either going to be a dream come true or a nightmare. Being part of these types of change-the-world places always is one or the other. It's never something in the middle because it's easy to want to change things. It's having to keep that energy up day after day that starts to mess with the people who are supposedly changed.

In a way, I figure the Heights is going to be like all the other programs claiming to offer golden opportunities to "the youth"—like we're a species that can be corralled, tagged, and studied—before sputtering out of gas.

There's:

F.A.L.L. into Success, because playing off the Diamond Falls

name shows you're caring and witty. Forging A Legacy of Learning encouraged young people to get interested in teaching as a career. That went about as well as you think it did.

Shiny Diamonds, "polishing our youth for the future."

The Gem Project, "mining our communities for future jewels."

Hell, even Soar, aka, broke kids gymnastics camp, played the game by hyping up that it "fosters confidence building and self-esteem development through the rigors of tumbling." I'll admit that if you ignore the bad food and bug-infested cabins, they definitely weren't my worst two weeks of summer the last three years.

I can go on. They all start with a bang, but eventually the people giving the money for this stuff would rather focus on the next new promise rather than admit nobody ever delivered on the original one.

But the Heights feels different.

A sliver of excitement tap-dances in my heart. None of the other programs had the city's biggest corporations promising the school money and internships for students. No other school in the city had media partners, basically a slick way of saying that Channel 11 and 90.5 Da City have to talk good about the Heights. Literally they are getting paid, by the school, to say good things.

Aunt Tam said she has no idea how that arrangement is legal.

"I thought the news was impartial," she'd said to Momma when we were reading the thick admissions packet that covered everything from mandatory special events to the five clauses that prohibit any of the athletes from participating in activities that might cause them injury.

Momma had swiped away a tear, put on her big sister's voice, and tried to reprimand. "Tam, don't overanalyze this. Let's just celebrate Chyna getting in. This is huge for her."

I could tell Aunt Tam wanted to argue. That's her first, second, and only gear. Also, she doesn't trust anybody. Momma is the opposite. I'm stuck somewhere in the middle.

If the Heights ends up like the other feed-the-needy programs, I won't be surprised. But I'll be graduated by then, so it'll be somebody else's problem to scam proof it. For now, the expectations and the cold make me shudder. Jacque pulls me to him. My warm lips cover his cold ones.

"What if the Soar coaches and Dr. Walker are wrong about me?" I whisper, unable to fight my worry.

He nibbles at my lips. "They not. You the best gymnast nobody know about. I've seen the videos. You as good as that Alicia girl."

Jacque never says something just to be saying it. But that Alicia girl is Alicia Swanson, daughter of 90.5's Black Swan and Evening Gem's Rodecia Taylor and more importantly, the reigning Blue Diamond champion. Self-proclaimed *Gymnast chick since I was old enough to walk*—according to her Chatter bio.

It sounds crazy to say I'm as good as her, no matter if Hot Lipz says I'm the Heights' number one gymnastics prospect. Honestly, especially if Hot Lipz is the main one saying it.

In the nine months since the anon account burst onto Chatter, it had single-handedly reignited beefs that had been dormant for decades and outed a scandal that started a three-way rivalry between the Heights and the city's two best-known schools, Dub, from the blackity-Black southside, and Winston Prep—a prestigious private school that sits smack in the center of Kings Ransome, the city's oldest and whitest subdivision.

Until Hot Lipz came along, Winston was used to its secrets staying just as hidden as the school is among the old forest surrounding it. Then she outed that three Winston lacrosse play-

ers had burned their own football field and claimed they saw Jamaal, Bear, and Bronny—Jacque’s best friend—do it. The rivalry between Dub and Winston is so deep, of course everyone believed it.

Luckily, Maal and them had a tight alibi. The Winston dudes backpedaled and said all they knew was that the dudes that did it were Black and they “thought” it had been Jamaal, Bear, and Bronny. It would have died there, then Hot Lipz found receipts to show the lacrosse players had done it to try and get Jamaal and Bear suspended so they couldn’t play in the Dub versus Winston state championship game.

That’s how out of pocket rivalries are here.

The online venom had boiled over for months as Winston’s trustee council outright accused Dr. Walker of being the Hot Lipz source.

Watching old rich people go at each other online is hilarious. I think they’re just bitter that Dr. Walker, one of their most famous alumni, decided to put his money into starting his own school rather than cosign their 125-year tradition of “excellencia in veritate.” And the scandal proved that if they ever once believed there was excellence in truth, they didn’t much anymore.

Hot Lipz’s timeline is so thick with trolls that if you’re not looking, you can easily miss some of the jewels she drops. People from southside dug past the ugly, racist chatter because she’s talking about us, and even if some of it is gossip, at least we’re part of the conversation. For a lot of people, her timeline is addicting that way.

Even more wild, she had people giving a damn about gymnastics in a city where basketball ruled. Probably because a lot (most) of her information is scarily accurate. Still, I’m having a hard time believing her assertion that I’m the school’s number

one gymnastics prospect. I have the receipts to prove that's one she got wrong.

The words of my acceptance letter into The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts are blazed into my brain:



THE HEIGHTS SCHOOL OF TECHNOLOGY, SPORTS & ARTS

Soaring to new heights

Empowering tomorrow's athlete, today

Founder, Dr. Timothy Walker, PhD

*Dear Chyna Thomas,
Congratulations. The Board of Trustees is pleased to welcome you to the student body of The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts—Home of the Power Panthers. You have been accepted into our gymnastics discipline.*

In September, you will begin an exciting journey designed to give you agency over both your academic path and your sport discipline. We give you the tools, you build the highway.

The Heights will prepare you for a world that is increasingly diverse and global in its approach. We will ask you to unlearn years of public-school dogma that there's a single path into the world. It will be challenging. You will test your limits and we ours.

Together, we will change our city, our state, and our nation, one Power Panther at a time.

I am especially pleased to offer you placement into our Diamonds in the Rough program. Diamonds in the Rough is a special path for those students who show promise but have less experience in their discipline. You will receive a

full outline of what participation in this special program entails, upon your acceptance.

If you accept this offer, please email AprilR@THS.edu no later than February 25. If you have accepted another opportunity, we wish you the best in your endeavors.

*A luta continua,
Timothy Walker
Founder, Executive Director*

Board of Trustees

Keisha Mathis, Mayor, Diamond Falls

Kevin Brashears, Owner, Radio World

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Natasha Joyner, General Manager, WSHN

Eric Wong, General Manager, Diamond Falls Diamondbacks

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Diamonds in the Rough is a special path . . .

In the rough is bad enough. "Special path" has me twisted.

Reading my mind, Jacque snuggles with me. "It don't matter how you got in, Chyna. You gonna show and prove from day one."

His trust melts my doubt. Everything is possible with Jacque caping for me. I kneel between his legs, take his face in my hands, and pull him to me, loving how when we're away from the crew he lets me in. For a second, he's not Maal's big brother, or the dude who teased me any chance he got for being Da Icy City's number one worrier, or the one our entire crew calls for advice. He's just lips waiting to be kissed, honey and lemon cough drop on his tongue.

Me and Jamaal used to tease Jacque about him eating cough

drops like candy—for liking the taste of menthol, for believing they kept him from getting head colds, but mostly because, at first, me and Maal were two peas in a pod. What one thought, the other agreed.

Eating cough drops like candy is weird. Dating your best friend's brother in secret is too, though.

I think about what Maal will think about me and Jacque being together. Wonder if he sometimes smells the cough drop on my breath.

I pull back, resisting the urge to wrap my legs around Jacque. My Aunt Tam's bedroom looks out over our backyard. Me and Jacque are probably just another lump of blackness in the dark. But I don't know that for sure.

I plop on my butt and thrust my cramping leg at him.

"You worked me too hard today. Rub it, please."

His phone vibrates four times in a row just as he's about to comply.

"Who's blowing you up like that?" I ask.

"Jealous?" he teases, eyes on the messages. "It's Bronny. Shit."

I knock at his phone with my toe. "Massage my leg, first, please."

He scrambles for the tramp's exit. "I gotta dip. Look, don't go nowhere near Culdeway tonight."

"When have I ever gone to Culdeway if it wasn't to watch Maal play ball?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

He squeezes by the narrow space between the trampoline and the rusty metal fence, the tiny yard's only escape point without going through the row house. Used to bossing me and Maal around, he snaps at me, "Just promise me, Chyna, damn."

I don't have time to remind him that he only has one sibling and I'm not it, because he's gone as I mutter "I promise" to the dark, empty yard.

Jacque doesn't play basketball. That means he's going to be a peacemaker or backup to his best friend, Bronny. Telling him not to go would have been useless. I debate heading inside or doing more flips.

I give in to my phone lighting up with messages in our Southside's Realest chat.

Jacquees

Ay yo, Jamaal where you at?
Stay away from Culdeway
tonight

Jamaal

Me and Pee just left his spot to
head over there. We balling with
Bear and his boys

Jacquees

Negative. Stay over Pee's.

Nyla

👊 What fresh nonsense popping
off now?

Jacquees

The block is hot. Just be where
you at, right now. Aight?

Nyla

Youn gotta tell me twice.
Where's Chyna?

Chyna

Where else? On the
tramp practicing. 😞

Jamaal

Bruh we already on the way.
Mommy said I could.

Jacquees

IDGAF what mommy said. I'm telling
you no. I mean it.

They're only two years apart, but Jacque takes older brothering to annoying levels. Sometimes with Maal, you have to. But Jacque never clamps down on Maal in front of the crew inside our chat. Something's about to go down.

I try and fail to stop thinking about what it can be. I want it to be the usual nonsense—people from our block in the Nines battling people from the Ell over which part of the park is theirs—but the way Jacque blew out of here, there's probably more to it.

Ellington Homes and the Nines are the southside's two biggest neighborhoods. They intersect at Culdewey Park, a huge forest of trees with basketball courts in the center and walk trails that slither in and out of tree-lined pockets.

The communities are trapped in a battle, like two roosters fighting over the last hen after an apocalypse, to claim ownership over both the park and Dub, the high school with the best record in the city's basketball history. Constantly fighting over scraps means sometimes the two spots get along and sometimes they don't. When people feel forgotten, they turn on each other instead of the people that forgot about them.

And right now, nothing has the block feeling more forgotten than Maal deciding to transfer to the Heights.

Dub winning States should be a victory for the whole southside. But high-key it matters which neighborhood the team's star player comes from. And for once, that star—my best friend since fifth grade—is from the Nines. The win is still fresh. People should still be slapping Maal on the back for the triple-double he made in the game, and they were until the Heights confirmed the rumors that he was transferring.

The confirmation was another win for Hot Lipz and her gossip mill, and it added salt to a wound that's opened fresh every single time a good player from the southside chooses any other school besides Dub.

It's wild, but right now, being pissed at Maal might be the only thing the two nabes have in common. So, who knows what kind of dumb stuff is popping off. In the southside, the line between love and hate is razor thin. If Jacque doesn't want Maal in the park, there's a good reason.

I stand in the middle of the trampoline, adrenaline warming my whole body. I call Maal to make sure he's complying with Jacque's request to stay away from the park. He's still venting to Pierre when he picks up my video call.

"No, 'cause Bear 'nem already on the way . . . What's up, Chyna?"

His square jaw juts, so he looks like he's always pouting. His eyes are a deep brown, and his eyebrows are fuzzy caterpillars. His hair, usually low cut, has four inches of new curly growth waiting to be twisted into locs.

His hair is too soft for locs, an observation he didn't appreciate when I pointed it out. Sometimes Maal acts like facts are annoyances out to get him. It's probably why he's already puffed up about Jacque's warning.

Pierre's face slides into the screen, joining Maal. He's nearly seven feet tall and has to hang his head like a giraffe to get into the frame. "Ay, girl."

Culdeaway Park's bright-yellow light poles, the city's way of lighting the area up as much as possible to cut down on late-night shenanigans, shine behind them. Of course, they're already there. It's impossible to keep Maal off the court.

I play dumb to the messages in the chat. "What y'all doing?" Maal's eyes wander beyond the screen. "Ready ball up."

"Why can't y'all go play over at Mount Street courts?" I ask, my head pounding with anxiety.

Pierre cosigns my suggestion. "Bro, I said the same thing."

Maal glares into the camera. "Y'all tag teaming with Jacque on who in charge of me tonight?"

Maal's insecurity about people assuming he's the softer brother gets worse every year. I stay easy about it. "Hardly. But if shenans are ready to pop off, better safe than sorry."

Pierre pulls at the few baby locs hanging from the front of his beanie. It was his idea that the Heights ballers all grow locs. When he was at Winston Prep, some of the students never let him forget just how Black he was. The second he accepted the Heights invite he decided he'd remind himself with the new style. He backs me up.

"And I'm not trying have Jacque pissed with me that I didn't keep you from the park."

Maal looks around more carefully, resisting but not as strong. "Bear already here. Even if we go to Mount Street, we gotta let him know we headed there."

"There's this device that you're on right now that allows you to send Bear a message," I say, relieved when Maal laughs.

His face bounces gently, on the screen, as he walks faster. "I

expect Chyna to be on her Mother Hen always worrying, but Pee, bruh, you going soft on me.”

Pierre is chill with his response. “Soft don’t got shit to do with it. A brother been drama free . . .”

Me and Maal chime in on Pierre’s favorite saying. “Since 2003.”

“And that’s facts,” Pierre says with a salute.

I’m along for the ride while they talk about how they’ll come into the season already gelled as a team. It was Jacque’s idea that Maal, Pierre, and Bear apply to the Heights on one application. He called it a collective. Said that it was better for the city’s three best players to stand together to stop people from pitting them against one another. And it’s working. The three of them ball every day, giving anyone watching a taste of what it’s going to be like to play against them.

It’s the Heights effect. We’re expected to be excellent when school starts in September. We understand the assignment.

My leg throbs, reminding me how hard I’m working to keep up, and the school year is still six months away.

The sounds of a basketball thumping, claps for the ball, and instructions of “This way, yo” get louder from Maal’s end of the call.

Bear’s voice booms, “Damn what took y’all so long?”

Him and Maal grip hands and pound each other on the back. Bear peers into the screen of Maal’s phone and grins.

“Ay, Chyna. What’s up girl?” The letters *K-E-N* are in silver on his front teeth.

LaKendrick “Bear” Tomlinson is a big dude, thick arms, thick legs, and a gut that hangs slightly over his sweat pants. He looks like he should be on the football field instead of the court, and he uses that girth to fool people into thinking he’s slow. Most have been jukeed by him more than they’d ever admit.

He's had a crush on me for over a year. I downplay the adoration in his voice and hit him with a friendly wave.

The ringing in my head quiets. All they have to do is scoop Bear's crew and walk back to Pierre's rusty dusty Honda. Mount Street is a fifteen-minute drive headed northwest and closer to Calloway Homes, Bear's part of town. What matters is, it's not Culde-way.

Maal, Pierre, Bear, and the Calloway dudes stand in a circle, chopping it up, in no hurry. Everything in me tingles, wanting him to obey Jacques before Jacques runs across him.

Just when I think they're ready to move, a girl comes over, hugs Pierre, then Maal, and posts herself in the circle between them. Her voice is faint. "You not gonna introduce me, Jamaal?"

"My fault. Shakira, that's Boo-Man and Dirk."

I call out to Maal. Shakira waves like we're friends.

"My bad. I forgot you was still on," Maal says. "I hit you up when I'm back home."

"Wait. Y'all are still going to Mount Street, right?" I ask.

"Ooh, y'all going over to Mount? Can I get a ride?" Shakira asks.

"Yeah. Come on, let's roll," Pierre says, peeling off to the left. There's mild commotion as Bear and his crew crisscross in front of the screen, following Pierre.

Shakira peels to the right. "Jamaal, walk over to the pavilion with me so I can tell my cousin I found a ride, please," she says.

His hand holding the phone drops to his side. All I see is the white stripe running down the side of his black track pants. I call his name, but he doesn't hear me.

I can't hang up until I know he's really leaving the park. I text—*Could you be more pressed? Let her run her own errands.* 😊—but he's already forgotten I'm on the phone, again.

Shakira flirts, telling him how good he was at States. He asks how come she didn't call him back the other day.

Geezus. I definitely need to tease him about being so pressed over somebody who was just up on his brother when the school year started.

I call his name again, but the screen goes black. He must have dropped the phone in his pants pocket. I'm about to end the call when Shakira calls out, "Ain't that your brother?"

"Shit," Maal mutters. And I feel the same way.

Even if I sprint the entire two blocks, I can't make it to Culde-way in time to referee the blowup between them, but I want to try. As soon as I reach the tramp's exit, I hear two muffled pops.

If I didn't already know what they were, Shakira's screams confirm it. Maal's feet pounding against the blacktop thump in my ears.

"No. Fuckfuckfuckfuck," Maal screams.

"Maal. Maal," I scream back. "What happened?!?"

My Aunt Tam races out of the house, adding to the confusion.

"Chyna? Why are you screaming? Where's Jacques? Where's Jamaal?" Her head swivels side to side, like she expects them to be playing hide-and-seek like we used to as kids. She calls back into the house to Momma, "Whit, something's wrong. Call Tika."

I stare at the screen, not seeing anything. Not needing to. Footsteps running, crying, shouting for an ambulance. I've heard them enough times to know what happened. Aunt Tam coaxes me off the trampoline. My legs tremble, trying to balance, even when I'm on solid ground.

I hold the phone and am as surprised to see Maal's face as he is to see mine when he finally takes the phone out of his pocket.

"What happened?" I scream.

He screams back, "He gone. He gone."

TRANSCRIPT OF DA BLACK SWAN MORNING SHOW—MARCH 31

BLACK SWAN

It's Da Black Swan rockin' since da break of dawn. It's time for everybody in Da Icy City to get yo' ass up.

MORNING SHOW JINGLE

Get. Up. Get yo' ass up.

Get. Up. Get yo' ass uuuuuup!

BLACK SWAN

Crank, I gotta say something before we get to that good question of the day.

DJ CRANK

Yezzir.

BLACK SWAN

On behalf of the entire 90.5 Da City family, I send my deepest condolences to Jamaal Henderson on the death of his brother, Jacques. Y'all know that I'm a son of south-side and man it breaks my heart that we keep losing our

future to senseless gun violence. What's got me twisted are the rumors saying this young man's death may have been about the Dub Wolves/Winston Prep Eagles state championship game.

SLAMMA JAMMA, PRODUCER

Wild. Just wild.

BLACK SWAN

We take our rivalries seriously in Da Icy City because, at the end of the day, nothing is wrong with healthy competition on the court. On the court, though! On. The. Court.

Back in my day, ballers talked with their skills. And, whether we was from the Nines or the Ell, the whole southside stood united against Winston Prep. But even that wasn't malicious.

There should always be something that brings communities that share a culture together. Basketball has always been it. And I'm sick thinking that we're ready to lose the one thing that always bonded us. So, yo, listen—if you know anything about the death of Jacques Henderson, do the right thing and let the proper authorities know. It ain't popular to do, but it's the right thing to do for our mans that's gone too soon. Mad love to Jamaal. Keep your head up, son.

SLAMMA JAMMA

And thas word. A lil advice to our listeners, when someone's teaching why don't you get taught?

BLACK SWAN

Real talk. Alright, Crank, we need to take a quick break but throw everybody that Q of the Day, first, my good brotha.

CRANK

Yezzir. Unless you living under a rock, you already know Hot Lipz got Chatter on fire with the gulliest gossip the city ever seen. Today's Q is a two-parter. First, who y'all think she is? Second, is all fair in love and gossip or are some things off limits?

BLACK SWAN

I'm scared of this question, man. Social media have people losing their minds already, but anonymous accounts are straight-up trash. I don't know if I want to give airtime to anybody afraid to cop to who they are.

SLAMMA JAMMA

All fun and games, Swan.

BLACK SWAN

Yeah, until somebody gets hurt. I don't have a horse in the race, just saying if you gonna gossip, get paid for it. Don't just be out here wreaking havoc for the sake of chaos.

SLAMMA JAMMA

Crank, you got Swan in his feelings, bruh.

[LAUGHTER FADES INTO AD FOR DA HOT SPOT]

The number one site for celebrity gossip. If you gonna drop it, drop it like it's hot! DaHotSpotdotcom.