

Chapter 1

“We’re live right now! Y’all seeing how to live the Lux Life! For real!”

Naveah Kendricks sat hunched at her desk so that Ms. Sherman, her ninth-grade English teacher at Bluford High, wouldn’t see the phone in her lap. Naveah’s black braids hung over the side of her face, hiding the single earbud in her ear. She had turned the volume low—as quiet as she could manage and still hear snippets of music and bits of conversation. One of her favorite influencers, Klassy Kay, was live streaming. Naveah wished she could turn it up so she could hear every word.

Klassy looked amazing, as usual. Her makeup was perfectly contoured, her hair extensions curled in ringlets on her shoulders, and her glossy nails gleamed like black talons sparkled with glitter. Klassy wore a

designer top with cutouts that showed her curves and glowing caramel skin. In the background, Naveah spotted servers in black ties rushing between fancy tables arranged with wine glasses and silverware.

“We’re at one of the most famous restaurants in L.A.,” Klassy cooed to the camera. Her voice was smooth and excited, but not too excited. Naveah had practiced Klassy’s tone many times. True, she didn’t have the designer wardrobe or the followers, but Klassy’s style was something she felt she could almost imitate.

We live from Bluford High right now! she imagined herself saying. For a second, Naveah pictured what it would be like to have thousands of followers watching her. The idea made her pulse quicken. But what would she say?

There was no way she would show them her dull classroom or her small, cluttered house where Christian, her eight-year-old brother, played video games after school. *Too boring*, she figured. Then an idea hit her. Maybe she could copy Klassy’s voice and style but post about Bluford’s cafeteria instead. It would be a joke, of course, but it might be funny.

This here’s one of the most famous eateries in the ’hood, she’d say, pointing out the

teachers on lunch duty as if they were celebrities. *That's right, Mr. Mitchell gets his mushy fruit salad right here on Tuesdays*, she could say. *And Mr. Dooling loves square pizza on Fridays even though it's almost too greasy to pick up*. The post would be silly but maybe she could tag Klassy. If Klassy "liked" it, Naveah hoped maybe she could get more followers. Maybe then someone would finally notice her.

Naveah studied Klassy Kay's face carefully as Ms. Sherman continued her unit on fairy tales and what they could teach to modern society. Today's talk was about *The Ugly Duckling*. Naveah could not care less.

What kind of filter will give me Klassy's look? she wondered. She closed the live stream and quickly snapped a selfie from her lap. The camera angle made her face look strangely puffy. She took another, raising her eyebrows and sucking in her cheeks.

Better, she thought.

Naveah applied one filter after another to the photo, finally settling on a look that smoothed her skin and made her lips seem glossy and wet. She uploaded the pic to Snapchat and waited for reactions. Naveah didn't have many followers, but hopefully, her cousins would click "like" and so would old friends from elementary and middle

school if they were online. Lately, though, they responded less and less to her posts.

“Desmond’s right,” Ms. Sherman declared, heading to the whiteboard. “This is a story about the dangers of trying to be something you’re not—and never discovering who you really are.” The teacher drew a circle, then a square, and then an equal sign on the whiteboard. Then she drew a slash through the equal sign and began walking the aisles between desks. “Anyone ever felt like that? Like they don’t fit?”

A few students shrugged, but others made grunting noises. Naveah held back a yawn and covered her phone as the teacher passed by.

“I know I have,” Ms. Sherman admitted. She was small and wiry. From afar, Naveah thought she looked more like a student than a teacher. “People are not all the same, and we don’t need to be! But still we are always trying to squeeze into boxes that others set up for us. It’s like a girl on the soccer team who can run fast but can’t dribble. Soccer doesn’t fit for her. Why? Because she belongs on the track team, that’s why!” she joked. “Track is where she fits!”

A few students smiled, while others rolled their eyes. Ms. Sherman coached girls track and cross country at Bluford High. She

was always bringing up running in class and trying to recruit girls for her teams. Girls track had come close to winning All City championships this year, partly because of two girls in Naveah's class: Malika Shaw and Jonique Howard. Malika was always low-key about winning the 100-meter sprint. But Jonique? She bragged about her victories in the 800-meter and mile races constantly, even in class. Ms. Sherman never stopped her.

Naveah could still remember when the video blew up on Instagram a few weeks ago. Jonique standing sweaty and triumphant in her Bluford track uniform, holding her gold medal out at the camera as if she was an Olympic champion.

"Winning, baby!" she had hollered and then whooped joyfully, her hair braided into neat cornrows.

Like running fast is hard, Naveah thought at the time with a mixture of jealousy and annoyance that still lingered. Back in seventh grade, Naveah had beaten Jonique in a race around the field in gym class. That was years ago, but Naveah savored the memory whenever Jonique gloated, which seemed to be almost every day.

Naveah glanced over at the two runners. Malika sat on the far side of class,

still smiling from Ms. Sherman's comment. Jonique was closer, just two desks away. The cornrows she had during track season were long gone. Now her hair hung in springy coils that brushed her cheeks when she moved. Her snug T-shirt and shorts revealed cords of toned muscle in her arms and legs. Compared to Jonique, Naveah was tall and lean, with almost no curves to speak of.

"You got the same build as me in high school," Mom always said. *"A distance runner's body."*

Naveah shrugged off her mother's words and noticed Jonique looking at her. For a second, their eyes locked, but then Jonique's gaze landed on Naveah's phone. The small screen glowed with Naveah's face, distorted by the dramatic makeup filter.

Jonique rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth.

Embarrassment spread over Naveah's cheeks, and her face suddenly felt on fire. On most days, Jonique acted as if Naveah was invisible. But during the rare times they did speak, Jonique always seemed bored and unimpressed, as if she was better than Naveah.

When I have thousands of followers, we'll see who's better, Naveah thought. She

pictured a future when she had throngs of people on her pages, loving her posts and hanging on her every word, making her feel important.

Maybe millions, she thought. Then we'll see who's—

"Isn't that right, Naveah?" Ms. Sherman's voice cut through the air. Naveah flinched and realized the teacher was standing right behind her. How had she crossed the room so quickly?

"Uh..." Naveah stammered. She could feel her classmates' sudden stares, their eyes crawling over her. She wished she could be like Klassy Kay and think of something clever or funny to say. But her mind was blank. All that came out was a confused mutter. "Uh, yeah."

Ms. Sherman glanced into Naveah's lap. The heavily made-up Naveah still stared up from her phone screen.

"Give that to me, please." Ms. Sherman stretched out her hand.

"What?" Naveah's face seared. A few students whispered and another laughed. The classroom seemed to fill with the sound.

"You know the rules, Naveah. No phones in my class. If I see it, I take it," Ms. Sherman said sternly. Naveah knew she couldn't argue. The teacher had scolded her twice

before in recent weeks. “C’mon, hand it over.”

A mocking grunt cut the silence from where Jonique sat. Naveah looked back and noticed her smirking, but her eyes were aimed forward, as if she hadn’t made a sound.

“Naveah?” Ms. Sherman’s tone was as sharp as jagged glass. “*Now.*”

The classroom twittered with nervous laughter. Naveah wished a hole would open in the speckled tile floor and swallow her up. She reluctantly dropped the phone into the teacher’s outstretched hand.

“That’s your third strike, Naveah. It means I’ll be contacting your parents—”

“Aww, come on, Ms. Sherm! It’s the last week of school!” Kareem Burnett blurted from his seat two rows back. “Don’t do her like that!”

Naveah winced. She couldn’t believe that Kareem, the shy, chubby kid from her fourth-grade class who had morphed into an athlete this year, was suddenly trying to defend her.

“First off, Kareem, this has nothing to do with you, though I’m sure Naveah appreciates your concern.” A few students snickered as Ms. Sherman shifted her gaze to Kareem and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“I know, but...” Kareem shook his head so hard his twists brushed the dark brown skin of his forehead. “Man,” he muttered. “That’s just cold.”

“Second,” the teacher continued, turning back to Naveah. “The rules have been in place all year for a reason. As long as you are in my class, they still apply. That goes for everyone. Unless you’d rather discuss this with Principal Spencer, Naveah, you can pick up your phone from me at the end of the day. You understand?”

Naveah nodded, gritting her teeth and wishing the day, the school year, and the stupid class would end for good. When the bell finally rang, she bolted for the hallway.

“Remember to stop by after your last class to get your phone,” Ms. Sherman called out to her, but Naveah didn’t turn back. She couldn’t stand to see Jonique’s smirking face or hear what she might say next. Instead, Naveah took the far corridor to get to PE, her next class.

The path was longer but less crowded, and it also took her past Bluford High’s trophy case just outside the gymnasium doors. She had visited the case many times this year. Besides trophies and assorted plaques, it contained framed pictures of past teams, retired coaches, and former champions.

They stared out at passing students from behind a sheet of protective plexiglass. Some of the photos were recent but most dated back many years, from when the school was still known as Woodrow Wilson High School, not Guion Bluford High. Naveah stopped in front of one familiar trophy that was taller than the others.

Etched in gold, the words *STATE CHAMPIONS* glimmered faintly. The trophy was twenty-five years old. Behind it, mounted on the wall, was a grainy color portrait of the winning girls track team. Naveah knew it well. Smiling back at her from the middle of the front row was her mother. Young and slender, she stood several inches taller than most of the other girls around her. Her hair was cut in a tiny afro, but her smile was wide—and unchanged. On her chest, two golden medals gleamed: one for the race she had won and one for the team's first-place victory. Mom still had the medals in a box in her bedroom closet. She shared them with Naveah last summer after she graduated eighth grade.

“Now it’s your turn!” Mom had gushed with excitement over Naveah’s starting high school. *“I know you’re gonna get trophies one day. Maybe track or maybe something else. We’ll see.”*

But so far, Naveah's high school experience had been nothing like Mom's. Instead, it was quiet, dull, and often lonely. Back in grade school, she was part of a core group of friends that played soccer and basketball and went to birthday parties together. They sat at the same lunch tables and even had sleepovers sometimes. But in middle school, the group started drifting apart. Then, in seventh grade, Naveah hit a growth spurt that made her taller than most of her classmates. It felt awkward to be all legs, towering over everyone, yet almost completely flat up top. Some girls started getting boy crazy, and others formed new cliques. Naveah gradually stopped being included. She had hoped everything would change at Bluford. But now, at the end of her freshman year, it seemed worse. She was just too tall, too skinny, too quiet, too awkward, too... something.

Naveah instinctively reached for her phone only to remember it was missing.

The one companion that made her feel "normal" at school was the phone she got in sixth grade. It kept her company at lunch when no one joined her, and it filled her evenings when there wasn't anything better to do. The endless posts, videos, memes, and conversations made her feel connected.

With them, Naveah wasn't alone. Yet now Ms. Sherman had taken all that away.

"I'll be contacting your parents," the teacher had said.

Naveah dreaded the conversation she knew was coming. Mom already thought she was on the phone too much. She had nagged her about it a thousand times. What would she do after Ms. Sherman called?

Naveah gazed at Mom's picture. On days when she was lonely, she would study her, trying to draw comfort from her mother's smiling face, a secret no one else in the school seemed to know about. But as the year wore on, Mom's winning smile felt less and less reassuring. Some days, like right now, it seemed more like a reminder that she had little in common with her mother.

"We're not the same, Mom," Naveah whispered. "I'm nothing like you."

The late bell blared overhead as Naveah reached the gym locker room. She barely finished changing into her shorts and T-shirt before Ms. Gaskins, their stocky and freckle-faced gym teacher, blew her whistle and summoned the class for attendance.

"We're finishing the school year with a quick unit on track," the teacher announced, as Naveah rushed to join the group. At the

mention of track, a chorus of groans filled their section of the gym. Ms. Gaskins ignored them and kept talking.

“We’ll jog a couple of laps to get warmed up, and then we’ll do some short sprints. Nothing too serious, but those of you who want to are welcome to do more.”

“There is no way I’m doing that,” muttered Alexis Newby, a girl Naveah had spoken to occasionally in class.

“And since we can’t have our two track stars on the same team,” Ms. Gaskins continued, “Malika and Jonique will be our captains. Let’s split into two groups.”

Ms. Gaskins began dividing up the class. Naveah breathed a sigh of relief when she was assigned to Malika.

The class lumbered out to the track and began a slow warm-up jog. Jonique and Malika were out in front leading them. Naveah noticed they moved effortlessly, talking the whole time, even as others in the class were already sweating and laboring to keep up.

“Okay!” Ms. Gaskins gestured them toward a chalk line on the track’s coarse red surface. “Let’s get a little competition going. Pair up. You’re going to run half a lap—just 200 meters. See if you can beat the person next to you. Once you’re done, walk around

the rest of the track and get back in line. Understand?”

Girls mumbled nervously and some shook their heads, but Naveah felt an odd sense of excitement.

“What do we get if we beat everybody?” Jonique cut in from the front of the line.

“Bragging rights and a good word to Coach Sherman. Like you even need that,” Ms. Gaskins replied with a knowing smile. “First pair, take your place.”

Naveah joined the back of the line and looked around to see who she would be racing against. Up ahead, a whistle blew and Malika and Jonique, the first two runners, sprinted out onto the track. Even though Naveah could see they weren’t running hard, they still moved with speed and power that was impossible not to notice. As they neared the finish line, they both slowed down and carefully stepped to the finish in unison. Their race was a tie.

“Next!” Ms. Gaskins barked.

Another pair of girls took off. Though they seemed to work harder, their speed looked to be about half that of the track stars. That was true of each group that followed until a pair of girls who were close friends decided not to race at all and simply walked around the track. As she waited for

them to finish, Naveah considered walking too, but no one seemed to want to go with her. She let other pairs go ahead of her until only a few students remained who hadn't run. Should she just walk alone? Naveah took her place at the starting line, but no one joined her in the other lane.

"Who's next?" Ms. Gaskins called when she realized the spot was empty. "C'mon, someone go with her." No one stepped up at first, but then Naveah recognized a muscled form step into the starting area.

"I'll go," Jonique offered. She eyed Naveah like a cat sizing up a fat mouse.

"But you already ran," Ms. Gaskins noted.

"I don't mind going again," Jonique cooed. "It's fine."

A hush swept over the remaining students. Did Jonique want to race her? Is that what was happening? Naveah wondered. Part of her was ready to walk around the track and not even try. No one would even care. A race in gym class was meaningless. But another part of her remembered the race in middle school and was suddenly hungry for a repeat.

Jonique seemed to remember too. She took her position in the lane next to Naveah's. Concentration furrowed her face as she toed the line and readied for the start. Naveah felt

her determination to win fill the air between them like the electric charge before a storm. It might have choked her—frozen her limbs so she was too scared to move—had it not been for the memory of seventh grade.

I beat you then, Naveah thought. What if I can do it again?

Malika stood on the edge of the track watching them. Alexis did too.

Ms. Gaskin blew her whistle.

Naveah watched as Jonique exploded into movement at an impossible speed. Already several feet behind, Naveah swung her arms and took off. Her shoes scraped and clawed against the track as she accelerated. She stretched her legs into fast strides and pumped her arms. Seconds into the race, she lifted her head and focused on Jonique's back, which was already about ten feet out in front of her. How was she so quick?

Naveah pushed harder, dug deeper. The pat-pat-pat of her feet pounded against the track like drums. Suddenly there were other noises in the background too—someone was screaming something—but Naveah didn't try to understand what they were saying. She concentrated on Jonique's back as it grew larger. Inch by inch, step by step, Naveah watched the space between them close.

Ten feet melted into eight...

Then dissolved into six...

And shrank down to four...

Ms. Gaskins blew her whistle as they reached the finish line. Jonique had clearly won, but Naveah had closed the gap. She had gained ground on the champion. Naveah slowed to a walk, panting, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

"That was amazing! Good race, girls. That's what competition does!" Ms. Gaskins yelled to the class. "You don't know what you can do until you're pressed. Good job!"

Naveah closed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. The sun was warm, but a slight breeze cooled her sweaty skin. Somehow, she felt stronger and more powerful than she had moments ago. She hadn't won, but maybe she could have if the race had been longer? Maybe?

"You know I just smoked you, right?" Jonique cut in, shattering her thoughts. "Only reason you got close is 'cause I let you. I was walking at the end. Remember that."

Jonique jogged off to join Malika and the rest of class. Naveah's mind kept spinning with what had just happened.

No matter what Jonique said, she felt as though she could have beaten her if she had a better start or another ten meters to run. Maybe it could have been seventh grade

all over again. Maybe she *was* her mother's daughter?

Naveah imagined posting her thoughts on her phone once she got it back. The idea made her fingers twitch with excitement.