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CHAPTER ONE

It was the first day of school at Harriet Tubman High School. “Hey, Sereeta,” Marko Lane called out, “Your mom on the wagon yet?” Olivia Manley, Sereeta’s mother, had shown up at the school very drunk. She had had to be half carried to her door by Jaris Spain and his girlfriend, Sereeta.

Sereeta Prince and her good friend Sami Archer were walking onto the campus for morning classes. Sami yelled back at Marko, “Hey fool, you a senior now. Act like one. Whatsa matter with you, sucka? You almost a man, and you acting like a mean little kid. You better grow up quick, dog, or somebody gonna knock you down.”

“Ooooo, I scared!” Marko crowed, laughing. “Maybe you weigh more than the half back on our football team, girl. But I’m not afraid of you. You still hit like a girl!”

Sami stopped and put her hands on her hips. She glared at Marko and declared, “Dog, you got lotsa enemies around this school. Know why? ’Cause you talkin’ trash all the time. You turn up dead in an alley, the cops’d have to question half the school.”

“Just ignore him,” Sereeta advised, a pained look on her face. “He’s attracted to blood like a shark.”

Sereeta only hoped Marko didn’t know about what happened the other night. There was a party at the Manley home. Sereeta’s stepfather, Perry, and her mother were on the front lawn, arguing loudly. They got so loud so late at night that the neighbors complained and the police were called.

Jaris Spain had not yet arrived at Tubman to begin his senior year. He was later than the rest because he was driving

his fourteen-year-old sister, Chelsea. She was beginning her freshman year. And she was taking a long time getting dressed for the important occasion.

When Chelsea finally appeared, Lorenzo Spain, her father, checked her out. “Nice. Very nice,” he commented. “Cute little top. Nice jeans. You look good, little girl. Jaris, he done a fine job of helping you pick out your stuff.”

“Everything is too big,” Chelsea complained. “It’s all a size too big. Everybody’s gonna laugh at me.”

“You look fine, baby,” Pop assured her. “Beautiful. Ain’t she a picture, Monie?”

“Yes,” Monica Spain agreed. “You look lovely, Chelsea. Now have a wonderful first day at Tubman.”

Chelsea followed her brother to his Honda Civic. “I’m so nervous,” she confessed. “I don’t know any of the teachers, except for Ms. Colbert for science. I’m sure glad I got involved in that opossum rescue program with Shadrach. Otherwise, I

wouldn't even know Ms. Colbert. Athena and Inessa and I have about the same class schedules. That's good. Then I got a class that Maurice and Heston are in. And there's one class with Keisha—"

"Good, good," Jaris interrupted. "Come on, chili pepper, it's getting late." He didn't want to be late for his first senior class. Chelsea would have preferred to ride her bike or walk to school. But she'd gotten involved in some trouble, and she was grounded. Now Jaris was stuck with taking her everywhere.

It had taken Jaris two minutes to pull his T-shirt over his head and put on his jeans. Now he drummed his fingers and stared at the kitchen clock. Chelsea primped, brushed her hair, checked and rechecked what she was wearing. Finally, they were getting into the car.

Chelsea hesitated at the car door, "Jaris, this top looks okay with the jeans, doesn't it? I mean, is orangey orange really a good color for me?" she asked.

“It’s perfect, smashing!” Jaris declared, getting behind the wheel. “I’ve never seen such a great combination as those jeans and that orange top.” Jaris was getting to sound more and more like Pop when he was exasperated.

The Honda rolled from the driveway and headed for Tubman. Jaris hoped he’d find a parking spot closer than a half mile from the classrooms. If you arrived late, you had to park at the outer edge of the parking lot.

Jaris circled around and finally found a spot. “We gotta run,” Jaris told his sister.

“There’s Athena,” Chelsea cried happily. She began waving frantically. “Hi, Athena! Do you think she sees me, Jaris?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jaris assured her. “She sees you. I can tell.” Jaris knew his teachers more or less. But he knew little about a teacher named Langston Myers. He had been named for the great African-American poet, Langston Hughes. Myers was an aspiring writer too. He’d had a few poems

published, and he was shopping his first novel around to publishers. At forty-seven years of age, Mr. Myers was worried that perhaps he wouldn't make his mark in the world as his namesake had. He feared having to remain forever teaching senior English at Tubman High School.

English class was right after lunch. The teacher printed his name on the blackboard. Then he took a roll call and assigned seats. Finally, he handed out sheets on the grading system. Some students had questions. Mr. Myers answered curtly in his deep baritone voice. As the teacher did all this, Jaris studied him. Mr. Myers was a tall, dark-skinned man with thinning hair and piercing eyes. He looked and acted like someone you wouldn't want to tangle with.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “Today we shall be introducing the poetry we will be studying. It will run from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to modern times. Some of you may believe that today's poetry can be

found only in rap music. I intend to disabuse you of that notion.”

At the mention of rap music, Marko Lane began snapping his fingers and tapping his foot. On his way to school, he had heard a rap song with a great beat, and it was coming back to him. The Blastin Caps was one of his favorite new groups.

Mr. Myers consulted his seating chart. “Marko Lane, are you snapping your fingers?” he demanded.

“Uh sorry,” Marko replied with a grin. “I just heard this song from the Blastin Caps. It’s going up fast in the charts. You know how it is when you get a beat going in your head.”

“Mr. Lane,” the teacher snarled, “do not snap your fingers and tap your feet in this class, *ever*. I could not care less what trash you like during your own personal time. In this class, we shall study serious and worthwhile poetry and prose. It offends me that so many people think this hip-hop is the only black contribution to the arts. Are those

insufferable hoodlums, hip-hopping around to a beat, the best we can do? I think not.”

Mr. Myers glanced around the room. “Sadly, I doubt anyone of your generation has ever heard of the great black poets of the past. For example, can anyone tell me about Claude McKay and something he wrote?”

Oliver Randall, whose father taught astronomy at the community college, raised his hand. “McKay was a major poet from the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. He wrote the poem ‘If I Must Die,’ which is probably his most famous work.”

Jaris thought Oliver Randall was too smart. Oliver was one of Jaris’s close friends. He was one of the guys who hung with Jaris and his other friends. They’d eat lunch every day under the eucalyptus trees in a corner of the campus. Still, he made Jaris feel like an idiot. Jaris had never heard of Claude McKay, and he had barely heard of the Harlem Renaissance. Probably nobody else in this class knew anything about it either—except for Oliver.

Oliver sat there and recited the first lines of the poem, “‘If we must die, let it not be like hogs, hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.’”

Mr. Myers looked as though he had died and gone to heaven. He trembled with happy rapture. He had found a glowing gem in what he feared was a slough of mediocrity. “Thank you, Mr. Randall,” he responded with joy.

At the end of class, Mr. Myers called the students’ attention to a stack of literary journals on a table. His poetry had appeared in these magazines. Jaris glanced at the covers. The magazines had strange names like *Mississippi Mud Ink* and *Bayou Bard*.

Marko was standing right behind Jaris. He picked up one of the magazines and flipped through the index. He snickered and whispered to Jaris, “Look, here’s his poem—‘Reflections at Daybreak.’ I bet that’s a snoozer. What a crock.” Then Marko turned to Mr. Myers and asked, “Can we borrow one of these?”