

Chapter 2

Harun left History and headed to the courtyard for lunch; Titus was already there. That was no great surprise. His last class before lunch was calculus. Math had always come easy for Titus, and it hadn't gotten hard enough to keep him in class. The only time Titus showed up in class was for tests and at the beginning of a new unit. One day and he pretty much understood what was going on.

That was one thing Harun hated about his friend. He was still trying to fight his way through college algebra and Titus was breezing through calculus. At least Harun was better in chemistry, but only marginally so, though he had trounced Titus in physics last year.

"History's two doors down from the courtyard," Harun plopped onto the bench across the table from Titus and dumped his backpack on the table. "Calculus is on the other side of campus, so I deduce that you cut class again."

"Brilliant, Sherlock Harun," Titus grumbled without looking up from his book.

"What'd you bring for lunch?" Harun rooted around in his bag and found the steel container his mom had packed his lunch in. She liked to grumble about how a paper lunch bag had been good enough in her day. Even if the government still allowed the use of throw-away containers, it wouldn't work because he had to lug around all those books. His cousin used to brag about how *he* hadn't needed to carry around textbooks because he had everything on his iPad. That must have been awesome, just having the one little tablet to carry around.

"Ham and cheese," still not raising his head from the book, Titus offered half of a sandwich to his friend.

Harun shuddered, "It would be so much easier to share lunch with you if you were an orthodox Jew!"

"If I were an orthodox Jew, we probably wouldn't be friends," Titus finally closed his book and smirked at Harun. "Not even the current persecution of religious people could overcome *that* animosity."

"You might be right," Harun shrugged and peeked at his own sandwich. It looked like roast beef. He also had carrot sticks and pear slices. "I'll share my carrots and pear if you'll share your chips."

"Have it," Titus pushed the container over. "I already ate half of them."

"You packed your own lunch," Harun sighed enviously.

"As usual," Titus shrugged. His dad was always gone for work by the time Titus got up in the morning, and Mom, well, Mom hardly ever came out of her room.

Harun watched his friend as he began to chomp on a carrot stick. One of the reasons Titus stayed so skinny was because he rarely ate right. Even when they ate the school lunches like they were supposed to, he didn't get proper nutrition. On paper the school lunches looked nutritious enough, but they were hardly ever edible. The so-called fresh fruits and vegetables were mostly rotten, the whole grain breads were molding and the meats were rancid. That was one of the many curses of unreliable energy sources.

"You planning on cutting out as soon as lunch is over, or are you waiting for Venus' lunch period?" Titus asked before he started devouring half Harun's pear.

"I've got phys ed next," Harun shrugged. "I'm not particularly fond of it, so I guess I can skip."

“Where we gonna hang until time to meet Venus?” Titus asked between bites.

“We sure can’t hang at the convenience store,” Harun scowled thoughtfully. “They’ll call the cops. Let’s do the usual.”

“Sure,” Titus leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Did you hear what happened to Allen Barnes?”

Harun hadn’t, but before he could ask his friend to elaborate, a harsh voice across the courtyard caught his attention. It wasn’t hard to spot the three boys on the second floor. Even though he couldn’t understand what they were saying, it was obvious that the two bigger boys were harassing the scrawny kid. Harun frowned. One of the bigger boys grabbed the smaller boy’s backpack, but it was firmly attached over his shoulders with both straps, and it looked like it had a chest strap to.

“Stop it,” the smaller boy’s anguished cry rang loudly in the courtyard.

Unable to get the backpack, the older boys snarled and pushed the younger boy.

“Aaahhhh!” He barely had time to scream before he splatted on the flagstones of the courtyard. He didn’t move.

Harun jumped to his feet.

“Did you see that?” he cried in horror, staring across the courtyard.

“See what?” Titus rose too.

“Those guys just pushed that kid over the rail!” Harun whipped his head around and stared at Titus, his eyes wide with shock. “You didn’t see it?”

“Nothing to see,” Titus watched his friend warily. First Harun saw Venus being taken away, but she wasn’t, now this.

“Yes there is! He’s right over –”

Harun froze as he turned back toward the spot where he’d seen the boy hit the paving stones. There was nothing there.

He walked slowly toward the side of the courtyard. Titus trailed him. Harun stood where the boy had fallen. Nothing was unusual.

“Hey, you okay?” Titus asked gently.

Harun jerked away from him, taking a step back and hissing, “No, I’m not okay! I just saw a boy die.”

“But you didn’t,” Titus frowned. “There’s nothing here.”

“But I *saw* it!” Harun whispered furiously. “Right there.”

“Right here,” Titus asked, pointing at the paving stones he stood on.

“Exactly there!”

“But there’s nothing here,” Titus spread his arms and slowly made a circle, carefully checking the ground as he turned. “You imagined it.”

“No I –”

Suddenly they heard a cry above them.

“Stop it – aaahhhh!”

Titus looked up and saw the falling boy. His arms were already open so he instinctively reached up to catch the boy. They both hit the ground hard. Titus was on the bottom with the other boy’s head snug against his chest. The air whooshed from Titus’ lungs and the world went black.

The next thing Titus was aware of was a worried, rambling voice.

"Is he okay? He's gotta be okay! He saved me! Wow! Is he okay? What if he hadn't been here to catch me?"

"You'd probably know the answer to what happens after death." That was Harun. Obviously he'd regained his wry sense of humor.

Titus opened his eyes to four faces hovering over him, Harun's, two other boys and a girl he vaguely knew. One of the boys looked shocked and frightened. That was probably the one he'd just had a close encounter with, but he couldn't be sure because the face was blurry in his memory of the brief seconds before impact.

Suddenly Titus became conscious of an excited babble converging on their position. He realized that if only two people had joined them, that would mean he hadn't been out for long. Four with more coming meant he'd been unconscious for way more than a couple seconds. He'd have to play this right, or he would be carted off in an ambulance. The staff ignored most fights, but serious bleeding, broken bones and unconsciousness got you a trip to the hospital. Sometimes you actually got treated before you died. It always earned you at least three days in Carsie, regardless of whether you were the victim or the perpetrator.

Titus gasped for air, making it more dramatic than it needed to be, then he groaned and sat up with surprising ease. The people were crowding around him now.

"Thank G – goodness!" the frightened boy breathed a gentle exclamation.

Titus groaned to himself and dropped his head in his hands, still sucking in lots of air. The boy had almost said, "thank God." He was a Christian. It figured.

"I'm okay," Titus snapped then sucked in another breath. It felt good. "Just got ..." another deep breath "...wind knocked out ..." this breath not so deep "... of me."

"You sure?" A girl asked with a suspicious frown. "It sure looked to me like you were knocked out."

"Why?" Titus asked sarcastically, throwing a disgusted look at her. "Because I had my eyes closed while I was trying to take a breath?"

"Coming through!"

When Titus heard the voice of the vice principal, he leapt to his feet.

"There was a fight? Someone got knocked out?" In the best of times Titus hated that whiny voice. Today it filled him with rage, and a tiny bit of fear. Vanderholtz had the power to send Titus to Carsie if he wanted to.

"He did!"

"He fell on him," the vaguely familiar girl pointed appropriately.

"No fight, sir," Titus said loudly, ignoring the excited babble of the other kids. He pointed to the other boy. "This guy just fell off the balcony and I was unfortunate enough to be standing under him. He knocked the wind outta me and I couldn't breathe for a bit."

"Someone said someone was unconscious," Vanderholtz eyed him suspiciously. "Was it you?"

"I don't think anyone was unconscious, Mr. Vanderholtz," Titus shrugged slightly, forcing himself to speak humbly and politely, "but I know for sure that I wasn't. I just got the wind knocked out of me. Couldn't breathe for a moment."

"Did anyone else see what happened?"

"I did," Harun spoke quickly. He pointed to the other boy. "He fell from the balcony and landed on Titus, just like Titus said. I didn't see a fight, and Titus got up pretty fast after he accidentally got

knocked down, and he looks just fine now, so it's likely he wasn't unconscious."

Titus stared at the vice principal, hoping he would buy it and just walk away.

For a brief moment, it seemed like that was what was going to happen.

"I saw it too!" That was Mouthy Melinda.

With great effort, Titus resisted the urge to groan and roll his eyes. If Melinda was offering her opinion, someone was going to Carsie. She wouldn't let it rest until she convinced Vanderholtz of someone's guilt. He was happy that it wouldn't be him, but he did feel sorry for the poor kid whose life he'd just saved. If he'd already had two trips to Carsie, Titus hadn't done him any favors when he saved him.

"What did you see?" Vanderholtz eagerly questioned Melinda.

"Ricky was up on the balcony," Melinda reported solemnly. "Chad Brewer and Andy Wright were picking on him. I couldn't tell exactly what happened because Titus and Harun distracted me when they walked over here arguing about something. But I do know that Chad and Andy ran off when Ricky fell."

"Is that right?" the vice principal peered intently at the boy who'd fallen.

Titus stared at him too. If he was right and the boy that Melinda had called Ricky was a Christian, then he would probably tell the truth, even if it did get him a trip to Carsie. Venus would tell the truth. She always did when asked a direct question, though she didn't often volunteer information. Like her, Harun avoided lying, but he was pretty good at not telling an outright lie.

The kid Ricky proved his religious morals.

"Pretty much," he hung his head.

"Come with me," Vanderholtz grabbed Ricky's arm. He removed a radio from his belt as he steered the unfortunate boy toward his office. "Franklin, I need you to pick up two boys, Chad Brewer and Andy Wright. Get them to my office. And have Ms. Inez get someone from DCARS over here."

Titus watched as they disappeared into the building. He was sorry for Ricky but relieved to have escaped himself. He was highly aggravated with Melinda the Mouth, not only for spouting off about what had happened but also for trailing after Vanderholtz without even being told to do so. As eager as she had been to give her statement to the vice principal, she would be twice as excited to give it to the officer from Division of Citizen Assimilation & Rehabilitation Services, for Youth, better known as Carsie.

"I feel sorry for him," Harun spoke quietly, even though the crowd was quickly dissipating.

"I wonder if he's been to Carsie before," Titus sighed and shook his head. "If he has, I could almost wish I hadn't been there to catch him."

"At least once, I think," Harun said sadly. "I'm pretty sure he was the one Venus talked about last year. He goes to her church."

Titus vaguely remembered Venus talking about some kid who had recently been released from Carsie and had cried at church until they'd all prayed for him. Supposedly something "miraculous" had happened and he'd been "healed" of his emotional torment. If Ricky was the same kid, he'd probably been to Carsie twice. Once wasn't that bad. Titus knew that first hand. So did Harun and Venus.

"That Melinda," Titus grumbled as they headed back toward the table they'd abandoned a short time ago. "I wish she'd spent some time in Carsie. Maybe then she wouldn't be so quick to rat people out."

"She has been to Carsie," Harun corrected him. "She came in my second day there."

"She has been?" Titus was shocked as he dropped onto the bench. "Then why's she always so eager

to get other people there?”

“I guess she’s one of those people who responded the way we’re supposed to,” Harun shrugged. “I know she was already terrified when she got there. Everybody there knew it.”

Titus almost felt sorry for Melinda. As bad as Carsie was, if you let them know you were afraid, it was way worse. The guards and the other kids exploited every weakness.

But Titus didn’t want to think about the high school’s resident rat being at Carsie. He deliberately changed the subject to one that was much more interesting.

“So you really saw that guy fall before it happened?”

“Yah,” Harun said with a puzzled frown. “At least sort of. When I saw it, you weren’t there to catch him.”

“I only broke his fall,” Titus said sardonically. “I didn’t catch him. He crushed me.”

“You really were knocked out, weren’t you?”

Titus looked around before he nodded. “But it really wasn’t anything serious. Obviously, since I’m sitting here now. Back to you. How did you see that before it happened?”

“I really don’t know?” Harun was troubled.

“Don’t you believe your God showed it to you?” Titus asked sarcastically.

“I would believe Allah showed it to me, except I didn’t see it the way it actually happened,” Harun didn’t react to Titus’ jab. He was too concerned to rise to his friend’s bait. “If Allah showed it to me then I should have seen you catching him, just like you actually did.”

“But if you’d told me that I was going to be mashed by that kid, I wouldn’t have gone over there,” Titus jabbed a finger toward the spot where Ricky had fallen.

“Yes you would have,” Harun said certainly. “It was your destiny to do so. It was what Allah willed.”

“Allah, shmallah,” Titus grumbled and rolled his eyes.

Harun’s eyes flared brightly. Titus quickly shook his head regretfully.

“I’m sorry, dude. That was disrespectful. I shouldn’t diss your God.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” Harun also shook his head regretfully. “Sometimes I wish you had a god so I could disrespect him.”

“Or her,” Titus snickered.

“Or it,” Harun’s lips barely twitched with his ever-so-slight smile. He put his lunch container in his backpack.

“Woof,” Titus barked softly, after glancing around to make sure no one was listening. There was a kid in school who worshipped some Egyptian dog-god. While the government didn’t let you talk about your religion, they also didn’t stop you from practicing it in private, and they did “retrain” you if you mocked someone else’s religion – as long as it wasn’t the big four: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Atheism. Those had caused the most trouble over the centuries, so it was always open season on anyone who practiced them.

“Why don’t we saunter off to our next class?” Harun rose and picked up his backpack.

“Yes, let’s do that,” Titus said a little too loudly. He too rose. He shoved his book into his backpack, along with the containers from his lunch.

As they started down the walkway that had once been an enclosed hall, Titus wondered if anyone would ever catch on to their code. Harun would not lie, so he always asked misleading questions. In this case, “Why don’t we …?” had a very obvious answer to Titus – because we have no intention of going to

class! Titus didn't lie habitually, but he had no compunction about lying, at least not when the truth would get him or one of his friends in trouble. On bad days, he wondered if that was why they kept him around. When they were in trouble, he could do all the talking. All they had to do was keep their mouths shut, and pray that no one asked them a direct question.

Once upon a time this school had been a secure facility, all schools had been. But that kind of security wasn't possible with today's doubtful electric supply. They had continued to use the security systems for a while, but every time the power went off, the system had to be reset, and that was time consuming. Every sudden shutdown also distressed the system in some mysterious IT way, so security systems became erratic. Now, only schools with the greatest need of security received backup power that kept their systems running 24-7. Valley Park wasn't one of those schools.

In addition to the loss of security systems, the campus was now open, more like a college campus than a high school. Ten years ago, when portions of the school had needed to be rebuilt after the Quake, like hundreds of other schools across the Midwest, some brainiacs in Washington had decreed that a new, standard design would serve two purposes: one, it would prepare the "young adults of New America" for college by making them familiar with a college landscape – meaning you move between buildings for your different classes, and two, it theoretically reduced places for students to hide and carry out nefarious purposes, like maybe praying. The theory was that if students were out in the open when they weren't in class, they would be seen by someone – either the security cameras, the roving guards or the eye in the sky.

The amusing irony was that the very thing that was supposed to keep students from "hiding," allowed them to easily vacate the campus at will, then return before the last bell. The eye in the sky had lost its sight when the power grids to support it had died. Like the security cameras, it was a relic of better days. The security guards at VPHS were basically non-existent. One guard roved the entire campus; one guard stayed in their office to be immediately available for any incident. That left ninety percent of the campus unguarded at any moment.

At the end of the walkway, Harun went left toward the gym while Titus went straight, presumably to the mathematics and science building. Of course both would divert their course before arriving at their assigned destinations. In fifteen minutes, they would rally at the convenience store two blocks from the school. If they went in and bought something then moved along quickly, no one would bother to ask them if they were supposed to be out of school.