

## **Chapter 1**

*Man, I hate this place,* Tyray Hobbs thought as he walked slowly towards Bluford High School. The motion from each step sent a dull jab of pain into his left wrist, making him wince slightly.

Just outside Bluford's thick steel front doors, Tyray adjusted his jacket, careful to conceal the bone-colored cast which now encased his left hand. The pain and cast were constant reminders of the humiliation he suffered four days ago.

Until then, Tyray had been the most notorious bully in Bluford's freshman class. Six feet tall and muscular, he could clear a path in a crowd just by showing up. In middle school, Tyray had learned to use his size to intimidate people he didn't like. Sometimes, he impressed his friends by forcing smaller boys to give him money or do his homework. Other times, he

threatened kids for fun. At Bluford, Tyray's reputation continued to grow. And then Darrell Mercer came along.

The first time they met, Tyray thought Darrell was the perfect target—a scrawny, weak kid who transferred to Bluford in the middle of the school year. Having just moved from Philadelphia days earlier, Darrell didn't know a soul in California, and he was scared. A punching bag with legs, Tyray thought. He had recognized the fear in Darrell's eyes from day one. After a bit of pressure, Darrell was giving Tyray his lunch money each week in hopes of being left alone. It was some of the easiest money Tyray had ever made. But four days ago, everything changed. The incident replayed in his mind like a scene from an old movie.

It happened at lunchtime in the crowded school cafeteria. Tyray was hassling Darrell for skipping his weekly payment. To embarrass him, Tyray tipped Darrell's lunch tray, spilling food all over the smaller boy's clothes. The trick worked. Kids throughout the cafeteria howled at Darrell's mess.

Then Darrell did something he had never done before. He stood up to Tyray in front of everyone.

“Tyray, you ain’t nothing but a bully,” Darrell called out. “No one in this school likes you. They are just afraid of you. But you know what? I ain’t afraid of you no more. You don’t scare me.” He then demanded that Tyray apologize and clean up the mess.

Tyray was shocked at the smaller boy’s bold words. It was true that Darrell had started acting more confident, especially since he befriended Mr. Mitchell, their nosy English teacher, and joined the Bluford wrestling team. But Darrell was still a coward. Tyray never expected him to stand up for himself.

Careful not to show his surprise, Tyray stepped over to beat Darrell into a pulp right there in front of everyone. But Darrell was fast. The next thing Tyray knew, Darrell had swept underneath him, lifted him up, and sent him crashing onto the hard floor of the cafeteria.

Tyray tried to cushion the fall with his left arm, but the impact cracked his wrist bone with a loud wet snap. He could not believe the amount of pain he felt. A nonstop knifing ache mingled with the sensation that the inside of his wrist was on fire.

Worse than the pain was seeing that

kids who once feared him were laughing. Some even cheered.

After the fight, Tyray was taken straight to the nurse's office. He was still fuming in the wake of his defeat, and his wrist was swelling by the minute. The nurse's reaction to his injury did not comfort him any.

"We've got to get you to a hospital," she said. "Your wrist doesn't look good at all, Mr. Hobbs. We'll have to call one of your parents to meet you there."

*Great*, Tyray thought to himself. *Just great.*

It was Mom who met Tyray and the school nurse at the Emergency Room of City General Hospital. For Tyray, sitting in the waiting room in pain for two hours was nothing compared to enduring his mother's coddling the entire time.

Once the nurse left, Mom looked at Tyray with a pitiful face. At one point, she even had tears in her eyes. "Mom, I'm fine," he insisted. Looking at her made him feel even worse about what happened. He did not want her there, but the school required a parent or guardian to be at the hospital with him. Tyray knew Mom was the only person he

could turn to. Calling Dad never even crossed his mind.

“Honey, I hate to see you in pain,” Mom said, her voice breaking. “And I hate to see you in trouble. We have an appointment to see the principal first thing tomorrow morning. You might get suspended—or even worse.”

Tyray tried to shrug off the whole thing. “So what,” he said. “I don’t care about school. That principal’s wacked anyway.”

“Well, I care,” Mom responded. “And so should you. I didn’t want to believe the things that woman told me over the phone. I couldn’t believe my ears. All those tales about you bullying kids and beating up on people. Tyray, it just breaks my heart. And your father won’t be pleased by this at all.”

Tyray knew Mom was right. His father would definitely not be pleased, but Tyray could not worry about that yet. He was still in a great deal of pain. And every time he thought about the fight in the cafeteria, he trembled with rage. Even as the doctor slowly wrapped his wrist, he was seething in silence.

He was not done with Darrell Mercer.

The next morning before his first class, Tyray and his mother met with Ms. Spencer, the school principal, who was sitting stern-faced at her desk. Tyray knew by the tightness in her jaw that he was in big trouble. He just did not know how severe the punishment would be. Would he be suspended? Expelled?

“Good morning, Mrs. Hobbs, Tyray,” Ms. Spencer said, an icy edge to her voice. She took a sip of coffee from a mug and turned to him. “I’ve heard Darrell’s side of this story. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Wasn’t my fault,” Tyray mumbled. “Mercer started with me.”

“I suggest you tell me the truth, Mr. Hobbs,” Ms. Spencer said, her voice filled with contempt. “We know how you have been bullying and intimidating other students. These are serious accusations. I suggest you tell me everything you know.”

As his mother listened, her eyes filled with tears. “Please, Tyray,” she whispered. “Just tell the truth.”

“I ain’t done nothin’ wrong. All you hearin’ is lies,” Tyray began, but the anger in Ms. Spencer’s face stopped him right there.

“Mr. Hobbs, you are very close to being expelled from this high school. Do you understand what I am saying?” Ms. Spencer growled.

Tyray imagined what his father’s reaction would be if he got expelled. Tyray was big, but his father was twice his size. In his high school days, Gil Hobbs was an offensive lineman on the football team, standing a solid six foot four inches and weighing almost three hundred pounds. Tyray knew his father would be furious if he got expelled. He shuddered as he thought of his father’s response to such news.

“Okay, okay,” Tyray said to the principal.

“Not ‘okay, okay,’” Ms. Spencer snapped. “That won’t cut it around here. It’s ‘I understand, Ms. Spencer.’”

Tyray was not used to being put in his place, not even by teachers. He felt a burning rage for the skinny woman glaring at him behind wire rim glasses. But she had the power now. So Tyray swallowed hard and mumbled, “I understand, Ms. Spencer.”

“Good,” the principal said crisply. “Now then, you will be suspended for three days for fighting and for bullying

other students. The suspension begins at once. And if there is ever any more bullying, Mr. Hobbs, I'll see to it that you are out of this school permanently."

"Don't worry, Ms. Spencer," Tyray's mother said, wiping her eyes. "I know Tyray's sorry, and I'm sure he'll behave from now on."

"I hope so," Ms. Spencer added. "For *his* sake."

Tyray shrugged his shoulders but said nothing. Ms. Spencer's threats were nothing compared to what was waiting for him at home when his father found out about the suspension.

"You little punk!" Dad screamed later that night. "Where you get off fightin' and messin' around in school and gettin' your hand busted?"

"Gil," Mom said in her soft voice, "he's in a lot of pain—"

"Woman, don't give me that!" Dad yelled, causing Mom to cower. "You been coddlin' this boy all his life, and that's why we got this kind of trouble with him now. I'm glad he's in pain, understand? Now leave us alone."

Mom hurried out of the room, lines of worry creasing her forehead. Tyray knew



she was just as afraid of Dad as he was. He could count on his mother to protect him only so much.

Dad grabbed hold of Tyray's shirt collar, lifting him so that their faces were only inches apart. "What you got to say for yourself, boy?" he growled.

Tyray shrugged, and his father flicked his finger into his face, bruising his lip. Tyray winced in pain. Dad had done this to him many times before. It was the same thing Tyray had done to Darrell when they first met.

"How come you been beatin' up on other kids and gettin' the whole school on your case?" As he spoke, Dad shook Tyray violently and shoved him into a corner of the kitchen, sending pots clattering to the floor. "You cost me money, boy. I got to pay to get your hand fixed. Cash money that coulda gone for food, rent, or clothes, y'see?"

With his last words, Dad opened his hand and slapped Tyray across the mouth. The force of the blow split Tyray's lip. A thread of blood sliding down his chin, he cringed, waiting for another strike.

"I'm sorry," Tyray gasped, covering his face with his hands.

“Sorry? Sorry is words, cheap words. They don’t mean nothing. You’d be sorry if we didn’t get your wrist fixed. That’s what you deserve. I feel like smashin’ that cast and bustin’ your wrist all over again. Then you’d be real sorry,” Dad said.

“Gil, please,” Mom pleaded from the hallway, fear heavy in her voice. “Isn’t that enough?”

“What?!” Dad yelled at her. “Woman, didn’t I tell you to stay out of this? We already lost one son, and I ain’t about to lose another.”

Mom vanished down the hall, and his father gave Tyray a final, violent shake of his shoulders. “You get in any trouble during the next three days, I swear I’ll bust your other hand.” He shoved Tyray away and stormed out of the kitchen.

Tyray jumped to his feet and rushed to the bedroom he used to share with Warren, his older brother. Warren had been gone now for over a year. He was serving a three-year sentence for armed robbery.

Tyray wished he never had to face Dad again. He was always unsure how he felt about his father. At times, he

admired the way Dad was boss wherever he went. Even at work, he ruled with an iron fist. A foreman for a construction company, he towered over his entire crew. Everyone knew not to get on Gil Hobbs's bad side. But more than respecting his father, Tyray feared him. He had learned long ago that the safest way to deal with Dad was to stay out of his way. It had worked pretty well until Darrell Mercer came along.

Now, Tyray was returning to Bluford for the first time since Ms. Spencer suspended him three days ago. As he got closer to school, he felt a growing sense of dread. The teachers and the principal would be watching his every move. So would the students. Some might even hassle him about losing the fight with Darrell. Hundreds of students had watched Tyray writhing on the floor with his broken wrist. Three days was not enough time for them to forget what they saw.

Walking down the main corridor of the school, Tyray sensed many eyes watching him. He noticed several students glance in his direction and then quickly look away. Their faces were like

billboards with one message. *Yeah, we've been talking about you since you went down*, they seemed to say.

As he approached his locker, Tyray was glad to see Rodney Banks. Rodney and Tyray had become friends in middle school. They discovered then that ganging up on smaller kids was easy and profitable. Rodney loved sharing in all the cash they extorted from scared students. He often used his cut of the money to buy the latest athletic gear, especially basketball sneakers.

"Hey, Rod," Tyray called out as he neared his friend. Rodney quickly turned away and darted into a crowd of students. Tyray watched bitterly as Rodney disappeared down the hallway. He remembered all the times the two of them went to the mall to buy jackets with team logos. Now Rodney was turning like the dog who bit the hand that fed him. "Forget you, then," Tyray mumbled.

Several students stared at Tyray as he continued down the long corridor to his first class. At one point, he thought he heard a girl snicker. Then, he spotted someone pointing to his cast.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Tyray yelled when he reached the end of the hall. A

heavy silence spread through the corridor. Tyray turned the corner and continued walking. "Just wait," he muttered. "Gonna be payback time for y'all. Just you wait."

Then he spotted Darrell Mercer walking with Amberlynn Bailey.

Instantly Tyray's pulse started to pound. Watching Darrell talk to Amberlynn, Tyray was filled with hatred. He would hide his feelings for now, but soon Darrell's time would come. Nothing would feel better than wiping that big smile off Darrell's face.

"I'm sorry about your hand," a girl said from behind Tyray as he walked towards English class.

Tyray turned to see Lark Collins, a freshman he hardly knew. She was cute, in a wholesome way, but his tastes ran to more striking girls. There were a lot of girls eager to mess with a bad boy, especially one as big as Tyray. Even though he was not that handsome, girls seemed drawn to him because of his reputation. But now, he wondered if all that would change too. And he wondered why a girl like Lark was suddenly being nice to him.

"Yeah, I bet you're sorry," Tyray said, moving his broken wrist out of her sight.

"I *am*," Lark insisted, her eyes widening.

"You for real?" Tyray asked gruffly.

"Yeah, I'm just sorry you broke your wrist, that's all."

"You see it happen?"

"No, I was in the library that day," Lark responded.

"But, you heard about it?" Tyray asked, tensing up.

"Sure. Everyone's been talking about it," Lark answered. Tyray cringed slightly, and Lark seemed to understand what he was feeling. "Don't worry. I try to stay out of everyone's gossip. Half of it usually isn't true anyway. I just feel bad for you, that's all."

Tyray looked closely at Lark. She was not the prettiest girl at Bluford, not by a mile. She was slightly overweight, and her glasses and frumpy clothes made her look a bit like an old lady. Yet she seemed sincere.

Before the fight in the cafeteria, Tyray would not even have spoken to someone like Lark. But now that he was alone at Bluford, he was in no position to chase people away. Besides, maybe he could use her. Lark would not be as stubborn or demanding as the girls who used to

flirt with him. A few harsh words, and she would skitter off in tears and never talk to him again. Tyray read this in her face the same way he read the fear in Darrell's eyes months ago. Lark was someone he could manipulate.

"You wanna eat lunch with me today?" Tyray asked.

Lark paused a moment and then answered, "Sure. That would be nice."

"Okay. Meet me in the cafeteria at lunchtime," Tyray said, before heading off to English.

Tyray used to swagger into classes, pausing to send menacing glares into the faces of kids he was trying to scare. It had been so exciting for Tyray to see them hunkering in their seats and wishing they were invisible. But now, he didn't glare at anybody.

Sitting down at his desk, Tyray opened his English book to a story he had not read and did not care about. He glanced at the meaningless words and sentences on the pages and noticed Harold Davis watching him. Harold was Darrell Mercer's closest friend. Until a few days ago, he was too scared to even look at Tyray. *Things sure have turned around*, Tyray thought, certain Harold was silently laughing at him.

*“Look at the big bully with the broken wrist. He cried just like a baby,”* Tyray imagined Harold saying.

*Just you wait,* Tyray thought over and over. *Just you wait.* His day of revenge would come, and no one would ever forget it. Especially not Darrell Mercer.