

CHAPTER 1

NINA

Charlie Ray threw his pencil down on the desk. “Seriously?” he complained.

Lights flashed in the hallway. A mechanized voice said, “There is an emergency in the building. Please proceed to the nearest exit.”

“Mrs. Maher, can we just stay here?” Nina Ambrose asked. “You know it’s another false alarm.”

“Unfortunately, we can’t,” Mrs. Maher said. “If we’re outside too long to finish the exam, I’ll give you more time. Let’s line up.”

Nina put down her pencil and got in line with the rest of the class. She was in the middle of writing a long answer to an essay question on *The Grapes of Wrath*. She didn’t want to lose her train of thought.

She picked up her purse and automatically checked to make sure she had a small notebook and a pen. As a reporter for the *Star*, Capital Central High School's online newspaper, she was always on the lookout for a good story.

"This stuff is starting to really scare me," Keisha Jackson said, walking beside Nina. "All these false alarms? And so many thefts lately. My phone last week. Marcus DiMonte's wallet. I've heard other kids have had stuff stolen too. It just seems like—oh my gosh! Is that smoke?"

The hallway was filling with smoke. Students started running. Some started pushing to get down the stairs.

Jair Nobles stood at the top of the stairwell. "Hey, chill!" he said to one boy who was racing to get around the crush of students. "You've got time. Take it easy. Don't want anybody to get hurt, man!"

"Hey, J!" Keisha said, stopping at the top of the stairs. Students tried to push past her. "This looks bad. You coming?"

"Yeah, I'm out of here," Jair said, walking down the stairs with her. "Can't believe all this

smoke. I about fell over when I went to the bathroom and found it on fire.”

“You discovered the fire?” Nina asked. “What happened?”

“Hey, Nina, move it!” Chance Ruffin said rudely, pushing past her.

“Can I talk to you later?” Nina asked Jair as she moved down the stairs.

“I’ll see you outside,” Jair yelled over the heads of the other students.

Nina and Keisha walked outside and found their class.

“There you are,” Mrs. Maher said. “Okay, everyone’s present. No talking. And stay with the class, please.”

The teacher walked over to Mrs. Dominguez, the principal’s secretary, to turn in her attendance list. As soon as she did, Nina and Keisha left the group. They joined Joss White, Eva Morales, and Neecey Bethune.

A light drizzle was falling. “Of course the day there’s an actual fire, it rains,” Eva Morales said, pulling her hoodie up over her head. “We’re going to be out here forever.”

In the distance, they could hear sirens.

“Hey, this is crazy, right?” Jair said, joining the group of girls.

“So tell me,” Nina said, pulling out her notebook. “Give me the details. What did you see? Do you know who set it? Everything.”

“This gonna be on the test?” Jair joked.

“I’m writing an article on all the stuff that’s been happening,” Nina said. She hadn’t even thought about writing an article until the fire alarm rang. “Stolen phones and wallets, false fire alarms, and now a real fire. I don’t know if it’s all related. Or just lots of people doing a lot of bad stuff.”

“You gonna describe me as the handsome hero of the story?” Jair asked with a smile.

“You’ll always be my hero,” Keisha said, kissing him on the forehead.

Keisha was president of the student government association. She had been at a party a few months back that had quickly turned rowdy. Word had spread on social media. Soon the house had been overrun with partiers. She had been surrounded by some guys who were trying to force her to drink. Jair and Zander Peterson, who was now her boyfriend, helped her escape.

Nina rolled her eyes. “Please,” she said, dragging out the word. “So what happened?” she asked impatiently.

“No big deal,” Jair said modestly. “I had to go, you know? So I went to the second floor boys’ restroom. Some guys walked out as I went in. The trash bin was on fire. I told Doctor Miller. She hit the alarm. And here we are.”

“Who were the guys walking out?” Nina asked him curiously.

“I didn’t really pay attention, except for—”

Just then, the doors to the school opened. Two figures dressed in black walked out.

“I was just about to say, except for Kaleb Black. And there he is!”

“Really?” Joss said, looking concerned. “You need to tell someone.”

They all looked across the parking lot. Kaleb Black and Bellamy Knight stood apart from the rest of the students. They both held notebooks. They were staring intently at the other kids.

“I wonder where the ‘Black Knights’ were hiding up till now?” Keisha asked, making quote marks with her fingers. “Shouldn’t they have been out here with everyone else?”

Nina checked the time on her cell phone and wrote a note in her notebook. “Weird that they took so long to get out of the school,” she agreed.

“You want to know who’s doing stuff around here?” Jair said, watching the two dark figures. “I’d keep my eye on them.”

Eva shivered. “They scare me,” she said. “Ever since they started calling themselves the Black Knights, they’ve gotten stranger and stranger. Have you noticed how they are always watching everyone and writing in their little notebooks? It’s like they’re taking notes on all of us. I see them in the cafeteria, watching and writing away. What do you think they’re up to?”

“I’d love to see one of their notebooks someday,” Nina said. “Who knows what they’ve got written in there.”

“Or what they’re planning,” Jair said darkly.

“They just look so ... threatening,” Joss said, struggling to find the words. “I mean, wearing black is one thing. But ever since Bellamy hacked off her hair, she’s just a hot mess.”

“And that cape Kaleb wears? And those boots? The chains actually clank when he walks,” Keisha added.

“You guys looking at the BKs?” Zander Peterson asked, walking up to the group. He put his arm around Keisha and kissed her.

As if he had heard Zander, Kaleb Black looked their way. He was scowling. He said something to Bellamy Knight and pointed.

Bellamy ran her fingers through what was left of her jet-black hair. It stood straight up on her head in some places. Other sections were cut so close she was almost bald. She looked directly at Jair. She nodded at something Kaleb said and wrote in her notebook.

“Well, that was freaky,” Jair said nervously. “Am I on their list or something?”

“It’s like they knew we were talking about them,” Joss said with a shiver.

“If I had to pick two people who had something to do with this fire ...” Keisha said.

“Something’s going on around here lately,” Jair said. “Something not good.”

Nina made a few more notes in her notebook.

Hero

“I agree,” she said. “And I’d sure like to figure out who’s behind it.”

They all turned again to look at Kaleb and Bellamy.

“You’re looking at them,” Jair said.