

## **Pull**

B. A. Binns

Dedicated to my nephew, Craig Houston, Jr.  
The world lost a wonderful young man far too early.

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## Chapter 1

It's fourth period, and so far not one teacher has questioned who I am. Like everyone else, the gym teacher accepted the transfer papers for David Albacore and waved me over to join the rest of the rejects in this class.

We're supposed to be practicing basketball passing drills. Not one of these guys, especially the nit wearing a dirty Chicago Bulls jersey, could even beat my sister. They're laughing and joking, and they barely know what to do with a basketball. I never wanted to go back to any school, but at least Farrington's a place where I can be invisible.

Then it happens--again.

The pain that's made its home inside me for so long that I've learned to ignore it suddenly roars to life, flexes its claws and tears at me from the inside. The voices around me fade, and sweaty bodies vanish as memory catches me in a strangle-hold and I'm back. Back in that house, caught up in that horrible night.

Only this time things are different. This time I see him raise the gun. Hear the shot. See the bullet racing toward her chest.

This time I *will* save her.

Sweat pours from my forehead and salt stings my lips as I step into the path of death. I have no delusions--I know what's about to happen. I'm just David, not some superman. I brace for the impact, my hands clench and my muscles tense, grateful for this chance to set things right.

My life for hers. This time I will not fail her.

The bullet slams into my chest, sending me hurtling through the air. Falling, I slide on the polished hardwood floor--*Hardwood?*

From the corners of my eyes I see the basketball rolling across that floor. I turn my head slowly but I already know. My mother's not here. She's

gone. I didn't save her.

A voice calls out, "Hey, Albacore, eyes open!" This provokes a round of laughter from the rest of the losers in the gym.

The gym teacher's whistle shrieks as he runs over from the sidelines where he's been talking with another man. His wide, worried gray eyes stand out from his pale face. You'd think he'd never seen a guy downed by a basketball before. Probably hasn't been teaching in the inner city very long. Probably still has ideals and intends to do some good or something.

Probably needs to get the hell out of my space.

"You okay, David?"

I'm tempted to answer *no* to his stupid question, but I'm not ready for the paperwork that'd be involved in a trip to the school nurse on my first day. Besides, I don't want to call too much attention to myself or strain the high-tension wire of fraud I've strung here at Farrington. I nod and sit up. The world spins as the cracks in the paint dance.

Over the teacher's shoulder I see a larger man approach. He's wearing an orange polo shirt with a wide black band around the left sleeve. I recognize the dark eyes and square chin from the picture in the trophy case outside the school's main office: Hakeem Kasili, the new varsity basketball coach.

The gym teacher reaches out to help me up. But I'm a senior--I don't need help--and I jerk free of his grip. The effort is too much--my legs tangle and I fall to one knee as laughter rings through the tiny gym once again.

"Fish-face can't even stand," someone taunts.

Only three hours in this school, and already I've picked up a nickname. But it's better than hundreds of voices in the stands yelling, "Don't hassle Murhaselt." I'm free of that despicable name. Anyone around here says that, they're dead.

The shuffling and muttering grow louder. Another joker says, "Get Fish-face a pair of glasses."

Kasili steps into the circle around me. He turns to look at them. Slowly. No more laughter now. No further shuffling of feet. More than thirty guys in the class, but every one of them has gone silent.

Total control. First teacher I've seen around here with that kind of power.

He reminds me of Coach Anderson back at Grogan Hills. Except this guy can't be much more than forty. Skin almost as dark as mine, with deep lines in the corners of his eyes. If I were ever to play ball again, it'd be for a man like him.

*If.*

The gym teacher points to the bench. “Sit and rest,” he commands. Coach Kasili just stares--as if he’s sending me a silent message. As if he knows.

When class starts up again, I sit with elbows on my knees and my head in my hands, pretending to look at the floor while I watch the court. The teacher and coach are talking again.

The students don’t matter. It’s easy to ignore their grunts and sighs as they practice ball handling. But that coach--he keeps throwing glances my way. If he’s here recruiting for this school’s team, he’s shit out of luck. My clumsy display of ball-handling should remind him it takes more than height to make a player. If he forgets, I’ll play the fool until the school year ends.

I relax once class lets out and I’m in the showers. Didn’t expect water so hot in this rundown excuse for a school. The backs of my legs still burn from the fall, but the near scalding water relieves the pain and loosens my tight muscles. I take extra time under the stinging spray.

When I go back to the locker room, all conversations cease. The guys sneak glances at me as I dress. *That’s right, guys. I earned these muscles. Go ahead and look. You want a set, come to work with me tonight. Let’s see how long you rejects last carrying around forty-seven pound sacks of Portland cement.*

Why shouldn’t I be vain? At six-foot, seven, I can do a hundred yards in twelve seconds, a five-minute mile, and last year I played almost an entire double overtime game for Grogan Hills. Can’t wait to see their faces when we get to the weight room.

Next period’s lunch so I take my time. No worrying about introductions to another new teacher until sixth period. Just three more classes and I’m done with my first day.

As I’m buttoning my shirt, the gym teacher steps into the locker room and looks at me. “Got a minute?”

Why do so-called intelligent adults insist on giving orders by asking a question? We both know what he means, and “no” isn’t an option. But what the hell, no point pissing off a man I’ll have to see five days a week until June. After slamming my locker shut, I follow him down the hall to the athletics office.

Kasili’s sitting behind one of the desks. Behind him on the wall hangs a diploma that says he’s got a psychology degree. Helps with motivating the team and all that crap, I guess. Won’t help him in his dealings with me.

There’s a picture on his desk of him with his wife and two little kids. From what I read in the papers, he uprooted that family and moved into the

neighborhood when he got this rinky-dink job. Wonder if the kids'll thank him, once they're old enough to attend this sorry excuse for a school? He's a new coach who's been handed a team with no chance of ever achieving a thing.

His unsmiling face gives me the once-over. "Haven't seen you around school before, kid."

*Kid.* Why do these old guys always have to say *kid*? Or *son*?

The sound of the gun I never heard echoes in my ears, but I hold onto reality and force myself to stay in the here and now. "Today's my first day at Farrington."

He's got no business interrogating me. If he expects fear, he's dealing with the wrong guy. Nor will I make a mistake and volunteer information.

Kasili shuffles some papers on his desk and glances at the gym teacher before turning back to me. "Your name's David...Albacore. Right?"

My heart beats as loud as a crowd counting down a game's final seconds as I nod and wait for his next move. There's no way he can *know*.

"You transferred up from...Oroville, is it? In California?"

"Yes."

"Small town to Chicago. Must be a bit of culture shock."

I shrug.

His fingers drum on the desk. "You play football?"

I could say yes. It's October, football season's well underway. No one would think of having me try out for that team this late. But I'm in no mood to waste a lie so I say no.

I turn to leave. The bell ending the period should ring any second.

"What about basketball?"

"No."

"You're what, six-four, six-five?"

"Six-seven." Damn. How'd I fall for that trick? He knows how tall I am. Coaches size up players in seconds, just like I sized him up at six-three.

"You've got size and strength," he says. "Don't pretend you haven't played before."

The inside of my mouth feels like someone shoveled a load of hot tar in it and down my throat. "I don't play now."

*Where the hell's that bell?*

"Come down after school and I'll give you a tryout." He smiles like he expects me to jump for the bait. "Being on the team gets you out of gym class."

Part of me admires the man's determination, and part of me wants to

hate him. And a tiny part tries to whisper, *Go for it*. After stamping down hard on that thought, I say, “I’m fine with class. You saw me out there. Take a miracle to turn me into a player.”

The bell rings, ending the period and freeing me.

As I close my hand over the doorknob, he says, “Miracles can happen.”

My heart burns with the memory of hours spent praying. If Kasili could turn back time and send her back to me, I’d do anything for him. But I’m too old for fairy tales and fantasy will get me nowhere.

## Chapter 2

Grogan Hills had signs everywhere reminding us we were the best, and the ones in the cafeteria claimed they were feeding America's future leaders. Farrington apparently doesn't expect much from its students. There are no signs in this cafeteria--just grim-faced old ladies in hairnets and dark brown aprons I bet they picked to hide the stains. It doesn't work.

I'm left staring at stale, shriveled fried chicken, thick greasy fries and a gooey pudding that I pick up only because it looks less disgusting than anything else in the dessert section. I won't touch those rocks masquerading as cookies. People on "Survivor" eat better than this.

A bunch of girls are hanging out in the dessert area. Only one of them even looks like she ever touches a sweet. I've seen her before, in my second period English class. Unlike her stick-figure friends, she's got curves I'm itching to grab. Luscious brown thighs descend from a skirt that's just the right length to torture me. Muscular arms show she's a Mighty Mite; barely five feet tall, even in the high heels that don't belong in high school, except she carries them off.

I'd let her carry me off, too. Mighty Mite could easily stop a few buses. Or an airplane or submarine. She's scowling at the so-called cookies as if she agrees with my assessment. Suddenly she whips her head around, sending the beads at the ends of her micro braids rattling against her back. "What do you suggest?" she asks me.

Her voice is softer than I expect. She's got big brown eyes and dark chocolate skin.

I could just toss my tray and eat the girl. She'd be spicy hot and sugar sweet.

I place my pudding on her tray.

She laughs. "I don't want you to starve."

"Don't worry." *I've never felt less hungry. Not for food, anyway.*

One of the other girls nudges her. "We don't have time."

Mighty Mite frowns. "Right." She throws me a glance over her shoulder as she joins her group.

If not for my sister, I'd go after this girl. But the only reason I even dropped back into school is so I could take care of Barney. She should be easy to spot. A lost-looking six-foot freshman with a big braid hanging down her back ought to stand out like a giraffe parading on the Magnificent Mile.

I leave the food line and enter the lunchroom, where I look around at the tables. Farrington's school colors are black and orange, laughable if you're a Halloween person, but depressing otherwise. Probably why I've seen so few Goths around. They'd blend into the scenery and be lost, and isn't the point of dressing like a zombie wannabe to stand out?

I don't bother to scan the two tables of white kids by the door or the back corner where the football types hang. I don't even look at the dead-heads, thugs and wannabe's. What I'm looking for is neutral territory, a place where Barney and I can find peace for the next seven months until I collect my diploma. That may not be all I want, but it's the most I can expect. Mom believed in reaching for the moon. But Antwon--my father--said be a realist. I hate being forced to agree with him.

When I do catch sight of Barney, she looks anything but lost. She's in a seat at a table by the windows and I smile in relief. She's already found friends. Maybe this won't be so hard.

One big dark-skinned dude next to her has gleaming ear studs and sits with his ass on the table. Black gangster pants leave his blue and white striped underwear visible. He leans over and says something that makes Barney laugh. Why any girl would find a guy dressing like somebody's prison-wife a turn-on beats me. But there's Barney, looking at him like he's Denzel or something.

I'd better get over there and check out my sister's first guy.

But before I can move, a female voice behind me says, "Oh, no. Hell, no!"

Thinking the angry voice is directed at me, I step aside, saying, "Sorry."

The Mighty Mite and her friends push past me and advance on the

table. She and the other girls form a semi-circle around Barney.

“We’ve been invaded,” the Mite says.

The guy beside Barney jumps away from the table. He’s tall, almost as tall as me. “Relax. She’s cute.”

“This isn’t about you, Malik.” The beads at the ends of the Mite’s braids clack together like a snake’s rattles. “That girl doesn’t belong here.”

Barney’s trying to look like she isn’t scared of the angry female horde surrounding her, but her fingers clutching the edge of the table give her away.

I drop my tray on a nearby table and push through the crowd just as one girl says, “Don’t know who you are, but you’re a fool to be where you’re not wanted.”

When I touch my sister’s shoulder, I feel her trembling. It’s not like she understands the maze of unwritten rules and set out to provoke a war. The treatment center they put her in after Mom got killed sheltered and protected her, and this is only her first day in a real high school. She’s so young, she still believes the world wants to be her friend.

Pushing back rage, I say, “Let’s go, kid. You don’t belong in the land of the bitches.”

One girl with a wide red stripe running through her black hair turns to me. “Ohhh, lord, they finally found us some cute guys.” She moves close and presses herself against my side. “I’ll be your bitch if you want, big guy.”

“The day I’m that desperate, I’ll cut it off.”

The guys behind her fall out laughing.

Red Stripe screams, “Kiss the shit off my crack, faggot.”

The Mite’s lips tighten. She remains silent, but her eyes move from me to the still shaky Barney as I lift my sister’s tray. Turning my back to the haters, I escort my sister to the table where I left my lunch.

“He invited me,” Barney whines as I help her into a seat. “He said I should come over...I thought it was okay.”

*It’s my fault. If I hadn’t wasted time with Kasili, I’d have been here in time to prevent this.* With my hand on the back of her chair, I look around to see what I’ve dropped into. The natives here better beware. I won’t wave a white flag. If they let Barney and me be, fine. If not, it’s their problem because I’m taking no more crap today, not from anyone.

The faces staring back at me are so varied, it’s like I’ve stumbled into a no-man’s-land. I recognize the long-haired boy seated across from me. Neill--can’t remember his last name--from the same English class as the Mite and me, so he has to be a junior or senior. Most of the others look like freshmen.

Neill looks me over like a general sizing up an opposing force. “You’re

David, right?”

“David Albacore.” After seven months the name rolls off my tongue as if I’ve never been anyone else. Like Murhaselt was never a part of me.

“Second period. Never forget a face, especially one seven feet from the ground.”

“David’s only six-seven,” Barney says.

Neill looks at Barney. “Still a big deal. And you’re right up there with him. I’m Neill Mallory.” He turns back to me and says, “Hope you’re sure about sitting here. Most people consider getting too close to this table social suicide.”

I’d never intended having a social life this year. “It’s fine. I’m happy here.”

I nudge Barney and she jumps. “I’m Barnetta Murhaselt.”

Neill grins. “Big name, big girl.”

“People call me Barney.” She looks as if she’s recovering. The social worker claimed to be thrilled about her resiliency. Me, I just hope she’s not faking it.

The food’s not as bad as it looks. As we eat, a couple of the guys introduce themselves, including a heavy-set kid named Carl seated next to Neill, and a tall, lanky Latino, Julian Morales, who’s a sophomore. The girls immediately include my sister in a discussion on clothes and makeup, so maybe social death won’t be so bad. And Barney’s loving the girl-talk. She seems content, or at least more relaxed.

The room is filled with laughter, shuffling feet and the clink of plastic silverware against plastic plates. But there’s no mistaking that rattle of beads. As musky perfume fills my nose, I turn to find the Mite standing behind my chair.

“I just wanted to say...sorry if we were...if I was--a bit rough before.” Her eyes have trouble meeting mine.

I stand to make things even more difficult for her. “More than a bit,” I reply.

She nibbles her lower lip. Why do girls do that? This one’s got so much God-given everything, she doesn’t need the extra advantage. From where I’m standing, the magnificent view inside her sweater’s giving me a hard enough time already.

*Maybe she’s here to make friends.*

She glances at Barney. “She didn’t belong at our table.”

*So much for friends.*

I turn my back on her and sit down. “And *you* don’t belong here.”

She leans over my chair. The combination of her warmth and perfume leave me squirming in my seat as she says, “My name’s Yolanda. Yolanda Dare.” Her head sweeps in a half circle, creating a string of soft notes from the beads and a hot thud from below my belt.

She leans even closer. “People call me Yoyo. And you can pull my string anytime you want.”

My stomach performs an atomic bounce. Pull *her* string? As if she can’t guess how the feel of her breath so close to my cheek jerks mine. This girl has a double dose of that thing girls have that makes a guy’s legs shake and teeth clench until we’re praying for relief. It takes everything I have to keep my hands to myself as I turn to stare at her face. For just a second, I let myself dream that the gleam in her eyes and her smile mean she likes me.

But I see her friends over her shoulder. They’re all laughing and smirking. A sure sign she’s only here to embarrass me.

“Obviously, anybody can pull your string,” I say. “I’m not about to join your crowd of puppet-masters.”

She straightens, and something washes over her narrowed eyes that’s way stronger than anger. Her skirt swishes around her legs as she storms back to her table.

“You’re an idiot,” Neill says.

“Not interested.”

*Really.* She’s not even my type.

“Most guys would give a kidney for an invite from The Dare,” Neill says. “Talk is, Yoyo graced most of the football team’s offensive line with her favors last year.” He points to the jock table. “This was supposed to be the defense’s turn, but Malik stole her for basketball.”

“Are you after an invite from her?” Barney asks Neill.

By the way he stares at me, I guess his answer before he says, “I’d rather get one from your boyfriend.” And I’m betting by the way Carl looks at him that they’re a couple.

“You mean David?” Barney asks. She laughs. “He’s not my--”

“Even if The Dare gave out lap dances, no one’s got the guts to chase Malik’s girl,” one of the girls says. She turns to Barney. “Better watch out for Malik.”

“Who’s Malik?”

“The guy you were with over there. Malik Kaplan, son of the man who owns Kaplan’s Body Shop. I don’t know about his dad and cars, but Malik never met a female body he didn’t want to work on.”

“I know about his dad and cars.” Neill shakes his head. “Don’t go

anywhere near his shop if you care about your ride.”

Looking over at the group, I check out the guy who lured Barney to his table and started this mess. He’s got a possessive arm around Yolanda’s waist. He may scare the others, but to me, those drooping pants and the bandanna around his head signify gangsta clown with a capital C. He’s probably never seen anything scarier than his own face in the mirror. I’ve met real thugs, the type you don’t fuck with. They don’t talk smack, and if you leave them alone you’re fine; but if you cross them, you’re an idiot and deserve whatever comes back at you.

He leans close to Yolanda, says something in her ear and she laughs. But her eyes stare at me across the room.

“He’s got money and looks,” Julian says. “And the hottest girl in school. He’s got his own car and he throws major parties whenever his parents split town.”

“If they’ve got money, why’s he go to school here?” I ask.

Neill’s voice goes all sarcastic. “Maybe his parents want to give all us poor, downtrodden inner-city folk an example of the successful black middle-class.”

Julian leans his tall body across the table. “What magazine’d you get that from?”

“Or maybe they’re not as well off as they pretend. Whatever,” Neill says.

But Barney’s still frowning at Neill. “What kind of invitation did you want from David?”

Before I can explain, Neill says, “Nothing. My boy Carl’s the jealous type.” Carl and Neill look at each other and grin. Then they kiss.

A scowling gray-haired cafeteria monitor walks over to our table. “Enough. You know the rules about public displays like that.”

“What’d she mean by that?” I ask as she leaves.

“PDAs--public displays of affection.” Neill turns to watch as she crosses the room. “Officially, none of us mere students are allowed to feel emotion toward each other. Unofficially, they jump on *undesirable* displays.” His fingers trace quotation marks in the air. “But see those guys?” He points at the elite table where Malik holds court. “If he laid her out on the tabletop, someone *might* step in, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

As if to prove the point, Malik begins playing skin the cat with his Yoyo. His hand moves up her skirt with no protest from the cafeteria monitor. No protest from Yolanda, either.

Means nothing to me. Nothing. But still, I can’t look away. Can’t

move.

“She shouldn’t be all over him that way,” Barney says.

*But she’s not. She’s just...letting it happen. Nothing more.*

Finally Malik goes too far with Yolanda and the cafeteria monitor comes back. Malik’s forced to bring both hands into view. When she leaves, Malik gets up and takes Yolanda’s arm, but she shakes her head no and points at her full tray. Seconds later he frowns and stalks from the lunchroom. Two other girls from the table jump up and run after him.

Yolanda stares after him for a second. Then she squares her shoulders and looks down at her food. But she doesn’t eat.

*Why’d she let him go without her?*

*Not my business.*

Julian turns to me. “Don’t suppose you play basketball?”

I force myself to turn and concentrate on the people at my table. “No.”

Julian sighs. “We could use someone like you on the team.”

*I should’ve known.* With his height and build, of course he’d be a basketball player.

He lets out a huge sigh and his shoulders slump as he says, “You look like the type. And coach’s desperate for players. Desperate.”

“Why’s that?” I already know. I’ve read the stories about this worthless team. But I’ll pretend.

The guys look at each other, and then all heads turn to Julian.

“Fine, I’ll tell him,” he says. “Last year the varsity bus crashed coming back from a game and almost everyone died. The Coach, the players-- everybody. We got almost nobody left now.”

“Yeah, nobody except Malik,” Neill says. “He’s this year’s captain by default, only because he was lucky enough to have his own ride. That’s why he wasn’t on the bus with the rest of the team.”

I look at Yolanda. Somehow she looks smaller without Malik at her side. If I hadn’t seen her bossing the other girls, I’d swear she even looks lost.

“He claims he had a premonition,” Carl says.

“Premonition hell,” Neill says. “I heard the coach wouldn’t let him on the bus--and that he was gonna be dumped off the team.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Carl says. “He’s all that’s left. Team sucked back then, so the replacements will suck this year. All except our Julian.”

Julian frowned. “We won’t suck. Coach Kasili says...he says we’ll do fine.”

But from the look on Julian’s face, I can tell that the coach’s psych degree isn’t doing much to motivate this thrown-together team of leftover

players.

“Aren’t you a sophomore?” I ask.

“Yeah, but Coach moved me up to varsity this year.”

“That’s how bad things are,” one of the girls adds.

*Doesn’t matter. I’m not playing.*

Barnetta glances at me. “David, you could--”

“No!” I didn’t mean to be that harsh with her, but no way will I ever go back to basketball again.