

Chapter 1

“Girl, where you at?”

Darcy Wills winced at the voice blasting through her new cell phone. It was her best friend, Tarah Carson, and she sounded angry.

“C’mon, Darce. You’re late,” Tarah scolded.

Darcy knew Tarah was right even before she looked at her watch. She should have left the house ten minutes ago. Instead she was staring at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, hoping Hakeem Randall wouldn’t notice the guilt in her eyes or the worry that haunted her face. So much had changed in the few months since they’d broken up. *Too much*, Darcy thought.

“I’m sorry, Tarah. It’s just that—”

“Tell her I’m starvin’,” yelled Cooper

Hodden, Tarah's boyfriend, in the background. "Tell her if she don't get here soon, I'ma start eatin' without her."

His voice was so loud Darcy held the cell phone away from her ear. It sounded like he and Tarah were in the hallway, not several blocks away at Niko's Pizza.

"Stop talkin' nonsense, Coop," Tarah replied. "We ain't eatin' nothin' till she gets here."

"C'mon, Tar! Why you gotsta be that way?" Cooper complained. "Don't ya hear my stomach growlin'?"

"Hold on one second, girl," Tarah said.

Darcy listened as Tarah started hollering at Cooper. She put the phone down to inspect her face again, paying special attention to a tiny pimple just above her right eyebrow.

Why does it have to be there now, she thought, dabbing it with a bit of cover-up. She'd already covered it once, but she wanted to make sure it was invisible to Hakeem.

It wasn't the only thing she hoped to hide.

"Hello? You still there?" Tarah asked.

Darcy quickly grabbed the phone off the bathroom counter.

"Yeah, I'm leavin' right now," she

replied. A jolt of nervous energy raced down her back, making her stomach tremble. An hour of trying on different outfits, messing with her hair, and putting on makeup hadn't calmed her nerves. She still felt tense about seeing Hakeem again, especially after what happened over the summer.

"You mean you didn't even leave yet?" Tarah shouted. Darcy held the phone away from her ear again, but there was no escaping her friend's yelling. "We was supposed to meet fifteen minutes ago!"

"I know. I'm sorry, but things were busy at Scoops, and my manager made me stay late," Darcy lied, annoyed at herself for being dishonest with her best friend.

It was true the ice cream store had a busy day. Though it was early September, the weather was as hot as mid-July, and Scoops had been crammed with people buying ice cream. But Darcy's manager, Tamika Ardis, never asked her to stay late. Instead, she sent Darcy home early after she argued with a customer. Darcy had been rushing to prepare two milkshakes when she heard someone call out to her.

“Where’s the rest of my change?”

Darcy turned to face a large woman with a tight weave. Two kids huddled close to the woman’s legs, holding sticky, half-eaten ice cream cones that dripped onto the floor. Darcy had served them just a few minutes earlier.

“I already gave it to you, ma’am,” Darcy replied.

“You better check your register or learn to count or somethin’ ’cause I gave you a \$20 bill. You just shortchanged me \$10,” the woman snapped, her free hand resting on her hips.

Darcy took a deep breath. All summer, she’d dealt with customers who treated her and her coworker Haley like trash. Usually Darcy just smiled and ignored it when people were mean, but today she didn’t have any patience.

“You don’t need to be rude, ma’am,” Darcy replied. The words had slipped out so fast Darcy was stunned. So was Haley, who at that moment dropped a small chocolate sundae onto her cash register.

“*Excuse me?*” the woman said, nudging aside the person who’d been at the head of the line. “Girl, you best check that register and yo’ mouth and give me

my change, or I'ma make a scene up in here."

"Ma'am, let me finish with this customer first, and I'll help you," Darcy replied, still holding the milkshakes in her hands.

"No, you're gonna help me *now*. I waited in line once. I ain't waitin' again."

Darcy felt her temper building. She couldn't tell the customer off; that would only get her fired. And she couldn't admit she was too stressed to focus on her work. That would only make the woman angrier. For several long seconds, Darcy didn't know what to say. Her mind had gone blank.

"It's okay, ma'am. I can help you," Tamika cut in just in time. "Let's check the register."

Darcy watched as her manager unlocked the cash drawer. She was sure she hadn't miscounted. In her months on the job, she had made plenty of mistakes, but never with money. At Scoops and at Bluford High where she was about to start her junior year, numbers were always something Darcy was good at.

But inside the cash drawer, Tamika found a \$20 bill sitting in the \$10 slot. Darcy knew instantly she had made a

mistake, and the customer had been right. Darcy felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” Darcy said as Tamika handed over the money.

“Mmm hmm.” The woman scowled and walked out with her children.

“What’s wrong with you, Darcy? I’ve never seen you act that way, and I never want to see it again,” Tamika warned as soon as the store emptied out. “I can’t afford to upset customers. It’s hard enough to stay in business around here as it is.”

“I’m sorry. I just got a lot on my mind.”

“I hope it’s not serious, Darcy. I need you around here. I wish I had two of you.”

“No, it’s not. It’s just . . .” Darcy paused, trying to decide how honest she should be. Tamika recently offered to increase her hours. Darcy didn’t want her to change her mind.

“It’s her boyfriend, I mean *ex-boyfriend*,” cut in Haley, her blond ponytail poking through the back of her green Scoops visor.

Darcy’s jaw dropped. Haley had promised never to tell anyone what they

discussed at work, especially not Tamika.

“He’s been in Detroit for months, and tonight she’s gonna see him for the first time since he got back. She doesn’t want to admit it, but she’s really excited,” Haley continued with a smile. “And kinda nervous too.”

“*Haley, shut your mouth!*” Darcy snapped, embarrassed to hear her personal life being discussed with her boss. “That was between you and me.”

“Relax, Darcy. I’m just telling her why you’re so out of it. It’s not like she hasn’t noticed. You’re on another planet today,” Haley explained.

“I’m *not* out of it. I just miscounted some change, that’s all. Not like *you* never made a mistake, Haley.”

“Don’t even go there, Darce. This isn’t about me, and you know it.”

Darcy knew Haley was right. All day, she kept forgetting customers’ orders. It got so bad she started writing everything down like her first week on the job. Even when she tried to listen to people, all Darcy could hear were the questions racing through her mind.

Should I tell Hakeem about what happened to me this summer?

If I tell him the truth, will he blame me

or think I'm a bad person?

Will we ever get back together?

"Haley's right," Tamika said, putting a hand on Darcy's shoulder.

"But—"

"It's okay, Darcy. I know you're a great worker, but today you're having a bad day. Lord knows I've had my share. When I think about it, almost all of them have to do with men," Tamika said with a knowing smile. "Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off. Haley and I can handle things until closing."

"Are you serious?" Darcy asked. It felt wrong to have everyone know her business, but she needed the break to clear her head and get ready.

"Yeah, go and have fun. Not too much fun, though," Tamika said.

"And whatever you do, be sure someone else counts your change tonight," Haley teased.

Darcy left Scoops in a daze. It was true Hakeem distracted her from work, but there were other things tugging at her too. The summer had been like the earthquakes that sometimes cracked sidewalks and shattered windows in her neighborhood. Only this time, the quake centered on Darcy's house. She still felt

aftershocks.

Grandma's quiet death in the bedroom next to Darcy's.

Her parents' announcement that they were having a baby.

Her old friend Brisana's pregnancy scare.

Deeper still was what happened one afternoon just after she and Hakeem broke up. That's when Brian Mason came around with his shiny red Toyota, his smooth voice and wide, dark shoulders. He was nineteen. Darcy babysat for his sister, Liselle. Just thinking of Brian made Darcy nauseous.

Should I tell Hakeem what happened?

For a while, it seemed like a question she wouldn't have to answer. The day Hakeem left, Darcy was sure she'd never see him again. His father was battling cancer, and his family was broke from medical bills. Their only choice was to move in with relatives in faraway Detroit. Hakeem and Darcy split up just before they left.

The loss crushed Darcy. Her boyfriend for most of their sophomore year, Hakeem had also been one of her closest friends at Bluford. He had stood by her no matter what drama was happening in

her life, and there had been plenty, especially since her father returned after abandoning the family for five years. When they said goodbye for the last time, they promised to stay in touch and to always be honest with each other.

Darcy hadn't kept that promise.

For months, she ignored the voice in her head, the one that made her feel guilty whenever she stared at Hakeem's picture collecting dust in her room.

Then a miracle happened. Hakeem's father's health improved, and he allowed his son to live with Cooper and return to Bluford High. Darcy was thrilled beyond words at the news, but her past with Brian still haunted her.

There was no way she could tell Hakeem what happened. No way she could admit she'd gone to Brian's apartment to be alone with him. No way she could say Brian soothed the ache she felt when Hakeem left. And there was something else she couldn't confess to Hakeem.

Brian had gone too far. They had been on his couch kissing, and everything was okay until he tried to work his hands under her shirt.

"Relax," he said when she grabbed

his hand.

Then she felt him tugging at her clothes again. His scratchy palm slid against the sensitive skin of her stomach. This time, she told him point-blank to stop. She even tried to push him away. He got angry.

"You're acting like a baby!" he yelled. She tried to get off the couch, but he was too strong. Within seconds, he had her pinned. Sometimes she could still feel how he held her down, his hands gripping her like chains, his strong body pressing against hers. For a frightening instant, she realized she couldn't escape him.

But her father arrived and stopped Brian in his tracks.

"If you ever mess with my daughter again, it will be the last mistake you make!" Dad yelled with a wild rage in his eyes, slamming Brian against a wall. Brian moved out a few days later, but the damage was done.

For weeks afterward, Darcy relived the attacks in nightmares. In them, Brian was even more violent, and Dad never arrived to save her. The dreams got so severe she couldn't sleep. Then she started having panic attacks. Things got

so bad Darcy told her parents and Tarah about her problem. She even met for weeks with a counselor at the community center where Tarah worked. Over time, the nightmares and panic attacks faded. But the scars were still there.

Darcy felt them gnawing at her as she left Scoops. Felt them as she prepared to meet Hakeem for the first time since he returned. Felt them even now as she spoke with Tarah on her cell phone.

“Look, Darce, are you comin’ out or not?” Tarah asked, shattering her thoughts.

Darcy sighed and put her makeup away.

“I’ll be there, Tar’,” she said. “Ten minutes. I promise.”

“If you’re not, we’re comin’ over there and draggin’ you out,” Tarah warned.

“I’ll be there,” Darcy repeated, smoothing out her shirt one last time and inspecting the way her body filled her jeans. “I’m leaving right now.”

Tarah hung up, and Darcy headed out the door, rushing toward Niko’s.

Should I tell Hakeem what happened?
She still didn’t know the answer.