

The  
Battered  
Black  
Briefcase



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by

Dee Shaw

**YAV PUBLICATIONS**  

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ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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# Character List

**Tess Blake** — Main Character

**Cliff Miller** — Thief

**Kara Blake** — Mother of Tess

**Jacqueline Benet** — Flute Teacher

**Dell Witt** — Cliff's Employer

**Officer Patterson** — Policeman

**Meg Cordelle** — Tess' Friend



“The LORD is near to all who call on  
Him, to all who call on Him in truth.”

*—Psalm 145:18*



# Chapter One

YESTERDAY HAD BEEN A SOAKER. During the constant heavy rainfall, loud claps of thunder and sharp flashes of lightening could be heard and seen throughout the city of Charlotte for the entire day and well into the late evening hours. Finally a short time after midnight a fine drizzle finished the horrendous deluge. Everything outside had been drenched, but somehow the Blake household received a good night's sleep.

The brightness of the sun on this early mid-spring morning was a welcomed sight as it found its way into Tess Blake's bedroom. Three clear but gentle knocks could be heard at the door before her mother entered. Sitting upright in bed with her eyes open only wide enough to acknowledge she was awake, Tess managed to mumble, "Morning Mom, I'll be up and ready for my bus in half an hour."

Hurriedly stepping over to her daughter's bedside Kara placed a kiss on her forehead, "Tessie, I'm about to leave for work, but I wanted to remind you that you have a long day ahead of you today. Don't forget your flute lesson after school. I left an apple and granola bar for each of you on the kitchen counter along with a small bowl of raisin bran cereal for your breakfast. Remember to turn off the lights and lock the front door when you leave." After a quick smile Kara was on her way down the stairs, hurrying through the kitchen and soon backing her car out of the garage.

Tess placed her feet squarely on the floor, and gradually standing, she raised her arms as she stretched her body. Gently filling her lungs with the cool morning air, she began slowly counting to ten as she inhaled and exhaled several times. Still a bit

groggy, she moved toward her closet. Staring inside she tried to decide what she should wear. She mumbled almost silently, "I don't have time to think much about this. A favorite top and a pair of my favorite jeans will do."

After slipping into her clothes, she ran her fingers through her thick shoulder-length hair thinking, *I'll hardly have enough time to do much with this heavy, unruly mane of mine. A quick twist and some kind of ponytail should work.*

Brushing her hair thoroughly, she made her way into the hallway bathroom to take a hasty look. After combing her hair with her fingers again, she gathered the entire handful and turned it into a moderately tight knot. Placing an oversized elastic band around it twice she hurried down the hall toward Eric's room. *I'll fix my mess of hair after I get on the bus.*

Knowing her brother would be dead to the world and not hear even if she took the time to knock, she stepped inside and began shaking him as she whistled a familiar spooky tune. He opened one eye, looked up at her and smiled.

"It's good to know you're alive, Eric, so get a move on. It's Tuesday, and we've got to be out of here and on our bus in 25 minutes flat. Our new bus driver will definitely not wait for us."

Never expecting his reply to be different, Tess turned to leave as Eric sleepily muttered the same short statements he said five times a week, "I'm good. Just give me 20 minutes. Did Mom already leave for work, Tess? Hey, thanks for waking me."

Running back into the bathroom Tess glanced into the mirror after noticing a few stray strands of her chestnut brown hair. She reached for her mascara and brushed a smidgen on each lash. After putting a dab of creamy rose coloring on her cheeks, she jammed a couple chosen items of makeup into her jean's pocket. Satisfied after catching another glimpse of herself in the glass, she returned to her bedroom.

Gathering her music book along with the algebra homework she had finished the night before, she stuffed both of them in her backpack. Then placing the makeup items that were in her pocket securely into the handy side section of her backpack, she walked toward the hallway. Reaching over with her free hand, she switched off the light. Swinging

the pack over her shoulder and grasping the handle of her flute case, within seconds Tess was headed down to the kitchen to eat a quick breakfast. She would definitely beat Eric out of the house this morning.

As she munched on her cereal, Tess thought about how everything was different for her this year, *Less than a year ago Eric and I were attending a small private school located in a different part of town. I was about to finish my sophomore year when everything changed for us. I had really been looking forward to driving both of us to school this year, but only months ago Mom decided to sell one of the cars.*

A tragedy had happened in the family, and now Eric and she were attending an overcrowded public high school in one of the busiest, most congested sections of the city.

After spending most of her junior year in the new school, Tess seldom was able to find time to keep in touch with the close friends she left behind. Although in the past she had always found it easy to make new friends, she continued to miss those friends who had been such an important part of her life from middle school through her first two years of high school.

By August when the present school year started, she and Eric both began experiencing several disappointments in their new situations. Both were committed to making any adjustments necessary to fit into their new school and were determined not to be sour quitters or ever complain to their mother, but the disappointments lingered.

Together they agreed they would not allow themselves to be tempted to spend money on any unnecessary whims and would not expect as much until there was more money available. They knew their mom had more changes and disappointments to contend with than they did.

Previously their mother had loved volunteering two mornings a week at a Christian ministry that helped needy people with their food, clothing and various other necessary household bills. After the sudden death of Mark, her husband and the children's father, Kara wondered how she and two teenagers would be able to make ends meet if she was unable to bring home an ample paycheck. She had been forced to leave that enjoyable, satisfying organization which had become so important to her and find a job where she would receive a paycheck.

Since a good job had been difficult to find, Kara applied and accepted two part-time bookkeeping jobs working for companies both located in a neglected, rough part of town.

For almost 20 years, Mark had been the love of Kara's life. In every way he had been her steady and dependable rock. Because Mark had extensive military training, he had been pursued by an army general to consider taking a number of specially trained troops into an isolated village of Afghanistan. Their mission was to gather secret, crucial information from several of the tribal leaders in that war torn country. After considerable thought, Mark agreed to take the covert assignment, and within weeks extensive plans were underway before his small team ever entered the Middle East.

No one involved in that mission knew a trap had already been set by one Afghani enemy traitor who had infiltrated into the village. All too late Mark and his troops realized they were pinned in by as many as seventy Taliban tribesmen. Receiving heavy gunfire and caught off guard, Mark and his men were all killed within a couple of hours.

The news had been a terrible blow to Mark's entire family and his many friends. Kara had lost a husband, and both his children lost their dad. For months tremendous pain and emptiness followed. That was when everything changed, and Kara found it extremely difficult to cope with the loss of her husband. Although she needed to be strong for her kids, she found herself weaker and less prepared than she would ever have imagined. She hated thinking that now both Tess and Eric would grow up without Mark's guidance and example.

Eric avoided openly showing his hurt and disappointment as much as possible as he dealt with his father's death, but he knew he had lost a great dad any kid would look up to. Tess, two years older, missed the father she loved and the man who had always made her feel significant and secure throughout her childhood. He was always dependable and had through the years encouraged her in so many ways. He prayed with her, taught her to do well in school and to consider good opportunities when they were presented to her. And most of all, he always took the necessary time to listen to what was on her mind.

Those in the military who knew Mark's abilities considered him brilliant in his work and an honorable leader. Others often spoke of him as an exceptionally wise, loving and thoughtful family man.



Climbing aboard the bus Tess and Eric found a vacant seat near the rear where they could sit together. There would be five more stops and 27 additional kids would be picked up along the route before they finished the long, tedious trip to their school. Riding a noisy city school bus was not something either enjoyed, but this morning they both decided to use the time for a little extra reading and to review their assignments while several of the sleep deprived kids took advantage of the long ride to catch up on their much needed rest.

Having Meg Hemming as her best friend this year at school had given Tess some assurance positive things could go on as usual. Meg and she, although different in many ways, had recently spent time together talking seriously about their futures. And lately Tess had given a lot of thought considering how she could best help her family, especially her mom.

Before their bus reached the school zone, Tess could see through her side windows that a traffic jam had occurred at the intersection nearest to the school's main entrance. Ten minutes might easily be added to their trip this morning, but she hoped there would be enough time to spend a few minutes with Meg before the first bell rang.

As the bus driver turned onto a side street to avoid the congestion, Tess' mind wandered as she thought about her dad and how he had instilled in her a desire to work hard in every class. He had inspired her to examine each opportunity and take advantage of those that were readily available to her. His constant interest in her education had influenced Tess to believe her advanced math and science classes as well as other difficult subjects were worth taking

and would benefit her even before she was aware of how well she was able to grasp them fully.

This year Tess' favorite class had become trigonometry, and in her estimation Mr. Easton was a top-notch teacher. His class always seemed to race by as she enthusiastically applied the exceptional abilities God had given her. Coming up with solutions was actually fun, and consistently each week she gladly finished every assignment. Her homework always landed on Mr. Easton's desk the day he asked for it.

Her friend Meg, also a good math student, sat behind her in that class, so it had been easy for them to become friends and spend a few minutes together each day. That small amount of time had become a highlight for both of them.

With more than 2200 kids enrolled in their school, only eighteen students were taking this advanced class, and of that number only six were girls. Four were noticeably competitive and always striving to obtain the best grade on any given test.

Arlene Sidler was a gifted, highly intelligent straight A student in the class, and it was evident to everyone Arlene, or Ahlee as one cocky boy labeled her for obvious reasons, was only content when she was able to compete with someone she considered on her level. Arlene was out to prove to everyone she would be the only girl in the entire class to receive an A+ at the end of the year. Recognizing in advance who all the other high achievers were, she intended to reach that goal and beat them all.

Since Tess Blake had shown she was one of the high achievers, she was definitely on Arlene's list. Aware Tess was new to what Arlene considered 'her school,' she immediately tagged her as an outsider and attempted to intimidate her. Then she began comparing herself to Tess in various ways. After the first month of school she hoped to deliver the point to Tess that she would not be able to continue to grasp trigonometry throughout the entire course. She was sure she could convince Tess too that she would never understand how things worked in her new school surroundings.

Although Tess was as capable as Arlene, she decided to play it smart by refusing to display either a superior or nippy attitude toward the girl. Tess also had caught on to how several of the guys usually held back their snide and crude remarks about Arlene when she considered herself at the top of the class. Whenever Arlene felt safe and did not feel threatened by anyone, she was agreeable. This strategy tended to work for the guys, and Tess believed she would be able to hold her own against Arlene if she followed that plan also. She would probably keep more friends in the process if she treated Arlene that way. With the regular fights that broke out at her new school Tess would definitely back off if Arlene physically came after her. After all, Ahlee was 5'10", and word had gotten around that she weighed over 195 lbs.



It was sad that such a dismal percentage of students showed much interest in making the most of the free education provided for them, while a much larger number attended on a hit and miss schedule because they felt they were forced by society into finishing high school in order to receive a diploma. In the process a large majority took courses which were distasteful to them, ones they were convinced would be useless once they finished high school.

A generous number of unrestrained, unruly kids attended Tess' new school, and gangs were common place. Tess could count on some type of ugly fight to break out in the hallway or on the school grounds every other day. It certainly did not take much to get one started. A casual insult or calling someone an obscene or crude name would result in fierce quarreling and the use of foul language. Fights of mainly revenge usually began in the cafeteria during one of the three lunch periods. These would be followed with at least a scuffle.

Whenever a big fight happened inside the school building or on the grounds, it could easily be handled by the interference of a few male teachers. But when a couple of the tougher guys who belonged

to a gang began a tussle outside the school property, hundreds of kids could see it all played out. When older and larger kids were fighting, broken noses or worse would often be the result. Some raucous onlookers might cheer for the hoodlums to continue. If an innocent student was drawn into a fight by a tough kid, it could be brutal. In the mind of some troubled teens, there were no innocents, and anyone should be willing to fight if someone called them out.

Only weeks ago, Tess had seen one slender kid in her French class take a licking from a brute because he refused to loan the guy a few dollars. After staying home for a solid week, the beaten kid returned with a large purple, green and black circle around his eye and two noticeable ugly gashes on his chin. He wore a wary expression and avoided not only the thug who had beaten him, but every brutal guy his assailant hung around with.

Members of the school board knew what the real problems were, but they skillfully tossed the blame onto other areas of society without honestly considering the main source of the anger displayed by the teens. Parents of the frequent troublemakers seldom seemed to be concerned and were not called by anyone from the school. The idea reigned that as long as the student was in school, it was the duty of that school to administer a penalty or punishment of some kind and not to consider involving either parent.

Behavior problems only worsened. Nothing was ever accomplished because the administrators decided to never deal with the obvious underlying causes.



The bus pulled up to the curb with barely minutes to spare before the first class was to begin. Glancing in the direction of her locker, Tess caught sight of Meg leaning against the wall checking out a couple of her recent text messages, "Hey Meg, thanks for waiting. Got stuck in traffic yet again. It happens too often. It's such a lame excuse, I know, but after school I hope we'll have time to talk. Better move since the first bell already rang. See ya later in trig."

After English Lit, the last class of the day, Tess returned to her locker. She shoved her science book and writing materials deep into her backpack, put on the light-weight school jacket she kept in her locker, grabbed her flute case along with the backpack, slammed her locker door shut and walked toward the designated meeting place to spend a few moments with Meg. Their time together would be extra short today because Tess would need to catch a city bus to reach another part of town for her weekly flute lesson.

Meg was patiently waiting and looked up as Tess inquired, "How'd it go in bio today?"

"I did okay. Maybe even quite well. The test was shorter than I'd expected, but I'm positive I'll get a good grade at the end of the year. At least I had enough time left to finish my lab work on that nasty smelling dead animal. I never knew cats were so skinny under all that fur! But I'm so glad that part is over! From handling it so much, I hope I don't smell like that bony feline. Yuck! I can still smell the creature, but a hot soapy shower when I get home should help."

Tess laughed, "Now tell me about Nick, or is he old news already? We haven't had much time lately to talk. We need to get caught up."

"Nick, well, he's really a nice guy, but far too ready to make me his girl. I'm definitely not interested in that. He's also a bit pushy, at least much too pushy for me."

Knowing she had to hurry Tess began stepping away, "Sorry Meg, but I've gotta hurry so I can catch that early bus for my music lesson. Please call or text me tonight. Better still, text me in the morning on your way to school. I want to hear all about you and Nick. Hey, maybe I will have enough time to call you tonight. See ya."

Watching Tess leave and speaking loudly enough to be heard, Meg said, "Tess I'll definitely call you in the morning cause we've just got to talk about doing a little shop hopping at the mall this weekend. Maybe Friday night will be good for me. Summer will be here in no time, and I desperately need a sweet new bathing suit. I'll call later. Love ya."

Tess was so thankful she had such a great friend. Although Meg was one of the prettiest girls in school, she wasn't haughty about it, but level headed about her school studies and an exceptional student. They had similar interests in what they wanted to study in the future and enjoyed the time and secrets they were able to share. Tess thought about Meg as she hurried to her bus stop, *I do not like everything about my new school, but Meg is the best friend I have ever had.*

Reaching for her cell phone Tess was relieved to see that she would have adequate time to get to her stop and catch her usual bus if she kept moving. It was Tuesday, her favorite day of the week, the day she went to Jacqueline Benet's home for her weekly flute lesson.

In the specific area of the city where Tess was headed, an incident had already taken place that would interrupt her ordinary Tuesday, and unsuspectingly, she would be caught up in something dishonest that had happened only hours earlier.