

Chapter One

There is no reason Nico Saito should be standing in front of my desk. Absolutely none. Zero. But there he is. Close enough I could reach out and touch him. Not that I would. That would be weird. I won't do that. I can't. Not even if I want to. Not even though I can.

Everything about him looks crisp and ironed. Even his perfectly straight hair. With a movement

of his head, he flicks his hair out of his eyes. Then, like a slow-motion dance, it falls back over his forehead. Nico crosses his arms and shifts his weight onto one leg. He says something I don't catch.

I have no idea how long he's been standing there. I spend every lunch and recess on my laptop, gaming. We're not really supposed to be playing video games at school. But when I play on my laptop, there's less chance a teacher will catch me. They think I'm doing my homework. Really, I'm saving the world from alien invaders and zombies and other monsters.

I pull my earbuds out as my laptop plays some sad music. Game over. When I looked up at Nico, an angry penguin shoved his beak through my player's stomach. That was the last bit of my health bar. I'm dead. No big deal. Start over and try again.

"Sorry. What?" I ask.

"I saw your latest stream," Nico says. "Where you played *Slumber Party Fortress*. It wasn't bad."

It's not exactly a compliment. I'm not sure how to respond. I manage a "Cool."

It's not just that Nico has no reason to be talking to me. It's that he has every reason *not* to talk to me. Nico's dad, Ren, is the founder of Pix Grid, one of the best video-game developers around. *Slumber Party Fortress* is their newest release. Everyone is playing it. Aside from being super fun, their games are on the cutting edge of the latest breakthroughs.

Nico's dad has been on the cover of all these tech and gaming magazines. I guess it helps that he looks kind of like a model. Nico takes after his dad. The modern haircuts. The awesome clothes. The sparkling smiles that look like they came out of a toothpaste ad.

Nico's shirt sleeve slides up. He's wearing the brand-new Pix Grid watch. It won't even be available to buy for another six months! Nico is basically the highest evolution a twelve-year-old can unlock.

Meanwhile I'm still stuck in my starter form. My laptop belonged to my mom until she needed a new one. All my other gear is outdated too. My hair is equally tragic. Mom cuts it at home to save money. When I run my hands over it, I can pull at the parts where it's uneven. My glasses are too big for my face, and my clothes are too big for me too. I wear my older cousin's hand-me-downs, which make me look chubbier than I already am. Mom says it's just the awkward stage before I shoot up. She says right now I'm between the kids' sizes and adult ones. She promises I'll grow. I keep hoping she's right and the awkward stage will end. Soon. But it doesn't seem to be going anywhere fast. For now I'm stuck. I'm short, pale and chubby. A typical, low-level kid gamer. Nothing special.

Nico clears his throat. "Even I didn't know about all those hidden side quests. And I've been playing it since before it was released. I don't know how you found those. Nice one."

"Thanks."

Nico tosses his hair. It does that slow-motion thing again. "I was thinking we should hang out."

I almost want to look behind me and make sure he doesn't mean someone else. To ask him if he knows who he is talking to. It takes everything, seriously everything, I have not to let my jaw drop. With my round cheeks and my glasses, I'd probably end up looking like some type of weird fish. The ugly kind that live in the deep parts of the ocean where no light ever goes. I blink. Then I force myself to swallow. It probably looks like I'm gulping for fresh air.

Nico nods. "So that's a yes." I think even he knows there is no other answer.

If Nico Saito asks you to hang out, you agree. You don't hesitate. You cancel all other plans and show up.

"What are you doing Saturday?" he asks.

"This Saturday? I don't know. Gaming, probably. It's what I usually do."

"Same. We can game together. My place. Be there at eleven."

I nod.

"Do you need a ride? I'll send a car from my dad's account," Nico offers.

"Really? That would be awesome. Are you sure your dad is okay with that?"

"Of course." Nico rolls his sleeve up farther and begins tapping the screen of his watch. "There. It's done. You'll get a text when the driver is outside your place. See you Saturday." Nico turns to walk away.

"Wait," I say. "How do you know my phone number and where I live?"

This time Nico reaches up and brushes his dark hair off his forehead. "You really need to update the security settings on your devices, Leon. I picked up your details just from standing close to you. You want to be more careful."

Nico walks back to his friends and sits down in the middle of them. He looks over and catches

me watching them. He gives me a short, fast smile before joining in their conversation.

I run one hand over my head and find an uneven patch of hair I hadn't realized was there.

Chapter Two

The rest of the week, it's as if Nico and I never spoke. He doesn't nod when we pass in the halls. He doesn't even look in my direction. It's like he never invited me over. Like I'm invisible. Which is pretty much what I'm used to anyway.

Still, I kept hoping he'd give me another smile or something. At least then I wouldn't be spending my

Friday night thinking I dreamed up his invitation to game together.

Mom walks into my bedroom as I'm trying to decide what to wear tomorrow. Nothing I own is good enough.

"Want a second opinion?" she asks as she sits on my bed.

I point to the drawer. "All I own are oversized T-shirts."

"You'll grow into them," she says. "That one isn't so bad. It's kind of hip."

I roll my eyes, but only because I'm facing away from her. If she saw me, I'd be in trouble. My mom doesn't tolerate sass. *Hip* is a word for people her age. Nico is beyond hip. I don't know if that translates to *ultrahip* in mom-speak. Or maybe he's groovy. Or something else entirely. Anyway, this could be my one chance to impress Nico. My one chance to get him to like me. If we're going

to end up friends, I've got to look like someone he could be friends with.

Mom stands up and pulls the shirt out of the drawer. "It reminds me of a tattoo. That's nifty."

Nifty is worse than *hip*. "I'm pretty sure that came free with a case of beer. I've never even worn it. And it's got a big stain on it. I can't wear that. Tomorrow is important, Mom."

"This Nico kid has seen you before," she says. "It isn't like he doesn't know how you dress."

"He hasn't seen me outside of school. This is a big deal. Nico's way cooler than I am," I tell her. No sense trying to translate it. It's a fact. Plain and simple. Nico is cool. I am not. It doesn't matter if he's seen how I dress. I want to be better than that. I need to be. It's time to unlock a new level of Leon. A new evolution. "I know you think I'm nifty or whatever. You're my mom. You have to say that stuff. But Nico is legit awesome."

"So you've been telling me. I'm still not sure I love the idea of you jumping in a car that some kid—"

"Nico," I interrupt.

"—orders off his phone—"

"His watch," I interrupt again.

"—and going off to someone's house whose parents I've never even met," she finishes.

"But you said I could go. You can't change your mind last minute. How would that make me look in front of Nico?" I argue. My mom is worried about me spending time with a real kid. That's kind of funny, since she never worries about me spending time with strangers from the internet every day when I'm gaming.

"I'm not saying you can't go. I think this will be good for you. I only want you to know you don't need to do anything to impress some other kid. At least, not anything more than being yourself. He should be impressed with that."