

Amari and the Night Brothers: Chapter 1

I'm sitting in the principal's office. Again. In the hallway, on the other side of the glass door. Principal Merritt is getting an earful from Emily Grant's mom. With all those wild hand gestures, you'd think I did a lot more than give her stuck-up Little Princess daughter a tiny shove. Emily got up in my face, not the other way around. Wasn't my fault she lost her balance and fell on her butt in front of everybody.

Emily stands behind her mom, surrounded by her squad. They cover their mouths and whisper, eyeing me through the door like they can't wait to catch me alone. I lean back in my chair, out of view. *You've really done it this time, Amari.*

I glance up at the picture of the brown-skinned boy on the wall behind Principal Merritt's desk and frown. Quinton proudly holds up the trophy he won in the state maths competition. You can't see, but me and Mama are just offstage, cheering him on.

There's not much to cheer about any more.

The door swings open and Mrs Grant stalks in, followed by Emily. Neither makes eye contact as they settle into the chairs furthest from me. Their dislike for me seems to fill up the whole office. I frown and cross my arms – the feeling is mutual.

Then comes Mama in her blue hospital scrubs – she got called away from work because of me again. I sit up in my chair to plead my case, but she shoots me a look that kills the words in my throat.

Principal Merritt takes his seat last, his weary eyes moving between us. "I know there's history between the two girls. But seeing as it's the last day of school before summer –"

"I want that girl's scholarship revoked!" Mrs Grant explodes. "I don't pay what I pay in tuition to have my daughter assaulted in the hallways!"

"Assaulted?" I start, but Mama raises a hand to cut me off.

"Amari knows better than to put her hands on other people," says Mama, "but this has been a long time coming. Those girls have harassed my daughter since she first set foot on this campus. The messages they left on her social media pages were so ugly we considered deleting her accounts."

"And we addressed that matter as soon as it was brought to our attention," says Principal Merritt. "All four girls received written warnings."

"How about the stuff they say to my face?" I lean forward in my chair, face burning. "They call me Charity Case and Free Lunch and remind me every chance they get that kids like me don't belong here."

"Because you don't!" says Emily.

"Quiet!" Mrs Grant snaps. Emily rolls her eyes.

Mrs Grant stands, turning her attention to Mama. "I'll have a talk with my daughter about her behaviour, but your daughter got physical – I could press charges. Be thankful this is as far as I'm taking it."

Mama bristles but bites her tongue. I wonder if it's because Emily's mom is right about pressing charges. Practically the whole school saw.

"Up," says Mrs Grant to her daughter, and they head for the door. Mrs Grant stops short and looks back at us. "I expect to be notified the moment her scholarship is revoked. Or the Parents' Association will have a lot to say at the next meeting."

The door slams behind them.

I can barely stand still, I'm so mad. This is all so unfair. People like Emily and Mrs Grant will never understand what it's like to not have money. They can do whatever they want with no consequences while the rest of us have to watch our every step.

"Are you really going to take away Amari's scholarship?" Mama asks in a small voice.

Principal Merritt drops his eyes. "We have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to physical altercations. School rules dictate she be expelled outright. Taking her scholarship is the smallest punishment I can offer."

"I see ..." Mama sinks in her chair.

My anger melts into shame. Mama's already sad because of Quinton. I shouldn't be adding to her troubles just because I can't handle a few bullies.

"I know that it's been difficult," says Principal Merritt to me, "since Quinton's disappearance. He was a great kid with a truly bright future. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to connect the dots between the incident and the start of your behaviour problems, Amari. I can arrange for you to talk to a counsellor, free of charge _"

"I don't *need* a counsellor," I interrupt.

Principal Merritt frowns. "You should talk with someone about your anger."

"You want to know why I shoved Emily?" It's because she thought it was funny to joke that my brother is dead. But he isn't. I don't care what anyone says. He's out there somewhere. And when I find him, I'll show you all!"

I'm shaking, tears streaming down my face. Principal Merritt doesn't say anything. Mama stands up slowly and pulls me into her arms. "Go to the car, Babygirl. I'll finish up here."

We ride home in silence. It's been almost six months since Quinton went missing, but it doesn't feel that long. Seems like just the other day he was calling Mama's phone to say he'd be home for Christmas. It was a big deal because Quinton was always gone once he got that fancy job after high school. The kind where you can't tell anybody what you do.

I used to swear up and down that Quinton was some super-secret spy like James Bond. But he would just give me this little smirk and say, "You're wrong, but you're not *totally* wrong." Whenever I tried to get more out of him he'd just laugh and promise to tell me when I got older.

See, Quinton is *smart* smart. He graduated top of his class from Jefferson Academy and got full scholarship offers from two Ivy League schools. He turned them both down to work for whoever he

was working for. When he went missing, I was sure his secret job had something to do with it. Or at least that somebody who worked with him might know what happened. But when we told the detectives about his job they looked at me and Mama like we were crazy.

They had the nerve to tell us that – as far as they could tell – Quinton was unemployed. That there were no tax records to indicate that he'd ever had a job of any kind. But that just didn't make sense – he'd never lie about something like that. When Mama told them he used to send money home to help out with the bills, the detectives suggested that Quinton might be involved in something he didn't want us to know about. Something illegal. That's always what people think when you come from the 'Wood,' aka the Rosewood low-income housing projects.

The car rattles as we pass over the railway tracks, letting me know we're in my neighbourhood now. I'm not going to lie, it feels different coming back here after being on the other side of town. It's like the world is brighter around Jefferson Academy and all those big, colourful houses that surround it. Where I'm from feels grey in comparison. We pass liquor store and pawnshops, and I see D-Boys leaning up against street signs, mean mugging like they own the whole world. Jayden, a boy I knew in elementary school, stands with a bunch of older boys, a big gold chain around his neck. He recognises the car and shoots me a grin as we pass.

I try to smile back but I don't know if it's convincing. We haven't spoken since Quinton went missing. Not since he started hanging with the guys he promised my brother he'd stay away from.

Once we pull up in front of our apartment building, Mama buries her face in her hand and cries.

"Are ...are you okay?" I ask.

"I feel like I'm failing you, Babygirl. I work twelve-hour shifts, five days a week. You should have somebody around who you can talk to."

"I'm fine. I know you only work so much because you have to."

Mama shakes her head. "I don't want you to have to struggle like I do. That scholarship to Jefferson Academy was your ticket to a good college – to a better life. Lord knows I can't afford to send you to a place like Jefferson Academy on my own. I don't know what we're supposed to do now."

"I'm sorry, but I never fitted in at that place." I cross my arms and turn to look out of the window. Just because my brother made it look so easy doesn't mean I can too. "I'm not Quinton."

"I'm not asking you to be your brother," says Mama. "I'm just asking that you *try*. That school was an opportunity for you to see that there's a big wide world outside this neighbourhood. A chance to broaden your horizons." She sighs. "I know it's unfair but the truth is that when you're a poor Black girl from the 'Wood', certain people are gonna already have it in their minds what type of person you are. You can't give them a reason to think they're right."

I don't respond. She acts like this isn't something she's already told me a million times.

"If you're not acting up in school," says Mama, "then you're sitting in front of the computer for hours. It's not healthy, Amari."

I mean, I know she's right. But it's hard to concentrate on schoolwork when you can hear other kids whispering about you. And posting photos of Quinton on as many websites as I can lets me feel like I'm helping with the search. I know it's a long shot, but it gives me hope.

Mama continues, "When you get inside, I want you to slide that laptop under my door and leave it there."

"But Mama."

She waves her hand. "I don't wanna hear it. Until you decide to take your future more seriously, that computer stays with me. "We'll talk more about it this tomorrow. I've gotta get back to the hospital."

I slam the car door after I get out. And I don't look back once as I stomp towards our building. What am I supposed to do now?

Once I'm inside the apartment, I fall over on the couch and bury my head in the pillows. This has been the *worst* day.

Finally, with a groan, I pull myself up to a sitting position and grab my old, beat-up laptop from my bookbag. Quinton won it after placing second at some international science fair forever ago. He gave it to me after he won a better one the next year.

I'm not even surprised when the screen stays black after I open it up.