



Juicy Central

Tia

Optimistic, genuine, dedicated, critical

Fitting In

Jada Jones

[chapter]

1

The cafeteria was empty. Tia Ramirez ran her hand through her long, brown hair. She looked around again. Tia couldn't be wrong, could she?

The sign in the main school hallway had said:

**Yearbook Club Meeting—
Join Today! Make Memories
and Friends for a Lifetime!
Meet in the Cafeteria Monday
after School. Let's Make This
the BEST Yearbook Ever!**

It seemed clear. Tia read the sign three times. She was in the right place for sure.

She really wanted to join yearbook club. Before her family left Mexico, she had read about the clubs American schools had. This one sounded like the most fun.

But no one was there. Tia headed back toward the cafeteria doors. She must have read something wrong. Tia still had to work hard to understand English. She wasn't going to let it stop her from getting what she wanted, though. She'd even joined the debate team as a way to improve her English. Practicing speeches for debate might not be the easiest way to get better, but Tia was up for the challenge. Yearbook would be another challenge that Tia wasn't going to give up on. If she had to read that yearbook club sign one hundred times to get it right, she'd do it.

Tia reached for the door, but it flew open in her face. Her eyes opened wide. A group of chattering students passed

her. Everyone was coming for yearbook club! A few said hi to Tia or gave her a wave. She'd got it right after all.

Tia watched about a dozen people spread out at the lunch tables. She knew who most of them were. Kiki Butler, the tomboy of her class, sat at a table with Misha and Tara. Tia also knew Kiki's twin sister, girlie-girl Sherise, and her sort of obnoxious sidekick, Marnyke. Sometimes Sherise and Marnyke could be nice. But often they were downright cruel.

Everyone was talking and messing around, waiting for the meeting to begin. Tia noticed there was no one else like her, no one else who spoke Spanish. She sighed. Almost a quarter of South Central High struggled with English. Not one other immigrant student wanted to be in the yearbook club? She didn't understand why. Tia thought everyone

should be in at least one club. That was the way to get ahead.

Marnyke and Sherise sat down near where Tia was still standing. Tia could feel Sherise's eyes look her up and down. "Yo, Marnyke. Looks like someone is lost."

"Probably can't read the signs. Think she's lookin' for an English tutor or somethin'?" Marnyke smirked.

Sherise laughed. "Yeah, *someone* can't speak English very good. Did you hear her in class today? She didn't seem to know what class she was in. She didn't even know the word *chemistry*."

Tia couldn't listen any more. Sherise was being mean because Tia had pointed out all the wrong answers on Sherise's history assignment last week. Before that, they'd hung out a lot. Now Sherise was making fun of Tia every chance she got.

Tia sat down at a table in the back by herself. She pulled out a notebook. "If I

look busy, maybe they will knock it off. I just want them to leave me alone,” Tia thought.

The other students seemed oblivious to what was going on. They didn't even look over at Tia. She could see Jackson Beauford, the biggest player at school. He was in her math class. Jackson was the one who ignored her when she asked him for some extra paper last week. His bright blue eyes had looked right through her. Tia never felt so stupid in her whole life.

Jackson was hanging around with Darnell Watson, the star jock of the school. Darnell was Tia's friend these days. They ate lunch together sometimes. Darnell even asked her for help with his Spanish homework. They'd meet after school or when basketball practice was over so she could work with him. He didn't seem to have a problem with her.

Or at least not when it was just the two of them.

Tia knew Darnell was hot stuff at school. Everyone always bragged how his jump shot just might land him on a pro basketball team someday. They also gossiped about his shady side. There were rumors he was still involved with gangs. Tia didn't believe one word of it. Darnell was always really sweet to Tia.

Tia watched Marnyke pull down her already low-cut, tight tank top. Sherise proceeded to brush out her hair, drawing as much attention to herself as possible. Then Marnyke and Sherise went over to where the boys had taken over a table. Tia shook her head in disgust. Those girls had only one thing on their minds. And it sure wasn't yearbook club.

"Hey, girlfriend," someone said from above Tia's head. She looked up. The voice had come from a slightly bigger

girl with curly brown hair. It was Nishell Saunders. Nishell had been one of the first people to introduce herself to Tia on her first day of school. Tia liked her immediately. Nishell was always so friendly and outgoing. She couldn't care less what others thought. And Nishell didn't seem to be bothered by Tia's obvious accent. Or anything else.

"This the meetin' for the yearbook club?" Nishell asked.

Tia nodded happily. She was glad Nishell was talking to her. A lot of people either ignored Tia or made fun of her. Like Marnyke and Sherise.

"Cool," Nishell said with a smile. She plopped down next to Tia. She looked around. "Looks like we're all by ourselves over here, huh? Why didn't you sit with Marnyke and Sherise, home girl?"

Tia shrugged. Tia knew Nishell liked to hang with popular, pretty girls like

Marnyke. But why did Tia have to hang with them too? Was hanging out with Tia not enough for Nishell?

“I just didn’t,” Tia told her.

Tia waited for her to get up and move to hang with the cool crowd. Suddenly, they heard a loud whistle.

“Attention everyone!”

Tia turned around to see that a woman had just come into the room. She made the high-pitched whistle with her fingers again. Everybody quieted down.

“I’m Ms. Okoro for those of you who don’t know me. Most students call me Ms. O,” she said. Ms. Okoro seemed really excited. She was smiling and talking really fast. She had an accent too. Tia leaned forward to try to understand her better.

“Welcome to our first yearbook club meeting. I can’t wait for us to get started! I know we’re a small group right now,

but there is much we can accomplish this year. I hope you all will have fun and work hard too. First off, some quick business. We'll be meeting most days after school. Members are expected to attend at least three meetings a week. Last year's yearbook never did get finished and ..."

Ms. Okoro trailed off. She was looking at Darnell's raised hand. Her lips thinned.

"Yes, Mr. Watson? Question?" she asked.

"Three days a week!" exclaimed Darnell. "Last year, Mr. Thompson only had meetings once every two weeks. No offense or nothin'."

Ms. Okoro frowned. "I am aware of how Mr. Thompson ran the yearbook club. I am also aware that he and Mr. Crandall established joining yearbook club as a way for students to make up for their bad behavior. If you are here for that reason, you are still expected