

CHAPTER 1

KESHAWN

So how'd I do on my math test?"

Luther Ransome stopped his black Escalade in the middle of Seventeenth Street. A line of cars began to form behind him. His window was halfway down. He leaned across Chance Ruffin, who was sitting in the passenger seat. Although it was only seven in the morning, the bass booming on his radio was loud enough to rattle the window.

From where he stood on the sidewalk, Keshawn Connor could see Jair Nobles and Thomas Porter in the back seat. Jair, Thomas, and Chance were all moving in time to the beat of the music.

"Your real score? Fifty-nine percent," Keshawn said flatly. "Now recorded as a seventy-five. So

your overall average is seventy something. You've got a C."

"My *man!*" Luther said, slapping his steering wheel. "I have an English test tomorrow. Make sure I pass it. I don't have time to study tonight."

As if you ever studied, Keshawn thought. And why should he? He knows his grades will stay above passing. Even though he's never cracked a book.

"Why are we talkin' to this loser?" he heard Thomas say from the back seat.

Keshawn turned back toward school. Luther rolled up the window, but then rolled it back down again. "Oh, and another thing," he said. "Make sure you take Neecy's seat in math today. I want her to sit by me."

Keshawn didn't bother to answer. No need. Luther knew Keshawn would do whatever he was told.

He was locked in a trap, and Luther held the only key.

CHAPTER 2

NEECY

Hey, Ferg! Whaddup?” Carlos Garcia called to his best friend, Lionel “Ferg” Ferguson.

Ferg turned and waited for Carlos to catch up. Together they walked down Seventeenth Street, turning at the corner of K Street toward the front door of Capital Central High School. The large high school was located in the north-east quadrant of Washington, D.C.

“Man, I am still feelin’ that practice,” Carlos said, making a face. “Coach seemed extra hard on us last night.”

“True that,” Ferg said. “He’s still mad about that Cardozo game.”

“I just want to forget that game!” teammate Charlie Ray said, walking toward them. “Down twenty-four at the half, and I couldn’t hit a three

to save my life.” Charlie was tall, with short dark hair and eyes that were almost black.

“At least you made your free throws,” Ferg said. “I shot like my sister does when we’re playing horse.”

“Hey, maybe Sierra should join the team.” Carlos laughed. “I’ve played horse with her. She’s not bad. And we may need a point guard.”

“Isn’t JaQuel the point guard?” Eva Morales asked, joining the guys.

Ferg threw his arm around Eva’s shoulders and gave her a kiss. Ferg and Eva had been going out for over a year. They made a cute couple.

Both of them were a little overweight, but it didn’t bother them. They were friendly and well-liked.

“He is for now,” Charlie said as they opened the door to the school. “But he might not maintain eligibility. He needs a 2.0 GPA to play, but he has Ds in English and math. So Coach Williams gave him until the day report cards come out. If his grades aren’t up by then, he’s off the team.”

“Man, that’s cold,” Eva said. “But everyone should know the rules. Bad grades should always get you tossed from the team.”

“Yeah, it’s harsh. Before Mrs. Hess came along, the rule was ignored,” Ferg said. “I guess whenever there’s a new principal, they make sure everyone follows all the rules. Since this is Mrs. Hess’s first year, we’re paying the price.”

“This is the hardest year ever,” Eva said bleakly. “I feel like all I do is study, and I still can’t keep up.”

“You guys talking about math?” Neecey Bethune, one of Cap Central’s cheerleaders, joined them. She had her long straightened hair pulled back in a ponytail that swung when she walked. Her big brown eyes looked concerned.

“Yeah, math and English and US history and—” Ferg said, shaking his head.

“I hear ya,” Charlie said. “All I do is practice and study. My game’s off, and my grades are tanking. And baseball season is just around the corner. I *have* to make grades so I can play. If I can’t play, I may as well kiss college good-bye. Getting a baseball scholarship is my last hope.”

“Don’t even talk to me about scholarships,” Neecey said with a shudder. “I’ve kept my grades up every semester since middle school. I can’t believe I might lose it this close to college.”

“Oh, that’s right! You’re one of those D.C. Stars, aren’t you?” Charlie said. “That seems so long ago.”

“It was. That happened back in fifth grade,” Neecey said.

“So what was the deal? Some rich guy offered to put you through college?” Eva asked.

“You make it sound like it was just me.” Neecey laughed. “It was my whole fifth grade class. I lived over in Southeast at the time, and no one from that neighborhood ever went to college. So some guy said he’d pay for college to any kid in my fifth grade class who maintained a 3.0 GPA, as long as we stayed in D.C. public schools. Maybe he was hoping a lot of us would move out of the area. College costs a lot of money.”

“So how many of you are left?” Charlie asked.

“Not many. Most didn’t keep their grades up, and some moved out of D.C. The last time we got together, there were only six of us left. I’m barely hanging on—my GPA last marking period was barely a three. I can’t believe I could lose the scholarship after hanging on for—what? Six years?”

“Now *that’s* pressure,” Carlos said, shaking his head. “But back to JaQuel. He *is* the team. He’s that good. If he’s ineligible, our season is over.”

“Quel should get some help,” Eva said. “I stayed after school yesterday with Mr. Sullivan to try to get caught up in math. It helped, I guess. I’m still lost, but not *as* lost.”

“Right, miss practice for math help,” Ferg said with a laugh. “Coach would have his ass if he tried that one.”

“Sullivan’s there at lunch too sometimes,” Eva said as they wove through the crowds of kids talking and laughing in the hallway. “If JaQuel doesn’t try to help himself, I don’t feel too sorry for him.”

“Get ready to feel sorry for the whole Cap Central basketball team if he doesn’t make grades,” Charlie said, looking dejected. “We need a miracle, and we need it soon.”

“Well, he’s still got a couple of weeks,” Eva said. “So if he gets his grades up like the coach said, maybe you’ll be all right.”

“He’d better,” Ferg said, shaking his head. “We play Wilson High School right after report

cards come out. Those guys go to basketball camp all summer. I hear some of them have personal trainers. You know, helping them keep fit with strength training and stuff. If JaQuel can't play, we're screwed. No one else has his moves. And the D.C. tourney is right after that."

"Our season could be over almost before it gets started," Carlos said. "Man! I wasn't feeling so bad when I left home this morning, but now I'm totally miserable. Thanks, guys," he joked. The others laughed. "I'm gonna find Joss to cheer myself up," he added. "I'll see you later." He took off to find his girlfriend, Joss White, who was Eva's best friend.

"Ask her to show you her new glasses," Eva called after him. He waved without turning around.

"You want to stop at your locker before biology?" Ferg asked Eva.

"Yeah, I need to get rid of my backpack," she said. "See you guys later." She and Ferg walked off down the hall.

"You ready for Piper's class?" Charlie asked Neecy. They walked down the hall toward their first period English class.

Neecy nodded. "I stayed up late to finish *The Great Gatsby* last night," she said. "Are you done with it?"

"I finished it a day or two ago," Charlie said. "I thought it was pretty good."

"Me too," Neecy said. "And Piper is a relief compared to math. It helps that I had him in ninth grade before they switched him to teaching junior English. You know, it's too bad about Quel," she added as they stood outside their classroom. "It's gonna mess everyone up if he can't play."

"I think he knows that," Charlie said. "At least he tries to do his work. Some of those others, like Chance Ruffin, don't even care."

"Is he in danger of being ineligible too?" Neecy asked.

"I think lots of guys are," Charlie said. "Chance and Luther Ransome and—"

"Please. Do not even mention his name," Neecy said with a shiver. "I hate that guy."

"Really?" Charlie said curiously. "Why?"

"Lots of reasons," Neecy answered. "Among others, he's a cheater. Back in ninth grade, I saw him looking at my test in math. He wasn't even

trying to hide it. All I do is study, and he tries to steal my answers. I don't think so."

The first bell rang, and they walked into Mr. Piper's classroom.

"You want to go to the library at lunch to work on math?" Charlie asked. "I can help if you want me to," he offered.

"Sure," Neecy said. "I'll see you there."

She looked up at the tall athlete and smiled. He grinned back at her and took his seat.