

# CHAPTER I



During recess, Ayo sits in the sandbox. It's his first week at Sandbury Middle School, and the enormous campus that is shared with a kindergarten, primary and high school overwhelms him. All around the playground, kids are running, screaming and playing. Most of his new classmates hang around benches and swings. The square sandbox is deserted, most kids his age don't play in the sand anymore. Only his muddy shoes look at home in the little dunes. Ayo huddles forward to continue drawing people in the sand. There's a man with a hat, a person with a dress and a little girl with curly pigtails.

"Is that supposed to be Nia?" a redhaired boy asks. He suddenly appeared behind Ayo, pointing at the sand drawing. Ayo doesn't respond, but tries to turn his back towards the boy. Ayo remember seeing him in his class, and tries to recall his name: Charles? "Don't you think it's a little early for crushes, or are you a womanizah?" he continues, with a mocking African accent.

"It's nobody", Ayo said, and he starts drawing another figure with a big round head.

"Oh I agree that Nia's a nobody, but come on, don't you think that one looks more like her anyway?" He says as he puts his foot on Ayo's latest drawing.

"Just leave me alone," Ayo says. He stands up and turns around, and as he swing his arm his hand accidentally smacks on Charles' shoulder.

“Oh you’re trying to fight now? I’ll show you how we fight round here”. Charles pulls back his arm to prepare for a punch. When he extends his arm, Ayo flinches, but doesn’t feel anything. Nia stands between Ayo and Charles and grabbed his fist. Before Charles can realize what’s happening, she yanks his arm down, pulls it back and presses his fist up behind his back.

“Au! What are you doing,” Charles cries out.

“I wanted to ask you just that,” Nia answers, then pushes his arm up a little higher.

“Let me go, Nia!” Charles squeaks, failing to hide his pain. “Alright.” Nia pushes Charles forward. He stumbles, but doesn’t fall.

“Next time I’ll –“

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, see ya Charlie!” Nia says with a big smile on her face, as she waved him goodbye. Charles shakes his head and walks away.

When Nia looks back at Ayo, Ayo doesn’t manage to conceal his staring. She smiles awkwardly and raises her eyebrows. Ayo doesn’t say anything at first. He’s not sure whether to be grateful, or embarrassed.

“Thanks,” he whispers under his breath. “How did you...?” He paused. “I didn’t even know you could hear us.”

“Well, I guess it’s easy to hear your own name” Nia answers quickly, trying to brush the issue off. Ayo looks down. His gaze wanders off and rests on the swings, behind the carrousel, where Nia sat earlier reading a book. Something doesn’t quite add up. Nia looks at the swings too, lost in thought.

“You’re quick,” Ayo concludes.

“I.. I guess so.” she agrees. Nia turns to Ayo, nods, and walks towards her book that still lay on the ground next to the swing. Ayo looks at his classmate, more carefully than he had before. Of course he’d tried to draw her, but since he didn’t want to be caught staring, he hadn’t gotten much more detailed than her pigtails, that sit atop her head like round sponges. Now he sees that Nia is quite tall, and

rather skinny. She wears square black glasses and a denim jacket over a yellow T-shirt. As she kneels down to pick up the book, the leg of her jeans lift a little, revealing her ashy ankles.

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Inside, Nia walks straight to the library. She rushes down a random isle and sits down on the floor, her knees tucked in and her arms hugging around them. Nia buries her face into her legs. *What just happened?*

When Nia sat on the swing, she thought she heard her name amidst the yelling children's voices. She looked around and saw Charles standing over Ayo in the sandbox.

"Nia is a nobody," she heard Charles say. Nia jumped off the swing and started walking towards the sandbox. She'd had it with Charles. Was he such a coward that he would spread rumors about her to the new kid? When she was a few feet away, she saw Ayo swing his arm into Charles's shoulder.

Nia hadn't realized she had been holding her breath all this time. Even though her anger management counsellor told her to breathe "slow but deliberate" breaths, holding it just felt better. She had tried to explaining to Mr Jones, that it made her feel more calm, that it allowing her to pause and take a little break from it all – he wouldn't buy it.

As she approached Charles, she felt her surroundings become more sluggish. Around her, the screaming noises started to fade. Nia felt as if she were underwater. On the carrousel two children with a look of excitement on their face; but the carrousel wasn't spinning. She saw children with both legs suspended in the air, fixed in place. Others had their mouths wide open, but no sound came out. She blinked and realized everything was still. Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound. In front of her she saw Charles, his arm was pulled back, ready for a punch. In shock, Nia inhaled sharply, moved towards Charles and intercepted his arm.

But how had she been so... quick, Nia wonders now, leaning her head on the rows of books behind her. She doesn't consider herself quick, she's always been bad at silly reaction time games where a teacher would drop a ruler and she'd have to clap to catch it. Neither is she a particularly good runner, especially not in the middle of recess, with kids running around playing tag. Nia wasn't quick. It was something else. It had to be. Nia sighs and extends her legs onto the floor.

"Excuse me," Mrs. Williams, the librarian, asks in a hushed voice. "Shouldn't you be in class?" The short, chubby woman with a chart full of books approaches Nia. When she sees the girl's startled face, the librarian's expression softens. She bends forward and puts her hands on the Nia's shoulders. "Is everything alright, dear?"

"Ehh yes, yes," Nia whispers as she picks up her book. "I'm sorry Ma'am, I lost track of time", Nia says and gets up. She nods apologetically and rushes out of the library

## **CHAPTER II**

After spending the afternoon at the pool with Ayo and his brother Samuel, Nia is the first to be done changing. She rushes outside to continue reading her book. It's a fantasy novel and she finally got her hands on the last part of the trilogy. Sitting on the bench, hunched over the pages, water dripps from her hair onto the paper. Nia can't even be bothered that it's a library book. The story got really intense and she eagerly flips through the pages. After a while, Ayo and Alex join her outside.

"Do you want a ride home from our mom?" Ayo asked.

"No thanks," Nia answers without looking up.

"Are you... sure?" Ayo asked as he sits down next to her on the bench. "Our mom wouldn't mind. Right Samu?" Samuel nods. He stands by the road looking to see if the car has arrived yet.

"Nah really, I'm good," Nia repeats. "I came by bike"

"Oh really, y'all bike around here?" Ayo asks.

"I do," Nia says as she flips the page. Ayo nods and a car pulls up.

"Well, there's our ride," he says as he jumps up. "See you tomorrow, Nia."

"See ya" Nia says, and she briefly looks up. She waves as Ayo gets into the front seat of the car, next to a blonde, middle aged woman. After reading for a couple more minutes, Nia gets up and walks to her bike like a zombie, her eyes still fixed on the pages. She unlocks the black bike she got from her father when she turned twelve, he called it a "granny bike". Nia never figured out why. When she gets on the bike, she places her book in front of her, resting against the crate that hangs in front of her handle bars. She slowly rides away, paced not quicker than a pedestrian. From time to time, her gaze shoots up, scans the environment and moves back to the letters on the pages. Traffic is quiet, as it usually was when she approached her part of town, so Nia becomes more concerned with the action in her book.

*Hooooonk*

Nia almost drops her book when she heard the loud noise. She looks around to see where it had come from. A voice shouted from a car to her right. The car is only inches away. She squeezes her breaks and her eyes.

It's like she's the pool. Underwater and safe. Floating in a little ball, no need to move, breathe or do anything else. Just listening to the muddled sounds and the dampened light. She doesn't want to open her eyes, fearing reality will sting her back like chlorine. She decides to do a little bit of her and a little bit of Mr. Jones. She lets her breath hold her in suspension as she counts to ten, and opens her eyes.

The large black SUV stopped inches away from the side of her bike. Nia can smell the burning asphalt rising up from the tires. The grey-haired passenger's knuckles are white, as they press into the steering wheel. Wide eyes stare back at her, filled with anguish, so tense they don't blink.

Nia did, as she realizes she has to get herself out of trouble. She pushes her foot on the pedal of her bike to rush past the car. It barely moves. Nia lifts herself up from the saddle and puts all her weight into the pedal. It doesn't budge. She looks back up at the anxious man in his SUV. She can't wait for her bike. *Sorry dad*, she thinks to herself, as she jumps off her bike. After a few wobbly steps, she crashes into a bush on the pavement. Spiky thorns pierce through the skin of her hands and her knees are chafed and throbbing. Nia gasps.

The sound of tires screeching, airbags inflating and alarms wailing hit her all at once. When she looks up, the first thing she notices is her granny bike, crumpled up under the wheels of the SUV. Smoke rises up from the car's hood. From the corners of her eyes Nia could see her library book laying on the asphalt, a soft breeze flipping its pages. Nia looks down at her bleeding hands, stung by flowers, not by metal. *Nia wasn't quick. It was something else. It had to be.*