

**Tamika
Gibson**

**OFF
TRACK**
A NOVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

KAYLA

Time can be cruel; the way it conspires against you whenever it pleases. It would suit me just fine if the coming days could race ahead like the suds scuttling down my arms and into the washing basin. I'd give anything to bypass a couple of tomorrows. That was too much to ask, apparently, like most other things in my life.

My legs were liquefied from today's training session, but I didn't want my mother facing a dirty sink when she came home. So, instead of abandoning the dishes, I swished some water in the bottle of dish detergent, creating more soap from the dregs.

"So long I tell you dish out my food! Is deaf your ass deaf?"

That voice barrelled through my aunt's kitchen window and found me. And then an open palm collided with flesh, searing the night. This one sounded like a sizzle, like when you plopp something into hot oil and jump back from the stove to dodge the splatter. With water dripping from my fingertips, I bolted through the living room and out the front door, until the gate banged against my shadow. After twisting my body through the cut-out in the rusted fence, I approached my aunt's back steps. The light

hovered over her frame, so although I wasn't quite near the gate, I saw her leaning against the countertop and staring ahead. With each breath she sucked in, her small torso convulsed.

When she heard me unlatching the bottom half of the door, her body jerked in my direction. Her glossy eyes mushroomed and then darted toward her bedroom, looking for him. Now that I stood closer, I saw the mark on her cheek, puffed up like risen dough.

"Kayla," she said. "Oh gosh, darling. I was now wondering when you reaching home. I know the running goes late sometimes but look at the time. I tired tell your mother you can't be coming home late like this. Not with those nasty men out there in this day and age."

"Yeah. I had trouble getting a taxi," I said.

Where were my sisters?

I wanted to call for them without making a show of it. They weren't here on the main floor, but I wasn't hearing their voices from upstairs either.

"Well, you know it's nothing for the girls to stay here," Aunty Jacqui said, making an exaggerated motion with her hand.

"My nieces are well-behaved girls. Girls!" She turned toward the stove and covered the pot, but the smell of geera and saffron powder gripped my nose. Although her back was facing me now, I didn't miss the way she propped herself against the kitchen counter.

"Leah and Tinelle, time to go home!" I called.

I hadn't even been here a good minute and the heat was already clogging my throat. As I was about to yell for my sisters again, their rubber slippers clapped against the concrete steps.

My body stiffened as my eyes surveyed them, down to the plaits swirling around their dark brown faces, checking to see if so much as a bow-clip in their hair was amiss. Not noticing anything out of place, I slumped against the back door.

Leah, the older of the two, traipsed in front of Tinelle, whose book bag swung in her hand. Their pronounced kneecaps moved in sync, as if prancing to the tuk-tuk of bamboo music that only they could hear.

“Aunty, that is curry chicken you make? I could get some?” Tinelle asked, bobbing her head to either side and inching toward the stove. She tiptoed and grasped the edge of the counter before stretching her neck to confirm her suspicion.

“We have food home,” I said, although we didn’t. Not a whole pot of food, anyway.

“It not finish cook yet, darling,” Aunty Jacqui said, her voice still uneven. She moved to cover the rice that sat in a metal strainer.

“And it’s for Uncle Sammy to go to work?” Tinelle asked.

“Sammy is not our uncle,” Leah corrected, her arms crossed over her chest. Motioning with my index finger, I ordered her to stop leaning against the fridge. I coiled my hand around Tinelle’s tiny fingers and steered her away from the stove and toward the door.

“Tell Aunty Jacqui ‘goodnight.’”

As if summoned by the talk of him, Aunty Jacqui’s boyfriend emerged from the sole main level bedroom, scratching his protruding belly. I’d never seen a stomach like Sammy’s, the bottom bulging from beneath anything he tried to stretch over it, including the vest he wore.

Sammy was tall, but in an unwelcomed way because it meant

there was plenty of him to look at. His only saving grace was his full head of hair, dense and black. Like if a marble fell in there it would get lost. He had a beard that looked like that too, just with coarser, wiry strands cleaving to his neck. Only when Tinelle whimpered and tried to squirm away from me did I realize my grip on her had turned unyielding.

“Aye, look my girls,” Sammy said, smiling, casting his eyes in a circle so that they touched my sisters and me. His arms were peppered with beaded balls of hair, and he stretched them to either side of the doorframe until his big body swallowed the whole room.

“Night, Sammy,” I said. “Yeah, we’re leaving now.”

“How’s school going, bright girl?” he asked.

“It’s good, can’t complain. Plenty work but nothing I can’t handle. When saying so, I have a set of homework to finish, so we can’t stay.”

I tugged my sisters closer to the back door so that we could evacuate. Sammy’s eyes raked over me, roaming my features and making my T-shirt feel like a see-through grocery bag. I fought to swallow the bitterness coating my mouth, but it didn’t budge. It just sat there, burning at the top of my windpipe.

I willed Aunty Jacqui to turn around, to twist her head just a little bit so she could see how his gaze had left my face and begun to travel down to my neck and even lower still. Not that I expected her to save me. But she kept peering through the kitchen window, like she planned to slink through the louvres and never return. Sammy’s mouth was ajar now, but then he dragged his eyes off me and pushed a rough breath through his nostrils. I locked my knees and nudged my sisters toward the gate.

“We gone,” I said to my aunt’s back.

When my mother shuffled through the door that night, something inside me lifted. She dumped her frayed brown handbag on the dining room table and bent to remove her shoes like she could hardly muster the energy. She planted a kiss on my cheek as I took my headphones out.

“That ragga ragga loud music always playing in your ears.”

My response was a sweet smile, stretched so wide that Ma eventually shook her head until she couldn’t even help the dancing in her tired eyes. The scant remains of her perfume curled around my face. I could never quite describe the scent. I just knew it was light with a whiff of sweetness. Almost like she wore it as a reprieve from our day-to-day. And it always made me happy, so much so that I didn’t even mind her fussing about my music again.

She left me ironing my sisters’ school shirts and approached the bedroom door, her carriage displaying only a fraction of the exhaustion that was just evident in her interaction with me.

“It doesn’t sound like too much sleeping going on in here,” she said to Leah and Tinelle, but not with enough volume to really be threatening. I’d been trying to get them to sleep for hours. Ma’s voice drew their guilty but delighted squeals, and over the creaking sounds of the ironing board, I heard them bound from the bed and jostle each other to reach her.

“Ma, what time it is?” Tinelle asked.

“Now is night. Y’all did homework?”

“Yeah,” Leah responded. “Kayla helped us. Mine was fractions though. That easy, Ma.”

“So that means you’re getting total in your test tomorrow?”

“Well, I could make a mistake, Ma. You never know,” Leah huffed.

“I will get all my maths correct,” Tinelle interjected. “And then I’ll get a chicken and chips, right?”

“And ice cream. Month end.”

“Ma, water was coming in my shoes today, you know,” Tinelle said. “After the rain fall.

My foot was going squish, squish.”

I stopped pushing the iron and held my breath so I could hear Ma’s response.

“After the rain fell. Past tense.”

“Fell,” Tinelle self-corrected. “You want to see my shoes, Ma?”

Tinelle had shown me her sneakers earlier. She’d pushed the holey underside of the sole at my nose like a prize.

“Ok, you will get a new one. When I get pay. Y’all say prayers already?”

Silence.

“Hmph. Come, kneel down.”

Leah and Tinelle fell to their knees with a thud and started a vigorous rendition of the night-time prayer my mother had also taught me. An epic Psalm delivered with forced gusto. With each line, their thin voices elevated by another pitch, like they were competing to see who could sound more filled with the Holy Ghost. By the time they jumped into bed, I could feel the excitement threading between them, but at the same time, Ma’s presence had subdued them some. That was one of Ma’s superpowers. You were always happy when you saw her but being around her had a way of calming you down too.

“Now the both of you, close your eyes and sleep.”

She eased the door shut and sat at the table. That palpable weariness returned, coating her like flour over fish ready for the frying pan. She propped her head on her wrist, and a weighty sigh unfurled from somewhere deep inside her.

“If you know how I can’t wait to leave that work,” she said after a few silent moments.

“How long do you have again?” I draped Tinelle’s shirt on a hanger and started ironing Ma’s work shirt. She was wearing red tomorrow. I’d long memorized her uniform schedule.

“Girl, I’m still waiting for the Ministry to pay the gratuity. I can’t leave before I get that.”

“Things will ease up soon though,” I said. “You were supposed to get your sou-sou hand this month, right? I dropped off the money last week.”

“Yeah, I picked it up tonight. And it’s a good fifteen hundred dollars too. So much things to do round the house though.”

Her eyes, worry in their wrinkles, calculated where that money would go. I was just as aware as she was of what was needed in our home. A water heater for the shower. New standing fans so the bedrooms wouldn’t feel so much like a furnace. And now, school sneakers for Tinelle. That alone would be a couple hundred dollars.

“Anyway, how was training? Every time I think about how that coach picked you for that program . . .” She shook her head and pursed her lips.

An involuntary smile tugged at my mouth although my muscles still ached from the punishment Coach D had doled on us earlier.

“Training’s going really well, Ma.”

Her face was alit now. “Tell me what that means. Your times getting better?” she asked, leaning in.

“There’s that. But my form’s improving too. It’s almost like I can feel my body respond to the races better.”

“Hmm. That sounds good for true.”

I nodded, the excitement slashing through me so that I abandoned the ironing and pulled out the chair opposite hers.

“Yeah, Coach D is a boss, for real. He likes to work by himself, but he’s considering an assistant for strength training. He might get a physiotherapist too. Today, he had us running with these sleds tied to our waists. I nearly dropped down, yes.” I couldn’t help my jabbering.

“And how’s he treating you?”

“Uhm, good.”

Her eyebrows shot skyward, so I tried to placate her.

“He’s not soft on us, Ma. But he doesn’t bawl up on us either. The important thing is whatever he’s doing is working. I might even skip National Junior Championships and go straight to Senior Champs. That’s what he said, at least.”

And her whole countenance brightened again. Senior Champs was the track meet where athletes qualified for the Olympic team. Mostly older runners in their twenties participated, but Coach thought I was fast enough to compete.

“Big things to come soon, girl,” she said, patting my hand. I felt our conversation dwindling, but I longed to delay her a bit, to tell her how close I felt to realizing my goal. I wanted to tell her that Sammy had come back again. I knew how tired she was though.

Between Ma picking up even more shifts at the nursing home

and my in-season training, we didn't have many meandering conversations anymore. There was little time to rock back in the gallery, eating fried channa. And she wasn't home to catch the latest cuss out between the two neighbours across the road.

These days, the neighbours were fighting about coconuts. Neighbour Sheila's tree was planted so close to her fence, many of her coconuts were falling in Mr. Khan's yard. He'd been piling them next to his water tank. Tauntingly so, I thought. Their last stand-off was high drama. Neighbour Sheila had picked up a cutlass and kept pointing it at Mr. Khan through the fence.

Mr. Khan remained unmoved though. "Any coconut fall in this yard is mine, you hear me? If you have a problem with that, then you need to cut down the tree."

A bareback Mr. Khan climbed his stairs and left Neighbour Sheila right where she stood, as flummoxed as I'd ever seen her. Ma usually took Neighbour Sheila's side, on account of her being an elder and all. Neighbour Sheila's age aside, I always thought Mr. Khan had valid points.

I sought Ma's face for some sign that we could talk about this latest incident, or that I could show her the picture I'd taken on my phone, where I'd zoomed in on Mr. Khan's mounting pile of coconuts. But Ma's eyelids had closed. She was doing a lot more of that too, dropping asleep while sitting up, right in the middle of a conversation. I stared at her sparse, stubby eyelashes, unable to remember the last time she'd coated them with mascara or worn any kind of makeup at all.

"Ma, go in your bed," I said, nudging her arm.

She awoke with a start, peering around with narrowed eyes, frantic and disoriented. "I going straight in my bed. Before I drop

asleep on myself right here.”

My eyes trailed her as she dragged herself to her bedroom. I heard rustling and then a drawer open. I knew she was putting her sou-sou hand in the centre of her worn devotional. The one with the dove on the cover, climbing the clouds.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, wondering if hand-to-mouth living was really better than having nothing at all. I mean, at least there was a predictability, a consistency, in abject poverty.

“Imagine, my child is going to the Olympics just now,” Ma muttered to herself. But the walls were so thin, it was as if she was standing right next to me chanting Olympic prophecies into my ear.

She’d been doing some semblance of this for the last six months, since the day I was at my usual training and noticed Coach Dabney sitting on one of the rickety benches in the stands. His eyes were hidden behind gaudy shades. After training, he approached me, looking unimpressed. Henrick Dabney was the country’s first Olympic gold medallist, renowned by any measure. But he introduced himself anyway and spoke about his Advanced Training Program. I told him I wanted to run for him before he even explained what that entailed.

“I have two rules though,” he’d said. “I’m getting nearer to the grave every day, and I don’t have time for any damn foolishness.”

“Yes, Coach. Whatever the rules are, I’m okay with them.” I hadn’t even realized I was nodding so hard until I felt my plaits hitting my back.

“No drugs. No bad company.” And then he repeated himself, harder this time, almost like he wasn’t sure I understood English.

“No drugs! No bad company! Friend will carry you, but don’t

bring you back.”

Even after another round of my vigorous nods, he looked curmudgeonly and unconvinced. I wanted to tell him that failing at track wasn’t an option for me. Not when my family was depending on me. Granted, we had a board-and-concrete house and we weren’t dirt poor. Even if it was only Crix biscuit and guava jam in our bellies, my sisters and I didn’t often go to sleep hungry.

But we were always waiting for month ends that took too long to come. Never mind that Ma was trusting God, just like Granny had taught her. Five nights a week, she wiped old people bamsee, without scorn, at the nursing home. Clamped her mouth shut when they cursed her stink, even as she changed their pampers. And a few hours later, she would clock in at the phone company, dressed in a shirt I’d starched and ironed for her. Her line of customers was always long because people told their friends to ask for her when they went to pay their bill. The phone company still hadn’t made her a permanent worker.

I didn’t share any of that with Coach D though. Family business didn’t belong in the street. When I reassured him that I was focused, he just grunted. Given what had happened to him, I couldn’t fault his scepticism. Or of anyone, for that matter. I was still curious though, as to how he’d managed to end up at my training that day, given that my running club was small, and nobody knew me on a national level yet. So, I’d asked him, unprepared for the answer he gave.

“A fella named Joel told me about you.”