

I LOVE
YOU SO
MOCHI

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-30288-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, June 2019

Book design by Shivana Sookdeo



CHAPTER ONE



One Week Earlier

I have to be honest—there was a moment when I regretted trying to make a dress out of candy wrappers.

It wasn't because I'd spent a solid month collecting them: scouring the recycling bins in the cafeteria, squirreling away the remnants of Dad's secret Twix stash, and (in a fit of impatience once I realized how long it actually takes to amass a whole bunch of candy wrappers) buying an economy-sized bag of Starburst and gnawing my way through endless fruit-flavored goodness during the more boring parts of Calculus. And it wasn't because the process of making legitimately sewable fabric out of candy wrappers was more complicated than I'd originally thought, requiring hours of ironing the wrappers between sheets of newspaper, Mod Podging them onto muslin, and hand-stitching the ones that refused to stay put.

No, it came down to this: When I presented my best friend Bex with her custom candy wrapper dress—a rainbow delight that I'd fashioned in a simple skater cut with tiny ruffle flourishes at the sleeves and the bottom of the skirt—one of her eyebrows twitched upward and the smallest of crinkles creased her brow. But no smile. No grin stretching

from ear to ear, no exclamation of “Wow, Kimi!” or other discernable signs of pleasure, happiness, and/or excitement.

Now we’re standing in front of the big mirror in the Drama Club room and she’s wearing the dress and twisting this way and that, the wrappers crinkling softly as she examines every facet of her appearance.

I can’t tell if she likes it and it makes me feel like a rabid animal is chomping my insides.

I thought the bright colors and quirky material choice were perfect for Bex’s unicorn-and-sparkles-loving personality, that they would complement the flaming magenta she’s dyed her hair. That this dress would give her the confidence of the superheroines who star in her beloved comic books, finally allowing her to ask out her crush, Shelby Perkiss.

“Just leave it to me,” I’d said last month, waving a hand. I was wearing rings made out of tiny rocks twisted up in wild threads of metal and they gave my hand-wave an extra touch of drama. “I’ll make something for you, Bex. The *perfect* thing.”

“No makeovers, Kimi!” screeched our other best friend, Atsuko. We were sprawled all over our usual lunch “table,” a patch of grass hidden behind the library, just out of the way enough that no one ever bothered us. Atsuko was tapping away on her phone, composing her latest advice column. “I hate that movies never show the part *after* the makeover,” she continued. “You know, when that new look that’ll help land you a new honey—and the new personality you’ve suddenly gained along with it—becomes a pain in the butt to maintain and you go back to wearing sweats and flip-flops.”

“Bex doesn’t wear sweats in the first place,” I said, rolling

my eyes and gesturing to Bex's cute dress. It had a Peter Pan collar and a whimsical mermaid print. We'd all been especially excited when we found it because some of the mermaids actually look like us. There's a tall Atsuko mermaid with long black hair and broad shoulders and a smattering of freckles; a curvy Bex mermaid with dark brown skin and a dreamy look on her face; and a shrimpy pipsqueak Kimi mermaid with messy bangs and intense dark eyes that look like they are always thinking just a little too hard about something. Or maybe we sort of projected some of those qualities onto them, since, as Atsuko noted, "most mermaid-fairy-elf-whatever prints are one hundred percent white, blonde girls and *no percent* everyone else, so you know, go this dress for being like ten percent Asian and Black and giving us some twee role models to call our own."

"Anyway, I don't believe in makeovers," I added, poking Atsuko in the arm. She elbow-nudged me halfheartedly and kept thumb-typing her advice column. I turned to Bex, who was regarding me with a mixture of hope and trepidation. "I want to arm you with a dress that enhances your natural charm and style and gives you the confidence to finally ask out Shelby Perkiss. I want you to feel like, like . . . Ultimate Bex."

"Ultimate Bex," Bex said, her eyes lighting up. "Yes. I love that. It sounds like a superhero name. Like I'm Kamala Khan and you're going to help me become Ms. Marvel. And Ultimate Bex will *not* get all flushed and weird and tongue-tied around Shelby Perkiss."

"Exactly," I said, grinning at her. "I'm gonna make you a Kimi Nakamura Original. Something that will make you feel like the best *you*."

“You’ve really bumped up your Kimi Originals game this year,” Bex said. “Your outfit output is on point.”

I smiled back and tried not to think about the fact that my “output” increase had nothing to do with better productivity or a desire to make my senior year the best ever. It had *everything* to do with the fact that I dropped out of Advanced Fine Art after slamming my head against complete and total lack of inspiration when it came to painting anything new. Every time I picked up my brush, all I saw was endless blank canvas, mocking me. All I felt was the pressure that came with being accepted early admission to the Liu Fine Arts Academy, one of the best in the country. And all I heard was my mother’s voice, taking on that tone she likes to imagine is “soothing,” but is weighted with way too many expectations about me becoming a Great Asian American Artist to be anywhere near the “soothing” ballpark. “You should work on a new set of paintings before college starts, Kimi-chan,” she’d say. “Go in with a theme, a voice, a point of view. Every great artist needs a point of view.”

My current point of view is that I can’t paint to save my life, so I’ve spent senior year pouring my energy into things like designing costumes for the school play, adding to my overflowing wardrobe of thrift store finds and my own creations, and now . . . creating a Kimi Original for Bex. You know, fun things. But also—as my mother would be the first to remind me—goofing off-type things. Things that have nothing to do with the important art career I’m about to embark on.

“Atsy, are you down with this plan?” I said, nudging Atsuko. She was still glued to her phone. “Because we need

your approval as Culver City High's resident advice columnist to the love-challenged."

"I approve," Atsuko said. "But only if you both acknowledge that Shelby Perkiss could still say no, because when it comes to any romantic endeavors, it's very important to prepare for all possible outcomes, to not build up your expectations, and—"

"Yes, yes, we get it," Bex said, flashing me a conspiratorial grin. "And I fully accept that I may still be heading down the path of loser-dom, Madam Therapist."

"That is *not* what I meant," Atsuko huffed. "I just want to make sure you're taking care of *you* first, because what most people don't realize—"

This was the point where I tuned them out. My brain was already buzzing, fantasizing about color palettes and sweetheart necklines and a dreamy full skirt that would swish beautifully around Bex, making her into her wildest daydream of a superheroine.

But now that we're standing in front of the mirror, now that the skirt is actually swishing beautifully around her . . . I can't help but wonder if I miscalculated. Maybe the candy wrappers are too outrageous, too weird. Maybe Bex feels self-conscious, like the dress is overwhelming. Like the dress is wearing *her*.

"Bex," I whisper, unable to contain myself any longer.

She's swinging her hips side to side now, allowing the skirt to really swish. The effect of all those bright colors, shiny with Mod Podge, is beautiful to me. Like a kaleidoscope brought to life.

“So?” Atsuko sidles up next to us, munching on a handful of trail mix. She’s wearing baggy yoga pants, layered tank tops, and sneakers with satin ribbons for laces. Atsuko loves the athleisure trend because it allows her to basically wear pajamas in public. Bex is always teasing her because she doesn’t actually play any sports. “We ready to do this thing or what?”

“Bex?” I repeat, keeping my voice soft. She still hasn’t said a word. Not one single word. “Do you like it?”

Bex’s brow crinkles again as she regards her colorful form in the mirror, swishes the skirt around again. She’s silent and my heart sinks like a stone. Did I get it all wrong? Am I even failing at my goofing-off, having-fun attempts now?

Bex turns to face me, clasps my hands in hers, and meets my eyes. Her face is deathly serious. I’m already preparing my apology speech. Then she breaks into a giant grin.

“I. Love. It!” she yelps, her voice escalating with each word.

And just like that, my heart bounces back up again, a buoyant beam of light shooting through my chest. The dress is doing just what I hoped it would: Bex is standing up straighter, smiling brighter, and cocking her head in that way that indicates she’s feeling good about life in general. She looks ready to take on the world. Or at least to ask out the girl she’s been crushing on almost all of senior year.

“I’m ready,” she says, giving a determined nod.

Linking arms with Bex and Atsuko, I beam at my two best friends. “Let’s go ask out Shelby Perkiss.”



“So, have you talked to your mom yet?” Atsuko shoves another handful of trail mix in her mouth and kicks my foot. We’re camped out in one of the far corners of the quad, where most of the student body eats lunch, watching Bex swish her way over to Shelby Perkiss. There’s a concrete planter thing containing three teeny sprouts trying valiantly to become real plants and we’ve sprawled ourselves on the edge of that, sitting end to end so that our feet are touching.

“Excuse me, but why are we talking about this right now?” I say, inching my foot out of kicking reach. “Let’s focus on the mega-couple forming on the other side of the quad. Ooh, what should their ’ship name be? Shex? Belby?”

“We’re talking about this because your state of denial has reached epic levels of epicness,” Atsuko says, stretching her leg to kick me again. Damn her tallness. “Like, it’s a *continent* of freaking denial at this point. You dropped Advanced Fine Art a mere month into the spring semester. It’s freaking *March*. Spring break is in a week. Then we have finals. Then school is basically *over*. The longer it takes to tell your mom you dropped that class, the more she’s gonna blow like a full-on rage volcano. It’s Asian Mom Math, and you know I’m right about this.”

“Bleah,” I say, swinging my legs around so my feet are on the ground, no longer touching hers. I cross my arms over my chest and hunch, a pose that always makes Mom fret

about my posture. “Don’t therapize me, Atsy. You’ve got plenty of our peers asking you for advice. Romantic advice, specifically. Meanwhile, I’m over here minding my own business, not asking for *any* kind of advice.”

“Actually, the romantic advice I’d give you is in the same general area,” Atsuko says, wriggling closer and poking my hip with her foot. She needs to stop with the foot. “What happened with that theater guy, Justin, again?”

“He enjoyed wearing the costumes I designed, said they really helped him get into character,” I say, my face getting hot. “Then he gave me a rock at the wrap party, which was a super strange thing to give someone, and then we never spoke again because we don’t have any classes together.”

My face has gotten increasingly hot as I talk. This is why Atsuko is such a good advice columnist: She always cuts straight to the heart of the matter. Her fans love it. I . . . only love it sometimes. Like when it’s directed at someone else.

“It was a rock like the ones on those weird rings you’re always wearing, therefore not a strange gift at all,” Atsuko says, unable to let it go. “Actually a very thoughtful gift. Some might even say sweet. Beyond the realm of ‘let’s be friends’ and edging into ‘let’s go on dates and make out and stuff.’”

“Well. I don’t know about that,” I say.

The truth is, it *was* a really thoughtful gift. And yes, I might have spent a night or two crafting elaborate fantasies about Justin’s and my first date, which would somehow involve a scavenger hunt where we searched for different kinds of rocks to turn into all sorts of whimsical jewelry. But

then he started texting me and trying to make plans and I just couldn't do it. Couldn't move beyond the perfect fantasy I'd made up in my head.

I focus on Bex across the quad. She's made it all the way over to Shelby Perkiss and they appear to be chatting. Shelby laughs at something Bex says and brushes her long swoop of platinum blonde hair out of her eyes, revealing her multi-pierced ears with their dangly feather earrings. All of this looks flirty, at least from far away. I cross my fingers, hoping it's going well.

Bex turns and heads back toward us and she looks happy, but I can't tell if it's happy like she's trying to keep from bursting with joy or happy like she's trying to put on a brave face and not cry after being rejected.

"De-ni-al," Atsuko says, sounding out each syllable. "Man. What's the weather like on your lovely continent this time of year?"

"Shut it," I say.

"What are you so afraid of, Kimi?" she murmurs.

I don't have the chance to respond, because suddenly Bex is there and her smile is spreading over her face and we can tell she's happy like the ready-to-burst-with-joy kind.

"She said yeeeeesssssss!" Bex sings out, sweeping us into a big group hug. "Ohmygod, you guys, she said yes. We're going to the movies tonight!"

The candy wrapper dress crinkles against us and then we're all screaming and I feel like my heart is going to explode. Bex is getting this big, awesome thing she's wanted for so long and the sheer triumph of that sweeps aside the

weird conversation I was just having with Atsuko, overwhelming me with joy.

“Kimi!” Bex pulls out of the hug and grasps me by the shoulders, beaming. “Thankyouthankyouthankyou! The dress did it. It really does make me feel like Ultimate Bex.”

I smile back at her. The sheer force of her happiness is so fully encompassing, like she’s projecting some of her superheroine-ness onto me. Like I helped her get this big, awesome thing she’s wanted for so long. And just for a moment, I feel like Ultimate Kimi.