

CHAPTER ONE

“My purse!” a girl standing in front of Harriet Tubman’s statue at Tubman High School screamed. “There’s a hundred dollars missing from my purse!”

About a dozen kids were arriving for Monday’s classes when she began yelling. One of them was Jaris Spain. He knew the girl—Ryann Kern—but he didn’t know her well. She was in his American History I class. All he knew about her was that she was very smart, and she was a loner with one friend, Leticia Hicks.

Now Leticia grabbed Ryann’s hand and cried, “Oh my gosh! Are you sure, Ryann? Are you sure it’s gone?”

“It’s not here,” Ryann screamed. She dropped to her knees at the foot of the statue and dumped out the contents of her purse. Lipsticks, mirrors, papers, a driver’s license all flew out. She groped through the mess frantically, crying, “It’s not here! It’s gone! It was in my wallet. I put it in my wallet and now it’s gone!”

Jaris drew closer. Some of his friends were near Ryann, looking at her sympathetically. Sereeta Prince was there. So were Alonee Lennox and Sami Archer.

“Girl, could you have dropped it on the bus?” Sami asked. “If you did, they got a special number you can call. The bus driver hangs on to stuff like that.”

“No!” Ryann cried. “I had it a few minutes ago. I leaned my purse against the base of the statue, and I turned my head to talk to somebody. Somebody must’ve reached in and grabbed the money.” Ryann began to glare at the girls closest to her. She took an especially hard look at Sereeta. “Did you see anybody near my

purse?" Ryann asked her, "You were right here, Sereeta."

"No," Sereeta responded, "I didn't see anything."

"A hundred dollars!" Ryann moaned, beginning to cry. "Mom gave it to me this morning. I was going to go shopping at Lawson's for my summer clothes. I was going to get all the cute tank tops and shorts on sale. I can't believe somebody reached in my purse and stole my money!"

"Nobody here would have done that," Jaris said. He knew all the kids who were near enough to Ryann to have been able to reach her purse. "There's gotta be some mistake."

"I'm going to report it to the office," Ryann cried. "I'm going to let them know there's a thief here who has my hundred dollars!"

Jaris glanced at Sereeta. She looked very upset. She leaned close to Jaris and said, "She thinks I took it. I was the closest

to the purse of anybody, and I think she suspects me! I feel so horrible.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jaris consoled her. “Everybody who knows you knows you wouldn’t do something like that.”

Slowly, the students dispersed to their first classes. Even before this happened, Jaris had been worried about Sereeta. She was going through a lot lately. Her mother and stepfather had had their first child. They had been paying little attention to Sereeta in their excitement over the new baby. Sereeta felt lonely and abandoned. Now she seemed badly shaken.

Jaris tried to remember all the students he saw near Ryann. Alonee and Sami were there, but he was willing to bet his life on their honesty. Jasmine, Marko Lane’s girlfriend, was there too. Marko lavished gifts on her, but she always wanted more. She was mean and sly. She might have ripped off the hundred dollars.

Then there was another guy, new to Tubman High. Quincy Pierce seemed nice

enough, but Jaris didn't know him yet. Maybe his family was tight on money. Maybe he was hurting for cash. Could Ryann have been careless enough to leave her purse open when she put it down? Did Quincy—or someone else—see a hundred dollar bill sticking out of her wallet and just grab the bill on impulse?

Jasmine was still hanging around the statue of Harriet Tubman after the others had left. “Too bad about Ryann losing her money like that, huh Jasmine?” Jaris asked.

Jasmine shrugged. “Stupid chick,” she replied. “She stacks her purse against the statue and then looks the other way. She asked for it. She got what was coming to her. You gotta keep your purse with you all the time. Ryann, she thinks she's so smart 'cause she gets As, but she's got no common sense.”

Jaris looked at Jasmine, hoping he could read some sign of guilt in her face, but she was cool. Even if she had taken the

money, she'd never show any emotion. "Seems terrible we can't even trust the kids we go to school with," Jaris commented.

"I'll tell you who I don't trust, boy. That girl you hang around with—Sereeta." There was a sneer on Jasmine's face. "She is one sick puppy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jaris snapped.

"She always cryin'," Jasmine complained. "What's that about, huh? Maybe she got mental problems. You ever hear of people who steal 'cause they're sick in the head?"

"Sereeta is fine," Jaris insisted. "She doesn't have any mental problems."

"Well, all I know is," Jasmine asserted, "nobody's gonna take what's in this girl's purse. They even try, I'll scratch them bloody."

As Jaris walked to his class, he wasn't sure what to think. Jasmine's father had a good job in banking. The family wasn't hurting for money. Jasmine didn't need to

steal another girl's hundred dollars unless she saw the chance and took it just for spite.

Later in the school day, Quincy joined Jaris, Alonee, and Sami for lunch. Sereeta was usually there too, but she went home from school early. She said she wasn't feeling well, and that worried Jaris even more. Maybe the accusation that she took the money had gotten to her, adding to the stresses she already had.

"Too bad Ryann lost her hundred dollars," Jaris said to Quincy, wondering how he'd react.

"Yeah man," Quincy responded, "if I lost a hundred dollars, my mom would freak big time. I'd be afraid to go home. Mom does housekeeping at the hospital, and she doesn't make much money. My dad's sick. So a hundred bucks is big stuff for us."

"It's a tough break for Ryann," Sami chimed in. "I feel for the girl."

"I just can't imagine somebody being nervy enough to reach into some girl's

purse when she's only a few feet away," Alonee commented. "I mean, Ryann turns her back for a minute, and somebody darts over and grabs it? I gotta believe the money just fell out of her purse earlier, and she wants to believe it was stolen."

"You know what I heard that witch Leticia say?" Sami asked. "I heard her say she's pretty sure Sereeta took the money. That burned me good. I go, 'Where you get off accusing another girl you don't even know, sister?' And she goes, 'She was right there, and I don't like her anyway.'"

Jaris was saddened to hear Sami say that. It added to his worries about Sereeta. He needed to talk to Ryann and Leticia and convince them that Sereeta was a good and honest person. If they really knew her, they would never call her a thief.

After school that day, when Ryann and Leticia came walking toward the bus stop, Jaris stepped into their path. "Hi," he said in a friendly voice. "The money turn up yet?"

“Are you kidding?” Leticia snapped. “The dirty thief who took it is out spending it and having fun!”

Ryann dabbed at her eyes as if she had been crying. “This is the meanest thing anybody ever did to me,” she moaned. “I had all my stuff picked out at Lawson’s. Now I got to ask my parents for another hundred dollars.”

“Ryann,” Jaris told her, “I just want you to know that Sereeta didn’t take your money. I’ve known her all my life, and she’s a really honest person. She’d never steal from anybody.”

Leticia was a tall, plain girl. She wore her hair severely pulled back. She looked like she didn’t trust many people, and she looked older than her age of sixteen. “She’s your girlfriend so you’d stick with her,” Leticia replied. “All I know is she was right there next to Ryann’s purse. When I looked at her, she had this guilty expression on her face. I’m pretty good at reading the looks on peoples’ faces.”