

Chapter One

Kevin Walker walked slowly onto the campus of Harriet Tubman Senior High School. The school was bigger than any other he'd ever attended. Right in front of the building was a large statue of a woman in a long dress with high button shoes and a cape. She had a determined look on her plain, kind face.

“That’s Harriet Tubman,” a girl offered. “Our school is named for her.”

“Oh,” Kevin said.

“She led a lot of slaves to freedom in the eighteen hundreds. They called it the “Underground Railroad.” It wasn’t a railroad though.

It was a string of safe houses where the slaves hid in the daytime. The slave catchers were after them with dogs and everything. So they traveled by night and hid during the day,” the girl explained with a smile. “You’re a new student, huh?”

“Yeah. I just moved here from Texas. Oh, my name is Kevin Walker,” Kevin said.

“I’m Alonee Lennox,” the girl introduced herself. “Welcome to Tubman High. It’s a good school. We got some great teachers and some okay ones. Lot of friendly kids. That’s what I love about Tubman.”

Kevin nodded. The girl seemed nice enough—friendly to be sure. Kevin tended to be shy, and he smiled and thanked her and then moved on. Kevin felt uncomfortable talking to people he didn’t know, or maybe to anybody. Before moving to Tubman, he and his mother had lived in a small town in Texas, Spurville. His mother was a registered nurse. There were just the two of them. Kevin had gone to Spurville High School, which was

about one-fourth the size of Tubman. While Tubman had trees and a nice green lawn, Spurville High was shabby without much landscaping. Still, Kevin missed it. He missed everything about Spurville. He felt like a fish out of water, having trouble breathing.

Kevin looked at his class schedule. He had English first. In Spurville Mrs. Roberts, an elderly woman, taught English. It was Kevin's favorite class. On hot days she put out a bowl of lemonade with ice floating in it, and the students were welcome to dip in and fill their paper cups. Kevin read the name of the teacher here: Mr. Pippin. He wondered what he was like. Probably he wouldn't be as nice as Mrs. Roberts.

When Kevin walked into the classroom, he felt many eyes on him. He was arriving in the middle of the school year, which was uncommon. He wasn't dressed like the other guys in the room. Instead of the new styles, he wore old jeans and a white shirt. He didn't see anybody else wearing a white shirt.

Everybody else wore T-shirts. But Kevin's grandmother insisted he wear a nicely pressed white shirt.

Kevin heard snickering when he sat down. He saw three boys staring at him and laughing. Kevin's face warmed. He wished he were back in Spurville. Twenty times a day he wished that, but he couldn't go back to Spurville until he finished high school. He wouldn't have minded being here in California for a visit, but to think Spurville was not home anymore made him sick to the core of his being.

Kevin noticed the girl who told him about Harriet Tubman was in this class too. She smiled at him, and she seemed worried about him. Kevin knew who Harriet Tubman was even before Alonee explained her importance. Kevin had listened out of politeness. Kevin's mother taught him a lot of things, including the story of the "Black Moses," Harriet Tubman's nickname.

Mr. Pippin appeared at the front desk, sliding in like a gray ghost. Kevin liked him

immediately. He was old and worn looking. His suit was shabby. Kevin thought he must have a lot of knowledge, like Mrs. Roberts did. Kevin and Mr. Pippin had something else in common too. Kevin was nervous being in this classroom, and for some reason Mr. Pippin seemed uneasy too.

“We will be discussing the “Rocking-Horse Winner” today,” Mr. Pippin announced. “A fine story by D. H. Lawrence. Does anyone wish to start?”

A boy in the back of the room rocked back and forth in his chair, making a squeaking noise.

“Marko Lane,” Mr. Pippin said, “stop that.”

“I was trying to get into the mood of the story, Mr. Pippin, you know, the rocking horse,” Marko replied. His friends laughed.

Kevin felt sorry for the teacher, who looked stressed. Mr. Pippin looked like an outnumbered soldier on the battlefield, bravely fighting on though he knew in the end he was doomed. Kevin was shy in social situations,

but he liked to participate in class discussions. He was articulate when he had something to say. By a happy coincidence, Mrs. Roberts had introduced her English class to the “Rocking-Horse Winner” a few weeks ago in Spurville. So Kevin raised his hand.

“The story has a very powerful message about how needing more and more money can destroy people,” Kevin stated.

Mr. Pippin stared at the new boy. The dead, dull look in the teacher’s face flamed with a look of hope. “Yes! Give us an example of this . . .” —he consulted the roster—“Kevin.”

“Well,” Kevin went on. “The mother. She never felt she had enough money. She was driven to search for more. And this destroyed her son.”

“The mother,” Alonee added, “felt the family was unlucky because they didn’t have more money.”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Pippin said.

“Even the walls seemed to be crying for more money,” Jaris Spain, another student, offered.

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Pippin encouraged. A real class discussion was going on, and Kevin had started it.

Marko Lane moved his desk with a scraping noise. Usually that kind of antic brought laughter from his friends. But now it seemed everybody wanted to talk about the story.

“The boy in the story—Paul,” Mr. Pippin interjected. “How did his mother’s obsession with success affect him?”

“He like caught the disease of wanting more money for his mother’s sake,” Kevin answered. “He rode that wooden rocking horse in his room, and he got the names of real horses, and he bet on them and won money for his mom. And eventually he died riding that horse.”

When the class ended, Kevin decided he really liked Mr. Pippin. He reminded Kevin of Mrs. Roberts. He was an interesting, intelligent man.

As Kevin walked from class, Marko Lane stuck out his foot and made Kevin stumble.

Then Marko said with exaggerated concern, “Hey, I’m sorry dude. I didn’t see you.”

“It’s okay,” Kevin muttered.

“Where you from man?” Marko asked.

“Texas,” Kevin replied. He walked a little faster. He hoped to lose Marko Lane and the boys who trailed along with him.

“Texas!” Marko repeated. “I never met anybody from Texas before.” He looked at his friends and asked them if they knew anybody from Texas. They shook their heads, laughing. Marko was on top of his game.

“You got a whole lot of cows down there, don’t you man?” Marko asked.

“Uh, not where I lived,” Kevin said.

“Then how come you smell like cow pies?” Marko asked, causing an eruption of laughter from his friends. “Not to offend you or anything dude, but I think you been spending too much time on the range.”

Kevin knew they were baiting him, but he ignored them. He saw a teacher just ahead. At least he thought she was a teacher—a smartly

dressed woman carrying a briefcase. He hurried to catch up to her, “Excuse me, ma’am, where’s Room 24?” he asked, “I got American history there.”

The woman was beautiful. She smiled at Kevin and said, “I’m going there now. I teach the class. I’m Torie McDowell. And you are—”

“Kevin Walker,” Kevin responded. He glanced back and saw Marko and his friends falling back into the shadows. For some reason they seemed afraid of this woman.

“Welcome to Tubman High, Kevin. We just go around this corner and we’re there,” Ms. McDowell said.

Kevin took a seat in the middle of the classroom. He was glad not to see Marko Lane and his buddies. Back in Spurville, there were boys like Marko. Kevin developed a deep hatred for them. He tried to avoid them, but sometimes things got too bad. Then Kevin had to deal with them.

Once Kevin Walker almost killed a boy. He hoped it would never get that far with Marko Lane.

Kevin liked American History I. Back in Spurville, he liked most of his classes. He was not brilliant, but he was a good student and he enjoyed learning. Kevin's mother had worked hard as a nurse, but she had always made time to get books from the library for herself and Kevin. "We need to stimulate our minds all the time," she used to tell Kevin. So they read books about astronomy and archeology, as well as the biographies of famous men and women. At night, when she got home from the hospital, she would sit with Kevin. She used to say things like, "Kevin, did you know that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the same day, July 4, 1826? Isn't it amazing that they would both go like that on such an important holiday?"

Kevin had loved to hear his mother talk. She had a lilting, musical voice. She led the Voices of Praise choir at the local church. When she