

Chapter 1

F

The letter was scrawled so big and red, Jamee wondered if Mrs. Guessner had any ink left in her pen after she had made it.

The grade covered up the first three questions on the algebra test. The words “See me” covered up two more wrong answers. At the bottom, a long red line was scratched on the paper with the words “Parent’s signature” printed beneath it.

Jamee crumpled the test into her fist. Mrs. Guessner was at the front of the room going over the answers, but Jamee was too mad to listen.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she wanted to scream. *Why is school so stupid?*

“Jamee?”

Jamee didn’t answer, hoping that the

teacher would move on.

“*Jamee?*”

She rolled her eyes, shifted in her chair and gave Mrs. Guessner her best leave-me-alone face, but it didn’t work.

“Can you tell us how to solve number eleven?”

Jamee sighed. *I failed, remember? What are you asking me for?* she wanted to say. Instead, she shook her head.

“No,” she said simply.

“Come on,” Mrs. Guessner urged. She sounded as if she was offering a treat. “You were one of the only people in this class to get this one right. Tell us how you did it.”

Jamee glanced at the crumpled paper. Mrs. Guessner was right: number eleven was one of the few problems that didn’t have a red “x” next to it, but Jamee wasn’t sure why. She couldn’t explain how she had gotten the right answer even if Mrs. Guessner offered to pay her.

Mrs. Guessner stared impatiently from her desk at the front of the room. The class suddenly grew quiet. Jamee felt as if an imaginary spotlight was shining on her.

“I got it right because . . .” Jamee sat

up straight and imitated a smart girl, making sure to say each word carefully. “You forgot to erase it from the board before you handed out the test.”

Several kids chuckled in disbelief. Jamee gave her head a little toss at the sound and nodded, smiling.

Mrs. Guessner frowned.

“You really should take your schoolwork more seriously, Jamee,” she said, shaking her head as if she was disappointed. “This is important—”

“Come on, Mrs. Guessner,” Jamee snapped. “Ain’t nobody gonna ask me to solve for x in real life. They might ask me a lot of things, but ‘solve for x ’ ain’t gonna be one of them!”

There was more laughter. Jamee even heard someone snort.

“Well,” Mrs. Guessner’s voice rose. “That’s where you’re wrong. We use algebra a lot in the real world. For example—”

The bell rang, and her words were drowned out by chairs scraping the floor.

“I’m offering a retake of this test on Thursday after school!” the teacher called over the noise. “And there will be help sessions after school every day starting today!”

Half the class was already out the door. Jamee tried to sneak out too, but Mrs. Guessner called out, "Wait, Jamee. Just a minute. I want to talk to you."

Jamee sighed. "My next class is gym, Mrs. Guessner," she began. "I gotta get all the way to the other end of the school and get changed and—"

"I'll give you a pass," Mrs. Guessner replied, filling out a hall pass as she spoke. "You need to make sure you retake the test on Thursday. And I want you to come for help this afternoon."

"But I can't!" Jamee cried. "Cheerleading tryouts start today!"

"You won't be a cheerleader if you don't pass this class," Mrs. Guessner warned, her voice stern. "It's disturbing to see a student performing this badly so early in the year." She shook her head as if she was surprised at what she was saying. "Especially *you*. When I saw your name on my class roster, I thought you'd be more like your sister, Darcy . . ."

Darcy.

Jamee felt as if something hot and prickly had been dumped over her head. Mrs. Guessner was still talking, but once she said the *D* word, Jamee couldn't hear her anymore.

Darcy.

For the first few days at Bluford High School, Jamee thought it was almost cool to have a sister in the junior class and older kids asking, "Are you Darcy Wills's sister?" But that feeling lasted about a week. Then the whole "Darcy's sister" thing started to become just like Darcy: a pain in Jamee's backside.

It started in history with Mr. Gonzalez. "You need to study harder, like your sister Darcy," he had said as he placed a graded test on her desk. A large angry *D* was circled in blue ink.

And in English a couple of days later, the same thing happened: "You're not as good a writer as your sister Darcy."

And then again in physical science: "If you're having trouble, maybe you could ask your sister Darcy."

If the teachers weren't bad enough, at least once a day juniors or seniors Jamee didn't know would stop her and ask, "Hey, aren't you Darcy Wills's sister?" Then they would add a comment like "You look just like her" or "You don't look anything like her." Each time, they would grin as if what they said was a compliment.

Darcy, Darcy, Darcy.

“Did you know Darcy was in my honors algebra class her freshman year?” Mrs. Guessner smiled as if she was reliving a pleasant memory. “She’s one of the best students I ever had at Bluford.”

“Well, I’m not Darcy.” The words stung as Jamee said them. She didn’t mean to sound rude, but she couldn’t help it. Mrs. Guessner blinked.

“I know that, Jamee,” she said gently. “All I’m saying is, you can do better. Right now it’s as if you’re not even trying. You realize cheerleaders have to maintain their grades, right? If your average falls below a C, you won’t be able to join the squad, no matter what,” Mrs. Guessner explained.

“I know,” Jamee mumbled, crossing her arms and trying her best not to say anything that would get her in more trouble.

“Now, I know you struggled last year in middle school,” Mrs. Guessner continued. “I understand your guidance counselor and your parents met just before school started—”

“Yeah, I know. I was there,” Jamee interrupted, wishing she could just forget the meeting in August when she crowded in Mr. Dorber’s stuffy office

with her parents.

"I noticed Jamee had some academic problems in middle school. If she's going to make it through Bluford, we're really going to have to stay on top of things," Mr. Dorber had said, flipping through a folder with her name on it.

Jamee had felt as if she was trapped in a cage. She wondered how many details of her life were in Mr. Dorber's folder.

Did he know Dad had walked out on the family five years ago and just came back last year? Did he know while Dad was gone, she had hung out with the troubled kids, people who didn't care one bit about grades or school? Did he know that last year she had even tried to run away? How could he know any of that?

"I'm going to suggest a lot of communication between home and school," Mr. Dorber had said, eyeing her as he spoke.

"Don't you worry. We're gonna stay on her about her schoolwork," Mom had agreed, nodding her head forcefully.

"Tell her teachers to call us anytime," Dad had added. *"Especially if she starts falling behind."*

Mr. Dorber had smiled and written

something in her file. *“That’s good to hear, Mr. and Mrs. Wills. The transition to high school can be difficult. But if we all work together, Jamee will do as well at Bluford as her sister . . .”*

Just remembering the conversation made Jamee want to gag.

“I really want you to retake the test,” Mrs. Guessner continued, breaking Jamee’s thoughts. “And if I were you, I’d come for help today and tomorrow after school. You could even ask Darcy to look over your homework, too. She’ll be able to help.”

No, I’m not gonna do that! Jamee thought angrily. I don’t want her help. I’m NOT Darcy, okay, so get over it! she wanted to scream. But even more, she wanted to get away from Mrs. Guessner.

“All right,” Jamee said, doing her best to hide her frustration. “I’ll try to stop by after school. And I’ll definitely take the retest. But right now, I gotta go or I’ll be late for gym.”

Students were gathering outside the door waiting for Mrs. Guessner’s next class. Jamee could see that the teacher noticed them. *Please just let me go,* she wanted to say.

“Okay, Jamee,” Mrs. Guessner sighed,

handing her the hall pass. “I’ll look for you after school. And don’t forget to have your parents sign your test and bring it with you to class tomorrow. I want them to know how you’re doing.”

Great, Jamee thought to herself. She could already hear her mother’s nagging and see the look of disappointment on her father’s face. Maybe Darcy would sigh and shake her head at her, too. Jamee had watched her do that for years. The thought made Jamee’s face burn.

Don’t worry about it, Jamee told herself. *Just think about tryouts*. She closed her eyes and imagined spending the afternoon with her friend Amberlynn doing something she was good at—cheerleading. It was something Darcy could never do. The idea almost made her smile. She opened her eyes, glanced at the crumpled test, and turned to her teacher.

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Guessner.”

As soon as the final bell rang, Jamee headed straight for the gym. The locker room was already crowded with girls when she arrived, most of them chatting nervously as they changed out of their school clothes.

“As soon as you’re dressed, sign in and get your numbers!” yelled an older dark-skinned girl in workout shorts and a gold Bluford T-shirt.

Jamee changed quickly, crammed her backpack with her crumpled test into her locker, and rushed into the gym. A long table stretched just inside the entrance. Two other girls in Bluford Cheerleading T-shirts sat at the table. Jamee figured they were upperclassmen who made the squad last year.

“Write your name here,” one of them instructed, pointing to a clipboard that held a yellow sign-up sheet. Jamee carefully printed her name on the form.

“Jamee *Wills* . . .” the girl read. “Are you Darcy Wills’s sister? She’s in my English class,” she continued before Jamee could reply. “That girl is smart.”

“Yeah, that’s Darcy,” Jamee muttered and started walking away.

“Wait!” the cheerleader called. She wrote a number on a white sticker and handed it to Jamee. “You’re number seventeen.” She smiled. “There are lots of girls trying out. The number is how Coach Seville keeps track of who’s who. I’m Crystal, by the way. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Jamee grumbled, sticking

her number to her T-shirt. Crystal seemed nice, but now Jamee was sure the cheerleaders would expect her to be like Darcy. She couldn't stand it.

No, I'm not gonna let Darcy ruin this, Jamee told herself as she sat down on the crowded bleachers.

"Jamee! Over here!" called a voice. Jamee whipped around to see Amberlynn Bailey sitting a few rows behind her, waving eagerly. Amberlynn patted to an empty space beside her. "Come up here!" she urged.

Jamee scampered up the bleachers beneath a row of Bluford banners and sat down next to her friend. "Girl, I am glad to see you," she said, dropping an arm around Amberlynn's shoulders. "For a minute, I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

"Are you serious?" Amberlynn asked, her braids dancing on her shoulders as she talked. "There's no way I'd miss this. I've wanted to cheer for Bluford every since Roylin's first game on the JV football team!" Roylin was Amberlynn's older brother.

"I know," Jamee laughed for what felt like the first time all day. "It's all you ever talked about last year. I was about

to tape your mouth shut a few times.”

“Well it worked, didn’t it? We’re both here, right?”

“Just like always,” Jamee replied with a grin. She had been friends with Amberlynn since fifth grade. They met in Ms. Scanlon’s language arts class at Irving Middle School. Back then, Dad was gone, and Mom was forced to work long hours at the hospital to pay the bills. To help out, Jamee’s grandmother moved into their apartment. It was years before a massive stroke left her weak and confused. Besides cooking meals and making sure the girls got to school on time, Grandma checked every homework assignment. Sometimes Jamee complained.

“Baby girl, I wish I could be in school like you right now,” Grandma would say. *“But since I can’t, I want you to show me what they teachin’ you. And if you can’t show me, I’m gonna call your school up and ask ‘em why.”*

Jamee wasn’t ever sure if Grandma meant it, but that year her grades went up. She got B’s in every subject. While she couldn’t compete with Darcy, she did well enough that Mom was satisfied. And, thanks to Amberlynn, she discovered

something in which Darcy couldn't compete: cheerleading.

Jamee had been doing it ever since and hoped to continue it this year, no matter what Mrs. Guessner or anyone else said. Cheerleading was the only thing that hadn't really changed this year. Home was a different story.

Dad's return and promise to make up lost time to the family.

Grandma's sad death in her sleep early in the summer.

The sudden announcement of Mom's pregnancy.

Most nights Jamee stared at the ceiling, thinking about it all, her mind racing, her heart pounding. While she tried her best each day, sometimes she just felt lost. Pregnancy had slowed Mom down, leaving her distracted and cranky. Dad was working two jobs so they could afford all the things the baby would need. Yes, the family was together again, but somehow Jamee saw less of her parents than ever. And when they were home, all Mom and Dad talked about was the new baby and Darcy's SATs.

Jamee sometimes felt as if she had become invisible. Cheerleading was an anchor that stopped that. It was hers,

not Darcy's. It was stable, not changing. She looked forward to it like an old friend.

Snap!

Jamee felt a pop just beneath her nose.

"Hello, Earth to Jamee? Did you hear me?" Amberlynn asked, snapping her fingers again.

Jamee blinked. "Sorry. What did you say?"

Amberlynn rolled her bright brown eyes and grinned. "I said we both have to make this team, so we can hang out together." She jabbed Jamee with a playful elbow. "So no sleeping out there. We got a lot of competition."

Jamee shook off her thoughts and looked around. The bleachers had filled with girls, each wearing a numbered sticker on her chest. It seemed every girl who had ever done a cartwheel had decided to come to the gym. Except for Tasha Jenkins, who sat a couple of rows down with some older-looking girls. Jamee didn't see anyone from her middle school squad.

"Wow, there are enough girls here to make about five cheering squads," Jamee murmured, feeling suddenly

nervous.

“It’s true. You gotta figure that most of the girls who were on the squad last year will make it again,” Amberlynn said softly. “That means only, like, six of us will make it.”

Jamee took a deep breath. She had been a good cheerleader in middle school, but she knew Bluford was going to be a whole new world, just like her classes. For a split second, she remembered that she was supposed to meet Mrs. Guessner after school.

But then Coach Seville strode into the gym. There was no turning back now.