

CHAPTER 1 – CUANDO LAS GALLINAS MEAN

Bitches diss the way I dress

'Cause the lyrics I kick be causin' stress

Kiss the ring of a true goddess

'Cause Fatal's the hottest

And I don't front modest.

“Almost but not quite.” I made a correction then handed back Leila’s notebook.
“Try it again, but don’t clip your words. Just let it flow like one long phrase.”

Leila sucked her teeth like she trademarked the expression. “How many times you gonna have me do this, Cassie? This is like the fifth time and shit.”

“Just do it.”

She kicked the verse again, and while it sounded better, it was still a bit off. But before I could ask her to do it again, she snapped at me. “It ain’t my flow, it’s the rhyme. Which is your specialty. Like you always be reminding me.”

Leila was right about the rhyme, but she never understood how hard it was for me to write for her. I’ve never been into the Queen Bee shtick, rhyming about whose name is

on my ass, how I get down or any of that. Sistas claim they want the dudes in the game to respect them only to rap about the same bullshit guys do or say whatever they think guys wanna hear. But that's how Leila rolled as Fatal Beauty, and like it or not, heads be feelin' it. Plus I guess it was no easier for her to coach me on my flow with my SAT vocabulary as she calls it.

If you got it, flaunt it, they be telling us, but truth is it depends on what *it* is. *It* only pertains to tits and ass. Which I got. But so does every other female. What I got that every female has but doesn't flaunt is a brain. But they don't really want a sister flossin' that, but that never stopped me. Might as well stop breathing.

Not that Leila never tried to step up her lyrical game. Once Leila bought a thesaurus and a rhyming dictionary and sat in the kitchen trying to compose something. Looking for an alternative for the word *skills*, she fell in love with the word *sleight*. Plenty of good words that rhyme with *sleight*, but Leila obsessed over leaving no doubt what she meant. Pointing at the definition in the dictionary, she explained, "It's gotta be clear that I mean 'skill or dexterity' and not 'cunning or craft used in deceiving.'" Then she flipped ahead to a dog-eared page where she highlighted the word *slight*. "Or worse, that I mean 'having little weight, strength, substance or significance' and shit. Can't have that."

Leila started at four in the afternoon and was still scribbling in her notebook when I went to bed at midnight. I woke up at eight the next morning to get ready for work to find her sleeping on the couch and the notebook on the floor. I picked it up and after pages of failed attempts to use *sleight* to her satisfaction, Leila wrote a three-page rhyme

blasting our high school English teacher Mr. Burke who spent more time trying to fuck her than teach her.

So now the occasional rhyme written by Leila writes has a catchy tempo and simple words like a nursery rhyme, but that's what the crowds loved the most. Although I penned the bulk of our rhymes, Leila recently cultivated the knack of writing hooks. When we ripped our last performance for Da Corridor – an underground showcase for aspiring MCs that changed venue each month like the legendary Lyricist Lounge – at its Valentine's Day Special at SOB's, the audience quickly picked up Leila's refrain and rapped along. Leila has always been the ticket on stage, grabbing the audience's attention with her low-cut halters and stiletto heels and keeping it with those contagious chants. It was all good because after the show while young girls were rushing Leila for her autograph and asking where she bought her gear, I was the one the other MCs stepped to saying, "Yo, your rhyme got me mad open" or "You gotta tape I can cop?" She caught their interest on stage, I kept thinking after the show so I didn't hate on Fatal 'cause it was our differences that made us such a tight duo. But that's exactly why I didn't appreciate her coming at me like she did.

"Fine," I said. I lifted myself off the sage Natuzzi sofa. "You don't want to work any more, just say so. Don't be bitin' my head off."

"Whatever." Leila flicked her hand at me, flashing her latest silk wrap with a Puerto Rican flag painted on each nail and the middle finger of each hand topped with a genuine half-karat diamond as the star. The manicurist had flipped when she busted out with real gems and said, "I don't wear fake shit." Sitting next to her getting my French manicure touched up, I reminded Leila of the dye jobs, hair extensions, padded bras, and

the wrap itself. She wagged an undone finger at me and said, “*¡Callate!* How you gonna put me on blast shout when I’m treating you? *¡Maldita morena!*”

That was two weeks ago and the last time we laughed together. That night we performed at SOB’s and brought the house down, but she had been ornery ever since, and I was sick of it. Leila’s always been moody, but she should have been fiending to iron out this rhyme so we could schedule a session with Darnell, record the track and get out the album instead of hating on my writing.

“Don’t whatever me.” I grabbed my own notebook and took off to my room. “You need to quit snappin’ at me ...”

“I don’t need to do nothin’,” Leila called after me. “You need to remember who pays the rent on this muthafucka.”

I walked into my room, whirled around to yell, “You mean your pimp?” and slammed the door as hard as I could.

At the moment, I didn’t think anything of it. Leila and me, we might as well be sisters. We love and fight each other equally hard. She’s my living diary and I’m hers, and we say shit to each other that if some other heifer said would get her tenderized. In fact, Fatal and I became tight because we fought.

Back at Raphael Hernandez Middle School in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, Leila rolled like the villain in an old western. The bad-ass whose name rippled spines. Then you’d see this tiny Puerto Rican girl dressed in royal blue leather from head to toe, parting the crowd in the hallway between classes. You’d wonder, “*This is the infamous Leila Aponte?*” as she was all of four-eleven, maybe a good eighty-five

pounds if she got caught in a thunderstorm. But that stone cold look with those icy eyes would freeze you in place.

Leila seemed even smaller when flanked by her crew. She ran with three of the biggest-boned Black girls you did not want to fuck with. Tasha the LL Cool J fanatic with buttons of him all over her knapsack, Mean Monique (because there was another sweet Monique in our class who looked just like Aaliyah, may she rest in peace), and Vaseline whose real name I can't remember. We called her Vaseline because her face was always greased up, ready and looking for a fight she usually found.

Leila had sent Vaseline to pick the fight with me. She only admitted that a few years ago when we heard that some woman stabbed Vaseline at a street festival in broad daylight. Now Leila claimed to forget why she sic Vaseline on me, but I remember like it was yesterday: this kid she liked named Craig.

Craig sat next to me in math class, and all I did was lend the scrub a pencil. You ask to borrow a pencil, most people give you the most busted one they find at the bottom of their bag. All chewed up, eraser so flat that if you make a mistake you might as well crumple it up and start over on fresh loose leaf because using the eraser is just going to jack up your page anyway. But my mother Genevieve always said, "Cassandra, if you're going to do someone a good deed, then do the deed good." So I handed Craig a new, freshly sharpened pencil and told him he can keep it. Next thing you know Leila got it in her head that I was after her man even though everyone knew Craig was messing with some chick at I.S. 98.

So Vaseline stepped to me in the locker room, claiming I made some wisecrack about the way she ran the bases in gym class. Leila entered followed by Mean Monique

and Tasha, and I immediately knew what time it was. I won't front seven years later like I wasn't scared. Vaseline and Leila were notorious for catching whoever they wanted no matter how long it took, and the longer it took, the worse it would be. I figured it would cost me less time and pain to face the inevitable than to run around scared trying to avoid it.

So when Vaseline accused me, I found it in me somewhere to push past her, step to Leila and say, "Leila tell you that lie?" Until this day Leila insists that I did not know she was behind the whole confrontation, that I singled her out because I assumed that because she was little I could take her. I tell her I chose her because she was the ringleader and therefore the toughest and not just to make her feel good. It was true.

Vaseline tried to rush me from behind, but Leila signaled her as if to say *I got this*. She got into my face – or more like my chest because when I was thirteen I was already about five-six and a 36C – and said, "What if I did say something?"

I looked down and said, "Then you need to stop starting trouble with bitches you don't know and concentrate on getting your sixteen-year old ass out the seventh grade."

I never thought Leila would hit me first, but I should have known better. Most girls would talk mad shit and even get in your face but would never throw the first punch. Leila was not one of those sisters, and she rang my head with a solid cross to my jaw.

So it was on with Leila and me rolling around on the floor, scratching, pulling and cursing, you name it. Although she caught me by surprise, I quickly got the upper hand. Her girls tried to jump in, but Leila started cussing and swinging at them as if they were *my* crew. "Mind your fuckin' business!" she yelled. "I can kick her ass by my damn self."

Then she flung herself at me like a wrestler off the ropes. Her screaming got the attention of the gym teacher who ran in, busted it up and sent us to the principal's office.

Once there Miss Olivera took one look at Leila and said, "I don't want to hear a word from you." Since I had never gotten into a fight before, she gave me detention for the rest of the week. But without asking a single question, the bitch assumed Leila started the fight and suspended her for two weeks. I guess when you get a reputation for looking for trouble, sometimes trouble saves you the time and energy and comes looking for you. But how the hell was Miss Olivera so sure that I didn't start the fight just to prove I wasn't the Moesha everyone made me out to be? Leila was pissed and even then I couldn't blame her. I spent my detention filing in Ms. Olivera's office. The real punishment though was hearing her boring lectures about how smart I was, how much potential I had, why I didn't need or want to turn out like Leila Aponte who was going to wind up dead or in jail before she turned twenty-one.

While filing I peeped Leila's records and found out that she had a mad high IQ but some learning disability, too, that was likely to have been caused by her mother's druggin' while she was pregnant. She lived in the projects with a foster family, the fourth in the last two years since her mother died of a heroine overdose. I started wondering why no one was looking out for her. When a guy's getting into trouble, they usually run tests expecting – maybe even hoping – to find an excuse to stick him in special ed. But if they realize he's restless 'cause he's mad smart, and if he's lucky, they stick a ball or an instrument in his hand. I mean I was busting out nineties and higher in all my classes, but the only time I got any recognition was the once in a blue moon when I fucked up. Then it was, "Cassandra, you're too smart for this foolishness."

So on the last day of my detention, I headed over to the Adams Houses where Leila lived. You know that saying about running toward what you fear? Once I overheard Genevieve joke to my Aunt Treece that she often wondered when I was a toddler if she should kill me for my own good like a plantation mother. She said I despised being afraid so too often I failed to heed my fear even when for my own damned good. Not that I shoved my fingers in an open flame or followed strangers. But instead of steering clear of the fire or the stranger altogether, I was the kinda child that climbed the stove and twisted all its knobs trying to turn off the flame or got in the stranger's face to shout him out about his nasty self. And even though she seemed the complete opposite of me in every way, I recognized a similar fearlessness in Leila. And when I peeped her records I stopped hating being afraid of her and started wanting to earn her respect if nothing else.

When I got Leila's building in the projects, she was in front of her building with some guy who was screaming on her – too young to be her father, too old to be her boyfriend. When she spotted me, Leila shoved the guy aside and walked toward me. “You come here looking for another ass kicking?”

I expected her to say something like that if I found her so I was ready. “I came all the way over here to thank you and you throw me shade?”

That took her off guard like I hoped it would. “Thank me? For what?”

“For fighting fair. Not letting Mean Monique and them jump me. You got heart. For a Puerto Rican girl.”

Leila looked so bugged I was convinced she was gonna start swinging. Not up to another fight, I backed up and bounced. Dude took that as his cue to resume screaming.

“Yo, Leila, get your ass back here!”

“Shut the fuck up already, Jay. I promised my friend I’d help her study for her test tomorrow. You should try it some time, ignorant ass. . .”

“When you gonna be back?” Jay Dude yelled.

“¡*Cuando las gallinas mean!*”

We must have walked a whole block in silence when I got over the shock that I was walking arm-in-arm with Leila Aponte. And I was leading the way, too. I was sure the moment we turned the corner, she would yank her arm away, shove me and warn me to stay the hell away from her if I knew what was good for me, but she didn’t. Although she was strolling down Tinton Avenue, I know her mind was back where I found her with whatever situation had her eating from Jay what she would never take from anyone at school. I finally asked her. “What’s that you said?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I mean, he asked you when you’d be back and you answered in Spanish.”

“Oh. I said I’d be back when chickens piss.”

“Don’t they?”

She laughed. ““No, *estupida*. Don’t you know that?””

I never like being called names not even in fun. Especially stupid since I knew that was the last thing I was. But Leila had the coolest laugh. She giggled like a little girl, teasing me like a friend and not like an older girl bullying me. So I laughed, too. “Why should I know some shit like that?”

“Cause you supposed be Ms. Honor Roll and shit.”

“Yo, teach me how to say that.”

Leila snickered. “I ain’t no teacher. Ask Mr. Fuckin’ Diaz.”

“Mr. Diaz’s not gonna teach us anything cool like that. He teaches that bougie Spanish that y’all Hispanics don’t even speak.”

“Word. He be teaching Thpanish.”

“C’mon, Leila, teach me that line so I can tell the ol’ Dominican guy on my block who keeps asking me when I’m gonna go out with him.”

That’s when Leila really cracked up. She walked me all the way home to my tenement building on Longfellow Avenue and said she would see me in school tomorrow. I hoped she would at least nod in my direction at lunchtime but actually expected her to ice me in front of her girls.

During math class the next day, Craig poked me in the side with the pencil I gave him. When I looked over to cuss him out, he pointed toward the door. Leila had her face pressed against the window of the classroom door, waving me to come into the hallway. I got a bathroom pass.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were on suspension?”

Leila smirked and rolled her eyes. “Flaco let me in.”

“Flaco?”

“I mean Anthony.” I still must have looked confused because she added, “The security guard. Yo, what you doing Saturday?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“I want you to go with me to a hip hop concert.”

I got mad hyped. My notebooks held more rhymes than schoolwork, but I had never showed them to anyone let alone gone to see a show. But in a flash my excitement quickly turned to disappointment. Genevieve would never give me the money or

permission to go, never hesitating to point out every news article about a kid getting hurt or killed at a hip hop concert who just my luck often turned out to be honor student bound for college.

“I can’t go, “ I told Leila. “Even if I had the money, my moms won’t let me.”

Leila said, “That’s the thing, Cassie, the concert’s free.”

“Free?” No one at school ever called me Cassie, and only a week before this girl had tried to kick my ass in the locker room.

“Yeah, and your moms don’t have to know ‘cause the concert’s right over there at Crotona Park at three o’clock.”

“For real?” The excitement returned like a flood. “I thought you meant at night downtown somewhere.”

“It’s gonna be da bomb, Cassie. All the ol’ school heads from the Bronx are supposed to be there.” Leila’s eyes sparkled as she counted names off her inch-long nails. Afrika Bambaataa, Cool Herc, ...” She didn’t know or care if I recognized let alone appreciated those cats, Leila was on a mission and intent on getting me to join her. Not that she had to try that hard. The few girlfriends I had liked hip hop but the depth of their interest stopped at mourning B.I.G. and swooning over Mase. They changed the subject when I mentioned anyone before Bad Boy let alone any founding fathers of the music they claimed to love so much. The only thing that amped me more than the chance to see these hip hop legends was the discovery that I had found someone who shared my passion for hip hop. Although I never cut school even on a snow day, had Leila asked me to roll with her right then and there, I would have said later for Ms. Olivera and her warnings and bounced.

So that Saturday at two-thirty I told Genevieve I was headed to the library to do research for a school project, and I met Leila at the token booth of the Simpson Street subway station. We decided to walk, and I quickly learned that Leila and I had different tastes in hip hop when we got into a big debate over whether Lil' Kim helped or hurt other female rappers. Still Leila's knowledge and passion for hip hop matched mine and, I *liked* fighting with her about it.

The concert took place on the handball courts before two hundred heads of all kind, from toddlers in diapers to seniors on canes. I rarely saw white folks in this 'hood, but that day quite a few represented, and no one gave them any beef. Afrika Bambaataa rolled solo, but the crowd convinced him to perform "Planet Rock." He left immediately after that, but that alone made the walk there worth it. It only got better when Herc mixed and scratched for an hour-long medley that included old school cuts from "Rapper's Delight" to "The Message."

The highlight for me came when I learned about a new group called The Cold Crush Brothers. New to me that was, but Leila knew all about them. As they rocked this song called "It's Us," Leila taught me everything about them. How they were from Sedgwick Avenue. That they never recorded a studio album. How the leader Grandmaster Caz was the same lyricist who wrote the funny Superman dis on "Rapper's Delight" and probably was the first MC to tell stories in his rhymes instead of just flossing about what he had. She promised to get me a classic rap mixtape from that dude Jay who was teaching her about the early hip hop. "That's the only reason why I bother with his ass," she said.

During the concert, not a soul lit a blunt or brought a forty. No gray heads complained about noise, and no new jacks called the music soft. The positive vibe was so powerful, I found myself patting my chest and crying. Overcome with euphoria so painful, I forgot that Leila was with me until I felt a tug at my sleeve. I rushed to wipe my face and turned to look at her only to see that she was crying, too.

Leila grazed away a tear with a single nail and forced a smile. “What you crying for, silly?” she asked.

It took me a few seconds to understand why myself, and it never crossed my mind to play tough and front like I caught something in the eye. “This is the way it’s supposed to be,” I said.

“Damn, Cassie, you such an old soul and shit,” said Leila, “but I feel you.”

“Is that why you’re crying?”

“Nah.” And she tried to leave it at that.

But I wouldn’t let her. “So…”

“Nothing. It’s just that I wish there was somebody up there, you know… Who kinda looked like me.” And I didn’t have to ask what she meant. Before I could say anything at all, Leila said. “Don’t tell nobody or I’m a have to kick your ass again.”

I felt for Leila. Her peeps had been part of hip hop from day one but had less to show for it than mine, especially the females. Not that I was all that crazy about where my folks were taking it. So I just shoved her and said, “Whatever.”

After the concert, we moved to the playground. We must have looked silly on the see-saw, a skinny sixteen year-old with her tiny feet dangling in the air on one end and a thick thirteen year-old squatting like a cricket on the rubber mat at the other. But we were

too busy taking turns throwing old school verses at each other to care. Then I spit out one of my own.

“Yo, that’s phat, Cassie,” Leila said. And she tossed out one of *her* rhymes. I pretended to fall off the see-saw from lyrical devastation, and poor Leila came crashing to the mat. Then we both got up laughing and moved to the swings.

I got home after eight o’clock and found Genevieve fuming next to my cold dinner on the stove. I admitted to her where I was and with whom, and she grounded me for a week. Leila had her own drama on account of me, too, although with her crew. The first day after Leila’s suspension she called me over to her table during lunch. She handed me the mixtape she promised me, and just as I was about to walk back to table, Leila invited me to sit with them. Vaseline asked her why the hell she inviting me to stay, Leila told her she could have lunch with whoever the fuck she felt like, Vaseline said this, Leila said that and the next thing I knew, Vaseline was wearing Leila’s leftovers. On the verge of getting expelled herself, Vaseline held back then but waited for Leila after school.

Leila must have made a telephone call that kicked off a phone tree because at three o’clock a posse of older project girls stood in front of the school. I went to the front of the pack to have Leila’s back, but Tasha and Mean Monique left Vaseline hanging by cutting out a period early. We stared Vaseline down as she hurried down the block onto her bus, and as much as I disliked her, I was happy that we didn’t chase her.

Ever since Leila and I had been two sides of the same coin. I drifted from my in-school friends whom I never saw otherwise because their moms were as strict as Genevieve, and Leila obviously dropped Tasha and them and her project crew quickly aged out of the foster care system.

And no matter how bad our occasional fights were, I never dreamed that some Irv Gotti wannabe would have us going at each other like Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim.