

Chapter One

It was pitch-black chaos in the storage room.

The gunshots fired by the two Ninth Street Rangers gangstas echoed off the cinder block walls. The gangstas were screaming, crying, and cursing in agony from the pepper spray that fourteen-year-old Robinson “Robin” Paige had just fired at their faces. Off to Robin’s left, his friend Karen “Kaykay” Knight was bellowing too. Robin thought she might be shot. As for Robin’s ace, Sylvester “Sly” Thomas, Robin heard nothing. He feared his homeboy could be dead, face down on the cold floor in a pool of his own blood.

Why did we come here, Robin asked himself. Why, why, why? I just assed us out. What was I even thinking?

Robin knew he had just a few seconds to assess, react, and get him and his friends out of the storage yard. Otherwise, the gangstas would fire at them again. The pepper spray wouldn't stop them for long. Only moments stood between him and his friends living or dying.

That is, if they're even alive.

But Robin couldn't think. Not only had the gunshots deafened him, but the events of the night also spun willy-nilly through his head like a helicopter with a busted blade.

The decision to come out here, to this storage room where the Ninth Street Rangers kept their drug money and loot. Not to steal money from the Rangers and give it to a righteous cause, but to recover a set of candlesticks that the Rangers had

stolen from an old lady friend of his grandmother's.

Getting through the gate of the U-Store. Picking the Rangers' storage room lock again. Finding the candlesticks that were now in his backpack.

And then the angry voices of the gangstas as they surprised Robin and his buds. Hitting the floor and killing their flashlight. The click of guns being cocked. Shooting pepper spray at the Rangers at the same time they fired their handguns.

The Rangers screaming.

Kaykay screaming.

It was too much.

Robin forced himself to think. He crawled across the hard concrete. There was Sly!

"You with me?" he hissed.

Sly squeezed Robin's bicep to indicate he was okay. Robin took his homeboy's

hand in his and kept crawling. They moved toward the sound of Kaykay's sobs. When they reached her, Robin felt no blood.

"How are you hurt?" He kept his voice low. The Rangers were still cursing and bellowing from the burning pepper spray, but it would be disaster if they heard him and his buds.

You don't have to be able to see to fire a Glock at a noise, Robin thought.

"Tried—tried—tried to spray 'em," Kaykay gasped. "Got myself!"

Oh no. Kaykay had pepper-sprayed herself by accident. Her face had to feel like it was on fire—eyes tearing crazily, her nose running like a thief in the night.

But she'll be okay.

He stood. "Let's get her out of here," he whispered to Sly.

"But the Rangers!" Sly hissed.

“Shut up and do what I do!” Robin hissed back.

He lifted Kaykay to her feet. Sly helped. Then the two boys picked up their friend and crossed to the open door of the storage room. The Rangers weren't there—they'd stepped outside, hollering into the darkness.

Robin realized they could get away, as long as the Rangers didn't see them.

Gotta move. And fast!

Kaykay was whimpering. Sly was chubby and out of shape, while Robin was just five feet tall and skinny. But somehow, the two guys half dragged and half carried the panicked Kaykay out of the storage room and toward the gate. The further they got, the heavier Kaykay felt, and the harder it was for her to contain her crying.

“Water!” she gasped. “Gotta wash my eyes! Help me wash out my eyes!”

“Hang in there,” Robin told her.

He heard the Rangers’ boss screaming in pain again. “Day-um! Day-um! Mah eyes! Mah eyes!”

A few moments later they were outside the yard. Kaykay was really suffering. At least the Rangers hadn’t come after them. They had to be suffering too.

“What we gonna do now, guys?” Sly demanded.

“Get her home,” Robin said. “Let’s get to the bus.”

Kaykay moaned. “I can’t go home! My parents will kill me! And then they gonna kill you!”

Robin nodded. Kaykay had a point. Her parents would flip if they heard what they’d been doing at the U-Store. Kaykay would be grounded for life and forbidden to hang with Robin and Sly.

There was no time to think about that,

though. If they didn't get out of here, the Rangers could still find them.

We have pepper spray, and they have Glocks. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, they win.

“Come on,” he ordered. “Kaykay, we’re hauling you again.”

Together, Robin and Sly carried her down Decatur Street to the bus stop.

Robin prayed that when they got there, the bus would come before the Rangers did.

At least I've got the candlesticks, Robin thought grimly as the bus rolled along. He touched his backpack. *Yep. There they are. But we totally blew it otherwise. We had the key to the Rangers' bank of badness. We could've gone back there whenever we wanted to make a "withdrawal." We used their money to save the Center, and we used it to save our school library from closing.*

Now, they're gonna move their loot someplace else.

We'll never find it.

I blew it, I blew it, I cold blew it.

He sighed. At least Kaykay was okay. She sat between Sly and Robin in the back of the bus. They'd found a water bottle under their seat, and after making sure it was water, used it to wash out Kaykay's eyes. That had helped a little. Robin had taken off his hoodie and told Kaykay to blow her streaming nose into it. It was disgusting. He'd have to throw the hoodie away. But at least she wasn't gushing snot on herself anymore.

Their plan had been for them each to get home by bus. To clear time for the operation, Robin had lied to his grandmother and said he was studying at the Barbara Jordan Community Center with Kaykay and Sly; Sly's father would drop him home. Kaykay and Sly had told versions of the same

story, except with different parents doing the pickup.

The plan had obviously changed. Robin knew they needed some good cover story for why Kaykay was so messed up.

He had it.

As the bus turned onto Marcus Garvey Boulevard, he took Kaykay's cell and pressed Home on her speed dial.

I dunno if I can get away with this. But I gotta try.

Mrs. Knight answered. "Hey, baby girl! Everything okay?"

"Hi, Mrs. Knight," Robin tried to keep his voice even. "It's Robin Paige. I'm with Kaykay at the Center, and she's had some kind of allergic reaction to something she ate. I think you need to come get her."

Robin hated to lie, but after nearly dying at the hands of the Rangers, he figured he had a good reason.