

# DEAR JUSTYCE

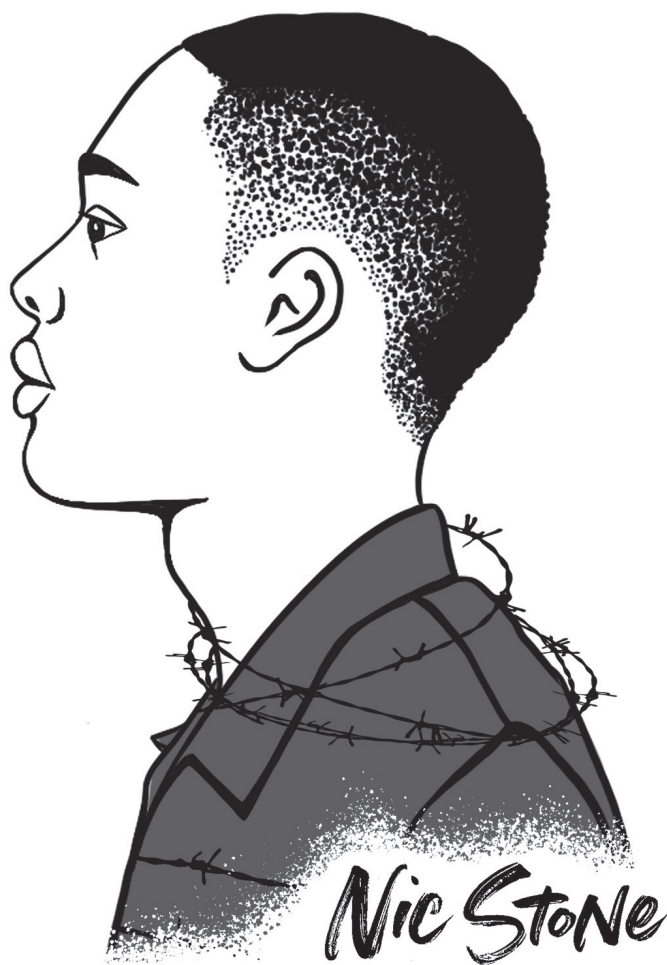
ALSO BY NIC STONE

*Dear Martin*

*Odd One Out*

*Jackpot*

# DEAR JUSTYCE



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*For Danny Ayers.  
You will always be my hero.*



# PART ONE

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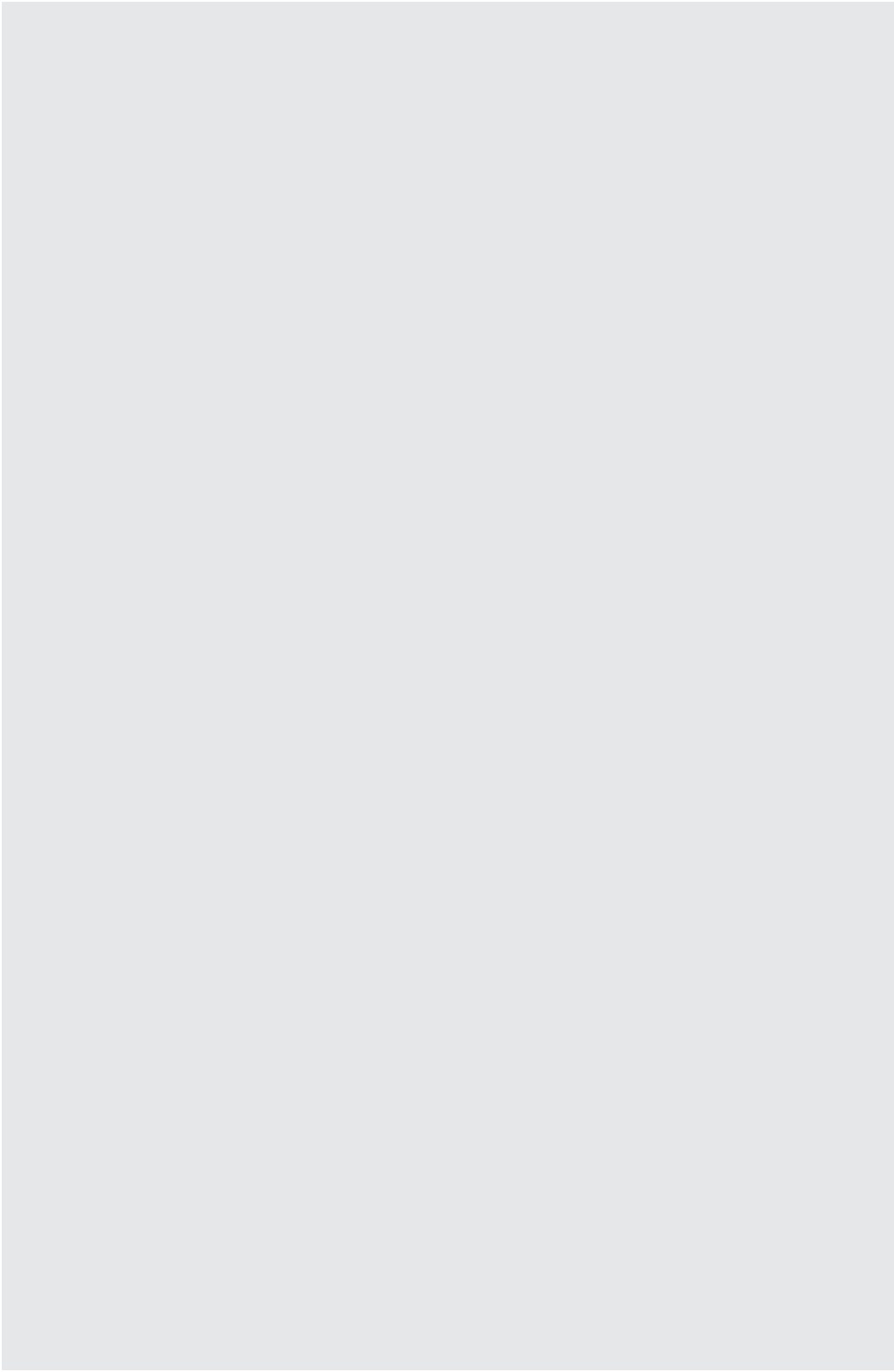
*The End*





# Snapshot:

Two Boys on  
a Brand-New  
Playground  
(2010)



It didn't take much for Quan to decide he was leaving this time. He feels a little bit bad, yeah: knowing Dasia and Gabe are still in the house makes his stomach hurt the way it always does when he finds himself faced with grown-people problems he can't fix. But Quan's only nine. Running away *alone* is hard enough. Trying to bring a four-year-old sister and a two-year-old brother just isn't gonna work.

He's glad spring has sprung early. Didn't have time to grab a jacket as he fled. He's pretty sure there was too much commotion for anybody to notice, but he takes a few unnecessary turns en route to his destination in case Olaf—that's what Quan calls his mama's "duck-ass boyfriend" (which is what Quan's *dad* calls the guy)—*did* notice Quan's exit.

What Quan is sure of? He couldn't stay there. Not with dude yelling and throwing things the way he was. Quan knows what comes next, and he couldn't watch again. It was hard enough seeing the aftermath bloom in the funny-looking bluey-purple blotches that made Mama's arms and legs look like someone had tossed water balloons full of paint all over her. He couldn't really do anything anyway. Though Olaf (Dwight is the guy's *actual* name) isn't *too*, too big, he's a whole heck of a lot stronger than Quan. The one

time Quan did try to intervene, he wound up with his own funky-colored blotch. Across his lower back from where he hit the dining room table when dude literally threw Quan across the room.

Hiding that bruise from Daddy was nearly impossible. And Quan *had* to hide it because he knew if Daddy found out what really happened when Olaf/Dwight came around . . . well, it wouldn't be good.

So. He made sure Dasia and Gabe were safe in the closet. That was the most he could do.

As Wynwood Heights Park looms up on his left, Quan lifts the hem of his shirt to wipe his face. It's the fourth time he's done it, so there's a wet spot now. He wonders if there will be any dry spots left by the time he gets the tears to stop. Good thing there's no one around to see. He'd never hear the end of it.

He bounces on his toes as his feet touch down on the springy stuff the new playground is built on. There's a sign that says it's ground-up old tires, that the play structures are made from "recycled water bottles and other discarded plastics," and that the entire area is "green," but as Dasia pointed out the last time Mama brought them all here, whoever built the thing didn't know their colors because everything is red, yellow, and blue.

The thought of his sass-mouthed little sister brings fresh tears to Quan's eyes.

He makes a beeline for the rocket ship. It sits off in a

corner separate from everything else, tip pointed at the sky like it could blast off at any moment. Inside the cylindrical base, there are buttons to push and dials to turn and a ladder that leads up to an “observation deck” with a little window. It’s Quan’s favorite spot in the world—though he’d never admit that to anyone.

When he gets inside, he’s so relieved, he collapses against the rounded wall and lets his body slide to the floor like chocolate ice cream down the side of a cone on a hot summer day. His head drops back, and he shuts his eyes and lets the tears flow freely.

But then there’s a sound above him. A cough.

The moonlight through the deck window makes the face of the boy staring down at Quan look kinda ghostly. In fact, the longer dude stares without speaking, the more Quan wonders if maybe he *is* a ghost.

“Uhhh . . . hello?”

Dude doesn’t reply.

Now Quan is starting to get creeped out. Which makes him mad. This is supposed to be the one place in the world he can *relax*. Where he’s not looking over his shoulder or being extra cautious. Where he can close his eyes and count down from ten and imagine shooting into space, far, far away from everything and everyone.

“Yo, why you lookin’ at me like that?” Quan spits, each word sharp-tipped and laced with the venom of his rage.

“Oh, umm . . .” The other boy’s eyes drop to his hands.

He picks at the skin around his thumbs. Something Quan does sometimes that gets him yelled at.

Hmm.

The boy goes on: "I'm sorry. I just . . . I wasn't expecting anybody else to come in here."

"Oh."

The boys are quiet for a minute and then: "I'm Justyce, by the way."

Justyce. Quan's heard that name before . . . "You that smart kid they was talking about on the morning announcements at school? Won some contest or something?"

Justyce again doesn't reply.

"Hellooooo?" Quan says.

"You gonna make fun of me now?"

"Huh?"

Now Justyce looks out the observation window. Quan wonders what he's seeing.

"I wish they would've never made that announcement. Winning an academic bowl isn't 'cool.' Everybody just makes fun of me."

Quan shrugs. "Maybe they just jealous cuz they ain't never won nothin'."

Silence falls over the boys again, but this time, it's not so uncomfortable. In fact, the longer Quan sits there with Justyce above him, the better he feels. Kinda nice not being *totally* alone. Which makes him wonder . . .

“You’re a fifth grader, right? You not gonna get in trouble for being out this late?”

“Oh, I will,” Justyce says.

It makes Quan laugh.

“I snuck out,” Justyce continues. “But it’s not the first time, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. I think my mama knows I’ll always come back.”

“Wish *I* didn’t have to go back . . .” It slips out, and at first Quan regrets it. But then he realizes his chest is a little looser. This one time at Daddy’s house, Quan watched a movie about this big ship that hit an iceberg and sunk, and there was this one scene where the main lady was being tied into this thing that went around her stomach and laced up the back like a sneaker. He later learned it was called a *corset*, but that’s what comes into Quan’s head when he thinks about his life. “My mom’s boyfriend is a asshole,” he continues.

The laces loosen a little more.

“He’s my little brother and sister’s dad, so like I *kinda* get why my mama keeps dealing with him . . .” Little looser. “But I hate him. Every time he come around, he mad about somethin’, and he takes it out on my mom.”

“Sounds familiar,” Justyce says.

“And I be wanting to stick around for my brother and sister but—wait.” Quan looks up at Justyce, whose chin is now propped in his hand.

All eyes (and ears) on Quan.

“What’d you say?” Quan asks.

“Hmm?”

“Just a second ago.”

“Oh. I said that sounds familiar.”

“Whatchu mean?”

Justyce sighs. “My dad was in the military and went to Afghanistan. Ever since he came back, he’s been . . . different. He drinks a lot and sometimes has these ‘episodes,’ my mom calls them. Out of nowhere he’ll start yelling and throwing stuff.” Now Justyce isn’t looking at Quan anymore. “He hits her sometimes.” Justyce swipes at his eyes.

Quan stands up. “You ever come here during the day?”

“Occasionally.” Jus snuffles. “Sorry for crying.”

“Man, whatever. Now I see how you won that ‘academic’ thingy.”

“Huh?”

“What kinda fifth grader says *occasionally*?” Quan shakes his head. “I’m gonna head home and check on my brother and sister,” he says. “You should go check on your mom.”

The boys meet eyes, and understanding passes between them.

“I’ll see you around.” Quan ducks and slips through the rocket’s arched entryway.

He’s almost back at the edge of the rubber-floored playground when—

“Hey! Hold up!”



Quan turns around to find Justyce is headed in his direction.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” Justyce says, out of breath.

Quan smiles—“Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr.”—and lifts his hand. “Call me Quan.”

“It was real nice to meet you, Quan,” Justyce says, smacking his palm against Quan’s and then hooking fingers. “Even, uhh . . . despite the circumstances.”

Now Quan laughs. “You’re ten years old, man. Loosen up.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Quan shoves his fists in his pockets. It’s gotten cooler. “Nice to meet you too, Justyce.”

Quan turns on the heel of his well-worn Jordans and heads home.