

Chapter One

CUPS

n. 1. small, bowl-shaped containers for drinking from, typically having a handle **2.** the two parts of a bra shaped to contain or support the breasts

Nana hates Show Your Secret. You know the store I'm talking about. The one that sells underwear. Oh, excuse me. Lingerie. *I feel diminished every time I walk past their window.* That's Nana. It's like she just has to make that point whenever she can. All I can say is it's a good thing we don't live in Center City so she doesn't have to pass by their store very often. She gets mad enough as it is when we're waiting for the bus on Spruce Street and here comes one with underwear ads splashed all over the sides. *See, this is why I prefer the trolley.* She says it in a low frosty voice, just loud enough so all the people standing close to us can hear. That is not the way I want to represent.

My nana's right about a lot of things, but I guess she hasn't noticed the trolley has ads too. They're usually about health care or some other boring thing like that, though. I don't think there's any way of stopping her from complaining, but I wish Nana wouldn't always try to speak for me. I'm twelve years old, I just started wearing a bra, I am going to look at those ads.

Why? That's what I've been trying to figure out. It's got something to do with having breasts; Michelle Overton, the new girl on our block; and being left with my grandparents while my mama and daddy traipse across Europe on their music tour. *Traipse*. That's a funny word. It means to walk around casually. Kind of like what some older kids do on Friday nights when they're out on Baltimore Avenue looking for a party.

Well, it's not really like that. My parents are working. That's why they left me at home with Granddad; Nana; my brother, Clayton; and my words.

I'm into words like some kids are into music or basketball. The way I see it, everybody's got something unique to them. Something that makes them interesting or weird.

So . . . it's probably good to stop right here and say which one of those words describes me. Interesting,

weird. Interesting, weird. I'd say I'm much closer to interesting 'cause I question things. Everything. I don't let anything slide. It's like I have a dictionary or an encyclopedia inside my head that I'm always riffing through.

I look words up in a real dictionary too. I have a big one that Mama gave me a long time ago. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. I use it to figure out what words really mean, but sometimes words and phrases have double meanings. *A woman without a fragrance is a woman without a future*. A salesclerk said that to me and Nana yesterday when we were walking through Macy's. Nana snatched me away so fast she almost tore my arm off. I knew she wasn't mad at me, though. She was, how would they say it on TV? Overcome by the circumstance. Like the time I told Kira Reynolds off for making fun of the gap between my friend Jamila's teeth.

Jamila's mama's African American, like me, and her *paapa*, her word for daddy, is from Ghana. Jamila Akosua Mensah. My girl is beautiful inside and out. *Ahouf3*. That's how you say "beautiful" in Twi. That's one of the languages they speak in Ghana.

Me and Jamila start off every summer morning in the same way. We sit on our front porch and figure out what we feel like doing that day. Now, if my mama wasn't in

Amsterdam (that's in Holland) I'd be with her, but I'm not. She's not here, that is. So I'm not with her.

"Isn't it time to pick the berries?" Jamila asks. The raspberries in the front yard garden of our three-story Victorian house are in bloom and their little red heads peek out from prickly green leaves. They've been like that for a few days already. Jamila grins when she asks the question, and I see the dimple in her right cheek. That's how I know she wants to do some gardening. *Get her hands in the dirt*, as Nana would say. I'm thinking about how much I like wearing my new bra so it takes me a little minute to focus on the garden, although the tomato, zucchini, and cucumber plants look peaceful in the early-morning light.

"Huh, Neva," Jamila says, poking me in my side. "The garden. Ask your nana if I can help out."

That's Jamila. She likes eating the stuff we grow and she's willing to work for it too. She doesn't try to take advantage of other people like some folks do. I give her a playful slap on the shoulder to show my appreciation.

Across the street Michelle Overton steps out in a bikini. A sarong is knotted at her waist so we can't see her butt but her breasts are on full display in her demi-cup halter top. She's two years older than us but even two years

cannot account for all that. She's *hot and happening* like that ad I saw on the casino bus last week.

Now, I'm not trying to say I understand why anybody would waste their money gambling, but Granddad says some people are addicted to it. That means they'd go to the casino no matter what so I don't see why the people who run the casinos have to put the ads with women with hardly any clothes on flat out on the side of their bus. I guess they want to make sure nobody slips away to put their money in the bank or do something else good with it, like donate to charity.

Jamila leans over the porch railing and looks down at the beetles in our garden. Me? I can't stop looking at Michelle. How can she prance around the neighborhood like that? Whenever Jamila and I walk the four blocks over to the swim club we wear shorts and T-shirts over our bathing suits.

"These raspberries need to be picked," says Jamila, holding her braids to one side. Her auntie runs an African braiding salon up on Fifty-Second Street so Jamila's hair always looks good. "That's the best way to get rid of beetles."

"How do you know?" I ask, but my eyes are still locked tight on Michelle. For real. She doesn't just walk down

her front steps. Uh-uh. Miss Thang descends like a goddess. Her light brown skin is tanned to a rich, dark sheen. That girl is spending a lot of time at the swim club. She smiles at me and Jamila but she doesn't say anything.

Jamila scoots off the porch down onto our front steps. She reaches way over into the garden and picks up one of the beetles. "Cute, isn't it?"

Cute is totally the wrong word for this moment. We're cute. Michelle's something else.

Jamila finds a twig by the side of the steps and sticks it down in the raspberry patch. She waits until a few beetles climb up on it before raising the twig to eye level.

"I just want a closer look," she says, cupping her free hand around the twig.

I'm peeking down the front of my WEST PHILLY T-shirt. My bra doesn't have demi-cups and Nana would rather *walk twenty miles on bad backcountry road* (another one of her sayings) before she'd let me get one. Even if I could fill it.

"I can see you're distracted," Jamila says without turning around.

What? She's got eyes in the back of her head like old people?

My girl faces me and coaxes her dimple out again, except this time it doesn't work. Something's changed.

Jamila's grin fades and she puts the twig back down in the garden. "Who cares about Michelle?" she says. "I have other things to worry about."

I care about Michelle and my brother, Clayton, does too. He's sixteen and he's a lifeguard at the swim club. He comes and goes as he pleases. Well, he tries to. He and Granddad have been going at it about his music, his curfew, his friends. Basically everything but especially politics or "social activism" as Clay calls it. He feels bad whenever we pass homeless people standing outside Mariposa Food Co-op. You can see it in his eyes. He can't just walk by them like they don't exist like other so-called neighbors do. And he's worried about all the people in our neighborhood who came here from other countries—Vietnam, Liberia, Ethiopia. We have it all right here. And we have Michelle too. Michelle.

It's not that I can't, but I don't put my thoughts about Michelle and Clayton into words. Something about that scares me. Like being without Mama and Daddy this summer.

There's an awkward silence between me and Jamila and she's the one to break it.

"Okay, Neva," she says, standing up. "Talk to you later."

I lower my eyes as if I'm fascinated by something in the garden. I don't say anything to stop Jamila from

leaving because something's pulling me back into the house. Something having to do with Michelle Overton and my profile. I need to see it again. My profile, that is. I need to check it out. I've only done this about eight million times this past week since I got my bra.

I don't hear anybody upstairs so the coast must be clear. The problem is the mirror in my room is too small. So is the mirror in the bathroom. I need a bigger mirror to really check everything out so I go into my grandparents' bedroom to the biggest mirror in the house.

I stand in front of my grandparents' bureau and smile. I love the way I look, starting with my new do, my twists, so I gently pat my hair before turning to the side to admire my body. I lift my lavender T-shirt so I can see the glorious white cotton status symbol against my walnut flesh.

Yeah, I'm all that. Michelle Overton might be going to high school, but she's got nothing on me. I admire myself from the front, from the back, from the left, and from the right. I do this over and over again until I am dizzy.

I don't know how long I have been posing when the door to my grandparents' bathroom flies open and Clayton falls out. He screeches, screams, shrieks, hollers, and howls his way across the room. Clay is laughing so hard he can hardly walk. Do you hear what I'm saying?

His eyes are sealed shut as he gasps for air, struggling to regain control of his heaving shoulders. He falls to his knees and bangs his right fist on the floor like a judge trying to keep order in his court. He staggers to his feet and roars past me without saying a word.