Chapter 10

On Monday morning, Tyray sensed that word about the gun was spreading through Bluford.

By lunchtime, freshmen were treating him differently. Jamee Wills, who usually scoffed at him, looked down and darted off in another direction when he approached her in the hallway. Others who had snickered when Tyray walked by now steered clear of him. For the first time in days, Tyray walked through the halls with his shoulders thrown back and his head high.

In the cafeteria, Tyray spotted Darrell. Almost mechanically, he found himself approaching Darrell's table. As he got closer, he noticed Harold was watching him, his face stricken as if he saw a ghost.

"Hi, there, Mercer," Tyray said, looking directly at Darrell. A hush seemed to fall over the cafeteria.

"Hi," Darrell answered, his eyes shifting to Tyray's hands.

He's looking for the gun, Tyray thought.

"I see you eatin' the cafeteria food," Tyray said. "S'posed to be bad for your health." Darrell did not say anything, but Tyray saw something familiar in the boy's eyes—fear. "But I guess it'll take a long time for that stuff to kill you," Tyray added before walking away.

After lunch, Tyray was called to the principal's office. He had hoped word of the gun would not reach any Bluford teachers. As he entered Ms. Spencer's office, he felt nervous. She had a stern look on her face. "Well, Mr. Hobbs," she said coldly. "Have we got a problem?"

Tyray smiled politely. "No, ma'am. Not me. Everything's cool. I'm studyin' and keepin' outta trouble."

Ms. Spencer eyed him warily. He knew she was no fool. "I've heard rumors that you're starting to intimidate kids again. There's even talk that you have a gun. I don't know if any of this is true, so I thought I'd ask you. Is any of this true? If it is, tell me now, and let me help you. I don't want to see you ruin your life or harm anyone else."

"Hey, I ain't got no gun, Ms. Spencer. I know we got this zero-tolerance rule about weapons, and that's a good thing. I got to tell you though, Ms. Spencer, Darrell Mercer likes to spread lies about me. Most likely he's the one spreadin' those rumors."

"Then you would have no objections to a check of your backpack and locker?" Ms. Spencer asked.

"That's just fine. I got nothin' to hide," Tyray said, beginning to empty his backpack on the principal's desk. He knew better than to bring his gun to school. After Ms. Spencer thoroughly inspected each pocket of his backpack, she escorted him to his locker. Two hallway monitors accompanied them.

"I told you I ain't got a gun," he said as they examined his locker. Ms. Spencer watched in grim silence.

After the locker was checked, Tyray returned to his classes. Students' heads turned nervously as he walked to his desk.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" he asked, knowing no one would dare answer him.

By the end of the day, Tyray could see the nervous tension in the eyes of many students passing him in the hallway.

Even Shamar and Cedric eyed him nervously as he walked out of the building.

Outside, he felt a hand grab his arm. He turned to find Lark standing next to him.

"Tyray, what's happening around here?" she asked. "Everyone says you're after Darrell Mercer and you got a gun. Is that true?"

"Who said that?" Tyray said, pretending to be shocked.

Lark put her hand on Tyray's shoulder and stared into his eyes. "Tyray, I care about you, honest I do, but if you did something stupid like getting a gun and—"

"Look, I don't wanna talk about it no more," Tyray said, avoiding her gaze.

"Tyray, Darrell didn't mean anything against you. He was just scared of you is all. Can't you just forget all the stuff that happened?" Lark said.

Tyray glared at Lark. "Oh, so now you sidin' with him too? Girl, just leave me alone."

"I wish you'd change," Lark pleaded. "Tyray, I've liked you from the beginning because I thought I saw something in you that nobody else could see. I thought you were different from what

everybody else said. I thought that no one ever gave you a chance."

"Yeah, well maybe you thought wrong," Tyray growled. "I'm what everyone says. I'm bad, and you should just stay away from me." He had to get away from Lark. Something about her was getting to him, was twisting him inside. No matter how hard he fought it, it was there. "I gotta go," he muttered, turning to walk away.

"Tyray, listen to me! Stop whatever it is you're planning. This thing with Darrell should have ended a long time ago. It's got to stop. Just go talk to him. He's working at the grocery store until 8:00 tonight. Why don't you call him after he gets home?"

Tyray turned back and looked at Lark. For a second, he considered her idea, but just as quickly, he dismissed it. If he called, Darrell would win, and Tyray would be the loser once again. He could not let that happen.

"I ain't callin' no one," he said, walking towards home.

"But Tyray . . . ," Lark began. Her voice grated on his nerves. He ignored her and kept walking.

Tyray got home before his parents and found a message on the answering

machine. It was from his mother, asking him to call her at work as soon as he got home. Tyray knew from the sound of her voice that she was worried. Maybe Ms. Spencer called her. If so, it was only a matter of time before Dad found out what was happening.

Tyray felt as if the world was closing in on him. Chills ran through Tyray's body, and his thoughts began spinning wildly. He dreaded the hour his father returned, and he knew not to call his mother. She would panic, and then he would have to deal with both of his parents. Tyray felt like an animal backed into a corner. Darrell was going to win again.

Tyray raced to his room and grabbed the gun. He had to be gone before his parents made it home. Hiding the gun under his belt, he bolted from the house. It was 4:00, and gray clouds were gathering overhead. Tyray knew he had to act tonight. If his parents found out about the gun, he would be in the worst trouble of his life. He knew his father would beat him maybe even disown him as he had Warren. Ms. Spencer would certainly kick him out of school. There would be nothing left for him but the torment of other kids, or worse—jail.

If I'm goin' down, thought Tyray as he reached a park, *Mercer is goin' down with me.*

At 6:00, a fine drizzle began to fall. Tyray escaped it by going into a local arcade. It was a place he and Warren would sometimes go when they needed to get away from Dad.

Tyray watched as kids took turns shooting villains on a large video screen. The bodies flashed for a second when they were hit and then disappeared. Tyray remembered how he and his brother used to play such games. He pushed the memory from his mind, fighting back tears. He missed Warren desperately, but he was alone now, and nothing would change that.

Tyray kept an eye on the arcade's windows, watching as darkness descended on the neighborhood. He felt a knot in the pit of his stomach as he imagined the events to come.

Heading out into the steady drizzle, Tyray walked towards the store where Darrell worked. Making sure not to draw attention to himself, he scoped out the spot where he thought he had the best chance of surprising Darrell. It was an alley lined by thick bushes behind some boarded-up garages.

On other days, Tyray had seen Darrell bike through the alley on his way to work. He knew that with the thick misty darkness, he could hide undetected in the shadows until Darrell appeared. He would just wait for him and then jump out, knock Darrell off his bike, and do it. It was as simple as that.

BANG-BANG, it would all be over, just like the video game. All he had to do was wait.

Tyray took his position in a group of bushes between two garages. It was 7:45. A scrawny kitten appeared at his feet. Its eyes glowed an odd green in the dark night. "Go away," Tyray whispered harshly, pushing the animal away with his foot.

Tyray's heart was pounding as he waited. He felt his blood rushing through his veins. Tyray wondered if Bones had felt the same way. Tyray grabbed the gun, feeling its weight in his hand, the metal still warm from the heat of his stomach.

Suddenly, Tyray heard the clank and rattle of a bicycle approaching. Tyray's right hand tightened on the revolver. His left hand, still in a cast, tingled with anticipation. A second later, the bike appeared.

It turned down the alley as Tyray expected. Darrell Mercer pedaled, quickly veering around puddles to get home. He looked smaller than Tyray remembered. Riding the bike, he appeared to be much younger than a high school student. Tyray's muscles tensed as he prepared to attack.

He waited until an instant before the bike passed him. Exploding from the darkness, Tyray lunged at Darrell, sideswiping him with his shoulder. The impact caught Darrell by surprise, sending him crashing into the garage wall, the bike tumbling just ahead of him. Darrell grunted as his body came to a rest in a shallow puddle.

Tyray walked over to him, aiming the gun at his face.

"I got you, man," Tyray said.

Darrell looked up, his eyes wide open in terror. "Man, please don't kill me," he begged, putting his hand over his head to protect himself. Tyray could see his jaw trembling as he spoke.

Cowering on the ground, Darrell seemed smaller than ever. And he was helpless. For an instant, he reminded Tyray of the small puppy from years earlier. Shaking off the memory, Tyray hesitated.

The alley was quiet except for the gentle drip of the light rain that was falling.

"I thought you were different from what everybody else said," Lark's words echoed through his mind.

But Lark was wrong, Tyray thought. This was his chance to get back respect, to show everyone who was boss, to be a man. Tyray's finger moved to the trigger.

"Please don't kill me," Darrell repeated, tears running down his face.

"I remember him when he was dying . . . the way his eyes went wild and his cheeks puffed out . . . the blood and all." Now, Bones's words came back to him.

"Be the last face you see every night . . . the last face you see before you die."

The gun trembled in Tyray's wet hand.

"I always knew you were headed for trouble."

Tyray's thoughts raced ahead with images of the future. He saw Darrell lying on the ground in a pool of blood. He saw Lark looking at him in disgust. He saw his mother crying. He saw Warren's saddened face, his father's unforgiving scowl. And he saw himself able to make it all different, right now.

Tyray looked closely at Darrell. The boy's face was scratched from the fall, and in the rain, he looked to be about twelve years old. Just one flick of the finger, and he would be gone. Just like the boy Bones killed, like the puppy Dad kicked out. Tyray could be just like both men—and he would be a monster.

But if he did not shoot Darrell, he would fail again. And he would be in trouble, the worst of his life. His father would beat him. Ms. Spencer would expel him. Kids would think he was a psycho, a loser. It was too late to avoid that now. Even if Darrell did walk away, Tyray knew his own life was ruined. *"It's too late for me,"* he thought.

"Whatever you do, don't end up like me," Warren's voice whispered in Tyray's mind.

Tyray raised the gun away from Darrell's face. Tears now mixed with rain on Tyray's cheek. He turned the gun towards himself, placing it against the side of his face, his vision clouded with tears.

"Tyray, don't!" Darrell said, springing quickly from the ground.

BANG!

Tyray felt the heat of the gunshot, heard the deafening pop, saw the blinding

flash and smelled the fiery gunpowder. Then he felt himself falling, almost in slow motion.

But an instant before that, he felt an impact against his chest and sensed his arm being wrenched away from his body. Darrell had charged him, and the two boys tumbled to the ground together. The gun was between them, aiming upwards and away. The shot had gone into the air. Both boys' hands were on the weapon when they hit the muddy cement.

"Let go!" Darrell screamed, struggling to pry the weapon from Tyray's hand.

Tyray relaxed his fingers, and Darrell yanked the gun away, throwing it into the thick darkness of the alley.

"Man, you shoulda let me do it," Tyray cried, tears pouring from his eyes. He sat up in the puddle and shook his head. Darrell stood up next to him. "I ain't got nothin' else, man. You took it all away. Besides, my dad's gonna kill me anyway."

Darrell turned, grabbed his bike, and started to walk away, but then he stopped and looked back at Tyray.

"So now you lookin' down on me too. You just wanna pity me, right?" Tyray said bitterly, struggling unsuccessfully to stop crying.

Darrell stood motionless for several seconds. "Come on," he said finally in a shaky voice, walking back over to Tyray and offering his hand. A scrape ran along Darrell's forehead from when he fell off his bike, but his hand was outstretched. The gesture made Tyray feel even sadder, and for once he made no effort to hide it.

"Man, I need help," Tyray said, shaking his head. "I'm in so much trouble. It ain't never been like this."

"Come on," Darrell urged. "It don't have to be this way."

Tyray closed his eyes. He wanted the words to be true. He was tired of fighting, of keeping everything inside, of lying, of being Tyray Hobbs, the bully that made other kids run. That path left him alone and friendless. It left him in dark alleys with a gun. It nearly made him a killer. But Tyray did not know where to begin, or how to change, or what to do.

Reaching up, Tyray grasped Darrell's wet and muddy hand, and the boy pulled him up.

In the distance, a police siren echoed through the dark corridors of the city.

"I won't tell anyone about this,"

Darrell said. "No one has to know but me and you."

Tyray looked at the boy. For once, he knew that he had avoided a mistake, and he was grateful that Darrell stood before him. Darrell was proof Tyray was not Bones. He was not a monster, a killer of kids. He was something else, something that was not totally bad. Maybe even something that could be good.

"Darrell, I'm sorry, man," he said.

"Hey, I'm just glad we're both standin'," Darrell said with a hint of a smile.

"Me too, man," Tyray said, his eyes misty again. "Me too."

Together, the two boys walked in silence down the dark alley. At its end, they headed in opposite directions. Tyray wasn't sure if they would ever be friends, but he knew as they parted they were no longer enemies.

When he approached his front steps, Tyray was afraid to go in, scared of what would happen in the hours, days, and weeks ahead. He dreaded facing his parents, especially his father. But the road ahead was not as bad as the path behind him, one of guns, criminals, and dark alleys.

Tyray wiped his eyes, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

The first person Tyray saw was Mr. Mitchell, sitting in the living room speaking to his father. Both men stopped talking as soon as he opened the door.

"Tyray!" his mother exclaimed, rushing over and hugging him. "Where have you been?"

"You okay?" his father asked, looking at him with concern. Tyray glanced at his parents in confusion.

"I'm fine. What's going on?" Tyray asked, taking a step back and glancing at Mr. Mitchell.

"I came over here to talk to your parents," Mr. Mitchell said. "We've been worried about you."

"He called this afternoon," his mother explained, "and when I got home, I found a bloody pillowcase and this in your room." She pulled a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. Tyray knew it was the letter to Warren he had started to write and tossed into the trash can. "We were so worried, we called Mr. Mitchell, and he came right over."

"Mr. Mitchell's a good man. He's been talkin' some sense to me," Dad explained, his eyes puffy and red. "I

already lost one son. I ain't gonna lose another one. What happened tonight, Tyray? What kinda trouble did you get yourself into?"

Tyray swallowed hard. He knew he had to tell them the truth. Part of him looked forward to it. For once, he would say what was on his mind, what had pushed him to the edge. He would admit what happened with Darrell, his feelings of desperation, his anger at his father, and his quest for the gun. And he would tell them about Warren, about how he would like to visit him, and how his letter had helped Tyray avoid an act that would have ruined his life.

"Nothin' bad happened. You didn't lose nobody, Dad. Not me or Warren. You never did." Tyray said. He felt strangely calm and relieved. For once, both his parents were listening, a teacher was on his side, and he hadn't hurt anyone.

A tear rolled down Tyray's cheek as he looked at the three people watching him. Outside, a police siren wailed, momentarily moving closer and then passing by, racing to some other part of the city. Racing away from Tyray's home.

Tyray took a deep breath and began to tell his story.