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For Joy, Nsaba, Esperanza and Imani,
our girls poised to soar!



HEARTBEATS

Baba says when I was small, I was always on the hunt for heartbeats. I'd snuggle in his arms, clamouring to hear the steady *boom*, *boom*, *boom* beating from somewhere deep in his chest. The story goes I would try to find the sound of a heartbeat just about everywhere. Anywhere. Baba also likes to say that if I'd been born in Tanzania, like him, he would have taken me to the family farm with its millions of goats and chickens and cows, and I would have found way more heartbeats than I knew what to do with.

But that's just Baba being Baba!

Instead of chasing farm animals, I used to cup my hand behind my ear and press it against tree trunks. Flower petals. My dolls and my trucks. Even the dirt-caked soles of Odie's feet. That was before we grew up and grew out of that kind of stuff. And obviously before I truly understood what a heart was. Or where to find one.

Truth be told, I don't actually remember hunting for heartbeats.

My memories don't reach that far back.

What I *do* remember is what happened when I started running. That's when I became a hurricane of arms and feet and one gigantic heartbeat.

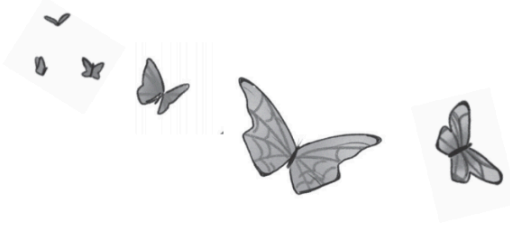
BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

It's also when Alexis, Neeka, Luce and I started flying around the track, *smack*, *smack*, *smack*, smacking a baton into the palms of each other's hands.

When we forgot everything, except our rhythm and flow.

When we found freedom . . . and the thrill of soaring across the finish line.

Thinking back on it now, though, I wonder. When I was small and searching everywhere and anywhere, in every little thing, for that steady *boom*, *boom*, *boom*, what exactly did I think I was looking for?





PART ONE:
ON YOUR MARKS

Philadelphia 1992





1.
SOMETHING EXTRA

'We don't need something extra,' Neeka said with her chest puffed up. 'We're fast . . . *remember*? Plus, we're thirteen.' She tilted her head towards the sun, which was just starting to slant down low. Bronze shadows cut lines across the red-brick wall behind her.

It was a Friday afternoon in April, and we were the last girls on the track. Since practice was done for the day, I thought Neeka would be easier to convince. But her hands stayed glued to her hips. Her face wouldn't give either.

Level ten hard-headedness.

'Trust me,' I said, squaring my shoulders. 'We do.'

Being fast wasn't enough.

And even though we'd been counting down the days until Luce finally turned thirteen – she was the last one in the group – that wouldn't cut it either.

If we wanted to win our relay race at the two biggest track meets of the season – *our last two races together* – something extra was a must.

'What about our race day nicknames?' Luce asked, smacking her lips like her bubble gum was lunch. 'Those *gotta* count?' She was sitting down in front of us on the thick white line that split lanes four and five. Her tube socks, hiked up all the way to her kneecaps, made her look even tinier than she already was.

'Nope. Don't count,' I said. 'First, we've had those nicknames since fifth grade. If they held any drop of extra luck, we'd be state champions by now. Second, we need something with more flair. Something with rhythm and a beat to it. Something supersonic!'

Luce looked at me. Her right eyebrow rose.

She shimmied her pint-sized shoulders, I slid my steps and we shouted out in unison just like the J.J. Fad song.

Luce loved that old song even more than I did.

We could dance all day every day to it.

One Saturday last year we *did* dance all day to it.

I could hardly bear to think about Luce moving away at the end of summer.

Who else had clown antics to keep me in stitches?

No one.

Alexis was too Alexis.

And Neeka? She was only silly when the Holy Spirit moved her.

Which was never.

Luckily, when we ran the 4 x 100 relay, none of that mattered.

On the track, we moved like rhythm and beat rolled into one.

And with Luce leaving, this championship season would be our last time to flow together.

So, losing wasn't an option. We had to win.

And we had to win BIG.

That's why we *really* needed something special!

While Luce cracked a million more Bazooka bubbles, Alexis jogged over, cool as a breeze. She was the last of us to finish. But she must've caught snatches of our conversation on her last loop because here she was, slipping in her two cents.

'What we *need*,' Alexis said, the words gliding right out of her mouth, 'is some majestic flyness.' She reached her hand up and pushed a bobby pin deeper into the bun coiled tightly on top of her head. Then she licked her fingers and smoothed down her baby hairs. 'That's how we win the 4 x 100 relay this year.'

And winning was everything!