

Chapter 1 *Calm before the storm*

September 9

It was a wonderful September day in Miami, Florida. On the wide white beach along the coast of Key Biscayne the sun was hot on the sand.

A slim young woman in her early twenties was lying alone down by the sea. She was beautiful, but her face was sad. Her long black hair fell over the book she was reading. From time to time she looked up from her book and along the beach. Then she put her book away in a bag and sat up. She looked unhappily along the beach again.

“I can’t tell him! I just can’t tell him!” she whispered to herself.

The sea was flat, calm, and clear. And the weather was hot. It was too hot to work, too hot to play, too hot to drive into Miami to meet up with friends, and it was too hot to stay at home. The wide green streets of Key Biscayne and the parking lots of the tall white buildings were almost empty in the burning sun.

Everybody was at the beach. Groups of friends lay on the sand, talking, laughing and listening to music. Some were playing ball games, others ran into the water to swim. Families with fat babies and sunburned children lay under the palm trees that grew along the beach. Mothers watched carefully as their children ran down to the sea to play in the warm shallow water. And at the far end of the beach, across the water, the tall white buildings of Miami stood out

against the clear blue sky.

At the far side of the beach a narrow path ran between the tall white apartment buildings. It joined the green streets of Key Biscayne with the wide white beaches. A tall good-looking man about the same age as the woman was coming down the path. He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans and his arms and face were brown from the sun. At the end of the path he stopped under the palm trees and looked out across the beach.

“Ikemi!” he shouted.

“Max!” The woman stood up and waved. “I’m here! Over here!”

He saw her, smiled, waved back, took off his shoes, and came running towards her over the sand. He sat down beside her and moved over to kiss her.

“Max, don’t.”

“Don’t? Don’t kiss you? Why not? What’s the matter?” he asked.

Ikemi looked away from Max. “I’m sorry, Max, I’m so sorry, but we have to talk. There’s something I have to say to you . . . I wish I didn’t . . . I really wish . . .”

“Ikemi! What’s the matter? What’s going on? Tell me!”

Ikemi reached down and picked up a small stone. “It’s my father,” she said slowly. “He doesn’t want . . . you and I . . . he says we’re getting too serious. He says . . .” Ikemi did not finish what she was saying. Max took hold of her shoulders and looked into her eyes.

“Ikemi! Tell me! What does your father say?”

“Oh Max! He says I have to stop seeing you. I can’t see you anymore.”

“Stop seeing me? But he can’t do that!” Max looked at

Ikemi in surprise. But she looked at the stone, turning it over and over in her hands.

“Ikemi! Look at me! What’s going on? Why does your father want you to stop seeing me? What’s the matter with me? What have I done?”

Ikemi threw the stone into the beautiful clear water.

She turned and looked at Max. “It’s not what you’ve done, Max. It’s who you are.”

“Who I am? What do you mean?”

“You’re American, Max. I know it’s difficult for you to understand, but my father does not want me to date American men. He says there are too many differences between us, between Japanese and American people, between the way we live and the way we think.”

“What? You can’t be serious!” said Max. “How on earth can your father say that? Your mother was American! He married her, didn’t he? He married an American! How can it be all right for him to marry an American but not for you? It’s crazy!”

Ikemi looked away.

“I don’t know, Max, I just don’t know. But I do know that he isn’t going to change his mind.”

Max shook his head.

“Ikemi, I don’t understand. You don’t agree with your father, do you? Come on! You were born in America! You’ve spent all your life here! You went to American schools and now you’re studying at an American university! You’re American too, Ikemi! You’re the same as me! We’re American and we’re free to choose who we see and what we do! You don’t always have to do what your father wants, you know.”

Ikemi lifted her eyes and looked at Max.

“You’re wrong, Max. I’m sorry. I’m not free. Yes, I do live here, and yes, I went to school here. But my father is Japanese and after my mother died he brought me up. I can’t go against my father.”

Max looked down at Ikemi’s face.

“But what about me?” Max said quietly. “And what about us? Ikemi, this is crazy! Are you going to let your father decide who you should marry? Is what your father thinks more important than loving someone?”

Ikemi did not look at Max. She didn’t want to see the hurt in his face.

“I’m sorry, Max, I’m really sorry,” she whispered. “I . . .”

But Max stood up and walked away before she could finish her sentence.

She watched him walk slowly across the beach. She wanted to run after him, throw her arms around him, kiss him. She wanted to tell him she loved him, tell him that she loved him so much it frightened her.

At the top of the beach he stopped, turned, and looked back at her. Their eyes met for a moment and then she looked away quickly. She hated hurting him. Max was the kindest man she knew.

It did not matter to her father that Max was kind. What mattered to her father was what a man said and what he did. Her father thought the most important thing for a man was to be patient, to be quiet, to say nothing, to be brave, to be able to feel pain without talking about it. It was not surprising that he did not like Max. Max was loud, he was noisy, he did not think before he spoke, he was impatient – he was everything her father hated in a man. It

did not matter to her father that Max was honest, generous and helpful. It was not important to her father that Max made Ikemi laugh and feel happy.

“Why?” she whispered to herself as she watched Max disappear. “Why do I have to choose between them?”

* * *

About 8000 kilometers away, off the west coast of Africa, the weather was very different from the beautiful, calm, sunny day on the beach in Florida. It was stormy in West Africa, very stormy: large waves were crashing onto the sand, and the leaves of the palm trees were blowing noisily in the wind. The beaches of Senegal were empty except for a few brave children who were jumping in and out of the waves.

The sea was empty too. All the fishermen had come back to land. They had helped each other pull their boats high up onto the beaches, away from the waves. The fishermen sat in groups, talking and laughing, happy to be on the land and not on the sea. Soon the storms would pass, the sea would become calm, and they would go out fishing again.

The fishermen were right: the storms did pass. They moved slowly west, away from the coast and out into the sea. And as they traveled over the sea, they took in the hot, wet sea air and they grew bigger and bigger. Then the storms all blew together and made one large storm. And as the hot wet air rose from the sea into the storm the wind began to move in circles. An eye formed in the center of the circles of cloud and wind. At first the eye was wide, about 200 kilometers across, and the winds blew round

and round the eye quite slowly. But as the storm traveled over the sea, the winds became stronger as more and more hot wet air rose up into the storm. The eye of the storm got smaller as the winds became stronger.

And all the time the storm continued to move west over the sea. It moved west, following the warm water that traveled west from the coast of Africa out into the Atlantic. The warm water moved thousands of miles across the Atlantic, towards the coast of North America. And like a wild dog chasing the smell of a kill, the storm followed the warm water. Day after stormy day, it traveled across the open ocean. And after a few days, on September 13, when the storm was less than 2000 kilometers from the Caribbean, the winds blew up to 120 kilometers an hour. Screaming, terrible, and dangerous, a hurricane was born.

The weather forecasters called the killer wind Hurricane Irene. And Hurricane Irene threw itself across the Atlantic, straight towards America. In front of it the hurricane pushed a huge wall of water, an eight meter high storm wave that would destroy anything in its way.