

Chapter 1

Darcy Wills clenched her hands so hard that her fingernails dug into her palms. Hakeem Randall was walking to the front of the classroom to give his English report on *Macbeth*. He was a good student, but when he got nervous, he stuttered. Darcy dreaded this moment. She knew that if he began to stutter, the class would show no mercy. Just thinking about how embarrassed he would be made her cringe.

“Oh, Tarah,” Darcy whispered to her friend, “I feel so *bad* for him!”

Tarah Carson turned a stern eye on Darcy, “Girl, he gotta fight this battle himself by doin’ just what he’s doin’, facin’ it.”

Darcy had been dating Hakeem for just a few weeks, but at times it seemed that she had known him forever. He was

a tall, handsome boy with a lot going for him—he was a good student, a great singer and guitar player, and a really nice person.

“My report on *Macbeth*,” Hakeem began, “is about how g-g-guilt p-p-played an important p-p-part in the story.” Darcy’s worst fears were coming true. She had never heard him stutter so badly. A soft ripple of laughter began in the back row and spread around the room.

Mr. Keenan, the teacher, glared at the students. “Let’s try to remember this is tenth grade English, not second grade recess!” he growled. It did not help much. Hakeem struggled on with his report, stuttering often. Stifled giggles erupted throughout the room, gurgling like an underground spring. Roylin Bailey was making a big show of covering his mouth with both hands while he rocked back and forth.

“T-t-tomorrow, and t-t-tomorrow, and t-t-tomorrow,” Hakeem stammered, “creeps in this p-p-petty p-p-pace from day to day—”

“Is ‘t-t-tomorrow’ the same thing as ‘tomorrow,’ Mr. Keenan?” Roylin asked cruelly. “’Cause I want to know, sir.”

Tarah's boyfriend, Cooper Hodden, just shook his head while other kids laughed. Cringing, Tarah shrank down in her seat. This was as hard for Hakeem's friends to watch as it was for Hakeem to endure, Darcy thought. Then, finally, mercifully, Hakeem's report was over, and he fled to his desk like a soldier racing across a battlefield and diving into a safe ditch.

Darcy reached over and covered Hakeem's hand with hers, whispering, "It was a good report."

Hakeem pulled his hand away, anger flaring in his usually warm eyes. "I made a fool of myself," he said bitterly.

Through the rest of the class, Hakeem sat staring at his desk and fiddling so violently with his pencil that he broke it in two. Darcy knew he was reliving the humiliation of the report. He told her once that he would replay his stuttering spells over and over in his mind. His speech therapist said there was nothing really wrong with him—it was something he would eventually overcome. But not today.

When the bell rang, Darcy hurried after Hakeem. "Hakeem, it wasn't that bad, really it wasn't!" she assured him.

Hakeem slammed his fist into his open palm and shook his head. "It was stupid! I'm stupid! If I wasn't stupid, I could talk right!"

"Hey man," Cooper said, standing in front of the snack machines, "don't sweat it. We all feel stupid sometimes. Once, I gave an oral presentation, and people were laughing but I didn't know why. Then the teacher whispered to me that my fly was unzipped."

"Yeah, and he was wearin' bright red boxer shorts that day," Tarah chimed in, smirking.

Hakeem jammed change into the soda-machine slot. He yanked out the can and walked away without saying anything. When Darcy tried to follow him, Tarah grabbed her wrist. "Girl," Tarah scolded, "give it a rest. We all got our lumps and bumps, and nobody gets outta this world without bein' banged up. It's not the end of the world that Hakeem messed up on a report. Let him work it out his own self."

Darcy reluctantly let Hakeem walk down the corridor alone. She felt so bad for him. Right now he was hating himself, and she understood that. Darcy had hated herself all through middle

school and her first year at Bluford High because boys just seemed to ignore her. Every other girl in her class seemed prettier, more popular, and Darcy's shyness hurt something like Hakeem's stutter must have.

Darcy walked slowly towards the library to work on a science report. Her father had offered to take her to the Palomar Observatory for the report. The observatory would have made a great topic, but Darcy turned him down. Her father had been away from the family for five years, and now he was trying to rebuild his relationship with them. But Darcy felt awkward and strange with him.

Now she felt estranged from Hakeem too. He was hurting so much, and he would not let her try to help.

As Darcy reached the library, she noticed a flyer posted on the door:

Talent show auditions.

February 20, Noon.

Singers, musicians, dancers, artists.

The depressing thoughts of a moment ago were suddenly forgotten. Darcy's heart raced with excitement over what this could mean for Hakeem.

Everyone knew he was a great guitar player and a wonderful singer. When he sang, he never stuttered. Darcy could not wait till school was over so she could track him down. This show was just what he needed to boost his spirits.

After school, Darcy found Hakeem sitting under the pepper tree behind the Bluford parking lot. His guitar was resting on his lap. She sat beside him on the grass and said, "Did you hear about the auditions for the talent show? You'd be just great for that, Hakeem. You'd blow 'em away!"

"Yeah, watch the stuttering idiot perform. Maybe I could do a ventriloquist act so the kids'll think the dummy is the one who stutters!" Hakeem said bitterly.

"But you don't stutter when you sing," Darcy pointed out.

"I guess," he said, rolling a red berry between his fingers and watching the papery skin pop off, leaving a little brown seed. "Why don't *you* audition, Darcy? You have a nice singing voice. And you don't stutter."

"Oh, I'm no singer," Darcy blushed.

"Sure you are," Hakeem insisted. "I've heard you. And you told me you

used to sing in a church choir.”

“But that’s because Mom made me.”

“Well, you should really enter this contest. It might give you that spark to start singing again.”

“I will if you will,” Darcy said impulsively, though the very thought of performing before the student body made her shudder.

Hakeem finally smiled. “Okay. Deal. Maybe we’ll both make such fools of ourselves we’ll have to run away to a desert island and hide.”

Darcy glanced at her watch. A neighbor, Ms. Harris, was sitting with Darcy’s grandmother, but Darcy still had to be home soon. “Gotta go now,” she said. “Grandma will be needing me.”

“How is she?” Hakeem asked.

Darcy shrugged. Grandma hadn’t been well since her stroke a year and a half ago. “She’s about the same. Some days, she’s, you know, almost like normal for a few hours, and then she’s back to thinking she’s a little girl in her mom’s house. I think she always knows me. I mean, she calls me ‘Angelcake,’ and she’s always got a smile for me.”

“Your parents getting any closer?” Hakeem asked.

“Dad goes down to the hospital where Mom works, and sometimes they talk in the cafeteria. I don’t know if Mom would ever let him come back or even if he wants to. He’s just trying to make up for what happened, you know, for running out on us.”

“You want your parents together again, Darcy?”

“I don’t know. Dad gets along good with Jamee. Even when we were little, she was always closer to him than I was. Maybe it’s because she’s two years younger than me, and Dad was always ready to baby her. I think right now she’s ready to forgive him, but I can’t say I am ready to do that. Maybe I should, but it’s hard,” Darcy admitted.

Hakeem gave Darcy a quick hug. “Like Tarah is always saying, ‘We gotta make the best of what we got ’cause there ain’t nothin’ else to do!’”

They both laughed, and Hakeem picked up his guitar. He strummed a melody and began to sing in his rich, deep voice:

*Will you hear me if I cry,
Above the thunder of anger,
Over blasts of fear and hate,*

*When help comes not at all,
Or when it comes too late?
When streets explode with fire,
And hearts grow dead with grief,
When all the sounds are sad,
And there's no more relief?
Will you hear me if I cry?
Will you come before I die?*

“Did you just write that?” Darcy asked.

“A couple of weeks ago. I was visiting my cousins, and we were talking about Russell Walker, that guy who went down in a drive-by shooting last year. I sort of wrote it for him.”

“Yeah, I heard about him,” Darcy said. “He was an honor student and an athlete, wasn’t he?”

Hakeem nodded somberly.

“That was a crying shame,” she added. “I hope they catch the guys who did it and put them behind bars for good.”

Darcy was heading home when she ran into Brisana Meeks. Until just a few weeks ago, they had been best friends. When Darcy started hanging out with Tarah, Cooper and their friends, Brisana

cut off the friendship. Since then, Darcy had made small efforts to repair their relationship. "Hey, Brisana," Darcy said, "how's it going?"

"Terrific," Brisana said with a sharp edge to her voice. Brisana had once told Darcy that she and Darcy were the bright, sophisticated kids at Bluford High. They were the "tens." It was their duty to avoid the low-class, stupid kids like Tarah and Cooper, who were zeroes.

"Want to go to the mall on Saturday, Brisana?" Darcy asked.

"With *you*?" Brisana scoffed, placing her hands on her hips. "No thanks," she added, leaving Darcy speechless.

As Darcy walked on, Roylin Bailey pulled up alongside her in a teal-blue Honda. "Hey Darcy, want a lift?" he shouted.

"No, thanks," Darcy said.

"Come on, Darcy," Roylin persisted. "Why are you wastin' your time with that stuttering fool? Sistah, I'm here to tell you, he ain't the one."

"Roylin, leave me alone. I don't remember asking for your opinion on my social life," Darcy snapped.

"Relax, girl. I'm just tryin' to help you out. You know, pass on the male

perspective. And from where I'm sittin' you could do a lot better than Ha-ke-ke-ke-keem," he said, snickering.

Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy saw Cooper Hodden's beat-up truck roll up behind the Honda. Tarah, sitting beside Cooper, yelled, "Cooper, baby, you know your brakes ain't so good. Don't go smashin' that Honda now!"

"I can't stop!" Cooper howled, hitting the horn and blasting Roylin's Honda out of his path. Both Cooper and Tarah doubled over laughing as Roylin sped away.

"You guys are outta your minds!" Darcy said, also laughing. "Thanks, I owe you." Leaning in the truck window, she confided, "Hey, guess what. I told Hakeem I'd sign up for the talent show that's coming up, just to make him try out. Problem is, I'm terrified of getting up in front of all those people. And then there's the issue of my voice."

"What's wrong with your voice?" Cooper asked. "You talkin' okay right now."

"No, my *singing* voice. It doesn't exactly make people jump to their feet with applause. Fall to their knees begging me to stop, maybe, but not jump to their feet," Darcy said.

“Girl, don’t even worry about it,” Tarah advised. “Just play the music real loud, smile real pretty, and nobody’ll notice how you sing.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” Darcy replied sarcastically.

Darcy climbed into the cramped front seat of the pickup truck for a ride home just as Hakeem sped by on a shiny silver motorbike. Hakeem did not seem to notice Darcy, but she saw him—with Brisana Meeks sitting behind him with her arms around his waist.

“That’s weird,” Darcy said. “I haven’t even seen his new bike, and there she is riding on it.”

“He prob’ly just givin’ her a lift,” Tarah said.

“Don’t know about that,” Cooper chimed in. “That girl’s *fine*.”

Tarah nudged Cooper in the ribs with her elbow, and he howled. But the damage was done. It was done the minute Darcy saw Brisana riding on Hakeem’s motorbike.

“Brisana always used to make fun of Hakeem because he stuttered,” Darcy said.

“Stuck-up girl like her, she prob’ly just going after him to mess with your head,” Tarah replied.

Or maybe, Darcy thought, *I like Hakeem a lot more than he likes me.* A cold chill pressed down on Darcy's chest like a heavy blanket of ice.