



Juzis False Alarm





CHAPTER 1

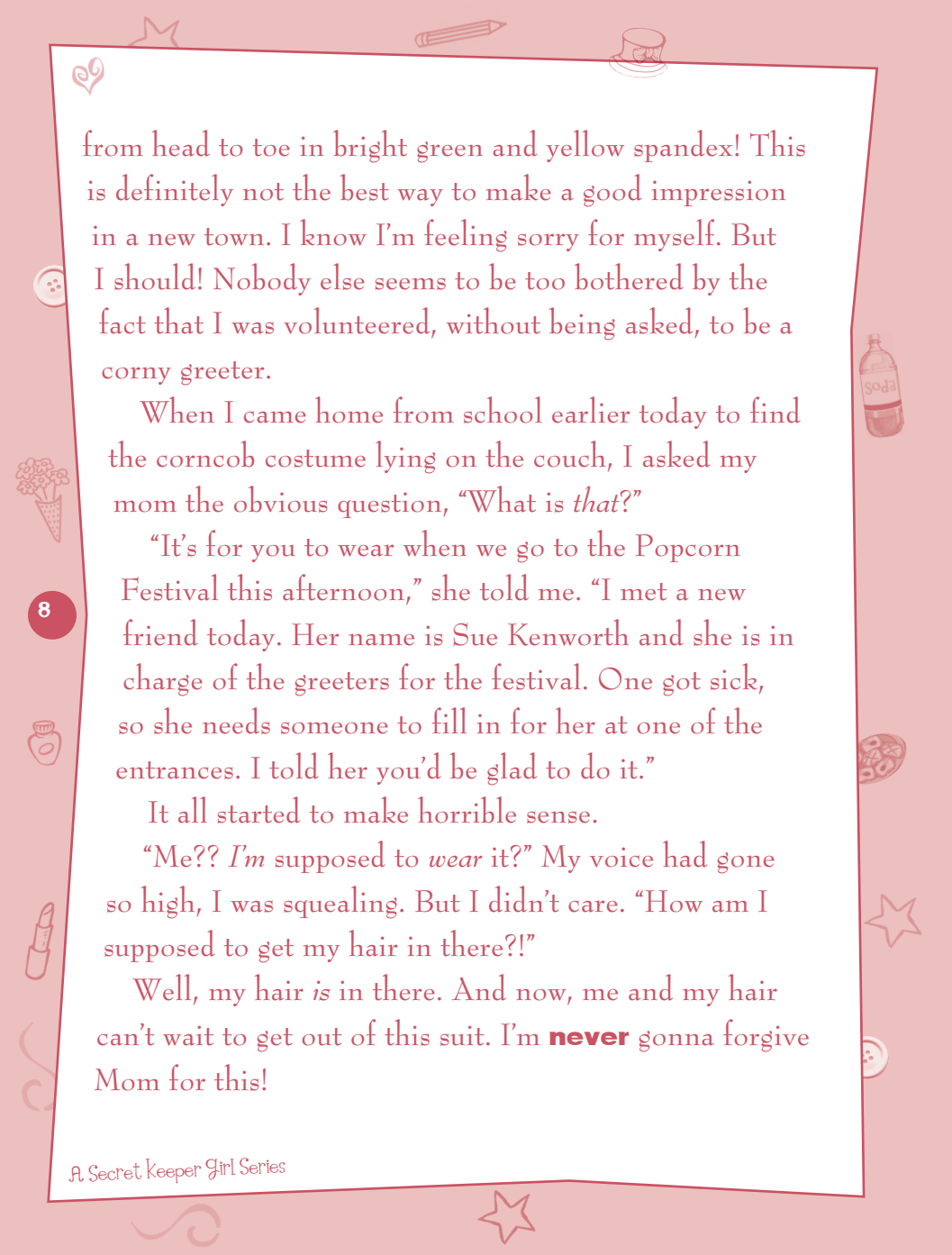
# Under Corn-struction

*This is not happening! This is NOT happening!* I feel all prickly from head to toe—and not because it’s a hot day, either. Here I am totally sprawled on the ground with no hope of saving a scrap of dignity or I-meant-to-do-that-ness. Why can’t the warm ground split open and swallow me whole?

Maybe if I lie here perfectly still, no one will notice me. No one will notice the girl lying facedown dressed in a tight, itchy, horrible corncob costume!

Yes. I am dressed as a **cob of corn**.

This was not my idea. It’s all part of my mom’s twisted plan to help me feel welcome here in Marion, Ohio, which happens to be “The Popcorn Capital of the World.” My family just moved here one week, six days, and thirteen hours ago because of Dad’s job. Mom figured it would be a good idea for me to be a greeter at the town’s annual Popcorn Festival. No big deal, *except* I had to dress



from head to toe in bright green and yellow spandex! This is definitely not the best way to make a good impression in a new town. I know I'm feeling sorry for myself. But I should! Nobody else seems to be too bothered by the fact that I was volunteered, without being asked, to be a corny greeter.

When I came home from school earlier today to find the corncob costume lying on the couch, I asked my mom the obvious question, "What is *that*?"

"It's for you to wear when we go to the Popcorn Festival this afternoon," she told me. "I met a new friend today. Her name is Sue Kenworth and she is in charge of the greeters for the festival. One got sick, so she needs someone to fill in for her at one of the entrances. I told her you'd be glad to do it."

It all started to make horrible sense.

"Me?? *I'm* supposed to *wear* it?" My voice had gone so high, I was squealing. But I didn't care. "How am I supposed to get my hair in there?!"

Well, my hair *is* in there. And now, me and my hair can't wait to get out of this suit. I'm **never** gonna forgive Mom for this!

# WELCOME

THE POPCORN CAPITAL OF THE WORLD




The stiff corn husks made it really difficult to get vertical again. When I finally got up, I ignored all the concerned faces looking at me. My nose is doing that tickly thing it does when I'm about to cry.







*Don't you dare cry*, I tell myself.



The only thing worse than being stuck in a corn-cob costume at a festival in a new town is bawling your eyes out in a corn-cob costume at a festival in a new town. I clenched my jaw, but one stubborn tear slipped out anyway.



"Well, hello. You must be the new girl in town!" The voice came from a super-smiley lady with lime-green glasses. Her short red hair was sticking out in every direction. On purpose, I think. I pretended to scratch the corner of my eye as I quickly wiped away the tear.



"Thanks for helping out today," she said, squinting in the sun. I assumed she was the woman who got me into this unfortunate comedy. "What's your name again, hon?"




"Yuzi," I answered.

"What?"

"Yuzi," I repeated.

"You're woozy? No wonder, in that getup!" She laughed.

"No. Yuzi," I said, slowly. "*Y-u-z-i.*"



"Ohhh, Yoozy! Wherever did you get a name like that?" Spiky Red asked, grinning.



I took a deep breath and started to explain. "My full name is Uzoma Ukachi. It's Nigerian. Most people can't

pronounce it, so my nickname is just the first two letters of my first name: *u-z*. And I spell it *Y-u-z-i*. Yuzi.”

“Woo! That was a mouthful! I have never been sooo happy to hear someone has a nickname. I’m Sue. No story. Just Sue Kenworth.” She stuck out her hand to shake mine, and then laughed like someone had told a funny joke. “It is hot to-*day*. But that probably doesn’t bother you since you’re from Africa. I, on the other hand, feel like I’m melting,” Sue said, fanning herself with her hand.

People usually assume I can handle any kind of heat because I’m Nigerian. But hot is hot. Besides, I’m wearing a spandex corncob.

“My son’s around here someplace,” Sue said, looking around. “I’d love for him to meet you.”

I tried to stop her. “Oh, no . . . that’s okay . . . I don’t really . . .”

“I don’t see Trevor anywhere. He’ll be so sad he missed you,” she said with a sigh.





I smiled sympathetically, but inside I was relieved.

“Where are you going to school, Yuzi?” Sue asked.

“Rutherford B. Hayes Middle School.”


“Oh, that’s perfect! You’ll probably run into Trevor there. Maybe you’ll be in some of the same classes,” Sue said






excitedly. She looked at her watch. “I’ve got to run. But it was so nice talking to you. See you around, all right?”

I nodded and smiled.



“By the way,” she said, winking like we shared a special secret, “you speak very good English.” She waved, and then disappeared into the crowd.




I waved back limply. I’m getting used to that weird compliment. So many people I’ve met think that if I’m African, and my name is African, then English must be difficult for me. But it’s not. In my family, we speak to each other a lot in Ibo, a Nigerian language. But of course, when we speak to anyone else, we use English.




**GO TO**  
[secretkeepergirl.com](http://secretkeepergirl.com)  
and type in the secret  
word “lbo” to learn  
some lbo!

12



I looked around, wondering where my family was. They were probably walking around, visiting different booths, and having a grand time dressed as *people*. I sighed. I hadn’t even asked Mrs. Kenworth when my torture would be over. A person can only handle so many hugs from cranky, sticky toddlers.



I heard familiar voices behind me and turned to see my dad, mom, two sisters, and little brother standing there with their hands full of hot, roasted corn on the cob,

towering ice cream cones, glistening hot dogs on soft buns, clouds of cotton candy in rainbows of color, and, of course, buckets of buttery popcorn. I grabbed a handful of Dad's popcorn and shoved it into my mouth.

My mom said, "Hello, dear! We just saw Sue and she said you'll be done in about fifteen minutes."

"Good," I said. "I feel like I've been wearing this forever." I still wasn't sure if I planned to forgive my mom and dad for ruining my life by moving me to this literally corny town. I did know the chances were slim that I'd recover from this traumatic start.

"But you look great—and leafy," my six-year-old brother, Ike, said, grinning mischievously. His real name is Ikechukwu, but most people call him Ike so they don't choke on his full name. His tongue was blue from his giant puff of cotton candy.

I rolled my eyes.


"Bye," I said pitifully as they walked away.

There's got to be a way for me to make friends in this new place, but I'm pretty sure it won't happen while I'm wearing *this* outfit.

I tried to make an effort for the last ten minutes. I smiled widely and put up with more hugs. Then, just as







I saw Mrs. Kenworth coming toward me again, my left foot somehow caught my right foot, and—yeah—I was on the ground again.

Lately, it's like my body's not mine. It's as if someone gave me a new collection of muscles and forgot to leave a manual. Mom says I'm going through a major growth spurt, as if moving to a new town isn't enough for me to deal with.

Sue hurriedly helped me up, concerned. "Are you all right, Yuzi?"

"Growth spurt," I mumbled, humiliated yet again.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression.

Not wanting to be rude but dying to get out of there, I asked quietly, "Am I done?"

"Absolutely yes. You were a lifesaver. Fantastic job. Thank you so much!" she said. "I'll be by next week to pick up the costume. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks. See ya." And I stalked off toward our van. Yes, *stalked*. And it's **not** funny.

I think I'm going to hate this town.