

## CHAPTER 1: AYISHA - JULY 2010 - ASHFIELD COMPREHENSIVE

Her hand sliding smoothly down the gun-grey stair rail, Ayisha was cursing her choice of footwear when the thunder of surging feet drowned their staccato clipping.

“Slow down, Nathan!” She raised her voice, naming the first face that span into view. Referred to in the staffroom as ‘But Nathan’, this boy came equipped with an unusually comprehensive range of excuses. “There’s no need to cause a stampede. And before you ask: No, I don’t care if it *is* the last day of term.”

Neck twisting self-righteously, he didn’t disappoint. “But Miss, there’s a fight -”

*Why now?* was Ayisha’s first reaction; now, when the day was winding down nicely and all she had left to do was set her Out of Office Assistant? Glancing through the picture window, she identified the back of a male colleague cutting diagonally across the quad: Jim Stevens. Hand taxi-hailing, he was heading towards a boxing ring formation. Moments behind, her moral support was all that would be required. Reassured, she said, “Slow down! Whatever’s happening outside doesn’t concern you!”

“Why are you always pickin’ on me, Miss?”

“I don’t know, Nathan.” She countered aggression with sarcasm, a tactic she had developed for the classroom but found overspilling into personal conversations. “Maybe it’s because you make yourself an easy target.”

“But that’s, like, discrimination -”

Side-stepping Nathan’s protests, Ayisha tightened her mouth - “I’m sure you’ll get over it” - and elbowed her way down, reaching the halfway landing between the second and first floors. Another glance outside: Jim had been absorbed within the outer ring. Through the bottleneck outside the boys’ toilets (where she instinctively held her breath), Ayisha used the side door, which was already hooked open, and briskly crossed the quad, shouting, “Alright! Break it up.” At the same time, she delved into her oversized shoulder bag, needing the feeling of security that having a mobile phone in her hand provided. The fading of the chanting (*Fight! Fight! Fight!*) and the slow disintegration of the ring gave the impression that Jim was already busy refereeing proceedings. But the witnesses who staggered backwards, the eerie hush, a single high-pitched scream, suggested the need for a different drill.

Fighting her instinct for flight, chest tightening, Ayisha wove through a maze of kids who no longer seemed sure why their hands were clutching carrier bags containing ingredients for flour bombs and bottles of Coke spiked with vodka. “OK, stand aside.” Confronted by the harrowed face of a girl, she paused. “What happened? Are you hurt?” *One question at a time*, Ayisha cautioned herself, heart thumping so wildly it shook her slender frame.

The girl shrank into the maternal embrace of a friend. “Not me, Miss.”

She followed the girl’s unswerving gaze, expecting to see Jim towering over the heads of teenagers.

A slump - barely a shadow - in the periphery of her vision: between the grey-trousered legs of boys, she saw her colleague sprawling on the tarmac. His face a perfect illustration of surprise, he was struggling to breathe. He reached one hand out to a boy - the only one to run forwards - who came to a halt as if colliding with an invisible barrier.

“Shit!” Ayisha said audibly. Bag avalanched from shoulder and she made no attempt to catch it in the hook of her elbow. As it collapsed by her feet, she had already dialled 999. “Come on, come on!”

“What service do you require?”

Jim was clutching his chest, an irregular red shape he could no longer disguise growing in circumference, spreading unevenly over the white breast-pocket of his linen shirt. A love of horror films

(something her friends thought uncharacteristic of her) hadn't prepared Ayisha for her first sight of blood - real blood - in these proportions. Her lungs inflated in stages, so that she was aware of an expansive void in her chest.

"I'm sorry. What service?"

She wasn't prepared for this. "One of my colleagues... he's been stabbed." It was as if her body was slow to catch up with this news. Only a couple of weeks ago, a staff meeting had been held to discuss the possibility of weapons being brought into school; just a *possibility*, or so Ayisha had believed, recoiling from the statistics that had been bandied about.

"Where?"

The calm voice of the telephonist couldn't hold her attention. Her mind was galloping furiously: should she line the witnesses up against the wall? But, scanning faces and hands, there was no obviously guilty party.

"Where?"

"I'm sorry. In the playground. Ashfield Comp."

"And the wound? Where's that?"

"His chest. The left side." Ayisha said this, knowing all it implied.

Address confirmed, she thumbed the red exit button. By now, she had reined in her coltish thoughts but felt no less panic. Several pairs of eyes raked the tarmac; some glancing sideways, open wide. With the worry that she might be dismissing the boy responsible or - just as important - those who had egged him on, Ayisha identified two faces from the few who had yet to fall under her radar. "Max! Otis! Stand by the gates and show the ambulance crew the way! No one goes out, do you understand?" Silent on the question of police, her head dipped repeatedly as she conducted a rough headcount - five, ten, fifteen. When she reached twenty, she realised that, having stepped apart, the boys were still standing there. "Well? Do you understand?"

One eyed the other, suspicious at their pairing. "Why us, Miss?"

"This is an emergency! *MOVE IT!*" Incredulous as her voice sounded, it wasn't a job she would have relished. "Everyone else: stay where you are!" Knowing they would mill about, Ayisha tried to memorise the groupings - the twos and the threes.

"Aw, Miss!" The speaker's shirt was unbuttoned, revealing crescents of pink nipple and a white band of underpants. His tie was loosened; his cheekbones smeared with a war paint of glittery blue eyeshadow. Pinched between his fingers was the neck of a sagging balloon, stretched to capacity like a bloated udder, ripe for milking. Not him.

Protest was their default reaction. Murmurs of discontent, even among the shocked, brought an illusion of normality. Next to him, a girl's blouse knotted in Daisy Duke style revealed an expanse of midriff. Not gym-toned or beautiful, her trophy stomach was defiantly displayed, its cavernous bellybutton pierced. "It's not like we asked for this, did we?" Definitely not her.

With one hand pointing, Ayisha retraced the same 180 degrees, repeating, "I said, *STAY WHERE YOU ARE!*" then turned to cover her back. Experiencing a sense of how ridiculous she must have appeared, she dropped the smoking gun.

For many of the kids present, these were to have been the final moments of their final day of school. Exams over, some had attended just so they could leave again. One last assembly, the Head's message about "sending our fine boys and girls out into the world" was delivered to the half-delirious crush pressing against the double doors at the back of the hall. No shouts of 'Three cheers'; no rendition of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow': this generation doesn't do pretence. Well, this is it, boys and girls: the 'life' you were so impatient for. Sucks, doesn't it?

Conspicuous among those holding uncapped lipsticks and laundry-markers, ready for the autographing of cheap polyester, stood a girl with covered head and limbs. Neither envious nor condemning, her religion freed her from the gaudier obligations of ritual. Earlier, Ayisha would have recognised her look of quiet bemusement. Their eyes met briefly before she tore herself away, confused by

the apparent knowing she found in the girl's expression.

All this in the space of a couple of seconds.

She swallowed. "And I want complete silence!"

The boy had positioned himself behind Jim, kneeling awkwardly on the tarmac: "Like this, Sir?"

"Hands under my arms. I need to lean against you."

This was not the time for Ayisha to remember how she had failed her St John Ambulance practical. She, Little Miss Perfect, without a filling to blot her dental record. And Jim, one of three First Aiders on the staff, had witnessed her disgrace. The examiner had jovially referred to the pensioner playing the injured party as her 'victim'. His dimensions had proved challenging when Ayisha tried to secure a broad bandage, not assisted by bouts of theatrical hyperventilation...

"Miss, I think you should be doing mouth to mouth."

Faces leaned inwards with expressions of fear and fascination, while Ayisha felt as if she were paralysed.

"Not for a stabbing, you eejit! Don't listen to him, Miss."

"I saw it on telly last week, man!"

"That was *Holby City*."

"No way! I thought it was one of them documentaries."

Nerves quadrupled Ayisha's irritation. "I said SILENCE!"

Since qualifying on the retake, she had distributed plasters, refused to administer painkillers, and once ran cold water over a burn for twenty minutes, never dreaming that a colleague would be her next victim. To do nothing - now - with everyone watching. She must give the appearance of control.

"Kris! Run to the nurse's office for help. And fetch the first aid box." Remembering the textbook instruction she twisted her head, seeing a tangled blur of uniform-grey. "Bring it back here!"

Then she knelt, recoiling as pain fuelled by a single stone - the princess's pea - rocketed into her bones: "Argh!"

"You," Jim rasped.

Colour draining but conscious: no need to check his airway just yet. "Florence Nightingale," she concurred, scraping the toes of her shoes on the tarmac, kicking them aside.

He graced her with a one-sided blue-tinged smile, despite his obvious pain. "I was banking on Abby Lockhart."

Ayisha wasn't yet thinking *a minute earlier, and it could be me lying there*; the shakes had yet to set in: those things would come. "You'll have to make do," she said. How unconvincing her attempt to instill confidence sounded! "What happened?"

Looking down towards his chest, Jim lifted his hand, mourning, "My best shirt!"

She caught sight of the entry wound beneath the slashed linen. "They *attacked* you?"

Ayisha pulled back her sleeves, sensing from the shifting of feet behind her that this lumping together of pupils was considered an effrontery. 'You were attacked?' would have been a better choice, but her intended emphasis had been on the 'you'. Jim: perhaps the one teacher students related to. Something about his insistence that, just because some kids don't have the vocabulary to express themselves, doesn't mean their arguments aren't valid. (Ayisha detected no disadvantage on their part: at the same age she wouldn't have had the confidence to confront an adult.)

Jim's eyelids began to flutter. "They were going for each other."

His speech increasingly slurred, Ayisha prioritised keeping him talking. "So you thought you'd be the big hero?"

"I thought I wa-schblocking a punch!" he spluttered.

She closed her eyes momentarily. *Focus!* "Shamayal," Ayisha addressed the boy who was supporting Jim, speaking slowly: "Very gently, lie Mr Stevens down."

"Don't move, Shamayal!" Jim said, weakly but firmly. "She's trying to kill me."

The boy looked from one of them to the other. "Which one of yous knows what they're talkin' bout?"

Jim locked eyes with Ayisha, lucid. Momentarily, she was back in her first aid practical, humiliated, with the examiner announcing that her actions would have killed a stab-wound victim. Fountainous movements of the pensioner's hands described spouting blood: a loud groan, his final demise. Just by sitting him in the wrong position. A surge of adrenalin rocked through her: "Mr Stevens is right," she gasped.

"Should of guessed as much."

"Let's not panic." Jim's voice calm, he was trying to reassure her! "Pressure on the wound."

She nodded, her training coming back to her: *stop the bleeding*.

"If you hear a sucking sound, or if the blood starts bubbling, I'm in bad shape. Anything in that suitcase of yours we can use for padding?"

"Tissues." She reached for her discarded bag, casting aside the copy of *The Wasted Vigil* she was halfway through.

"Let's hope they're man-sized." While Ayisha plucked at a couple, as she would when dispensing to persistent sniffers, Jim's attempt at laughter morphed into an ugly grimace. "The whole box, for God's sake!"

Feeling heat rise to her face, she cautioned herself: *just do what you have to do*.

Ripping through an oval of perforations, her increasingly uncooperative fingers freed a wad several inches thick. Pressing it in place, Ayisha leaned closer. "So, who was it?" But, finding his hands limp, one glance at Jim's face confirmed that priorities had changed.

"Miss?" Shamayal reacted to her eyes, whites now making up the greater proportion of his own.

Was it time to move Jim into the recovery position? *Think!* ABC: airway, breathing, circulation. Ayisha felt his breath against her cheek: weak, but still there. "It's alright."

The boy exhaled noisily, shaking his head. Ayisha detected doubt rather than relief.

Hearing the scrape of approaching footsteps, she raised one hand, shouting, "Over here!"

"All of you: move!" the Head's voice was uncharacteristically decisive. "Against the wall of the chemistry lab. NOW."

Her hard work: undone in an instant.

He bent down, hands on knees, framing Jim in a triangle. "Is an ambulance on its way, Miss Emmanuel?"

"Yes, I..." As if in affirmation, she heard the waver of a siren. Her part over, there was nothing more she could do.

"We'll take it from here. Shamayal, you're OK staying put for now?"

"I guess."

"Good lad."

Relief flooded through her in waves, bringing with it an urge to cry. Here was the nurse, ripping the green and white hygienically-sealed packaging with her teeth; ably folding her triangular bandage, using her thighs as a tabletop. The discarded mass of sodden and desiccated tissues lay oozing on the tarmac, like steak on a butcher's slab. Except that this was no horror movie: this was Jim's blood. So real, Ayisha imagined she could taste iron. The enormity of what had happened hit home. Someone else had stabbed Jim but, had he not known what he was talking about, she might have been the one to kill him! As she backed away - one hand clamped over her mouth - as the look the boy cast her said, 'I got you sussed,' the Head was reassuring an unconscious Jim that everything was going to be fine.

Since they had gone for a drink a few weeks ago, Ayisha had begun to look forward to their exchanges. Earlier she had passed Jim in the corridor and had said, "One more lesson. I can't wait!"

"Six weeks of thinking time isn't good for me. I've never liked the big holidays."

She had laughed at that: "Where are you? At primary school?" And, rather than ask why, she'd quipped, "You can help me decorate if you're not doing anything."

Now, in the space of an hour, everything had changed.

Removing her hand from her mouth, she realised it was sticky with blood: the taste of iron wasn't imagined. She balked as she licked her lips unthinkingly in an attempt to rid them of their unwanted coating.

And again, Shamaya's eyes bored into her. No, Ayisha acknowledged, shoeless, tights laddered, shivering in the bright July sunlight: she hadn't been in control of the situation. Not for an instant.