





# CHAPTER ONE

## Present Day

*I must be cursed.*

Maybe it's just bad luck, but beginnings always seem to go wrong for me. And the way something kicks off determines how it lands, right?

Today, the Thursday before Labor Day, is my first day of sophomore year—and I'm running late. I rush through the doors of Christian Prep, weaving through the hallway mob like I'm swimming upstream.

Last night I did everything right: I set positive intentions while ironing and laying out my uniform, took a bath with the healing salts Tati Mimose posted about on her socials . . . and I *still* overslept! All that needs to happen now for me to *truly* be on brand is to get lost on the way to class.

I speed-snake my way through chatty Black and Brown students in white polos with starched collars, smooth khakis, pleated gray skirts, and maroon sweaters. Everyone's braids, twists, 'fros,

locs, coils, curls, edges, or straight strands are first-day fresh. Everyone has that prayed-over sheen to them. I breathe in a mix of scented lotion and that fresh-out-the-box-school-supplies smell.

Things could be worse. On the first day of my freshman year, I got hit by a parked car.

That's word!

As I stepped off a curb between two seemingly parked cars, the quiet hybrid crept back and bumped my leg. The car stopped as soon as I slapped my palm against its trunk, and it did no more than ashen up my skin, but still.

And let's not relive my cringey first day of eighth grade. Long story, but it involved a crowded after-school meetup, a super-clear glass wall, and my forehead. *Konk!*

Finally, out of breath, I make it to my first-period class, World Literature. It's only ten seconds after the late bell.

"Always one straggler in every bunch," the teacher, Sister Lucille, snarks dryly.

I ignore the muffled chuckles around me. Winded, I plop into the first empty desk I find.

Why would a teacher give anyone a hard time for dragging a little this morning? Most of us have barely had time to adjust to this new and early start date. It's still August, for Beyoncé's sake! True, I have cousins in Atlanta who start school in damn near July, but this is Brooklyn.

In Brooklyn, it's still very much summer. Every breathing West Indian around here knows that our version of Caribbean

Carnival—the much-anticipated event also known as the West Indian Day Parade, or the Labor Day Parade—marks the official end of summer break. The parade is happening this coming Monday.

It's tradition.

And this year? The parade also falls on my birthday. That feels like a little bit of the good luck I need.

Sister Lucille begins to take attendance. I raise my hand when she calls my name, then sneak a glance down at my phone in my lap. I know I'll have to stash it away before class starts for real, but I can't resist checking out my aunt's latest post.

It's a selfie that shows off Mimose's stunning features. She's got her coils gorgeously pinned into those classic 1940s hair rolls. Tati Mimose and I have the same dark chestnut tresses, brown eyes, and heart-shaped brown face. But when I once tried to copy that same retro hairstyle, I looked like one of those pastoral sheep with spiral horns.

I notice an altar set up behind my aunt. It's lined with tall prayer candles, dried flowers, and tiny framed photos of ancestors who are no longer with us. My eyes sting when they land on Grandma Rose's photo.

My everything, Grandma Rose, passed away last year. (The rest of my freshman year did not get much better after I got hit by that parked car.)

Grandma Rose not being here for my birthday feels unbearable. What will it be like, not waking up on Monday to her

rendition of “Bon Anniversaire,” the old-time French “Happy Birthday” song she’d learned from her own grandmother?

My breathing quickens and sweat pricks at my temples at the thought of not hearing Grandma Rose’s painfully off-key vocals. She sounded like an electric guitar with strep throat and it made my ears want to weep. I used to troll her about her singing, but now I just miss it.

To keep from drowning in a swell of sadness, I laser-focus on the caption underneath my aunt’s photo:

*Wanna know something SENSATIONAL? Carnival is gonna hit different this year.*

I feel a tingle of intrigue, grateful for the distraction. I wonder what my aunt’s mystery caption means?

The post already has thousands of likes. My aunt is a Vodouista influencer—though the Vodou she presents on her social media is more like a fusion of New Age rituals mixed with island dabbling. Tati Mimose is a Brooklyn-born-and-bred Haitian like both my parents, so she takes creative license with her spirituality. She wears her beliefs on her ethically made sleeves, and her followers praise her for it. Some people follow her for her tarot card readings and aesthetically pleasing posts. Others like how she reps the culture, no filter. Or they just dig her because she’s hella beautiful.

I follow her because I don’t get to see her that often in real life. Ever since the blowout fight they had when I was nine, the tension between my aunt and my mom has been a few city blocks thick. But at least we always had Grandma Rose, the bridge that

kept Mom and Tati Mimose connected and together. Ever since my grandma passed, that bridge has been burned, and the rift between my aunt and mom has gotten even wider.

I double-tap my aunt's post to like it, but instead I unmute the sound.

Papash's "Sensational" thumps from my phone speakers.

"Aaaaye," someone shouts.

"Labor Day a'comin'!" someone else trumpets in proud patois.

From the second the beat drops, the class is instantly hype. They can't even help it. Heads start bobbing and voices call out the lyrics. This time of year, it takes nothing to get people jumping up to jump-ups.

A Papash bop is especially welcome. Papash is an island bredren, from Brooklyn, and, in my opinion, the illest rapper today. (Oh, and he's gorgeous.) Listening to his music has been my escape lately. There's something about the notes in his voice that ring true. And all of Flatbush lost their minds when he released "Sensational," a Carnival-themed banger earlier this summer to rep Caribbean hoods like ours. It's expected to be the biggest song at Carnival. But my DJ slipup is causing a stir at the wrong time.

"Where is that coming from?" demands Sister Lucille.

Frantic, I tap my screen to silence the song, but that only makes the music stop and start again. I scroll up, but that triggers the sound on the next post, some sort of movie trailer.

"Who played that music?" Sister Lucille asks, looking every

bit like Harriet the Spy in a nun cap. She starts making her way down the aisle in her chunky orthopedic shoes.

*Oh no.*

I manage to close out of the app, then reach an arm back to slip my phone into the unzipped pocket of my bag.

One person takes notice of my movements—the boy sitting across from me. Roll call refreshed my memory of his name: Kwame Hilliard.

He watches me with interest, like he's piecing things together. A throat-click sound that could either be a snort of laughter or a sneeze escapes him. I look over and his eyes meet mine like it's his gotcha moment.

He *could* snitch. One thing I didn't enjoy about my honors classes freshman year was the competitiveness that made everything feel a little like *The Hunger Games*. But Kwame Hilliard is a new face in the honors group. I'd seen him in passing last year—a blink of his piled-high 'fro bobbing down the halls, or a flash of his smile in the cafeteria line—but that's about it. I don't really know him, though I have noticed he's got a lot of friends. Now I'm noticing a few more things about him—like the fact that he's observant, which is a church usher's way of saying nosy.

"God bless you," I respond to his sneezy throat click, meeting his eyes as if daring him to tell on me.

A slow smirk tugs one corner of his mouth. "Thank you," he answers, signing this moment's contract to confirm that, yes, he'll keep my secret.

“You’re welcome” is my thank-you to him.

He nods, amused.

Even though I’m finished with my phone, my phone isn’t finished with me. Just as Sister Lucille walks by my desk, it buzzes like a rat-sized bee in my bag. I sit very still, my heart galloping. That’s gotta be my bestie, Renee. She texts me with breaking news, no matter when she comes across it—even in the middle of her Latin class.

I hold my breath as Sister Lucille stops behind me. In my efforts to look as casual as possible, I come short of whistling a jaunty showtune.

As soon as Sister Lucille turns to go, I reach back to switch off my phone. I can’t chance any more slipups. The moment my fingers don’t feel the familiar ridges of my galaxy-print case, I panic.

“Looking for this?” Sister Lucille asks, my phone gleaming as she sways it side to side.

*Sister Sticky Fingaz?* The former tween magician in me would *almost* be impressed by her sleight of hand—if I weren’t mortified.

And speaking of hands, mine are still frozen on my backpack, because apparently I can’t move and think of a good lie at the same time. “Uh, I was just grabbing . . . something.”

Sister Lucille looks down at my phone screen and reads Renee’s text out loud:

“‘Yo, your aunt is a goddess. Did you see her post? What’s that all about?’”



The entire class erupts in volcanic laughter and my cheeks start burning like hot lava.

Most kids don't know my aunt is the famed influencer Mimose Benoires. If they know anything about me, it's that my parents run the struggling Haitian take-out restaurant Port-au-Princesse.

And now, apparently, that I'm the object of Sister Lucille's comedy routine.

"Whew, now *I* want to see this post," Sister Lucille sighs, faux impressed. One of her hands is holding my phone and the other is fanning the air. The way she's performing, you'd think there's a NUN' BUT LAUGHS sign over a velvet rope outside the classroom and we all paid a cover charge to get in here.

Chuckles break out once again, and I note how little it takes for reasonable people to act like a stale laugh track.

I glance sideways and see that Kwame is still watching me with a hitch of his eyebrow. I boldly meet his watchful stare. Now the amusement—or relief?—quirking one corner of his mouth communicates something different: I am of some comfort to him. Maybe he thought class with honors nerds would be robotic. I'm not sure he expected there'd be any humans malfunctioning, and I can tell this relaxes him.

In this moment, him and me, eye to eye, we are the reverse Adam and Eve, aware of our nakedness but not hiding it from each other. We don't run for cover. We don't place a fig leaf over what lies exposed: His honors class discomfort. My chaotic

moment. Understanding this, and seeing my faults welcomed, relaxes *me*. For a minute, anyway.

“I will hold on to your phone until the end of class, Ms. Destin,” Sister Lucille tells me sharply. She turns on her Boomer heels and begins her slow creep to the front of the classroom.

“Speaking of goddesses,” my teacher continues as I slump in my seat. “Which Greek-mythology goddess could be considered the patron saint of popularity? Anyone want to take a guess?”

Kwame starts fidgeting like a *Jeopardy* contestant with a broken buzzer. He knows the answer. But he’s scanning the room as if expecting someone else to respond. Why doesn’t he just say it? I raise my eyebrows and give him a look like, *Speak up*.

Kwame’s ink-black eyes shift to me and he mumbles, “PHEME,” under his breath as if expecting me to share. Um, not gonna happen. I’m trying to stay unseen right now.

“Did somebody say PHEME?” questions Sister Lucille, glancing toward our corner of the classroom. “I thought I just heard the answer come from this area. No?”

Kwame doesn’t own up to it.

“Must’ve been my imagination,” she relents. “But PHEME is right. Known as the goddess of popularity, PHEME would go viral pretty regularly if she were a real person in today’s world.”

I give Kwame a knowing look, which he acknowledges with a wink. I roll my eyes and look away, fighting back a smile. At least I can feel some of the awkwardness of being put on blast melt away.

For the rest of the class, Sister Lucille has us read and discuss a passage in our *Mythology Through the Ages* book. When the bell rings and I stand up, she walks over and hands me my phone.

“This isn’t freshman year anymore,” she says quietly. “We’re stepping things up. Phones off in my class.”

Chastened, I nod and inch my way into the bottlenecking crowd heading out the door.

In the hallway, friends separated during class reunite like matching pairs of socks after a tumble in the dryer. I feel a pang of sadness that Renee and I have totally opposite schedules this year that keep us from seeing each other during the day—another bit of bad luck. But I’m happy that we’ll be meeting up after school to go shopping for Carnival outfits.

“Sister Lucille may be getting old, but nothing wrong with her hearing.”

It’s Kwame, who is suddenly beside me. I meet the challenge that sparkles in his eyes.

“She could hear your phone buzzing a mile away,” he adds.

How dare he bring that up?

“Not as clearly as she heard your nerdy answer,” I bite back. When he looks around to make sure no one else heard me, I can’t help but smirk.

He nods. “Okay, I see how it’s gonna be.”

“Yo, Professor Kwame!” his friends call out, slapping his back as we merge into the hallway traffic.

“He don’t even look the same,” another friend jokes. “My dude, why is your ’fro like a whole inch shorter?”

As they lead him down the corridor, Kwame manages to communicate one last thing to me—the slightest hint of a shoulder shrug that seems to sign off from the Kwame I met in class to another, more Pheme-ous Kwame.

I get it.

Mind swirling, I head toward my second-period class . . . in the wrong direction. Of course.

I spin my behind around to go the right way, and tell myself this flustered feeling is because sophomore is off to a rocky start. It has nothing at all to do with Kwame Hilliard.