

Chapter 1

“Lionel, can you read the poem to us?”

Lionel Shephard cringed. It was the third time Mrs. Henley, his English teacher at Bluford High School, called on him today.

First she'd asked him to define what the American Dream was. Lionel joked that it was what happened when everybody in the country was sleeping. Dontrell Neeves, his classmate and friend since second grade, laughed out loud.

“You trippin,' L,” he whispered.

Mrs. Henley smiled and moved on, but she returned a few minutes later, pressing him with another question. She even circled to the back row where he sat, stopping just a few feet from his desk. Her eyes beamed through her glasses like

two bright headlights focused on him.

“So, as an American citizen, Lionel, what is *your* dream?”

Lionel wanted to ask her why she was always picking on him. It had been going on since he started his freshman year a month ago. Jamar Coles, his friend from the car wash where he worked weekends, would have told her off right there in the middle of class.

“Get yo’ bug-eyes outta my face.”

Lionel could picture Jamar shoving a desk at her and walking out in the middle of class. Of course, Jamar had dropped out of high school last year. Lionel often thought of doing that, but he knew his dad would never allow it. Neither would Mom, though she was sitting in a sandy army base on the other side of the world, too far away to do anything about it if he did.

“Basketball. I’m gonna play in the NBA one day,” Lionel answered. He meant it, though half the class snickered at him.

“Yeah, me too. We all gonna play,” said Rasheed Watkins from the far corner of the room. A few other students giggled.

“Why you gotta say that?” cut in Malika Shaw from the front row. “People

said I wouldn't run hurdles again after I broke my ankle, but they were wrong. I'm still running."

"Whatever," Rasheed said, rolling his eyes. "He's dreamin' if he thinks he's gonna play in the NBA. Maybe smokin' something too."

"Man, I'll smoke you on the court right now," Lionel shot back.

What did Rasheed know? He wasn't there when Lionel's squad at the Greene Street Police Athletic League won the summer basketball tournament. Lionel had blocked a shot in the final seconds, allowing Greene Street to defeat the Tanner Street Titans for the first time in three years. Officer Hodden, his coach, was so happy that he'd lifted Lionel up in the middle of the court.

"You're a smart player, Lionel. Keep playin' like that and you might have a future in the sport," he'd said. It was one of the few times Lionel could remember anyone calling him smart. On the court, it was true. But school was a different story.

"Lionel? Can you read the poem to us?" Mrs. Henley repeated, snapping him from his thoughts.

Why wouldn't she just skip him? He

could handle that, coasting in the back row, working in small groups and copying what other kids did, getting them to do the work for him. He'd been doing it for years. Hadn't she realized what his middle school teachers knew, that he wasn't the one to call on in class?

"Which poem?" Lionel asked, sitting up in his desk. He knew class was almost over.

Rasheed rolled his eyes and sucked his teeth. "I told you he's dreamin', Mrs. Henley," he said.

"Rasheed, I am about to be your nightmare," Lionel cut back.

"That's enough, gentlemen," Mrs. Henley said. "The poem's called 'Harlem,' by Langston Hughes. It's on page sixty-two."

Lionel reached down and dragged his heavy textbook off the floor. Reluctantly he flipped it open, his heart starting to pound. He hated being put on the spot in class. It made his temples hurt and his palms go clammy and cold. Sometimes, it even made it difficult to focus, like right now.

"What page again?"

"Boy, don't you listen?" Rasheed hissed.

“That’s enough,” Mrs. Henley repeated firmly, flashing Rasheed a look that silenced him. “Page sixty-two, Lionel.”

Several students snickered. Lionel could feel the eyes of his classmates crawling over him, judging him. It was like the day back in fifth grade, before Mom’s army unit was deployed, when he really started having trouble in school.

Then Mr. Grabowski, a substitute teacher in his science class, asked him to read aloud a passage about insects. Lionel had always been one of the weakest readers in class. For a time, he got extra help figuring out letters and sounds. And he used what he knew the day Mr. Grabowski called on him. But it didn’t help with the word “mosquito.”

“*M-m-moss*,” he’d stammered, trying to make the letters on the page into sounds that made sense. “*Moss-quit-oh*,” he had said finally, the word as meaningless as those countless tests he’d filled in with number two pencils each year.

“*Moss quit?!*” teased a girl next to him. Lionel could still hear how the beads at the ends of her braids clicked as she shook her head at him, her face twisted into a cruel smirk. At the time,

Lionel was one of the shortest kids in class. It was years before the growth spurt that made him a wiry six-footer over the summer.

“Boy, I think your brain just quit,” she had mocked. The whole class erupted in laughter. Lionel’s face seared with embarrassment.

“I think you should quit talking ’cause your breath stink,” he snapped back.

“At least I ain’t like you—too stupid for school,” she had said before Mr. Grabowski settled them down.

Though it happened years ago, Lionel remembered the moment as if it was yesterday. One ugly word from that day still echoed in his head whenever teachers tried to push him.

Stupid.

He heard it now with Mrs. Henley leaning toward him. Maybe it was true. Lionel felt that way whenever he struggled with reading and writing.

It started back in elementary school with him always being behind his peers. But it got worse in middle school, especially after Mom left.

At the time, his teachers seemed to feel sorry for him. They said nothing when he withdrew to the back of the

room with the other kids who hated school. They didn't yell as much when his homework was late or when he acted up in class. It was as if they knew that Dad was struggling to raise him and his little sister Kendra, and they didn't want to trouble him.

Lionel expected Bluford High School would be more of the same, but he was wrong. Mrs. Henley and his other teachers were constantly on his case, especially today.

"I'll read it, Mrs. Henley," said Malika from her corner seat in the second row. She glanced over at him, her hair pulled back behind her head, making her curls spill like coppery ribbons down her neck. She was someone who always answered Mrs. Henley's questions. Sometimes she seemed to bail Lionel out when he didn't have an answer.

Lionel hoped Mrs. Henley would give up on him and let Malika read.

"No, thank you, Malika. We know what your voice sounds like. I want to hear Lionel's for once," Mrs. Henley said. "Go on, Lionel."

Lionel glanced down at the open page. Words covered just half of it, so he knew the poem was short. And he'd

heard Mrs. Henley say the title, so he knew what the first word was. But what about the rest?

“Why do we have to read a poem anyway?” he asked.

It’s what he often did when teachers tried to get in his face: distract them, push back, waste time. But this time, he meant it. Reading out loud wasn’t going to bring Mom home or allow Dad to work less or stop the bullets that killed his neighbor’s grandson in his neighborhood a couple of years ago.

“It’s not like this or any poem really matters when you step out of this school, Mrs. Henley,” Lionel continued. “I mean maybe it matters somewhere, but not here.”

Mrs. Henley nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s deep, yo,” Dontrell said.

“I think you and Langston Hughes might have more in common than you think, Lionel,” she said with a knowing grin. “Why don’t you read it and we’ll see.”

The class grew silent again. Lionel saw Malika looking at him. Rasheed too.

Lionel could feel tiny drops of sweat gathering on his forehead. His heart started to pound. His legs bounced nervously. He took a deep breath and

looked at the words, at the first letters. He tried to focus on them, figure them out. But in his mind he could hear how childish he would sound. He could feel the embarrassment already, the laughter that was sure to rain down on him. His hands curled into fists.

Ring!

The bell signaling the end of first period blared loudly overhead. Lionel sighed with relief and closed his eyes as the class exploded into chaos. Students jumped from their desks and rushed to the hallway. He slammed his book shut and made his way toward the doorway when he heard Mrs. Henley call out behind him.

“We’ll have to continue this on Monday,” she announced. “Lionel, can you come here for a second please?”

Lionel cringed. Why couldn’t she just leave him alone? He dragged himself to her desk on the other side of the room, looking back once to see Malika disappear down the hallway.

“I gotta go to my next class,” he said.

“I know, but I just want to give you this,” she said, handing him a crisp white envelope.

“What is it?”

“A letter for your parents.”

“For what?!”

“Because you barely participate in class. You never handed in your first assignment, and on your last quiz you scored a 50,” she explained. “I think you’re capable of more, and I want your parents to know it.”

“Why you gotta be like that, Mrs. Henley?” Lionel asked, thinking of how upset Dad would be to see the note. “I didn’t do nothin’ wrong today.”

“No you didn’t, but that doesn’t change what I just said. I want to see you focus on your work, and I think this letter can help. It’s only the first marking period. You still have time to change how this class is going, but you need to start working now, and your parents need to know that.”

Lionel rolled his eyes. Dad said the same thing when Lionel announced his plan to join the NBA the night his team won the Police Athletic League tournament.

“You can keep messin’ around on the court all you want,” Dad had said. *“But I want to see you spend some more time worrying about school. You’re getting older, and it’s time you start takin’ your*

education seriously.”

Lionel hated Dad’s words. *Messing around on the court.* It was an insult, as if he was playing a kid’s game, not something serious.

“*Why you gotta talk about it like that? I can make more money playin’ ball than I’ll ever make in school,*” Lionel had tried to explain.

“*Yeah, Dad!*” his little sister Kendra had cheered. “*Then he can buy us a new house like on that show Phat Cribs. We could have a pool and four cars and—*”

“*That’s enough, baby.*”

“*He’s really good, Leroy. You should see how quick he is,*” Aunt Mimi had chimed in, bouncing her daughter, Sahara, on her knee. Aunt Mimi was Dad’s younger sister. She moved in to help out right after Mom left. When Lionel started seventh grade, she announced she was pregnant, and her boyfriend was going to marry her. But that never happened.

“*Yeah, I know he’s quick, Mimi, but there are a hundred quick kids a block from here. How many of ’em make it to the NBA?*”

Aunt Mimi didn’t answer.

“*Whatever,*” Lionel had grumbled.

“Don’t you whatever me, boy. I’m trying to talk some sense into you. School is your ticket out of here, not basketball. Understand?” his father had said, pointing his arm toward the barred front window that faced Cypress Street.

Lionel knew what was out there. Down the block was Kwik Cash, where strangers wandered in at all hours to sell stuff for money. Almost everything there was stolen. Further down was Discount Liquors and Tez’s Lounge, a neighborhood bar with graffiti-stained stucco walls that smelled of urine. The area was dangerous, especially after dark. Some nights, gunshots cracked and popped in the distance.

“But Dad, if I go pro, we can move—”

“Enough, Lionel! What happens if you don’t make it, huh? What happens if you get hurt? You’ll just be another kid without an education or a future. Maybe you wind up in jail. Maybe worse. I can’t have that. You understand?”

Lionel shrugged, struggling not to argue with his father.

“Yeah, I understand, Dad. But you don’t,” he’d added under his breath.

Now Mrs. Henley was trying to tell him the same thing.

“Okay, Mrs. Henley, I’ll take the note to him,” Lionel lied. He knew he’d toss the letter in the trash as soon as he left the classroom. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Good,” Mrs. Henley replied. “And one last thing, Lionel. I want you to have your dad sign it. Bring it back on Monday and be ready to read your poem to the class.”