

## ***Chapter 8***

When he arrived at Bluford, Tyray learned that a pep rally had been scheduled in the gym for just before lunch. All freshmen were expected to attend. Tyray did not mind such events during football season, when he got to attend as an athlete. But this pep rally was for winter sports. That meant the wrestling team and Darrell Mercer would be included. The last thing he wanted to do was see people praise Darrell.

"We've had a great season this year," Coach Lewis said, talking about the wrestling team. "A couple of our seniors are going to the state championships. And from the looks of things, a number of our freshmen may be there one day too."

Tyray rolled his eyes. He would rather be in Mr. Fitch's history class. He listened as the coach praised several

wrestlers and then mentioned the team's success in a recent match against Lincoln High.

"Each year the team selects an award for the most improved member on the team," the coach continued. Tyray's eyes widened. "This year's recipient is Darrell Mercer."

Tyray watched in horror as Darrell stood up and waved. Many kids in the bleachers clapped loudly, and a few even chanted, "Dar-rell, Dar-rell!"

Amberlynn Bailey and Jamee Wills squealed loudly at the news, and several guys on the wrestling squad patted Darrell on the back.

Tyray stood up. Each clap for Darrell was like an insult aimed directly at him, making his head throb even more. Desperate, Tyray spotted Mr. Mitchell sitting with his section of freshmen and mumbled, "Gotta go to the bathroom. I'm sick."

Mr. Mitchell nodded, and Tyray ran down the bleachers towards the hallway.

"Hard to take, Tyray?" Jamee jeered as Tyray descended the steps. "What goes around comes around."

Tyray made it to the bathroom and went inside. The room was empty, and

Tyray kicked a trash can, sending it smashing into a bathroom stall. His head ached, and he rubbed the wound repeatedly while listening for the end of the pep rally. Finally, after about ten minutes, the rally was over, and Tyray heard everyone leaving the gym. When he came out of the bathroom, Mr. Mitchell was standing there waiting for him.

"Feeling better, Tyray?" Mr. Mitchell asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Tyray said, turning to walk away. "Somethin' I ate, I guess."

"You're upset, aren't you?" Mr. Mitchell asked.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, man," Tyray snapped.

"Kids are mean, Tyray. They're a lot like chickens. When chickens find one of the flock vulnerable, they peck it to death. Darrell was on the receiving end of the pecking a while ago, and now I think you're catching some of it. I know how tough it can be," Mr. Mitchell said.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Mr. Mitchell. I ain't no chicken. Look, I gotta get to class."

"Tyray, this will all pass," Mr. Mitchell added. "One day you're gonna realize that none of this is important."



But there are some things you can do right now to change things. You've got to own up to your part in this, and you gotta get that chip off your shoulder and reach out to the other kids."

"I ain't reachin' out to nobody. I ain't got problems. Don't waste no time on me, Mr. Mitchell," Tyray insisted, walking away from the teacher.

At lunchtime, Tyray approached Lark in the cafeteria.

She glanced up at him and then turned away. Tyray wondered what he would say if she asked him about the money. Would she give him more money if he asked for it?

"Hi, Lark," he said, sitting next to her. "Girl, you look good today."

Lark opened her can of soda but said nothing. She avoided eye contact with him. "Yesterday, I went with my friend Livvie to see her grandma in the nursing home where your mom works," she said. "Livvie's grandma is pretty sick."

"Too bad," Tyray said trying to figure out what Lark had to say.

Lark raised her gaze and looked right at him. "Your Mom was there, Tyray. We got into a conversation about birthdays.

Of course, I kept the necklace a secret. She told me she just celebrated her birthday two months ago," Lark said, taking a deep breath. "Have you been lyin' to me just to get my money?" she asked, tears in her eyes.

Tyray's heart sank. He glanced down to escape her gaze. "You . . . uh . . . I didn't really get her anything nice, so I thought I'd give it to her as a late present as soon as I could afford it," he explained.

"That's not what you told me before," Lark said, shaking her head, a look of disappointment on her face. "You said you wanted to get it for her this year. You acted like you had to get it soon. I told your mom we're friends at school, and she seemed real glad about that. I asked how your sick aunt was doing, and she said there wasn't anyone in the family that was sick. I didn't say anything else 'cause I didn't want to get you in trouble."

"She's lyin'," Tyray blurted out awkwardly. "Mom's like that. She don't like people knowin' her business."

"No, Tyray. I think *you're* the one who's lying," Lark replied. "Everyone kept telling me not to trust you, but I didn't listen. I kept hoping that they were wrong, that you were different from



what they said. Well, I guess I was the one who was wrong."

Tyray's mind spun wildly as he searched for something to say. "Okay, okay. Do you really want the truth? The truth is that I . . . was embarrassed to tell you why I needed the money," Tyray said, thinking quickly.

Lark's eyes widened. "What is it?"

"I owe some guys a lot of money, and they said they're gonna hurt me if I don't pay. They did this to me last night," Tyray insisted, bending forward to show her the gash on the back of his head. "I still gotta get fifty dollars or they're gonna hurt me again. I didn't want to admit that to you."

"Tyray, they can't get away with something like that," Lark said. "You have to go to the principal and tell her what's happening."

"No, you don't understand. The principal hates me. She's just lookin' for a reason to kick me outta Bluford," Tyray said.

"Well, go to Mr. Mitchell. He'll help you. He's great about helping kids with problems," Lark suggested.

"Baby, you don't get it. If I bring anyone else into this, those guys are gonna make it worse for me. All I can do is pay

them off. That's why I asked you for the money. You're my only hope."

"Tyray, I can't keep giving you money. I already gave you everything I had. I believed you when you told me about your Mom's present, and you were lying to me. How can I be sure that you're not lying to me right now? I don't know what to do." Lark's eyes began to water, and she wiped them with her fingers.

"Just walk away then," Tyray said bitterly, surprised at how much Lark's tears bothered him. "That's what everybody does. No reason you should be different."

"Tyray!" Lark sobbed.

He glanced up to see Jamee Wills coming towards them. Passing Tyray in icy silence, Jamee rushed to Lark's side and put her hand on her friend's shoulder. "Come over and eat with us, Lark. You don't have to stay here." Lark got up slowly. "Me and Amberlynn are gonna go to the mall after school. My sister is driving us. We want you to come too, Lark," Jamee said as they walked away.

"You need to mind your own business," Tyray snapped at Jamee.

"My friend is my business," Jamee shot back. "And it's my business when she gets mixed up with losers like you."



Jamee pulled Lark to a table on the far side of the cafeteria, where Amberlynn was sitting. Tyray knew by the look on Lark's face that she was confused. As he watched her wipe tears from her eyes, he experienced a twinge of guilt.

Tyray looked around and realized he was completely alone in the middle of the crowded cafeteria. *So this is how it's gonna be from now on*, he concluded. His only comfort had been the knowledge that he would soon have a gun. Tomorrow he would meet Bones as they had agreed to nearly a week ago. But without money, Bones would just laugh at him.

Just then, a light bulb turned on in Tyray's head. There was one place where he had not yet gone for money, a place with more risk than robbing a bank. His mother's money stash.

Mom had savings she called her 'cheat money.' Every payday she hid cash in her dresser drawer. When it grew to a nice sum, she would use it to take her mother to dinner or buy herself something she needed. Dad knew about the stash, and he often borrowed from it. Tyray knew if Dad found him taking money, he would be in the worst trouble of his life.

But he had to do something.

Mom's money was the only answer. As long as he returned it quickly and without Dad knowing, nothing bad would happen. Once he got the gun, Tyray figured he could start scaring kids. They would start paying him again, and he could replace Mom's cash before anyone knew it was gone. By then, everything would return to normal.

As soon as his final class ended, Tyray sprinted from Bluford, rushing to arrive home before his mother. He had about five minutes to spare when he walked into the house. Making sure no one was home, he went quickly into his parents' room. He cautiously opened the drawer and found the 'cheat money' hidden between two folded shirts. Tyray counted one hundred and twenty dollars. He took out fifty dollars and carefully arranged the clothes in the exact position he had found them. Unless Mom looked for the money immediately, there would be no way she would know what he had done.

Tyray's hands shook as he folded the bills and shoved them deep into the pocket of his jeans. Immediately, he felt dirty. He had done many bad things in

his life that did not bother him, but this was different. He had never stolen anything from his mother.

Struggling to push the guilt from his mind, Tyray focused his thoughts on the gun. "My gun is gonna change everything," he whispered to himself, quietly fighting the images of Lark and his mother, which gently haunted him in the darkened bedroom.

When Tyray went to bed that night, he slept fitfully, tossing every few hours, unable to get comfortable. At one point, he dreamt of Lark's face. Tears were in her eyes. To his horror, Tyray realized she was sitting alone in a church pew crying. Before her was a coffin, and in it Tyray saw his own body, a gun resting on his chest.