

## **Chapter 1**

Harold Davis took a deep breath and slowly started to peel the gauze from the wound on his grandmother's leg.

"Hold on, Grandma. I'm almost done," he said quietly.

"Don't worry, baby. It doesn't hurt too much," she replied, wincing slightly. "Just take your time."

Harold glanced up at his grandmother lying on the couch. He could tell she was in pain from the way she gripped the cushions, but still she managed to smile back at him.

"Go ahead, child. Really, it's okay," she insisted.

Harold gently peeled away the sticky gauze and looked at the large, swollen wound. It was blood red, with a white film along the edges.

*It looks angry,* Harold thought as he

carefully spread ointment over the cut and covered it with a clean bandage. He hated looking at her leg, but he knew he had no choice. It was her first day out of the hospital, and she needed his help.

“Okay Grandma, all done. I’ll get dinner started,” Harold said as he turned the television to her favorite channel and put away her medical supplies. “Those bandages the hospital gave us are cheap. We need the more expensive kind that won’t stick so much. Like the doctor said.”

“Oh Harold,” Grandma sighed, struggling to sit up on the couch. “I’m sorry you have to do all this for me. But don’t you worry. Just a few more weeks, and I’ll be good as new.” She smoothed out her long floral housedress and fussed with her hair as she talked. “Just as good as new.”

“I know, Grandma,” he said, forcing himself not to stare at the deep purple bruise that covered the left side of her forehead. He wanted her words to be true, but after the events of the last few days, he wasn’t sure. Grandma had turned seventy-three last month, and today she seemed even older.

*At least she’s home again,* he thought

to himself. *At least we're home.*

Two days ago, Grandma fell on the front steps of their apartment building, banging her head on the pavement, spraining her ankle, and cutting her leg badly. Mr. Harris, their neighbor, had found her lying on the sidewalk and called an ambulance. He'd also driven to Bluford High, where Harold was a freshman, to take him to the hospital. Harold shuddered as the events of that day flashed in his mind like a nightmare.

He had been in the middle of Ms. Webb's algebra class when Ms. Spencer, the school principal, rushed into his classroom.

"Harold, I need you in the office," she said, her voice tense. "*Now.*"

Everyone in the class turned to face him.

"Boy, don't tell me *you're* in trouble. You don't do nothin' wrong," said Rodney Banks.

"Maybe he broke into the cafeteria. Look at his stomach. You *know* that boy likes to eat," added Andre Jenkins with a smirk. Harold cringed in embarrassment.

"Man, leave him alone," snapped Darrell Mercer, Harold's friend. "This ain't any of your business."

“That’s enough, gentlemen!” warned Ms. Webb as Harold left the classroom.

When Harold arrived at the principal’s office, Mr. Harris was standing at the counter, quietly arguing with Ms. Bader, the school secretary.

*Why’s he here?* Harold wondered.

Mr. Harris lived in the small apartment at the end of their hallway. He’d moved in a few months ago, though in that time, Harold had hardly said a word to him.

“I’m sorry, but you’re not on the list, Mr. Harris. We cannot let you drive Harold to the hospital,” Ms. Bader explained.

Mr. Harris’s eyes were focused and determined. “I understand,” he replied calmly. “But his grandmother asked me to come. She doesn’t want him to be scared.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but I can’t change school policy, Mr. Harris—”

“What happened?” Harold asked, interrupting them. “What happened to Grandma?”

The office suddenly grew silent. Harold saw the concern on Ms. Bader’s face, but before she could reply, Mr. Harris stepped forward, putting his hand on Harold’s shoulder. A thin streak

of dried blood stained his sleeve. Harold's heart raced.

"It's all right. She's all right," Mr. Harris said calmly. "She fell down and banged herself up pretty bad, but I've seen worse. She's at the hospital now. Your teachers are going to take you over there right now," he said, glancing back at Ms. Bader and Ms. Spencer. "I'll be right behind you."

At the hospital, Harold sat for hours beneath the buzzing fluorescent lights of the crowded waiting room. Doctors hurried back and forth. Families wandered in and out, some in tears. He needed to use the bathroom, but he didn't want to get up in case the doctors came looking for him.

Finally, well after sunset, a doctor sat next to him and described what happened. Harold felt dizzy when the doctor began explaining the details of Grandma's condition.

*Significant leg abrasion and minor head trauma.*

*Diabetes, obesity, and age complicate her injuries.*

*Slow recovery. Constant care may be required.*

Harold stared at the floor, his head

throbbing at the news. After the doctor left, he was visited by a social worker, a young woman with neat hair and lipstick and shoes that clicked on the floor as she walked. She asked Harold questions that haunted him ever since.

“Do you have any other family, Harold? Is there someone you can stay with?”

She paused, waiting for him to answer. Harold stared at the dirty flecks in the tile floor.

“If not, we’ll need to place you somewhere while your grandmother—”

“No! I’m staying *here!*” he insisted, jumping out of his chair and backing away from her like an animal about to be trapped. “I’m staying with Grandma.” He knew he sounded like a child, but he couldn’t help it.

He was shaking with panic, his heart pounding frantically as the full meaning of her words sank in. *There was no other family.* His mom died in childbirth with him, and his father had run out shortly after that. He had no one else to stay with. His eyes burned with tears, and he looked around desperately. He thought he might throw up, right there on the hospital floor.

Just then, Mr. Harris stepped forward. Had he been there the entire time? Harold couldn't recall. The evening had been a blur.

"The boy can stay with me tonight, ma'am," Mr. Harris said quietly. "I live just up the hall from his apartment. I'm sure Mrs. Davis will give her consent."

Harold stayed at Mr. Harris's that evening and the next, sleeping on a fold-out sofa at night and visiting Grandma at the hospital all day. Though just two days passed since Grandma fell, their apartment felt like a foreign place to Harold when they returned.

Normally it was filled with the aroma of his grandmother's cooking. But when Harold unlocked the door and helped Grandma in, it smelled stale and musty. He knew he'd need to clean it, but first he had to cook dinner.

Harold poked around the fridge. The milk was already starting to sour. There weren't enough eggs for tomorrow's breakfast. Fortunately, Mr. Harris had dropped off a tray of lasagna. Harold took it out of the refrigerator and put it in the stove, turning it to 350 degrees as Mr. Harris said. Then he returned to the living room to check on Grandma.

The usually clean living room was now cluttered with bandages, unanswered mail and the bulky wooden crutches from the hospital. Pillows were piled awkwardly on the couch to keep Grandma's ankle elevated. A bag of dirty laundry sat in the corner where she left it two days ago, still waiting to be washed.

"My goodness, this place is a mess," Grandma said, almost to herself. "Now, don't you worry about all this, Harold. I just need to rest up for a little while and we'll be back to our normal schedule. Don't you forget about your homework, either," she added. "I might need to stay off this leg for a few weeks, but that don't mean I won't be checking on you."

"Yes, Grandma," he replied, rubbing his temples. He could feel a dull headache starting to build behind his eyes.

*School's the least of my worries now, Grandma,* he wanted to say. Dishes needed to be washed. Laundry needed to be done. The bathroom needed scrubbing. Groceries needed to be bought. And more than anything, Grandma needed his help.

*"Do you have any other family, Harold? Is there someone you can stay*

*with?*” The social worker’s questions echoed in his mind again. Harold shuddered, his headache worsening.

Harold rummaged through the cabinets for some clean dinner plates. Unless he was hungry, he rarely came into the kitchen. He spent most of his time in the living room watching television or doing his homework at their small table. The kitchen was Grandma’s territory, and Harold felt lost among the pots and pans and plastic containers of flour, spices, and odd foods he could not identify. There were shelves of canned peaches and sweet potatoes, which she would use to make pies.

*Was she still allowed to eat pie?* he wondered.

The hospital had sent them home with a list of “approved” foods for his grandmother, but he hadn’t had a chance to read the list yet. Harold didn’t really understand her diabetes. She’d had the disease for a long time and it never seemed to be a problem before. But at the hospital, her doctors discovered some sores on her feet when they examined her. They said she could have “complications” if she didn’t control her weight and diet.

Harold found the dinner plates piled in the sink. He washed two plates and checked on Mr. Harris's lasagna. After five minutes in the oven, it was still cool, especially in the middle.

"Grandma," he called, turning up the oven dial to 400 degrees. "How long does it take to heat up lasagna?"

There was no reply.

"Grandma?" he repeated, waiting for a response that didn't come. "*Grandma?*"

He rushed into the living room, his heart suddenly pounding. His grandmother lay still, asleep on the couch. Her head leaned to one side, and her chest rose and fell heavily with each breath. He could see the swollen bruise on her forehead and the bandage peeking out from beneath her long dress. It was already turning brown, even though he just changed the dressing. He turned off the television and covered her with a blanket—what she usually did for him when he was sick.

"How are we gonna get through this, Grandma?" he whispered as he leaned over her, gently kissing her forehead. "Who's gonna make dinner while your leg heals?" Harold swallowed hard, and stood up.

*What if it doesn't?* he wondered.

Harold's head throbbed now. He was hungry and exhausted, and he didn't want to think any more. He ate a piece of Mr. Harris's lukewarm lasagna and washed the dishes. Then he grabbed a pillow and blanket from his bedroom and sat on the floor by the couch.

The apartment was silent, except for his grandmother's breathing and the occasional siren outside.

*"Do you have any other family, Harold? Is there someone you can stay with?"*

In the dark apartment, the questions crashed down on him in endless waves.

"There's no one else," he whispered into the darkness. "We're alone."