



Chapter 1

Max stared at the wall of brand-new sneakers.

The store's display included a hundred pairs, but Max had come for only one: the white and blue high-tops—the week's hottest release—which he quickly spotted in the center of the wall.

Max lifted the sneakers from their shelf. He glanced at the soles, checked the price tag, and shook his head. Then he returned the sparkling new Jordans to the wall and pretended to look at other sneakers.

Max needed a new pair of basketball shoes. As she did every year, his mom had given him fifty dollars. And as he did every year, Max had arrived hopeful—always hopeful—that somehow this season's Jordans would be on sale.

They never were.

When he was young, the fifty dollars had seemed like a fortune. Now, as a seventeen-year-old, he felt embarrassed. The scene always played out just like this: Max stared at the perfect new models, but eventually he sifted through the bargain bin, hoping to find last year's models in his size.

Max walked back to the Jordans. He stared a little longer, imagining himself racing down the court in them.

"May I help you?" a voice from behind asked him.

Max turned to look at the sales associate, who was wearing a blue Polo shirt. "Nah," Max said, because that's what he said every year. "Just looking."

The man headed toward another customer.

"Actually," Max called, reaching for the Jordans.

The man looked back.

"Can I try these on? Size 10?"

As Max laced up the Jordans, he felt a pang of frustration: He shouldn't be doing this; it was better not to know.

The sneaker felt smooth on his foot. Max glanced at the tops and knew how good he'd look playing in these, even if lately he hadn't

been playing as much as he used to. He stood and walked to the store's full-length mirror. He checked himself from all angles. He definitely looked good.

A face appeared in the mirror. It took Max a second to recognize who it was.

Instantly, he wished he wasn't wearing the Jordans.

"Dang, boy, I didn't know you rolled like that," said Raul, giving Max a handshake that made the two of them seem that they were better friends than they were.

"Well," Max said, shrugging because he had nothing else to say.

"Your sister said I could find you here."

Max paused. He wasn't sure he wanted Raul near his sister. "You were at my house?"

"I was looking for you," Raul said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Raul said, pointing toward the sneakers. "Get those, and let's get out of here."

"Oh, right," Max looked down at his spotless white shoes. "These actually aren't the right size, so . . ."

Raul tilted his head. A second later, a sly grin crept across his face. He reached down and looked at the side of the shoebox.

“How about we make a deal?” Raul said. “These are on me—if you give me the rest of the afternoon.”

Information scrolled through Max’s mind like a news ticker: He was supposed to meet DeMarcus that afternoon for hoops . . . He shouldn’t let Raul buy him anything . . . He really wanted these new sneakers . . . Maybe he’d play so much better in them.

Max told Raul he couldn’t spend the afternoon with him—he was supposed to be playing basketball then.

“These shoes are too slick for the court,” Raul said, pulling out a hundred-dollar bill and dropping it into the empty shoebox. “They’re meant for looking cool.”

“Meet me outside,” Raul said, and then he walked out of the store.

Max looked at the cash dropped like loose paper into the box. The bill seemed like a contract he wasn’t yet ready to sign. He wanted the shoes on his feet, but he didn’t want to buy them with Raul’s money.

This is Philly, Max thought to himself while unlacing the shoes, *I’ll find a way to buy my own Jordans*. He pocketed the cash and placed the sneakers back in the box.

He'd come back later for shoes he could afford.

When Raul saw Max exit the store empty-handed, he raised an eyebrow.

"I don't need this," Max gave Raul a handshake and returned the bill to Raul's palm. "But I'll run with you this afternoon."

As Max walked with Raul, he looked at the ground. He couldn't decide whether he'd just made a mistake, or had just dodged a trap.

Raul, who was shorter and thinner than Max, never said much. But unlike Max, Raul always seemed sure of everything he said and did. Max had noticed that difference between them.

Raul hung around the courts, but he never played. Everyone seemed to know him though. Once Raul had walked into the middle of a game, stopped play, and demanded that one of Max's teammates immediately run an errand for him. Some people did as he asked, but no one seemed close with him.

"Where we going?" Max asked.

Raul pointed ahead, toward a junkyard, and said, "Right there."

Max thought about the games he was

skipping, and didn't feel as bad as he should have. It was the start of the summer, when he and DeMarcus usually played every day. He had started missing a day or two each week. In fact, he had even considered quitting basketball to find a job.

He wanted to make his own money.

"What are we doing here?" Max asked as they came closer to the junkyard, which was really just a vacant lot in a bad neighborhood. The area was framed by two three-story houses that looked recently refurbished. Rusted cars and car parts littered the sparse grass.

The junkyard wasn't a place to picnic. But since it was a Saturday afternoon in early summer, Max wasn't concerned. He realized that he might have been concerned if it had been darker.

"Time to teach you something," Raul said, wandering through the lot, weaving around the twisted car frames.

Toward the back of the yard was a row of cars that looked drivable. Raul cranked open the driver's door of the first car—it sounded as if it hadn't been opened for years—and slid behind the wheel. He motioned for Max to join him.

Max glanced around the vacant yard, looked out toward the street, and then slipped into the car.

“You know how to hot-wire?” Raul asked, reaching under the steering column.

“Come on, man,” Max’s eyes darted around them.

“Focus,” said Raul, locating the wires and pulling them down to show Max.

“I don’t know this stuff,” Max said. “It ain’t my scene.”

“Oh yeah?” Raul dropped the wires. “What is your scene? I see you with those second-hand clothes and last year’s shoes, trying to make it all work.”

“What do you know about that?” Max shot back, fighting off his embarrassment with anger. He looked down at his basketball shoes from a few years ago—Reebok high-tops, scuffed and tattered,

He put his hand on the door handle, ready to leave.

“I know all about it,” Raul said, turning his attention back toward the wires. “You come with me, and you’ll make money.”

Max slowly relaxed his grip on the handle.

• • •

It was dusk as Max walked the long way home, avoiding the courts. He was absorbing his surroundings the way you do when you're thinking about something important. The houses, the lawns, the passing cars, the street lights—Max was aware of all those things as he debated the next step in his life: basketball or not basketball.

He wasn't sure what to call that other path, so he thought of it as “not basketball.” He considered what that path might be like.

He kicked a stone and watched it skip along the sidewalk and off the curb.

Nothing was easy anymore. When had that started?

His phone vibrated in his back pocket. He pulled it out and flipped open the scratched cover.

He saw that Larissa had been texting him all afternoon.

At the courts lookin for u, when will u be here?

D says you're supposed to be here. Call me?

Leaving now. Where are u?

Max pictured her on her touchscreen phone—she always had the coolest things—her long fingers moving nimbly across the screen.

He hit “Reply” and began typing a message on his mom’s old phone.

Had to work. Walking home now.

He kept the phone in his hand, knowing how quickly Larissa usually responded. Within a minute, his hand vibrated.

Walking? Wanna go for a ride?

Every so often, Larissa’s older brother let her borrow his rusty old Ford Explorer. He’d saved the car from a junk lot, and she always cruised the city in it. She seemed to enjoy the freedom.

As Max turned onto his street, he saw that old Ford Explorer creeping toward him. He stopped and waited for Larissa. Pulling alongside, she rolled down the driver’s window. “How about a ride?” she asked.

He smiled. “’Cause it’s such a long way home,” Max gestured toward his house, not more than fifty yards away.

“Get in,” she said.

Max climbed into the passenger’s seat. He thought about kissing her, but didn’t.

“I was over at the courts,” she said.

Max turned to look out his window.

“Why weren’t you there?”

“I got busy,” he said, still looking out the window.

“Busy with what?”

Max didn’t answer for a few minutes. He just stared at the passing houses. Larissa had driven on past his house. She was cruising through the neighborhood, not asking any more questions.

Finally, Max spoke. “I’m thinking of not playing this year,” he said.

Larissa’s eyes swung toward him, but she kept driving. “Why?” She turned her eyes back to the road.

“My mom, my family,” Max said. “Things are hard for her. I could make them easier.”

“Is that what she wants?”

“She’s worked double shifts for ten years.”

“Did she ask you for help?”

“You wouldn’t understand what it’s like,” Max said, trying to end the conversation.

“Oh, okay, I see,” Larissa responded, always ready to argue. “Because my dad makes a little money, you think I don’t understand what your life is like.”

“Maybe, yeah,” Max turned to face her.

Larissa, who had seemed on edge, sighed deeply. “But Max—basketball is what you said you always wanted.”

“Things change. It’s time for me to grow up.”

“And you can grow up by quitting?”

Max began to speak, but then didn't.

“A few years ago I wanted to quit the violin,” Larissa said. “I never wanted to play again. My dad told me that if I quit once, it would become a habit. He said the next time, quitting would be even easier.”

Max thought about this. He mumbled something, but then he reminded himself that Larissa, with her touchscreen phone and nice clothes, didn't *really* understand how things were.