

Chapter One

I. FEEL. LIKE. AN. IDIOT.

I'm walking down the busy street with an urgency that makes my movement uncoordinated. My legs fumble over each other in a hasty attempt to pass the elderly couple in front of me and get to my destination.

I'll admit, this is a low point for me. I've hardly left the house since my family and I moved to America a month ago. But today, I threw on a stain-free sundress, quickly slicked down my edges with my favorite fruit-scented gel, and rushed out the front door looking like a civilized person.

All this to save an old DVD player.

At first glance, a passing stranger might look at the blanket in my arms and assume I'm cradling an adorable baby or a helpless puppy. Their last guess would be a DVD player on the verge of death. The chunky, outdated technology has a disc stuck inside it, and while the situation might seem trivial, to me it is a full-blown emergency. Hence my clumsy march to the tech repair shop.

A mild breeze, laced with the smoky scent of barbecue, tousles my long braids, and I shake the displaced locks from my line of vision, squint against the sun's glare, and hurry past a restaurant with a grinning cartoon pig on its front window. When I arrive at my destination, I release a deep breath. Before leaving my house, I googled "DVD player repair." That search brought me here—to Tech

and Techies. I open the door, and a bell chimes. There are only a few customers in the small space; some examine the displayed computers, while others go through the products that seem to be in an unorganized cluster on shelves.

“Hey,” the girl behind the counter says, jutting her chin to me.

“I . . . um . . . er . . . hi.”

Upon arriving in America, I developed a new personality trait: extreme awkwardness. It started in the airport. In the swarm of travelers, I became very aware of myself—of the color of my skin and my intonation—for the first time in my life. In the melody of American accents, my Nigerian accent stood out like an off-key note. When a uniformed man with an air of authority requested to see my passport, I froze and babbled. Thankfully, my mother and sister intervened.

Since we arrived, I’ve noticed Esosa, my younger sister, speaking with a convincing American intonation. I can’t do that. I only know how to sound like myself.

“Need something?” The girl at the counter speaks again. She looks about fifteen. She’s wearing heavy, dark makeup that’s harsh against her lily-white complexion. When she blows her bubble gum, it pops, then flattens on her pierced nose.

“Um . . . yes. I need help,” I answer in an unsteady voice.

“Yeah. We don’t do animals. The vet’s a few blocks down.”

I look at my arms and instantly understand her assumption. “It isn’t an animal.”

“Okay. Well, we don’t do babies either. Dr. Mason’s across the street.”

“It isn’t a baby.”

The girl blows another bubble. She watches me blankly as the pink gum expands and pops. Clearly, she isn't willing to waste any more words on our exchange.

I approach her and place the bundled DVD player on the counter. "I need this fixed. Please."

"O-kaa-aa-aay." She drags the word, extending the two syllables into six. "A few questions. One, what is it?"

"A DVD player."

"Okay. Why is it in a blanket?"

"I walked here. I wanted to give it some cushion just in case I dropped it."

"Right."

Even with her deadpan expression and flat tone, her judgment comes off clearly. I really regret leaving the house, but there's little I can do about that now. I sigh and shift my weight from one leg to another. "So? Can you . . . fix it?"

"We repair phones, computers, game consoles. Not that."

"Um . . . I don't understand. Why not this? According to Google, you fix electronics. This is an electronic."

"But is it? Or is it just a piece of junk?" She pulls a lock of brown hair behind her multi-pierced ear and shrugs.

"Come on, Jade, just look at it." The disembodied voice that comes from behind makes me flinch. The guy standing two feet from me is tall. He's wearing sunglasses, a baseball hat, and a large hood over the baseball hat. Only the lower half of his face is visible. He's left a lot to my imagination when I would rather see the face of the person coming to my aid. "Just plug it in and have a look," he goes on.

“Ugh,” the girl—Jade—grumbles, then grabs the cord and plugs it into a socket. “What exactly is the problem?”

“There’s a disc inside,” I explain hurriedly. “It’s stuck and won’t come out.”

She pushes multiple buttons with no true coordination, like I did at home. When nothing happens, she scoffs. “Like I said, it’s a piece of junk. Toss it.”

“What about your dad?” the hooded guy says to Jade. “Maybe he can figure it out?”

“He’s at an appointment. Won’t be back for another hour.”

“An hour.” I frown, but nod. “Okay. I’ll come back.”

“Mind if I try something?” the hooded guy asks, moving to my side.

“Um . . . I . . . I . . .” Surprised by both his question and his sudden proximity, I stutter.

“Promise I won’t destroy it. Well, I’ll really try not to.” He smiles. It’s a nice smile, infectious too, because the corners of my lips immediately turn up. He accepts my smile as permission, and then he fists his hand and bangs it on the DVD player.

“Oh, my God!” My eyes go wide. “What are you doing? Do you want to destroy it completely?”

“Nah. That was definitely not the plan.” His lips shrink into an apologetic smile. “I was just trying something, and I really hope it works.” He presses the Open/Close button, and to my surprise and total relief, the disc slides out.

“Oh, my God.” I expel a loud breath. “It worked.”

“Yay,” Jade says in a monotone. “Hooray.” She grabs her phone and stares at the screen.

I ignore her and celebrate by bouncing on my toes. “I can’t believe you fixed it. Thank you so much.”

“Don’t mention it. I think I just got lucky.” He looks from me to the ejected disc and smiles. “*Sixteen Candles*. My mom’s always going on about this movie. Never seen it, though. Is it good?”

“It is. I had a few minutes left when it stopped working.”

It really was a shame when the DVD player malfunctioned at a pivotal moment in the movie—just when Jake Ryan surprises Samantha at the church. The urge to know what happened next pushed me to declare a state of emergency.

“Well, let’s hope it’s good now.” He presses the Open/Close button several times to confirm the device does exactly what it’s supposed to do. Thankfully, it does. He reaches behind the counter and unplugs the cord. After wrapping the blanket around the DVD player, he extends it to me. “Protect it at all costs.”

I laugh. “Of course. Thank you.”

“Still think it’s a piece of junk,” Jade adds, without looking away from her phone. “Ever heard of streaming a movie? Life made easy.”

I roll my eyes, and even though the hooded guy is wearing tinted glasses, I have a feeling he does too.

Outside the store, the sun hangs a little lower than it did minutes ago. The barber across the street flips the sign on the shop door from OPEN to CLOSED, and the dry cleaner two stores down does the same. The once busy street is growing empty, many customers and shop owners ending their day at five o’clock. While some cities never sleep, Bellwood, where my family immigrated to, has an unofficial yet respected curfew. The scenic town is located in New York State’s Hudson Valley and has a mixture of groomed greenery

and picket-fence houses. Lampposts with ornate designs almost seem like accessories on the impeccably clean streets lined with small commercial buildings that are white or brick. It's the kind of close-knit, my-nose-in-your-business town where everyone knows everyone, where news travels too fast, and neighbors gift each other pies and casseroles and other American dishes I have only heard of but have never tried. It's also the kind of town where a very small percentage of the residents look like me.

My father would not have liked it here. His picture of America involved neon lights and glass skyscrapers, a multicultural hub with a liveliness that wasn't set to start and end by a clock.

When I asked my mother why we couldn't live in New York City like Dad would have wanted, she told me to be grateful we didn't have to struggle like many new immigrants. She told me to be thankful my uncle—my father's older brother, who has lived in America for twenty-four years—is a generous and kind man with the means to take care of us. I *am* grateful. But sometimes I think if we lived in the part of America my father imagined, he would feel more present. Alive.

I sigh and look over at the children's performing arts studio beside the dry cleaner—Little Big Star. Through its large window, a group of girls dance in sync; they leap in the air and then twirl on their toes. I stop walking and watch, immersed in their performance. I've walked past the studio a few times, during the rare occasions my mom forces me to leave the house and run errands with her. Each time, I've stared through the window and watched either a dance routine or a musical performance. The music and voices always fill the streets, faint but still audible. Usually, I'm captivated until my

mom calls for my attention. Today, the thing that diverts my focus from the studio is the sound of quick footsteps moving toward me.

“Hey.” The hooded guy from Tech and Techies jogs forward and stops once he reaches me. His breath is quick and short. He looks at the studio briefly, a small furrow between his eyebrows, then turns to me. “Don’t judge me,” he says with a hand on his chest. “I’m a little winded. Coach’s gonna have to whip me back into shape during practice.” He laughs, but I frown, completely confused and slightly uneasy.

Why is he following me? To be more precise, why is he running after me in a disguise?

As if sensing my apprehension, he takes a step back. “I must be freaking you out right now. I didn’t mean to. I was just . . . um . . . sorry.” He smiles timidly, and I relax. Despite his getup, he doesn’t seem like a threat.

I study him through narrowed eyes. “Why are you dressed like a burglar on a budget?”

He chuckles. “What?”

“You know—the glasses, the hat, the hoodie. It looks like you’re about to rob a house but can’t afford a proper disguise? Hence being a burglar on a budget.”

“Well, I would like to point out that most burglars are on a budget. Hence them being burglars.”

“And I would like to point out that smart burglars invest in good disguises and really commit.”

“Well, I guess I’m not a very smart burglar.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “It seems like you aren’t.”

It occurs to me, as we’re both smiling, that I haven’t stammered

or paused awkwardly since we started speaking. I've forgotten about my accent and the feeling of inadequacy I developed since moving here. I don't know where that feeling has gone, but I hope it stays at bay until this conversation ends.

"I'll admit," he says, "this is a terrible disguise. But I'm not a burglar. Promise. I'm actually trying to avoid some people." He turns around and surveys the street. When he's satisfied with his inspection, he faces me again. "My friends."

"You're trying to avoid your friends? Why?"

"I've spent the whole summer with them. I just needed a break, you know? Some time to myself. So I planned to grab a video game from Tech and Techies and go home to chill before any of them see me."

"Oh." I glance at his empty hand. "Where is the game?"

"Well, I didn't get a chance to grab one. I was looking through the stack when . . ."

"You came to the rescue of my DVD player."

He laughs. "Yeah. And then after you left, I—"

"You ran after me." I frown, then lift an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Well, I noticed your accent. I wanted to tell you I like it."

"Accent? What accent? I don't have an accent."

"Um . . . I . . ." He bites his lip. "Right. Sorry. My mistake."

"Relax. I'm just joking." I smile, and my cheeks grow warm. He likes my accent, one of two things that make me stand out in Bellwood. "I'm from Nigeria. I just moved here."

"Really? That's cool. Did your whole family move too?"

I consider the question, then shake my head. My father's absence is still new to me. Sometimes I forget he's gone. I laugh; I get wrapped

up in a movie about American teenagers; I meet a peculiar guy in a terrible disguise, and my grief is temporarily suspended—hanging over my head like a hammer, waiting for the precise moment to fall and hit me with a staggering force.

This is the moment.

A tightness gathers in my chest, and my heart thumps. I have taught myself how to survive these moments, how to contain my grief until I am alone, behind a closed door.

First, I shut my eyes.

Second, I breathe with intention.

In and out.

Slow and steady.

Third, I imagine my breaths as a tide of cool blue water flowing through me—dousing the flare of emotion and then soothing the disquiet.

“Hey.” His voice is gentle, laced with a touch of concern. “Are you all right?”

I open my eyes and nod. “Yes. But I need to go. Thank you again for your help.”

“Yeah. Sure. And sorry for . . . you know. Keeping you.”

I start to leave, then stop. “You know what’s unfair?”

He shakes his head.

“The fact that you’ve been staring at my face this entire time, and I don’t know what you look like.”

“Yeah.” He smiles, nodding. “I guess that’s unfair.” In one swift motion, he pulls the sunglasses from his face.

I don’t mean for it to happen, but it does—automatically, as if my body is programmed to react to his striking hazel-green eyes.

Soft flutters explode in my stomach, then intensify and travel like a ripple through my whole body. I'm dazed until he takes a small step toward me.

“Are you okay?”

“Um . . . yeah . . . yes.” I force my eyes away from his and look toward the path that leads home. “I should go. Bye.”

With the DVD player pressed to my chest, I rush down the street. There's an irrepressible urge at the pit of my stomach, compelling me to turn around. To look at him. One more time.

So I do.