

Chapter 1

“Girls, sit down. Your father and I have something important to tell you.”

Darcy Wills glanced at her sister Jamee, wondering if she knew what their mother was about to announce. Jamee, fourteen years old and two years younger than Darcy, shrugged her shoulders and sat down at the table.

“We’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately,” Mom said nervously, sitting down at the head of the table. Darcy’s father sat beside her, gently holding her hand. “We’ve decided to give our marriage a second chance.”

Darcy’s heart jumped into her throat, and Jamee nearly fell out of her chair.

“For real!” Jamee cheered, putting her hands on either side of her face as if she could barely believe what she just heard.

“That’s right,” her father added. “We’ve been going to counseling and we’re gonna try and make it work, for us, for you two, and for Grandma.” Dad’s eyes glistened as he spoke, and Darcy knew he meant every word.

Only months ago, he had reappeared after a five-year absence. Darcy was just eleven years old when he abandoned the family. For years, she had made up stories to explain why he had left. But later, when she found out that he had taken off with another woman, Darcy decided she would never forgive him for the hurt he caused.

Then, last fall, he came back like a stranger one evening. Since that time, he did everything he could to help Darcy, Jamee, and their mother. He even admitted his mistakes, apologized to each of them, and swore to be a father again. At first, Darcy did not believe him, but months had passed, and he was still there, offering advice, support, and love. And now this.

“Girls, I understand this might be difficult. I’m not going to forget what your father did, and I don’t expect you to either,” Mom added, looking at her husband. “But he’s a different man now. I

believe what he says, and we both want us to be a family again.”

Before Mom finished her sentence, Jamee got up and hugged her parents. “I’m so happy,” she repeated over and over again.

Darcy quickly followed, putting her arms around her parents. The years of bitterness seemed to thaw in the embrace. Even though part of her was still angry at her father, another bigger part was thrilled that he was back and that he wanted to be with them.

“There’s something else we want to tell you,” Mom said, gently pulling away from the hug. “We’re moving.”

“What?” Darcy yelled, pretending to be surprised. Her father had admitted to Jamee and Darcy that he wanted to move the family out of their old apartment and into a nearby house. He had even taken Darcy and her sister to see the house, though he never promised them he would buy it.

“We found a small house a few blocks away. It’s so close you two will still be able to go to Bluford High School, but it has more room and a nice little yard for Grandma,” Mom explained. “We’ll be moving in about a week.”

“I can’t believe this. Wait till I tell everyone at school!” Jamee said with a wide toothy smile. Darcy agreed. She couldn’t wait to tell her friends about the sudden changes in her life.

As she got ready for bed that night, Darcy wondered if there were any other surprises in store for her in the days ahead.

The next morning, Darcy raced off to Bluford High, eager to tell her boyfriend Hakeem the good news about her family. Over the past year, Darcy and Hakeem had become very close. Months ago, he helped her deal with the sudden arrival of her father and was supportive weeks later when Jamee ran away from home. Darcy got even closer to Hakeem when he told her his father had been diagnosed with cancer earlier in the year. At least now, Darcy figured, she had something good to share with him. As she reached school, Darcy spotted Hakeem riding his silver motorbike into the school parking lot.

“Hakeem!” she cried, running over to him. “I’ve got the best news! My parents are getting back together, and we’re moving into a new house with a backyard and everything!”

Hakeem gave Darcy a hug, but she felt right away that there was something wrong. His arms were like dead weights around her, and the embrace did not last long before Hakeem pulled away.

“That’s great, Darcy,” he said, getting off the motorbike. He began to walk ahead, shoulders down and staring at the ground. Darcy remained a few steps behind, stunned.

“Hakeem, is everything okay?”

Hakeem stopped and slowly turned to look at her. “D-dad c-can’t handle the job like he used to,” said Hakeem, stuttering as he often did when nervous, “not since the chemotherapy t-treatments. That cancer really whipped him bad. He works two or three hours, then he’s no good for the rest of the day.”

Darcy walked up to Hakeem and took his hand. “I’m sorry, Hakeem,” she said, suddenly feeling foolish.

“It’s not good,” Hakeem continued, shaking his head. “Dad’s brother has a store in Detroit, where they sell furniture and TV’s and stuff, and he’s offered Dad a job there. It would be a lot easier for him to handle, mostly keeping up with the inventory. Dad’s real good with numbers. He just can’t work real long hours, that’s all.”

Darcy felt as if her heart had dropped into her knees. *Detroit?* It was so far from California, it might as well be another planet. For a second, Darcy's tongue felt glued to the back of her throat, and she was unable to speak.

"So does this mean you're going to move?" she asked.

"Yeah, if Dad takes the job," Hakeem said somberly. "He hasn't made up his mind yet. He said he needs to talk to his doctors. But if he decides to take it, we would leave as soon as the school year ends."

Darcy's mind spun like a whirlwind. Waking up this morning, Darcy felt as if her life was on a wonderful upswing, and nothing could go wrong. Now everything felt different. Just as quickly as she had gotten her family back, Darcy was now at risk of losing her boyfriend.

"I . . . I don't know what to say," Darcy stammered, forcing back tears.

"Nothing is definite yet," Hakeem assured her. "I just wanted you to know that I might have to move away."

Hakeem's last words seemed to hang in the air. *Move away.* Just minutes earlier she had so many plans for the summer. Now all that was threatened.

“You can’t leave Bluford now,” she declared. “I mean, don’t you have a relative or someone you could live with? Maybe you could stay with Cooper or something.” Cooper Hodden was one of Hakeem and Darcy’s closest friends. She was sure Cooper would let Hakeem stay with his family. Even as she spoke, Darcy knew she was being selfish, but she could not stop herself. She felt as if someone was robbing her.

“I can’t leave my family, Darcy. They depend on me,” Hakeem said, stepping away from her, as if something she said pained him. “Look, I don’t know how this is all gonna turn out. The doctors don’t even know, not yet. But if Mom and Dad and the rest of the kids have to go to Detroit, then I have to be there, too. I don’t want to go, but—”

The school bell rang loudly, signaling the start of morning classes. “We gotta go, Darcy. We’ll talk about this later.” Hakeem quickly turned and rushed into the building, leaving Darcy alone in the parking lot.

Tarah Carson, Darcy’s closest friend, shook her head when Darcy told her Hakeem might be moving. They were

standing at a water fountain between classes. "Girl," Tarah said, "Hakeem's father is real sick. That chemo is tough to handle. I know because my neighbor went through it, and he ain't been himself ever since."

"But what about *us*?" Darcy wailed. "This was supposed to be our first summer together."

"Listen, Darcy. Right now Hakeem's gotta do what he can for his family. They're all goin' through this, not just him. His little sisters and his mother are sufferin' too," Tarah explained.

"I know what you're saying, and I feel bad for them, especially for his dad," Darcy said, wiping her eyes. "But at the same time, I feel so bad for me, too. Is that wrong, Tarah? Am I a bad person to feel that way?"

"No, Hakeem's your boyfriend. Of course you don't want to see him go! If someone told me Cooper had to move, I don't know what I'd do," she admitted, giving Darcy a sympathetic hug. "But you gotta put yourself in his shoes too."

Darcy nodded. "Thanks, Tarah," she said, fighting back more tears. She knew Tarah was right. Moving would be harder on Hakeem than anyone else. Besides

worrying about his father, he would be losing everything—his school, his friends, his neighborhood, and her. But understanding Hakeem’s troubles only made her feel worse. *What about us?* she thought to herself again, dread gathering in her chest like storm clouds in a summer sky.

After school, Darcy went straight home. She wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone. Normally, she would go into her bedroom when she wanted to be alone, but now her room was cluttered with boxes in preparation for moving into the new house. Frustrated, she sat in the living room and flipped through a magazine. Jamee arrived from school a few minutes later.

“Hey, Darcy, guess what?” Jamee said, throwing her school bag on the couch. “Liselle Mason, the girl who lives across the street, wants to hire you.”

“Hire me? For what?” Darcy asked. “I hardly know her.” Liselle had been a junior at Bluford when Darcy was in eighth grade. All Darcy remembered about Liselle was that she had been popular until she got pregnant and dropped out of Bluford. Once in a while, Darcy

saw Liselle at the grocery store, but she never said more than a quick hello.

"I ran into her outside, and she told me she needs a babysitter. She asked me if you were available," Jamee said, fishing a piece of paper from her pocket. "She needs someone to watch her baby while she goes back to school. Here's her phone number. I told her you'd call her."

Darcy was surprised by Liselle's offer. Still, she could use the money. And working would be better than sitting around feeling sorry for herself if Hakeem left, she thought. "Thanks. I'll call her tonight," Darcy said, getting up from the couch to check on Grandma.

In the darkened bedroom, Darcy found Grandma sitting in her chair staring into space.

"Hey, Grandma," Darcy said, kneeling down and taking her grandmother's thickly-veined hand. "We're gonna move into our new house soon. That'll be so good. We're gonna have a backyard and you can watch the birds—"

"I'm cold," Grandma declared, even though it was warm in the apartment. "Why isn't the heater on?"

"I'll get your shawl, Grandma," Darcy said. She went to the nearby dresser and

reached into the top drawer.

“Is that better?” she asked, draping the shawl on Grandma’s thin shoulders.

“No,” she snapped. “It’s still cold.”

Darcy noticed that her grandmother seemed to be having more cranky spells lately. *Could her condition be worsening?* Darcy wondered. Ever since Grandma’s first stroke over a year ago, Darcy feared that the family might be forced to send Grandma to a nursing home. She imagined her grandmother calling out her name in the middle of the night, only to have a stranger appear at her bedside. The thought of Grandma alone and frightened in unfamiliar surroundings made Darcy shudder. There was no way she would allow Grandma to be put into such a place. No way.

After dinner, Darcy called Liselle Mason. “Thanks for calling,” Liselle said. “I guess your sister told you why I asked you to call.”

“Yes,” Darcy replied. “She said you were looking for a babysitter.”

“That’s right. I’m heading back to school this summer, and I wanted to know if you’d be interested in babysitting my daughter a couple days a week. She’s just two years old, but she’s an angel.”

“I’d love to watch her for you,” Darcy said, trying to sound enthusiastic, though her thoughts kept drifting back to Hakeem. Darcy agreed to visit Liselle’s apartment and meet the baby after school the next day. As soon as she hung up the phone with Liselle, Darcy tried to call Hakeem, but his phone was busy. She gave up after two more attempts.

Why doesn’t he call me? she wondered as she lay in bed that night. Her small bedroom was almost completely packed and ready to be moved. In the darkness, the shadows of boxes and the stale smell of cardboard made her room seem eerie and unfamiliar. Everything she had grown used to seemed to be changing. Some of it was good, and some was bad. But it was all different, and Darcy felt powerless to stop it.

“I wish some things never changed,” Darcy whispered, thinking of Hakeem and wondering why he didn’t call.