

Chapter 1

Liselle Mason stared into the cracked mirror of the Bluford High School girls' bathroom. She had been standing there for several minutes, fussing with her hair and trying to cover up the dark rings under her eyes with makeup. There was a stain on her jeans, and her white shirt was slightly wrinkled. She pulled on the front of it, hoping the wrinkles would disappear.

Give it up, girl, she told herself with a sigh. *You're a mess.*

She checked her watch. It was 11:30 a.m. In ten minutes she would be standing in front of a group of teenage girls in Bluford's library. Her stomach flipped nervously every time she thought about it. She had never talked to a large group of people before. But when Ms. Spencer,

Bluford's principal, called her a few weeks ago, Liselle felt she couldn't say no. Not after all that had happened.

"Liselle, I think it would be very helpful for the students to hear your story," Ms. Spencer had said. *"I'd like you to be the guest speaker at a small assembly I'm having for some of Bluford's female students. I know it might be difficult, but would you be willing to share your story with the girls here?"*

"I don't know, Ms. Spencer," Liselle had replied nervously. Just hearing her old principal's voice again brought back a wave of painful memories. *"I mean, I don't know what I could tell them. I'm no kind of role model. You of all people should know that."*

Ms. Spencer had been quiet for a moment, as if she was searching for the right words. *"You can tell them the truth, Liselle,"* she finally replied. *"Your truth. That's all I'm asking."*

It had been four years since Liselle had set foot in Bluford High School. She was twenty years old now, and yet she couldn't help but feel like a sixteen-year-old again as she looked around the bathroom. She clearly remembered the blue-and-white checkered tile on the

floor, the shiny gray paint on the walls, the echoing of footsteps in the hallway outside. Liselle walked over to the last stall and opened the door. She closed her eyes tight against the memory of what had happened to her there.

I never thought I'd be back here, she thought. *But here I am.*

Liselle took one last look at herself in the mirror. *Get it together, girl,* she thought. *Don't get nervous now. They're just a bunch of kids, right?* Then she walked out into the hallway and down the long, silent corridor.

Ms. Spencer was waiting just outside the library door.

“Hello, Liselle,” she said with a warm smile. “Thank you for coming. You look so mature. Not like the young kid I remember.”

“Thanks,” said Liselle, trying to straighten the front of her shirt again. “It’s been a long time. Sorry I’m such a mess. It was a crazy morning.”

Ms. Spencer put a reassuring hand on Liselle’s shoulder. “You look just fine. I know you have your hands full these days, and I appreciate you finding the time to do this. Are you ready? The students are waiting for you.”

Liselle peeked into the library window. "I think so," she replied nervously. "It's just . . . I'm still not sure what to say to them."

"Just start at the beginning, Liselle. Take your time. I should warn you, some of these girls are more . . . challenging . . . than others. But I'll be right there with you, in case we have any problems."

Liselle followed Ms. Spencer into the library. About thirty students were spread out across the room, sitting at tables or in small clusters on the carpeted floor. They were all wearing bright yellow stickers with their names written in black magic marker. Some were waiting quietly, thumbing through their notebooks and fiddling with their pens. Others talked to their friends and shifted impatiently in their seats.

Liselle recognized Jamee Wills, who lived not far from her apartment. Jamee looked surprised to see her there.

"Hey Jamee," she whispered with a smile. Jamee smiled quickly and looked away, as if she didn't want her classmates to realize they knew each other.

"Yo, Ms. Spencer, when you gonna tell us what we're here for?" shouted a

girl from the back of the room. She was wearing a tight-fitting red T-shirt, dark blue jeans and red lipstick. Her hair was long and brown and arranged into neat thin braids. Her name tag said "Tamara."

"Yeah, Ms. Spencer! Why you being all mysterious about it? We in trouble or something?" added another girl who was sitting at the table with Tamara. She too was wearing a snug shirt with a red rhinestone heart in the middle.

"You're about to find out, April," Ms. Spencer answered. "This is Liselle Mason. She used to be a student here at Bluford. Today she's going to talk to you about a very important topic, and I expect you girls to listen carefully and be respectful."

Tamara and April groaned. "Man, I thought we were going to watch a movie or something," said April. She was chewing a large wad of gum and leaning back in her chair, twirling a long piece of black hair around her slender finger.

Tamara eyed Liselle suspiciously. "Whatever," she added. "I don't care what this girl has to say. How long we gotta sit here?"

"That's enough!" said Ms. Spencer

firmly. "If you can't sit quietly and listen, you can head straight to my office."

Liselle smiled knowingly as she watched the two girls. "I got this, Ms. Spencer," she said with a sudden burst of energy, striding up to the front of the room. "My name's Liselle, and like Ms. Spencer said, I used to go to school here."

"So?" snapped Tamara. A few of the other students giggled. Jamee shot them an annoyed glare.

"Can you just let her talk?" Jamee grumbled.

"It's okay, Jamee," Liselle replied calmly.

Tamara looked Liselle over with a critical eye. "Figures you two know each other," she laughed. "Man, look at her jeans! All stained and nasty!" Laughter rippled through the room.

Liselle put a hand on her hip and smiled calmly. "So, you're the tough girl, huh? How old are you?"

"Sixteen," Tamara answered defiantly. "How old are *you*?"

Liselle continued, ignoring her question. "I bet you're *real* popular, too. I bet nobody messes with you."

"That's right," Tamara said proudly, crossing her arms. "And?"

Liselle looked around the library thoughtfully. “You know, in all my years at Bluford High, I don’t think I was ever in this room. My friends and I used to make fun of the kids who studied in here. We thought they were losers.”

“Look who’s talkin’,” Tamara mumbled. The comment was aimed at Tamara’s friends, but Liselle heard it.

She smiled and nodded at Tamara. “I probably look old to you, huh?” Liselle said. “I bet you think we don’t have anything in common. Maybe you won’t believe this, but when I was your age, *I* was the tough girl. Right, Ms. Spencer?”

“It’s true,” nodded the principal.

“I spent a lot of time in Ms. Spencer’s office. I remember this one time, my friends put a lit cigarette under the smoke detector in the girl’s bathroom. The alarm went off and the entire school was evacuated.”

Several students snickered. A few, who hadn’t been paying much attention, suddenly looked up.

Tamara smirked and arched an eyebrow. “So? That was like years ago. You don’t look so popular now.”

“No. I guess I don’t,” said Liselle with a shrug. “I used to think my whole life

would be as easy as it was when I was sixteen. I wouldn't have to work hard. I didn't even have to go to class if I didn't want to. I thought I'd be young forever. My friends would always be there. And no matter what happened, someone would be there to fix it for me."

Liselle sat down in a chair at the front of the room and rubbed her forehead. She could feel a dull ache building behind her tired eyes. She laughed bitterly and shook her head. "I actually believed we'd be together, me and Oscar."

Tamara picked at her nails. She looked bored. "Ain't my fault if you can't keep a man," she murmured, quietly enough so that Ms. Spencer couldn't hear. Then she pulled out a small red cell phone from her backpack and began texting under the table.

"That's cold," someone said.

For a moment, Liselle's face burned with anger. She could feel the entire room watching her, waiting to see how she would respond. She imagined herself striding over to Tamara and kicking the chair right out from underneath her. That's what she would have done four years ago, when she was Tamara's age.

Liselle stood up and walked over to

Tamara's table, her face serious but also slightly amused. She leaned in close to Tamara, who suddenly looked surprised. Tamara glanced at Ms. Spencer, then at April, who was staring at the floor.

"I'd be offended by what you just said to me," Liselle said firmly, "if I thought you had any idea what you were talking about." She then took the cell phone from Tamara's hand and slipped it into her pocket.

"Hey, that's mine. You can't take that—"

"I don't care what you think about me," Liselle cut her off, locking her eyes on Tamara. "But for the next hour, you're *gonna* listen to what I gotta say. Understand? So sit up straight, girl. Pay attention. And quit pickin' at your nails. You might just learn something. You'll get your phone back when I'm done."

"Oh snap!" someone said.

"She just schooled you, Tamara!" another girl added.

A wave of excitement rippled through the room. Liselle walked back to her chair at the front of the room.

"Look," she said, staring into each of the faces in front of her. "I'm not here to lecture you. And some of you might not

wanna hear what I have to say. But here it is.”

Liselle took a deep breath and glanced at Ms. Spencer. “When I was sixteen, I got pregnant.”

For a moment, the room went quiet. A girl sitting next to Jamee, whose nametag said “Cindy,” dropped her pen. April shifted in her seat and looked at the door, as if she wanted to run out of the room. But other students, including Tamara, rolled their eyes as if they had heard this story before.

“Here we go,” grumbled Tamara, shaking her head. “Now we know why she’s here.”

“My cousin had a baby last month. He’s soooo cute!” blurted a short, round-faced girl.

“Danisha, don’t no one wanna hear ’bout your cousin’s kid,” said a girl wearing a yellow shirt. Her nametag said “Nyeema.”

“I’m just sayin’,” Danisha protested. “Babies are cute.”

“Well, my sister had a baby last year,” Nyeema added. “All he does is cry and poop. That ain’t cute. That’s just nasty, and I’m the one who does all the babysitting.”

“How old is your sister?” Liselle asked.

“Eighteen,” Nyeema answered.

Liselle nodded and glanced at Ms. Spencer.

“Eighteen ain’t *that* young,” snapped Tamara. “That’s how old my momma was when she had me. I bet lots of girls in this room have moms who were young when they had them. And we turnin’ out all right.”

“C’mon, girl,” April murmured. “You know what she’s tryin’ to say.”

“*Excuse me?*” Tamara replied, staring at her friend. “What, you all interested now?”

April crossed her arms and looked away.

“My mom was young, too,” Liselle continued. “And I’m not here to judge anyone. But I wonder, how many of you really understand what it’s like to have a child? I mean, *really* understand?”

“I do,” said Nyeema. “Screamin’ and cryin’. That’s all they do.”

“Not my cousin’s baby,” added Danisha.

“Girl, would you stop,” snapped Nyeema. “The kid ain’t a doll.”

“What do you know?”

“More than you! You ever change a diaper or clean spit-up?”

The two went back and forth, and for a second Liselle wondered if she had made a mistake. She was about to break up the argument, when April leaned forward in her seat.

“So, what happened with you?” she asked quietly.

Tamara shook her head and rolled her eyes, but she didn’t say a word. The two girls behind her stopped arguing. A hush spread across the library.

Liselle felt eyes turn toward her. She looked out at the young faces. For a moment, she thought she saw a girl sitting alone in the corner, her hair in short, tight cornrows, her arms crossed self-consciously over her baggy T-shirt. She could have sworn she saw herself as she rose from her chair.

“I’m not proud of the story I’m about to tell you,” Liselle began. “There are certain things that happened—things that I’m ashamed of. I made some really bad choices.”

Liselle looked away for a moment, her eyes burning with tears she refused to let fall.

“But I got hurt, too. Hurt like I never

thought I could be. In the end, you gotta make your own choices. But maybe you can learn from my mistakes. That's why I'm here. Everybody's different. And I don't know how it is for other girls who've faced the same situation."

"All I can tell you," continued Liselle, "is how it was for me."