

## ***Chapter 1***

“I can’t do this again, Carl. I don’t have the strength, not without Mama.”

Darcy Wills hid in the dark hallway listening to the sound of her mother’s weary voice. It was 11:00 at night, and Mom was in the bedroom talking with Dad. Their door was closed. But through the thin walls of her family’s small house, Darcy could hear them as if they were standing right in front of her.

“So what are you trying to say?” Dad asked. His voice was strained, as if he was carrying a heavy block of cement on his back.

Darcy stood still as a statue, careful not to make a sound that would alert her parents to the fact that she was just a few feet away in the dark.

“I don’t know, Carl,” Mom answered.

“I don’t know anything anymore.”

There was a moment of silence, and Darcy thought she heard her mother sob.

“I just don’t have a good feeling about any of this.”

So it *was* true, Darcy thought. Something was definitely wrong with her parents. Darcy had sensed it for days. She had noticed tension between them and had even heard Mom snap a few times, but until now she figured her mother was still recovering from the loss of Grandma.

Only three weeks ago, after a slow, steady decline in her health, Grandma had died in her sleep in the bedroom at the end of the hallway. The loss left a depressing void in the house. But in the three weeks that had passed, the sadness was replaced by an uncomfortable silence, one Darcy couldn’t understand.

“Just don’t worry about it, Darce,” said her sister Jamee last week. Jamee was fourteen, two years younger than Darcy. “Anyway, it’s none of your business. Besides, Mom’s tough, and Dad’s here. They’ll be okay.”

Darcy had rolled her eyes at her sister’s comment. Jamee wasn’t the best

person to judge a situation. Only six months ago, she had dated Bobby Wallace, a sixteen-year-old who messed with drugs, hit Jamee, and convinced her to shoplift for him.

“How can you be so sure?” Darcy had asked.

Jamee shrugged off the question. “You know what your problem is, Darcy? You think too much,” she said and then left to go to the movies with her friend Cindy Gibson. It was what Jamee always did when anything serious confronted her. Run away. Hide. Ignore it. Anything to avoid things that were unpleasant or difficult. It was Jamee’s way, not Darcy’s.

*No, the problem is that you don’t think enough,* Darcy thought as she watched her sister leave. No matter what Jamee said, Darcy knew the issue with her parents was serious. For weeks, Mom had walked around in a daze, sometimes, it seemed, on the verge of tears.

Yesterday, Darcy even spotted her watching what she hated most—a TV show about a hospital emergency room. For as long as Darcy could remember, Mom had forbidden all medical shows when she was around.

“I see that stuff every day at work. I’m not going to watch it when I’m home,” she had once declared. Mom was an emergency room nurse. Though she rarely discussed what she saw at the hospital, Darcy knew that her mother witnessed victims of shootings, stabbings, car accidents, and all sorts of diseases. No wonder she didn’t want to see it on TV. But last night, she did not even seem to notice the TV doctors trying to revive a patient who had a heart attack. It was as if her mind was somewhere else. As if she wasn’t in the room, even though her body was sprawled across the couch.

But tonight, Mom was even worse. Her face looked worn when she came home from the hospital. It wasn’t the usual tiredness that made her stretch out on the couch and sleep after she got home. It was deeper, as if Mom’s spirit was drained like an old battery.

“Are you all right?” Darcy had asked as Mom came in the front door, slumped onto the living room sofa, and sighed. She had not even said hello to Dad, who was making dinner for her in the kitchen.

“I’m fine,” Mom grumbled. Her voice

had a hollow sound to it, as if she didn't believe her own words.

Darcy was certain her parents were having serious problems. That had to be why Mom was acting so strange. The last time Darcy had witnessed her parents fighting was when she was in middle school, just before her father left. There was the same tension in the house then, the same awkward silence.

"Are you sure you're okay, Mom?" Darcy had asked, hoping her mother would explain what was bothering her. Darcy couldn't help remembering the August day years ago when Dad took her and Jamee out for ice cream. She recalled the pained look on his face and the heavy drag of his steps on the concrete. It was the last thing he did with them before he took off, before the five-year span without a phone call, a birthday card, or a single word.

Mom cried every night for a month when Dad left. Seeing her so upset was almost worse than losing Dad. It was a kind of torture that made Darcy shudder whenever she remembered it. Only Grandma's strength enabled Mom to work full time, pay the bills, and hold the family together. Now Grandma was

gone, and Darcy knew that if her parents split up again, there would be no one for Mom to turn to.

“Yes, I’m sure!” Mom snapped. “I’m just tired. You understand? And you know the one thing that bothers me most when I’m tired? It’s people asking me what’s wrong.”

“Sorry,” Darcy said, stepping back. She had not expected Mom to get so angry. It was just more proof that there were major problems in the family.

For the rest of the evening, Mom didn’t say a word, even when Jamee came home a half hour late from the movies.

“Cindy’s mom was late picking us up,” Jamee explained as soon as she walked in.

Darcy did not believe her sister. There was something rehearsed about what she said, as if she had practiced it a few times. But Mom didn’t even acknowledge Jamee, who quickly grabbed the cordless phone from the kitchen and retreated into her room.

For two hours, except for the TV, everything was unnaturally quiet. But Darcy knew it was a false calm, like the muffled silence just before a bad storm.

As soon as her parents headed into the bedroom, Darcy turned out the lights, locked the doors, and crept into the hallway to find out what was wrong. Now she stood outside her parents' bedroom, trying to catch pieces of their private conversation.

"What can I say to make you feel better about this?" Dad said. Darcy could feel the strain in his voice. He was upset.

"There's nothing you can say," Mom replied. "I'm too old for this, and I don't want to be in this situation. I just can't do it again, Carl. I just can't."

Suddenly Jamee's bedroom door opened, and she stepped into the hallway. Darcy turned and tried to act as if she was walking toward her own bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Jamee whispered, nearly running into Darcy.

"Just going to bed."

"No you're not. You're listening to Mom and Dad, aren't you?"

"No," Darcy whispered. "And keep your voice down."

"Darcy, you're the worst liar. Even in the dark, I can tell you aren't telling the truth. Why don't you just leave them alone?"

“Because something is wrong, Jamee. I know it. They didn’t say a word to each other at dinner tonight, and even you had to notice that Mom’s been out of it. I’m just worried.”

“Maybe she’s just in a bad mood or something,” Jamee said, but her whisper cracked. Darcy could see Jamee’s eyes dart back and forth in the darkness. She was shaking her head the way she always did when she was upset.

Though Jamee talked tough, Darcy knew that her younger sister looked up to Dad more than anyone in the world. Jamee would take it harder than anyone if Mom and Dad were having problems.

“I hope that’s all it is, Jamee,” Darcy said, though she was sure it wasn’t. And she suspected Jamee felt the same way.

Jamee walked into the kitchen, hung up the phone she had grabbed earlier, and poured herself a glass of water. Darcy followed her.

“Why can’t things just be easy for once?” Jamee said, leaning against the kitchen wall.

The two were silent for a second. Darcy wished Grandma was there to talk to. Or that Hakeem, her ex-boyfriend, was somewhere nearby so

she could call him. But Grandma was gone, dead from a massive stroke, and Hakeem was living in Detroit, far away from their crowded neighborhood in southern California.

“I don’t wanna think about something bad happening with Mom and Dad. I just can’t deal with that,” Jamee confessed between sips of water.

“Like you said. Maybe it’s not that bad,” Darcy replied, trying to keep her sister’s spirits up.

“Yeah right,” Jamee whispered bitterly. “When are things around here ever better than you expected?”

Before Darcy could reply, her sister turned and walked out of the kitchen. “I’m going to bed,” Jamee said as she left. A second later, her bedroom door closed with a soft thud.

Darcy stood at the edge of the dark hallway and listened.

The house was deathly quiet, as if everything had been swept under a heavy blanket of gloom. Reluctantly, she decided to go to bed too.

Lying in bed, Darcy stared at the shadowy ceiling of her room, unable to relax. It was so quiet she could hear the

rhythmic click of her watch on the other side of the room.

*Tick tick tick.* Like the heartbeat of some unwanted guest.

Darcy's body was tired from a full day of work at Scoops, the new ice cream parlor not far from Bluford High, where she had just finished her sophomore year. But her mind was wide awake, as if she had just drunk ten cups of coffee.

It had been this way for days, even before she noticed the strange tension between her parents. As soon as it got quiet and she was ready to go to sleep, Darcy would remember the afternoon weeks ago, when she was attacked by Brian Mason.

Often the memory was so strong, it was as if he was in the room with her, pinning her down, threatening her again, making her heart race with fear.

*"What's wrong with you?"* Brian's words still insulted her, bouncing inside her mind like ricocheting bullets. When he attacked, Darcy had struggled to free herself, but Brian's grip was strong, like a vise crushing her arm. Sometimes, she still felt the pain from where he had pinned her against the couch in his

apartment.

“Stop it!” she had demanded. “Let me go.”

It had been a nightmare that caught Darcy completely off-guard. She had met Brian just before summer vacation began when she babysat for his sister, Liselle. At first, he seemed nice, and for a time, Darcy was flattered by his attention, especially after her old boyfriend, Hakeem Randall, broke up with her. On the day of the attack, Brian invited her to spend time alone with him, and she agreed, lying to her parents so they would let her out. But once she got there, Brian started getting physical with her. Too physical.

“*You’re acting like a baby,*” Brian had yelled when Darcy tried to stop him from lifting up her shirt.

Darcy could still feel him gripping her, his wet lips pushing against her neck, his roving hands. His musky smell. On that afternoon, he had touched her more than any other boy, even Hakeem.

No one except Mom and Dad knew of the attack. Not Jamee. Not Hakeem. Not even Tarah Carson, Darcy’s best friend. It was a secret, an invisible scar Darcy

faced alone each night.

*If Dad hadn't shown up . . .*

Darcy could not bear the thought, yet she couldn't escape it either. She knew the dark corner it went to. It was the same conclusion every night.

In fifth grade, just before Dad left, Darcy had gotten into a fight at school with a seventh grade boy who pulled her bra strap, making it snap painfully against her back. To the kid, it was just a joke. But Dad had seen what happened, grabbed the boy and dragged him to the principal's office.

*"What's wrong with you, boy? You treat girls with respect, you hear me!"* Dad had yelled, holding the kid's shirt in his clenched fist. Even the principal looked scared.

It was then Darcy knew her father would always keep her safe. Would protect her when she needed it. Would never allow anyone to hurt her. Dad had proved that again when Brian attacked. He had saved her. He had stopped Brian from going any further. He had found her and brought her home.

But now, with her parents fighting, it seemed Dad might not always be there. Maybe he would go away again, perhaps

for good.

Darcy trembled in her bed.

*If Dad hadn't shown up . . .*

*If Dad wasn't there . . .*

*If Dad leaves again . . .*

Darcy's mind raced, as it had each night for the past week. In the shadows, she could almost feel the specter of Brian watching her. And even though she knew he was gone, that he had moved over 300 miles away to Oakland to live with his aunt, Darcy still could not shake the damage he had done, the crack he had put in her world, one that left voices deep inside her which she could not silence.

*"You're not safe,"* the voices said. *"Boys can't be trusted. The world is dangerous. Your father won't always be there to protect you."*