

## Chapter One

“**W**hat was *that*?” Jaris Spain screamed. He was working the late shift at the Chicken Shack when a noise that sounded like gunfire exploded from Pequot Street a block away.

“Probably just a car backfiring, bro,” Trevor Jenkins said. He was Jaris’s best friend, and at the moment he was eating a chicken nugget.

Jaris turned cold. He knew what backfiring sounded like. “Trev! Somebody’s shooting over there!” he exclaimed. Once, when he was six or seven, Jaris was coming home

from a movie with his father. A car drove by and a woman was shot. Pop covered Jaris's eyes but too late. Jaris had seen the blood on the woman's white sweater. Nothing else sounded quite like gunfire, and he knew he had just heard it from Pequot Street.

Within seconds, the eerie whine of emergency vehicles drowned out the normal noises of the night. Jaris grabbed his cell phone and called home. "Mom, I'm okay. But something bad just happened over on Pequot. I heard gunfire and now there's sirens. I'll be coming home right away."

Pop must have grabbed the phone from Mom after he saw the shocked look on her face. "Jaris, what's going down?" he asked.

"Shooting over on Pequot, Pop. I'm okay. I'm getting off work in a few minutes," Jaris explained.

"Listen to me boy. Sit tight. I don't want you walking home, you got it? I'm coming in the pickup to get you," Pop commanded.

It was only a few blocks from the Chicken Shack to Jaris's house. He easily walked the distance on a normal day. "Okay, Pop," he replied. "You got it."

Jaris turned to Trevor, who lived on the same street as Jaris. "Man, there's room in Pop's pickup for the both of us," Jaris said.

"Your father's coming?" Trevor asked, wide-eyed.

"Yeah. Who knows what that gunfire's all about man. Maybe the gangs are making war on each other," Jaris said.

"Or maybe some fool's shooting a stray cat off a fence," Trevor countered. "Seems like everybody's got a gun around here."

More sirens wailed in the darkness. Jaris had a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. Somebody was hurt—or worse. Maybe it was somebody he knew. Jaris grew up in this neighborhood. He knew most of the kids, most of the families. The gangbangers generally lived south of Grant Avenue, and their violence didn't spill over into Jaris's neighborhood. But

the gunfire came from Pequot Street, several blocks north of Grant.

Pop pulled up in his green pickup. Jaris and Trevor piled in. “Bad business,” Pop growled.

“Did you hear anything about the shooting on the radio, Pop?” Jaris asked.

“Just about heavy traffic around Pequot due to a police action,” Pop answered.

“Maybe the cops were chasing somebody and there was a shootout,” Trevor suggested.

“I’ll just be glad to get you guys home,” Pop said. “Your mom is a freakin’ nervous wreck and your mom too, Trev.”

When Pop pulled into the Spain driveway, Trevor jumped out and ran across the street to his house. The front door of the Spain house opened, and Mom was framed there, a terrible look on her face. “It’s Maya Archer,” Mom cried. “She was shot!”

Jaris’s brain went into a spin. Thirteen-year-old Maya, Sami’s little sister? Sami was a junior at Tubman High School too, and she

was one of Jaris's best friends. Who would want to shoot a little girl like Maya?

"Maya was coming out of the deli, and she was caught in the gunfire," Mom said. "Dear God, what is this world coming to?" Mom groaned.

"Is she okay, Mom?" Jaris asked, his breath coming in a gasp. Sami was always talking about her little sister, her off-the-wall jokes, her dancing. Maya was friends with Jaris's fourteen-year-old sister Chelsea.

"I don't know," Mom sighed. She appeared near tears. "She's been taken to the hospital."

Chelsea was standing alongside Mom, her face red from crying. "Jaris! They shot Maya!" she sobbed.

"Come on," Pop said. "We're going to the hospital. Maya must be down at Drew Emergency."

Jaris and Chelsea hurried toward their father.

"No," Mom protested. "Maybe those shooters are still out there looking for trouble. It's

dangerous to be driving around tonight. You guys need to stay home until the police catch the shooters.”

“We’re going,” Pop insisted harshly. “If it was one of our kids shot like Maya, Lonnie and Mattie Archer would be there for us, and you know that, Monie.”

“We gotta go, Mom!” Jaris sided with his father. “It’s Sami’s little sister!”

“Maya is one of my best friends,” Chelsea cried. “I want to go!”

“Lorenzo,” Mom pleaded with her husband. “There’s nothing you guys can do. The doctors and nurses are helping Maya and—”

“Come on, you kids,” Pop snapped. “We’re going!”

“All right,” Mom said. “I’ll go too. We can use my car. I’m not sitting here alone in this house worrying myself sick about you, afraid that those criminals are shooting at my husband and kids!” Mom pulled on a sweater against the evening chill. In a few minutes they were driving toward Drew Emergency Hospital.

“I know what it’s like sitting in an emergency room, waiting to find out if somebody you love is dead or alive,” Pop explained. “I went through it with both my parents. It felt like I was sitting in that blasted waiting room forever before a doctor came to tell me what was going on. Right now Lonnie and Mattie are going through hell and they need us.”

“It must have been a stray shot that hit Maya,” Jaris suggested. “Nobody would have shot her on purpose.”

“Jacklyn’s mother called me right after it happened. Jacklyn Webster. Jacklyn and Keisha and Maya had just finished cheerleader practice, and they stopped at the deli for one of those big colas they were going to split. A lot of kids from Tubman High were there. Marko Lane and DeWayne Pike were coming out just ahead of the girls,” Mom told them.

Marko Lane was a creep, but Jaris didn’t think he was mixed up with gangs. DeWayne Pike was a good guy. He had just finished playing Charles Darnay in Tubman’s presentation

of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Jaris had played Sydney Carton.

“Maybe it was just random,” Pop figured. “Maybe they saw a bunch of kids and they just let loose. They don’t need a reason. Some of them initiate new gang members by asking them to do a shooting. I’d like to get my hands on them for five minutes. They wouldn’t be blasting away at kids after I got through with them.” Pop was furious, and Jaris couldn’t blame him. To think that a sweet little girl like Maya just wanted a cola and ended up being shot was horrifying.

They parked in the lot for the emergency visitors, and the four of them rushed to the waiting room.

“That’s Lonnie Archer’s van,” Pop pointed out. “I recognize it. We took it when he and I went fishing at Arrowhead.”

When Jaris and his family got to the waiting room, they saw Sami and her parents. Sami was a big, tough girl with a soft heart, but right now her eyes were red from crying.



Mom went to Mattie Archer and gave her a big hug. Pop embraced Lonnie Archer, and Jaris and Chelsea both put their arms around Sami. The Archers had two children, Sami and Maya. The girls were their whole life.

A young Asian doctor stepped into the waiting room. “The Archers?” he called out. Lonnie and Mattie rushed over to him. “Your daughter is out of surgery,” he announced. “She’s in the recovery room. She did well. The bullet struck her in the thigh, and her femur was broken, so that has been repaired and she received a blood transfusion. You’ll be able to see her in about one hour. She’ll recover completely from the injury with physical therapy.”

Lonnie and Mattie Archer, with Sami between them, laughed and cried. They praised God and praised the doctors. The Spains joined in the celebration. Then Mattie Archer wept and said, “Monie, Lorenzo, you guys were here for us. We’ll never forget that. You guys are the best. Jaris, Chelsea, you’re like our babies too!”

“Nobody could have kept us away,” Pop said. “Our kids started school together Mattie. And before I got my job with Jackson at the garage, Lonnie, you got me a part-time job with the sanitation department, and that kept us going.” Pop looked over at Mom with a half smile, “Remember, Monie? Those were the days you were still in college, learning to be a big shot teacher. If it hadn’t of been for the Archers, we wouldn’t have had fried chicken and dumplings on the table.”

Mom smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, we were up against it all right.”

Sami huddled with Jaris and Chelsea. “When I heard that Maya got shot, it was like my heart stopped,” Sami said. “I got all cold and I thought I was dying. I couldn’t breathe. I thought she was dead. I swear, I thought I was gonna die. We were expecting her home with Keisha and Jacklyn in a little while, and then we got this call that Maya was shot and I thought I was losin’ my little sister. I couldn’t stand to lose her. I was three years old when