

SHARON M. DRAPER

The dramatic conclusion to the powerful Hazelwood High trilogy

DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN



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I think homeroom is a stupid waste of time. They take attendance, read announcements, then make you sit in a room watching the clock when you could be in a class, maybe even learning something. Dumb! Mr. Whitfield is okay as a teacher—he's probably too nice, so kids take advantage of him sometimes, like I'm getting ready to do.

"Grimes?"

"Here."

"Hawkins?"

"Yeah."

"Henderson?"

"Here."

"Immerman?"

"Over here."

"Jackson? . . . Jackson? . . . Is Andy absent again?"

Everybody looked at me like I'm supposed to know where Andy is at every single moment. I'm not his mother. I'm not even his girlfriend anymore. I ignored them all and dug in my book bag for a pencil.

"Yeah, Mr. Whitfield. He's got 'senioritis,' a terrible disease." Leon thinks he's so funny. Everybody laughed but me.

"Well, since he's only a junior, I'd say that he's got a fatal disease. Juniors who catch senioritis have been known to develop serious complications and never graduate," Mr. Whitfield said jokingly.

"He'll be here tomorrow. He has to. He owes me two dollars."

"Good luck. Okay, let's finish with attendance."

"Johnson, Ranita?"

"Here . . ."

"Montgomery, Keisha?"

"I'm here. Mr. Whitfield? I don't feel good. Can I go to the nurse?"

"Okay, Keisha, but unless you're going home, try to get back in a hurry."

I wasn't really sick. I shouldered my book bag and headed out of the room without looking at Mr. Whitfield. I was still upset about breaking up with Andy, and I just needed some space. I glanced down to the end of the

hall where I saw my best friend Rhonda heading my way. She yelled down the hall, "Hey, Keisha, have you seen Andy this morning?" A couple of teachers stuck their heads out of their doors, but Rhonda ignored them as she hurried down the hall toward me.

"No, and I hope I never do again."

"Come on, girl, you don't really mean that. I know it hurts. You and Andy were together for so long. It's hard on me to see you two break up."

"Yeah, Rhonda. It hurts. I really liked him, you know, but it just got too complicated. He's better off without me. He's got to get himself together before he can get seriously involved with someone else. How's Tyrone?"

"Oh, just fine—so fine!" Rhonda giggled. "We're going to the movies tomorrow. Do you want to come?"

"No, I'll probably just catch a movie on cable. It's kinda nice just to relax for a change and not worry about how I look or what I'll wear or where we're going. I'm just going to chill and enjoy my freedom." I said the words, but Rhonda knew I didn't mean them.

"Okay, but call me if you change your mind. Say, I'm going to drop off Andy's chemistry homework at his house after school. Mr. Whitfield said he'd fail unless he got this assignment in. You wouldn't want to go with me, would you?"

HAS KEISHA FOUND HAPPINESS AT LAST?

In her senior year, things are finally looking a little brighter for Keisha. Still haunted by the suicide of her ex-boyfriend, Andy, she finds comfort in the attentions of the new track coach, twenty-three-year-old Jonathan Hathaway, the principal's son. How can Keisha not be swept off her feet by a tall, dark, handsome "lemon drop wrapped in licorice" who treats her like a woman, not a girl?

But suddenly this intoxicating relationship takes a frightening turn, and Keisha is once again plunged into the darkness she's fought so hard to escape. Will Keisha ever be able to find her way back into the light?

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