

CHAPTER 1

It was Khalil's first day at his new school. He stood in the playground by himself, watching other kids being dropped off by parents, then running mindlessly to meet groups of friends who were catching up after summer break. Others ran straight to the field to play soccer and football or to run around crazily before the bell rang. Khalil was athletic and loved to play sports. His favourite was to run track, high jump and long jump, but he was really good at soccer too. He wanted to join the boys on the field but was too shy to throw himself in the game, so he just walked the pavement surrounding the school.

He stopped to watch some girls skipping Double Dutch. He was good at that, too. He would skip with his cousin Marcia and her friends whenever his parents took him along to visit Uncle Randy and Aunt Gem. He watched

the girls' quick feet pitta-pat pitta-pat as they ducked into the revolving ropes in pairs. Khalil always imagined they were stepping into a time machine, and if they skipped fast enough, it would transport them into the past or even way out into space. He contemplated joining in with the girls. That would be more fun than just standing on the pavement waiting for school to begin.

A few steps over were kids playing handball. Khalil was the handball champion at his old school. His father had shown him ways to slap the ball backhanded and forehanded with speed and power. Once again, he was too timid to get in the game. A few yards away, he noticed the boys on the basketball court. It was just one basketball net, with at least ten to twelve boys playing. Khalil hadn't played much basketball. Not organized anyway. He shot around at Bible camp but wasn't very good at it, so normally he played tether ball or would sit on the sidelines while his older cousins would look like professionals; they dribbled the ball like it was connected to the jelly sticky hand toy they'd give the kids after Sunday School. Any time Khalil would try to bounce the ball, it would ricochet off his knees, then hit the wall. So he was happy to stay on the sidelines for basketball.

He walked closer to the game. He instantly recognized that the boys were playing American Twenty-One. Not the shooting game, but the one-on-one-on-one-on-one game. Some of his American cousins would call it Uptown. One player against the world is how Khalil would describe it. Literally, the player with the ball was being defended by everyone else on the court with no one to pass to. Like a

pack of rabid wolves attacking a lonely lamb. The aim was to be the first to score twenty-one points (some kids would play to eleven to make it quicker).

Khalil watched the boys on the court play. Defenders crowded around the boy with the ball. They slapped and swiped and clawed at him as he attempted to dribble into the hurricane of bodies. It was a dangerous game. Khalil couldn't even see the boy with the ball any longer, as defenders surrounded him. From the eye of the storm, the boy tossed up a shot that clanged off the metal backboard before bouncing into the rim.

"Game!" the boy yelled, punching the sky triumphantly. He didn't seem bothered by the stream of blood trickling down his wrist as he celebrated his game-winning basket.

"Oh, you got lucky. I had you right there. My finger jus' grazed that shot on the way up," said one of the wolf-like defenders.

Examining the blood on his arm, the boy who made the shot said, "Looks like you grazed more than jus' the ball. Lookit this. You fouled me, guy!"

The boys all began to argue with each other when the school bell rang. Khalil shook his head as he headed towards the school side entrance. *Those guys are crazy. Playing football seems less dangerous*, Khalil thought, while joining the line of students forcing their way inside. Walking down the hallway, Khalil searched for his classroom. He was assigned to class 8-3. Bumping off bodies like a pinball, he finally found his class at the end of the hall. There were about twenty students sitting at desks when he walked in. The teacher was sitting at her desk, watching the last few

kids filter into the room. There were a few empty desks in the front of the class and a couple near the back beside the window. Khalil went straight for the window seat. He liked looking out into the blue sky and watching airplanes as they passed. He thought that one day he'd like to become a pilot and fly people all over the world.

The teacher rose to her feet and slowly approached the chalkboard where her name was already written in bold block letters. Some of the in-class conversations faded away as students noticed her walking to the front, but there was still the murmur of a few groups who either didn't notice or didn't care that the teacher was getting started. Somehow, Khalil had neglected to read the name as he came into the class, as he was more preoccupied with observing the other students. *Ms. Kirkland*, he mouthed the name as she began to speak.

"Hello class, I'm —"

Suddenly Khalil felt a gust of air as a boy darted into the room. The chair at the desk nearest to him squealed when he plopped into it. It was the boy from the basketball court who took the last shot before the bell rang. Khalil took note of the red scratch mark on his wrist as confirmation. The boy ran a hand through his blond hair, slouched back in his seat and elevated his feet onto the dark brown basketball he brought with him. Khalil admired the silver initials scribbled onto the leather that read C.C. He liked the way the letters gleamed off the ball. No one could mistakenly take the ball and claim it was an accident.

"Glad you could join us, Mr. Campbell. I hope we aren't keeping you from anything important."

“Not at all, Ms. Kirkland,” he replied while sitting up in his seat. “Please excuse me. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please continue.”

“Why thank you, Cameron. I shall,” Ms. Kirkland said with a hint of sarcasm. The classroom chuckled at the interaction as Ms. Kirkland continued her introduction.

“Yes. Okay, class, as you can see, my name is Ms. Kirkland. I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but moved to Milton, Ontario when I began my teaching career. I’ve been teaching for five years and I love puppies. So now that you know a little about me. How about each of you tell me about yourselves. Let’s start with Cameron since he was the first to make his presence known.”

Cameron looked over at Khalil and rolled his eyes while smiling.

“Thank you, Ms. Kirkland. I’ll take it from here,” he said, standing up and talking into his fist as if he were holding a microphone. Students giggled as he continued, “As many of you already know, my name is Cameron Campbell. Basketball Champion. Milton born and raised. On the playground is how I spend most of my days. And I am basketball. I am basketball.”

Cameron turned the invisible microphone towards Khalil. “Now, back to you in the studio with the weather we have ...”

Khalil froze. He hadn’t expected Cameron to put him on the spot like that.

“... uhhh. Muh, my, my name is Khalil? Khalil Harris. I’m new here. I used to live in Toronto. And ... and I like airplanes. I want to be a pilot.”

“Thank you, Mr. Campbell. Mr. Harris, welcome to Milton. It’s a pleasure to meet you both. Next. Sitting in front of Khalil. Please, yes you, go ahead,” said Ms. Kirkland.

Khalil let out a large breath as he leaned back in his chair. He turned to Cameron, looking at him like, “why would you do that to me?” Cameron smiled genuinely while nodding and threw up thumbs as if to say, “great job!”

Ms. Kirkland went through the rest of the class introductions, then spoke about her expectations for the school year before talking about their first assignment. “Class, our first assignment will be to pick a subject you are passionate about and write a song or a poem about it. I want you to work in pairs. You can pick a partner and let me know tomorrow. Anyone who needs help finding a partner, please come to my desk,” Ms. Kirkland said.

“Can we write a rap?” Cameron shouted.

“Yes, yes, of course. A rap is a song and a poem, so definitely,” Ms. Kirkland replied.

Cameron fist-pumped his red, scratched arm like he’d done after making the winning shot. The bell rang, and the students hustled to get their things together to move on to the next class.

“Hey, Airplane.”

Khalil looked up strangely at Cameron while putting his books in his backpack, wondering who he was talking to.

“Ya, you Torono. Airplane,” Cameron continued. “You wanna be partners? This assignment should be easy.”

“Uh okay. Ya, I guess we can.”

“Great. I got the perfect idea we can do. You like basketball?”

Khalil shrugged.

“Well, we can write a rhyme about basketball. Whatchu think Airplane?”

Still looking puzzled, Khalil replied, “Okay? But how would we do it?”

“Leave it to me. We’ll get this done easy and have extra time to hang out, too.”