

CARLOS  
ANTHONY

A stylized illustration of a person with dark skin and braided hair, wearing a vibrant green hoodie. The person is looking slightly to the right with a neutral expression. The background is a dark, muted grey. The title 'SHADES OF BLACK' is written in a bold, yellow, graffiti-style font across the lower half of the image, with the words stacked. The word 'OF' is smaller and positioned to the left of 'BLACK'. The letters of 'BLACK' have vertical drips extending downwards, suggesting paint or ink.

SHADES  
OF BLACK

# SOMETIMES THERE'S A STEEP PRICE TO BE PAID TO FIT IN.

Romero, a Guyanese Canadian, is a sensitive kid starting at an inner-city-style school with a large racialized population. He falls in with a friendly crew but finds himself in trouble when a shot is fired in the school cafeteria — and he gets stuck with the gun. Meanwhile, the police, often using brutal tactics and targeting young Black males, try to find out who the shooter was.

Romero finds himself stuck in a dangerous situation he never anticipated as the gun's owner, a gang member, is now on the lookout. Can Romero get rid of the weapon while keeping himself and his family safe?

CARLOS ANTHONY is a filmmaker and author who writes about the experiences that Black men have historically avoided talking about. He has been recognized for his video web series, short story series, published essays, and short films that explore themes such as fatherhood, healthy relationships, and overcoming addiction. This is his first novel. With his wife and children, Carlos lives in Windsor, Ontario.

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SHADES OF BLACK

CARLOS ANTHONY

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# SHADES OF BLACK

The title 'SHADES OF BLACK' is rendered in a bold, black, hand-painted style. The letters are thick and blocky, with some irregular edges. From the bottom of the letters in 'BLACK', several thick, black vertical lines drip downwards, resembling paint. The word 'OF' is smaller and positioned to the left of 'BLACK'. The background is white with some faint, scattered black specks.

Carlos Anthony

James Lorimer and Company Ltd., Publishers  
Toronto

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*To all the young Black boys across the world who are challenged with being themselves because they desire to be accepted for who they are and fit in. I want you all to know that you are enough. This book is for you.*

CHAPTER 1

# DO YOU ONLY LIKE BLACK GIRLS

It's 8:45 in the morning at Rexdale Secondary School. The school's halls are full of uniformed students rushing to their classes. A fifteen-year-old skinny teen boy with braids stands alongside his locker holding a piece of paper in one hand as he spins the dial to the numbers on the paper "15-36-19." He pulls down on the lock, but it doesn't open. He looks at his watch for the time.

"Man, I'm going to be late on my first day in a new school!" he mumbles to himself.

He looks around, checking if anyone saw his failed attempt before returning to his lock. His eyes meet Desiree's. She's a tall, beautiful brown-skinned Jamaican girl who smiles at him. Desiree and her crew look like

a squad of Black Barbies with their sewn-in weaves, the illusion of being born with straight hair. She stands out from the rest of her crew with hair that shines and distinct features that include a small button nose, full lips, a small waist, wide hips, and a raspy voice that comes with a whole lot of attitude. Though you can't tell by looking at her that she has any attitude, not with that innocent smile that makes you believe and agree with everything she says. A smile that makes you feel unnecessarily generous.

As soon as students walk by, blocking his view, Romero returns his gaze to his lock. He only glances every so often, trying not to make it so obvious that he's been checking her out. It's only a matter of time before their eyes meet. Romero can't help but smile. *She's perfect!* As he shyly looks away, Desiree's smile disappears, replaced by a frown and narrowed eyebrows as female students walk by and give her crew elevator eyes. They flinch as Desiree and her crew pretend to hit them, laughing the entire time. Eventually the girls walk away, intimidated and ashamed.

After another failed attempt, Romero looks back to see if Desiree can see him struggling. He smiles nervously as he jiggles the lock.

"Come on, come on!" he says to himself.

He continues to smile at her before a group of female students interrupt his view of her. The girls

in the group lower their heads and cover them with their hands as they walk away. When Romero makes eye contact with Desiree again, he gives her a puzzled look. She looks at the group of girls ahead and shrugs. He shakes his head and continues to smile nervously as he pulls at his lock.

Desiree and her crew are the most popular girls in school, feared and envied by all girls because of the influence they have in sports, art, and academics. Teachers love them because their accolades make the school look good and provide an opportunity for additional funding. The school is a safety hazard that desperately needs renovations. Students take turns playing hopscotch in between the tiles and the holes in the uneven floors. The classroom ceilings are mouldy, the portables infested by rodents, the bathroom stalls and locker rooms tagged with graffiti. The showers are dirty and have low water pressure. The gymnasium floors are uneven and need to be replaced; it's the reason they never have any home games for basketball. The only time the gym is used is for presentations, volleyball games, and phys ed. The lack of funding makes the school the joke of Etobicoke.

Romero was one of three Black students at his old school. He remembers dating Lisa, the heavy-set white girl he was ashamed to be seen in public with. He quivers with disgust and refocuses his attention on

the variety of beautiful women from different parts of South America, Africa, and the Caribbean that make him smile and feel anxious.

He feels like a kid in a candy store, and much like when he was a child, he can look but can't touch. He remembers being in a convenience store with his mother, reaching for a chocolate bar and getting slapped on his hand before he could grab it. She would wave her finger as a final warning, and he wouldn't test her.

Romero loves the look, smell, and sound of a girl, but he's always self-conscious of what to say. He's observed how Will Smith pursues girls on *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* but never felt comfortable reenacting those pick-up lines. He feels girls would laugh in his face and tease him, call him the names his stepfather does. That his stepfather would be right about him in saying that he's a skinny, weak, wutless boy. So instead of facing rejection, Romero smiles but won't engage until they do, first.

Still, the validation he's received from their smiles is enough to make him feel attractive and accepted. This is his opportunity to have a fresh start in a new school. He doesn't have to be a nerd; he can be cool at this school and attract all types of girls. He continued to observe all the different shades, curves, and styles of girls that walked by.

Romero never had any trouble getting the attention of women; his problem was his shyness. The only reason he dated Lisa was because he was pressured into asking

her out. He called Chase a friend, but the truth is Chase wasn't really nice to him. Chase would make fun of him when he brought curry to school. He would mimic an Indian accent and request that Romero share his curry. Romero felt alone watching everyone laugh. Being one of few people of colour, he never felt the courage to stand up for himself. So when Chase was doing something racist, ignorant, or stupid, Romero would just laugh and wait for the bell to ring or for some other distraction.

One day after gym at Romero's old school, the boys were changing out of their gym clothes.

"Lisa has big boobs!" Chase held his hands up to his chest as if he were holding basketballs. The laughter filled the locker room. Romero shook his head, laughing along.

"Bro, you know she likes you?"

"You should totally ask her out!"

All Romero could think about was the fat jokes his stepfather would make about Lisa if he saw them out holding hands or if Romero brought her home to introduce her to his family. He couldn't help but reflect on the fat jokes his stepfather had made about his mother and how they made him feel.

"Nah, man, she's not my type," Romero responded.

Chase got in Romero's face while the others circled him.

"Not your type?" he said, tilting his head.

Romero gulped, as the boys hovered around him.

"Do you only like Black girls?" Chase asked.

Chase's questioned triggered a flashback of when he was surrounded by his aunties in his mother's living room. They gave him a stern look and said, "If we ever see you out on the street with a white girl, we'll disown you."

Romero returned from his flashback and looked around the room to see his peers anticipating his answer.

Chase rolled up his gym clothes and put them in his pants. He started twerking. The boys in the locker room laughed. Romero shook his head as he laughed.

"What's the matter? Lisa don't got enough junk in the trunk?" Chase asked.

"Nah, I like all different kinds of girls, I'm just not attracted to her."

"But you haven't talked to any girls at the school, and the one girl that likes you, you don't like back? Something don't seem right."

Chase looked around the room. "Watch out, fellas, Romero might be playing for a different team."

The boys quickly covered themselves as Romero laughed off his embarrassment.

*How bad could being Lisa's boyfriend be?*

He started thinking back to his aunt's warning. Romero was concerned about her not meeting his family's cultural standards. He was afraid if his family saw him and Lisa holding hands in public, they would humiliate them.

He continued to imagine the consequences of his

actions. He visualized being teased and taunted at family gatherings, eventually leading to his exile, but the teasing he was experiencing daily from Chase finally made him reconsider. After weeks of being teased, he finally gave in and asked her out. She said yes, and hugged him.

The relationship didn't last long. Lisa got bored of not having anything in common with Romero and his lack of experience and dumped him. Although Romero wasn't deeply attracted to Lisa, he grew fond of being in a relationship. It felt special having someone care about him. He enjoyed the admiration he felt from his peers the moment they found out that he was going to experience sex for the first time and missed it. The attention Romero was getting on his first day from the girls at Rexdale reminded him of what felt like his glory days.

Before walking over to Desiree, he thinks about what he will say. He thinks about how he would want things to be different with her than with Lisa, and remembers watching Will Smith hit on several women on his sitcom.

He fantasizes about whispering in her ear and watching her giggle right before she grabs him, pushes him against a locker, and starts kissing him.

Once he returns back to reality, all he can think about is saying the wrong thing or tripping over his shoelaces while attempting to pursue her.

*Coming to this school is the fresh start I need. I can be different here. I can be cool.*

He continues to attempt to match up the numbers again. He pulls down on the lock, but it still doesn't open. She walks over to Romero, leans in, and whispers in his ear.

"It still won't open, huh?"

He's startled but plays it off.

"Sorry if I startled you."

He points to himself. "Me? You didn't startle me, it's this stupid lock."

"Maybe the third time's a charm."

It has been more than three attempts, but he doesn't want Desiree to know that.

He spins the dial on the lock. After another failed attempt, Desiree extends her hand; he gives her the paper from his hand, and steps aside. She turns the dial three times and then enters the numbers. She pulls ... it opens.

Romero scratches the back of his head in disbelief. *She must think I'm a total loser*, he thinks.

"I guess I owe you one."

He places his bag on the floor and takes off his sweater. His shirt rises up, showing off his six-pack abs. Desiree smiles, looks at his tie, and tilts her head.

"Hmmm."

She lifts Romero's shirt collar and redoes his tie's knot. When she is finished, she pulls his collar down.

"Sorry, your tie was bothering me. You new here?"

“Is it that obvious?”

Desiree chuckles. “Yeah!”

Romero blushes, embarrassed.

“See you around,” she says, before walking off with her crew.

A biracial, light-skinned fifteen-year-old walks up to Romero as he closes his locker. He tilts his head as he watches Desiree and her crew walk off.

“Damn, the things I’d do to be in detention with any of them.”

Romero chuckles before picking up his backpack from the floor and putting it over his shoulder. They walk down the hall.

“I don’t know if detention is necessary, since you can see all you need to do is not have your tie done to get their attention,” Romero says, pointing to his tie.

Joel rolls his eyes. “Okay,” he says with sarcasm. “My girl is feeling you, and she doesn’t just feel anybody, but be careful. Not everything that glitters glows.”

Romero makes a confused face. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say her ex ended up in the hospital after thinking he could get away with two girlfriends.”

Romero thinks about his long-distance relationship with his first Black girlfriend and summer crush, Simone. He pictures himself being caught holding her hand at the movie theatre line-up while Desiree approaches him with her crew.

Romero makes a worried face. “Well damn, but who would want to cheat on a girl who looks like her?”

His new friend shrugs, then raises his hand to shake hands with Romero. “I’m Joel, by the way, but you can call me JoJo.”