

ONE

“YA MAMA SO TALL, she tripped on the curb and hit her head on the sun,” Lorenzo spit out between sips of pineapple soda and bacon-and-sour-cream chips.

“Ohhhhhhh!” me and Andre shouted. Our hands formed megaphones over our mouths to broadcast our pleasure at Lorenzo’s well-crafted bag.

Trent scooped his narrow butt closer to the edge of the step, then turned up toward Lorenzo, seated above him, and said, “Oh, you wanna bag? All right, then . . . lemme see . . . Ya mama so fat, she . . . Ya mama so fat, she stood over me and the sun disappeared.”

“WEAK!” Lorenzo crunched into Trent’s ear.

“Trent . . . that *was* weak,” Andre said from the

sideline between basketball chest passes aimed at Billy Dee Williams on a faded Colt 45 malt liquor poster.

The small patch of real estate between Trent's All Stars held his attention. He swished his purple quarter water back and forth on the concrete with his thin hands. A blood-burgundy Cadillac Brougham bumping bass thumps stopped at the light in front of us and caught Trent's eye.

School was out for the summer, but Mama still dropped me off at my aunt Gertie's house in Compton. Summer meant lazy days filled with soap operas, TV game shows, and Aunt Gertie's frequent alcoholic blackouts.

This summer would be different. In a few months I'd be a freshman. In high school. No more junior high! But right now I had three months to kill, and in Compton, with nowhere to go, that's an eternity. At least now that I was older, Mama had loosened up on me a bit and let me hang out more with my boys.

By ten a.m. every day except the weekends, we could be found outside Pop's Liquor Store off Wilmington Avenue doin' what the cops call "loitering" — shootin' the breeze and letting the wind carry our thoughts into the day. The sun was always bright. The air was always hot. And we were ready for anything.

"Trent, you still with us?" Lorenzo said after a swig of soda.

"Yeah. I'm thinkin', I'm thinkin'."

"See, that's your problem, Trent: you think too much," Andre bounced.

"Yeah, baggin' is all about the quickness. Reaction. You gotta be quick or you will be broken down," Lorenzo said.

Trent's eyes darted between the concrete and the Cadillac.

Green light. The bass thumped into the distance and bounced an idea into Trent's head. His eyes lit up.

"All right, wait . . . all right . . . I got one. Hold on. . . . Ya mama so black, they marked her absent in night school."

"Ohhhh! There you go, Trent, that was a good one," I said, giving him a soul clap.

"Yeah, Shawn. That *was* good. That's because I said the same thing just a couple of weeks ago. Remember?" Lorenzo said.

"Is that where I heard it from?" Trent asked.

"Yeah . . . that's where you heard it from," Lorenzo said. He stood and dusted bright golden chip crumbs from his black tracksuit, then crumbled the empty bag of chips into a ball. His white Adidas heels

inched up into a half jump shot aimed at the brown wire trash can.

"Three, two, one . . ."

Brick.

"Dang!"

Lorenzo stretched his thick arms to the sky, exposing his round Buddha belly under his sweatshirt.

Trent finished off his last purple swallow. Andre stopped passing the basketball to Billy Dee and started weaving it between each leg, bounce-bouncing a nice little rhythm. Until I stole it from him.

"What we gonna do now?" I asked.

What are we gonna do today?

Same question. Different day. This was always where the spark was struck for the fire that would become that day's story.

"Let's play some ball," Andre said.

Trent and Lorenzo came off the steps to join me and Andre. We each took turns shooting our trash into the garbage-can goal.

Trent: "Three, two, one . . ."

Brick.

Andre: "Three, two, one . . ."

Swish.

Dang. I wish he missed once in a while.

Me: "Three, two, one . . ."

Brick.

Trent took the ball from me. "They got courts over at Bunche," he said.

"Nahh . . . too much glass," Andre sneered.

"How 'bout Carver?" I said.

"Nahhh . . . the Mexicans take over the court at this time of day."

"What about MLK?" Trent said.

We stood in a circle, each facing out. Pop's is on the dividing line between Crip blue and Piru red, or what I like to call the DMZ. My dad taught me that in Vietnam, DMZ meant demilitarized or neutral zone. That meant no trouble. But if we headed east, Pirus. West, Crips. This was always the biggest decision of the day. We didn't wanna be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Planning helped.

"I don't know about MLK. When I was there last time, I saw some Crips hanging out near the handball courts shootin' dice. But then my brother told me that he saw some Pirus playing ball there one time, so I don't know," Lorenzo said.

'Zo's shoes pointed north as he tugged at his thick waistband.

"How 'bout DuBois?" I said.

"Man, they ain't got no nets on those creaky rims," Andre said.

He stole the ball from Trent and rocked it side to side.

"Yeah, that's why it'll be empty," Lorenzo said.

He stole the ball and took off in the direction of DuBois.

"I swear, Andre, you act like every court has to be the Forum," I said before hustling after Lorenzo.

Andre brought up the rear.

"It ain't that. That court just sucks," he said.

And that's how it was. Yeah, DuBois's court sucked, but we'd rather deal with rickety rims than trigger-happy gangbangers.