

Chapter One

*J*aris Spain turned numb when the girl took her seat in American History I. Goose bumps crawled up his arms like caterpillars. Sereeta Prince was a honey-skinned beauty with glossy black curls making little halos around her face. Jaris had been in love with her since junior high. Now the feelings grew stronger. But Jaris was sure that he was no more to her than the yellowing ivy plant in the classroom. She seemed to look right through him like he was made of plastic wrap.

Jaris felt crushed. At times like these he would remember some of his father's bitter

sayings. He didn't want to share in his father's hopelessness. But sometimes it came over him like an onrushing darkness.

"The best dreams always get away," Pop would say. "Just when you think you got it all made, it crashes around your head."

Ms. McDowell, the history teacher, came clicking into the classroom on her red high heels. Most of the lady teachers at Harriet Tubman High School wore comfortable shoes, but Ms. McDowell was a striking young woman. She dressed fashionably. And she was one of the best teachers at the school.

"We've been reading *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck," Ms. McDowell said, "and now we're going to watch the movie that was made of it."

"Isn't that a real old movie where everybody is jumpy and stuff," Derrick Shaw complained, making a face. "Those jerky old movies give me a headache."

"No, Derrick," Ms. McDowell said patiently, "it's a well made movie."

“I’ve seen it,” Sereeta said, “but I’d love to see it again. The director won an Academy Award for the movie. It really makes Steinbeck’s book come alive.”

Ms. McDowell smiled at Sereeta. “Thank you for your comments, Sereeta. I’m sure the whole class will get a lot out of watching it.”

Jaris couldn’t help but admire Sereeta’s cool, confident voice. Even in junior high she always seemed more mature than everybody else. When she glanced back for some reason, Jaris smiled at her, but she didn’t seem to notice. And then he felt foolish for smiling at all. He worried that she’d think he was an idiot or something.

Jaris figured she was looking at somebody else anyway.

After class there was a break, and most of the students headed for the machines. Jaris knew Sereeta’s routine. She’d always buy an apple or an orange and take it to the little patch of lawn by the bronze statue of Harriet Tubman to eat it. Jaris kept a respectful distance until

she had bought her bright red apple. Jaris bought an apple too. He had no intention of invading her space, but he did walk slowly by as she nibbled on her apple.

“These are really good, aren’t they?” Jaris commented.

Sereeta looked up, smiling. “Yes, sweet and crunchy.” Her light brown eyes sparkled. She almost seemed pleased to be talking to Jaris. His heart took a wild leap.

“They’re really delicious,” Jaris said.

“Yes, that’s their name,” Sereeta said.

“Really?” Jaris asked. He didn’t know one kind of apple from the next. “You mean they call them that?”

“Sure,” Sereeta answered. She giggled a little. Was she laughing at him for being stupid about apples. “Don’t you ever buy apples in the store, Jaris? They got these little stickies on them telling what kind they are.”

“I never noticed,” Jaris said. Sereeta was so lovely when she was smiling, even if she *was* laughing at him. Jaris wanted to stare at

her, but he was afraid she would resent that. “Uh, Ms. McDowell sure was glad you said good things about that movie we’re going to see.”

“Yes. *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Sereeta said. She seemed to be looking past Jaris now, at somebody else. Still holding her now half eaten apple, Sereeta got up slowly, her whole expression changing. “Excuse me, Jaris,” she said. She skipped across the grass onto the sidewalk, and Jaris heard her say, “Hi Marko.”

“Hey babe,” the boy answered. “Chillin’?”

Marko Lane was a junior at Tubman High too. He was tall and broad shouldered with a flashy personality. Jaris thought he was a phony, but the girls liked him. Jaris had seen Sereeta talking to Marko before, but now she seemed really excited to be with him. Jaris thought about the lame conversation he had just had with Sereeta, and he winced in embarrassment.

Jaris felt flushed and warm. Sereeta would probably laugh with Marko about the whole

stupid conversation she'd had about apples with this nerd who was coming on to her. Jaris stuffed his hands into his pockets so hard that he almost broke through the bottoms of them.

"Hey Jaris," Alonee Lennox asked. "You okay? You look like your dog just died." Alonee was cute and friendly, and Jaris had known her all his life. They made block buildings together in Head Start.

"I'm okay," Jaris answered. His voice was grumpy. He had a fine baritone voice, and he had won some awards for regional speech contests. But when Jaris was down, as he often was, his voice rasped like his father's. Like a rusty old hinge screeching for oil. Pop always sounded hoarse as if all his sorrows and disappointments settled in his vocal chords.

"You sure seem down, Jaris," Alonee pressed. "Gotta be something wrong."

"Always something wrong, girl," Jaris said in a snarl. "Like Pop says, if it's not wrong today, it'll be wrong tomorrow."

Alonee laughed. “You’re being a drag! And just when I had this exciting news to share with you. But if you’re too down in the dumps to hear it, I’ll just keep it to my own self.”

Jaris couldn’t stay in a bad mood for long around Alonee. She was too much like a little kitten jumping on a ball of yarn. “Okay girl, what’s the exciting news?”

“Tubman High School is going to put on a new play by some lady from New York,” Alonee told him. “Seems like her brother graduated from here a long time ago, and she feels close to us. She wants to do something special for the school. Anyway, it’s a really cool play, and there’s a part just right for you in there, Jaris.” Alonee was breathless when she finished.

Jaris laughed. “Girl, I’m no actor. What’re you thinking of?”

“You got such a fabulous voice. You’ve done dramatic readings like Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Gave me chills,” Alonee said.

“I’m telling you, Jaris, this is something you can do!”

Jaris shrugged. Except with close friends like Alonee, Trevor Jenkins, and Sami Archer, Jaris was shy. He was no actor. When he was making speeches, he turned into a different person, but that was a far cry from acting. Still, maybe actors did that too, turned themselves into the characters they were playing. “I’ll think about it, Alonee. You got a lot of faith in me.”

Jaris didn’t live far from Tubman. He rode his bike or jogged home. He lived in a nice neighborhood of single-family homes with nicely kept yards. Still, in the past few years hard times had hit a lot of the families. Several houses had been foreclosed. The windows were boarded up, and the lawns had turned brown. But those houses were the exception.

Across Grant Avenue was a whole other world. People lived in apartments and there was graffiti all over, on the walls, fences,

everywhere. Gangbangers roamed at will. The Nite Ryders were the worst, but there were smaller, deadly bands. Some of the kids who lived across Grant attended Tubman High, but few graduated.

As Jaris jogged home, he thought about his father. It was Friday and that was always worrisome. If Pop had a bad day at Jackson's Auto Repair, he didn't come right home. He stopped off for some drinks. Pop hated his job as auto mechanic, even though he was very good at it and he earned excellent money. He called himself a "grease monkey," a name that always angered Mom. She and Pop would argue and Jaris hated listening to them. All evening they would bicker, and late at night they would start yelling. So Jaris dreaded Fridays.

Jaris slowed down his gait and turned the corner to his street. From this far off he could see the family driveway. Jaris took some deep breaths. If it was going to be a good Friday night, Pop's green pickup would already be in the driveway. That would mean he had not

stopped for drinks. He would be sitting in front of the TV watching basketball. That was good, very good.

Jaris's father was a tall, lanky man. Jaris figured that when his father was his age, he looked a lot like Jaris. "We're lean and mean, boy," Pop would say when he was in a good mood. He was an LA Lakers fan, and he got really excited when the team was on a winning streak. He was always a little sad that Jaris had no athletic ability. But then he often said, "I was a football star and look where it got me. They called me the 'Little Terror' 'cause I could carry the ball underneath those big men. But in the end I got busted, and my football dreams went down the john, right? So don't sweat it that you're not a jock, boy. You won't get no gripin' from me. No way."

Pop had counted on a sports scholarship to get him into college. He was smart, but they weren't awarding as many academic scholarships in those days. So the career-ending injury blew away all Pop's dreams. "That's