



## *Chapter 1*

**D**eena pretended not to hear her mother's call to dinner. She was tucked into the overstuffed chair in the corner of her room, her nose buried in a book. Happily absorbed by the story, she did not have to think of the unhappiness in her own life.

Only one chapter left. She turned the book sideways to see how many pages. Not more than 15 minutes of reading.

"Deena!" came her mother's second call, closer now. "I said dinner's ready!"

Deena sighed. She placed her bookmark at the start of the last chapter and stood. Her long legs, growing daily, seemed like stilts. She stood, towering over the corner chair, as her mother pushed open the door.

“You’re still in here?” Her mother acted annoyed, but Deena knew she wasn’t. “Aren’t you done with that book *yet?*”

“One more chapter.”

“Well, it’s going to have to wait. Dinner is ready.”

“I heard something about that,” Deena said, smiling. “Can I bring my book to the table?”

“Honey . . .”

“Okay, okay,” Deena said, dropping the book onto the chair. “I’ll wait until after.” She followed her mother to the kitchen. Her father, Wilson, and her brother, Jamal, were already seated.

“Nice of you to join us,” said her father.

Deena and her mother slipped into their seats, and the four of them joined hands. A second later, the room was filled with her father’s voice, blessing the steaming food.

Dad was a burly man, mostly muscle. He’d never gone to college, but started as a construction worker, years ago. His company became so impressed with him that he was promoted to assistant foreman. It was a tiring job, often with long hours, but he was able to pull his family from a run-down rental into this in-between neighborhood. Their street,

with its ranch-style brick houses, was adjacent to Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. It was one of the safer streets in the neighborhood, although Deena knew never to go into the park at night.

Neither of Deena's parents had attended college, but they'd always told Deena that she would be different.

"Amen," concluded her father, reaching for his fork. "This looks wonderful, Candice." He smiled at his wife.

"Looks can be deceiving," she said, and then turned her attention to Deena and Jamal. "Don't ignore your broccoli."

Jamal, who looked so small sitting next to his father, speared a piece with his fork and popped it into his mouth. He put a wide grin on his face. "Mmmm," he said, swallowing dramatically. "So good."

Deena laughed, which caused her mom to flash a disapproving look.

"So what does the school week look like for you guys?" said her father, his mouth full.

Deena looked down at her plate. She pushed the broccoli from one side to the other and hoped her brother would fill the silence for both of them. Underneath the table, her mom squeezed her knee reassuringly.

Jamal, the star of his eighth grade class, began reeling off that week's schedule: a school assembly on Tuesday, a baseball game on Thursday, and an end-of-year field trip on Friday. Jamal adored school. And why shouldn't he? Everyone wanted to be his friend.

Deena watched Jamal talk. He was so enthusiastic and engaging. He was genuinely excited about the upcoming school week.

On the other hand, Deena couldn't wait for the week to be over. Summer started next week. For three months, she wouldn't be the un-cool kid. She wouldn't be the one who sat at the un-cool table during lunch, struggled to find a partner for the biology project, or wasn't chosen as a teammate during gym class.

Her father turned his attention toward her. "And what about you, sweetie?"

*Why does he always do this?* Deena thought, her frustration rising. *It just makes everything so much worse.*

"I don't know, Dad." Deena met his gaze. "Same as every week, I guess."

"So you're looking forward to summer?"

"I'm just trying to make it to summer, actually." Deena filled her mouth with broccoli so she wouldn't be able to say anything mean.

She chewed it slowly.

“Don’t let things hold you back, baby girl,” said her dad, sensing his daughter’s anxiety. “You’re a star.”

Deena, her cheeks filled, smiled weakly at him. She thought of a moment during last week’s gym class.

Deena had gym during the middle of the day, just before lunch, and she always changed into her clothes in a corner of the locker room where no one else stood. She turned her back to the other girls and slipped into her white t-shirt and black gym shorts.

A few girls were already heading out to the gymnasium, so Deena fell into line behind them, careful not to make it seem as if she was joining their group. They pushed through the heavy swinging door into the gym. Girls gradually started filling the space, standing in small groups, chatting, and waiting for their teacher’s instructions.

Deena spotted an empty seat on the first row of the bleachers. She sat down and waited, smiling at a classmate also sitting alone. Then she heard the shrill sound of the teacher’s whistle.

“All right, everyone, quiet down!” Their teacher thundered into the middle of the gym, a bag of volleyballs slung over her shoulder. It was only then that Deena noticed the net set up on the right half of the gym.

“We’re starting our volleyball unit today,” the teacher continued. “Let me see hands for volunteers: Who wants to be a team captain?”

Deena’s heart began beating rapidly. She hated this tactic, this popularity contest. It was a brutal public display of who would be the first chosen, and who would be the last. She stared down at the tops of her shoes and listened while the teacher chose two names she recognized: Carly and Monique. They were the two best athletes in the class, always the first to volunteer for any challenge. Deena did not like them or dislike them; she wasn’t even sure the two knew she existed.

Deena listened as the first few rounds of players were chosen. She glanced at the girl sitting to her right, and the two of them exchanged a pained look. Finally, Deena stood up and joined the remaining group of girls who had yet to be picked. Maybe joining the crowd would prevent her from being the absolutely last person chosen, merely out of circumstance.

The group around Deena continued thinning out as each chosen girl walked forward and joined either Carly or Monique's team. As each girl walked away, Deena's embarrassment rose. Finally, she was the only one standing there, except for the girl from the bleachers.

It was Carly's turn to pick. The entire gym glass stared at them. Although Carly's decision felt especially important to Deena—she wanted so badly not to be last—Carly herself did not seem to care much one way or the other.

Deena looked up as Carly raised her finger to point at one of them. She did not seem to know either of their names or, if she did, did not feel particularly compelled to use them.

Carly pointed at the girl to Deena's right. Deena's heart dropped, and her face flushed red. The girl, relieved, walked forward to stand behind Carly.

Deena glanced over at Monique, who'd landed her on her team merely by default. Monique shrugged and said loudly, "Yeah, sure, whatever."

After gym class, Deena had her study period. She walked to the library, pushing through the heavy wooden door in hopes that one of the girls she sat with at lunch—Whitney or Ashley—

would already be in the room, studying. Deena gripped a book in her hand, tucking it under her armpit. Books, as they'd been for years, were her weapons against shyness. She could not be assured, in the library or in the lunchroom, that one of her few friends would also be present, and she could never build up the courage to ask others if she could join them at their table.

Deena looked out across the silent room. To the right of the stacks of books, a few students sat together at circular tables, but she did not see Whitney or Ashley. She walked past the tables, eyes straight ahead, as if she was looking for someone. The library also contained a few chairs behind the book stacks. Sometimes, Deena would sit back here to escape the loneliness of sitting at an empty table. But other students had similar thoughts, and these chairs were almost always taken.

She turned the corner around the last stack. All of the chairs were filled. One of the students, a girl Deena believed was a sophomore, looked up from her books and smiled softly. She understood.

Walking back to the front of the library, Deena lifted her backpack onto one of the circular tables. She slid into the chair and placed

the book in front of her. Immediately, without looking at any of her surrounding classmates, she opened the book and began reading.

This way, she hoped, her classmates would assume she was too busy to worry about sitting alone.

Deena had never been popular. She was not disliked, but had always been invisible, partly as a result of her own shyness. When she was in second grade, the eye doctor prescribed thick glasses, and her mom had selected a pair with wide pink frames, the lenses half an inch thick and appearing very similar to goggles. A few years later, she'd endured a growth spurt that made her taller than most of the boys. And after that, she'd been fitted for braces.

Even now, as a junior in high school, Deena was considered a nonentity. She'd had the braces removed her freshman year and had switched to contacts a year after that. None of it seemed to change the image already created in her classmates' minds. She often felt like a ghost in their presence. And she sometimes wanted to call out just to see if anyone was paying attention.



Deena felt her mother's hand covering her own.

"Wilson," Mom said, "we all know Deena would rather be reading her books than out at all those parties anyway."

"Of course she would," said her father, but neither of them was convinced.

"Thanks, Mom." Deena rolled her eyes.

Deena was certain that if she transferred to a different high school, she'd have a chance to be cool. Her new classmates wouldn't know about the thick glasses, the bulky braces, and the awkward growth spurt. She could present herself exactly as she currently appeared: tall, yes, but not unusually so; contacts hiding her poor eyesight; and straightened teeth from those multi-colored braces.

Sometimes at night, Deena would stand in front of her full-length bedroom mirror and try to look at herself objectively. Was she really that unlikeable? Would it really be that awful to be seen with her?

"Honey," said Deena's mom, snapping her out of her fog, "you can go read your book now, if you'd like."

Deena could see the sympathy in her mom's eyes. "No, that's OK," she said, noticing her

plate was still filled with food. "I can read later." She turned to her dad to ask him a question, but his face was contorted with pain. He raised his right hand as if to stop the oncoming question.

"Dad?" she asked, her concern rising.

He slammed his closed fist onto the table. The impact shook the water in each of their glasses. Dad, head down, put a hand to his chest.

"Honey, what is it?" Mom quickly stood up. She pushed back her chair so abruptly that it threatened to tip over behind her. Deena reached over to steady it and then watched her mother as she knelt beside her father. He was shaking his head as if to say it wasn't all right.

"Mom!" Deena's voice was shaking. "What is it? What's happening?"

Deena watched her mom feel for her father's pulse and then place a hand on his forehead. Sweat beads instantly formed on his brow. For a few seconds, she watched her mom, who seemed deep in thought. For the last 17 years, Mom had worked as a nurse, and so Deena imagined the different thoughts now coursing through her mind.

"Mom!" Deena tried again.

"Call an ambulance," said her mom, locking eyes with Deena. "Now."

Deena hesitated, unsure how this moment had come upon them so quickly, but then she raced to the kitchen phone and dialed 911.

Hours later, Deena sat in an uncomfortable hospital chair, her book open on her lap. She'd been staring at the final pages for at least two hours, but she couldn't absorb the words. She and her mother and brother were tucked into a corner of the visitors' center at Hahnemann Hospital, waiting for any word on her father.

Jamal was asleep, his head resting on Deena's shoulder. Her mother was seated next to her, flipping through her third or fourth magazine. Every half hour or so, she'd toss the magazine onto the side table, as if exasperated with its contents. A few minutes later, she'd pick up another one. It was as if her mother wasn't comfortable without some form of distraction.

It was nearing 11 p.m. when a doctor finally approached them. Deena nudged her brother awake. The three of them adjusted themselves in their seats, sitting up straighter. A fan whirled overhead, the only sound between them for a few seconds.

"Mrs. Jackson?" asked the doctor, eyes leveled on her mom.

“Yes . . .”

“Your husband is fine,” said the doctor, removing a pen from his coat pocket and fiddling with it. “He suffered a mild heart attack tonight.”

Her mother released a long sigh, as if she’d been holding her breath.

The doctor seemed about to continue speaking, but stopped and looked at the three of them. Then he continued, attention back on Mom, “I was hoping you’d join me in your husband’s room for a few minutes.”

“Yes, of course.” Mom stood and trailed the doctor through the swinging doors.

Deena wasn’t sure how to feel. She felt relieved that her dad’s heart attack had been mild, but something about the doctor’s demeanor had left her anxious.

Deena and Jamal waited for an hour before their mother reappeared through the visiting room’s doors. She was unaccompanied this time, although she seemed more distant and preoccupied than when she had left. Deena watched her navigate the tables and chairs as she made her way toward them. Mom’s eyes were downcast, as if she was following a line drawn

along the carpet. Finally, she stood before them and offered a thin smile.

“He’s OK?” asked Deena.

“The heart attack was mild, and he’s awake right now, in his room.”

“So everything is going to be OK?” Deena asked again.

“You’ll get to see him very soon.”

The thought of seeing her father *very soon* frightened Deena. There were too many unknowns in this hospital, which they’d never before visited. At home, she could picture her dad in so many places he spent time: under the sink fixing the always-breaking garbage disposal, relaxing on his recliner during the football game, helping Jamal with his math homework at the dinner table. But here? She could not picture him here. Trying to do so felt like trying to picture a different father altogether. And who could do that?

Deena looked into her mother’s eyes, which seemed closed although they were open. “OK,” Deena finally said, standing. She couldn’t be scared of seeing her dad, even if he was collapsed on a white hospital bed, trapped inside a disinfected room.

Jamal stood too, and Mom instantly wrap-

ped them in a hug. Deena could feel her short, quick breaths turn into tears, which then turned into heavy, deep breathing. She opened one eye and caught her brother's attention. The two looked at each other for a second until Deena finally lifted her shoulders slightly, conveying the sense of confusion they were both feeling. She shook her head as if to tell her brother she was at a loss, also. They both held onto their mother for a second longer.

“Mom, he's OK, everything is OK,” Deena said, peeling herself out of Mom's embrace.

“Yes, of course.” Mom straightened her shirt and wiped at her eyes. “Let's go see him.”

The three of them tiptoed into the darkened hospital room. All Deena could see were shadows of things: a hospital bed, a dripping IV machine, a wall-mounted television. She'd never seen such things, so they presented themselves almost as if in a dream. The room was filled with the constant beep and hum of machines that seemed, in the darkness, like futuristic monsters.

Her father was asleep. The doctor had said he might be, and not to wake him if he was, because his body needed the sleep. He'd be

awake soon enough, the doctor had told them, so be patient.

Deena and Jamal sat in the chairs underneath the television, while their mother pulled a chair next to Dad's bed and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek. He didn't stir.

"Come say hi to your father," Mom whispered.

Jamal glanced at Deena. They both inched over to their father until they were casting their own eerie shadows across his sleeping outline. Deena leaned down and planted a kiss on his forehead. Jamal did the same. This seemed to satisfy their mother.

Suddenly, the door opened, bringing with it the hallway's bright light. A flood of yellow landed on the hospital bed and the family's hovering outlines. "I'm sorry to interrupt," said the doctor they'd all met in the waiting room. "I was just going to check in on our patient."

The doctor stood in the glow of the hallway, shifting his glance between Mom, Deena, and Jamal. He seemed to be looking for an answer to an unknown question. Finally his gaze landed on Mom, and Deena noticed the nearly imperceptible side-to-side movement of her

mother's head, no more than a centimeter each way. It seemed to answer whatever question the doctor had silently asked.

"I'll give you guys some more time," he said, backing into the doorway. "Visiting hours are over in 25 minutes, but take as long as you need."

As the doctor disappeared, the door clicked shut. Deena hated sitting in the darkness with all the strange smells and strange shadows. "What was that about?" she asked her mother, with more accusation in her voice than she'd intended. Jamal's eyes lifted, surprised.

"What was what about?" asked Mom, rubbing her hands on her knees as she often did when nervous. Her palms weren't sweaty, but Deena recognized it as her mom's nervous habit. It was as if she could transfer her fear and worry to some other surface.

"Mom," Deena firmly said. "Please?"

Her mom seemed caught off guard, as if she was not prepared for the moment. Deena watched as her mom squeezed her dad's hand. Deena wasn't sure if she was trying to wake him up, or if she was reassuring him of her own resolve.

Deena waited. Each passing second made

her increasingly nervous and worried. Jamal joined Deena in watching their mother.

“Yes,” Mom said finally, meeting Deena’s gaze. “It’s not good. I promised your father we’d tell you in the morning, as a family, OK?”

“Mom, how can we wait that long? I can’t wait.”

“You can,” Mom said.

Deena turned, left the room, and walked the long, dimly lit hallway. Her body filled with a new kind of adrenaline. Since her mother had returned to the waiting room an hour earlier, she’d been feeling worried and upset.

*What was worse than bad news?* Deena thought. *Knowing that bad news was coming!*

It was a special kind of torture, and Deena walked up and down the hallway in an effort to rid herself of it. Walking didn’t help. Her legs felt bouncy, as if they contained springs.

During the ride home from the hospital, Deena said nothing. Her mother drove, while her father sat in the passenger seat, his right hand resting on the windowsill just as it always did. Deena sensed that the two of them had pre-arranged the circumstances in which they’d talk with their kids. Now they seemed determined to

carry out the plan exactly, despite the obvious tension and worry that had been present for hours.

As they drove along next to the Schuylkill, Philadelphia's meandering river, Deena stared at each runner along the path, feeling that same restlessness in her muscles. She hadn't felt it before, but walking the hallways the previous night had filled her with a desire to stretch her legs and dash through the early-summer air.

Her family filed into the house quietly, each member of the family walking directly to the kitchen table at which they always ate dinner. Deena sat in her usual seat and watched as her father slid slowly into his chair at the end of the table. He took a deep breath and reached for his wife's hand.

*Finally, Deena thought, finally this black cloud overhead can at least start raining.*

"We have some bad news," Dad said, looking first at Deena and then at Jamal. He paused then, as if waiting for one of them to inquire about exactly what the bad news was. No one spoke.

"Last night, what I had was a mini-heart attack, nothing life-threatening in any way. By the time I got to the hospital, the pain in my chest was lessening." He touched his hand to

where the pain had been and looked again at his wife. “But while I was back there, the doctors did a number of tests.”

The house was quiet around them. The dishes from the previous night were piled haphazardly near the sink, which disturbed Deena as much as anything. She’d never seen this kitchen so dirty in the light of day. Her parents never went to sleep with dishes in the sink or on the counters. Oddly enough—considering their reluctance to talk to their kids these last twelve hours—her parents weren’t procrastinators.

The neighbor’s dog barked. Dad turned his head toward the noise, pausing once again in mid-thought.

“Dad,” Deena said, more sharply than she would have liked. For her, this moment could not end soon enough. She needed to hear whatever words he held within him. She needed all of them to share this terrible thing.

“Hmm,” Dad said, turning forward. He gave his wife’s hand a quick squeeze and then said, “I have pancreatic cancer.”

Like a bowling ball, the words landed with a thud in the middle of the table. All four of them, Deena included, seemed to be staring at

the same point equidistant between them. No one's eyes ventured farther than precisely in the middle. Deena knew right then that the only thing keeping her from absorbing the full truth of that sentence was eye contact with either one of her parents. Until the moment she looked into her dad's eyes, this sentence about "pancreatic cancer" was connected to nothing. He could have said that the grass needed cutting or that he'd rather not have meatloaf for dinner again. But once she looked at her father, that would be the period at the end of the sentence, the final movement that made this news real and complete.

Deena moved her eyes slowly from the swirled grain of the wooden table. First she saw her father's hand. She noticed his gold wedding band. Then she saw the hair on his arms, and then the grey sleeve of his t-shirt. She moved her eyes higher, toward the stubble on his chin, which was noticeable because he hadn't yet shaved that morning. Finally, she raised her eyes to his and saw the pool of tears within them. She had never seen that before, and the sentence—"I have pancreatic cancer"—sent a wave of fear through her.

"Daddy," she whispered.

“I know, honey,” he said quickly, reaching up and wiping away the tears that had not yet dropped. The four of them said nothing for a moment, each staring into their own space.

Deena didn’t know how bad pancreatic cancer was, but she suspected the worst. Jamal, though, understood the word “cancer,” but didn’t know how “pancreatic” affected the diagnosis.

“You can beat this, Dad, right?” Jamal said, glancing between the three of them. For a second he locked eyes with Deena. He seemed confused by how quiet and scared she looked.

“Of course we’re going to try,” said Dad, offering a wisp of a smile to his son.

“Matt’s mom had breast cancer a few years ago, you remember that?” Jamal continued. “Everyone was so sad and worried in the beginning, and now she’s doing awesome. I saw her last week at the game, and it’s like nothing ever happened.”

“Well, yes.” Dad searched for the right words. “This is a little different than that, though.”

No one said anything for a few seconds. Deena watched her dad’s eyes, wondering if more tears would form during the silence.

None did. Just when he seemed ready to say something more, something that might give Jamal a better understanding of exactly what they were fighting, the shrill ring of the house phone cut through the silence.

“We better get that,” said Mom, who was at the phone before it rang a second time.

As the family left the table, Deena hurried back to her room. She noticed Jamal trailing her down the hallway. He seemed to want to come into her room and talk, but Deena closed the door quickly and walked to her computer. With trembling fingers, she opened up Google and typed “pancreatic cancer” into the search box. She tried three times before finally getting it right.

The search results quickly loaded onto the screen, and Deena closed her eyes against the words that appeared below the first result: *The worst kind of cancer.*

She took a deep breath and clicked the page anyway. She scanned the page that came up, and more terrible phrases appeared, each one taking more of her breath away:

*Extremely low survival rate.*

*Unknown cure.*

*Fast progressing.*

Not wanting to read any more, Deena closed the search page, fearing that if she allowed the results to stay on the screen, they would become more and more real. She knew her parents possessed the same information and wondered what questions they had asked their doctor.