

Chapter 1

“Goodbye, Darcy,” Hakeem Randall said, gently letting go of Darcy Wills, his girlfriend for the past year. The tears in her eyes were like daggers slicing deep into his heart.

“Goodbye, Hakeem.”

He watched her walk down the short driveway. If there was anything he could do to stop his family from moving away, he would have done it. But the decision was out of his hands.

Squinting under the Monday morning sun, Hakeem felt like someone had wrapped him in a heavy blanket of gloom. He wouldn't see Darcy again this summer. Maybe not ever. And in just a matter of hours, his old friends at Bluford High School and his home in

southern California would be thousands of miles away.

“I’m gonna miss you, girl,” he mumbled as Darcy turned the corner and disappeared. “You and everything else.”

Just weeks ago, his parents had informed him that they were moving the family to Detroit to live with Uncle James and Aunt Lorraine. The news struck Hakeem like a bomb blast, turning his world upside down overnight. Yet, as bad as it was, the announcement wasn’t the worst thing he heard recently.

Five months ago, his father was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Surgery, chemotherapy, and the sickness it caused had reduced Dad’s strength so much that he could no longer perform his job as a warehouse manager. For three months, Hakeem watched as his father’s size diminished and his face aged. Though the treatment had stopped the disease, it left Dad a shadow of his former self, and it devastated the family’s savings.

“We’ve spent everything we had on medical bills, baby,” Mom said tearfully a few weeks ago. “I don’t know what’s gonna happen. But no matter what, I need you to be strong, Hakeem. I need

you to be the man around here.”

Hakeem nodded solemnly in response, expecting that the family would find a small apartment nearby. He was even ready to share a bedroom with his seven-year-old twin sisters so his parents could save money. But Hakeem never imagined that his Uncle James would invite the family to Detroit or that Dad would agree to go.

“I don’t know what choice we have,” Hakeem’s father explained when he told the family the news. “Even though the cancer’s stopped, the doctors say it could be months before I get my strength back. And without our savings, we can’t afford to stay here any more,” he said, massaging his forehead, his scratchy voice sounding much older than his forty years. “I wish I didn’t have to do this to you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. It’ll be all right,” Hakeem had replied, half believing his words. Besides their money problems, Hakeem knew there was always a chance the cancer could return, a possibility which kept him up many nights, his heart racing with fear. In a few days, Dad would meet with doctors in Detroit to see if the cancer was still in remission.

Even though no one admitted it, Hakeem knew one reason Dad was moving them to Detroit was to keep his family together in case his health took a turn for the worse.

Watching the movers load his family's belongings into the storage truck, Hakeem felt as he had years earlier when someone robbed his church. The stolen money had been collected for a little girl who had leukemia, but that didn't stop the thieves from taking every cent. He had decided then that life was cruel. His father's cancer diagnosis, his horrific battle with the disease, and the sudden move were just the latest proof.

"You all right, Hakeem?" Dad asked, snapping Hakeem from his thoughts. "I know it isn't easy sayin' goodbye to your friends, especially Darcy."

"I'm fine, Dad. Darcy and I said what we had to say," Hakeem replied, trying to hide his sadness. *Be strong*, he reminded himself.

"That's it," his mother said as the movers closed the back of the truck. "Everything's packed, and the airport taxi is here. We gotta leave now. Come on, everyone."

Hakeem grabbed his suitcase, the

notebook he used as a journal, and his old guitar, and took one last look at his house. Without furniture and pictures, it was a cold and empty shell, not the place where he grew up.

I can't believe I'm not coming back, he thought, glancing down the street toward his school, Bluford High, just a few blocks away.

I need you to be the man around here, his mother's words echoed in his mind.

"Come on, son," his father urged. The family was waiting in the cab.

Hakeem took a deep breath, wiped his eyes, and said a silent goodbye to his world.

*Good men beat down
Smiles turn to frowns
There is no logic
In a world so tragic*

Hakeem read the words from his notebook. He had written them when his father first mentioned the move to Detroit. It seemed as if years had passed, not weeks. He flipped the page bitterly.

The dull hum of the plane's engines had lulled the rest of his family to sleep,

but Hakeem could not relax. His mind swirled with thoughts of Darcy and his closest friends, Cooper and Tarah.

Maybe one day he'd write a song for them, he thought. Hakeem turned to a blank sheet of paper and stared at the tiny blue lines on the page. For years, he'd been singing and playing his guitar. He joined his church choir in second grade. Later, when he developed a stuttering problem in middle school, he discovered that it disappeared whenever he sang. Years ago, Mr. Smalley, the choir director, praised his voice.

"God gave you some talents, young man. Be sure you use them."

Hakeem hadn't sung for the church in years. But he did perform from time to time at Bluford. Even when he wasn't singing, he was always jotting lyrics in his notebook for songs he might sing one day. Music and writing were two things he relied on when the rest of the world was a mess. In his songs, he could control everything. There was no cancer. No goodbyes. Not unless he decided it.

Hakeem glanced at the notebook and tried to remember everything he knew about Detroit. He'd been there once before. It was ten years ago, when he

was just six years old. Then, his father was to him the strongest person in the world. A person immune to disease, to cancer and chemotherapy. A superhero.

What Hakeem did most during the visit was eat huge dinners at his aunt and uncle's house and play video games with his cousin Savon. The two boys were nearly the same age, though Savon was much heavier.

"Savon's a husky boy," his mother used to say.

During the weeks he stayed in Detroit, Hakeem and Savon played for hours on end. Hakeem remembered once the two were playing catch in the street when some teens stole their ball.

"Thanks, Wimpy and Blimpy," the teens mocked as they strolled down the street, passing the ball around. The moment had stuck in Hakeem's mind. The teasing hurt, but it had also made him feel close to his cousin. They shared a special bond that moment. They were family.

But when Hakeem returned to California, he gradually lost touch with Savon. An awkward phone conversation three years ago at Christmas was the last time they talked. And now, after so

many years, the dim memory of Detroit was bittersweet, a reminder of a past long gone.

Staring out of the small window next to his seat, Hakeem watched a veil of wispy clouds pass beneath him. His memories did little to erase the hole the move was carving into his life.

I miss home already, he thought, stretching back in his seat and closing his eyes.

I miss home.

“Are we there yet? Are we at Uncle James’s house?” asked Charlene, one of Hakeem’s younger twin sisters.

“Almost,” Dad said wearily from the passenger seat of the rental car. Since Dad got sick, Mom drove the family everywhere.

“You’ve been asking that ever since we landed,” snapped Charmaine, rolling her eyes at her sister. “Can’t you just stop talking?”

Hakeem yawned and said nothing. The hour wait to get off the plane and pick up their bags was tiring. Now, the twenty-five minute drive through city traffic to Uncle James’s house felt like slow torture. His sisters only made it

worse.

“Is this it?” Charlene asked suddenly as the car stopped at a traffic light. “Is this where we’re going to live at?”

“Shut up,” Charmaine groaned.

“*Girls!*” Mom snapped. “If you don’t stop whining, I’m gonna give you both somethin’ to whine about.”

“Make a right up there on Sawyer Street,” Dad interrupted. His tired voice silenced everyone.

Outside, the houses were older and more densely packed than those back home. Made of red brick, many were row homes, though a few bigger houses did stand alone on some blocks. At the end of one street, Hakeem spotted a playground with a swing set and basketball court. A steel fence surrounded the park, making it look more like a prison yard than a playground.

Several teenage boys were shooting baskets as Hakeem and his family passed. One reminded Hakeem of his best friend, Cooper Hodden. Coop was one of the toughest people he knew, but he was also one of the nicest. When he found out that Hakeem was moving away, Coop had almost cried.

“Stay with *us*, Hak! My mom says we

got room for you,” he insisted. “Besides, she likes you more than she likes me.”

For a second, Hakeem had considered Cooper’s offer. He desperately wanted to stay, but he couldn’t abandon his family. Not with everyone depending on him. Still, as he gazed out at the unfamiliar neighborhood, part of him wished he’d listened to Coop.

On a corner up ahead, Hakeem noticed two guys sitting on the steps of a house. One had a sharp angular face and wore a sideways baseball cap. The other was shaved bald and shirtless, his chest as wide as a barrel. Both glared at the car as the family approached.

Hakeem felt a nervous twinge in the pit of his stomach. Seeming to sense tension, Hakeem’s mother pushed the accelerator, and the rented sedan lurched forward.

Welcome to the neighborhood, Hakeem thought bitterly to himself.

As they drove further up Sawyer Street, the homes gradually began to resemble what Hakeem remembered from his childhood. Some featured small porches with chairs and iron railings. Others had driveways and tiny front yards lined with flowers. While an

occasional house was boarded up and empty, most looked recently painted.

“One more block,” Dad said, as the car passed two young boys racing each other along the sidewalk. Hakeem remembered how he and Savon had run up and down the streets years earlier. He wondered what his cousin would be like today.

Mom slowed the car to a stop in front of a green and white three-story house. “Here we are,” she announced, her voice more relieved than excited.

“It’s smaller than I remember it,” Hakeem said.

“That’s because you’re bigger,” Dad replied with a haggard smile. Though his face looked older, his intense black eyes were as clear as ever. “Looks like James had the house painted. The color’s different,” he added.

“How did you remember something like that?” Mom asked, unbuckling her seatbelt.

“My memory still works even if the rest of me ain’t what it used to be. That house used to be bright yellow, kind of an eyesore. Good thing they repainted it.” Dad chuckled then, a sound as scratchy and dry as sandpaper.

Hakeem cringed at Dad's raspy laughter, a scar of the illness that had threatened his father and driven them out of their home. Keeping his thoughts to himself, he stepped out onto the curb and scanned his new neighborhood.

At the end of the block, a fire hydrant gushed water into the street. In front of it, a crowd of children splashed loudly, their joyful screeches mocking Hakeem's mood. Somewhere far off, sirens screamed into the summer air, while overhead, a jet plane rumbled across the sky. Across the street, a mottled German shepherd growled menacingly from a nearby porch.

Hakeem shook his head at the strange chorus of sounds. He felt as if he'd just been dropped into the center of a strange and hostile world.

"They're here!" a husky voice called out from behind an open window. "It's about time."

Hakeem glanced up from the trunk and saw a muscular young man with tightly braided cornrows step out of the house and come toward his mother. He wore a white T-shirt and navy blue and white striped athletic pants. A thick silver chain with a glimmering letter S

hung from his neck. Hakeem didn't recognize him.

"Savon? Is that you?" Hakeem's mother asked.

Savon? Hakeem's jaw dropped. It couldn't be. The person who stood before them looked nothing like the overweight kid from years earlier. Instead, he resembled a middleweight boxer.

"Who else would I be?" Savon asked, strutting down the short walkway with his thick arms swaying from side to side. "Wassup, Uncle Henry," Savon said, as he approached the car. "How you doin', Aunt Selma?"

Hakeem's mother threw her arms around Savon. "I can't believe my eyes, Savon. My Lord, I almost didn't even recognize you. You've grown into quite a young man."

"Well, that's what happens when you don't see somebody for ten years," Savon said proudly. "Last time you saw me I was just a chubby kid," he added.

"Ten years is too long for a family not to see each other," Hakeem's mother replied, shaking her head at her own comment. "Where does the time go? You kids grow up so fast."

“Aw, don’t start gettin’ sentimental on me, Auntie. Looks like we’re gonna have lotsa time now,” he added and then turned to Hakeem. “What up, cuz?” Savon asked, his eyes squinting slightly. “Now *you* don’t look that different from back in the day. Maybe a little taller, that’s all.”

Hakeem could easily see over Savon’s head. He had to be at least two inches taller than his cousin. But Savon was definitely more muscular—and probably stronger. Yet what struck Hakeem most about Savon was his eyes. They seemed almost angry. “Man, you always were skinny, cuz. But now you look like a toothpick,” Savon added. Even his voice seemed to have a bitter edge.

Hakeem blinked for a second, unsure how to respond. Was his cousin kidding, or was he trying to start trouble?

“That’s all right, Savon. I remember you being a little thick in the middle. Looks like some of that thickness left your stomach and went to your head,” Hakeem replied playfully, trying to turn the moment into a joke. He then offered his hand to shake Savon’s.

“I guess we can’t all be as perfect as

you, huh, *cuz?*” Savon said. There was an icy bite to his voice, and he ignored Hakeem’s outstretched hand. “But it’s all good ’cause while you spent years bein’ everybody’s favorite son, I spent some time hittin’ the weights. And from what I see, weights would do your skinny butt some good,” he snapped.

Hakeem swallowed hard. He was stunned, but no one seemed to hear the comment his cousin made. For an instant, he felt his old stutter beginning to seize him. Though the problem was nearly cured, it flared up when he was stressed or nervous. He shook his head and tried to think of a comeback.

Just then, his little sisters sprinted up to him, grabbing his arm.

“Mom said for you to unload the trunk,” Charmaine said nervously.

Savon looked down at them then and laughed. “Oh no, you brought rugrats!” he exclaimed. “Two of them!”

“We ain’t no rats,” Charlene protested, “so don’t be callin’ us that.”

“Don’t get mad, I was just teasin’ you,” Savon said. “You better get used to that ’cause I do a lot of it.”

Charlene frowned and moved closer to Hakeem, as if she was looking for

protection. He put his hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Charlene. He’s just playin’, that’s all—”

“Oh, thank God you made it!” a woman’s voice interrupted. “I been prayin’ ever since you left California!”

Hakeem turned to see his Aunt Lorraine standing on the porch. She looked heavier than he remembered, but she still had a sweet, round face and a warm, inviting smile.

“And look at the toothpick they brought with ’em,” Savon laughed, pointing his finger at Hakeem. “Hakeem’s as skinny as he was when we were kids,” he added.

Hakeem seethed at the comment but smiled out of respect for his aunt.

“Oh, he’s just fine,” Aunt Lorraine said, waving Savon away with her hand. “And he’s good-looking, too. I bet you had all the girls back home chasin’ after you.”

Hakeem blushed and shook his head as she came closer to him. “I do okay,” he said, thinking of Darcy and their painful breakup.

Savon seemed to be annoyed at his mother’s comment. He frowned and

stepped away while she approached.

“I missed you, Aunt Lorraine,” Hakeem said, giving her a hug.

“I missed you too, baby. It has been too long. Way too long. I keep telling myself that all this trouble is a blessing in disguise. It’s a way for all of us to get to know each other again.” Letting him go, she turned her attention to Hakeem’s sisters. “And look at you two!” she cheered, wrapping them both in a massive embrace. “I am so happy to finally see you!”

Hakeem smiled, nearly forgetting the painful events that had forced them to Detroit.

“C’mon, Cali-boy.” Savon’s rough voice jarred him like an alarm clock. “We got work to do.”