

Chapter One

Robinson “Robin” Paige leaned his skinny self against the wall near the Barbara Jordan Community Center restrooms and rubbed his tired eyes. He was worn out, and not just from “Welcome Day” at Ironwood Central High School where he’d start ninth grade for real on Monday.

He was more than ready for school. He’d already done his summer reading, an amazing novel called *Bud, Not Buddy* about an orphan boy searching for family, and written a great five-paragraph essay too. Robin was whipped because he’d barely slept. There’d

been a fist fight under his window at midnight that woke him the first time. An hour and a half later, there'd been another fight. This time it wasn't just gang dudes throwing punches.

This time, there'd been gunfire.

Three gunshots at one thirty in the morning can mess up your shut-eye, Robin thought.

Robin was no stranger to gunfire. He and his grandmother lived on the toughest street in the toughest hood in the tough city of Ironwood. Miz Paige—that's what everyone, except for Robin, called his grandmother—would have gotten them out of the Second Ward ages ago if she could afford it. She couldn't. She ran a joint on Ninth Street called the Shrimp Shack that was barely making it. Unless they hit the Powerball, they were stuck with the Ninth Street Rangers gang, the blast of

deuce-deuces at one thirty in the morning,
the sirens. ...

The men's room door opened. Old Mr. Smith teetered out. The Center had two kinds of members. You had to be younger than sixteen or older than sixty-five to hang out there. Robin was fourteen, though some folks still took him for twelve. Barely five feet tall, he had coal-colored skin and a buzz cut.

Mr. Smith was way older than sixty-five. He'd lost part of one foot in the Vietnam War, wore a special shoe on that foot, and sometimes used a cane. He had thick round glasses and smelled of Old Spice. Robin loved him. He used to be a locksmith and could open any lock with just a hairpin. He was great at games. He had taught Robin and his friends pinochle, hearts, spades, rummy. ... Robin had never beaten Mr. Smith at cards. Not once. And checkers? Maybe twice.

“Robin Paige, you waitin’ to walk me back to the rec room?”

Mr. Smith had on a baggy dress shirt tucked into pants, with his belt way too high. As for Robin, he wore the ICHS school uniform: dark blue pants and a matching short sleeve shirt. His new school had a strict dress code, mostly because so many kids got bussed there from different parts of the city. When the school first started, kids from the same hoods started dressing alike, and there were a lot of fights. That’s when the school board said all Ironwood kids had to wear blue and blue, even the girls. Even the teachers.

Not that it stopped the fighting, Robin thought. Kids know who’s from their hood. You don’t need a shirt to represent.

“You got it, Mr. Smith.” Then Robin noticed something. He winced. “Um ... XYZ, Mr. Smith.”

“XY. ’Scuse me, what?”

“XYZ, Mr. Smith. X-Y-Z.”

Mr. Smith stared blankly. “Huh? Whatchu talkin’ ’bout, Robin?”

Robin grinned and pointed. “X-Y-Z means examine your zipper.”

Mr. Smith laughed. “Oh! Sorry. Don’t want to be showin’ the colors in the rec hall. Too many old ladies askin’ me to marry them already.” He zipped his fly. “Easy to fo’git when you my age.”

Easy to forget, Robin corrected mentally. His gramma was always on his case about speaking properly, even if she used a lot of street slang herself. Robin could go both ways. It was useful.

“Okay,” Mr. Smith said. “Sly’s show starts in five minutes. It’ll take me that long to git to the rec hall!”

Sly was Sylvester “Sly” Thomas. He was one of Robin’s two homies, along with

Karen Knight, who everyone just called Kaykay. Sly's daddy was Reverend James "Tex" Thomas of the Ironwood Community Baptist Church that Robin and Miz Paige attended. Sly and Kaykay hung at the Center a lot. Most every Friday afternoon Sly put on a magic show. The old folks loved him. His goal was to have his own stage show in Las Vegas, and Robin thought he just might do it. He was a cold magician and a dope mime.

Robin and Mr. Smith finally reached the rec room, where a crowd of maybe fifty people waited near the low wooden stage for Sly to appear. Kaykay saw them enter. She rushed over with a full plate in her hands.

That's so Kaykay, Robin thought. She never walks if she can run.

Robin gulped. Kaykay was just so ... fine, even in her blue school uniform. An inch taller than him, she had tawny skin, straight hair to her shoulders, and eyes that

appeared to change color depending on her mood. Every boy who met her wanted to be with her. Robin did too.

Not that I'd ever tell her. She'd laugh her ass off.

“Robin! Mr. Smith! Check out what I made with Mrs. Swett in the kitchen!” Kaykay talked as fast as she moved. “Organic peanut butter cookies. Taste!”

That was so Kaykay too. She was all about keeping it organic and green. She was the kind of girl who'd yell at a stranger for dropping a McDonald's cup on the sidewalk.

Robin and Mr. Smith were about to try Kaykay's cookies when the room hushed. Robin thought Sly's show was starting, but it wasn't. Instead, a man of about forty-five took the stage. He wore black pants and a white shirt and stood ramrod straight. This was Sergeant Bruce Jones, who'd been a real Marine drill sergeant before he ran

the Center. Everyone just called him Sarge. When Robin first met Sarge, he'd been afraid of him. Then he figured out that under it all, the ex-Marine was a softie.

"I'm gonna keep this short," Sarge declared, "'cause it sure ain't sweet. You know I care 'bout each of you. You also know the shape this place is in. We jus' got a visit from the city inspectors, and they say we can't put off the new roof no longer. But it's gonna cost twenty-five thousand dollars we ain't got. If we can't get the money soon, we gots to close."

A murmur went through the crowd. Robin felt sick to his stomach. The Center had to close? He loved this place. It had this rec hall, a kitchen, arts and crafts, meeting rooms, even a small library. The place was pretty jacked up, though. The heat was bad, the A/C worse. The walls and floors were

a mess, and it did need a new roof in the worst way.

“When we gots to close?” Mr. Smith called out.

“Next Wednesday. Wednesday be the last day, ’less someone comes up with some big money. That’s all I gotta say.” Sarge stepped off the stage as everyone talked at once.

What will these old people do with themselves? Robin thought as a dozen conversations erupted around him. *What am I gonna do?*

Mr. Smith went to talk with some of his friends. Sly came over to join Robin and Kaykay. Sly wasn’t tall, but he was wide. A clown by nature, he wasn’t clowning now.

“Can you believe this bull?” Sly asked. “We can’t let this place close! No way, no how!”

Kaykay put her hands on her hips. Robin thought that maybe she was about to cry. “Whatchu plannin’ to do then, Sly? Pull a big-ass wad of dead presidents out your magic hat? If we was in the rich burbs, we’d get fixed right up. But who gonna help us out?”

“I wish I could,” Sly admitted.

“We can’t just give up,” Robin told his friends. What they could do, he didn’t know, but they just couldn’t let the Center die.

Like Sly said: “No way, no how.”