

Chapter 1

With a cold November wind stabbing through his jacket, Darrell Mercer took one last walk with his best friend, Malik Stone.

“Man, I can’t believe you’re movin’ to California tomorrow,” Malik said. “I just can’t believe I won’t see you no more.”

Darrell shook his head. He could not believe it either. In just a few hours, he would leave the only neighborhood he had ever known in his fifteen years. Soon his street, his school, and every friend he had in the world would be thousands of miles away. Thinking about what was ahead of him, Darrell felt like a man going to his own hanging.

“I’ll miss you, man,” Darrell said, his voice wavering.

The boys had known each other since first grade at Harrison School on 44th

Street. Their neighborhood was definitely not one of Philadelphia's best. Most of the buildings were old and decaying, and graffiti covered just about every one. Some houses were vacant, and a few had broken windows. Abandoned cars rusted along many streets, and occasionally local newscasts would run a story about city crime and feature this area as an example. To many people, the neighborhood was trouble, but to Darrell and his friends, it was home. True, there were guys selling drugs on street corners. But there were also good kids like Malik, Big Reggie, and Mark. Because of them, Darrell had never felt alone.

Inside the rundown homes that lined Darrell's block, there were always people to turn to in times of trouble. Across the street was old Mr. Corbitt, who sat on his porch each day and waved at everyone who passed by. And in the corner house was Mrs. Morton. She made sweet-potato pie for people in the neighborhood, especially Darrell and his mother.

"This'll help you grow," Mrs. Morton would say whenever she left a pie at their apartment. It never seemed to work, but Darrell didn't mind because the pies were delicious.

Darrell had always been short for his age. At fifteen years old, he was just under five feet. He was also skinny, without a respectable muscle in his small body. Back in September, Darrell had dreaded starting Franklin High, but his friends were right there with him. If anyone picked on Darrell during those first weeks of school, they had the other guys to deal with too. But all that was changing.

Darrell was moving to California two months after the school year had begun. It was the first day of high school all over again, only this time Darrell did not have his friends to protect him. Darrell did not admit it to anyone, but he was scared.

“Want a cheesesteak?” Malik asked when they came to Sal’s Steaks.

“I guess,” Darrell said. Sal made the best cheesesteaks in the neighborhood, or maybe in the entire city. They were loaded with gobs of dripping cheese and just the right amount of fried onions.

“This one’s on me,” Malik said, a crack in his voice. Physically, Malik was the opposite of Darrell. He was six feet tall with big muscular shoulders. Although he was just a freshman, Malik had already earned a position on the Franklin High School varsity football

team. Ever since they were young boys, Darrell was thankful that he was Malik's friend because nobody messed with Malik or his friends. Watching Malik return with the steaks, Darrell felt a wave of sadness sweep over him.

"This is our last cheesesteak together," Malik said, handing one to Darrell.

"Thanks, Malik," Darrell said. Normally, he would devour the cheesesteak quickly, but now, for the first time he could remember, he felt as if he could not eat. His throat seemed to close up on him. *It isn't fair*, he thought. Why did things happen this way? Why did he have to leave his home and his best friends? And why, of all times, did it have to be in the middle of his first year of high school? He knew why. His mother had explained it many times, but she could not change how he felt. Realizing he would hurt Malik's feelings if he did not accept his gift, Darrell forced the cheesesteak down his throat. He knew it would be the last meal he would ever have with his friend.

The boys continued walking down the darkening street. Every storefront was painful for Darrell to see. He knew he would not be back to the old neighborhood

again, at least not for a long time. He glanced across the street at the old grocery store. Today it looked warm and inviting, even though the owners charged too much for meats, and the fruits and vegetables were not always fresh. At the corner, they passed the laundromat where his mother did her wash. A black mechanical rocking horse stood next to the door so parents could entertain their children while waiting for the laundry to dry. Once, Darrell and Malik gave coins to a little neighborhood kid so he could ride.

“Remember when Rasheed took four rides on our money?” Darrell asked.

“Yeah,” Malik said glumly.

It was dark now. Mom had asked Darrell to be home early. The bus was leaving at 5:15 the next morning.

Darrell looked down at the emerald-green shards of a shattered beer bottle glistening in the street light. “I guess I gotta go now, Malik,” he said heavily. “I gotta go home.”

Home. What a mockery that word was now, Darrell thought. Home was an empty apartment with boxes in the middle of the floor, packed for the move to California. Mrs. Morton was handling the shipping for them.

“You been a real brother to me,” Darrell said. “I . . . I love you, man,” Darrell blurted, his voice melting into embarrassing sobs.

Malik grabbed Darrell and gave him a bear hug. For a second, Darrell’s face was jammed into Malik’s shirt. Then the two separated, and, without a word, started walking in opposite directions. After a few steps, Darrell began to run.

“It’s not fair!” he yelled, as he sprinted through the dark. He felt as if he were being robbed, that things were being taken from him that he could never replace.

Sure, Malik would miss him, Darrell thought, but Malik was big, and he had tons of friends. Darrell was sure Malik would be fine without him.

But Darrell was not so certain about his own future. The days ahead stretched out before him like a dark road filled with dangerous shadows. It would be like the summer Mom sent him to a camp for inner-city kids. The camp director promised Darrell and his mother that he would experience adventures in the outdoors away from the dangers of the city. What Darrell ended up experiencing was torment from a kid who wanted nothing

more than to make anyone weaker than him feel as miserable as possible.

The kid's name was Jermaine, and his favorite activity was torturing Darrell. He pushed Darrell into the lake. He dropped worms into Darrell's ice cream. He put laxative in Darrell's pudding, making him sick for two days. During the whole time at camp, Darrell remained silent about Jermaine. What choice did he have? He knew he did not stand a chance against Jermaine in a fight, and he knew if he told one of the adults, Jermaine would retaliate the next time no one was watching. But the biggest reason Darrell never said anything to anyone was that he was ashamed of being so helpless. At least if he kept everything to himself, no one else would know how pathetic he was. Lately, whenever Darrell thought about California, he imagined some kid like Jermaine waiting for him. Or maybe several Jermaines. And nobody would be there to help him. Not Malik. Not anyone.

As Darrell walked down the alley towards his apartment, a stray cat greeted him. It purred and rubbed its face against his calf, looking up at him with radiant green eyes.

“This is it, Max,” Darrell said, petting the cat’s soft gray fur. “Your last pet from me. Goodbye, Max.” The cat circled his legs.

Darrell and his mother had lived in the apartment for six years. Before that, they lived in a small house. Darrell’s father was with them then, but he was killed in a car accident. After his death, Darrell’s mother got a job as a clerk for an insurance agency, and they moved to the apartment.

For years, everything had been fine, but then in August a larger insurance company bought out the agency where Darrell’s mother worked. To save money, the company eliminated her job along with hundreds of others. For a while, she tried to find work nearby that would pay her enough to support the two of them, but the only jobs she could find were in fast-food restaurants. Then in October, Darrell’s Uncle Jason, her brother, called and offered her a job in California paying twice what she could make in their neighborhood. Darrell understood why his mother chose to take the job, but he did not like her decision. *I wish he never would have called*, Darrell thought as he walked up the steps to the apartment.

“Hi, baby,” his mother said as she opened the door.

Darrell tried to hurry to his room and shield his face from his mother. He did not want her to notice he had been crying.

“Are you okay?” she asked, reaching an arm out to comfort him.

“I’m fine,” Darrell said, wishing she would leave him alone. He felt bad enough without his mom fussing over him.

“Oh, baby, I know how hard it is for you to leave your friends, especially in the middle of the school year. It hurts me so much to be doing this to you. If there was any other way . . .”

“It’s okay,” Darrell replied.

“You know if I hadn’t gotten laid off—”

“Mom, I’m telling you, it’s okay,” Darrell insisted.

“Your Uncle Jason promising me that job in California seemed like a godsend. I got no choice,” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

He had heard it all before, and he knew it was true. It only made Darrell angrier knowing his mother was right. If she were doing this for some selfish reason, then he could be mad at her, and it would almost feel better. “Mom, stop callin’ me ‘baby,’ okay?”

Darrell escaped to his bedroom and sat on the bed he would use one more night. His suitcase sat alone in the middle of the floor, ready for the morning. The room where he once felt so comfortable, his cave, was no more. All his posters had been stripped from the walls.

Sitting in the dark room by himself, Darrell wanted to do something crazy, anything to avoid moving away from home. *Maybe I could run away tonight and hide in one of those empty warehouses on 35th Street*, he thought. But then he remembered his mother. There was no way he would put her through that. Instead, he stretched out on his bed and stared at the ceiling, waiting for the day to arrive.

In the morning, just before sunrise, Darrell and his mother grabbed their two suitcases and climbed aboard the westward-bound bus. Darrell stared out the window as his neighborhood passed by him for the last time. His mother talked non-stop in a nervous monologue. Darrell paid little attention.

“Darrell, just give it a chance. You might like California. Uncle Jason said our new neighborhood is much nicer than here. He said the houses are well

kept, and we'll be close to the stadium, and you can see baseball and football games."

Darrell closed his eyes and resolved to hate California no matter what anybody said.

"Jason also said the school you'll be going to is pretty new. It's an old neighborhood, but the school is only about fifteen years old. It's called Bluford High. It's named for an African American astronaut," his mother went on.

Darrell closed his eyes and said nothing. He knew his silence would hurt his mother's feelings. But he could not help it. Nothing she could say would convince him that he'd like California.

"Oh, honey," she added, "if you'd just give it a chance."

Darrell sank deeper into his seat.

"I hated to leave my friends too, Darrell," she continued. "I made some wonderful friends at the office and on our street, and I won't know anybody in California either except for my brother and his family."

It's different with you, Mom, Darrell thought. You make friends easily. I'll be in class with kids who've gone through middle school together and had two

months in high school to get used to each other. They'll see this kid from Philadelphia who looks twelve years old, and I'm in for it. Yet he said nothing. He did not feel like explaining things to his mother. She would only worry about him even more.

"Just put a big, friendly smile on your face your first day there, honey, and by the end of the day you'll have at least one nice friend," she said.

Maybe that worked in first grade when everybody was wearing name tags and kids hadn't learned to be mean to each other yet, Darrell thought. But kids learn fast. By third grade, Darrell was glad he had Malik, Big Reggie, and Mark.

But now, he wouldn't have anybody.

Everything Darrell knew and loved was gone. And though she meant well, his mother had no idea how hard it was to be the new kid in school, especially one who is smaller than everyone else.

Darrell remembered that his Uncle Jason was well over six feet tall. A few years ago, he came to Philadelphia to visit, and he looked at then twelve-year-old Darrell and said in a booming voice, "Will you look at that boy? Why is he so skinny? Nobody in our family was ever

that small at his age! Jackie, ain't you feedin' him enough?"

His mother seemed defensive. "Oh, he'll hit his growth spurt anytime now," she said, "He'll shoot up like a spring weed. Then you won't even recognize him, Jason."

Remembering that conversation, Darrell could only think one thing—his mother was wrong.

She refused to accept the truth, Darrell thought. And the truth was that he was still a short, underweight kid, and all the hopes and smiles in the world were not going to change that.

Darrell gazed out the window while the bus raced farther and farther from his home. A feeling of dread weighed heavily on him as the sun crawled slowly into the sky.