

# Chapter One

It's 4:00 a.m. Ichiro hears the phone ring, his mother's hushed voice. He rolls over and goes back to sleep. Around ten he pulls on a pair of shorts, throws on a white T-shirt and heads downstairs. It's Saturday, so he's hoping his mom will make him breakfast. But she's not in the kitchen.

"Mom!" he yells. "Mom?"

“Ichiro, I’m here.” She’s taking a load of laundry out of the washer and dryer they share with their landlord. “Not so loud—the neighbors might hear you.”

“I’m hungry,” he says.

“Okay, okay,” she replies.

At almost seventeen, he should be making his own breakfast. But breakfast is one of the only times they get to sit down and talk. He wishes she could be around more.

“Ichiro, why so late this morning?” She’s dressed for the office.

“Ten isn’t late, Mom. Some kids sleep till noon,” he says. He rests his head on the kitchen table.

“No, no, they don’t.”

“Yes, they do.”

“What would you like today?” she asks.

“Pancakes and bacon,” he says hopefully.

“Yeesh, so much work. How about a cheese omelet with bacon?”

“Mom!”

“Ichiro, no complaining. You should be cooking for your mother.”

She puts the frying pan on the stove and breaks two eggs into a bowl. She preheats the oven and puts four slices of bacon on parchment paper.

“Who called last night?” he asks.

“Grandma.”

“Grandma Yamada? What did she say? Can I go visit? I still haven’t been to Japan.”

“No, Grandpa is sick. He fell and is in the hospital.” His mother opens the oven and turns away from Ichiro. When she does this, he knows she’s crying.

“He’s not doing well, and she wants me to go home. But how can I?”

“Mom, I’m going to be working soon. Maybe I can help?”

She doesn’t answer. She puts the omelet on a plate and puts it in front of him. “How’s school?” she asks.

“Okay.”

“Why just okay? What’s wrong?”

“Changing schools is hard, Mom. I miss Jazz and Blaze. I don’t fit in with the Japanese kids because I can’t speak Japanese. But I can’t speak Mandarin either. Why did you and dad not teach me anything?”

“Ichiro, I can’t speak Mandarin. The girls at school used to pick on me too. They pulled my pigtails and pushed me off my bike. It’s just how it is.”

“Pulled your pigtails?” Ichiro laughs.

“It’s not funny,” she says. But she’s smiling.

“It’s hard to imagine you in pigtails.”

“Why don’t you join an after-school club and make some new friends?”

“Only nerds do that.”

“You have Chris and Jia.”

Ichiro pushes the eggs away from the bacon. He likes to keep his foods separate.

“What about all those books you read?” his mother says.

Ichiro loves to read nonfiction to learn new things. He doesn’t like what he calls “the pretend world of fiction.”

“What about them?”

“Hang out in the library. Find a girl who reads.”

“No thanks. What I want is a new skateboard.”

“Honey, I can’t afford that.”

“Mom, I can pay for it myself.”

“With what?”

“I signed up for cafeteria class this year. The teacher is supposed to be a great chef. We learn how to make giant pots of soup, salads and desserts for the students. And they offer some part-time work helping with catering the banquets at night after school.”

She clears his plate. “Maybe then you can help out a bit more around here.”

“Like how?” Ichiro asks.

“You know, cook for us sometimes?”

“We’ll see, Mom. I am still a beginner.”

“Confidence, daughter. You can do it,” she says.

Ichiro feels weird when his mother calls him daughter. He has told her before that he doesn’t feel like a daughter. But she didn’t understand what he was saying, and he could tell she wasn’t ready to have a serious talk. He knows it will have to happen sooner or later.

Ichiro’s mom finally leaves for work, which means he can play some video games. He plays FIFA for a couple of hours and then takes a nap. When he wakes up, it surprises him to see that it’s 5:00 p.m. already. Bored, he gets up and snoops in his mother’s room.

Ichiro knows he shouldn’t be in there, but his mother’s room has always been a mystery to him, especially the very large and full closet. He never knows what he’ll find in there. Last month he checked out some old dresses in the back that he

can’t remember ever seeing. She probably wore them way back when she met Dad. Ichiro moves the bulky winter coats and old hat boxes out of the way. He has to be super careful to put everything back in just the right way.

There’s something on the other side of the closet that draws his attention. It’s a big pile of clothes on the floor. Men’s clothing and a couple of pairs of shoes. Must be clothing his dad left behind that Mom is finally going to get rid of. One day, when Ichiro was only six years old, his dad just got up and left. Though his mother tried to comfort him, Ichiro cried for a very long time. He used to think it was all his mother’s fault. Now that he’s older, he’s realized his dad was never meant to have kids. He’s too self-involved. Travel and photography have always been his passions. He’s rarely even in the country anymore at all. Ichiro can’t decide whether he loves or hates his dad. Sometimes it’s a bit of both.

He sees his dad only a few times a year, when he's passing through town. His dad left Canada right after the breakup to do a photo shoot in Hong Kong. He's now a well-known artist in China. He got married again, to a woman who is kind but not the type who wants kids. Ichiro's friends think his dad is so cool. Ichiro just wishes he would visit more.

His dad says that the next time he visits, he'll take Ichiro to the futuristic exhibit of sneaker art at the Hexagon Gallery in North Vancouver. There are a bunch of Air Jordans on display that artists have taken to the next level. Most of the shoes are so cool-looking, but only for display. Ichiro and his dad will go for dim sum afterward at Ichiro's favorite restaurant, Jade Garden, in Chinatown.

Ichiro pulls out a vintage dress. It's purple and made of lightweight wool, with a pleated front and sleeves. The label is one he doesn't recognize. He pulls it over his T-shirt and shorts. He looks in

the mirror and laughs. When he raises his arms, he looks like a large prehistoric bird ready for flight. But his side profile, with his arms down, looks rather elegant. He searches around for a pair of heels and accessories to complete the look. He wanders over to the vanity. So many tubes of lipstick! He pouts in front of the mirror. A nice purple red should be his style. He purses his plump lips and smears a couple of light strokes across his mouth. He gets lost looking at himself in the mirror. "I can totally pull this off," he says to himself.

"Ichiro, Ichiro?" His mother is home early.

He rushes out of her room and into the bathroom down the hall. Did he remember to put everything back? Shit, he's still wearing the dress and heels. He quickly slips them off and hides them in the cupboard under the sink.

"I'm in the bathroom. Be right out." He quickly wipes the lipstick off his face and scrubs his lips

with soap and water. It's so dark though. His heart is beating fast, and he feels hot. He can barely think. The room feels like it's spinning.

"Ichiro, are you okay?"

"Yes, fine. Be right there." He finds some makeup remover and dabs it on his lips, but they are still very red. He hears a sound.

It sounds like his mom is crying.

"Mom? Mom, are you okay?" he asks as he enters the kitchen. "What happened?" He puts his arms around her.

She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. She won't look at him. "It's nothing, Ichiro."

"It's not nothing," he says. "Tell me!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Going to sleep now. Just tired."

"Mom!"

"See you in the morning." His mom looks at him, and he can see her swollen dark eyes. "What's that on your lips?" Of course she would notice, even in her state of distress. She sees everything.

Ichiro wipes his lips with the back of his hand. "Oh, that must be from the grape juice I had before I came home."