

THE WORD GANG

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CHAPTER 1

What a morning! A few puffy clouds. A pure blue sky. The lark was on the wing. The snail was on the thorn. And Kalisha Jackson was on her stoop, having a panic attack.

It's funny about fear. There's the scary kind: the gun, the knife. Then there's the kind you live with, day after day, week after week, until you get good at it. It had been like that for Kalisha. A year of fear. And she'd gotten good at it.

But today, it was all going to come crashing down.

She gave her brother, Jarod, a playful push. "C'mon, Jay! Race you to the corner." Their feet flew down the stoop and they took off, laughing and dodging passers-by as they ran. Wise in the ways of little brothers, Kalisha made sure it came out a tie. Jarod could get pissy if he lost.

"Hey! What's that say?"

"Uhh...bus stop?"

"All right!" She gave him a high-five. "You're going to be the smartest kid in the first grade."

It was Kalisha's first day at her new school, Jefferson High. It was also the day she'd picked to confess everything to her mother. To put an end to a year of lies. Well, she pretty much had to; her mother was going to find out anyway. Kalisha took in the city and the sky, the busy people getting on with their busy lives.

Beautiful! she thought. *A perfect day to die!*

"Kally! Look!" Jarod pointed excitedly up the street. "It's him!"

Kalisha pulled his arm down. “Don’t point, Jarod. It’s rude.”

An old man was slowly making his way toward them. He had a long white beard and was bundled up in a heavy coat even though the day was already warm. Kalisha knew him from their building; he lived a few floors above. There was something mysterious about him. She’d seen the younger children teasing, walking all bent over as if they were a hundred years old. He never seemed to pay any attention. And he never got angry.

“He looks like he’s reading a book on the ground.” Jarod whispered even though the old man was still fifty feet away.

“That’s what you’ll look like when you get old.”

“No, I won’t.”

As he got closer Kalisha could see he was pulling a two-wheeled shopping cart. He got to their stoop, turned and straightened up slowly. Nothing mysterious there—his cart was filled with ordinary, boring groceries. Celery. French bread. Swiss chard. A big box of Arm & Hammer laundry detergent jammed in at an angle.

Kalisha and her dad used to see the old man on their walks. Her father called him “Aqualung” after some character in an old song. Her mother warned her to stay away, but Kalisha knew he was kind. She’d seen him throwing breadcrumbs to the birds in the dead of winter.

I wonder if he knows about the elevator.

Which was out-of-order. She and Jarod had run down the stairs.

“The bus, Kally! The bus!”

Jarod jumped into the street; Kalisha quickly pulled him back. “Don’t be such an idiot, Jarod! You’ll get killed!”

The bus was lumbering toward them, still a block away. A man in a dark-gray suit got in line behind them. Next came a cute guy who looked like he might be gay. He gave Kalisha a friendly smile. She looked at the bus. She looked at the old man, who was standing like a rock in a stream, just letting the crowd flow around him.

He’ll never get that thing up the stairs by himself.

“C’mon, Jarod.”

“Kally, the bus...”

“Don’t worry. We can make it.”

They ran back to their building. The old man was breathing heavily and his skin had a bluish undertone.

“Sir?” Kalisha saw a pair of kind, brown eyes underneath wild eyebrows. One thing amazed her: his face had lines so deep they were almost grooves but his skin was as pink as a baby’s. His pants were baggy, his shoes shined bright. A red scarf peeked out from behind a bushy white beard. “Do you know the elevator’s not working? They sent a notice last week.”

He looked surprised for a moment, then nodded. “A week,” he said quietly to himself.



Albrecht! Seven till noon. Don't you remember?

That was a week! Time moves so fast.

And you move so slow. You do nothing all day!

No, not nothing. I remember.

It's useless, this remembering. It's like a disease.

I remember a Malacca cane with an ivory handle...

...but not to whom it belonged.

I remember an inn on a rainy afternoon.

Rosa and I had a coffee. We were hiking.

Where was that?

She would remember. She was so beautiful then.

Yes!

What a kind young woman! And so tall!

They're all so tall nowadays!

She has clear, brown eyes. Just like my Rosa.

A smile with a gap in front, a dusting of freckles.

Her skin is the color of coffee with cream.

Rosa's was pale with a hint of roses.

When she was healthy...

When she was healthy.

Come, Albrecht! Enough!



The old man smiled and patted his large waistline. “I do recall getting a notice, but the Spinoza stomach required food. *It* must have forgotten.”

Kalisha eyed the bus. They could still make it. “I’ll get the building superintendent to help you.”

“Thank you. That would be most kind.”

“Jarod, stay here!”

“Awww!” Jarod made a face like a wrinkled-up candy wrapper.

Kalisha ran up to Mr. Treadway’s apartment and knocked. No answer. She knocked louder. *Where are you, Mr. Treadway?* Still, no answer. Kalisha ran back. Jarod was talking about monsters; the old man was listening and nodding. “He’s not in.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find a strong young man to help me.”

Kalisha glanced back at the corner. Their bus was just easing up to the curb. “Well, I’m a strong young woman. Can I help?”

He took in their backpacks, their new clothes. “I wouldn’t want to keep you from your schooling.”

Keep me from my schooling? Oh, yeah!

Kalisha almost laughed out loud.



The whole thing had been so easy. After Dad left and we moved I never even started at the new school. Just got up at the usual time, dropped Sonya at Ms. Ames’ and walked Jarod to kindergarten. Then I went and hung out with Becca.

Becca and I have been friends our whole lives. When we were babies our moms used to walk us together in strollers. Something happened between the two of them, but Becca and I always stayed friends. We wore each other’s clothes, read each other’s journals, drank her mother’s wine

when she wasn't looking. So when Becca got pregnant, had Micah and dropped out, I guess I just followed her.

Becca loved having me around. She and Rodney, the baby's father, had split up so she was desperate for company. And I loved taking care of Micah; he was such a good baby. All three of us would go to the park. Sometimes I said I was Becca's cousin, sometimes her friend. Once I said I was her au pair. I even used a French accent!

And then there was the other thing. That's getting high. Becca used to get high a lot, but she'd quit when Micah was born. Then she started again, just a little wine in the afternoon. Then some weed. I got into it, too—and that's something I'm never going to tell anyone, period. I quit, though. Not because it was illegal. It was because I didn't like how it made me feel, all nervous and paranoid. One time we were in the park and one of the other mothers stared at me and I knew she knew! That's when I quit. Becca did, too. At least that's what she told me...

I got good at it, ditching school. I had rules. Like I always made sure I was there "after school" to pick up Jarod. And getting the mail was important; I threw out anything that looked official. When mom asked about report cards I said they must have sent them to the old address by mistake.

She was so wrapped up in her own life, she never even noticed.

But today I have to tell. I made up my mind. And she's gonna kill me. Both my parents hate lying more than anything and basically, I cut the whole year. You could call that lying.



The last passenger climbed on the bus, the driver's gaze flicked her way. Kalisha looked at the driver, then at the old man, who was simply waiting. Yet his soft, brown eyes seemed to take in everything. Her. Jarod. The beautiful morning. Even the dingy, water-stained stoop with its far-flung islands of chewing gum.

Kalisha caught the bus driver's eye and shook her head no.

“We can catch the next bus.” She slung her backpack over her shoulder and took the handle of his shopping cart. “It’s the first day, we won’t miss much. Besides, if you have to wait for a young man your French bread’ll go stale.”

He smiled and made a tiny bow. “My name is Albrecht Spinoza and I accept your kind offer.”

“I’m Kalisha Jackson. This is my brother, Jarod.”

“Kalisha. What a lovely name! I must warn you, I may have to rest along the way. I live on the fourth floor.”

They set off. Kalisha bumping the shopping cart up the stairs and Jarod keeping up a steady stream of chatter. At each floor they stopped to rest. Between floors they stopped to rest. After two floors they were resting every other step.

Kalisha spent the time trying to remember what her mother had taught her about CPR. Then she had to invent a game of running up and down the stairs touching doors to keep Jarod from exploding. On the third floor, after catching his breath, Mr. Spinoza asked how she liked school.

“Oh,” said Kalisha. “School’s okay...”

He misunderstood her hesitation. “Everyone’s nervous on the first day. I’m sure a bright young woman like you will do fine.”

Yeah, right! Fine.

Kalisha pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The many months of keeping her secret weighed heavily, like the locked room in a horror movie you’re never supposed to enter.



But Mr. Spinoza feels big somehow.

Like I could tell him anything—

And he wouldn’t get all shocked and horrified.

I don’t know...

Should I?



Suddenly Kalisha was pouring out her story. As they walked and stopped, walked and stopped, she told him about her parents' divorce. The move to this building. How she quit going to school, and how no one knew.

He listened gravely, nodding, not interrupting, only saying, "Hmmm" and "Mmmm" and once, "Oh!"

Jarod's eyes grew wide. "You cut the whole year, Kally?"

"You didn't hear that, Jarod. You better not tell!"

Mr. Spinoza stopped once more, lost in thought. He began to stroke his beard. It looked like he was petting a dog.

"I do have something to say."

Kalisha braced herself. "Yes?"

"I dislike giving advice." He smiled. "Free advice is usually worth what one pays for it. I'll say only this. I have confidence you'll do the right thing. I can tell you are a fine young woman. Look how you're helping me!"

I wish it were that easy!

"Also remember, your mother was once your age. She may understand more than you think."

"I never thought of her like that, but...isn't that advice?"

Mr. Spinoza's startled laughter echoed in the stairwell. "The other thing about advice—it's almost impossible *not* to give it. So let's call that an observation. An observation with didactic implications."

"What's that?"

"Oh..." He made a casual gesture, like he was shooing a fly. "Didactic is a word we inherited from the Greeks. *Didaktikos* means good at teaching, so didactic means..."

"A little advice?"

He laughed. "Or a lot."

They arrived at apartment 406. Mr. Spinoza straightened up slowly and said, "Oh, my aching back." He pulled out a worn leather key case the

size of a paperback book. He opened it solemnly. Inside was one small key. “If it weren’t this big I’d lose it four times a day instead of three.”

Kalisha smiled. He unlocked the door then reached for his wallet. “Oh, no!” she said. “You don’t have to pay me. Besides, you already gave me your didactic observations.”

“Then perhaps I can be a witness for your defense. Without your help I would never gotten these groceries up the stairs. I’d like to invite you and Jarod over for tea.” He smiled. “Tea time is at four.”

“That’d be nice,” said Kalisha.

“Splendid!” he said enthusiastically. “Thank you for your help and good luck today.”

They said good-bye, then she and Jarod raced down the stairs.

He seems lonely. I wonder if he lives there by himself. Mom’ll want to meet him. I’m definitely going to visit.



They waited almost a half-hour for the next bus. Traffic was unbelievable. After they settled in, Kalisha checked the time. Jarod’s school was only twelve blocks away but Jefferson High was clear across town. She was going to be late. Very late.

I always felt sorry for commuters. Now I’m one of them.

When they got to Jarod’s school Kalisha asked the driver if he’d wait a minute while she ran in with her brother. “Ten minutes back,” he said, tearing off a transfer and holding it up without looking at her.

The bus roared off, enveloping them in a cloud of gray exhaust. Kalisha checked in at the office and got permission to walk Jarod to his class. “Here’s your lunch. Be good today. And remember: Don’t say a word to mom!”

“I will. I won’t. Bye, Kally.”

Jarod’s new teacher, Ms. Konnellen, waved at her through the door. Kalisha thought she seemed really nice. She watched her brother run happily into the room. She felt a pang remembering when she was seven and school was that much fun.

The next bus came in twenty minutes, not ten. As it shouldered its way through the city Kalisha kept telling herself to breathe and relax. They passed a huge billboard for Elgin watches, a picture of an elegant couple posed against a glittering night sky. The woman was checking the time on the man's watch, oblivious to the fact she was wearing one herself. Kalisha imagined their dialog and laughed out loud. A woman turned to look at her.



You're an hour late, darling. You'd better skip homeroom.

Ugh!

What was going to happen?

New teachers. New friends. New everything.

I should turn around and go to Becca's.

No! That's what happened last year!

So? What's wrong with that?

You don't want to wind up like Becca.

What's that supposed to mean?

I don't know.

I don't know why I just said that.



Thirty minutes later the bus dropped her a few blocks from her new school. This part of town was older and slower. Kalisha walked past a beautiful old hotel with colonnades that looked as if Abraham Lincoln might come strolling out. A few doors down was a spiritual book shop and on the corner a tiny strip mall with a dry cleaners and a thrift store.

Kalisha passed a homeless man sitting on the sidewalk in front of a church. He was holding a sad-looking sign that said "Please Help!" She went over and dropped in some change getting a big smile and a thank you. *Poor man.* She could see gaps where he was missing teeth.

A merchant sweeping the sidewalk stopped so she could walk past. His dog, a golden lab, was sitting regally in front of the store. With its

calm gaze and wrinkled forehead it looked both noble and slightly puzzled. Kalisha went over to pet it.

“His name’s Sam.”

“That’s a good boy, Sam. Are you wondering why I’m not in school?” The dog swooned against her leg.

“I’m Swede,” said the man.

“Kalisha.” She added, “Missed the bus.”

He laughed and pointed to a sign that said “Jack’s Drugs” in flowing script. “I missed high school...and I own that.”

“So there’s hope for me?” Kalisha meant it to be a joke, but it came out sounding serious.

“There’s always hope,” he said in a strong voice and went back to his sweeping. Kalisha gave Sam a final scratch and headed off.

Swede? That’s a funny old-time name.

She got the feeling he might have been an officer. He sounded like it. Anyway, he was nice and his store seemed to sell everything. She decided to stop in sometime.

A few blocks later, in a quieter neighborhood, Kalisha came to a stone wall topped by a wrought iron fence. Through the bars she caught her first glimpse of Jefferson High. It was a large brick building with a flat roof. She was delighted to see families of swallows swooping and gliding under its eaves.

It’s like the Nature Channel!

But as she got closer Kalisha began to notice other things. All the first floor windows had bars on them. Dark stains ran down the sides of the building where the gutters had overflowed, making the school look worn and forlorn. The gutters themselves had turned sea-green with the passing years. Through the barred windows Kalisha could see rows of students bent silently over their desks. As she crossed the wide expanse of schoolyard she felt like a tiny bug watched from every window.

Boy, there’s nothing creepier than an empty schoolyard.

Kalisha ran her hand along the ornate iron railing of the staircase. It matched the fence around the yard. The front door weighed a ton. Inside it was dark and the marble floors felt cool after the warmth of the morning. She had no idea where the office was so she wandered through the halls smelling floor polish, chewing gum and chalk. She passed classroom after classroom, all with closed doors. It was eerily quiet.

Rounding a corner she saw “OFFICE” stenciled on a pebbled glass window. Inside she found a cheerful-looking woman typing so fast it sounded like rain falling on an umbrella. She peered at Kalisha over her glasses. “Can I help you?”

Here goes...

“Hi, I’m Kalisha Jackson. I’m a transfer. I’m late, I guess.”

“Oh...” A kind smile and a gracious wave. “The first day’s always hard. I’m Ms. Kenny. What year are you, dear?”

Kalisha hesitated. “I’m not really sure. I was...um...sick a lot last year. My mom called to register me.”

That is, Becca called and did a good imitation.

“Hmmm...let’s see...Kalisha Jackson. I remember that name. I think there was some problem with your paperwork.”

Kalisha’s heart stopped.

“Here it is! You’re in Mr. Ralston’s new class.”

Ms. Kenny peered into the screen, clicking through folders. “That’s Project Restart. Room 214.”

Kalisha only heard “new class” and “Project Restart.” Neither sounded good. She used her most innocent voice. “What’s Project Restart?”

“It’s something new. We’re the only school in the state to have it.” Ms. Kenny sounded proud. “Mr. Ralston will answer all your questions. He’s very thorough. He’s our vice-principal, you know.”

“Oh...”

“Room 214 is up the stairs to the right. Here’s your late pass. Be careful with it. It has to be signed by your parent or guardian and

returned tomorrow or..." Ms. Kenny held on to the pass setting off a small tug-of-war, "you won't be allowed back into class. And one more thing. All cell phones have to be turned off during class time. No exceptions."

Kalisha went up the stairs in a daze. Things were moving way too fast. She fought another impulse to get back on the bus and go hide at Becca's. She found room 214 much too quickly. A part of her wished she could wander the halls forever and never have to go inside.

At the door Kalisha paused and took a deep breath. Suddenly she thought of Mr. Spinoza and his "fine young woman" speech. Her hand felt sweaty on the worn metal doorknob.

Okay, fine young woman! Let's go!

Kalisha pulled open the door and walked in.