

SOPHIE AGAINST THE INEVITABLE

Written By: Adam Mandias

Special Thank You To: Holly Joy Jackson

70,000 Words

Sophie Against the Inevitable
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Shoutout to the band Winona Fighter.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	1
Just as Rehearsed	
CHAPTER TWO.....	10
Lottery Winnings	
CHAPTER THREE.....	21
Calisette Hills	
CHAPTER FOUR	31
Mounting Anxiety	
CHAPTER FIVE	0
Internal War	
CHAPTER SIX	6
The Prophecy	
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	13
Swim Practice	
CHAPTER EIGHT	20
Debate	
CHAPTER NINE	31
The Search for Answers	
CHAPTER TEN.....	39
Ms. Jackson	
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	45
The Weight of the World	

CHAPTER TWELVE.....	54
Marc	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	65
Sophie's Job Quest	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	76
The Thirteenth Amendment	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	85
One of the Good Ones	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	95
Midnight	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....	105
Breathing Room	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	112
A Gamble	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	123
Swim Meet	
CHAPTER TWENTY	132
Election Day	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	139
Election Results	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	145
Make Good Decisions	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	162
The Journey to Rick's	

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR170
 Up to Fate

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE178
 The Third Eye

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX184
 The Ledge

EPILOGUE188

POST CREDITS189

CHAPTER ONE

Just as Rehearsed

SOPHIE'S EYES locked on the clock, an old analog with a *tick* that—unlike herself—knew nothing of the future. As the second hand neared its peak, the other students stirred, packing slowly as though the teacher couldn't see them if they didn't make any noise. But Sophie didn't move. No. She knew that, in just a few seconds, Ms. Jackson would call her to the front of the room, and beside a fading poster of Stephen Hawking and Newton's laws, she'd have to fight her way out of a cheating accusation.

Fortunately, she knew how this would end.

In fact, she'd run this scene through in a series of meditations, each one revealing the outcome of a different timeline. Most of these ended poorly—maybe she spoke too loudly, said the wrong thing, froze, or cried—and her failing grade was inked forever. But in one future—just one—she'd found a way to get a makeup test on Monday. All she had to do was follow the script to a T. Any change in tone, timing, or posture would ruin *everything*.

The old clock ticked, and the final bell rang. At this, Ms. Jackson came out swinging.

"Sophie," Ms. Jackson said, raising her voice over a chorus of zipping bags, "would you stay behind a moment? We need to discuss your—" she paused to find a specific word, "—disappointing test grade."

Eyes turned, and Sophie's face burned. One kid *oobed*, and Sophie wished she'd spent a meditation exploring the timeline where she kicked his teeth in. But the opportunity had passed, and the consequences of her actions were now real.

“U-um, s-sure,” she said, precision in every syllable.

She stood and walked toward Ms. Jackson’s desk, smoothing the wrinkles of her faded T-shirt and patting down the frizz in her curly brown hair. This didn’t help much, though, as she still looked a mess next to Ms. Jackson, who didn’t have a hair out of place in her tight black ponytail.

As the last student left the room, Ms. Jackson pulled a red-marked paper from a stack and swiveled it to face Sophie. The number at the top read 35/100. Sophie’s eyes widened, and she gasped.

“I’m curious, Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said, adjusting her cat-eye glasses so they sat higher on her nose. “How is it that a student like you can get a perfect score on every scheduled test, yet fall apart the second one comes as a surprise?”

“There must be—” Sophie froze. *Shit*. She’d forgotten to start her rebut with a pathetic quaver. A deviation this early, even one this little, could send reality spiraling out of control. Thinking fast, she fumbled her way back to the script. “I mean... T-there must be s-some kind of m-mistake.”

Ms. Jackson laid a finger beside the red **35**, letting the number speak for itself. Sophie didn’t respond. Instead, she let the room simmer until only the hum of fluorescent lights could be heard. This was intentional. The winning meditation revealed that silence was needed to diffuse tension. Seven excruciating *ticks* passed before Sophie stopped her fake contemplation and spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Jackson... It’s just... I’m a horrible procrastinator. When your tests are scheduled, I know to study in advance and... Look, I know it’s my own fault. I should be staying on top of your assignments, but I’ve been so busy and...” Her voice trailed off.

“Putting things off is an odd habit for a junior who’s on track to graduate as valedictorian,” Ms. Jackson said, flipping the paper back into her stack and aligning the edges with meticulous care. “Perhaps you have too much on your plate. Maybe you should drop your campaign for class president and focus on your studies. I imagine running against Tay is stressful given your... close relationship.” She

raised an eyebrow without moving the rest of her face.

“I can’t. I need every advantage to get into Harvard.” Sophie sighed and slumped, overacting a bit. “Listen, Ms. Jackson... You’re a great teacher. The best I’ve ever had. Nobody’s ever challenged me like you have, and that means I need to work harder. And I will—just give me another chance.”

And that was it. The fight was over, the script run through. Sophie didn’t know *why* this particular line worked—she just knew it did. The best she could figure was that it turned the focus away from Sophie and shone a spotlight on Ms. Jackson. Either way, the makeup test was hers.

Well, maybe. She *had* messed up the stutter.

Seconds passed as Ms. Jackson thought, and Sophie’s heart sped. Her hands perspired, her legs shook; none of these things had happened in her meditation. That made everything worse.

Keep it together.

“Right,” Ms. Jackson said, pursing her lips. “Well, since I’m such a *challenging* teacher, and since you’re offering to work harder, I’ll give you a retake.” She held up a finger. “But it’ll be another pop test. Moving forward, do you think you can manage your time better?”

“Of course I can,” Sophie said, genuinely relieved.

If there’s one thing I can manage, it’s time. This conversation was proof.

“Good. You may go.”

Sophie turned to gather her belongings. This timeline could’ve been much, much—

“And Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said. A shiver ran down Sophie’s arms. This was new. “Say hello to Phoebe, for me, would you?”

“My older sister?”

“Who else?” Ms. Jackson cracked a smile. “She was my student a couple years ago. Let her know I’m thinking of her.”

“I—I will,” Sophie stammered. “If she calls.”

Ms. Jackson turned to her computer. “See you tomorrow.”

Sophie gave a tight smile and left, wondering how her one mistake could’ve led to *this*. But she didn’t have time to reflect on it—the Ledge was waiting, and if she didn’t hurry, she’d be the one to

break the streak.

For sixty-four school days straight, she, Marc, and Tay had met after school by a wall with a smiley face graffitied on the front. There was nothing special about the spot, but the streak meant a lot to them. Fortunately, the Ledge was close, and with a heave, she pushed through the double doors and stepped out onto the terrace where the Southern California sun—bright and unbothered by the region’s January winter—bathed the school in gold. For once, it almost looked nice here.

She smiled as Tay came into focus, enjoying the flutters in her stomach. But this feeling faded when Tay’s new boyfriend came into view. What was his name? Dustin? Derek? D-bag? Whatever it was, it was only his second day at the Ledge—Sophie hoped it’d be his last, especially as Tay leaned against him with one hand on his chest and laughed at something he’d just said.

In contrast to them, Marc was something of a jump-scare. The dark bags under his eyes were impossible to miss, standing out even against his brown skin. His lanky frame looked heavier than usual in the oversized T-shirt he was wearing, and even the thick-rimmed glasses on his nose seemed to slump in a tired way.

“You made it,” Marc said, his voice sagging in a way that matched his appearance.

“You must’ve been up late,” Sophie said. There was a subtle intonation that Marc caught instantly.

“Yup, you guessed it.” Marc smiled toothlessly. “What took you so long? You’re never late.”

“Ms. Jackson pulled me aside after class. She thinks I’m cheating.”

“Well...” Tay looked up, pulling her attention away from her boyfriend. “You are.”

Sophie looked at Tay to defend herself, but when their eyes met, Sophie discovered she’d forgotten how to speak. This always happened around Tay. She was so pretty—like, prom-queen pretty—with an athletic build and a golden tan. This, coupled with her blonde hair and blue eyes, made her glow like a sunlit statue. A few tight

seconds passed before Sophie realized how long she'd been silent, and by then, it was too late to gather an excuse. Regardless, Tay took the pause as irritation and grimaced.

"Kidding," she mumbled.

Silence marinated, and Marc was the first to break it.

"So, do you guys still want to see a movie tonight?" he asked. "The new Origin of the Ring came out. I want to see how they make an eighteenth-century horror story about telegrams that kill you."

"Is that the movie where a guy whispers 'one-half fortnight' before slamming the door in a peasant's face?" Sophie asked. "Because it looks awful."

"So...?"

"So, I'm in," Sophie said. "Obviously."

"Me too, as long as it's later," Tay said. "Darren and I are going to Chipotle for dinner. Do you want to come to the movies with us, babe?"

Sophie turned to Tay's boyfriend expectantly. She could see why Tay liked him. He *was* handsome. Not as pretty as Tay, of course, but textbook pretty. The kind of pretty that would have had a semi-successful Instagram account if you counted paid bots. What made him irresistible to Tay, however, was the mustache. This guy had the biggest, bushiest mustache of all the boys in his grade. For most people, this would've been a dealbreaker, but given Tay's private obsession with Nietzsche, it made perfect sense. Sophie longed to bring this up, if only to tease, but since this secretive information was acquired through a meditation, she was forced to keep it bottled.

"Hm? A movie? Sorry. I don't have time," the boyfriend said, looking up from his phone. "I have an essay due tomorrow I haven't started."

Sophie perked up, recognizing an opportunity to get rid of him early.

"Maybe you should do that," Sophie said, blurring the line between encouragement and dismissal. "Grades are important, right?"

"Yeah. Actually, that's a good idea." He turned to Tay. "Pick me up at 4:30?"

“I’ll be there.”

They kissed. Sophie’s stomach knotted, but she couldn’t look away. Several uneasy seconds passed, and nobody spoke again until Nietzsche-junior was out of earshot.

“So, Marc,” Sophie said, grabbing the conversation early. “Are you sure you’re feeling up to another late night?”

“I don’t mind,” Marc said. “Why? You have another idea?”

“Well... since it’s just the three of us, maybe we skip the theater and break into that private mansion on Calisette Hills again. We get to pick any film, and you get to have a little shut eye in the process.”

“I don’t know,” Marc said. “It’s a bit of a hassle getting in. Remember last time?”

“This time will be better,” Sophie said. “My power’s more reliable than ever, and I’ve gotten so much faster at entering the meditations. I can let you know when it’s time to do your dream walking thing.”

Marc wobbled his head back and forth.

“And you get to see Buck.”

“I’m in,” Marc said. “Tay?”

“I think it’s a fun idea,” Tay said. “Actually, I have a lead on our movie. The other day, I was digging through the gas station rack of direct-to-DVD masterpieces and—”

“Holy shit, DVDs?” Marc scoffed.

“If you want the best worst movies, you need DVDs,” Tay said matter-of-factly. “And I’ve got two picked out. The first is *Gophertopia*—a movie about a village of gophers who live in harmony until the fire-ant nation attacks. The second is *Meteoradocane*, a low-budget disaster film about a firestorm hurtling through Hollywood.”

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood for a double feature,” Marc said. “That’s a long time for me to work my magic on a guy.”

“Well, I don’t want to drive an hour just to have a quick watch party,” Tay retorted. “We have to do something else while we’re out there.”

“You know,” Sophie started, “we should make an evening of it. Maybe we watch one movie and then break in somewhere else for a hot tub? That’ll give Marc a break, and us a chance to relax.” She tried

to sound casual, but it was obvious she'd been wanting to make this request for a while now.

"That sounds lovely," Tay said. "But if we're only doing one movie, I want to know which one is better."

"Are you seriously efficiency-maxxing your pastimes?" Marc asked.

"I efficiency-max all my times," Tay said.

"Do you really want to know which movie—between *Gophertopia* and *Meteoradocane*—is better?" Sophie deadpanned. "Isn't it the point that neither of them is good?"

"Look... It'll only take you a minute to get an answer."

"It'll only take *you* a minute to wait for the answer," Sophie said. "The visions pass in real time for me. It'll take hours on my side."

"*Pleeease?*" Tay flashed her best puppy-dog eyes.

"Ugh, fine." Sophie rolled her eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh. "But let's take a shortcut. I want to go straight to your house and watch the movies now."

"Now?" Tay paused. "Like, right now? I mean, I have dinner plans and—"

Sophie waved both her hands. "We'll only be watching it in the vision. You'll still be able to go out for dinner, but you *do* have to commit to our plans first. Otherwise, the vision won't play out right."

"Uh, well—"

"Tay?" Sophie gave a serious look. "What's rule number one?"

"To trust you," Tay recited in a tired, rehearsed tone.

"Right. We're not *actually* going to watch these movies at your place tonight, but if you're not *willing* to watch these movies now, then my vision won't work."

"I know." Tay sighed. "Fine. I'm *willing* to cancel my dinner date, but *only* theoretically."

"Thank you." Sophie relaxed as Tay affirmed she could still be priority number one over, uh, Destin or whoever. "Now, give me a minute."

She took a seat beside the Ledge—her back to the wall—and closed her eyes. There, she listened to the sound of her breath. Over

the course of seconds, her brainwaves elongated, her respiration deepened, and her heart rate slowed. In minutes, time itself ground to a halt, and Sophie fell into a meditative state.

When she next opened her eyes, she was seeing the future.

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Sophie started her precognitive vision by leaving Marc at the school and getting the DVDs with Tay. The next two hours were spent marveling at the meteornadocane as it tore through Los Angeles, hurtled past Vegas, and threatened Nebraska. The film was a B-movie masterpiece that lingered on all the right things, such as the Hollywood sign being ripped to shreds, the Walk of Fame stars being ejected into space, and an Elvis impersonator dodging fireballs to the tune of *Burning Love*. Yet, as the movie reached its climax—wherein a mad scientist conjured the world’s first Category 6 hurricane to clash against the monstrous storm over Nebraska—Sophie found it hard to pay attention.

You should tell Tay that you like her, Sophie thought. It was a dumb, intrusive thought.

But she took it seriously.

It *was* safe here. Perfectly consequence-free. Maybe she *should*. But as she opened her mouth to speak, her vocal cords wound themselves so tight she couldn’t even whisper.

What if Tay doesn’t like me? she wondered.

Or what if she does?!

I don’t know!

Indecision slapped her around, and Sophie decided to ease into it. Give Tay an out. With shaky hands, she inched closer to Tay, moving until their shoulders were touching. Soon, their arms pressed together. Then their hands sat side by side. At each step, Tay made no effort to move away.

Sophie felt a bubble of hope swell in her heart. At last, with a burst of nervous energy, she placed her hand on top of Tay’s and squeezed. This got Tay’s attention. She turned toward Sophie with a tilted head and narrowed eyes.

This was it. The moment of truth. A lump formed in Sophie’s

throat, and even though this vision was only a reflection of what reality could be, it felt as real as anything.

“Tay,” Sophie said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “I want to tell you something.” Was her voice weird? It sounded weird. “I’ve—I’ve liked you all year. Like, *liked* you, liked you. And I was... I mean, if you’re open to it... Can you... Will you...” she sighed. “Be my girlfriend?”

Tay smiled, but a noticeable tension formed in her shoulders. Slowly, she withdrew her hand. Her mouth opened, then closed again. Silence. The longer the silence dragged on, the more Sophie melted.

This was a mistake. This wasn’t right.

How could I be so stupid?

“Um... Thank you, Sophie,” Tay whispered. “I’m flattered... but... we... I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Rejection. Outright rejection.

“W-Why?” Sophie whispered, but she wasn’t even sure it came out all the way. The world seemed to darken, and reality broke at the seams. Panic compounded the effect, and pieces of the world began to tear away.

Maybe Tay was committed to her boyfriend. Maybe Tay needed time to think. Or maybe Tay couldn’t love Sophie under *any* circumstances. But Sophie couldn’t stay with the meditation long enough to find out.

Her breath caught. Her chest ignited. Each *thump* of her heart seemed to hammer through her skull over and over again, until—

Sophie hurtled back to reality, having been violently expelled from the entrails of time. The school blurred into focus and the bright sun beat hard on her face.

Ice crept through her veins, and terror ripped through her.

This... This had never happened before.

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CHAPTER TWO

Lottery Winnings

SOPHIE OPENED her eyes, finding the fuzzy outlines of Marc and Tay hovering overhead. They had wide eyes and were expecting her to say something.

“So?” Tay asked after a few seconds.

Sophie blinked. “Um, *Gophertopia*.”

“*Gophertopia* it is,” Marc said. “You said it’s a DVD at the gas station?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you need prune juice with that?”

“Shut up,” Tay said. “DVDs aren’t *that* old.”

“Wait.” Sophie shook her head, the fog starting to lift. “How much will the movie cost?”

“Didn’t you buy them?” Marc asked. “Like, in your vision?”

“Uh...” Sophie gave a sly smile. “We might’ve stuffed the movies into Tay’s purse and booked it.”

“Excuse me?” Tay blinked. “I *stole*? You made me *steal*?”

“It was a rule number one situation, don’t worry about it.”

“Ugh, meditation me *sucks*,” Tay said. “Anyway, *Gophertopia* is fifteen bucks, and we’re definitely buying it this time.” She pinched her forehead. “God, I feel like I should buy two copies to make up for your *crime*. You *criminal*.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that.”

“I *know*, but still...” Tay scoffed.

Sophie laughed. “Okay, well if we’re going to buy it, we need money. How much do we have?”

They each emptied their pockets and found nothing. A scramble through Tay’s purse, however, procured four crumpled dollars. She held them up shamefully, silently asking them to consider—how did they have just \$4 between them? Nobody wanted to admit it, but the stash of candy wrappers in the backseat of Tay’s little red Subaru had the answer.

“It’s enough,” Sophie said. “Let’s go.”

They started their trek to the gas station, roughly a mile away. The walk began light, with chatter about school and movies, until Marc remembered he needed to call his mom. This left Sophie alone with Tay, the rejection still fresh in her mind. As they walked, she made a point to not look at her friend. Instead, her eyes were locked to the sidewalk where she kicked pebbles out into the street. This was strange behavior for Sophie, and Tay picked up on it immediately.

“You look upset,” Tay said.

“I do?”

“Yeah, and I think I know why.”

Sophie’s heart skipped a beat. *Oh, God. Do I sleep-talk now?*

“You’re worried about the election, aren’t you?” Tay asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Sophie said, barely able to mouth the word amid her relief. “Yeah. I’ve been nervous about it since they announced we were the only two running.”

“It’s weird, right?” Tay sighed. “Best friends turned political rivals? I don’t like it.”

“I don’t either,” Sophie said. “But the school is lucky to have us. Even if I lose, you’ll win. It’s the best-case scenario.”

“Right...” Tay struggled to say more, eventually finding the right words. “But one of us *is* going to win, you know? And I feel like you have an, uh, advantage on me. One I can’t compete with.”

Sophie opened her mouth to inquire, then stopped herself short. Of course—precognition. It was the whole reason she’d been calm about the election. Her power always solved her problems. But

now...

“I was hoping you could promise me something.” Tay’s eyes locked to the pavement and she kicked her own rock. This wasn’t easy for anyone. “Can you promise you won’t use your powers to win?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course. I wouldn’t dream of cheating.” *Would I?*

Tay stayed quiet as though she were trying to pull more words out of Sophie, but when none came, Tay relaxed.

But the relief didn’t pass to Sophie. Instead, dread seeped through her skin.

It’ll be okay, she told herself. *You can still win without your powers.*

No, you can’t, said another voice, deeper in her mind.

But I have to.

The rest of the walk was silent, and Sophie’s stomach felt like it was recovering from a punch. How was she supposed to win without knowing the future? There was just no way, right?

As the group reached the gas station, Marc returned from his call, and his request to know what he missed was met with a gentle deflection. Sophie took her seat beneath a dirty shaved-ice banner and drew breaths to prepare for a meditation. From this vantage point, her friends looked exceptionally tall as they crowded around her.

“Have you ever thought about hitting the jackpot?” Marc asked. “I think the Powerball’s up to a billion.”

“I’ve considered it,” Sophie said, “but I’d be stupid to do it. You’ve seen the studies, right? Lottery winners are less happy than regular people, and I’m not dumb enough to ruin my life with all that attention. Not when I can get a few hundred bucks here and there whenever I want.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Marc said, unconvinced. “By the way, on the note of a few hundred bucks, uh...” He hesitated, casting a glance at Tay before shutting his mouth. “You know what? Never mind.”

Sophie knew what he was getting at. It was near the end of the month, and his family needed extra money to cover rent. Again. She winked to assure him she’d get it.

“I’ll be back in a second.”

Sophie closed her eyes and listened to the quiet hum in her mind.

With each moment, she felt a tug in her body—the familiar cocoon of time as it folded around her. Today, its pull was weaker than usual, likely due to Sophie using some of her brainpower to ignore the situation with Tay. But the more she pushed her thoughts away, the more overbearing they became. Each new intrusive thought was a firework spooking off her peace.

Forget about it, she thought. Look for your answers later.

This reassurance seemed to work, and Sophie slipped off into a washed-out meditation. The whole vision was like looking through a foggy porthole. With a burst of concentration, she got through it with a working plan and opened her eyes. To Sophie, an hour passed, but to everyone else, it'd been seconds.

“Alright,” Sophie said. “I need one dollar.”

“That’s it?”

Tay dug through her purse, and Sophie gave Marc a reassuring nod.

“Here you go.”

Tay held out the dollar, and Sophie snatched it from her hand. With a swagger, she stepped into the gas station, Marc and Tay tailing her before splitting off to comb the place for snacks.

“Sophie!” The young clerk’s eyes widened. “How much are we winning today?”

“Three hundred,” Sophie said, slapping the dollar on the counter.

“Wow.” The clerk smiled and turned to his case. “And which card are we starting with?”

Sophie pointed to card 7. The clerk ripped it from the roll and laid it on the counter. From the take-one-leave-one bin, Sophie plucked a nickel and scratched two numbers, earning \$20. She used that to buy four more tickets. The first three she tossed, but the last one hit \$50 in bonus cash. The process went on for six rounds, and on the last card, Sophie collected her \$300 prize, exactly as promised.

Sophie left him the usual tip: twenty dollars and a hint about which card would be the next winner. She appreciated that the clerk never asked for more. But honestly, how could he? He *was* selling the tickets to her illegally. If he ever outed her, he’d be telling on himself,

too. And as for her, she couldn't go anywhere else without risking her powers being exposed. At least *this* guy could be trusted. Sophie liked to think they'd forged a silent, unlikely crime syndicate and wondered if the clerk felt the same way.

While Tay was reading the nutrition facts of a protein bar, Sophie slipped Marc the money he needed for rent, and they returned to the front. A moment later, stacks of sugars and salts were rung from the register, and Sophie paid for the haul—including the movie. With whatever remained, she booked each of them a RydeShare taxi. With only three drivers in the area, Sophie had to book them all. This ensured her friends would get back to their cars, and it saved her from the long walk home.

"I'll pick you up at 6:30," Tay said, waving as Sophie climbed into the back seat of her RydeShare. "After Chipotle."

"Sounds good," Sophie said, stifling her feelings. "And Marc, don't forget your melatonin."

"I won't."

Sophie closed the door and buckled up. As the car pulled away, her gaze lingered on Tay, and her mind ran wild. The promise to run a fair race echoed louder now, hollow and inconvenient. What did fairness even mean? Tay had her own advantages too, but Sophie couldn't exactly ask her to stop being so pretty now could she?

Dinner with the family was bland and unenjoyable as Sophie had eaten it three times already. Since being dropped off by her RydeShare, she'd spent hours in her room blasting Olivia Rodrigo from her top-of-the-line speaker while stealing answers from the future. So, while her mom's ravioli *was* good, it had long since lost its flavor.

"Katelyn, what are you swimming tonight?" Mom asked.

Katelyn was Sophie's younger sister, a freshman who was annoyingly good at everything, even without the ability to see the future. Her years as a swimmer had sculpted broad shoulders and given her tanned skin, both of which complemented the voluminous auburn hair she'd picked up from Mom and the dimpled cheeks she got from Dad. By contrast, Sophie had picked up Mom's healthy chub

and Dad's cleft chin, neither of which she was particularly fond of.

"Coach has me on the 100-yard freestyle, the 100-yard butterfly, and the 200-yard medley," Katelyn said.

"That's a lot," Dad said.

"I'm sure I'll do fine."

"I can tell you how you do," Sophie piped up. "Do you want to know where you place?"

"No thanks. I like surprises."

"Gross," Sophie said, already making plans to check when Ms. Jackson would issue her makeup test.

"By the way, Sophie," Katelyn started, stuffing another bit into her mouth. "Now that it's the second semester, do you think you're going to sign up for any sports?"

Sophie nearly choked.

"Absolutely not."

Sports were the one place where her power was useless. No glimpse of the future would change the outcome of a race. No. The only way to get better at sports was to work hard, and Sophie wanted no part of that. She needed controllable variables, predictable outcomes, and most importantly, *no surprises*.

"Well maybe you want to come cheer on your sister, then?" Mom paused to let Sophie answer. This was just a formality, however, as everyone already knew what Sophie's answer would be.

"No, thanks. I'm hanging out with Marc and Tay tonight."

"Okay," Mom said, her eyes not lifting from her plate. "Make good decisions."

It had become the default response. *Make good decisions*. Mom was well aware of Sophie's powers as she was a seer herself—albeit a much less talented one; one who only glimpsed snippets of visions as they skirted past her in dreams. But at a certain point, it'd become clear that Sophie was going to be unstoppable, and so her mother did the only thing she could do, which was to encourage Sophie to make good decisions. And each night, Sophie considered whether she'd follow that advice. Most of the time, she didn't.

"Hey, did Phoebe call?" Sophie asked, thinking back to Ms.

Jackson's words. "I feel like she's overdue for some phone time."

"She hasn't called all month," Mom said. "I believe she's still on phone restriction at the compound. I'm sorry."

"That's okay."

With most potential conversations already spoiled for Sophie over the course of her visions, there was nothing more to say, and dinner ended on a quiet note. Afterward, everyone split. Mom, Dad, and Katelyn were the first to leave, along with a childish Hello Kitty towel that Katelyn felt no shame in having. Sophie wasn't long behind them as Tay rolled up in her little Subie Forester, a bright red hand-me-down from her aunt.

Practically bouncing, Sophie raced out the front door. Marc was already in the backseat as he'd need that space later, so Sophie slid into shotgun beside Tay, her adrenaline buzzing. Even though they weren't touching, she could still *feel* Tay beside her.

"How's traffic?" Sophie asked, her voice a bit unsteady.

"No delays on the way to Calisette," Tay said. "As usual."

"Cool. Let's go."

Tay hit the gas, and they began their journey. Calisette Hills was the rich district in their city. Marc often practiced his skills there as it offered two things that made his power extremely convenient: people who lived alone, and nice toys. But the drive to Calisette was strange because it required a route that passed through a patchwork of different neighborhoods.

Coalview came first, with its buckled pavement, barred windows, and a smell of rust that seeped into Sophie's chest. At nearly every corner, there was a shirtless, stone-faced kid on a too-small bike who eyed the Kia like it was a spaceship. To be fair, it was out of place. Each house here had the rust-bitten carcass of an old vehicle lying in the front yard, ivy twining through the wheel wells like varicose veins. Sophie almost commented on it—where did all these broken-down cars come from?—but the rattle of the road swallowed her voice, and she chose instead to let her mind wander.

If I'd grown up here, would I still be aiming for Harvard? Or would I be content with a Kia that ran?

She put the thought behind her as they transitioned to the second neighborhood: a suburb called Bristol that mirrored the one Sophie lived in. With suburban districting came suburban funding, and the warped pavement smoothed into a ribbon of asphalt. On the skyline, rolling green hills replaced the dilapidated factories, and the tangled power lines straightened on their poles. Everything here was more planned. More polished. More proud.

“We’re getting close,” Marc said, rolling down his window to catch a breeze. “It’s about time you made sure tonight goes smoothly, Sophie. Buck’s house is a bachelor pad, so we should be good, but you never know.”

Sophie nodded. As her breath evened into a steady cadence, she let the empty echo in her head pull her deeper and deeper until—

What if there’s no way to win the election while keeping Tay as a friend?

A spike of fear jolted Sophie from her meditative state. All she’d seen was darkness. She stayed still and tried to silence her heart, but it wasn’t possible. Her next breath felt shallow, as though Coalview’s air still clung to her lungs, and her mind couldn’t find its rhythm with the cracks of time narrowing too thin to slip through. And all the while, her brain screamed: *What if Tay will never love you?*

Sophie opened her eyes.

“You okay?” Marc asked.

“Fine.”

She took a few more breaths and focused on the sound it made. Somehow, the peaceful nature of it all slowed her mind, and she entered the future. The vision was rough but quick. A flash of lights, Marc’s tense jaw, and a cold voice asking for IDs. She broke into a cold sweat and snapped awake.

“How’d our trespassing go?” Marc asked. “Should I start prepping my melatonin?”

Truthfully, Sophie hadn’t seen that far into the vision. Somewhere higher up the hill, Tay had grazed her arm and the meditation shattered. The question threw her for a loop, and she recentered herself to warn Tay about the—

Whoop, whoop!

The sirens of a patrol car sounded behind Tay, and a flash of red and blue blasted across the rearview mirror. The intensity of the lights slapped Tay across the face, and her arms began to shake.

“What?” Tay’s face paled. “But—”

“It’s okay,” Sophie said, straightening in her seat. “It’s going to be fine. Just do what he says.”

“I can’t get a ticket.” Tay’s knuckles whitened around the wheel.

“No, it’s fine,” Sophie whispered. “You’re not going to be in trouble. Just be yourself.”

Tay found a pull-off under a streetlight that shone upon the car like a spotlight. There, they waited. It took forever for the officer to get his stuff in order, doubly so as his K-9 bounced about the passenger seat. After minutes, the officer left his cruiser, his right-hand hovering over the holster of his gun while his left shone a flashlight straight at them. It was oddly aggressive for a routine traffic stop.

The officer glared through Marc’s open window, and Marc withdrew his arm, folding his hands and locking eyes with the back of Tay’s seat. In this moment, Marc was very aware of his dark skin, and he moved accordingly.

The officer took another step until he was even with Tay’s window. There, he tapped twice on the glass, and Tay rolled down the window.

“H-Hello,” Tay said through a closed throat and watery eyes.

When the cop saw Tay for the first time, his eyes widened. There was a flash of consideration as his mind played through a variety of scenarios. Then he clicked off his flashlight, shifted his demeanor, and removed his hand from his holster.

“Good evening, ma’am,” he said, almost pleasantly. “License and registration.”

Tay reached to her glovebox and retrieved her papers. The cop didn’t even glance at it.

“I need to see IDs from everyone.” His eyes fell to Marc.

Slowly, Marc reached into his pocket, withdrew his wallet, and deposited his license into Tay’s hand. In an intentional contrast,

Sophie moved sporadically through her purse, throwing her learner's permit into Tay's lap. Naturally, the officer paid her no mind.

"Did I do something wrong, sir?" Tay asked, handing over all the cards.

The officer didn't respond. Instead, he inspected each card—spending extra time on Marc's—before handing them back.

"Do you know how fast you were going?"

Tay choked, and a tear dripped down her cheek. When she spoke, her throat was so tight the words were barely audible.

"I t-thought I was going the speed limit," she said.

"63 in a 55," the officer said. "Do you know what the penalty is for that?"

"N-no, sir." Tay gasped for air, more tears streaming down her face.

"It's not good," he said, withdrawing a pad from his back pocket. "A pricey ticket, higher insurance, points on your license. Sometimes, it'll even prevent you from getting a job."

Tay nodded and time slowed. Her heart skipped several beats, and she knew it was only a matter of time before it stopped completely. This can't be happening; she never gets in trouble.

"But I can tell you're a good kid," the cop said quickly, flipping his pad closed. "So I'm not gonna write a ticket. Not today. Consider this a verbal warning, got it?"

"O-okay," Tay composed herself quickly. "I'll slow down. Thank you, sir."

"I'll have to record this as something, though, so let's pretend this is a courtesy stop." The officer straightened. "As with all courtesy stops, I have to ask: is everyone safe tonight?"

"Yes, sir," Tay replied, her voice full once again.

"So, you're all good? No problems?"

"No problems," Sophie answered.

"And you're *sure* you don't need any help?" The officer cast a not-so-subtle look at Marc.

"Yes, officer. I'm sure." Tay smiled, finding her charisma once again. "It's nice that you're patrolling for safety like this." Her words

were genuine, which caught Sophie by surprise. Surely, she sensed the subtle hostility toward Marc, right?

“We sure do,” Marc said, flat and resigned.

“What was that?” the cop barked, snapping his neck to glare at Marc.

“I said thanks,” Marc replied, staring at him with the energy of a one-finger salute. When the cop didn’t back off, Marc forced a smile that felt more like a thin shield than anything else. “Thank you, sir.” His voice carved each syllable.

“Yes, well...” The officer straightened. “You kids have a safe night.”

Pivoting on his heel, the officer strolled back to his vehicle and climbed into the driver’s seat. He patted the dog’s head and turned off the flashing lights. Tay waited for him to pull away, but he didn’t move.

“Is he...”

“Just go,” Marc whispered.

“Huh?”

“Go,” Marc said, a little more pronounced. “He’s done his stop. Let’s move.”

Silently, Tay pressed on the pedal and merged back on the highway. Somehow, the car moved slower than before, as though it were carrying a new kind of weight.

CHAPTER THREE

Calisette Hills

IN MINUTES, suburbia melted away, and they reached the outskirts of Calisette Hills. The differences in lifestyle were apparent as the surrounding world shifted to reflect the intangible aesthetic of excess wealth. Every square inch had been cared for to an obsessive degree. The grass was thick, the pavement smooth, the fences white. Everything was in perfect order. This should've pleased Sophie, but it didn't. When it came to the forces of nature, untamed was better.

Tension melted as they wound around the foothill bends, finally reaching a house that stood in the uncanny valley between a suburban home and a mansion—too grand for Bristol, yet too modest for Calisette.

“You ready, Marc?” Tay asked, grazing Sophie's arm as she engaged the parking brake.

“Sure,” Marc said, lying flat across the backseat. From here, his job was simple: fall asleep, possess the man, and unlock the hot tub. “Anything I should know, Sophie?”

Sophie froze, still reeling from the brush with Tay. “Uh, yeah. I'll check.”

Her eyes closed and the air settled, but her brain didn't fall silent as usual. It whirred on and on, forming a wall of thoughts that prevented her from crossing into the future. She sat with herself a moment, desperately working to care about nothing. And it worked—sort of. Dimly, she saw the break-in start smoothly, then collapse after Tay made eye contact for a second too long. But this was enough.

“It’s smooth sailing,” Sophie said, trusting the unseen parts of her vision would fall in her favor.

Marc nodded and closed his eyes, slipping into a dream in seconds.

“How do you think he does it?” Tay asked. “He just falls asleep and starts dreamwalking inside someone else’s body?”

“As far as I can tell, it’s magic,” Sophie said.

“I could say the same about your power.”

“Nah. My power’s genetic.”

“Then how come Katelyn didn’t get it?”

“Something, something, recessive genes?” Sophie shrugged. “I don’t know. I used my power to pass biology, remember?”

“Fair.”

In the backseat, Marc flinched, and Sophie drew her eyes to the front door. In seconds, the porch light flickered on.

“Oh, I think he’s ready.”

The front door opened, and a strange man stepped out. He was dressed in pajamas and carried half his sleep with him to the porch. Despite the face, body, and clothes belonging to a stranger, the man’s gait was unmistakably that of Marc’s—off-kilter with a lean to one side. Beside him, a bulldog bounced about, begging for attention.

Tay scrambled out the car and bolted toward the dog in a half-squat.

“How’re you doing, Buck?” Tay cooed, meeting the dog in the yard and scratching his shoulders. “I missed you. Yes, I did!”

Sophie followed behind Tay, passing the dog and approaching the man at the door.

“That you, Marc?” she asked the stranger.

“Yup,” Marc said in the other man’s voice. As he spoke, Buck turned away from Tay and jumped on Marc, clawing for attention. “Buck can always tell it’s me,” he said, rubbing the dog between the ears. “I might look and smell like the owner, but he always knows when I take the body. Weird, isn’t it?”

Marc—in the stranger’s body—stepped sideways to let his friends pass. The house was modest, leaning on gaudy. A crystal

chandelier hung over the door, and a gorgeous geometric carpet made the first impression in the foyer. From here, it was a straight shot to the living room, where an expensive array of couches and chaises were set up around an enormous projector screen.

Tay set up the movie, using three separate remotes to do so, and soon they were looking at the title card: *Gophertopia*. On the menu selection screen, a swarm of animated gophers popped out of the ground only to be whack-a-moled back down by a battalion of ants. It was offensively stupid.

Perfect. Nothing sexy could happen during such a film.

“You guys get started,” Marc said, sliding open the glass door to the backyard. “I’ll be back.”

Buck disappeared with Marc, and Tay dimmed the lights. The movie started, and they were alone.

What now?

Paralyzed, Sophie buried her emotion in food, and by the time the movie ended, she’d gone through a bag of chips, a box of candy, and a river of soda. In contrast, Tay only indulged in a protein bar. The whole picture rolled through before Marc returned with a mud-covered Buck.

“Sorry,” he said, a glob of mud dripping off his shirt. “Lost track of time. How was it?”

“It was bad enough to be good.” Tay paused. “Or maybe good enough to be bad? Are you *sure* it’s better than *Meteornadocane*?”

Sophie didn’t bother to answer, as that would force her to admit she was a liar. And she *wasn’t* a liar.

“Well, it was something,” Tay continued. “I wish they would show these movies on the big screen, but I digress. How was your playtime with Buck?”

Marc held up a gnarled tennis ball and let the toy answer on his behalf.

“You going to shower before we leave?” Sophie asked.

“Well, I know that’s the right thing to do, but I don’t want to see his... you know...”

Tay and Sophie shared a look of confusion until Marc pointed at

his groin.

“Ohhh...”

“Eww...”

“Yeah... Besides, we have somewhere else to be, don't we?”

“Hot tub?” Sophie asked, sitting bolt upright.

“Hot tub,” Marc confirmed, stepping off to the bedroom. “Race you to the car.”

Tay and Sophie exchanged a glance and began their sprint, squeezing through the door and scrambling across the lawn. By the time they reached the car, though, the real Marc was sitting upright in the backseat, ready to go.

“I win,” he said.

“We'll get you next time,” Sophie said.

The drive to the next place was simple. After all, Calisette Hills was basically a straight line through a row of mansions. In a strange way, Sophie felt pity for these people. These people would never walk to a corner store with friends, bike to a movie on a hot day, or take a RydeShare to the mall. Living out here meant basking in a perfectly manicured life with no room for the joy that came with little sufferings.

Tay's Subie slowed outside the gate of a particularly lifeless mansion. It was two stories tall with a modern Miami-type layout: short, squat, and far too white, with rounded tan shingles.

“Alright, Sophie,” Marc started. “I scouted this place during Christmas break. It belongs to a guy named Rick. He's super anxious about his marriage, which is hard for me to work with, but I can do it. All I need to know is if he's alone and asleep. From there, I'll do the rest.”

Sophie felt a lump in her throat and nodded. Her power's sudden unreliability was bad enough, but now, performance anxiety was making it worse. Hoping for the best, she closed her eyes, but her best wasn't coming out to play.

I want Tay to like me.

I want to win the election.

I want my power to work.

The thoughts ricocheted off the walls of her skull. Her mind, usually infinite, felt claustrophobic. The dark space of her imagination was typically something she could locate, but now it felt abstract and irritating. And just as she neared the edge of focus, her brain flinched again.

Fuck.

“I wish I had some sort of power,” Tay said.

Sophie continued to pretend she was in a meditation.

“You have a power,” Marc said casually. “You’re the driver. Every cool heist team needs a driver. I can’t do it because of my clunker car, and Sophie doesn’t even have a full license. But you, Tay? You make us a team.”

“Shut up,” Tay said, smiling. “I’m serious. It’d be cool to have a *real* power like phasing through walls or invisibility. Hell, I’d settle for something stupid like shining a beam of light out of my mouth.”

“You want the ability to shine a light out of your mouth?”

“Well, imagine how useful it’d be when you were scared. It’s all dark and stuff, then *bam!* You open your mouth and *boom—*” her hands flashed like a magician, “—light.”

“Could you imagine yawning, though? You’d never be able to fall asleep.”

“Listen, I’d take anything, okay? Right now, I have no will to power. You guys are like super-people, and I just feel... regular. You know? Unimportant.”

“Will to power?”

“Uh, just...” Tay walked it back. “I feel powerless between you two.”

This statement almost broke Sophie’s concentration.

“Tay, you don’t need any powers,” Marc said. “You’re one of the smartest, hardest-working people I know. Honestly, you’d be terrifying with powers—even if it just turned you into some kind of lighthouse.”

Tay and Marc laughed. Sophie wanted to join in, but she was too busy panicking. It’d been a full minute and the only thing she’d seen

was the back of her eyelids. She drew a deep breath and encouraged herself to focus. This was counterproductive, of course, as it became a new source of anxiety, but it was all she could think to do. At this point, she was ready to bargain. Something had to give.

Most of our break-ins have gone perfectly well, Sophie reasoned. So why would this one be a problem?

Slowly, she opened her eyes, feigning the confusion that came with awakening.

“There you are,” Marc said. “Quick question—if Tay was a lighthouse, do you think she’d be good at helping ships find safe harbor, or do you think she’d just keep herself awake by yawning?”

“What?” Sophie acted confused.

“Tay wants to be Aquaman’s sidekick.”

“No, I don’t,” Tay said. “I just want to be... whatever. Is it safe?”

“Yeah, it’s all good,” Sophie said, the lie bubbling like acid in her chest.

Maybe she *was* a liar.

“Awesome,” Marc said. “Give me ten minutes and I’ll have us soaking in a hot tub the size of a pool. Be right back.” With this, Marc lay back across the seat and closed his eyes. As sleep took hold of his mind, the real world slipped away, until...

...his eyes fluttered open—this time in a dream. Rick’s dream. While Marc didn’t know exactly how his power worked, the dream-sharing part never failed. The next part of his power, however, never seemed to go as smoothly.

Marc took note of his new surroundings. An office building. Trite and unoriginal. There were nearly two dozen employees slotted into cubicles, all browsing Reddit. Marc shuffled past these stand-ins, knowing none of them were real. Only one man was a true person here, and that was—

“Rick!” An angry voice echoed down the hall. “You’ve let our company down, you’ve let your wife down, and you’ve let yourself down! Pack your bags and get out!”

Ah. The story pieced itself together. Rick must’ve been caught

browsing Reddit at work. He must think everyone does it, which explains why all the workers here are browsing it too. And instead of taking responsibility for his action, he believes himself to be unlucky.

I can work with that, Marc thought.

“N-No,” Rick’s pathetic voice broke down, and the lights flickered alongside his voice. “If I don’t have this job, I can’t pay for my house. My wife will leave me. You can’t—”

“We can do whatever we want,” the boss interrupted. “We *own* you. Now get out!”

Marc basked in some *schadenfreude*. The anxiety of privileged people was so... *stupid*. Their problems were *so* out of touch with his month-to-month survival needs that he could only laugh at their shortsightedness. Here’s a guy with a net worth higher than most people’s lifetime earnings—someone who could retire tomorrow if he’d just settle for a house in Bristol—and through it all, he was worried he wouldn’t be able to hoard *more* money. Marc scoffed. This guy wouldn’t survive a day in Coalview. What a loser.

The boss marched away, and Rick returned to his desk, slamming his possessions into a cardboard box.

Marc pushed his judgment aside, needing clarity for what came next. If he was going to take Rick’s body for a sleepwalk, he needed to empathize with Rick. *Truly* empathize. The anxiety of becoming poor would be an easy feeling to conjure, but the self-righteousness about deserving wealth? That was harder.

It wouldn’t hurt if Rick felt something a little different, Marc thought. He paused to formulate a plan, and a pulse of willpower rippled through him, changing reality to match his thoughts. Marc’s hoodie shimmered and re-formed into a sharp, tan suit. He struggled to remember the look of a Rolex, until it appeared fully-formed on his wrist. His shoes came last, forming around his feet in a faux leather sheen. With his costume ready, he stepped into view.

“Excuse me, Rick?” Marc peered around the edge of the cubicle opening.

Rick looked up and brushed snot from his nose. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Marc from, uh, Reddit? Yeah, Reddit. We’ve been

monitoring your performance and we're very impressed. We would like to bring you on board as the director of, uh, upvotes." Marc hardly used Reddit. Hopefully, his bullshittery skills were up-to-par.

"What's the pay?" Rick asked suddenly, ignoring the nonsensical job title. Was this all he cared about? Marc struggled to stay in character.

"It's a six-figure job—"

Rick frowned and the world grayed at the edges. The office stilled, and the workers stopped working.

Panicking, Marc held up both hands and corrected himself.

"*Seven-figure* job...", he said. "...with an end-of-year bonus for high performers."

I hate him so much.

Rick looked Marc up and down, scrutinizing. After a long moment, the sound of clacking keyboards returned, and color faded back in.

"How big is the bonus?" Rick asked.

Marc blinked, and it took all his effort to stay in character.

"Another 250k," he said. "You'll be sifting through Reddit's content all day long and picking what rises to the top."

Rick deliberated, staying silent for a minute. Marc couldn't figure out what was so difficult. The man must've been thinking through every aspect of the job, his eyebrows furrowing. It was a million-dollar salary, what's the holdup? The answer came in a most unsatisfactory manner.

"I knew it!" Rick shouted. "I knew there was someone who chose which posts rose to the top. *That's* why my content never makes the front page. Ugh. Alright. Make the bonus 300k and I'll save your company."

Marc bottled a flash of anger and extended his hand to shake on it. This was the bait, and as they clasped palms, the hook was in. Marc squeezed and yanked Rick off balance. As the man fell forward, Marc clasped the back of his head and pressed their foreheads together. A jolt of clarity surged between them, and Rick's internal mental state sounded off.

In there, Marc felt it all. Fear of abandonment. Fear of poverty. Fear of emasculation. Rick was ashamed of his life as a corporate lapdog. Ashamed of his weight. Ashamed of his age. The truth was simple—he was a man who’d given up control of his life in exchange for a place on the hill. He’d sold his life for mere cash and fashioned his own handcuffs with the change.

Okay. Where’s the common ground...

Emotions rolled through them both, and Marc dug through the trenches of his psyche to find ways to relate. Whereas Rick feared abandonment from his wife, Marc had known abandonment when his father was arrested on trumped-up drug charges. Whereas Rick feared emasculation, Marc had lived through it every time he had to ask Sophie for money. Whereas Rick feared poverty, Marc was familiar with exactly which parts were worthy of such a nightmare.

As their emotions coalesced, so too did their bodies, and inch-by-inch, their brains intertwined. Marc pushed through, breaking some invisible barrier of consciousness until... eventually... with a twist of nuance... they became as one.

Suddenly, he wasn’t just inside Rick’s *mind*, he was inside Rick’s body too.

Marc woke in a foreign bedroom. The mattress was cloud-soft, but the new body was nauseating. It was older, out of shape, and soulless. An arm lifted, gross and pasty. His legs bent, creaky and tight. This guy needed to stretch, *badly*.

With great effort, Marc opened Rick’s mouth. “Alexa, turn on the lights.”

The words echoed in an unfamiliar voice, but the computer responded all the same. With the room illuminated, Marc rolled out of bed and stumbled to his feet, feeling an ache in his back.

It was time to let Sophie and Tay inside.

He stomped toward the door, nearly tripping over his own feet as he fumbled for the doorknob. His arm moved numbly, and his knuckles rapped sloppily against the wall with each miss. The connection was weak, and this imprecision highlighted how poorly he

and Rick matched. Finally, his fingers latched on the knob, and he twisted.

But halfway through turning, a footstep sounded from the other side of the door. Marc froze, a cold sweat piercing his heart.

Someone else was here.

Dammit, Sophie. This is what you're supposed to watch for.

Another footstep echoed, and a shadow materialized under the trim of the door. In half a second, Marc's mind ran through a variety of scenarios. What if this was Rick's wife? What if she tried to kiss him? What if she tried more? His rejection could have a lot of consequences for Rick's fragile marriage.

Worse, what if it wasn't the wife at the door? What if it was someone else? A mistress, maybe? Interacting with anyone went against his rules. But it was too late to back out now.

Tension mounted as the door opened...

...To a woman. A woman he recognized. A woman he'd seen every day in the halls of his high school. She had witchlike features, cat-eye glasses, pitch-black hair, and an aura that made Marc want to scream bloody murder. Of all the people it could be...

It had to be Ms. Fucking Jackson.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mounting Anxiety

“RICK?” MS. JACKSON asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s... fine,” Marc said, his tongue lolling sloppily, the connection between them weak. “I just wanted... to use... the restroom...”

“Oh, of course.”

Ms. Jackson let Marc step out into the hallway. He guessed the bathroom was to the left and motioned in that direction, but as he passed a line of wide-open doors, it became apparent that he’d picked the wrong way. This error was magnified in importance as he heard a smattering of voices from the room ahead. It was too late to turn around, though, as Ms. Jackson was ushering him forward with an air of excitement.

It’s a six-bedroom house! Marc thought. How are there no bathrooms?

He kept his panic under wraps as he stumbled upon a group of women sitting in the living room.

“Hey, hubby,” one of the ladies called out from the circle. This must’ve been Rick’s wife. “Have a seat. Join us.”

Marc took choppy steps forward, not daring to look at the other faces as he plopped down. Luckily, there was no embrace, just a cold distance that forced Marc to consider whether Rick’s marriage really was on the rocks.

“Welcome to the party,” Ms. Jackson said. “We were just discussing what we were going to do about... this.” She gestured to Rick’s entire body.

“Oh?” Marc responded, trying to keep his tone casual. “About w-what?”

Come on, tongue. Cooperate.

“We feel that your behavior has become a bit of a problem,” one of the other ladies said. Her voice was familiar, but Marc didn’t have the motor control to look. “You should be more careful before your power gets you into any more trouble, DeMarcus.”

All the ladies nodded, and the hair on Marc’s arm spiked.

How did they know?

Terror erupted in Marc’s heart, and the connection that joined the two men together fractured. It took every bit of effort to stay locked in, and even *that* wasn’t quite enough.

“I—I—” Marc struggled for words, but they were hard to come by with the heavy body and dense air. “I don’t... hurt... anyone.”

Rick’s body became unnaturally heavy, and Marc slumped over.

“I know you don’t,” Ms. Jackson said, shuffling through her bag before withdrawing a taser, “but it’s still really invasive, isn’t it?”

Marc said nothing.

“Tell Tay I said hello,” Ms. Jackson said, pressing the metal prongs of her taser against Rick’s arm, “and tell Sophie she needs to do better. I wish she’d stop lying and cheating to get the things she wants. *Tsk, tsk.* Anyway, ta-ta now.”

There was a *click*, and Marc felt a rush of hot pain. Electricity surged through his arm, neck, and brain, rooting out his consciousness from the inside out. With the violent intensity of a car crash, Marc’s soul disentwined from Rick’s, and he found himself back in the car with Sophie and Tay.

“Go, go, go,” Marc shouted, his stomach cramping.

Tay, who’d been laughing a moment prior, sobered and slammed on the pedal. The car skidded, and Rick’s house shrank in the rearview mirror.

“What happened?” she asked, her eyes locked dead ahead.

“It’s—” Marc struggled to collect himself. “I—It was—”

Sophie’s chest squeezed. Her insides felt hollow. Whatever

happened in that house was her fault.

“Ms. Jackson,” he finally wheezed. “Ms. Jackson was there.”

“What?”

“I mean Ms. Jackson was *there!* Along with... I don’t know. A bunch of other women. They were all in a circle, and—and—and Ms. Jackson recognized me.”

“Like Rick?”

“Like *me!*” Marc wiped a bit of spit from his lip. “She said I shouldn’t be sleepwalking, and then she mentioned both of you by name.”

“What did she say about us?” Tay asked.

“To you? She said hello.” He swiveled to Sophie. “To you? She said to be more diligent, to stop cheating, and to stop lying.”

Sophie’s jaw dropped, and she looked at Marc as though she’d just been caught robbing a pawn shop.

“What does she mean by that?” Tay asked. “I mean, Sophie *should* stop cheating, but lying? You’re not a liar. You’ve never been a liar.”

The car simmered a moment as they waited for Sophie to confirm this. Amid the silence, however, things tensed.

“Sophie,” Marc started. “How did you not know that was going to happen?”

“Didn’t you do your—” Tay waved a hand wildly, “—future seeing thing?”

Sophie squirmed. Her mind raced to find a suitable answer, but there was nothing she could say to fix this. She wished she could close her eyes and find perfect words, but it was too little, too late.

“Well?”

“I couldn’t do it,” Sophie admitted. “I couldn’t see the future. I... I just froze and...” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “I figured it would be okay. It’s always okay.”

“So you *did* lie?” Tay phrased it like a question, but it wasn’t.

“I—” Sophie’s throat closed tight, her lower lip quivered, and tears streamed down her face. “I—”

“What’s rule number one?” Her voice was cold.

“What?”

“What’s. Rule. Number. One?”

“To trust me,” Sophie answered.

“To trust *you*,” Tay repeated. “We had one rule, and it relied on trust. And now, you broke it. You *broke* it. You broke the line of trust. How can we trust you now?”

Tay let this question linger, knowing the silence would stab at Sophie’s chest. Then, she spoke again, changing her tone.

“Marc, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just... I thought I was going to have to mess with that guy’s life.” Marc was still struggling to catch his breath, his childhood asthma coming back to bite him.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Tay said.

“Me too,” Sophie said.

“No. Stop.” Marc shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. “Tay’s right. You should’ve told us you were having problems. We would’ve understood. But now...”

“Now what?” Sophie asked. “We’re still friends, right?”

Tay and Marc stewed in the silence. Neither one of them was rushing to answer.

“Right?” Sophie asked again, this time pleading. “No, but—one mistake can’t... but I—” Words gave way to ugly sobbing, and Sophie buried her head in the crook of her arm.

Nobody spoke, and the longer Tay and Marc shunned her, the more Sophie wanted to shrivel up and disappear. Up to this point, she hadn’t considered how much that rule meant to them. Now, she knew the truth: it was everything.

The world outside was hard to see behind a wall of tears, and the rest of the drive was filled with hollowness that was only broken by an occasional sob. The road whipped past them all until they found themselves on the far side of Coalview, minutes from Sophie’s house.

“We’re still friends,” Marc finally said as they pulled into the neighborhood, “but this is going to take some time to process.”

“We had one rule,” Tay said. Her voice was no longer loud, and this made it hurt so much more.

When Tay parked in Sophie’s driveway, there was a moment

when someone could've said something. Goodbye. See you tomorrow. I'm sorry. Anything. But no one spoke. Instead, Sophie got out of the car and turned to wave, but there was no one there. Tay had driven off before she could even lift her arm.

The scent of chlorine bombarded Sophie as she shuffled through the front door, and this meant Katelyn was already home. Sure enough, just past the foyer, her sister was at the table eating leftover pasta.

"Congratulations on your placements," Sophie said, not bothering to pretend she didn't already know the results. "First in everything. Again."

Katelyn smiled halfway through a large bite. Sophie rushed past her, nearly running to avoid getting a response. She was halfway up the stairs when Katelyn swallowed and shouted after her.

"Phoebe called!"

"Phoebe called?" Sophie slammed up against the railing, looking down at her sister with wild eyes.

"Said she had her phone back for the night," Katelyn said. "She was going to call you, but I told her you were out. She said to call back if you got home at a reasonable hour."

Sophie looked at the clock and grimaced. It was past midnight in D.C. Was this still a reasonable hour?

"Uh, thanks," Sophie said. "I appreciate it."

How could she have seen Katelyn's swim results but not this?

She made a beeline for her bedroom, feeling a swirl of emotions. Phoebe was her closest sister, partly because they shared the gift of foresight. For most of their lives, Phoebe's power was a lot like Mom's—fleeting and unpredictable, only appearing in a random dream here and there. But since leaving to work in D.C., it seemed as though Phoebe's powers had developed to the point that they'd caught up with Sophie's. For a while, they touched base to talk about their visions, but a month ago, Phoebe stopped taking her calls on account of national security concerns. It seemed serendipitous that she'd call now, in time to talk about the faltering visions.

Safe in the confines of her bedroom, Sophie scrolled through her

contacts and stared at her sister's number. Adults stayed up past midnight all the time, right? This was unadulterated cope, however, as Phoebe had always been an early riser. That being said, she dialed her sister's number anyway, letting it ring three times before getting an answer.

"Hello?" Phoebe's groggy voice answered.

"Phoebe," Sophie said, relieved to hear her sister's voice. "Were you asleep?"

"Yes," she said. "But now I'm awake."

"I'm sorry to bother you. I forgot about the time difference." Why couldn't she stop lying? "It has to be really late, but... uh..." Sophie exhaled softly, delaying the blow of putting her worries into words. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," Phoebe said evenly. "How are you?"

"I'm, um—" Sophie sighed. "Listen, I'm not doing well."

"I figured," Phoebe said, waking herself up for a longer conversation. "What's wrong?"

"I had a problem with my power today," Sophie said. "I was trying to see into the future, and it's—it's not working."

There was a pause. "What do you mean it's not working?"

"I mean—" Sophie let out a sigh. "First, I was in a vision that ended sooner than I wanted it to. Then it wouldn't work at all. And then my friends... Never mind. Phoebe... What's happening?"

The line went silent as Phoebe paused to think. "What were you thinking when these things happened? You're not giving me enough details."

Sophie stayed silent, nervous to answer. Finally, she relented, deciding it better to root out the problem than to avoid saying awkward things aloud.

"When the vision broke early, I was trying to see if... if this girl Tay liked me."

"Sophie!" Phoebe's voice cracked with excitement. "Is she your first crush?"

Sophie blushed, and her delay spoke louder than words.

"Oh my goodness. My little sister is growing up!" Phoebe waited

for another response, but Sophie was still shrinking away in the moment. “Sorry, I mean, that’s cool. So, this Tay—does she like you back?”

“I—I don’t know,” Sophie admitted, finding this conversation as enjoyable as a jalapeño smoothie. “She has a boyfriend, but... yeah. I don’t know.”

“Mmm,” Phoebe hummed a few awkward notes, trying to find the right level of sympathy. “Okay. What about the second time your power failed? What were you thinking about then?”

Sophie could feel herself blushing and wished she could stop. “I was thinking about an upcoming pop test, the student government runoff elections, and a rejection I got from Tay in a vision.”

“Ahhh,” Phoebe’s voice lit up. “Sophie... have you—and this might be a stupid question—but have you ever had anxiety?”

“Anxiety?” Sophie repeated. “Stressing about the future? Me? A seer?” She scoffed, then gave it real thought. “What does it feel like? Like, on the inside?”

“Have you ever felt like your mind won’t stop thinking about what went wrong in the past? Or maybe you got fixated on what’s going wrong in the present? Or possibly your stomach knots up when you think about what might go wrong in the future?” Phoebe paused. “It’s like you’re emotionally out of breath, but you can’t stop running.”

“Oh, that’s exactly how it feels.”

“Right. This makes sense.”

“So, it’s anxiety?” Sophie said. “So, what?”

“Well, I have a theory.” Phoebe cleared her throat. “I don’t think you’ve ever had anxiety before. That’s why you were so *annoyingly* quick to pick up on the meditative visions. I mean, seriously—thousands of seers in the world and *none of them* can do what you’ve already mastered. Why? My guess is that you’ve never had anxiety to muddy up your brain. No bills, no crushes, no struggles—it’s been easy up to now, and because of that, you’ve never had to understand that our power only works in one of two situations: when you want nothing, or when you want one thing so much it drowns out

everything else. But when you have two problems? More than two problems? That's when anxiety demands you make a choice, and that choice could leave you spiraling out of control."

"Alright," Sophie said, following the logic. "So how does one get rid of anxiety?"

"If I knew the answer, I'd be *rich*." Phoebe chuckled. "Hold on, let me call the Buddha."

Sophie felt like her sister's laughter was too targeted and her mood darkened. Then, she worried she was overreacting. Suddenly, she realized she was having anxiety over having anxiety. And that meant—

"Oh my god! I hate this!" Sophie said, halfway between laughing and crying. "Is this how adults feel all the time?"

"Yes!" Phoebe said. "Yes, it is. And you're going to have to figure out how to deal with it on your own, because what works for me won't work for you. You can either obsess over one issue to clear your mind, or you can systematically eliminate all of your anxieties, problem by problem, until your mind is clear again."

"Well, I can't erase all my anxieties," Sophie said. "I won't even have answers on Harvard until next year—not unless they process my junior pre-screening package early."

"Then I recommend you put on some music and choose one thing to obsess over. And I mean *really* obsess over it. Your best bet is to sideline your other problems. If you can do that, I bet you can find a meditative mind-space again."

"Maybe," Sophie said, sensing the end of the conversation growing closer.

"I wish I could do more to help," Phoebe said. "But I have to go. It's a big day tomorrow. If you need anything, call me later, okay? Sometime when the sun's up."

"Okay," Sophie said. "I love you."

"Love you too, sis."

There was a beep, and then nothing. Now, Sophie was alone, destined to pick up the pieces of her life the same way everyone else does: by—by—

Wait, how the fuck did anyone ever get their shit together?

CHAPTER FIVE

Internal War

SOPHIE BREATHED out a sigh and stared at her phone's home screen. Absentmindedly, she fumbled with some apps, turned on some music, and got to work thinking.

Focus on just one thing.

With Tay rightfully furious at her for lying, Sophie knew it was pointless to pursue a relationship with her right now. It was an odd comfort that she would have to return to the days of wooing her as a friend before anything romantic could happen. She also knew that it was pointless to fret about her powers; they would either work or they wouldn't. Further, voting day for class president wouldn't be for months, and Harvard admissions not for years. Last, since Ms. Jackson was going to be busy all night at her girls' club, it was highly unlikely the new pop test would be prepared in time for tomorrow. So, the biggest problem of the evening was rooted in one question: What was Ms. Jackson doing at Rick's house?

Just obsess over this problem and let the others fall away.

Sophie closed her eyes and focused on the situation. Over and over, she let the bad night play out, and embraced her despair. It was a simple bargain: she could win her friends back. End her problems. Fix everything. She just had to figure out why Ms. Jackson was at Rick's.

This flawed logic worked, and the world faded away.

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Sophie's eyes opened in a new world. Quietly, she turned off her

speaker and forced herself to go to bed. With too many emotions to process, she didn't sleep. Instead, six hours of emptiness passed until the sun rose again, uncaring as always.

The next day was dismal and lonely. Marc and Tay paid no attention to her in the hallways, and this tugged at her heart in an uncomfortable way. Regardless, she pushed through class after class until the end of the day. All through Ms. Jackson's lecture, she glared at her teacher, and when the final bell rang, she approached the front desk. In the safety of her meditation, she was going to get answers one way or another.

"Yes, Sophie?" Ms. Jackson asked, her eyes glued to the paper in front of her.

"How did you know about Marc last night?" Straight to the point.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ms. Jackson said, refusing to meet Sophie's eye.

"We went to a house last night," Sophie said. "Marc possessed the guy there, and you recognized him while he was sleepwalking in that guy's body. He said you mentioned me and Tay by name. How did you know we were there?"

"That's a wild story, Sophie," Ms. Jackson said. Finally, she looked up and let her eyes twinkle. She was playing with her food. "Do I need to refer you to the psychologist? Are you having a—what's it called—a crash out?"

A flash of heat swept through Sophie. The dark thought crossed her mind that there were no consequences in her visions, but she put down her impulse to escalate. That wasn't who she was, and it wasn't who she wanted to be.

"No," Sophie said. "You were there. Marc *said* you were there."

"Marc must be mistaken," Ms. Jackson said, her voice carrying a calculated amount of disinterest. "It sounds like you're sleep-deprived. You should be more diligent about your rest."

Sophie nearly screamed. There was an urge to reach across the desk and—and—do something. Anything! She'd learn Ms. Jackson's game and make her pay. She'd—

Amid her rage, the walls of the meditation cracked.

“See you tomorrow,” Ms. Jackson said.

The way she said this was so dismissive. So flippant. Said in such a way that seemed to acknowledge the walls of the meditation. And as the anger rose through the top of Sophie’s head, the world shattered.

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Sophie awoke in reality, her teeth grinding. Immediately, she closed her eyes and worked toward another meditation, but the volcanic emotions in her soul wouldn’t settle. She tried for an hour, but, in the end, she was forced to take solace in the knowledge that her powers hadn’t disappeared forever—they were gone just for now.

Other than the confrontation with Ms. Jackson, the next day went exactly as Sophie had seen. Marc and Tay ignored her, the classes droned on, and everything was dreadful. That said, she wished she had stayed in the meditation a bit longer to prepare herself for what was coming that evening.

Sophie’s family huddled around the dinner table, a plate of ravioli in front of each of them. Katelyn scarfed her food as usual, eager to carb-load before swim practice, while Sophie barely touched a raviolo. Though her depression was written in the way she moped around the table, neither parent spoke of it. Instead, as a matter of respect for how Sophie had asked to be treated in the past, they let their daughter sulk, trusting her to find solutions to her problems. She always did. Deep down, though, Sophie wished they would ask about her feelings, even if it was to decline to respond.

Hope seemed to die as the dishes were swept away from the table, and she considered whether there was any joy left in the world. It was at that moment that Sophie’s cell phone rang. She looked at the caller ID. Instant adrenaline.

“Everyone shut up,” Sophie said. “I think it’s—Hello?”

“Hi!” A chipper voice sounded on the line. “This is Cathy from Harvard University. Is this Sophie Vedas?”

“Hi, yes. How are you?”

“I’m great, thanks for asking. I’m calling today because we

received your junior-year prescreening package. Do you know the importance of this call?"

"I do," Sophie said. "You're going to tell me how strong my application is, right?"

"That's correct," Cathy said. "In my hands, I have your preliminary academic resumé and—" she flipped through the pages silently for a moment, "—it's very strong."

"Thank you! I—"

"But all Harvard applicants have a strong resumé," Cathy continued. "Being valedictorian with a perfect GPA only gives you a 50-50 chance of being accepted."

"I understand," Sophie said, trying not to sound dispirited. "My application goes beyond academics, though."

"I see. Your resumé mentions that you're running for class president? How's that going?"

"It's just me and my friend running," Sophie said, the words stinging. "Voting won't happen 'til March 14th, but I think I have a chance of winning. Could we follow up then?"

"Ah, well, if you're elected, you'll have an *extremely* competitive application. Although..." Cathy's silence lingered a little too long, "...I'd still like to point out how exceptional Harvard students are. There are thousands of picture-perfect class president valedictorians across the nation, and we here at Harvard only accept the best of the best. While you've hit incredible milestones, I think you'll need something more to polish this off."

"Really?"

"Yes. You see, at a certain point in the admissions process, academics are no longer the focal point of our discussion. As I'm looking over your prescreening package, it's very apparent to me that you don't volunteer with your community or participate in team sports. You're clearly a strong and independent worker, but I do see some areas for opportunity here."

Sophie paused. Her throat swelled.

"I think," Cathy continued, "that if you added some physical extracurricular activity to your package, your chance of admission

jumps to a near guarantee. You can take your chances with academics and politicking, but..."

Sophie tensed. No. There was no way she was going to do a sport. She'd rather ace every test from here on out. Volunteer a million hours. She'd rather—well, would she rather cheat on the election? Betray Tay's trust? Rescind everything she stood for? Again?

"Right," Sophie said, feigning confidence. "I have lots of plans to volunteer when I win the election, and..." She was going to say something about sports, but there weren't any words. "Thank you for your review."

"You're welcome," Cathy said. "Good luck on your journey to becoming a Pilgrim."

The phone beeped. The call ended. As Sophie's attention snapped back into the dining room, she found the whole family staring, wondering what she'd been talking about. She studied each of their faces before saying, "They think I have a good package."

"Amazing!" Mom said.

"Our girl is going to be a Harvard grad," Dad beamed.

"She'd make a fine lawyer, or doctor, or anything she wanted." Mom leaned forward and kissed Sophie on the forehead. "We're very proud of you."

There was a moment when Sophie felt good about herself, but this was punctuated by a deeper moment of worry. She only had a good package if she remained perfect—even then, that might not be enough.

And after getting in, then what? What would she study at Harvard, then? Medicine? Psychology? Business? She'd spent so much time nabbing answers from the future that she'd never even bothered to sit down and understand what she wanted to do with herself.

Mom and Dad turned away to start gathering their belongings, and Katelyn moved closer.

"They said your package was perfect?" Katelyn asked, suspiciously.

"They said it was strong, not perfect," Sophie admitted.

“What’s the holdup?”

“They want me to join a sports club. Be part of a team.”

Katelyn’s eyes glimmered for a fraction of a second, her excitement too bubbly to be contained.

“You can always join the swim team,” Katelyn said. “Spring season just started, and it’s going to run all the way through to the end of the year.”

“No, that’s okay,” Sophie insisted. “I’ll be alright if I focus on my academics. All I need is perfection.”

“That’s it?” Katelyn asked.

“That’s it.”

“Well, the offer always stands,” Katelyn said, her disappointment palpable. With this, she got up, and Sophie sat in the empty space wondering how far she was willing to go to make this dream come true.

CHAPTER SIX

The Prophecy

HARVARD WAS all that mattered. That night, Sophie spent hours on her meditation pad, rehearsing every minute of the coming week. Under normal circumstances, she'd have taken shortcuts to get the answers she needed, such as slipping an answer key away from the teacher's desk when they weren't looking. But with the pressure mounting, she left nothing to chance. She saw each day several times before the real day swept by, and her diligence was leading to success. Every grade was perfect; every conversation was perfect; *everything* was perfect.

Except none of this brought Marc and Tay back. Fine, whatever. Nothing would bring them back. Believing this to be true was the only reason she could still use her power anyway. so long as she sacrificed everything else in her life forever, the power would remain. Simple, right?

Friday came to a close, and after one successful week of avoiding error, the cycle began anew. Saturday disappeared in support of her test prep, and Sunday was cut short because of a migraine. Sunday night arrived way too fast, and she had to drag herself to bed amid the pain. Only another thousand weeks or so to keep this up, and then she'd be president of the world. If that's what she wanted.

What the fuck did she want, anyway?

The hippocampus is in the center of the brain, Sophie thought, her mind incessantly repeating the week's new information. Its primary function is

to store memories.

Right now, Sophie felt her hippocampus had swollen three sizes. In under an hour, it had encoded nearly a hundred hours of memories. Quite possibly, her real superpower lay in feats like this. Only when the searing pain dulled to a prickle did she find any comfort or sleep.

This peace was shattered, however, by an overly vivid dream—the kind Sophie used to get before she developed her precognitive abilities. It was a glance at the inevitable future. An unchangeable omen of what was to come. A prophecy notarized by the universe itself.

In the dream, Sophie watched a copy of herself—her future self—as they moved about the world. This future Sophie sat at her desk in Ms. Jackson’s room, clicking her pen and eyeing the clock. When the final bell rang, the students packed their backpacks and filed out the door, smashing shoulder to shoulder to make their escape.

“Sophie, a word, please.” Ms. Jackson’s cold voice cut through the crowd.

Future Sophie stood to face Ms. Jackson. When the last student filed out of the room, the door closed, and a backdraft swept through the open space. If a tumbleweed had been in that room, it’d have undoubtedly blown between them.

“I assume you know what I’m about to tell you,” Ms. Jackson said, opening a drawer and withdrawing a sheet of paper. “Your pop test results came back. Last time you scored 35 points. This time?” She slammed the test on the table. “You got 25.”

Future Sophie didn’t respond. Instead, she looked at the wall and pretended not to care.

“Sophie, this was a unit review test. Two-thirds of the questions came from last semester’s tests—all of which you scored 100% on. And then, when I repackaged the questions and got rid of the multiple choice answers, you failed? If I had any doubts before, I don’t anymore. You’ve been cheating, and you deserve your failing grade.”

“But—”

“But I don’t want to fail you,” Ms. Jackson interrupted.

Future Sophie narrowed her gaze.

“Instead, I’ve devised a way to close this out in a manner that’s fair for both of us.” Ms. Jackson drew a shallow breath. “If you can ace every assignment for the rest of the semester, I’ll let you escape with a C-minus.”

“That’s not fair!” future Sophie shouted.

“In my opinion, it’s more than fair.” Ms. Jackson snatched the paper off the desk. “You’ll get the lowest passing grade, but we can avoid an investigation.”

“And we can kiss Harvard goodbye,” future Sophie spat.

Silence. Ms. Jackson straightened some papers on her desk. Then...

“Yes,” Ms. Jackson whispered. “You can kiss Harvard goodbye.”

“Is that all?”

Ms. Jackson nodded, and her tone softened. “Listen, I know you have a lot going on, but you need to be more diligent. If you work on your time management, you’ll be just fine. Believe it or not, Sophie, I’m here to help. Okay?”

The projection of Sophie let out an indignant grunt and spun to exit the room. Had the door not resisted, she would’ve slammed it off the hinges. Ms. Jackson watched with an even expression, then quietly resumed her work.

The real Sophie stood in the corner of the room, invisible to Ms. Jackson, and she waited for the dream to end.

Sophie snapped awake as though smelling salts had been dumped over the bed. Her brain, half-functioning, made a thousand calculations all at once, forming plan after plan to skirt around the premonition. If she studied hard—if she meditated *every* day—if she dropped out of school—

But no. There was no escape. These dreams were tattoos on the soul. Fate had calculated her every move, and this outcome was inevitable.

“Mom!” she called out. “*Mom!*”

In seconds, Mom stormed upstairs and burst into Sophie’s room

wielding a hammer and a frenzied expression. She glanced at the window and then at the bed. When she realized Sophie was safe, she lowered her arms and breathed.

“Sophie, it’s two in the morning. What’s wrong?”

Sophie wiped away her tears and frowned. For a moment, she struggled with words. Then she gave up on them and buried her face in her arms. Mom’s panic melted away, and she sat beside Sophie. She knew what this was about. Automatically, her fingers danced up and down her daughter’s back, just as they had when Sophie was a child.

“It’s okay,” Mom said, her tone shifting. “What happened?”

“I had... I had a prophecy,” Sophie croaked.

“Are you sure?” Mom shook her head. “No, of course you’re sure. What happened?”

Sophie recounted the details of her dream, leaving out no detail.

“Is that everything?” Mom asked as the story concluded.

“That’s everything,” Sophie said. “Do you think there’s anything I can do?”

“No. Prophetic dreams are unbreakable spells.”

“So, that’s it?” Sophie asked. “My Harvard dreams are...?”

“Well, that’s it for your grade,” Mom said. “But unless your next dream is a rejection letter, it’s not the end for Harvard. Not many of us know what the future holds; you’re rare in that regard. You have other routes to admission, don’t you? What did the advisor say?”

Sophie felt another round of tears billow up, her stomach twisting. “She s-said I n-needed more. That I-I’m not g-good enough.” A river of tears flowed down her face, treading familiar banks.

“Listen, Sophie, I’ve been where you’re at,” Mom said gently. “When I was younger, I had a dream that I was going to lose my job. At the time, I was a lawyer’s assistant and had just signed a lease for a beautiful apartment I could barely afford. Nothing else would pay close to my wage, so if I lost my job, I’d lose my home. To fight this fate, I pulled extra hours every day. I excelled at each task that crossed my desk. It took priority over everything else in my life. And when the time came, do you know what happened?”

“What?”

“I lost the job,” Mom said. “The company wasn’t *firing* me—they were liquidating the position. There was *nothing* I could’ve done to save my job.”

Sophie’s tears evaporated, and now there were only sniffles.

“But I don’t regret putting in the extra work,” Mom continued. “As soon as my position dissolved, I nabbed an interview with a competing firm and got hired day one. And it was there that I met your dad.”

“Really?”

“Really. He was fresh out of law school, sweet, and adorable. I’d never seen someone so confident in front of a judge become so shy in front of a lady. In front of me.” Mom took a moment and swooned over the memories. “Within a month, he took me out on a date, and the rest is history.”

“So, the lesson is that failing my test will lead to marriage?” Sophie said, bitter, joking, and sincere all at once.

“No,” Mom said, her voice akin to honey. “The lesson is that the future is a mystery—even to those of us who *think* we know it. Even when I thought I was doomed, working hard led me to a better path. That taught me the most important lesson of my life: You’ll *always* gain more from trying. I promise.”

“So, what do I do?” Sophie asked.

“For starters, don’t give up even when you’re certain you know the outcome. There are countless options ahead of you. Think about it: in the next three hours, what could you do with your life?”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “I could run through my week in another meditation. Go to bed. Get food?”

“You could do so much more than that,” Mom said. “You could book a flight to Australia. You could call a random number and make a new friend. You could rob a jewelry store and go to jail. In any span of time, your life could change in any number of ways—but you have to understand the limitless breadth of your options.”

“I don’t want to pick the wrong thing, though.”

“There *is* no wrong thing. The hard part is knowing that there

isn't a right thing either. If you want my recommendation, I think it's time you start dabbling in things you're bad at. Things where success can't be gained by peeking at the future."

Sophie let out a pained smirk. "Why would I do that?"

"Because I don't think you remember what it's like to fail at something," Mom said. "You should fail at something every now and again, if only to remember that nobody else cares. Everyone's too busy worrying about their own faults to think about yours. Besides, if you're doing anything worthwhile, you're going to fail at some point. And listen, I have no doubt that your future's bright, Harvard or not, okay? That's just the kind of person you are."

"Thanks..." Sophie said, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry for waking you up."

"I'm glad you did," Mom said, rising to her feet. "Failure I can handle, but watching you grow up is so hard. Taking care of you is how I express my love, but now that you've become so independent, I worry you don't need me anymore. So when you come to me and ask for help, it still makes me happy. It always will."

Sophie smiled, unsure how to respond.

"Good night, Sophie," Mom said, planting a kiss on Sophie's forehead.

"Good night, Mom," Sophie said.

The door closed, and Sophie was alone again.

Okay, so, if she couldn't change the results of the test, she'd have to do something else to get into Harvard. That 'something else' was obvious, but she really, really, *really* didn't want to go through with it. But what else could it be? What other path could she walk? It was obvious.

In the morning, she'd have to join the swim team.

Fuck.

Sophie stayed up far later than she should've and woke to an unwelcome alarm. She tapped the snooze button and bargained for extra sleep. An extra twenty minutes were earned by skipping her shower. Another fifteen by avoiding makeup. Another five by giving

up her TikTok scroll. It was only after she considered skipping breakfast that the line was drawn.

Downstairs, Katelyn was chipper, singing a pop ballad Sophie couldn't stand. Doing her best to ignore it, Sophie poured herself a bowl of cereal and stared into the bottom of her milk.

"You're acting weird," Katelyn said through a mouthful of oatmeal.

"Uh, okay... First of all—rude."

"I call it as I see it," Katelyn said, stuffing another spoonful in her mouth without swallowing the first bit. "Wuths wong?"

Sophie sighed. This was going to ruin her whole week.

"I was wondering if—" Sophie closed her eyes, hoping this would make her next words easier, "—if I could join the swim team?"

Katelyn nearly spat up her meal. She opened her mouth to reply, but it was too full, so she chomped and swallowed the paste in a big gulp.

"Practice starts at six," she said, hacking to clear her throat. "I'll talk to the coaches at lunchtime to get your papers. Buy a swimsuit and meet me here after school so we can ride together. It'll be a carpool. Get it? A car *pool*? Never mind. What's your favorite Hello Kitty character? No—don't answer. Not yet. Just bring a plain towel. I'd say more, but I don't want you to change your mind. Okay? Okay. Bye."

In a flash, Katelyn was gone, and Sophie found it was too late to back out. Just like that, she was officially the newest member of the swim team. She stared into her cereal one last time, hoping the milk might have a better idea for a painless way to get into Harvard, but it did not.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Swim Practice

FOUR DAYS, Sophie thought. *I spent four days in the future for nothing.*

That Monday, school had gone the same way it had the first half dozen times she saw it. But now, standing at the edge of the pool for swim practice, Sophie realized that her pivot would have ripple effects that'd change her entire week.

"Welcome to swim team," Coach barked in a fading Texan accent. "My name is Coach. You can call me Coach." He was dressed in tight red shorts and a plain gray shirt. When he stepped forward, Sophie noticed his calf muscles. They were *huge*. And veiny. How did they get so veiny? "Every swimmer has a specialty stroke, and today you get to choose yours. What will your fate be? Backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly, or freestyle?"

Sophie paused. *Did he just say breaststroke? Breast?* She looked around nervously for another adult. *Is that allowed?*

"Ah, I know that look," Coach said. "I can tell exactly what you're thinking."

Sophie's eyes widened.

"You're worried we won't teach you all four strokes," Coach concluded. "Rest assured, little turtle—we will teach you *everything*. Now, though, you need to pick just one stroke to focus on so we can prepare you for battle."

Not what I was thinking, but okay.

She considered her options. If the breaststroke *was* a real stroke,

it was certainly off the table—you know, just in case. Freestyle sounded fun, though maybe too unstructured. And backstroke sounded worse than breaststroke. Was she really going to tell people she was a *backstroker*? Ew. No. This meant the only reasonable option was—

“The butterfly,” Sophie said. Given the name, it’d probably be smooth, graceful, and easy. She felt good in the decision until Coach developed a nasty grin. It was at that point Sophie realized she’d fucked up.

“I like your moxie, Soph. You’ll be in lane four with the other masochists. Do what they do, and you’ll survive.”

“Wait—”

Coach ignored her, turning the might of his whistle toward lane one. Sophie looked over at lane four and saw three of the biggest-backed, widest-shouldered, strongest-necked women she’d ever seen. They all looked back at her through bug-eyed goggles.

“I bet you picked the breaststroke,” Katelyn said, bouncing up behind her. “That one’s so easy.”

Seriously?!

“I picked butterfly,” Sophie said.

“You’re with me, then. Come on.”

Katelyn jumped in the water, and, after a moment of reluctance, Sophie followed. The water swallowed her up, and she had to fight violent shivers to scramble for the wall. There, she held on with both hands, scared she would drown at any moment. The girl beside Sophie noticed her discomfort and smiled warmly. She was barely attached to the wall by the lightest touch of her fingertips.

“Welcome to swim team,” the girl said. “I’m Olivia.”

“Sophie.”

“Well, Sophie, I’m impressed,” Olivia said. “Nobody *chooses* the butterfly. Coach had to beg me to move here from the backstroke lane.” Olivia gestured to the girls two lanes over, making a symbol with her hands that vaguely resembled a capital ‘B’. All the girls in that lane gestured back with the same symbol. “But it’s nice having people who want to be here.”

Sophie watched the interaction with awe and made a mental note to create a group sign with Tay and Marc when they were on better terms. Then the thought stung, and she shunted it aside.

“Honestly, I just picked the stroke with the prettiest name,” Sophie said.

Olivia laughed, nearly choking on water. “Ah, classic. Well, girl, you fell for the trap. Welcome to hell.”

This stroke must be awful.

“Look,” Olivia said, seeing the terror on Sophie’s face, “it’s not all that bad. Follow my lead and you’ll do great.”

“Alright!” Coach said, centering on their lane. “You’ll start with a four-by-twenty-five.” He blew his whistle.

Katelyn took off first. She sped through the water like a dolphin, lifting her head out of the water only a few times as she traversed the length of the pool. The next girl followed after a couple of seconds, and the third girl began prepping.

“Four by twenty-five what?” Sophie asked.

Olivia had her legs coiled up against the wall, ready to spring. “Yards.”

“What?”

But Olivia sprang off before she could elaborate. Feeling like a wacky inflatable tube man, Sophie followed, her arms flopping over the water. Her goggles and lungs filled with water at the same rate, and Sophie fought the urge to drown right there. It wasn’t the water that was going to do her in, though—it was the embarrassment.

“Legs together!” Coach shouted.

But mid-stroke, all Sophie heard was “*Le—*” some muffled splashing “*—ether.*” This, of course, was terribly unhelpful. Regardless, she vowed to finish, especially as Katelyn and Olivia had stopped on the far side of the pool. It was only going to be one lap—thank goodness. She dug deeper to finish the lap, doing her best to emulate the other girls. But time seemed to slow, and three-quarters of the way down the pool, Sophie realized she’d rather be on fire right now.

Harvard. Harvard. Harvard. Harvard. Harvard.

Her mind locked on the prize, and Sophie blacked out, reaching

the other end with the grace of a gerbil.

“Whew,” Katelyn said. “Only three more laps.”

“What?”

It was too late. Katelyn had taken off, swimming under the surface like a mermaid.

“Sophie, let’s go!” Coach shouted. “Kick, swim, win! Over the water, under the water! Arms together! Legs together! Lock and load! You got this!”

The next two hours were the worst of Sophie’s life, with each lap taking a bigger toll than the last. First, she needed air, so she’d expend a ton of energy to get to the surface. Then she’d sink to the bottom because she was tired. There, she’d need even more air and so she’d expend a ton of energy and...

The announcement of the last set was the happiest Sophie had ever been, and as she touched the wall for the last time, she forgave every cringy person who’d ever kissed the ground after being lost at sea. Today, she understood. Her arms hurt, her legs hurt, her lungs hurt, and, if she’d ever doubted having a soul, she was wrong because *that* hurt too. Heading under the overhang was the best reprieve of her life, and there, Sophie concluded that swimming was little more than an exercise in delayed death.

“So, how’d you like it?” Katelyn asked, draping her Hello Kitty towel over her head.

Sophie didn’t know how to answer. *I didn’t*, was one answer. *I hated it*, was another. *I’d rather eat bugs than do that again*, was closer to the truth. But Sophie said none of these things.

“It was alright,” Sophie said, finding a layer of sweat had replaced the water she’d just towed off.

“She did great,” Olivia said, bundling her hair with her towel, this one themed after the Hello Kitty character of Keroppi. Suddenly, Sophie didn’t feel so strongly about Katelyn’s childish towel.

“Well, you’ll feel better tomorrow,” Katelyn said.

“Really?”

Olivia smiled devilishly. “No.”

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Sophie's alarm blared, and a rush of pain flooded her body. The strain from last night had affected muscles Sophie didn't even know existed. The spaces between her toes ached. The middle of her shoulders twinged. The ends of her fingers pulsed. She was wrecked.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Sophie moved to turn off her alarm—or, well... she tried, but she couldn't reach it. Every fiber in her body resisted.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The door cracked open, and a well-rested Katelyn skipped in.

"You want me to get that?"

"Oh my god, yes," Sophie said, inching her body off the side of the bed. "What is this?"

"Delayed onset muscle soreness," Katelyn said, tapping the off button on Sophie's phone. "DOMS. Don't worry, it goes away."

"DOMS? Christ, you sound like a dominatrix. How long 'til I heal?"

"Three or four, uh—" Katelyn glanced at her wrist, but she wasn't wearing a watch, "—days?"

"Three or four days?! But we have practice tonight."

"Oh, huh. You're right. See you there." There was a musical tone in Katelyn's voice as she closed the door, and Sophie stared furiously at her afterimage.

If I wasn't broken right now, she'd be in for it, Sophie thought.

"Lane four, I hope you ate your Wheaties," Coach said, his teeth clamped around a whistle. "You've got a 300-yard freestyle warm-up before a full day of butterfly sprints. Let's go, go, go!" Coach blew the whistle so hard that the only place to escape the noise was under the water.

300 yards?!

"We got this," Olivia said, moments before pushing off. Katelyn followed, as did the rest of the girls.

Sophie was last off the wall, and with no one behind her, she moved as slowly as she could. The more she moved, the more she felt

her body loosening, and with each stroke, she was able to swim with a bit more elegance. Air was still hard to come by, but she now felt as though she were gliding and not just suffocating.

Just get through today, Sophie thought. 120 minutes—that's all.

Ahead of her, Olivia did a somersault to turn around, and Sophie decided she was going to try it. With a surge of bravery, she took a stroke, folded her body, and—

Oh, god.

Sophie took a noseful of water and surfaced, hacking out a lung before sputtering back into line. That was the last time Sophie felt even remotely good during practice. The rest of it was a slogfest, just like the night before. But in a bout of stubborn persistence, she pushed herself until Coach blew the final whistle. With practice over, her body felt twice as heavy as normal. She dragged herself out of the pool and hobbled toward the overhang, numb to the world around her.

“Sophie, a moment, please,” Coach said, holding her back as the team disappeared into the locker room.

Please kick me from the team. Please tell me I can't show up anymore.

“I got a text from Ms. Jackson,” Coach said. “Christ in a manger, that woman scares me. But she wanted me to tell you that the presidential debate just got scheduled for next Friday. That Tay’s a sniper, so you’ll need some floaties to stay alive. Good luck, cowgirl.”

Sophie’s face went from asphyxiated red to pale and clammy in an instant. For a moment, she was happy that the physical exhaustion kept her from expressing more as she would’ve loved to scream into the void of the night sky. In ten days, she was going to be in front of the entire school debating Tay. The same Tay that wasn’t talking to her. The same Tay who didn’t want her to cheat in the election. The same Tay she only wanted to love.

“But don’t worry,” Coach said. “I’ll be rootin’ for ya.”

“That was all the support I needed, Coach,” Sophie said, dryly.

“Let’s do it, lady. Now git.”

I can do this, Sophie thought, treading carefully over the wet patio. I can beat Tay, and I can do it without cheating. It's just going to take—

Sophie didn't want to think about the next part. It was something she'd avoided since she first learned her power, but now, there'd be no avoiding it.

—*it's going to take hard work.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Debate

THE REST OF the week limped by. Each swim practice left Sophie more broken than the last. She hoped the weekend would give her a chance to heal, but it didn't, and Monday morning hit like a freight train.

"I thought you said the pain went away after three days," Sophie said to Katelyn during breakfast.

"Yeah, but our last practice was two days ago."

Sophie thought for a moment. "That means there's never three days between practices."

"Now you're getting it." Katelyn chuckled and shoveled more eggs into her mouth. "Eat up—Mondays are the *worst*."

Sophie had enough experience now to know she wasn't kidding. Coach started them off with twenty laps straight—a feat Sophie couldn't believe she could do until it was over. And then Coach dropped a bomb by announcing that practice would mimic a competition and Sophie had to swim in the medley relay.

"What's the order again?" Sophie asked Olivia.

"Backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly, freestyle," Olivia said. "Everyone only needs to do one length of the pool."

Sophie waited an hour for her event to start, and in some sort of cruel paradox, this hour took both a million years and a millionth of a second. Either way, when the time arrived, she watched with dread as the backstrokers prepped themselves for the first leg.

“Y’all ready?” Coach asked.

With a strong grip, the swimmers held onto the bottom of the starting block and nearly pulled themselves out of the water.

“Go!”

The racers pushed away. Their arms moved like windmills, their legs kicking up buckets of water. They swam all the way down and slammed their hands into the far wall. This was the cue for the breaststrokers to jump in overhead and begin their leg of the race.

“Butterfly swimmers—you’re next!”

Sophie could hardly balance as she stepped onto the starting pad. The breaststrokers were charging toward her, and Sophie wished they would stop. They didn’t, of course. In fact, Sophie thought it rude how they seemed to speed up in their attempt to reach the wall, despite knowing that this was the name of the game. In a burst, the breaststroker torpedoed to the wall and...

Sophie froze.

“Let’s see you dive, Soph!”

Coach’s shouting was accompanied by an unwelcome nudge, and Sophie was sent flying off the starting block. She belly-flopped and sank, resurfacing slowly like a corpse. Without momentum, she began the hard flail toward the other side of the pool. Lactic acid burned, and halfway down, Sophie was sure her leg of the race would last forever.

But she was wrong. Somehow, one of her hands touched the wall and the next swimmer jumped over her head. Before Sophie could catch her breath, the race was over, practice done.

“That was fun,” Katelyn said, hoisting herself to solid ground with grace. “Better rest up, though. Tuesdays are the worst.”

“I thought you said—” Sophie groaned as she flopped onto concrete, a fish out of water, “—Mondays were the worst?”

“I lied.”

Sophie gave Katelyn a splash and they both laughed.

But nobody laughed on Tuesday. Coach had Sophie work with Katelyn and Olivia to refine her technique. Sophie was impressed by their instruction. Katelyn explained the mechanics of kicking while

Olivia made sense of the arms. Despite this extra attention, Sophie didn't think she was improving. Despite the lack of progress, she *did* notice her mind was quieter in the hours after practice. Unfortunately, this made her meditations harder as she was now forced to fight past sleep to get to the visions. They lasted only until Ms. Jackson's class, before she snapped awake with the certainty that there'd be no test in the following day.

Maybe it won't happen, Sophie thought. *Maybe Ms. Jackson was bluffing.*

But she knew better. Her prophetic dream was signed and sealed.

Wednesday passed without practice on account of Thursday's competition. Luckily, Coach didn't sign Sophie up for any races, meaning Sophie got two days off in a row. She split her time during the meet, scribbling down debate ideas between races.

As times and placements rolled in, emotions overflowed. The boys were either screaming in joy or vomiting along the fence, unless they were doing both at the same time. The girls, however, were much more subtle about the whole affair, gloating over the swimmers they beat and crying after a loss. And her sister was the team's superstar, beating down the other swimmers by wide margins. By the end of the competition, Sophie couldn't help but feel she was missing out by sitting out. It'd been fun watching her sister win so easily.

But eventually, the lights around the pool extinguished, and Sophie was driven home. When the house came into view, Sophie had a sobering snap back to reality. Tomorrow was the big day: the debate against Tay. She'd been dreading the moment for so long, but now, it was here.

Worse, the debate took place during sixth period, while Ms. Jackson's class was seventh. That meant that, if she were to explore whether Ms. Jackson was giving her the pop test tomorrow, she'd have to cut through the debate. She'd have to cheat. Was it worth it?

Sophie sat very, very still for a long time before making her decision.

The next morning, Sophie's muscles felt like mush. There was a

sinking feeling in her soul, like it was drowning in an infinite pool. The alarm blared, and she slunk off the side of the bed. Today, she would see Tay. Not just see her—talk to her. With the whole school watching. Listening. Judging. This would hardly be a reunion.

The morning and afternoon were a blur; the only thing on her mind was the debate. It seemed the clocks in the school no longer ticked. Instead, they jolted from bell to bell. Her teachers carried on like the day was normal, and she marched like a zombie between classes. At lunch, she had a staring contest with the wall, and finally, in only a handful of blinks, she was standing on stage, starstruck next to a beautiful girl shuffling notes.

Sophie's microphone hummed as power surged through it. The tone it made was ominous and oppressive, like the backing track of a horror film. And then, the movie's monster emerged—a stout history teacher with the questions that would bury her. Today, he wasn't some guy from the social studies department. He was a gravedigger. The man strode with confidence, sat neatly in his chair, and snapped open his briefcase. From there, he withdrew his list of topics, and Sophie eyed it with lust knowing that if she'd meditated on this moment, she'd know all the mysteries printed on the backside.

“Thank you so much for being here today,” Mr. Moderator said, halfway to the girls on stage and halfway to the audience of—

Sophie peered through the shadows. The whole junior grade was in attendance, ready to watch her fold.

“Would you mind introducing yourselves?” Mr. Mod said, facing Sophie.

“Uh, hi.” Her voice wavered. “I'm Sophie Vedas, and I'm running for class president.”

There was silence. Was she supposed to say more? What else did she have to say?

The moderator cleared his throat, and when nothing else came, he moved on.

“Okay, great,” he said, swinging toward Tay. “And who are you?”

With an air of confidence, Tay bent into the microphone and began reciting her opening statement. “Hello everyone. My name is

Taylor Jardine, but I go by Tay. Right now, I'm the Junior Class Treasurer, but in the wake of our current president graduating early, I wanted to contribute more to my school. Tyler See, if you're out there in the crowd, I hope you have the best time at UCLA."

The class applauded. It was gentle and polite.

"Okay," the moderator said. "Now, I have a series of questions and you'll each have two minutes to answer. First on our list is one that affects the whole class. Each year, student government is tasked with organizing prom. How do you plan to make that night memorable for everyone? Sophie, the floor is yours."

Sophie nodded. "Thank you. If I'm elected class president, I vow to find a suitable location within the allocated budget. I'll spend my off time in pursuit of the perfect location, and I'll use every cent of the budget to make the night as good as possible. What's more is that I intend to organize a vote for the theme of prom, so our graduating class can have—"

"Like Fortnite themed?" a student in the back shouted.

"Uh, maybe," Sophie said, scanning to see who'd shouted. "I'm sure we'll be able to find a good theme that everyone would like, and, uh, yeah."

There was an awkward silence as Sophie finished, and she nodded at the moderator to signify that she was done. Tay glanced over at Sophie with suspicion, but Sophie kept her eyes locked on the audience.

"Well, alright. Tay, what about you? What will you do to make the night as memorable as possible?"

Tay smiled, bright and charming.

"Thank you for asking, Mr. Pittman. As class treasurer, I'm already familiar with the budget we'll be working with as I've spent the last three years building an appropriately sized war chest for just such an occasion. Over the last two weeks, I've been scouring for locations and have found the perfect place: the California Aquarium." Tay shuffled a paper on her podium. "Earlier this week, I contacted their events staff and placed a no-cost hold on the ballroom for next April. The aquarium offers all-inclusive pricing for their events,

complete with a take-home goody bag and an unlimited soda bar. This ensures a guaranteed single fixed price with no surprise expenses.

“To make matters better, the cost for the two rooms adjacent to the glass tunnel came in at \$8,000 *under* the district budget. As such, I’ll be filing a motion with the school board to have the excess money reallocated to our club’s department. Specifically, I’ll be requesting that this money be spent on five gaming computers so we can develop our district’s first eSports club, which will pave the way for us to compete in the national Fortnite Championships.”

The boy who had shouted let out a resounding “Woo!” while the rest of the audience clapped politely. There was a quiet commotion moments later when a teacher paraded over to rebuke him.

Sophie swallowed. While she’d been drowning—figuratively and literally—Tay had been preparing. Tay didn’t care about eSports, Sophie knew, but she discerned that a portion of the class wanted it to happen, and so she made strides to get it done.

She’s so impressive.

Get it together.

“Excellent,” Mr. Pittman said as the applause died down. “Now, as Senior Class President, you’ll have to be a role model for the school’s educational advancement system. Do you have any plans to help your fellow students acquire scholarships or get accepted to college?”

Tay looked over at Sophie. So did the moderator. So did hundreds of people in the junior class. Sophie smiled through the wall of tears.

“Hi, yes.” *Promise everything*, Sophie thought. *Win them over*. “The office of the president is one of ultimate servitude. As the current frontrunner for valedictorian, I know my approach to academics is one that works. I believe that a current issue with the academic institutions offered to us is that we don’t have access to tutors. As such, I am willing to personally offer myself as a tutor for all students who need help with their classes, collegiate packages, or scholarship applications. This is a service I’m willing to provide every day during lunch hour and after school.”

There was a smattering of applause, and Sophie smiled. There was no way Tay would be able to top that. She looked at her competition expecting to see her friend dismayed, but Tay's eyes carried the sheen of pity. Sophie's answer had been dazzling, but it was a huge overcommitment, and Tay read through the desperation like it'd been marked up by Ms. Jackson herself.

"Tay, what will you do to help students acquire scholarship money and acceptance letters?"

Tay turned back to the room and lifted a note to the top of her stack.

"Well, as we all know, getting accepted into college is about more than grades, standardized test scores, and sports accomplishments. Colleges want individuals who shape themselves with intention. As an inspiration of mine once described it, they want students who *become*. Intelligence, yes. Physicality, yes. Diversity, yes. But one overlooked component to both scholarships and college acceptance is community service. I've been working with our janitors to develop a custodial program where students can earn community service time during lunch by walking the school and picking up trash. In this way, service hours will be easily obtained in an equitable way, fast-tracking us all for statewide scholarships and nationwide recognition."

That was a great answer, and a bulge formed in Sophie's throat. A few of the more studious pupils applauded vigorously, while the gamers barely clapped at all. Sophie noted, however, that after two questions, nearly everyone had clapped for Tay at least one time. And when the applause died, the moderator cleared his throat again.

This is it, Sophie thought. Tay had outmaneuvered her in the second question too, so this was her last chance to bring it home.

"Alright, thank you very much. For our last question, I'd like to ask if either of you have plans for the Senior Class yearbook? This is a keepsake many of us will hold onto for life. How are you going to make the Senior yearbook special?"

I don't know! For as bad as that response would've been, it would've been better than what actually came out of Sophie's mouth.

"Uh, well, for the yearbooks..." Sophie said, "Great pictures

make great memories. With the savings from having prom at the aquarium...”

Shit. That was Tay’s talking point.

“...we can afford a, uh, better... what’s the word... picture person for the dance to help capture what will be many of our last moments together. Thank you.”

I forgot the word photographer? I FORGOT THE WORD PHOTOGRAPHER?!

“Interesting,” the moderator said. “As a note, the final copy of the yearbook has to be submitted to our publisher in March to ensure it’s printed on time. With prom being in May, it would be impossible to include those pictures in the yearbook.”

“Oh... right...”

Sophie brushed away at her face, doing what she could to obscure the fact that she was crying in front of the whole student body. The moderator turned to Tay, but the whispers in the crowd still clung to Sophie.

“Okay. And Tay? Do you have any plans for the yearbook?”

“I do, Mr. Pittman.” Her tone conveyed a sense of pride in herself alongside a tinge of sadness. That bit was in there for Sophie. “I’ve been in contact with the current senior year historian, and they informed me that the cost of the yearbook is typically, uh...” she shuffled through her notes, “...eighty dollars, which is a big expense for many families. As such, I took it upon myself to visit local businesses, and in exchange for ad space in the back ten pages, these companies have agreed to fund seventy-five percent of the cost of the yearbook.”

The auditorium lit with applause, but Tay held up a hand to quiet them. In this motion, she had the air of royalty. The power of a queen.

“But that’s not enough for me,” she said. “Whether I’m elected President or not, my goal is to fundraise enough money that each member of the senior class gets their yearbook for free. Nobody should have to graduate without their senior class yearbook. Nobody.”

At this point, even Sophie wanted Tay to win. With only twenty-

four hours a day, Tay had wiped the floor with Sophie who had all the time in the world. She looked over at Tay, defeated and exposed. Tay looked back, an apology in the sparkle of her eyes.

“Amazing,” Mr. Pittman said. “Well, that’s all the time we have. Your next debate will be on February 18th. You have four weeks to prepare. Thank you for your attention and with that—” the bell rang, “—you’re all dismissed to seventh period.”

Sophie burst into tears before even leaving the stage. She stumbled backward and retreated through the curtain. The darkness backstage was suffocating—fitting for a girl who’d just been buried alive. She moved blindly, stumbling over drama props as she crossed the room with her head in her hands filling with tears. Somehow, she found her way to the bathroom where she collapsed in a stall, vowing never to leave.

It’s healthy to fail, Sophie thought mockingly in her mother’s voice. *Maybe I should’ve cheated*. At the thought, she winced, feeling a pain in her chest. It wasn’t fun to have these thoughts. Nothing made sense, and everything hurt.

Then, there was a creak and the bathroom door opened.

“Sophie...?”

“Go away, Tay,” Sophie said, her voice croaking.

“Listen,” Tay continued, a little softer. “I know... I know you probably don’t want to speak to me right now, especially after I’ve been so distant, but...” She sighed. “Look. I—I thought you were going to cheat. I was *sure* of it. It pushed me to prepare—to overprepare, really. I spent weeks obsessing over this, and now I feel... I don’t know. I feel ashamed. Because I didn’t give you enough credit. Because I *really* thought that if you were willing to lie to me once, then you’d lie to me forever. And that’s stupid. Like, of course it’s stupid. You didn’t cheat when I gave you a reason to, so I wanted to say thank you—and I’m sorry.”

Sophie opened the door so Tay could see her face. Her eyes were puffy and cheeks splotchy red. The tears had been so persistent, they threatened to make a liar of Sophie’s waterproof mascara. Tay ran a paper towel under the sink and passed it to Sophie who took it

begrudgingly.

“What makes you think I didn’t cheat?” Sophie asked, pressing the cool towel against her eyes.

“Sophie...” Tay smiled gently, trying to soften the blow. “We could tell.”

Sophie felt a new wave of tears burst through her, although it was accompanied by a stifled laugh.

“You’re right,” Sophie said. “I couldn’t do it. I missed you too much, and I felt so bad about betraying your trust. I thought about it, Tay, I really did. But I don’t want to hurt you. I missed you too much.”

Tay pushed forward and wrapped Sophie up in her arms, pulling her close so Sophie could cry into her shoulder. “I missed you too.”

“You were, like, *really* amazing up there,” Sophie said, pulling away. “Like... can I vote for you already?”

Tay chortled, ugly and choking. Her eyes misted, which made Sophie tear, which made Tay cry, which made Sophie sob—this tension went back and forth until they both clung to a hug, squeezing so tightly that an awkward moment couldn’t possibly fit between them. Reprieve finally swept through Sophie’s body, and she relaxed.

“Can we be friends again?” Tay asked, as though this needed an answer.

“Yes.”

They pulled apart, and Sophie sniffled. Everything about Tay was perfect. Literally everything.

Even if she liked me, Sophie thought, she’s just too good for me.

Above them, the class bell rang.

“We should probably...”

“Yeah...”

They left the bathroom with matching puffy eyes and red noses. In the hallway, Sophie had to go right, and Tay left. There was a lag before splitting where they stared at one another. Out of words, they hugged again.

“I’ll meet you at The Ledge today, okay?” Tay said in Sophie’s ear.

“Are you going to bring that guy you’re dating?” Sophie asked.

Tay laughed and shook her head. “We broke up. He was dumb as a rock. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Sophie tried to not seem too happy about this. She beamed a smile, forced it into a cringe. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, really.” Tay shrugged. “I’ll find someone else I’m sure. Now, let’s get to class.”

She took a step backward, and they were off. As Sophie travelled down the hall, she reflected on what had happened and came to an unlikely conclusion. Even though this was never the path she’d have chosen for herself, maybe it was the best outcome after all.

CHAPTER NINE

The Search for Answers

OUTSIDE MS. Jackson's room, Sophie paused to fix herself. She straightened her hair, wiped her makeup, and drew a few breaths to push away the tension. For the first time in two weeks, Sophie had no idea what to expect from Ms. Jackson's class, but she felt confident it'd be okay. After all, everything else had worked out—why not this?

In an attempt to slip under the radar, she opened the door and tiptoed into the room.

"Sophie," Ms. Jackson said, stopping mid-lecture to draw the class's attention. Sophie would've started shaking if there was any adrenaline left in her body. "How was the debate?"

"Fine," Sophie said, booking it to her desk. There, she took a seat and flashed an uncomfortable smile.

"Really?" Ms. Jackson said. "From what I heard, you seemed a tad unprepared. I hope that's because you were studying, yes?"

"Studying?"

"For your makeup test."

Sophie froze. Her eyes widened, pleading for mercy, but Ms. Jackson smirked, enjoying the way hope drained from Sophie's body. Her spindly fingers plucked a paper from the front table and placed it face down on Sophie's desk.

"Good luck."

Sophie stared at the test in disbelief. The corners of her mouth tightened, her breath stilled, and her stomach churned. This was proof

that the universe was as cruel and indifferent to her as Ms. Jackson was herself, and the last straw of hope in Sophie snapped.

Everyone else in class worked through a packet—busywork “to help Sophie focus”—while Sophie stewed over useless questions.

What does the fourth dimension measure?

Sophie shook her head. The first dimension was length, the second width, and the third height. What could a fourth dimension even be? What were their lessons even about? Something with strings? Quirky... particle... things?

Whatever. Sophie scribbled the word *depth* and moved on.

What's the smallest unit of time?

Knowing it was wrong, Sophie wrote nanosecond and kept going. The whole test continued in this manner. No multiple choice, matching, or fill-in-the-blank sections were present. It was just a list of open-ended and long-response prompts.

Name the quantum property that allows a particle to be in two places at once.

Sophie blinked. She wasn't even sure that was *real*, let alone something they'd studied.

Twenty-five percent is inevitable, Sophie thought, struggling to stay focused. By the end of the test, though, she wondered if she would score even *that* high. This was the nail in the coffin. There would be no valedictorian title for her, and the road to Harvard would be blocked off forever.

I'd be lucky if a school as little as Bristol Community College accepted me.

There was a moment after the last question where Sophie just sat in despair. Out of tears and stripped of power, she thought about ripping the test in half, cursing out Ms. Jackson, and giving in to a catastrophic breakdown, but amid the cold indifference of reality, she didn't have the courage for it. Instead, she stared at her teacher who sat in the chair in the front of the room like a queen in a throne. This was *her* doing. It was *her* fault that Sophie's life was unraveling. Why did Ms. Jackson pick *today* to give the test? Was it just because she knew Sophie would be busy with the debate? Or did she know about the meditation ritual?

Her thoughts spiraled, and she could barely focus. The clock's

ticks didn't seem to progress time; they simply counted down the moments left in her life. The ripple effect this moment would have would bury her. There was only one way out of this nightmare: to claw power back from the monster who pulled the strings.

She looked up with wild eyes and a clear mind. The test was a shadow in her past. Now, all that mattered was the downfall of Ms. Jackson. Surely, this fury would drive her next meditation.

The bell rang, and Sophie dropped her test on her teacher's desk. "I'll grade it over the weekend," Ms. Jackson said.

No interest. No emotion. No respect. Sophie glared, waiting for something more, but nothing happened. Ms. Jackson raised her eyes without moving her head.

"Is there something else?"

"No," Sophie said, pointedly.

"Then have a good day." Ms. Jackson's flat voice nearly pushed Sophie out the door on its own. Sophie scrambled the rest of the way and rushed to meet Tay at the Ledge. Already there, Tay stopped adjusting her makeup with her phone's camera and gave Sophie a brilliant smile. When Sophie didn't return it, Tay changed her expression to something more empathetic.

"Ms. Jackson gave me the makeup test," Sophie said.

"*Today?*" Tay shook her head. "That's cruel. Do you think she planned it for debate day to make sure you were unprepared?"

"Actually, I think she planned it for a day when I didn't check the future for it. She knows more than she lets on, and I'd like to know exactly what that is."

"Marc's been hung up on her too since the day at the Jacuzzi house," Tay said.

The mention of Marc stripped Sophie of her breath. He was probably already on the drive home, alone.

"Then let's get some answers," Sophie said. "Not just for me, but for Marc too. Are you free this afternoon?"

"I can clear my schedule, but the only money I have is from my dad's credit card. We're not going to be spending real money, right?"

"Right."

“Okay, then—” Tay paused. “Then I’ll choose to trust you again.”

On the drive to Sophie’s house, she texted Katelyn to tell her that she needed the day off from swim practice. A bad case of DOMS was her excuse, but Katelyn knew better. Regardless, she agreed to let Coach know that Sophie was busy, and Sophie agreed to get her a bag of Takis the next time she went to the gas station.

Anxiety built as they arrived home. How far would she be willing to go? What was her plan? Would anything work to crack Ms. Jackson? Each step to her room was heavier than the last, weighed down by the morality of what they were about to do—and even more so by the presence of Tay in her house again. As the door closed to Sophie’s room, the two girls were left alone. Both expected to feel something new in their reunion—a spark, a silence, a sting—but there was nothing except the familiarity of being near an old friend.

“So, how’s this going to go?” Tay asked, perching on the edge of Sophie’s bed.

“I’m thinking we should start by finding out what Ms. Jackson’s routine is,” Sophie said, pulling out her meditation pad. “At Rick’s, she was in a meeting, right? If we track her to the next meeting, we can learn who the members of her club are and deduce why they’re there. Maybe that has some clues as to what she’s doing?”

“Do you think she has some special power?” Tay asked.

“I mean—” Sophie thought a moment, “—would that really be wild? Half my family can see the future. Marc can share dreams. Is it insane to think Ms. Jackson is hiding something too?”

“I suppose not,” Tay said. “What do you need from me?”

“For starters, I’ll need you to drive,” Sophie said. “Are you okay with that?”

Tay nodded, withdrawing keys from her purse and placing them on the floor between them.

“And I’ll need money,” Sophie said.

Slowly, Tay placed her dad’s card beside her keys, her serious eyes locking with Sophie.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No,” Sophie said. “But I’m going to do it anyway.”

Tay nodded and gave a confident smile. “I get it.”

With that, Sophie drew a deep breath and closed her eyes. Tonight, she was fueled by one desire, and one desire alone. Test scores didn’t matter. Student government didn’t matter. A relationship with Tay didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was Ms. Jackson. And tonight, Ms. Jackson would burn at the stake.

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Sophie swiped Tay’s card off the ground and scrambled to the computer. A quick web search gave her a link to a sketchy site that ran background checks, and with just a few keystrokes, she was staring at Ms. Jackson’s home address.

“So what’s the plan?” Tay asked.

“We’re going to camp out at Ms. Jackson’s home and follow her when she leaves. You ready?”

“I—” Tay hesitated, her fingers fidgeting at her side. “We’re definitely in a meditation, right?”

Sophie’s gut clenched. Tay had never asked that before.

“Yes,” Sophie said.

“Okay.”

Still, Tay was stiff, her hands now balled into fists and her lips drawn into a tight line.

“Here, let me put you at ease,” Sophie said. “You’ve known me a long time, yeah? And in all that time, have I ever spoiled the perfect gift?”

Tay shook her head.

“Well, shortly after Christmas, you confided in me that you didn’t get all the things you wanted. So I did some, uh, thinking and got you the perfect gift. I’ve been holding onto it for the right occasion. Check the bottom drawer of my dresser.”

Tay did as instructed, sliding out the drawer. Sophie held her breath, hoping Tay would find the moment endearing—not creepy. Her fears were put to rest when a gasp escaped Tay, and she pulled out the book *Human, All Too Human* by Nietzsche.

“Oh my gosh! How did you know?” Tay clutched the book against her chest, owning it from the moment she laid hands on it. “I’ve been thinking about getting this.”

Sophie smiled, not wanting to admit her ways. “All you need to know is that I would *never* spoil such a surprise unless I could erase the outcome, okay? Does it make you feel better?”

“Yeah, it does,” Tay said, putting the book back in the drawer. “Future me is going to be very excited.”

“And present me is happy to know that.”

Tay picked up the keys, and the two bounded down the stairs, waving to Katelyn as they sped through the living room. Tay’s car sat in the driveway, shining in the late-afternoon sun. She took the driver’s seat while Sophie grabbed shotgun, the leather warm from the sun. The engine turned over with ease, and they rolled out of the neighborhood in style. The journey was smooth to the highway, and their trek through Coalview was without issue. And then Tay got an idea.

“You know, if there are no consequences to my actions now, then let’s get there faster, yeah?” Tay pressed down on the pedal and accelerated to an alarming speed. Sophie’s pulse spiked and she held onto the bar above her seat. The road buckled and waved, sending them flying in different directions, and Sophie laughed as the pressure smushed her against her seat. Eventually, she caught her breath and rolled down the window. Tay’s hair blew haphazardly, and Sophie’s went just as wild.

As they cut through Bristol, they passed a police cruiser lying in wait. Tay had definitely been speeding, but as they passed, they noticed the officer slumped in his car, eyes closed with his chin to his shoulder. Sophie couldn’t believe it—he was sleeping on the job.

“That was lucky,” Tay said.

“Eh, it’s a meditation. A ticket wouldn’t have mattered. Anyway, take a left at the next light. We’re getting close to Ms. Jackson’s neighborhood.”

In minutes, they were rounding the loop in Ms. Jackson’s cul-de-sac, stopping a hundred feet away from her house. Despite its

normalcy, the house stood out from the surrounding homes because of its overbearing cleanliness. It looked like it belonged on the foothills of Calisette, not in the heart of Bristol.

“So what now?” Tay asked, parking just out of sight.

“Now, we wait,” Sophie said, reclining in her seat. “When Ms. Jackson leaves, we’ll follow her. I don’t care how long it takes, I—”

Immediately, Ms. Jackson stepped onto her porch. She stretched as though she’d just woken from a nap and took large steps toward her car. Sophie sat up and watched, ready for a formal pursuit. But her confidence that things would go as planned shrunk when Ms. Jackson passed her car and turned down the sidewalk. Suddenly, she was making a beeline straight for them.

“Should I drive?” Tay whispered.

“No,” Sophie said, the edges of her vision closing in. “We should—uh—shit.”

Ms. Jackson walked to Sophie’s window and knelt to make eye contact. Initially, Sophie refused to look, but when Ms. Jackson knocked, she couldn’t ignore her any longer. With the press of a button, she rolled down the glass.

“Go home, Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said. “You’re wasting your time.”

“So what?” Sophie said, more confident than she felt. “I have time to spare. What’re you up to today? Meeting with the girls? Messing up more lives?”

“Messing up lives?” Ms. Jackson tilted her head but said nothing more.

Sophie grew more serious. “Why did you give me the pop test *today*? Of all days, you picked the one day I—”

She almost said, *‘the one day I didn’t meditate,’* but this was never something she wanted to casually admit out loud. Even though this reality was fake, letting that habit in would be dangerous.

“You picked the one day I had the debate,” Sophie continued. “Why?”

“You had nearly two weeks to prepare, did you not?” Ms. Jackson asked, her eyes narrowing.

Sophie fumed, and with her rise in emotion came a waver in the meditation. A slew of new *wants* came screaming through her head. She wanted to curse, to scream, to fight.

“Go home, Sophie. Try another time.” Ms. Jackson turned to leave.

With gritted teeth, Sophie rolled up her window, and the vision collapsed.

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CHAPTER TEN

Ms. Jackson

SOPHIE'S EYES jolted open, and the sight of her room was enough to ground her back in reality. Tay was sitting nearby, fidgeting with a loose thread on her sleeve, bored and untouched by what had happened. To her, she'd just been sitting in a room with a half-conscious Sophie.

Sophie cursed, and Tay jumped.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Ms. Jackson knew we were going to be there."

"What?"

"She knew *when* we were going to be there. To the minute." Sophie massaged her temple as though she were squeezing out the memory. "We went to her house and prepared a stakeout, but she was ready. Whatever secret she's got, she has us pinned. Maybe this can't work."

Tay thought a moment and nudged the card closer to Sophie.

"Buy a GPS," Tay suggested. "We can stick it to her car and monitor her stops. Maybe she'll even take us straight to her coven."

"Alright," Sophie said. "Let's give that a shot."

She closed her eyes and tried again.

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Safe inside the meditation, Tay drove Sophie to pick out the best tracker money could buy. Much to Tay's discomfort, they put it on her "emergency only" credit card before continuing on. The drive out

to Ms. Jackson's house was slower this time. Sophie considered why Tay wasn't as relaxed as she was in the first meditation and realized she'd left the Nietzsche book in the dresser. If Tay didn't need it, that meant some trust had returned.

The cop was still asleep as they passed, and Ms. Jackson's neighborhood was just as quiet as before. Her house crept up on them, the pristine decor looking more like a haunted house to Sophie.

"Just drive past Ms. Jackson's house and don't stop." Sophie turned on the tracker and connected it to her phone. Then, she applied a line of super glue on the back. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Tay turned down Ms. Jackson's street and coasted around the outer edge of the cul-de-sac. Outside Ms. Jackson's home, she nudged the brakes, and Sophie slipped out. A firm slam nailed the tracker in place, out of sight under the bumper. Silently, Sophie scrambled back to her car, and Tay hit the gas. In seconds, they were out of sight, getting away with their scheme scot-free.

Sophie hit the ceiling with her fist. "Hell yeah. She probably won't make a move until nightfall. Let's find a suitable spot to camp out."

Tay knew exactly where to go—a quality gas station lay just a mile away. Once there, Sophie pumped gas while Tay went hunting for snacks. Instead of nuts and protein bars, as Sophie expected, she came back with an entire box of zebra cakes and dumped the contents between them.

"I didn't take you as a zebra cake girly," Sophie said, digging into the first pastry.

"If it didn't make me gain so much weight, I'd eat one with every meal." Tay stared at the cakes as though they would grow legs and run away. "We're definitely meditating, right?"

"Yeah," Sophie said. "Why? You watching your figure?"

"Aren't you?" Tay grabbed two cakes at once, tearing off both wrappers simultaneously. "Elections require perfections."

"Well..." Sophie wasn't explicitly watching her figure, though she had started taking nutrition more seriously since joining swim team.

"Oh, thish ish sho good," Tay said, smacking the bread from her

gums. “I know I won’t remember this later, but—” she gulped, “—*god* I love sugar.”

Sophie stuffed one of the cakes into her mouth and felt a small pop of joy. Maybe she was just more familiar with sweets, but it was nothing like what Tay was experiencing.

“Do you think I should put more effort into my appearance?” Sophie asked. It was something she hadn’t considered before. Having the answers to every social situation meant she didn’t need to present as well. But looking over herself and comparing it with Tay or Ms. Jackson—was she sloppy in the details?

“No, you’re gorgeous,” Tay said automatically.

“I mean it,” Sophie said. “Can I get an honest answer?”

Tay swallowed what was in her mouth and looked Sophie over. Then, she shrugged.

“I mean, I don’t think you need to change anything, but you could put more effort into your appearance.”

Even though Sophie had asked for honesty, it still hurt to receive it, despite it being a truth she hadn’t paid much attention to.

“I guess I’ve never seen much of a reason to invest in my presentation,” Sophie said. “Why do you do it?”

“Because I have next to no control in anything else,” Tay said. “You get to explore every possible future while I have to go in blindly. It may not be fair that the world expects us to spend so much money and time into building our appearance, but it’s at least something I can control. That and psychology. Did you know people are more likely to think you’re good at everything if you’re good looking? It’s called the halo effect. Whether society is right or wrong doesn’t matter—if everyone’s playing by the same rules, then we have to as well.”

“Huh,” Sophie grunted. She caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror and frowned. Then, she straightened out a strand of hair and pulled a wrinkle from her shirt.

“Mmm, if the real version of me could see me now,” Tay said, stuffing another cake into her mouth. Then, she paused, an existential thought blowing through her mind. “I mean, I am the real version...”

but, well...” Her face recoiled. “Well, I guess I only *feel* like the real version. So, yeah. If the real version could see me now... she’d be so... judgmental.”

“You’re real,” Sophie said, her mouth empty as her appetite evaporated. “I mean, you’re not fake. You always act like the real version—except for the rare moments when I get to see how you *really* feel about things. Times like this.”

Tay’s smile faded.

“Sophie,” Tay said. “How much do you know about me?”

“We’re best friends,” Sophie said, casually. “I know a lot about you.”

“No, I mean...” Tay struggled to form her question. “How much do you know about me that I don’t know you know? How often do you see moments like this? Moments I wouldn’t share if I didn’t think the consequences were going to be nullified in an hour? You must have a lot of memories about me that I don’t have of you, right? I mean, it’s weird, isn’t it? If this was a normal friendship, I would’ve spent *exactly* the same amount of time with you as you’ve spent with me. But you must’ve spent *hours* with me that I don’t remember, yeah?”

Sophie shifted uncomfortably. It was true, but she didn’t want to say it out loud.

“Am I going to stop existing when this meditation ends?” Tay drew a sharp breath. “Like, will this version of me just... die?”

Sophie shrugged. “Well... you won’t exist.”

Silence.

“That’s a little messed up, isn’t it?” Tay put down the cake in her hands. “I mean, maybe not. I don’t remember what it’s like before I was born; I won’t remember what it’s like after the meditation ends either, right?” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m helping you, and that’s what matters. You know, I’ve never told anyone this before, but I’ve been getting really into Nietzsche, and it’s helping me think about my purpose.”

“Nietzsche, really?” Sophie asked, her heart dimming. To Tay, this was a big moment. She was putting her soul out there. But to

Sophie? She'd heard it before.

"Yeah. I really want to be on your level. You're not some average high school rival, Sophie—you're an *Übermensch*. You're the next evolution. How am I supposed to keep up? I've been looking for answers."

Sophie smiled, but it was empty from the eyes. In all her time with precognitive powers, Sophie had never realized how much she'd been asking from Tay. She thought it was crossing the line to expect Tay to cancel plans—even hypothetically—but Tay was rationalizing the equivalency of death just to help Sophie on a quest for petty revenge.

Her words also shed light on how one-sided their relationship had been. This was like falling in love with a content creator. Like, sure, it always *felt* like a mutual relationship, but at the end of the day, you're watching a performative version of a personality. You're falling for a fake rendition of a person who's making decisions in a context they wouldn't make in the real world. And while Sophie had watched Tay a thousand times over, Tay had never seen or learned as much about Sophie. Their relationship had become straight-up parasocial.

"Tay... I..."

But Tay was distracted. The dot on the tracker app had started moving and Ms. Jackson was heading straight toward them. They both tightened, afraid they'd been caught again until the dot passed and Ms. Jackson's car flew past.

"Hit it," Sophie said. "Don't tailgate. I'll guide."

Tay threw the car into drive and made her way onto the road. Sophie kept her eyes on the phone as Ms. Jackson wound toward Coalview. The road narrowed, but Tay stayed focused. Sophie called out directions. "Left at the light." "Straight ahead." "Run this light." "Go!" The buildings deteriorated in quality and Tay's car struggled to maintain itself as Ms. Jackson drove into the worst parts of town.

Thirty minutes of chasing ensued. The sun dipped below the horizon, and still, Ms. Jackson continued her haphazard path away from them. Tay whipped corners as fast as she could, but nothing was fast enough. Finally, the dot stopped moving against a dead end with

no escape.

“In two minutes, we’ll have her cornered,” Sophie said, pointing Tay down a side road. “A left here and a right at the light. Then—”

Sophie’s heart sank as Tay took the turn. They were facing the wall at the end of a road, but Ms. Jackson’s car was absent. What *was* there, however, was the GPS tracker. It’d been stripped from the bumper and flung into the alley. And on the far wall, a line of dry, chalk-white graffiti stretched across the brick, written in a familiar script.

Sophie caught her breath and her arms prickled cold. There was a symbol of an eye inside a triangle. Above that, the words were cold and written with Ms. Jackson’s voice. They read:

GO
HOME, SOPHIE
TRY ANOTHER TIME



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Weight of the World

SOPHIE OPENED her eyes into a body already braced. Jaw locked. Fists knotted. Sweat tracing a line down her temple. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, she bit her bottom lip and fumed.

Tay smiled, finding it funny that her friend snapped from a peaceful meditation into immediate rage.

“I’m guessing it didn’t go well?”

“I swear,” Sophie growled, “in the next meditation, I’m going to strangle her.”

“What happened?”

Sophie told her everything—except the part about the zebra cakes and the nature of their friendship. The irony of keeping this detail private didn’t escape her, but she was still processing what to do about it. At one point in the story, she caught her reflection in a mirror and straightened her shirt.

“Alright, well, while you were meditating, I made a new plan,” Tay started. “I was thinking that maybe if we—”

“Actually,” Sophie said, raising a hand between them, “I think I’m going to let it go.”

Tay blinked. “What?”

“Whatever she’s doing—however she’s doing it—it’s working. She’s two steps ahead and pulling away. She’s got us beat.”

Sophie wasn’t sure if she believed her own words, but there was

suddenly a risk to meditation, a realization that it wasn't some consequence-free dreamscape. Each time she did it, she internalized a version of her friends that didn't exist. She learned things about them that they wouldn't have otherwise shared. She was living half a friendship that only got more distant the more she used her power. But what else could she do? *Not* use her power?

"So, you're giving up?" Tay asked. "Come on, we can do this."

"I'm sorry, Tay. I—" She shook her head. "We can't do this."

Tay tried to look neutral, but the slope of her lips gave too much away.

"Okay," she said, gathering her stuff. "I get it."

"It's nothing you did," Sophie said, standing suddenly. "It's just—"

"No, it's fine."

"Listen, Tay," Sophie's voice softened. "Look, it's been a really rough couple of weeks. I think I need to spend the weekend figuring out what I really want."

Tay considered this a long time before nodding with thin lips. "Okay. Fine. But can I ask you something? Why do you need this? Not just answers about Ms. Jackson, but Harvard. Valedictorian. President. Why are you chasing this life?"

Sophie drew a sharp breath and considered it. "I don't know." It was an answer that satisfied nobody, least of all her.

"Okay. I heard this quote and I think you should hear it too. It goes, 'She who has a why for which to live can bear almost any how.' If you figure out why you're doing these things, then nothing's going to stop you. I'll see you on Monday, okay?"

"Yeah," Sophie whispered through the break of tears. "Monday."

Tay stepped forward and gave Sophie a hug. Somehow, it was painful and comfortable at the same time. Then, she left without another word. Sophie listened to her footsteps as they thumped down the stairs, then perched up by the window to watch her pull away. As the car turned out of sight, Sophie sighed and took her place on the meditation pad.

Should I try Ms. Jackson again?

*Should I spend the weekend with Tay?
Should I make plans for my campaign?
Should I call Marc?*

Considering her next move was pointless. There was too much rattling around in her head. It was going to be impossible to focus—impossible to meditate. And as Sophie spiraled into despair, she feared the worst.

What if I can't meditate again?

She tried channeling her hatred of Ms. Jackson, but enough time had passed that she no longer felt all-consuming anger. Her brain had mellowed amid the time with Tay, and there was no going back to that fury.

What if I don't want to meditate again, she thought.

She closed her eyes and tried one final time to enter the future—just to see if it would work—but there was nothing there. She was a lighter missing flint; no matter how many times the right buttons were pressed, the spark was gone.

After a minute of panic, she buried her head in her hands and cried.

I should've just gone to swim practice.

Sophie spent the entire weekend trying to get her powers to work, but her brain was just too full. Full of desire, full of memories, full of itself. Once, she got close to slipping away, but a jolt of fear snapped her out of it. By the time Sunday was upon her, Sophie was in full-blown panic. If she didn't meditate now, this would be the first week in years she experienced raw. Without the comfort of her precognition, *everything* became a source of worry. What if tomorrow there's a test? A fire? A surprise debate? What if... What if... What if...

It was stupidly late when Sophie gave in and called the only person who could help. But surely she'd overlook another way-too-late conversation, right?

"Hello?" Phoebe groaned, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

"Hi," Sophie said, her voice stiff. "Uh, how are you?"

There was a strained silence.

“What’s wrong?” Phoebe asked bluntly.

“I can’t use my powers again,” Sophie said. “They came back for a bit, but now…”

Phoebe drew in a deep breath, buying time to awaken her mind. “Have you tried focusing on one thing to the point of obsession?”

“Yes,” Sophie said, “but the obsession passed, and now I can’t get back to that headspace.”

“So you have too much anxiety, got it,” Phoebe murmured. “Well, it *was* dumb to rely on the obsession strategy—that was supposed to be a band-aid until you healed the normal way.”

“So what do I do?”

“If you’re out of ways to distract your brain,” Phoebe said, “then there’s only one other way to get rid of your anxiety.”

“The spa?”

Phoebe chuckled. “No, Sophie. You’re going to have to solve your problems the old-fashioned way.”

“And that is?”

“Confront your issues head-on. Close some doors, upset some people, and accept the consequences of the things you can’t control.”

“Nooooo.”

“Yeeahhh,” Phoebe replied, mocking her tone. “One by one, you’ll have to approach each anxiety and put them to rest.”

“Okay, well, how can I pinpoint those?”

“They make themselves known when you meditate,” Phoebe said. “When you sit down in a dark room and think, your brain lights up. Write down what it thinks of, and then start chipping away. Only when those voices are gone will you have a clear mind again.”

Sophie sighed into the phone as though she’d just been told that scaling the Himalayas was the only way to solve her problems. “Is there anything else that might work? Herbal remedies? Ancient rituals? *Anything?*”

“It’s meditation, Sophie. That *is* your herbal remedy and ancient ritual.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Phoebe repeated, but more sternly. “Do you need anything else?”

“No,” Sophie said. She paused, trying to gather sincere energy. “Thank you for listening.”

“Of course, Soph. I’m going back to bed now, but you call anytime if you think of anything else I can help with. And in case you haven’t looked at a clock lately, I mean it.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“No worries. Now figure this out and get some sleep. Love you, sis.”

“Love you, sis.”

Sophie hung up. Slowly, she got up from her bed and shook her legs out. Then, with the tiniest of steps, she withdrew her mat and sat down on the floor. Her eyes closed and, just as Phoebe had said, her brain blurted out one anxiety after another. Sophie wrote down each thought, and while none of these things were wrong to want, they were all massive hurdles. Seeing them together highlighted how impossible it would be to get it all.

I want to get accepted to Harvard.

I want to be valedictorian.

I want to be class president.

I want Tay to be my girlfriend.

I want Marc to stop being mad at me.

I want to know what Ms. Jackson is up to.

I want to win my first swim race.

When she finished and looked back at her list, her stomach turned. This was like the obituary of a person who had done everything right, yet completed nothing worth remembering. Worse, the list required her to be perfect *without* precognition. With this being her first time trying, she wasn’t sure she could pull it off. But what else was there to do? She looked over the list once and struggled to find a step she could take now. Everything was so far away, so far out of reach.

With doubt clouding her mind, Sophie found herself unable to sleep. She spent the whole night staring at the dots on the ceiling, and

by the time her alarm blared, she'd named nearly a dozen constellations imagined from the popcorn construction.

As Sophie trudged downstairs, Katelyn perked up at the table.

"You comin' to swim practish tonight?" Her mouth was full of protein-rich cereal.

"I... I don't know..." Sophie answered, pouring her own bowl of Lucky Charms.

"Olivia said she missed you," Katelyn said, swallowing her bite. "I told her I missed you too."

Sophie looked up at Katelyn from beneath her lashes, checking to make sure she was serious. There was a sudden lightness in Sophie's chest, but she wasn't sure what it meant. For the first time all night, she cracked a smile. It was tight and toothless, but still genuine.

"Alright," Sophie said. "I'll go to swim practice, but don't expect much. I didn't sleep well last night."

It wasn't much, but it was progress on her list. And that was worth something.

"Awesome."

Katelyn returned to her cereal, and Sophie sighed, staring deep into her bowl. How was she going to get through the whole day?

It was the scariest day of Sophie's life. She did everything she could to keep her head low. No chances, no mistakes, no gambles. At lunch, Sophie took her books to the library and got a head start on homework. Without being able to steal answers, she actually had to study, which was so *annoying* given the silence of the room. Time felt *endless*, and her phone was more like a siren's call than a useful gadget.

When sixth period ended, Sophie felt a surge of anxiety. What was she going to feel when she saw Ms. Jackson? What would Ms. Jackson say to her? She shuffled into her seat and stared down at her desk.

But class proceeded as usual. Ms. Jackson rambled on about some physics thing, and Sophie stared at her. The more she took in her teacher, though, the angrier she became. She had to get out of here. She clicked her pen and stared at the clock, willing the bell to ring.

Finally, it did, and Sophie scrambled to get out of there.

“Sophie, a word please.”

Sophie turned toward Ms. Jackson, her eyes rolling as the class filed out. She heard whispers of her name on their breaths, and she endured until the door closed and she was alone with Ms. Jackson.

“I assume you know what I’m about to tell you,” Ms. Jackson said, her hand hovering over a stack of papers.

Sophie didn’t respond.

“Your pop-test results came back,” Ms. Jackson said. “Last time, you scored 35 points. This time?” She pressed Sophie’s test onto her desk. “You got 25.”

Sophie looked away, unable to meet her teacher’s eyes. Briefly, she recognized this moment. She’d seen it before, right? But it was impossible to place the source of her *déjà vu*.

“Sophie, this was a unit-review test. Two-thirds of the questions came from last semester’s tests—all of which you scored 100% on. And then, when I repackaged the questions and got rid of the multiple-choice answers, you failed? If I had any doubts before, I don’t anymore. You’ve been cheating, and you deserve your failing grade.”

Sophie gritted her teeth. How dare Ms. Jackson tell her what she deserved. “But—”

“But I don’t want to fail you,” Ms. Jackson started, cutting Sophie off. “Instead, I’ve devised a way to close this out in a manner that’s fair for both of us. If you can ace every assignment for the rest of the semester, I’ll let you escape with a C-minus.”

Anger boiled over. “That’s not fair!”

“In my opinion, it’s more than fair.” Ms. Jackson picked the paper off the desk. “You’ll get the lowest passing grade, and we can avoid an investigation.”

“And we can kiss Harvard goodbye.”

Ms. Jackson looked at Sophie with eyes that sparkled, gleaming with satisfaction. She relished this. The idea of destroying Sophie and crushing her dreams, it titillated her. Almost euphoric, she straightened a stack of papers on her desk and ran a finger down the

corner.

I've seen that before.

“Yes,” Ms. Jackson said. “You can kiss Harvard goodbye.”

Something inside Sophie cracked. The armor of her ego took on a chink, a hairline fracture that proved she wasn't bulletproof. That she never would be.

“Is that all?”

Ms. Jackson nodded, and her tone softened. “Listen, I know you have a lot going on, but you need to be more diligent. If you work on your time management, you'll be just fine. Believe it or not, Sophie, I'm here to help. Okay?”

“Hmph.”

Sophie turned and yanked the door open, wishing she had the strength to pull it off its hinges. She was halfway to the Ledge when it hit her.

That was the prophecy, you idiot! Sophie scowled. That's why you recognized it. You could've changed it by staying focused, but no. You got angry. You played right into the hands of fate. What is wrong with you?

It was there, in the middle of the hallway, that she wanted to bang her head against a locker. In an uncontrollable rage, she growled in frustration, scaring a group of freshmen who were stuffing textbooks in their bags.

You need to slow down, she thought. Be more diligent.

She cursed herself for sounding like Ms. Jackson and paused at the double doors to collect herself. She didn't want Tay to see her upset. With a few deep breaths, she worked to find a win. Surely, there must be *something* positive about the fact that the prophecy had been fulfilled.

Well, at least it's over, she thought. This was the brightest side she could come up with. The test was over, and the prophecy was fulfilled. Now, she was even with the universe, and everything from here on out would be fresh and clean. Maybe this was a weak justification for her pain, but it meant she no longer had to dread it coming. It was bad enough that the past was written in ink—the future didn't need to be so as well.

Finally ready, she pushed open the double doors, ready to see Tay—but Tay wasn't there. Instead, she was face-to-face with someone else.

Marc.

For the first time since their falling out, Marc was at the Ledge, waiting for her. And he looked like shit. More tired than usual. More defeated than ever. More... desperate, even.

“Hey, Sophie,” Marc said, shame dripping from his words. “I need your help.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Marc

MARC MET Sophie's gaze, stone-faced and unshakable. The open space felt small and stuffy—rightly so as it struggled to fit Sophie, Marc, and all the awkward tension between them. Now more than ever, Sophie wished she could've seen the future. More than *ever*, she felt unprepared for what was to come.

"We're going to get evicted if we don't come up with rent money by the end of the week," Marc said. "We're \$200 short, and I have nowhere else to turn."

Sophie opened her mouth, but only to breathe.

"Marc," Sophie said, her voice like a sympathetic doctor delivering bad news. "My power. It's... it's gone."

Marc tilted his head. "Gone? What do you mean, *gone*?"

"I mean it's not working." She looked up at the sky. "It hasn't for days."

Marc stared at the ground, debating whether to believe her.

"Can we try?" Marc pleaded. "I need this."

Sophie swallowed, then nodded. If there was ever a time to try and fail, this was it.

"Fine," Sophie said, shrugging off her backpack and thrusting it against the wall. "I'll try."

She took a seat beneath the graffiti smiley face and leaned her head back against it. Her eyes closed and her hands found their normal spot, folded in her lap. Then began the breathing. Deep breath

in... deep breath out... But instead of the billowing presence of the future, she only found pressure and anxiety. Every minute that passed found the pressure building, and knowing it wasn't going to work made Sophie despair. After thirty minutes, Marc finally spoke.

"Listen, Sophie," Marc said, "if you're trying to deliver payback for how I've been treating you, I need you to stop. This is really important."

Sophie opened her eyes and flinched, adjusting to the bright sun. "Look, man—I'm trying my best here. If you'd spent any time with me over the last few weeks, you'd know how much I've been struggling."

"Whatever." Marc stood up. "For as long as I've known you, you've been perfect with your meditations, but when I need you the most, you can't do it? I'm not dumb."

"And I'm not a liar," Sophie said.

"Oh yeah?" Marc crinkled his eyebrows, challenging her.

"Yeah," Sophie said, getting to her feet. "Yeah, I lied to you at Rick's—I know that. But one mistake doesn't define a person. And I'm *not* a liar. In case you haven't noticed, I've had a really rough time over the last few weeks."

Marc wasn't having it.

"Oh, I can't imagine *anything* more stressful than *your* life. A campaign you're *choosing* to run, friends you're *choosing* to lie to, tests you're *choosing* not to study for. Sounds totally out of your control. It must be so much harder than preparing my mom for what it's going to be like to sleep under a bridge."

"That's not fair." Sophie's fists were suddenly clenched, but she wasn't going to strike him. No. She was going to cry. "Why don't *you* get a job? You could've earned rent by yourself instead of using me for an easy cash grab."

"You think I'm using you?" Marc threw up his hands. "And get a job? Get a job?! Really? Why didn't I think of that? Don't you think I've been trying? I don't have the luxury of—"

"The luxury of what? Seeing the future?" Sophie scoffed. "Well, great. Me neither."

“No, I don’t have the luxury of being—” Marc shook his head. “You know what? Forget it. I’ll find someone in Calisette with \$200 in their dresser and have them walk it out to me in their sleep. It’ll be easy.”

Sophie recoiled as Marc threatened to break his only rule: no interference. The rules were important to him, so he wouldn’t follow through, right? Right?

“Fine,” Sophie said coldly. “Do it.”

Despite her unwavering voice, she feared Marc was serious. And if he was...

With a sneer, Marc stormed away. Sophie took a step toward him, but stopped herself short. Instead of pursuing him, she marched in the opposite direction and walked home, fuming the whole way.

Once there, she blasted music on her speaker and sobbed into her pillows. When five o’clock rolled around and Katelyn came to collect her, she was eager to leave the house. In fact, for the first time ever, Sophie actually *wanted* to go to swim practice. In the water, there were no phones. No conversations. No distractions. And there, halfway between a flip turn and a noseful of water, she had an idea for how to solve Marc’s problem. After practice, she got to work.

The next day, midway through Ms. Jackson’s lecture, she texted Marc from under her desk: “*Meet me at the Ledge.*” Marc didn’t reply, but he *was* at the Ledge when the final bell rang. Sophie was relieved to see him, even if he was ambivalent about the whole meet-up. In fact, he looked annoyed. Burdened. Spiteful. Without a word, she placed \$200 in his hand and waited.

Marc eyed the money, thinking about giving it back. But he didn’t. In a way, this comforted Sophie; it meant he hadn’t robbed anyone.

“Did your power come back, then?” Marc asked.

Sophie’s expression twisted.

“No, you prick. I sold my speaker.” She flared her nostrils and gave him a disgusted look. “Listen, I’m sorry I lied. I’m sorry I put you in an awkward spot at Rick’s, okay? And I don’t want to make that mistake again. So yeah. You say ‘thank you,’ I’ll say ‘sorry,’ and

then we can be friends again.”

“Really?” Marc said. “You’re sorry?”

“If there was a way to prove it, I’d do it.”

Marc and Sophie stared at one another in a standoff.

“There’s a way.” With a shrug, Marc pulled off his backpack and dug through it. Deep in the biggest pocket was a bottle of melatonin. He cracked the lid and angled the container toward Sophie.

“What?”

“Fifteen milligrams will knock you out in broad daylight,” he said.

“Take the pills and fall asleep.”

“Why?”

“Because my power works through empathy. If you let me sleepwalk with your body, I’ll know what you feel.”

“So my word isn’t good enough?” Sophie spat.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Marc said, finality in his voice. “If you want my trust back—”

“Say no more, asshole.”

Sophie grabbed three pills and swallowed them dry. Marc took some as well, and they stared silently at one another for nearly twenty minutes as the pills took hold. There, on a bed of concrete, they fell asleep.

Fifteen minutes passed before Sophie opened her eyes—though it was Marc who was looking through them. She shut them again, and soon after, she snapped awake with a gasp. The ritual was complete, and Marc had walked a mile through Sophie’s soul.

“Holy shit,” Marc said. “I’m sorry. I should’ve believed you.”

“You really should’ve.” Sophie turned to hide her face. The experience of baring her soul left her grimacing on the floor. Everything she’d repressed was now boiling at the surface, and her eyes welled with tears. Sophie didn’t know how many muscles there were in the body—she cheated through anatomy class—but every one of them was tense and raw.

“I can’t believe—I didn’t mean—” Marc slipped the money back into Sophie’s hands.

“I don’t want it.”

“No, come with me.” Marc closed her fist around the cash. “Give this to my mom in person. I want her to thank you. She can make you some dinner and—”

“I have swim practice in three hours,” Sophie said, wiping her face. “I can’t.”

“Then I’ll text her now so the food’s ready when we arrive.”

Sophie stopped to consider. She was desperate to decline his invitation, but this *was* the first time that Marc had ever invited her to his house. That was worth something, wasn’t it?

“Fine,” Sophie said, sniffing. “But not for you. For your mom.”

“Thanks,” Marc said quietly. “That’s all I ask.”

They stood and moved slowly across the schoolyard, crossing to the back of the parking lot. There, Marc’s decrepit junker stood, a hospice patient turned automobile. No air conditioning, broken shocks, and a bad smell. To think that he drove this to school each day.

“Hold on,” Marc said. “I’ve gotta—” He pulled a jug of water from the backseat and popped the hood. There, he poured the water into the radiator, and when the jug was empty, he pulled out another container—this one a quart of oil for the engine.

“Isn’t that stuff expensive?” Sophie asked.

Marc shrugged. “It’s cheaper than a new car.”

When he was finished, Sophie climbed into the passenger seat, and Marc fiddled with the ignition. Unlike Tay’s car, this one needed some coaxing for the engine to turn over, and soon, they were chugging along. But even the smooth asphalt around the school felt like the rocky roads of Coalview.

“So, you joined swim team?” Marc asked, careful not to tread into risky waters.

“Yeah,” Sophie said, her eyes locked on the world outside her window.

“How’s that been?”

“Good.”

“When’s your next competition?” Marc asked.

Sophie softened a little, appreciating Marc’s attempt to make

things normal. With a heavy sigh, she turned to Marc and allowed herself to open up.

“Coach says I’ll be competing in a couple weeks,” Sophie said. “But I hope it never happens.”

“You don’t want to race?” Marc tapped his thumb on the steering wheel. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not any good,” Sophie said. “I won’t win.”

“You’ve never done competitive sports before, have you?”

“Well... no...” Her eyes drifted out the window, and she recognized the decaying landscape of Coalview—but it was an old section of town she’d never been to before.

“I don’t want to be the ‘let me give you some advice’ guy,” Marc started, “but let me give you some advice. You’re looking at it all wrong.”

“I am?”

“Yeah.”

The car sputtered, chugging on its journey to the speed limit.

“Ignore that,” Marc said. “So, how many people are there in a race?”

“Five,” Sophie said.

“So, that means there are four losers in every race, right? In other words, 80% of the people who race are going to lose, right? If people were out there *only* to win, do you think there’d be many athletes left?”

“I suppose not,” Sophie said.

“So why do four losers go out every week and compete?”

“Having met them, my theory is that they’re masochists.” Sophie thought of Olivia and chuckled. “But maybe there’s something more.”

“There is,” Marc said. “Time yourself. Then, try to beat your time. That’s the whole game. You’ve spent so much of your life trying to outgun literally everyone else that you forgot the best competition is against yourself. Take it from me, a guy who takes L after L and still steps up to the plate. The game isn’t to beat four other racers; it’s to beat yourself. When you’re a better person tomorrow than you were yesterday, you’re winning.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Deep into Coalview, Marc pulled into the seedy backlot of a run-down apartment building. The complex was two stories tall and made of graffiti-ridden brick. Bars had been bolted over the windows and the stairs had rusted out entirely so that they shook whenever anyone stepped on them. He put the car in park and stepped out onto a driveway of pebbles.

“DeMarcus! DeMarcus!” A seven-year-old boy with braided hair and a four-year-old girl with a puffy ponytail rushed up to Marc from one of the corner units and wrapped their arms around his legs.

“Jamal! Tiana!” Marc patted their heads. “This is my friend Sophie.”

Jamal and Tiana peeled off Marc and rushed to hug Sophie. She smiled, her tension melting away.

“I didn’t know you had a brother and sister,” Sophie said. How, amid thousands of meditations, had it never come up? To have missed such basic information about her friend gave her a moment of concern. Was she really *that* focused on Tay and Tay alone?

Marc picked Tiana up by the waist and playfully scooped her inside. Sophie followed into the musty apartment. Toys, clothes, and blankets were strewn across the living room, a pile of trash stacked near the door. There was a small television against the wall and a set of foam pads opposite. On the far side of the room were two small cots which, based on their size, were for Jamal and Tiana. Nowhere, however, was there a dinner table.

But amid the grim space were many reflections of a bright and loving family. Macaroni art lined the refrigerator door from top to bottom. Off-brand building bricks were strewn in the corner with a dozen half-formed creations scattered through the pile. Different colored crayons marked the wall to measure how each child had grown through the years. Despite having less stuff than Sophie was used to, this place was still *clearly* a home. But it was different than the kind of home her own parents had created. While Sophie’s Mom showed she cared by parading a vacuum around the house twice a day, Marc’s Mom took pride in letting the house become whatever it

wanted to be.

“Just in time.” A woman’s voice sounded from the kitchen. “Food’s almost ready.”

Marc turned to Sophie. “Have a seat.”

“Where?” Sophie asked.

Marc pointed to the pads, and Sophie forced herself to sit. They barely compressed. Moments later, Marc’s mother, Mrs. Brown, emerged from the kitchen. She was a woman with box braids and a warm, effortless smile. In each hand was a plate of spaghetti.

“This must be Sophie!” Mrs. Brown’s eyes sparkled in the light. “It’s nice to meet you. DeMarcus talks about you all the time.”

“He does, does he?” Sophie said, taking a plate.

“Yes. Thank you for always helping us out.” She gave the other plate to Marc, never taking her eyes from Sophie. “The four of us would’ve been on the street months ago if it weren’t for you.” With her hands free, Mrs. Brown turned on the TV, and Jamal inched up to the set for an episode of Power Rangers.

Sophie smiled and placed the plate of spaghetti beside her. “Right, uh...” She pulled money from her pocket. “Marc said you needed a little extra this month?”

Mrs. Brown’s expression softened, and she looked up as though that might keep the tears from falling.

“That’s so nice of you, Sophie. It really is. I—” Her eyes watered. “We try so hard to make it work. We’re on the waitlist for a second car through our church’s car-donation program, and if that lands, a lot of problems go away too. For now, this buys us another month. Thank you.” She turned to Marc. “Here, put it with the rest of our rent and drop it off on Saturday.”

Marc pocketed the cash.

“Why Saturday?” Sophie asked, taking her first bite. There was a spice to the sauce that made her eyes brighten, and she shoveled the next spoonful in her mouth quickly before it was her turn to speak again.

“We only have one car to share, and DeMarcus needs it to drive to school. The payment office is only open during school hours, so

Saturday is the only day he can pay. It's actually been a real problem for DeMarcus's job search because his hours of availability aren't—"

"Do you like Barbies?" Tiana tugged Sophie's hand, holding up her favorite doll.

Sophie smiled warmly.

"I did when I was your age," Sophie said, scooping more spaghetti into her mouth.

Accepting her attention as an invitation, Tiana crawled into Sophie's lap and started explaining everything about the doll. Sophie listened as she ate, taking pride in the fact that her help kept a roof over the entire family. Without her, maybe they'd have found a different route to staying afloat, but maybe it would've been more desperate, like robbery.

"DeMarcus," Mrs. Brown took a seat. "Did you get a call back from the hardware store yet? The bowling alley? The dollar store?"

"I'll tell you when I get hired," Marc said curtly. He shuffled away from his mother and took a seat next to Jamal, pretending to be equally enthralled with the Red Ranger.

Mrs. Brown looked at Sophie. "He's been applying for nearly six months. I'm very proud of him, even though nothing's happened yet. He's been a proper man of the house. Well, except for the dishwasher incident." Mrs. Brown chuckled. "He put regular dish soap in the dishwasher and—"

"Alright, alright," Marc said. "That's enough."

Sophie stared at Marc. "You never told me you were looking for a job."

"What would I say? That nobody wants to hire me? That the whole town takes one look at my name and tosses the application? With my mom's work and government assistance, there's just a small gap in our finances, and I can't get it closed."

"What does your name have to do with it?" Sophie asked.

Mom looked at Marc, imploring him to be honest in his response, but Marc shook his head.

"Nothing," he said. "Let's get you to swim practice."

Sophie glanced at the time on her phone and nodded. It was a

good time to leave.

“Thank you for the spaghetti, Mrs. Brown,” Sophie said, clearing her plate before standing.

“It’s the least I can do,” Mrs. Brown said, picking the paper plate out of her hand and placing it in the sink. “Jamal, come say bye to Sophie.”

Jamal stood and gave Sophie a big hug before returning to his seat. Tiana, however, stared up at Sophie with stars in her eyes before jumping into a tight hug. Marc had to pry her away before they were allowed to leave.

In the driveway, Marc topped off the engine oil again and popped the trunk, placing the \$200 in a Ziploc with the rest of his rent money. Then, they were off. The first stretch of road held a heavy silence, and Sophie wondered what it was like to be Marc.

“It was nice meeting your family,” Sophie said.

Marc sighed. “Yeah. Sorry the place is a mess.”

“No, I enjoyed it.” It didn’t escape Sophie that this was Marc’s way of being vulnerable, and she felt a swell of empathy rise within her. “What are you going to do next month if my power doesn’t come back?”

Marc shrugged and gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“Maybe *I* can get a job and use the money to pay your rent,” Sophie said suddenly.

“You shouldn’t,” Marc said. “I know I downplayed it earlier, but you have student government and swim and Harvard on your plate. If everything goes your way, you’ve got the chance to change the world. Me, though? I just have the chance to give Jamal and Tiana a shot to go one rung up the ladder, and I’m going to take that shot.”

“Well, to be fair, I have my opportunities because I don’t have to worry about anything,” Sophie said. “Food, shelter, water, healthcare—I don’t have my successes because I did anything to get those baseline things covered. I have it because I didn’t have to worry about basic survival.”

“You’re right, but—” Marc shrugged. “There are thousands of families like mine, and we could all use some structural changes

around society. The same things that keep us from getting ahead in small ways continue to be roadblocks in big ways. We need more people at the table reaching across neighborhoods to fix the boring stuff that matters: buses, food stamps, childcare. I think you could be at that table. So, don't give up your chance to help us all by focusing on me. Besides, maybe I'll get hired this week and then my problems will go away."

"If you don't, I want to make sure you'll be okay," Sophie said. "Maybe I can help put in applications on your behalf and—"

"Look," Marc said. "I know you have good intentions, and I know I need the help, but this is something I need to do for myself. I know you felt it when our minds intertwined. The shame. How hard I am on myself. My pride needs me to take care of it, and I don't want the easy way out. I'll be okay; I have faith."

Sophie nodded, struck silent. Marc pulled up to the school gymnasium. Sophie leaned to get out of the car, but Marc stopped her.

"Before you go," Marc started, "I wanted to apologize. That stunt I pulled after school was... I'm sorry."

"No," Sophie said. "I'm sorry for lying at Rick's house."

"Do you have any plans for Friday?" Marc asked. "After swim practice, maybe we can go for a drive? It'll be like nothing happened, yeah?"

"Well—" Sophie smiled and shrugged. "Let's not pretend nothing happened. I made a mistake, and if I'm going to be a better person tomorrow than yesterday, then I need to remember my mistake. So let's move forward knowing I'm fallible, okay?"

"Okay. Now go time yourself. Trust me. Once you're on the clock, you'll find your stride."

"Sure thing." She tapped the roof of Marc's car. "See you Friday."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sophie's Job Quest

“TWO MINUTES, three seconds,” Katelyn said, slamming her thumb on the side of the stopwatch. “Honestly, it’s not a bad time.”

“You... suck... at lying...” Sophie said between breaths. She clung to the pool’s edge, steam rising off her back. A hundred meters of butterfly stroke would kill a lesser girl—but not her.

“I mean, you’re not going to be winning any races,” Katelyn said. “But you didn’t drown.”

There was a truth to Katelyn’s words that stung. Sophie hauled herself out of the water and sprawled out on her back. Practice had ended ten minutes ago, so the pool deck was empty. She was lucky to have the support of her sister and parents—all of whom were more than happy to acquiesce to her request to stay late.

“Thanks for timing me,” Sophie said, the cool concrete digging into her skin.

“Sure.” Katelyn wrapped her Hello Kitty towel around her body. “But why’d you want the time? Your first meet isn’t for, like, two weeks.”

Sophie hesitated. Some part of her still needed to believe she could win her race if she trained hard enough, but saying this out loud would sound delusional. Another part of her just wanted to see if Marc was right.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, whatever. Mom and Dad are waiting. Come on.”

The sisters left the pool with loose tees and baggy sweats. They clambered into the back of the car, finding it clean and well-maintained—something Sophie had never really appreciated before. On the short ride home, Sophie’s mind wandered. While Marc had rent covered for February, the cycle would renew in March. If Marc couldn’t get a job and Sophie couldn’t get her power back, then she’d need to plan for something else.

“Mom? Dad?” Sophie bit at her fingernail. “How do you apply for a job?”

“Oh?” Dad smiled. “Are you thinking about working?”

“Just on the weekends.”

Mom’s eyes flashed in the rearview mirror. “Really?”

Sophie hadn’t told her mom that her power had disappeared. This would be her mom’s only tip-off, and she scrambled to cover her tracks.

“Yeah, well, a bunch of my friends are looking. I figure it wouldn’t hurt to join them.”

“Right,” Mom said.

“Well, I think most places are doing online applications these days,” Dad said. “Come to think of it, I know the guy who owns the movie theater. If you wanted a job there, I can put in a good word.”

“I’d love to work at a theater,” Sophie said. She imagined sneaking popcorn between customers and catching clips of movies for free. “Maybe I’ll look for other jobs too, just in case.” She pictured how fun it would be to make coffee and quips over tip jars. Honestly, any job would do if it made a little cash and didn’t eat her soul.

That night, instead of meditating, she pulled out her laptop and scrolled through job listings near her. Cafés, coffee shops, and restaurants were the top contenders, though a few applications went out to daycares and grocery stores. By the time she went to bed, Sophie had submitted eight applications and bookmarked three more. The rest of her week would still be a mystery, but tonight, she slept well knowing she’d done something to help her future.

Life without her precognitive ability was growing easier, thanks

in part to a healthy dose of hard work. Since taking Ms. Jackson's makeup test, Sophie had developed a routine of studying during her lunch period. With her developing muscles, her time at the pool was getting easier as well, and she was finally able to attend practice without carrying the cumulative weight of yesterday's laps.

After school each day, she and Tay spent extra time at the Ledge, staying long after Marc had made his way off campus. By Wednesday, Sophie had already heard back from three places with requests for interviews. She made a note of each one so she could share them all with Marc. After all, she could only work in one location—these other places were going to need to look elsewhere for their workers.

On Thursday, Sophie attempted to meditate, but the future never came. Instead, her anxiety swirled, and the same few thoughts kept rolling through her brain. After just ten minutes of concentrated effort, she gave up and turned to her desk. There, the journal of her problems lay sprawled beneath the desk lamp, and she leaned over to give it an update, adding *I want to get a job*.

She thought about crossing Harvard and valedictorian off the list on account of Ms. Jackson's C-minus deal, but her mom was right: anything could happen. For once, this was a comforting thought. Maybe she becomes a star swimmer and that's what Harvard needs. Maybe Ms. Jackson has a stroke and a new teacher wipes the slate clean. Maybe Tay gets a D in Calculus next year and falls behind. Either way, there wasn't much she could do to control these things. Not without her power.

So what can I control right now? She clicked her pen and considered each item on the list. Her eyes lingered on Tay's entry, but short of confessing her feelings, there was nothing she could do. Her eyes traced farther down the list, finding only one entry she could close out entirely: accept an employment offer.

She pulled up the contact info her dad had given her. One email later, she was scheduled for an interview—a formality, she was assured. Already, she could cross an item from her list. After this, there were only incremental steps to be taken in any one direction, but this didn't dissuade her. Instead of trying to solve her largest

problems all at once, she decided to move. Anywhere was better than nowhere.

Her attention turned to school, where she spent an hour studying Physics, just in case Ms. Jackson wanted to quiz them soon, and another hour studying Psychology. Late in the night, when the day rolled over, she turned to the internet and researched esports orgs that could sponsor their school. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, she turned in for the night, resting her head beside a video of swimming tutorials.

Her diligence paid off in Psychology as Sophie aced a test. Even better, she'd heard back from a gaming guild, and they showed interest in the details of a sponsorship. Everything was starting to click, and the answers she'd been looking for became clear. Life was about taking small steps toward a large goal. So long as she kept chipping through the backlog while doing everything right, nothing could stop her.

Finally, it was Friday, and the final bell on Friday was extra sweet. After flying past Marc all week without serious conversation, she was finally slated to spend some time with him. He picked her up in his beater and took her back to his mom's for dinner. There, they had peanut butter and honey sandwiches while Tiana told Sophie she looked like a movie star and Jamal proclaimed he was going to be a pirate king, inspired by a recent fixation on *One Piece*.

As the sun dipped and practice neared, Marc supplied his car with a new quart of oil, and Sophie fidgeted as she waited for the ride to be ready. Jamal and Tiana insisted on coming along, but Marc refused.

"We can't take them to Calisette afterward," Marc said as they coasted along the highway.

"But we're not doing a break-in today," Sophie said. "Not without my power."

"Doesn't matter. Not happening."

The drive was smooth, but all during practice, Sophie felt self-conscious about Marc's presence. He'd decided to watch her from the tiered aluminum bleachers instead of staying in the car. She kept an

eye on him between strokes to make sure he was still absorbed in his phone and not staring at her floundering.

“Who’s that?” Olivia asked at the end of practice, pulling out her Keroppi-themed towel.

“That’s Marc,” Sophie said, drying off her hair.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“Blegh, no. He’s just looking for a job while he waits on me to finish here. Besides, I don’t like guys.” Sophie covered her mouth as though she’d said something she shouldn’t have. It wasn’t a secret, exactly, but she didn’t go around advertising her interest in girls. But Olivia didn’t seem to care, nor did she seem surprised.

“Yeah, me neither,” Olivia said flippantly, as if she were stating her preference for strawberry over vanilla.

Sophie perked up. Did she mean generally, or...? But just as she was about to ask about it, Olivia was called to the other side of the pavilion by Coach. She waited for their conversation to end, planning to ask follow-up questions, but their discussion got animated, so she decided to leave. After all, five minutes after a casual comment would be a strange time to ask about it.

As such, with a wave to her sister and a hug to a girl from her lane, Sophie rushed off with Marc. A flick of the key in the ignition sent them rolling out of the neighborhood and through the ugly parts of Coalview.

“So the plan is to go to the top of Calisette Hills, right?” Marc said. “No break-ins? No Buck?”

“Not while my power is out,” Sophie said. “Let’s avoid what happened last time. Besides, we’ve always gone to Calisette for the houses; this time, I want to see the view.”

Marc accelerated—or rather, he pressed the pedal and the rusty car grumbled louder.

“By the way, I have some good news,” Sophie said. “Thanks to my dad, I’m getting a job at the movie theater. I haven’t been officially hired yet, but it’s coming.”

“Nice,” Marc said, his voice flat. He was smiling, but his eyes were deadened.

“I got a few other offers too,” she said. “Maybe you can apply? The grocery store on Main, the bakery on 5th, and *JCPenney* all offered interviews.”

“Yeah.” Marc bit down on his lip, his thumb thumping the steering wheel. “I have applications in for all three.”

“Oh. You’ll probably hear from them soon, then...”

“It’s been a month, but maybe.”

The car sank into silence as they exited the highway and turned toward Bristol. The colorful sheen around the suburbs seemed more lifeless than usual. After spending more time in Coalview, Bristol was starting to look as fake as the hills.

“You looked like you were having a good time at practice,” Marc said, trying to start a new conversation.

“Oh, you saw me?” Sophie shrugged. “I had Katelyn time my split, by the way. I don’t think it’ll help me feel better when I lose, but we’ll see.”

“You’ve never really failed before, have you?” Marc asked. His tone wasn’t judgmental, but more of a sudden realization.

Sophie thought about it. She had almost failed middle school Geometry—but her parents got her a tutor. She had almost failed the Girl Scout Brownie advancement test, but her parents got her a sewing machine and she’d earned three patches the night before her application was due. And now, she was going to fail her first swim race—but without a doubt, her parents would pay for a weekend coach if she asked for one. So the answer was no, she’d never failed before. Not yet, anyway.

“I guess not,” she admitted.

“Well, let me tell you something about failure.” The car jolted, then straightened out again. “The first time it happens, it’s crushing. The second time? Also hard. But when you’ve failed ten times? Twenty times? A hundred? You just stop caring. You just start knowing you’re a dumb, stupid failure. It doesn’t even register after the thousandth time.”

“Do you really think you’ve failed a thousand times?”

Marc gave her an incredulous look.

“Easily. I’ve put in a thousand applications. I’ve burnt a thousand meals for Jamal and Tiana. Hell, I can’t even pass an open-book test without—”

Whoop, whoop!

Bright lights flooded the car, and Marc cursed. A flood of adrenaline hit them both, and Sophie straightened as an officer pulled behind them. A quick glance at the speedometer confirmed that Marc was going right around the speed limit, so this must’ve been about something else. He slowed down and coasted off the highway, gently directing them to a safe spot. Sophie found it odd that he stopped beneath the same streetlight that Tay had been under all those weeks ago when she was pulled over. It was the same cop, too. Seemed like he had a favorite spot—right at the bottom of a hill.

“It’s okay,” Sophie said, amid Marc’s deep breaths. “He let Tay go with a warning. I’m sure—”

Marc gave her a hollow look that shut her down.

Like last time, the officer took a long time to approach the vehicle, and when he did, his posture was tight, his hand cupped over his gun. A shadow descended over them, and the officer tapped lightly on the window. Marc rolled it down and moved his hand back onto the steering wheel. Slow and steady.

“License and registration,” the officer’s familiar voice growled.

“My wallet is in my pocket, and my registration is in the glove compartment.” Marc spoke very deliberately.

“Well, go get it.”

He reached over Sophie’s lap and pulled down the glove box. It made a *thud* and the officer flinched. With care, Marc flipped past the dry napkins and dusty manuals to find his registration, and Sophie noticed how Marc’s hand shook as he moved. Then, he dug into his pocket, moving slowly to pick his license out of his wallet. Both items were handed over to the officer.

“Do you know how fast you were going?” the cop asked, clicking his flashlight so it shone in Marc’s face.

“I b-believe I w-was going the speed limit, s-sir.”

“Well, you’d be mistaken,” the officer said, withdrawing a pad

from his back pocket. “I clocked you going 63 in a 55. That there will earn you a ticket. Couple hundred bucks and a point on your license will teach you to slow down.”

Marc drew a shallow breath and nodded, not daring to make eye contact with the man who towered over his window. But Sophie was taken aback, forced to consider if she’d seen this in a dream before. That number was far too familiar. What were the odds that—

“Hey, wait,” Sophie said, leaning over from the passenger seat. “My friend was pulled over by you last month going the same speed. She got a verbal warning. Maybe—”

“That’s enough,” the officer said, ripping off the ticket and handing it to Marc. “Your hands are shaking. You look nervous. Do you have any drugs in the car?”

Sophie’s face contorted. “What?”

“No, sir,” Marc answered quickly.

“That wasn’t unanimous,” the officer said. “Get out. I’m searching.”

“Yes, sir,” Marc said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“Hold up,” Sophie said, her hand resting on Marc’s arm. “You need probable cause to do a search and—”

Marc lolled his head in her direction, despair seeping from his eyes.

“I *have* probable cause, miss. There’s a drug dealer that rummages through town. Some kid who matches the description of your friend here. I’m tryin’ to help since it’s been a real, uh, *problem* for the community.”

Sophie leaned in to read his name plate.

“Well, maybe your community shouldn’t be buying so many drugs,” Sophie spat.

The officer’s face twisted as though Sophie had insulted him, and he dropped whatever pretense of composure he’d been holding up.

“If you’d like probable cause, let’s try this.” He whistled twice. “Come ‘ere, boy.”

The K-9 that was in his car lunged out the driver’s-side door and scrambled up to Marc’s beater. It was a beautiful shepherd with a low

tail that pranced to and fro. The cop gave the dog a signal, and he began sniffing the car. When it got to the trunk, it stiffened, pawed at the bumper, and whined.

“How’s that, miss?” The cop stared daggers at Sophie. “Now, pop the trunk, open your doors, and get out of my way.”

Sophie slammed her door and followed Marc a reasonable distance away. The officer got to work, shuffling through Marc’s backseat, tossing his trash into the street. When he found the water and oil containers, he dumped them each “out of an abundance of caution.”

“This is wrong,” Sophie whispered to Marc.

“This?” Marc shook his head. “This is normal.”

Sophie grimaced at the notion of how different their lives really were.

“How much is the ticket?”

Marc handed over the paper, and Sophie stared at the number. “\$200?” How were they going to get *another* \$200 to pay this off?

“Hoo, boy! What do we have here?” The cop was rifling through the trunk, and when his back straightened, he was holding the Ziploc of Marc’s rent money. With a tug, the bag ripped open and the money fell into the officer’s hands.

“What’re two sixteen-year-old kids doing with \$1,600 cash locked in the back of their car?”

“That’s for rent,” Marc said, his eyes betraying something more than fear. “I’ll be depositing it on Saturday.”

“That’s a funny story,” the officer said, palming the money. “It’s already several days into the month, so rent should’ve already been paid.”

“Well, it’s true,” Sophie said.

The officer glared, finding Sophie’s friendship with Marc to be somehow more offensive than anything else going on.

“Tell me, where do you guys work?” the officer said.

Sophie and Marc stumbled for an answer.

“I thought so.” Without further consideration, he placed the money in his pocket and took a step toward his cruiser.

Something in Sophie broke. Maybe it was how blatant it was, or maybe it was the sheer corruption on display, but whatever broke inside her had positively *shattered*. All her life, she thought that most people wanted to do right by others—especially those with power. But here, the man who had taken an oath to help others was blatantly stealing from them.

“You can’t just take his money!” Sophie said, taking an aggressive step forward. “Give it back.”

“Miss.” The officer turned on the heel of his boot. “Two kids without jobs paying \$1,600 in rent halfway through the month doesn’t add up, and I don’t think it will at the precinct either. I have good reason to believe this money was acquired by, or is an accessory to, the sale of drugs. Bein’ that this property is liable to be used in a crime, I’m within my rights to seize these funds under the purview of civil asset forfeiture.”

“I sold my fucking stereo for that money, you pig.” Sophie’s frustration mounted to tears. “They’ll be homeless if you don’t—”

“Sophie,” Marc said, his eyes brimming. “Stop.”

“No, Marc. We didn’t get that money from selling drugs, and we’re not buying any.” Sophie drew a deep breath and collected herself. With a new tone, she tried to turn on her charisma. “Look, if we go to the police station and prove the money’s legit, will you give it back?”

“No, ma’am.” The officer laughed a single, hearty chuckle. “You’ll need to prove that in a court of law. You can hire an attorney to contest it, but my job is to make sure this money remains away from criminal activity.”

Sophie scoffed. “You want us to spend thousands on a lawyer to recover less than what we’d spend?”

“Look, lady, I don’t control the price of attorneys.” The officer wiped his nose. “Now if you’d like to avoid an obstruction of justice charge, you’ll take your ticket, shut yer mouth, and carry on. Y’all stay out of trouble, and I’ll stay out of your business. Simple as that, a’ight?”

There was no more discussion. He whistled twice to recover his

dog, got into his car, and pulled away. Then it was over. The money was gone forever.

Sophie opened her mouth, but the look on Marc's face made her close it.

"Let it go," Marc said. He stared absently at his car, emotions locked behind a steeled heart. Despondent, he lifted his gaze to the stars. There, he found some small comfort in the reminder that he was small. That he wasn't alone in his struggles. That the problem he was facing wasn't the worst problem in the world. Then, he closed his eyes and tried not to cry, but for the thousand-and-first time in his life, he failed.

Sophie watched, heartbroken. Had she known this was coming, she could've stopped this, but without her power, there was no way she could've prevented it. There was nothing she could've done. She looked toward the heavens and found no comfort in the clouds. They'd done everything right. They'd taken small steps and reached their goal of paying rent. Victory was supposed to be inevitable, and yet fate had stepped in to stop them. For the first time in her life—she'd failed.

She folded the ticket into her palm and clenched it tight, letting it dig into her skin. How was anyone supposed to make progress if they could do everything right and still lose? How could she?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Thirteenth Amendment

MARC AND Sophie were silent as they drove into Calisette Hills. What was there to say? I'm sorry wouldn't pay the rent. Complaining wouldn't make money. She couldn't even empathize. Her rage was Marc's existence. The officer who let Tay off with a verbal warning had robbed Marc. Same speed, same situation, same location. How could that be possible? Legal? Even worse—how could Marc find this normal?

“I'm sorry you had to see that,” Marc whispered.

“Marc...” Sophie gave him a sad look. “We'll get the money back. I'll figure out my power and we'll get you \$1,600. I'll try and try until I get it right.” She shook her head. “I can't believe he thought you were a drug dealer.”

The despair in Marc dissipated, and he laughed. It was a sad laugh, but still...

“Sophie, there's always a Black dealer in the stories cops tell. And once that's the narrative, they can pull over every Black guy who rolls through town in a beat-up Corolla.”

“That's messed up.” Sophie languished in her seat. “It has to be against the law.”

“It's not the law that allows them to do this. It's the Constitution.”

“What?” Sophie flinched, turning to him in disbelief.

“The law wasn't built for poor Black people like me,” Marc said,

dipping into the right lane to let another car pass. “While the Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable search and seizure, the Founding Fathers never defined what they meant by unreasonable. The moment the cop said I matched a description, it was over.”

“But that’s still unreasonable, isn’t it?”

“Not to them, because every once in a while, they actually *do* find a Black guy with a gram of coke. That makes it reasonable. Those guys end up in prison to become slaves.”

A car cut in front of Marc, forcing him to slow.

“That’s an exaggeration, right?” Sophie squinted her eyes to make sense of his words. “You don’t mean actual slaves, do you?”

“I do. Slavery is a constitutionally protected right.”

“But the Thirteenth Amendment—”

“The Thirteenth Amendment is what protects it,” Marc said. “Seriously. It doesn’t say what your teachers told you it says. Pull it up. Read it out loud.”

Sophie stared at her phone, her face red with the brake lights of the car ahead. “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime*—” She looked up. “Holy shit. ‘*Except*’ does a lot of heavy lifting here.”

“Yeah, it does,” Marc said. “So think about it. Under the letter of the Constitution, what would a racist country need to do in order to keep enslaving Black people?”

“It would just need to criminalize the things Black people do.”

“And that’s exactly what happened,” Marc said, the warm light of a lamp catching the disgust on his face. “It’s not even a conspiracy—one of Nixon’s aides admitted it out loud and was totally ignored. Did you know that for every month someone spends in jail for powder cocaine, a person—like my dad—spends *a year* in jail for crack? They’re the same drug, Sophie. The only difference tends to be the skin color of the user. Justice might be blind, but lawmakers certainly aren’t.”

Despair washed over Sophie as the houses grew bigger. She’d never faced these facts before, and it shone a new light on her life. Her successes weren’t due solely to her hard work or even her

power—they had been shaped by things outside her control. She'd been born into a middle-class white family. She went to school with a full stomach. She went home to a stable house. She had parents with jobs that gave them time to be proper role models. Even if racism wasn't rampant around the country, the fact that she didn't have to consider it at all said a lot about her life.

"Listen, I'll do everything I can to make sure you pay your rent this month," Sophie said.

"What about next month?" Marc asked.

"Well, with my job and your job—"

"You're assuming I get a job. All those places that offered you an interview? They threw my resume in the trash. You know that, right?"

"But they have positions open," Sophie said. "I know they do."

"I'm sure they do—and they're offering those positions to white people or minorities they already know. These people take one look at my full name—DeMarcus Brown—and decide to hire some guy named Adam. Plus, I'm poor, with a clunker car, so even when I get to the interview phase, the hiring manager is never convinced I'll be able to show up long term. It's the same loop—no car, no schedule, no callbacks."

"Isn't it illegal to discriminate like that?" Sophie stared out the window at a billboard for Chanel, finding it almost offensive amid their conversation.

"Only if you can prove that's what they're doing. But how? The hiring manager will say they're looking for more experience. A different skill set. Higher availability. They may not even do it consciously, but still, there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's awful."

"It's just how it is."

Sophie didn't have another response—how could she? She looked at the houses outside her window, finding that the higher they got, the more opulent the houses became. It was so excessive. So unnecessary.

"How come you don't steal from the richest of the rich?" Sophie asked. "How can you resist? None of these people would even notice

they were missing \$1,600.”

“How come you never won a million dollars playing the lotto?” Marc countered. “We both know that if money’s all you care about, you become a monster. Besides, my power doesn’t work once you get this high.”

“Because of the elevation?” Sophie asked.

“Because I can’t sleepwalk with sociopaths,” Marc said. “My power runs on empathy, so if my target doesn’t feel anything, I can’t empathize with them. And if you’ve made it up here, you’ve had to push down a lot of people on your way. You can’t do that if you view others as human. See that house? It belongs to a real estate guru with enough money to end poverty in half of Coalview, but he’d rather max the rent on a young couple to get a few extra bills in his account. That one over there belongs to the pastor of a megachurch who pretends to heal people for money—people who die because they don’t get treatment. And that one’s the CEO of an insurance company. When society rewards those who step on others to get ahead, you’ll find that only the trash rises to the very top.”

Sophie sank in her seat, Marc’s dilemma clear. Anyone he *could* steal from had some virtue left, and anyone *worth* stealing from was so far gone that Marc wouldn’t be able to get the job done.

The road flattened into a parking lot, and they’d arrived at the highest overlook the hill had to offer. Marc curved into a slanted spot and flicked off his headlights. Now, only the night sky and city lights shone upon them.

The city shimmered below like it had been set in resin—each district caught in its own little pattern of light, some twinkling like stars, others dull and irregular. Calisette glowed soft and golden, a jewelry box nestled in the hills. Bristol was busier, tougher, its grid of streetlights humming like an old machine. Coalview, however, barely flickered—some streets were lit, while others were swallowed in shadow.

They soaked it in for a moment until the car got stuffy, then unbuckled and departed. The terrace was empty of other people, and they leaned up against the guardrail to observe the town. Sophie

hugged her own arms to defend against the cold air and stared at the valley, finding each streetlight to be as enamoring as a firefly.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“It’s pretty if you don’t look too closely.” Marc pointed down the hill. “The farther you get, the worse things are. You can see it in the power lines. In Calisette, the lines are underground so they’ll never lose power. In Bristol, the lines are straight and well maintained. But in Coalview? Everything’s jank. The poles are tilted, the lines are saggy.”

“I mean, that’s a matter of taxes, right? If the rich pay more, shouldn’t they get more?”

“Let’s run that through a few cycles,” Marc said. “If you pay more taxes, you get better schools. If you go to a better school, you get a higher-paying job. If you get a higher paying job, you pay more in taxes. What happens when you run that cycle a few dozen times?”

“The gap between the rich and the poor widens,” Sophie said.

“That’s right,” Marc said. “If there’s not a government that pulls more tax dollars from the rich and filters it to the poor, then the whole economy dries up. The problem is that the rich would rather let society disintegrate than give up a fraction of their wealth.”

They lingered a little longer, the hush between them filled by the gentle murmur of wind and the faint, faraway sound of a late-night train. Sophie found herself imagining what it would be like to live in a place like this—high above it all, far away from the regular people problems. Maybe this was why people in Calisette didn’t leave. Not just because they had it easy, but because, from up here, you could almost believe things made sense.

“It’s pretty hopeless, isn’t it?”

Marc thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No, you just need the right people to make the right changes.” He took a step backward. “Come on. I don’t need you thinking it’s all hopeless.”

They got in the car and Marc shifted into reverse. The car stumbled until he shifted back into drive, and they were off. Going down was easier than ascending, and the worn tires of Marc’s car allowed them to coast naturally around the bends. As the mansions

shrank, Sophie felt more at ease about their surroundings.

“Where are we going?” Sophie asked.

“I want you to meet the kindest person I’ve ever met.”

“In Calisette?”

“Ever.”

Down and down they went, past Rick’s and Buck’s, until at last, near the farthest reaches of the community, Marc pulled over into an unmarked driveway. After half a mile of off-road driving, they arrived at a simple gate.

Marc rolled down his window and waved at the camera. Immediately, the gate opened, and Marc coasted through. The house here was modestly sized, maybe smaller than Ms. Jackson’s residence. Quite honestly, there was nothing notable about it whatsoever.

“About a month ago, I noticed this place and got curious,” Marc said. “I tried to use my sleepwalking power on the girl inside, but I couldn’t do it. Not because she was a sociopath, but because she was purer than I ever was. In the dream, she spoke to me for two hours, listening to my story and promising to represent my interests as a state representative. Her name is Bonnie.”

Bonnie stepped out of her house. Despite the time of night, she was wearing nicely tailored work clothes. A blazer hung unbuttoned over her blouse, and slacks brushed up against her—Sophie looked closer—fuzzy nighttime slippers. Her hair was dark and braided to her shoulders, complementing her light brown skin. When she saw Marc, she had a smile that cut to Sophie’s core. It was both warm and to the point.

Marc parked the car and unbuckled his seatbelt.

“It’s good to see you, DeMarcus.” Bonnie stepped forward and offered him a handshake. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Sophie.”

“Delighted.” She extended her hand and gripped tightly. Sophie lost her train of thought immediately. The way this woman composed herself emanated power.

“How do you know DeMarcus?” Bonnie asked. “Did he try his sleepwalking trick on you?”

“Oh, we go to school together,” Sophie said.

“Ah, very cool. Speaking of school”—she turned to Marc—“I was just out in D.C. to visit a very peculiar kind of college. It’s for people who have your kind of abilities. I’ve already said more than I’m legally allowed to, but it’s important to me that you know you’re not alone. When you graduate, I’ll vouch for your admission.”

“You have that kind of power?” Sophie asked. “You can just make a call and change lives?”

“It’s amazing how many lives you could change in just two hours,” Bonnie said.

Her words reminded Sophie of advice her Mom once gave her, except it was focused on others. It was a nice fit.

“So, what brings you here?” Bonnie asked. “You both look like you just saw a deer get hit by a car.”

Marc’s eyes lowered to the ground. Sophie recognized he wouldn’t be able to speak, and she chimed in.

“We were driving through Bristol and an officer pulled him over for speeding,” Sophie said. “He stole \$1,600 in rent money from him via civil forfeiture. If we don’t get it back before Saturday, Marc’s going to get evicted.”

“Ah, okay. Give me a minute. Let me call the precinct and see if we can’t sort this out.” Bonnie scrolled on her phone and dialed a number. “Hi, yes. This is Bonnie Delgado, your favorite state representative. It would seem your precinct’s at it again. Civil forfeiture. Now, if you want to buy a new margarita machine with these funds, then I suggest—” There was a pause. “Oh. Nice. I was hoping for a reason to bring this to court. Yes, thank you. Alright, bye.” She hung up and scoffed, all but cursing out loud.

“So it didn’t go well?” Marc asked. He was already bitter, yet somehow, there was more room for him to despair.

Bonnie sighed and evened out her emotions. “No, this is how progress happens. If I could fix your issue overnight, that’d be great, but it wouldn’t fix the system that’s broken. I’ve been organizing a team of lawyers through the NAACP. Your case will be added to our mission, and we’ll continue our work to end these practices.”

Marc nodded, his gaze falling to the ground.

“But that doesn’t change the fact that you need \$1,600 to pay rent by Saturday, does it?” Bonnie sighed. “Well, lucky you. It’s my purpose to help those who land at my doorstep. My wealth—including my house—came from an inheritance I didn’t earn, so I think it’s fair that I share it with those in need.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a checkbook. Moments later, she was handing over a check. \$1,600 flat.

“I—” Marc touched the check as though it were made of gold. “I don’t know what to say. I’ll pay you back, I swear.”

“You can if you want,” Bonnie said. “But I don’t lend money. If you feel you need to pay it back, you may, but I’d rather you pay it forward when you’re in a position to do so. Note that I won’t float this bill again. From here on out, you’ll have to walk your own path.”

Marc stared at the check and held back deeper tears.

“Where did you go to college?” Sophie realized this question came out of nowhere, but it made perfect sense to her. “Sorry, I’ve always wanted to go to Harvard, but...”

Bonnie faced Sophie and gave her some undivided attention. The straight, narrow focus was so direct that it made Sophie feel important. Seen.

“Why do you want to go to Harvard?” Bonnie asked.

“Because I want the best education.”

“And why do you want the best education?”

“I... I don’t know, actually.”

Bonnie nodded. “To answer your question—” she turned and pointed, “—I went to Bristol Community College. If you squint, you can see it from here.”

“Seriously?”

“Got my associate’s degree and then joined the military. Got stationed in D.C., and Tampa before discharging. From there, I took my college benefits and earned a bachelor’s degree in political science. Education is education and all schools teach from the same books. The difference for me was community. I wanted to serve *this* community—which is consistent with my purpose—so why would I

go to school elsewhere?”

“Huh...” Sophie mulled this over.

“Now, I have to get back to work,” Bonnie said. “Marc, it was nice to see you again. If there’s anything more I can do for you, please let me know.”

“Will do,” Marc said, choking with emotion.

“And Sophie—” Bonnie gave her a serious look, “—life isn’t about collecting titles. It’s about finding the reason you’ll choose to suffer. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Sophie said. “But how do you know you’re doing enough to help others? How do you know you’re helping as many people as you can?”

“You don’t start with as many as possible; you start with one—your neighbor. If all we ever did was help the person beside us, then the world wouldn’t need to be changed. After this, it scales up—but you don’t start with saving the world. I can tell you’re on the right path. Trust that what you’re doing is enough, because it is, for now.”

Sophie nodded. “Got it.”

“Great,” Bonnie said. “Anyway, I have a lot of paperwork to do. I’ll see you again soon, I presume. Have a good night.”

She turned and walked inside, leaving Marc and Sophie to stand beneath the starlight—but none of the stars shone as brightly as Bonnie.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One of the Good Ones

“BONNIE SURE is something, isn’t she?” Sophie said, watching the night ripple past as Marc’s car rumbled downhill.

“She’s one of the good ones,” Marc said. “Maybe the only one from that hill.”

They coasted around a bend, and the mansions slid out of view, swallowed by the slope. Soon, the landscape opened up into Bristol—busy, cluttered, quietly buzzing like a frayed wire. They passed by Bristol Community College, and Sophie eyed it with renewed inspiration. She’d wanted Harvard for so long that she’d internalized anything else as failure. Now she knew the truth: she could make a difference no matter where she would go. Harvard was still at the top of her list, but schools like Bristol Community College were suddenly *on* the list.

As they rolled into Coalview, the city softened. Sidewalks split like tree bark and half-decaying apartments sagged by the busy road. They passed a mural of a child with angel wings, fading under the weight of time. For a moment, Sophie wished she knew how to spray paint, if only to touch up the picture. As the thought rolled through her mind, she realized she’d seen spray paint recently, hadn’t she? And it was somewhere around this part of town, wasn’t it? Was this another *déjà vu*, or—

Ms. Jackson.

Sophie sat up straight. This was where Ms. Jackson had left that

graffiti for her during the meditation. She hadn't thought about the logistics before, but how had it gotten there? There was no chance Ms. Jackson would've had enough time to paint the wall in the middle of their chase, right? So that meant...

"Hey," she said. "Can we make a detour?"

"Sure. Where to?"

"Just—left at the next light. I'll tell you when to turn next."

They wove through a narrow corridor of crumbling buildings. Sophie was no longer sure she *wanted* to find what she was looking for, but the urge had taken root, and there was no turning back.

"Right here," Sophie said.

Marc took the turn down into a tight alley, coasting with his foot off the gas. They were one turn away, and Sophie clenched both fists.

"Turn here."

Marc did as instructed. The alley was darker than she remembered, or perhaps it was just later, and she squinted to see through the veil of night. Then Marc's headlights washed over the wall, and bright white graffiti glared back.

GO
HOME, SOPHIE
TRY ANOTHER TIME



"Holy shit," Marc said. "Is that for you or a different Sophie?"

"It's for me."

That this was here in reality meant something huge—but Sophie wasn't quite sure what that was yet. Ms. Jackson really did this? If so, she wasn't just predicting Sophie; she was planning around her. Going out of her way. Working in her off-time to *topple* her.

"Turn around," Sophie said. "I'll explain on the way home."

After a three-point turn, Sophie opened up about her adventure with Tay. Marc listened with a keen ear, knowing better than to question anything, and when Sophie finished, the car sank into silence.

This lasted until Sophie's neighborhood drifted into view.

"You know, there's always been something off with her," Marc said. "I want to know what she's hiding."

"I do too," Sophie said. "Especially since she's in the way of my power returning. If we can figure out what's going on with her—"

"Then we'll be one step closer to you seeing the future again."

"Right."

Sophie's house grew taller before them, and Marc pulled into her driveway.

"But what are we supposed to do?" Sophie asked. "I tried asking her for answers during a meditation, but she pretended I was crazy. We'll have to coerce her to talk somehow."

"I have an idea," Marc said, but it's a little gray around the moral edges. If I can sleepwalk with her body, then at least I can figure out what's going on in her head. Sometimes, when I'm entering the sleepwalking state, I can hear the other person's thoughts. Maybe she'll be that way too."

"Are you sure you want to get involved like that?"

"I need answers just as much as you do," Marc said. "She wasn't even surprised to see me in Rick's body. How does she know what I do? How could she have known it was me?" He shivered. "I have to know."

"Okay." Sophie sat up in her seat. "So, when do you want to do this?"

They coordinated schedules. Between her new job, swim practice, and the second debate with Tay, Sophie was too busy to meet for a week. But in exactly seven days, they could meet again and solve the Ms. Jackson puzzle.

"Next Friday night it is," Marc said.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Sophie gave Marc a serious look. "Without my power, I can't be of help if things go sideways..."

"I'm sure," Marc said.

"Good." Sophie unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door. "Next Friday, after the debate, let's end this."

The next day was Sophie's interview and first day of work at the movie theater. Nervous, she arrived early with her best blouse and slacks. A young manager wearing a Superman tee took her in for a five-minute interview followed by fifteen minutes of training. This was where she learned that her sole responsibility at the job was to press play on a laptop. It was a dream job—except for the butter smell that lingered on her clothes after work. Then again, there were worse things to smell like.

On Sunday, she showed up to work with a notebook, a pen, and a good attitude, ready to get her life back on track. After hitting play on the first movie, she calculated her monthly take-home pay, determining it was more than enough to keep Marc afloat. Then, she answered emails, coordinated with the CEO of a tutoring app, and prepped for a physics test. There was no test scheduled, but Sophie could sense it coming. Halfway through her review, however, she was distracted by a rom-com in which a man tried to catch the attention of a beautiful woman who was destined to be with another. With the way it echoed her feelings for Tay, she was drawn in long enough to abandon her studies.

She paid for this on Monday, as Ms. Jackson indeed surprised the class with a quiz, and on it, Sophie was certain she scraped by with a C. Undoubtedly, this would tank her grade below the threshold of passing per her deal with Ms. Jackson. Under normal circumstances, this would've gutted her, but this week? It was fine. She let the acid turn to venom, knowing this week would be the last one where Ms. Jackson had her secrets.

"Aren't you concerned that this will cost you the valedictorian seat?" Tay had asked. She was appropriately concerned, but there was an undeniable sparkle in her eyes as she was primed to take Sophie's place as the head of the class. "What about Harvard?"

Sophie shrugged. "Nothing I can do about it now."

And that was the key. All of a sudden, her task was simple: do what she can to change what she can—and accept everything else without ruminating.

With this in mind, she went home and updated the list of wants.

It should've been easy to cross some of these items out, but she still had to work up the nerve to give up her hope. In particular, she stared at the word "Harvard" for over an hour before scratching a line through the entry. Another line later and she'd nixed the need to be valedictorian. To her surprise, the sky didn't fall. She was still here, still herself. It turned out that if she just kept living, some problems would solve themselves.

In the end, only four *wants* remained:

I want to be class president.

I want Tay to be my girlfriend.

I want to know what Ms. Jackson is up to.

I want to win my first swim race.

It was a short and manageable list, especially since each of these could be solved in the near future. And while virtually nothing had been solved the way she had hoped, it was still exciting to see her problems fall away at a rapid pace.

On Tuesday, Sophie showed up to swim practice ready to think, but she was blindsided by Coach.

"You ready to race, Miss Vedas?" Coach asked. "I'm making the list for next Tuesday's meet. Whaddya say—looking to prove yourself against the top school in the district?"

Her first real race against the reigning district champs? Yikes. She would find no victory there.

"I'd love to, but—"

"You'd love to? That's exactly what I wanted to hear," Coach said. "Say no more, little lady. You're fearless, Soph, and that's what I like about you."

He walked away before Sophie could protest, and she spent the rest of practice trying not to freak out. Olivia and Katelyn's tight forms became the center of her attention, and she tried different ways of skimming the water.

Wednesday and Thursday nights were spent at meetings, mediating between groups to have something prepared for the debate. And by Friday, she was ready—not just to fight against Tay for the privilege of being class president, but also to end things with Ms.

Jackson once and for all.

Friday blinked past, and Sophie woke from a fugue state to find herself backstage with Tay. Unlike last time, the two girls were cordial and supportive, sharing notes and offering advice before the curtains opened.

“You’re going to do amazing,” Tay said, impressed by Sophie’s preparation. “No matter who wins this election, the school can’t lose.”

As the moderator, Mr. Pittman, adjusted the microphone levels, a knot ruptured in Sophie’s stomach, and she swallowed hard. It was difficult to keep her face even, and harder still to withstand the urge to throw up. But when Tay grabbed her hand, she felt like the tip of a sparkler lighting up for the first time.

“I mean it,” Tay said. “You got this.”

“Thanks,” Sophie said. “You’re going to do so well too.”

“Are you ready?”

There was no need for an answer. The curtains opened, and the entire junior class was staring at them. Panic returned, and she scanned the crowd to find anyone whispering. After her last showing, surely there was someone talking about it still, right? But Tay squeezed her hand, and Sophie settled.

Newly grounded, she took another look at the class. With her new mindset, she saw the truth of the situation: practically nobody cared. Half of them were asleep, and the other half were buried in their phones. This made it easier, and when her name was called, she strutted to the podium with a brilliant smile.

“The rules are simple,” Mr. Pittman said. “I have a series of questions, and you’ll each have a turn to respond. At the last debate, our first response came from Sophie. For this one, we’ll begin with Tay.”

Tay lifted her chin, ready to take on the world.

Mr. Pittman faced her directly. “The class president is in the unique position to guide initiatives for the local community. Our school is more than just a hub for academics; it’s a service-oriented

collective that represents our area. Tay, do you have any plans or initiatives prepared that are designed to give back to our surrounding neighborhoods?”

Tay nodded, cool and collected. “A school should be the center of hope, and a school is only as good as the community supporting it. But the cornerstone of strong support is good communication. After all, if we don’t know how we can help, then we won’t be able to help. To address this, I’ve drafted plans to host 50/50 raffles, and with the money, I propose we update our marquee so as to promote more events. Using this as our calling card, we can build a social network for our community that echoes all the way to the top of Calisette Hills.”

Improving the infrastructure of the school was useful, sure, but Sophie realized this didn’t provide real benefit to the community. It was just marketing. Scattered applause came, but nothing ferocious.

“Sophie, same question,” Mr. Pittman said. “What are your plans to give back to the community?”

Sophie lifted her hand, thumb tucked against her finger like she’d seen presidential candidates do. “Many people in our community are affected by the inaccessibility of the district’s food pantries. In driving from Coalview to Calisette, it’s become clear how dependent our culture has become on cars. If someone doesn’t have a car, they can’t access the pantries. To address this, I’ve partnered with our Driver’s Ed department to set up a new training route that would have students passing the inner-city food banks. Once there, students with permission forms will be instructed to pick up staples and bring them back to school where the home economics department will work to create our school’s very own disbursement kitchen. Not only will this make driving a more accessible option for our student body, but it will ensure that any student whose family is hungry will have access to bring food home.”

Those who were paying attention applauded. A small group of girls in the corner cheered enthusiastically, and Sophie peered through the darkness to see who they were. The junior girls from swim team were clustered together, showing rabid support. Sophie beamed at

them, and chanced a small wave.

“Excellent,” Mr. Pittman said. “Tay, back to you. The senior class president is responsible for organizing high school reunions. What are your plans to keep your class together for the long haul?”

Tay shuffled through a handful of printouts.

“Sure,” she said, speaking slowly to buy time. “So, I’ve already set up our class’s Facebook group where we’ll be able to organize future events.”

Mr. Pittman waited for more, but when nothing came, he simply nodded. It wasn’t much of an answer, but it was something.

“Okay. And Sophie, have you created any plans to facilitate your class’s reunions?”

Sophie plucked a single page of notes from the top of her stack and smiled.

“As you’ll remember from the last debate, Tay made arrangements to host prom at the aquarium. Building upon that foundation, I believe our reunions should be hosted in the same place. I’ve followed up on her actions and secured a letter of intent to book the aquarium for the first Saturday of May every ten years. If you want to be there, put it in your calendar today, and I’ll see you there.”

“Oh, I wish my class president did that,” Mr. Pittman said. The swim girls cheered again, and Mr. Pittman cleared his throat, regaining his impartiality.

Tay was smiling at Sophie again, though her intensity had diminished. Sophie swore that if she listened closely enough, she’d hear Tay’s heart cracking at the seams. They both wanted this, and it wasn’t fair that only one of them could have it.

“I want to note,” Sophie said, leaning a bit too far against the microphone so that it emitted extra feedback, “that this plan is only possible because of Tay’s hard work in setting up prom.”

Tay found her breath.

“Indeed,” Mr. Pittman said. “Now, final question. Our community is unique in that it serves a wide array of students from a variety of financial backgrounds. This has historically led to mass inequality among our student body. What are your plans to make sure

each student has equitable access to the tools they need to succeed?”

Both Tay and Sophie softened. They'd each considered this in their preparation.

“Inequality is the source of our culture’s problems,” Tay began, “but it’s also a perspective that can give us strength. We live in a world that teaches people to compete, to outperform, and to rise above. This, however, leads to a definition of success that is defined by what others are doing. To address inequality, I’ll be starting the *Define Your Success* initiative, inspired by the Angel Trees that emerge during Christmas. Instead of pulling an angel from the tree with a gift written on it, students will ask for supplies that the community can provide for them. Podcast mics, video cameras, running shoes—the tools we need for our successes are not cheap. We’re all capable of becoming our highest selves, but only if we have the financial freedom to shape ourselves. My goal is to create a school where every student—not just the richest—can have access to explore the creative world. I firmly believe that the highest version of yourself isn’t something you find—it’s someone you become.”

There was a great deal of applause around the room, but Sophie saw the flaw right away. This was a system based on luck. Whether their dreams came true was a roll of the dice, and while random luck *was* preferable to the current system, it still didn’t provide for everyone equally. Worse, Sophie knew from her work with Marc that asking for help *felt bad*. Tay’s plan failed to account for that shame. The idea had good bones, but it needed some meat.

“Sophie,” Mr. Pittman said, “do you have anything you’d like to do to help struggling students?”

“Yes, of course.” Sophie lifted her chin. “Last weekend, I contacted the sales department of the TutorMe app—an app that allows students to be linked directly to online tutors. Ordinarily, these tutors are contracted on an individual basis, but I’ve developed an agreement that would allow each student to have unlimited access. The cost of this endeavor would run close to \$10,000 per year. I’m still working on funding, but—”

“You could use the 50/50 raffle funds,” Tay said. She swallowed

hard and shook her head, annoyed at herself. But still, she continued. “It’s estimated that the 50/50 raffle would bring in—” she plucked a paper from her stack “—about that much money over the course of a football season. And when looking at the cost of a new marquee and comparing it against the cost of rotating banners at the front of the school, I think using those funds for the TutorMe app is a better use of money.”

Sophie looked at Tay, dumbfounded. It was no secret how badly Tay wanted to win the election—and yet she still placed the community over her ambitions. In this moment, Sophie could clearly see why she was crushing on Tay; she was the best of us.

“Well alright then.” Mr. Pittman took the mic from its stand and faced the audience. “You’ll hear from Tay and Sophie in three weeks as they deliver their final speeches over morning announcements. Voting will commence that day during your lunch period. Until then—” he turned back toward the stage, “—good luck to you both.”

Sophie and Tay stayed put, waving as the curtains swept across the stage. And when the drapes furled shut, they ran across the stage to hug. There, they clung to one another for a whole minute, sobbing into one another’s shoulders. This time, the tears weren’t the messy aftermath of failure; they were the reprieve of victory.

“What are you doing tonight?” Tay asked. “We should celebrate somehow.”

Sophie’s smile widened as she remembered her destiny with Ms. Jackson. “I have a great idea on how we can celebrate. How would you like to cause a little mayhem?”

Tay laughed and nodded. “What do you have in mind?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Midnight

DINNER THAT night was spaghetti, and it was the best it had ever been, made extra sweet by the knowledge it was the only time Sophie would be able to enjoy it. Dad asked how Sophie was enjoying swim team, and this led to a wonderful conversation about the new triceps bulges she'd earned. When Katelyn suggested she take protein supplements, Sophie asked questions and took a genuine interest in the response. The house hadn't felt like this in years, not since she was a child.

Hours of homework, journaling, and TikTok came next, and Sophie passed the time until a blanket of stars carved through the horizon. Eventually, she ran out of things to do and stared at the constellations, waiting for Tay to arrive. Feeling small was what she needed right now. This was just a ball of dirt destined to collide with the sun—everything was going to be okay. Focusing on the dim lights of the universe kept her mind clear until Tay texted.

“Just got Marc. Picking you up next.”

In a flurry, Sophie cleaned up her look. She changed clothes, applied a fresh coat of makeup, and straightened her hair, adorning it with a bow. After spending a minute in front of the mirror, she hurried downstairs, sure she was alone. But despite the silence, the room wasn't empty.

“Have fun, Sophie. Make good decisions.”

Sophie froze as Mom's voice rang out. She was sitting in the dark,

sipping a warm drink—maybe chamomile, maybe coffee. Was she going to stop her from sneaking out? Lecture her about boys? Or was she just going to sit there and let her leave?

“O-okay. I will.”

Sophie opened the door and paused, giving her mom a moment to say something more. When nothing came, she slipped outside, and suddenly, each step toward Tay was filled with apprehension. *Was this a good idea? A good decision?* It didn’t matter. She had to know the truth about Ms. Jackson. With one look back at the house—her eyes meeting Mom’s in the window—she hopped in Tay’s car and buckled up.

“You look so cute,” Tay said as Sophie took the passenger seat. “I love your hair.”

“Oh, this?” Sophie adjusted the bow. “I was just playing around.”

“So, where are we going?” Marc asked. To him, this wasn’t a fun outing to Bristol—it was a solo mission on behalf of his friend. A risky extraction that would test the limits of his power.

“Tay knows,” Sophie said. When Tay gave Sophie a puzzled look, though, Sophie cringed and corrected herself. “Sorry, I forgot we did the GPS heist in a vision. Head toward Bristol and I’ll tell you when to turn.”

“So, how did you feel about the debate?” Tay asked.

“I’m just glad it’s over,” Sophie said.

“Your ideas were great. I’d love to use them if I’m elected—if you’re okay with it.”

“Only if you’ll let me use your ideas too,” Sophie said. “The 50/50 raffle for the TutorMe app? So smart. You saved my ass there.”

“The TutorMe thing was *such* a killer move. I’ve been using it for years, and it never occurred to me that I should get it in the hands of the whole school.”

Sophie sighed. “I wish we could team up. We’ve spent weeks preparing for our individual debates, but it was only once we were together on stage that we came up with our best ideas. That’s weird, right? It shouldn’t be like that.”

“You’re right.”

The car fell silent and Sophie joined Marc in spacing out. The road lines whipped past her. She would've guessed the lines were only three feet long until one crept up beside the car at a stoplight. There, she realized the stripe was almost three times as long as she expected. Ten feet long, at least. When the world wasn't rushing toward you, none of it seemed so small, and perspective came easy. Maybe if she slowed her roll and let go of ambition, she'd find a compromise that would—

“What if we *could* team up?” Sophie suggested, facing Tay. “What if the loser of the presidential election became something new? A vice president? Then—”

“Then we'd get to spend the whole year together,” Tay said. “That's an amazing idea! Both of us would get a role for our applications, and the school gets a more rounded team! Let's make it happen.”

Sophie and Tay bounced excitedly, and their conversation shifted into logistics. How would it work? Who performs which roles? What would they need to do to get the position established at the school?

All the while, Marc stayed silent, his mind ablaze. He was the only one who couldn't enjoy the ride. This was the first time since the mishap at Rick's house that he would be using his powers, and that made him nervous. What if it all went wrong again? Each of his targets before now had been oblivious to his coming, but Ms. Jackson wouldn't be so easy. She'd already proven herself to be a match for Sophie—what if she could overcome him too?

Soon, they were pulling into Ms. Jackson's neighborhood. Sophie called out the rest of the directions until they reached Ms. Jackson's residence on the side lot of a cul-de-sac.

Marc stared at the house, his eyes glittering at its construction. As a realist, he always knew he'd never afford a house on Calisette, which meant a house like *hers* was the most he could ever attain. It was large enough that Jamal, Tiana, and Mom could have a room to themselves, and clean enough that he'd take pride in having friends over.

“You ready, Marc?” Tay asked.

“Yeah,” he said, snapping from his reverie. “I'm ready.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Sophie said. “Any information helps, but if you learn she’s a sociopath, just get the hell out of there.”

Marc chewed through another melatonin pill—his second since leaving his house. By now, his arms were rubber, but his legs were still jittery amid the adrenaline boiling in his system.

“I’ll do what I can,” he said, lying back in the seat. “Wish me luck.”

Over the years of Marc’s sleepwalking adventures, he’d invaded more than a hundred dreams. In that time, he’d encountered a great variety of workplaces, parks, and homes. He’d often find himself on beaches in the Caribbean or cathedrals in Spain. He’d empathized with anxiety, exuberance, and everything in between. Sometimes, he found himself in nightmares where he’d fight zombies, home invaders, or clowns. These dreams were terrifying but manageable if you kept a level head. Sometimes, he found himself in paradises full of women, parties, and music. These dreams were easy to be drawn into, but still manageable if you kept focus. And with all this experience, he’d become hardened, prepared for a thousand possibilities. He thought he’d seen it all.

But he hadn’t.

Marc burst into Ms. Jackson’s dream, finding it to be an infinite prairie of nothingness. Just a flat, empty world. A flicker of soil stirred, swirling like mist on a battlefield, but nothing else was present. Just grass, Ms. Jackson, and a flying rock.

No. Not flying. Falling.

Marc scrambled as an asteroid slammed into the ground, spraying debris in all directions. His body was coated with dirt, and amid the rubble, he sputtered for air. The wall of dust was thick, and in it, he was blinded. On his hands and knees, he crawled sideways, burying his face in his shirt to filter out the cloud. Jagged rocks dug into his skin, and pain strummed at his nerves like a lyre.

Amid the dust, someone grabbed his leg.

Marc kicked out, but the slender hand that trapped him was pulling too hard. His heart rate tripled as his back was shredded by

the ground. His fear compounded as a new realization hit: pain wasn't usually a part of his dreams. Something was wrong. *Very* wrong.

The dust blew away, and the foreign hand that dragged him let go. He collapsed into the dirt and clutched his chest, an asthma attack building.

"Hello, Marc," Ms. Jackson said.

Marc scrambled away, looking up at the teacher like she was a giant. He drew a series of breaths, trying to figure out what his next step would be. Nobody had ever anticipated his arrival in a dream. But no, of course Ms. Jackson knew what was going on. She always did.

"What are you doing here?" Ms. Jackson asked.

In the distance, another meteor struck the earth, but only a gentle shockwave reached them. Marc covered his eyes amid a gust of wind and slowed his breathing to a steady pace. Then he swallowed hard, losing his desire to finish the mission. From all the way across the field, Ms. Jackson emanated a creepy, unraveling, bone-chilling energy; what would the inside of her brain feel like?

"Never mind. I know what you're here for." Ms. Jackson sniffed, a layer of dirt caking her back. "Ask your question."

Marc swallowed and clambered to his feet. As he stood, he half expected Ms. Jackson to lunge at him, but she waited without fear.

"How are you always one step ahead?" Marc asked.

"You came all this way to ask that?" Ms. Jackson laughed and shook her head. "No. That's not what you want to know. Ask your *real* question."

Marc drew a shallow breath.

"How can we beat you?" he asked.

"That's Sophie's question," Ms. Jackson said. "I'm not interested in sharing that information. I'm *interested* in *your* question. Why are you here, Marc?"

Marc swallowed and eyed Ms. Jackson. She was always prepared. Always ready. Always perfect. How did she do it? What was her secret? *That* was what he needed to know.

"Why do I always fail?"

“You’re *so* close,” Ms. Jackson said. “As a teacher, I’ll answer that for you, and while I do, think of the question that lies deep in your heart. Why do you fail, Marc? It’s because you believe it to be your destiny. And maybe it is, but that doesn’t make it cruel.”

“How so?”

Ms. Jackson thought a moment. “Consider how you’d feel if you won a million dollars. It’d be incredible, right? But what if you already had ten million dollars? Would you feel the same? Of course not. That alone tells us that life is about the swing of fortune, not the size of the prize. Why do you fail? Because it makes success taste sweeter. We’re here to experience the highs and lows thrown at us, nothing more. But still—that’s not your question. *Think*, Marc. Why are *you* here? Why did *you* agree to come tonight? To fight me? I don’t think so.”

Marc clambered to his knees and planted his hands against the soil. A dark rumbling echoed in the distance. What was the question Ms. Jackson wanted him to ask? He questioned his soul and found the desire for truth bubbling to the surface.

“Am I alone?” he asked. “Are we alone? Me and Sophie? Or are there others like us? Others like...”

“Like me,” Ms. Jackson finished his statement. She took another step forward, closing the distance between them. “You’ve put a lot of thought into that night at Rick’s house, haven’t you?”

Marc stayed rooted for a moment, then took a hesitant step in her direction. “It’s consumed me. How did you know I was in Rick’s body? That I can sleepwalk? Why weren’t you surprised? If there are more people like me out there, I want to know.”

“If I told you what I knew, then I wouldn’t be one step ahead anymore. But I’ll make you a bargain. I’ve been wondering how *your* power works just as you’ve been interested in mine. So why don’t we agree to a trade?”

“So you do have a power?”

The ground crunched as Ms. Jackson took another step. They were an arm’s length apart now. Marc froze in a patch of fear, and Ms. Jackson craned her neck to study the depths of Marc’s eyes.

“How does it work?” she mused, stressing each word as she

peered into Marc's soul.

"It works like this."

Marc flexed his fingers, breaking through his paralysis. A warm sensation flooded his arms, and his brain fired up to engage on all cylinders. This next part would need to be perfect, and every part of his body cooperated in making it so.

With a jerky motion, he cradled his hand behind Ms. Jackson's head and yanked her forward until their foreheads clashed. Her feelings flowed through him, and an overwhelming terror flooded his veins. Like most of his victims, she was afraid. He pressed harder and harder—then realized his mistake. She *was* afraid—just not of him. No. Her fear was supreme. Cataclysmic. Existential. Her deepest worries echoed:

What if it's hopeless?

What if we're doomed?

How do we stop it?

What if we can't?

Another asteroid cratered into the plains to their right, and Marc's blood turned to acid. Of all the thoughts she could've had, this wasn't what he expected. How could he relate? He reached into the depths of his soul, pulling out insecurities about death and loss, but none of it was enough. He'd never feared anything this big before. Anything like—

"Ah."

His brain felt a tug, sharp and invasive. Ms. Jackson was fighting back. The link he'd formed was a two-way street, a bridge that could be traveled across from either direction. Petrified, his own insecurities came rushing to the surface.

What kind of man am I if I can't provide for my family?

How strong am I if I have to rely on Sophie to keep me off the streets?

What future can I have when I've already messed up high school?

His deepest, most repressed feelings came bursting to the surface. His resentment of Sophie and Tay for their stable life. The burden of purpose his power provided. A guilt that he'd never reach his potential. He hadn't shared these thoughts with *anyone*, yet Ms.

Jackson was pulling them out of him like poison through a siphon.

Marc flinched, but Ms. Jackson had ensnared him, her hand rooted in the back of his skull. A whisper slithered through his thoughts, coaxing him to surrender. He resisted, but it grew louder and louder until...

He gave in. Lost control. Relinquished. His vision blacked out—

—And his eyes opened in the back of Tay's car. The world was hazy and unrecognizable, and when he moved to speak, he found he couldn't.

Ms. Jackson succeeded.

The link she'd created was weak, her control uneven, but still—he was hers to control. The teacher's fingers twiddled in his control room, moving him like a puppet on strings. Gangly and awkward, he sat up.

Tay jumped and clutched her chest. "You scared me. Are you okay? You were breathing heavy. What happened?"

Marc's mouth opened—or perhaps unhinged—and a rumble came from his throat.

"Ughhh."

Marc's tongue lolled around, and his lips moved in and out. Suddenly, he was a baby babbling incoherently, trying to sound out its first word.

"Marc?"

There was another tug on Marc's subconscious, dragging him underwater. The real Marc was clawing for control, but Ms. Jackson wasn't letting him have it. There was a surge of electricity that overpowered him, and then he was dead in the water. His neurons realigned, and when he next spoke, the words were crystal-clear.

"Go home, Sophie. Try another time."

The car was silent. Then:

"AHHHH!"

Sophie unbuckled and jumped out of the car, hopping up and down, shaking both hands as though there was mud on her fingers. Tay was fast behind her, slamming the door as though a ton of steel

would be enough to hold Ms. Jackson hostage.

Marc felt a release, and then—

—he was back in the dream. His body fell backward, and his brain seared as his energy realigned.

“That was... different,” Ms. Jackson said, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “A lot harder than I thought it was going to be.”

Marc stared at Ms. Jackson as though she were the devil incarnate. Nobody had ever fought back against him like that. Wrestled control like her.

“I see why you’re offended,” Ms. Jackson said, tilting her head to observe Marc’s anguish from a better angle. “You have the same need for control that Sophie does, don’t you? Well, tell Sophie she needs to do better. And you? You need to *choose* better. Understand?”

She took a step away.

“Wait,” Marc called out. “You said you’d tell me your secret if I showed you mine.”

Ms. Jackson stopped and smirked.

“I told you my secret, just not with words. If you didn’t hear it, it’s because you weren’t listening. Or maybe it’s that you don’t want to believe it.”

Marc stared at her.

“And Marc,” she said, moments before the dream blacked out, “you’re not alone. Neither is Sophie. But that doesn’t mean you’re ready to know what’s out there either. Figure your shit out, and when you’re ready, I’ll teach you the next step, as is my destiny.”

Marc slammed upright. Sophie and Tay were visible through the windshield, illuminated by a streetlight. Their hands moved wildly as they spoke, and then at once, they turned to face Marc, eyes wide.

“LET’S GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!” Marc shouted.

They both rushed back to the car. Doors slammed, buckles clicked, and wheels squealed. A light turned on in Ms. Jackson’s house, but nobody was looking long enough to see if she would follow.

“It’s you, right?” Sophie asked.

“It’s me,” Marc said.

“What happened?”

“Sh-She got in m-my head,” Marc said. “She possessed me.”

“How is that possible?”

“She must have experience, or... or...” Marc reflected on what he’d felt when he was trying to control Ms. Jackson. He couldn’t empathize with her because she was riddled with the burden of things to come. It was a fear of the future, but not one built from anxiety. One of certainty. She feared what would become reality. He’d felt those feelings once before with Sophie. And that meant—

“She sees the future,” Marc said, his voice like ice. “Just like you do, Sophie.”

Sophie stiffened and despaired.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Breathing Room

SOPHIE WAS in a daze the rest of the way home. Though her eyes were open, they weren't really seeing anything. Just the blur of lights and an endless parade of white lines. So deep was she in the abyss of her mind that nothing could pull her attention away from its deepest consideration.

Was Ms. Jackson really a seer?

Tay stopped outside Sophie's house and attempted to say goodbye, but no words came out. Sophie understood and gave a vacant smile before trudging up the driveway. She half-expected her mom to still be awake, but no. She wasn't there. Sophie crossed the empty room and stomped upstairs. Safe in her room, she flopped into bed and stared at the ceiling.

Was she really a seer?

Ms. Jackson *was* always one step ahead. She always knew when Sophie would miss her meditation. When it was the right time to pounce. The evidence was there. Then again, the numbers weren't. Being a seer was rare, and so far as she knew, it was only her and Phoebe who could see the full branching of the future. It was likely Ms. Jackson could have spontaneous dreams like her mom, but meditating the future wasn't common, right? Maybe Phoebe knew more.

Sophie picked up her phone, the screen blasting her with light. In giant numbers, she saw it was two in the morning. With a sigh, she

ignored the blister of guilt in her chest and dialed her sister, hoping her phone was still accessible. The line rang only once.

“Sophie...” Phoebe said, her voice tired. “Why do you always call when it’s late?”

“Because nobody has their crises at brunch,” Sophie said. “Besides, once it’s after 4, it’s morning. So this time, I’m calling early.”

“No.” Phoebe didn’t have the energy to elaborate, nor did she need to. Sophie knew she was being a smart ass.

“Look, I’m sorry about the time,” Sophie said, “but I have a question only you would know the answer to.”

“Shoot.”

“How rare are we? People who see the future?”

“Precognitors? Like in the world?” Phoebe thought a moment. “There might be thousands of us? It’s impossible to know.”

“I’m not asking about people like mom who get their visions twice a year. I want to know about people who can see the branching multiverse. People like *us*.”

“Oh. It’s just you and me, kiddo.”

“Seriously?”

“I could be wrong,” Phoebe said. “But of the dozens of precognitors I work with, nobody else can do what we do. And for good reason. Everyone else who’s tried it has gone crazy. Like, asylum crazy.”

“Huh, I wonder why,” Sophie said sarcastically.

“Yeah, big mystery,” Phoebe replied, just as dry. “Why are you asking this now, though?”

“Because I—I think my teacher can do it too. I just need to know whether that’s possible.”

There was a long pause. Sophie held her breath as she waited for a response, knowing that, if it was possible, then it was true. And Phoebe confirmed her worst fear.

“It’s possible,” she said. “That’s all I can say about it.”

“Alright, well...” Sophie didn’t know what else to say. “Thank you. That helps.”

“Sure. Now listen, I miss you more than anyone, but can you

please start calling me in the afternoon like a normal person?”

“I will make no such promises.”

“Sophie—”

“I love you, buh-bye!”

Sophie hung up, happy to end the call on a playful note. But Phoebe’s validation dragged down her mood.

Ms. Jackson is really a seer.

In a strange way, this comforted Sophie. Now, she’d unmasked Ms. Jackson, and the emperor had no clothes. Unfortunately, this didn’t change the fact that it made Ms. Jackson seem unbeatable. The only thing that had upended Sophie was her own laziness. Undoubtedly, Ms. Jackson would never be so careless, lest Sophie take that opportunity to fight back. That made any chance of a comeback against her close to zero—but, however bleak it was, hopelessness was still an answer. It was enough permission to move on and cross the item off her list.

And thinking of the list—how much further did she need to go?

Sophie slipped out of bed and hobbled to her desk. There, she flipped open her journal. A pen *clicked* through her fingers, and she steadied her hand, drawing two lines through the paper. No more class president; VP would suffice. And no more Ms. Jackson; nothing would beat her. Now, only two desires remained.

I want Tay to be my girlfriend.

I want to win my first swim race.

This was the final stretch. With the race on Tuesday, Sophie knew she’d have her power back in just a few days. Then, win or lose, the swim meet would become a thing of the past, and she’d be able to meditate again. One thing or nothing—that was what Phoebe had told her the power was contingent upon. Only then could she find the perfect solution to understanding Tay’s feelings.

Or you could have your power back tonight, Sophie realized. *You just have to quit the swim team.*

She shook her head, finding the thought repulsive.

No. I don’t want to quit.

The thought surprised her, but it was true. With each practice,

her arms grew larger, her shoulders broader, her waist thinner, her willpower stronger. She'd forged bonds with Katelyn, Olivia, and the other girls in her lane. No. Quitting the swim team was out of the question.

Which was odd. She reflected on the dread she'd felt in joining the team. The pain she endured through her first few days of practice. Had she known how hard it would be, she would have quit on day one. Harvard was the only thing that kept her going.

But now, with Harvard off the table, swimming had become a source of joy. A place of comfort. An activity she looked forward to. Her meditations could only show her short-term outcomes, but it was only through months of suffering that she could finally cross the desert and arrive at an oasis of peace.

She looked back at her list and nodded. It was time to cross some deserts. She was going to admit her feelings to Tay. For real. In reality. And she was going to do it before the swim meet on Tuesday.

It was now Saturday, which meant Sophie had to work. As she sat in the projection booth, not even the half-baked CGI in the newest low-budget monster flick could pull her away from planning a perfect date with Tay. By the end of her shift, she had crafted a plan that would win Tay over—but only if Tay was interested.

On Sunday, all that remained was to ask Tay to come with her for an outing. In the projection booth again, she typed out a message to Tay and edited it for hours. Every few minutes, she'd tweak a detail, add an emoji, delete it, and start over. It was impossible to stop overthinking. But finally, halfway through her shift, she had a message ready to send.

Now, don't touch it, she told herself, placing the phone face down. *Tay will respond when she responds.*

Despite knowing it wouldn't speed up a reply, Sophie still checked her phone every few seconds until Tay answered an hour later.

'A girls' date! Sounds fun!'

Sophie stared at the message, brimming with hope and despair.

Did Tay mean this would be a cutesy girl's date? Or did she get that this was a *date* date? Either way, she'd be spending tomorrow afternoon with Tay, and maybe by the end of the night, they would be—

No. No expectations. Needing the future to be a certain way was what got her into this mess.

She finished her shift with the biggest smile and went home to her upstairs safe haven. There, she did what she always did. She wrote in her journal, listened to music, and stared at the ceiling. The moon swept overhead as she readied herself for the biggest Monday of her life. Nothing could stop her.

Knock, knock.

“Sophie?” Katelyn's voice sounded soft from the other side of the door.

“Come in,” Sophie said.

Katelyn shuffled in, wearing apprehension all over her face. The door closed and she struggled to make eye contact.

“Are you okay?” Sophie asked.

“Yeah,” Katelyn said. “Sorry. I don't want to impede, but I wanted to check in on you. You've been acting different lately.”

Sophie sat up. “Different good? Or different bad?”

“Both. I like how vibrant you've been at swim and stuff, but there are also times where you seem sad and distant. It's really confusing.”

Sophie wanted to choose her words carefully, but the truth sort of flooded out. “I, uh... lost my future vision.”

“That's a bad thing, right?”

“Yeah...” Sophie paused, her breath caught in her throat. “Well, it's different, that's all.”

“Why did it go away?” Katelyn asked, taking a seat on the bed next to Sophie.

“It's because I can't meditate. I have too much anxiety.”

“What's making you anxious?”

Sophie shrugged, and she could hardly contain a smile. “I'm going to ask Tay to be my girlfriend tomorrow.”

“Aww, Sophie. I hope she says yes.”

“I don’t think she will,” Sophie said. “She’s only ever dated boys.”

“Well, if things don’t work out, maybe you can ask Olivia out.”

“Olivia?”

“Yeah. You know? Olivia? The girl in our lane?”

“No, I know Olivia,” Sophie said, chuckling. “Is she— Why her?”

“Because she thinks you’re cute.”

“Really?” Sophie tilted her head. “But how could she think that when I’m always wearing a swim cap and goggles?”

“They are ridiculous, aren’t they?” Katelyn said.

They laughed, and the room simmered into a calm silence.

“So, are you ready for Tuesday?” Katelyn asked.

“No.” Sophie frowned. “I wish I was as good at swimming as you. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about the meet.”

“You’ll be as good as I am if you do stick with it,” Katelyn said. “Remember, I’ve been doing this for eight years and I didn’t *win* a race for the first six. It’s not like Mom and Dad came home to flaunt my failures. People only talk about you when you succeed.”

Katelyn was right, Sophie knew, but life was never so logical.

“You know... I’m sorry I never went to any of your meets,” Sophie said. “I’ve been in my own world for too long, and I want to work to be a better sister.”

“Even after your power comes back?” Katelyn leaned into the following silence, forcing Sophie to respond. The longer the pause lasted, the more Katelyn lost hope in the answer. But then...

“Yeah,” Sophie whispered. “Especially after I get my power back.”

“Good.” Katelyn slapped her thighs and stood. “Well, you have a big day tomorrow. I’ll leave you be. I love you, sis.”

“Love you too.”

The door closed, and Sophie was alone.

She sat still, worried that Katelyn had misinterpreted her silence. It wasn’t that Sophie was hesitant on being a better sister. No. There was another thing that had stopped her from speaking. A new truth she hadn’t confronted yet.

For the first time ever, Sophie wasn't sure she wanted her power back in the first place. And without her power, who would she be?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Gamble

SOPHIE WOKE on Monday with a burst of energy. School blurred past, and Sophie consulted her plan between every class to ensure things with Tay would go perfectly. As she stared down her carefully plotted timeline, she had the feeling that this excessive planning was something like an echo of her former power. Was this how normal people did precognition? While Sophie could appreciate the process the way a math nerd might enjoy solving a function without a calculator, it suffered from the same problem: efficiency. She'd plot out six different contingencies only to be forced to improvise when reality came.

Nothing exemplified this better than Ms. Jackson's class. Here, in seventh period, all of Sophie's plans were thrown out the window as Ms. Jackson... well... didn't do anything. She pretended as though Sophie hadn't camped outside her house to assist with a forceful corporeal hijacking. It was the last response Sophie expected, but at least it was a break.

When the bell rang, Sophie darted out to the Ledge. Tay was waiting there as usual, not suspecting that their relationship might be different in just a few hours. Marc joined them too with some exciting news, giving them both a quick hug that nearly knocked them off balance.

"I got hired!" he said. "It's construction on weeknights. The Ledge has been great, but I have to go to training."

And then he bolted past, leaving Sophie wide-eyed in his wake. This was a problem that had haunted Marc for months, and for all the thinking Sophie did to try and fix things, it turned out that Marc could find stable employment all by himself. And in doing so, he took the burden off Sophie of saving any more money for his rent. Which meant...

Suddenly, Sophie had some extra cash to burn.

"The night's on me," Sophie said. "Anything and everything—I'll foot the bill."

"Are you sure?" Tay said.

"Positive." Sophie faced Tay and held both of her hands. "You've been an awesome friend all year, and I want to use this evening to say thank you. I've got everything planned down to the minute. Are you ready?"

Tay's face melted into a smile, and they were off.

Their first stop was the movie theater. A perk of Sophie's employment was a free seat for any movie that hadn't sold out, and, lucky for her, a new kaiju movie had been released a week ago with subtitles only. The rumors were that the movie was unfinished, and the rumors were underselling it a tad. From the moment the title card glitched on screen—*Atlantic Brim: Ninjas from Atlantis*—they knew they were in for a treat.

Despite the theater being nearly empty, Tay and Sophie sat in the back where they whispered snarky commentary. For the most part, they did a good job of keeping it down, but when one of the ninjas began an overly sincere monologue while drowning, Tay broke out into uncontrollable laughter, placing her hand on Sophie's arm to steady herself. Sophie joined in, and this started a loop of "I'm only laughing because you're laughing." By the end of the movie, they were red-faced, snotty, and the proud recipients of dirty looks from the three other patrons who had paid to watch.

"Sorry," Sophie muttered at them as the lights came on. But the moment the other group turned the corner, she was laughing with Tay once again and making fun of the ninja whose rubbery sword was never fixed in post.

“So what’s next?” Tay asked, squinting against the lobby lights and rubbing happy tears from her eyes. “Are you hungry? I am. Where do you want to eat?”

“We should get concessions,” Sophie said.

Tay gave her a look. “Why after the movie?”

“Because I made a special request with management,” Sophie said, veering off toward the popcorn line. “They let me rent a private auditorium where we can play anything we want. Let’s grab dinner, and then I’ll show you what we’re watching.”

One concessions run later, and they were walking to a new auditorium while cradling a pair of personal pizzas, a giant pretzel, a bag of gummy worms, and a couple drinks. As they entered the theater, Tay paused to read the title on screen, and a giant smile brightened her face.

“*Meteornadocane*.” Tay’s starry eyes reflected the frozen screen.

“You once told me that you wanted those straight-to-DVD movies to show in a theater, so I made it happen. This was supposed to be another showing of *Atlantic Brim*, but my manager let me book the room for the price of six tickets.”

“Based on the last showing, I think you got ripped off,” Tay joked, running headlong into the studio.

Sophie followed her, hands full, and sat beside Tay in the middle of the room. There, they looked around the room, Tay with the wonder of a child who’d just seen their first magic trick.

“This is so cool,” Tay said. “And *Meteornadocane*? Are you *sure* this’ll be worse than *Gophertopia*?”

Sophie shrugged, not wanting to admit the truth about that meditation. It was so long ago anyway. Instead, she changed the subject.

“I have one more surprise for you,” she said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a pair of Zebra Cakes. She held one out for Tay.

“Oh! Sophie, what the hell?” Tay snatched one of the cakes and demolished the packaging. “How did you know?”

“I just knew,” Sophie said. “Now, without further ado—” Sophie waved at the projectionist, and the lights dimmed.

The last time Sophie had seen this movie, she was in a meditative fugue. This time, it was much better, due in part to the fact that the “bad flicks” really *did* look better on the big screen. Something about it gave the stock special-effects footage an extra sheen, and when the Category Six hurricane was summoned to fight the meteornadocane, both their jaws dropped at the fiery spectacle. By the time the credits rolled, both girls were giddy with excitement.

“That was like ten times better than *Gophertopia*,” Tay said on their way out the door. “The fact that it ended with the spontaneous black hole that forced the two natural disasters to team up to defeat it? Brilliant. That kind of twist would *never* make it into a traditional blockbuster.”

“I know. You’re absolutely right to want to see these flicks on the big screen.”

Sophie checked her phone for the time and began subtly guiding them back to the car. It was now close to golden hour, and Sophie knew the schedule was running tight. In a bit of a rush, she waved goodbye to her coworkers and ushered Tay to the car. Oblivious, Tay started to thank Sophie for a wonderful night, but Sophie stopped her short.

“We’re not done,” Sophie said. “There’s a secret spot near Bristol I want to show you. I’ll plug in the address—just follow the directions and don’t think too hard about where we’re going.”

The scenery brushed past, but Sophie noticed none of it. She didn’t want to be distracted by anything. And besides, she needed to figure out how the finale would unfold—and fast. Her final gift was at home, and after that came the moment of truth.

“The Zebra Cake was a ridiculous move,” Tay said. “I haven’t told *anyone* about my addiction to them. Did you know that sometimes I’d eat a whole box in one go?”

“Really?” Sophie feigned surprise.

“For real, I don’t think I can fit another thing in my stomach.”

“Well, maybe now’s a good time to reconsider that, because—”

They turned the corner, revealing a frozen yogurt shop with an adorable theme. The building was erected beneath the canopy of a

banyan tree. Huge prop roots and vines dipped to the ground to help support the weight of the offshoot branches, and a pair of swings hung from the largest branch.

“Oh my gosh.” Tay’s eyes widened. “I’ve *always* wanted to come here.”

The tires of Tay’s car squealed into the parking lot, and Tay leaped out of her car. Her eyes stared straight up, and she marveled at the enormity of the tree. The colossal trunk was thicker than a semi-truck, and the whole of it looked like it had been picked straight from an enchanted forest.

“How old do you think it is? It looks like it remembers dinosaurs.”

“I think it’s like a hundred years old,” Sophie said, staring at a placard near the base. Then she stared at the branches, letting herself feel engulfed by its gargantuan size. “Feels like it should be older.”

“Yeah. Do you think it’ll swallow up the froyo shop in another couple decades?”

“It’s inevitable,” Sophie said. “We’d better get the yogurt now before it’s gone, then.”

The inside of the shop was homey and vibrant, with green decorations adorning every corner of the shelving. Air plants, palms, and ferns stood in every corner. Even the froyo dispensers were decorated with paper that’d been ruffled to look like branches. Sophie took a sample cup and tried Vanillavender, Chocobark, and Cedar Caramel before landing on Citrus Grove Swirl. Tay, however, went straight for the Coconutty blend, no sample cup needed. They filled it to the brim and doused it with toppings, from M&M’s to chocolate chips to tiny rectangular slices of cake. Using some of the money she’d set aside for Marc, Sophie paid and led them outside to the swings. Side by side, they rocked, feet brushing blades of grass as their spoons picked through the yogurt. Halfway through Tay’s cup, she paused and drew a deep breath.

“You really planned all this for me, huh?” Tay’s voice wasn’t flat, but it wasn’t bubbly either.

“Yeah. Why?”

“It’s been lovely,” Tay said. “But this seems like a lot of effort for just a random night out.”

“I always give a lot of effort,” Sophie said. “That’s kind of my thing. Perfection.”

“Perfection, I agree with. Effort, though? Jury’s still out.” Tay chuckled and took another bite of her yogurt. Her eyes were pulled to the sky, where she watched the first stars twinkle out from a dark blanket. “Is this because you’re nervous about the election? If you win, I won’t be mad. I promise.”

“I’m not nervous,” Sophie said. “We’ll be together no matter how the school votes.”

“What about your grade?” Tay asked. “Aren’t you pissed about Ms. Jackson stripping you of your valedictorian status?”

Sophie shrugged, a bit of creamsicle numbing her tongue. “A little.”

“And amid all of this, Harvard’s looking less and less likely,” Tay said. “Yet somehow, you’re not panicking at all. Instead, you’re planning amazing excursions for me. Helping Marc’s family. Working?” Tay let the spoon fall into her cup and faced her friend, an arm wound through the swing’s chain. “What’s going on?”

“I…” Sophie couldn’t find her words. “Nothing. Things have been different since I lost my power. I’m just trying to do my best as a normal person.”

Tay frowned.

“I’m not saying normal is bad,” Sophie said. “But it *is* an adjustment.”

“It’s okay.” Tay kicked back and swung a few inches. “I don’t know. This has been really cool, though. I don’t know how you knew all the little things I loved, but you really nailed it.”

“Thanks.”

Sophie looked up at the stars, her mind ablaze with the question. *The question. Will you be my girlfriend?* With the way the stars were peeking out of the darkness, it felt like the right time. But no—this wasn’t the perfect time. It’d only be perfect after the final surprise.

At the top of the hour, a brilliant array of lights turned on, and

the banyan lit up with dazzling white beads. Beneath this regal display, they finished their froyo and kicked their feet back and forth, seeing the rush of lights blur past with every ascent. Finally, it was getting quite late, and Tay flung herself from the swing, momentum forcing her to take an extra step.

“You got anything else planned or is it time to take you home?” Tay asked.

“Both,” Sophie said, plopping off the swing herself, nearly tripping as she landed. “I’ve got one more thing for you at my house.”

“Let’s do it.”

On the ride home, Sophie started to perspire, which was a worst-case scenario for things like a date. In just a handful of minutes, they’d arrive home, and Sophie would have exactly one chance to get this right. Bristol was already in the rearview, and Coalview would soon be a thing of the past. Her adrenaline ramped as they turned into her neighborhood, and Sophie found her mind to be silent. Amid the moment, there was enough tension to pull her focus to a singular place, and it dawned on her that, if she wanted to, she’d be able to meditate. After all, who could care about a swim competition at a moment like this?

But no, Sophie decided. It was time to commit. To live with the consequences of her actions. To be honest and vulnerable.

The house was empty when they got back, and Sophie led Tay upstairs. They pounced up the steps two at a time before Sophie closed the bedroom door behind them and smiled nervously.

“So what’s this last surprise?” Tay asked, her face crinkling with suspicion.

“I’ve been holding onto a gift for you since Christmas,” Sophie said, taking a small step toward her dresser. “It’s something I know you wanted then, but nobody got it for you. So I did.” She squatted and opened the bottom drawer. Then, she withdrew a book and held it close to her chest to obscure the title. Her eyes met with Tay, and her body flushed full of the jitters. This was it. This was when perfection mattered. Her arms shook as they lowered, exposing the book *Human, All Too Human* by Nietzsche.

Tay's eyes glittered as she read the title.

"Tay—" Sophie placed the book in her crush's arms, "—I have something I'd like to confess."

Tay's breath stilled, and her smile dipped.

"We've been friends for a while now, and you've been with me through a thousand visions. A million moments. And I... I can't begin to tell you how amazing I think you are. You've helped me through everything—even when it was hard. Even when you didn't need to. Tay, I owe you more than just a book and a night out. I owe you the world."

Tay gave a toothless smile but said nothing.

"I was hoping we might... I mean... You don't have to..."

Tay swallowed and her eyes widened—was it surprise or terror?

"Will you..."

Sophie's brain snapped, and a million offshoots of potential futures coursed through her mind. She recognized that this was her last chance to bail. Her last chance to avoid rejection. To avoid reality.

But it was also the last chance for her to get what she wanted, and surprisingly, it wasn't Tay she wanted from this moment. No. What she wanted was to come clean. She wanted to be honest, open, and vulnerable. She wanted to offer Tay the context she would need to define the rest of their relationship. By coming out with her feelings, she was ceding control and handing it over to fate.

"Tay, will you be my girlfriend?"

Tay stared. For a second, there was no answer. For a minute, there was no answer. For two minutes, Tay's face shifted across a huge spectrum of thoughts until her gaze finally landed on the Nietzsche book, and she deflated.

"Sophie..."

"I'm sorry," Sophie said, knowing what came next. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I just... I..."

"I'm really flattered, Sophie," Tay whispered, and a soft smile returned to her face. "But I'm straight. Like, *definitely* straight. And I love you. I do. But I don't think I could love you romantically."

Rejection.

Sophie felt like a broken inflatable tube man, hunched over and defeated. Tay's words were unambiguous and direct, with no room for reinterpretation. With this, she knew the quest to court Tay had been doomed from the start. The outcome inevitable. She'd spent the whole year swimming upstream, trying to fight against what time had in store for her—but her destiny was always written in the stars.

"I was just hoping, you know?" Sophie looked to the ground. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. No. I—" Tay sighed. "I don't have the words that can help you make sense of this, but—" she shuffled through her book, flipping forward and backward a few pages until she could settle on a specific passage. Then she read: "In reality, hope is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs man's torments."

"How'd you find that so fast?"

Tay smiled and closed the book. "I bought a copy for myself a few weeks ago. It's one of my favorites."

"So, you already own it?"

"Yeah. I never felt comfortable admitting that I like philosophy, but I'm really into it." She placed her hand on top of Sophie's. "But you're not supposed to know that, and I can think of only one reason you do."

Sophie blushed and looked down at the ground. Her eyes watered and a lump formed in her throat.

"I don't like that," Tay said. "It feels... violating, in a way. And today has been great—one of the best nights of my life. But it was also—you know—weird. Like, how much do you know about me that I don't know you know?"

"I..." Sophie thought about lying, then thought better of it. "A lot."

"Yeah. You knew all my secrets—including the little ones—even though I've never shared them with you. Some version of me did, I know—but that wasn't me."

A sinking feeling flooded through Sophie. She'd put in all this work, but now she saw the truth. Tay hadn't asked for this day. She never asked for a perfect night out. The date was wrong. Manipulative.

Invasive, even. Ironically, the fact that it was perfect was the very thing that made it flawed.

“I guess I was hoping that if things went well, you’d feel something for me.” Sophie shrugged one shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“And I forgive you,” Tay said. “Just, please don’t use your visions to learn things about me again. Ask me, and I’ll talk.”

“I won’t abuse my visions ever again,” Sophie said. “This must be so weird from your perspective. I’m not sure I can forgive myself.”

“You should. Here—” Tay flipped through the book and pulled out a new passage. “Forgive yourself. You have it in your power to merge everything you have lived through—false starts, errors, delusions, passions, your loves and your hopes—into your goal, with nothing left over.” Tay looked up, staring into Sophie’s soul. “So that’s your answer. All this is leading to something, you just have to define your goal. What is it?”

“After tomorrow, I won’t have one,” Sophie said. She leaned over Tay to retrieve her journal. Before handing it over, she *clicked* open a pen and crossed out the line about Tay. “It’s just the swim meet, followed by a void.”

Tay looked over the barely legible list. “These aren’t goals,” she said after a minute. “These are wants. Desires. A task list. But none of these define a goal—not in the way Nietzsche means it.”

“What do you mean?”

“My favorite Nietzsche quote is this one: ‘He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.’” She held up the journal. “Why do you want any of this stuff?”

Sophie rested her cheek on Tay’s shoulder and looked over the notebook. “I don’t know.”

“Well, if you figure that out, then you’ll never have to struggle again. See, if you’re guided by a single *why* for living—a self-defined purpose for being—then the right thing will become clear in every moment. That’s what Nietzsche would say.”

“That guy sounds smart. I should probably read his stuff, huh?”

Tay closed the book and placed it gingerly on Sophie’s desk. “It’s yours.” Then she stood and placed her hands in Sophie’s. They were

soft. Warm. Everything Sophie imagined they'd be. A minute ago, this would've lit a spark in Sophie's soul, but now nothing happened. Tay pulled, and Sophie stood.

"We're friends forever. Okay?" Tay said.

Sophie leaned in for a hug, partly to conceal her tears, and they embraced.

"Be safe driving home," Sophie whispered.

Tay wiped a tear and nodded. Then they pulled apart, and she left.

Sophie returned to her bed, where she cried. After all this, the future was now hers to shape, but there was nothing in it she wanted. No. Right now, she wanted to feel pain. She wanted to let the shame roll through her. She wanted to process her emotions in real time, as it would be the last time she'd ever get the chance to feel these feelings. Somehow, that made this moment special.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Swim Meet

FOR MOST people, Tuesday was a beautiful day. To Sophie, it bled gray. It was hard to pretend she was living the same life as yesterday. Each class seemed pointless, filled with nonsense. None of it would help her fix her problems. Nothing would make her whole again. And yet, she still attended each one, just waiting for the day to end.

For whatever reason, Ms. Jackson left Sophie alone again today, and the Ledge was dominated by a quiet conversation. When the group eventually split, Sophie stopped faking her smile and rushed home to brood. There, she sat on her floor, listening to nothing, just staring at the wall and waiting for the swim meet to begin.

Dinner came first, though, and her mom called her downstairs to join the family. There, she picked at her spaghetti, her fork slicing the noodles into smaller and smaller bits until they looked like rice.

“Eat a little,” Mom said.

“You’ll need the carbs,” Katelyn added.

Sophie shoveled a tasteless morsel into her mouth and sighed.

“I’m excited for your first race,” Dad said, trying to spark a nice conversation.

Why? Sophie thought. The irony of having her power back at a time like this didn’t escape her. This was the one thing where the power wouldn’t help at all. The future wouldn’t grow her muscles or develop her lungs—only reality would build those things. No. Losing today would be inevitable.

At last, dinner ended, and Sophie scraped the last of her food into the trash can. The clock ticked a minute closer to six, and now it was time to change into a bathing suit. She trudged upstairs and changed into her one-piece, throwing a baggy shirt over her top for modesty. Just as she pulled her gym shorts up to her waist, a knock came at the door.

“What?”

The handle twisted and Katelyn peered through a crack.

“Come in,” Sophie said.

Katelyn sidled in and stared at Sophie. Sophie looked back, her eyebrows raised.

“What?” Sophie said again, her tone less patient.

“You’re going to lose today,” Katelyn said. Her words were hurtful, but her tone was gentle. “You’re going to lose, and I’m still going to love you.”

Sophie tilted her head, puzzled.

“Listen.” Katelyn thought carefully about her next words. “I’ve had a really good time swimming with you, and I’m not blind. I can see how stressed out you are. So I want you to be prepared to lose, because it’s probably going to happen. And when it does, I want you to stay with me on swim team. We haven’t been this close since Phoebe left, and I like it. So, losing doesn’t matter to me. As long as you choose to keep swimming, I’ll cheer for you, okay?”

Sophie felt a pull at the edges of her lips, and a natural smile landed on her face. Through the whole season, all she’d cared about was comparative metrics: winning, being the best, getting more votes. And Katelyn could have all these things without trying, but these things didn’t matter to her. What mattered was the connections she made, and this connection was one of them.

Katelyn turned to leave the room.

“Wait.”

Katelyn paused and looked over her shoulder.

“Thank you.”

With a warm smile, Katelyn backed out and closed the door.

After a minute, Sophie shuffled behind her sister and waited for

the rest of the family in the living room. Once they were together, they piled into Mom's minivan and took off. The ride was silent; Sophie's tension weighed them down. She stared out the window as the houses blurred past, letting her mind drone on in the silence.

It felt like only a minute before they had arrived at the pool complex and piled out of the car. Sophie held her plain blue towel, racing-stripe cap, and goggles loose at her side as she followed Katelyn through the locker room and out to the pool. She stepped out onto the concrete deck and swallowed, her hands clenching at her sides.

"Let's go, Sophie!"

"You got this, Sophie!"

"Yeah!"

"It's her!"

Sophie looked to find Tay, Marc, Tiana, and Jamal sitting in the bleachers, waving. *Why were they here?* Her eyes darted between them, and she worried it was a dream. When she realized it wasn't, she blinked out of her paralysis and rushed in for a round of hugs.

"What are you doing here?" Sophie said, giving Tiana the biggest hug of all. "Did you all really come here to watch me swim?"

"Did you really think we were going to miss your first meet?" Tay asked.

"Never," Marc said. "And since Jamal and Tiana have never seen a pool, Tay thought it'd be nice to bring them with."

"Can you teach me to swim?" Jamal asked.

"Can you teach Barbie too?" Tiana asked, thrusting her doll in front of Sophie.

"I don't know," Sophie said, leaning over to meet them at eye level. "I'm a master at my craft, you know."

"Really?" Jamal's eyes grew wider.

"Really," Sophie said. "I'll tell you what, though. If you promise to be good for Marc, I'll do it."

"We promise!" Jamal and Tiana said together.

"Good." Sophie ruffled Jamal's curls. "Now I have to get back with the team. Be sure to yell 'GO!' any time my head's out of the water, okay?"

“Okay!”

Sophie gave a curt bow and departed, joining the rest of the swim team at the pavilion. She wasn't sure if having her friends here was better or worse for the nerves, but either way, her fate was sealed as Coach posted the schedule beside a note that stated the normal order of events had been shuffled. While her event would've normally been sixth in the lineup, today the 100-yard butterfly would be the last race of the day.

“Good luck, Sophie,” Olivia said as she passed by, goggles already on her face.

“Are you up first?” Sophie asked.

“Coach put me on the breaststroke since Stacy's out. Back to my roots.” Olivia flashed the “B” sign with her fingers, the gang sign of the breaststrokers. Everything in her was calm, cool, and collected. And cute? Had she always been cute?

“Good luck!”

Olivia shot a finger gun and strolled up to the starting block. There, she climbed on board and bent over to grip the edge. Sophie watched carefully, taking notes on how to approach the race. Olivia's eyes narrowed. A subtle breath. Muscles tightening.

BEEP!

The race began, and Olivia dove into the water beside five other racers. The breaststroke was Sophie's favorite to watch as the races were interactive. Each time the swimmer bobbed out of the water, the whole team shouted. Olivia pushed neck and neck with the best racer from the other school. The last open turn sent the girls screaming down the final stretch. The whole terrace was on their feet, giving up the controlled yelling in favor of more chaotic shouts. The swimmers reached their last stroke, extended, and...

Olivia lost. Second place. The next best.

Sophie readied herself to offer a moment of empathy, but Olivia took one look at the clock and started celebrating, slapping the water and shouting with glee.

“Yes!”

She pulled herself out of the water, and it took her a solid minute

to get back to the pavilion amid a dozen hugs and a parade of congratulations. It didn't make any sense. When she got to Sophie, she giggled and read her confusion.

"I broke a minute-thirty," Olivia said, beaming. "I've wanted that time for a year."

"You don't mind that you lost?" Sophie asked.

"Lost?" Olivia laughed. "Do you think I'm out here to dethrone Michael Phelps? No, I'm here to see how fast *I* can get. Now hug me and say good job."

Sophie chuckled and obliged, reaching in for a hug. "Good job."

The next race started—a long men's 500 freestyle event—and Sophie made her way to sit with Tay. After a brief conversation about school, Marc—ever empathetic—noticed the tension between the girls and took Jamal and Tiana to concessions. This left Sophie alone with Tay. For a moment, there was silence. What were you supposed to say? But Tay eventually found her words.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Nervous. Anxious. Scared." Sophie slumped in the bleacher seat.

"You're going to do fine," Tay said.

"Oh, I wasn't talking about swimming," Sophie said, lowering her voice. "I was talking about us."

"Really?" Tay tilted her head.

"I'm worried that things will change."

"Of course things will change, Sophie—but that doesn't mean they'll change for the worse. Why do you think I'm here? We're best friends. As far as I'm concerned, you gave me a perfect night out, and one day, I'd like to treat you to a perfect day too. In the meantime, if you need some space—"

"No, I don't need space," Sophie said. "I just needed an answer, and now I have it, so..."

"Good." Tay wrapped her arm around Sophie's shoulders. "Now, I want you to swim as hard as you can, okay? Because if you give up, it's going to make my cheering look real silly."

"Thanks."

Sophie stood as her sister joined the line behind the starting block, prepping for the 200 medley. The backstrokers were already in the water, lined up and pulling at the starting block. Then came the *beep*, and they bolted off down the pool.

Sophie watched, her mind narrowing to a point, and she considered using her time to check the future. But no—she didn't want to run there every time she faced a challenge. She wanted to *live*. To let things be imperfect. To choose a life of unknowing.

Loud “Go!” chants pulled her from her thoughts as the breaststrokers sprinted down the lane. Katelyn coiled on the block as the swimmers churned toward her, her eyes narrowing and a flame lit in her body. This fire took the same form as Olivia's, and Sophie wondered where it came from. How could *she* tap into it?

The breaststroker hit the wall, and Katelyn dove. An absolute powerhouse, Katelyn overtook two racers on her way across the pool, slamming her hands into the wall to let the freestyler take their stab at winning. With all the freestylers at an even pace, Katelyn's efforts paid off, and their school won. There was a collection of cheers from the pavilion, but Sophie was too nervous to feel joy.

Race after race proceeded, and she watched as each racer celebrated and despaired. She wondered how she was going to feel after the race was over, but the window for her anxiety was rapidly closing.

She was next.

The announcer called the final racers, and Sophie stepped gingerly around puddles toward the starting block. She stood behind the stand, knowing that once she climbed up, she *had* to race. With a heavy heart, she pulled herself onto the bumpy pedestal and looked over the swimmers' pavilion.

“Good luck, Sophie,” Katelyn shouted.

“You lookin' fly, Soph!” Olivia shouted.

“You've got it!” another butterfly stroker shouted.

Her attention shifted to the stands. Tay and Marc were rounding up Jamal and Tiana, bringing them to the edge of the pool. They each shouted a word of encouragement, and Sophie smiled. The terror

she'd been expecting never came; she only felt invigorated by the support.

“Take your mark...”

She leaned forward and gripped the edge of the starting block. She had expected to feel jitters, but instead, a flash of adrenaline filled her veins. Her eyes narrowed, and something ignited inside her. For the first time, she felt the fire of competition.

BEEP!

Sophie dove with eyes closed, and cold water swallowed her up. Under the surface, she took a long stroke before opening her eyes. But there was just water there. Horror seeped in. The dive had unsealed her goggles, and they filled with water. She couldn't see.

I need to stop, she thought, her legs drifting toward the bottom. *I can't control anything.*

The water closed in around her, and her feet sank lower. If she touched the bottom, she'd be DQ'd. But an inch from the ground, the fire of competition came roaring back. Her friends were here. Her family was here. Hell, Tiana was here, and what would Tiana think if Sophie gave up?

No. I have to see it through.

Sophie gave a hard kick, letting momentum pull her back to the surface. With her arms fresh, she rowed, pulling the dead weight of her body halfway through the first length of the pool. Each breath came easy, and as she neared the wall, the voices of her friends told her it was time to turn.

She gripped the edge, turned, and kicked off the wall to start the second length. A new panic rushed through her as her right arm grazed the lane line, but she adjusted, swimming through her blindness. Her comfort returned, and she realized there would always be something to guide her, even if she didn't know it was there.

It was here, halfway through the race, that she realized she was gaining on the other school's slowest swimmer. There was a chance she wouldn't be last. Sophie huffed a bigger breath of air and dug deep, but her shoulders burned at the second open turn. She distracted herself from the pain by thinking of music, and this carried

her through the third length. There, at the far end of the pool, she turned in time with the other school's slowest swimmer. Her friends shouted vigorously, inspired by the closeness of the race, and began shuffling their way to the finish line.

Sophie moved as best as she could, her arms and shoulders numb. The competitive spirit could no longer carry her, and the voices of her friends died away. Suddenly, she had no energy left to push her forward. And yet, she kept going, finding that the harder she pushed, the more power she found. Then it dawned on her: this race wasn't about beating the girl one lane over—it was about finishing the split with nothing left to give.

In three strokes, it'd be over. Her legs locked together and her arms heaved. In two strokes, it'd be finished. She grunted and pulled. In one stroke, she'd be done. Her body stretched, and with a final kick, she touched the wall.

That was it. Her first race concluded.

She held onto the edge with her fingertips, guzzling air. The amount she needed burned her throat, and she tore her goggles off her face, pissed that they filled. The water drained from her eyes, and she saw the other butterfly girls waiting for her to get out of the water. Why was the world spinning?

“Look.”

Katelyn pointed at the scoreboard, and Sophie turned. At two minutes flat, Sophie had indeed earned herself a last-place finish. But also, she'd beaten her old time by three seconds. It didn't matter how she felt about anything else—this one fact was enough to light up her mood. In two weeks, she'd grown measurably more powerful, and that was kind of amazing.

Sophie turned to look back at the girls in her lane, ready to celebrate, but she found that, in her distraction, they'd taken out a towel. It was a dark towel with a cute cat on the front; a Hello Kitty towel bearing the likeness of Chococat. It matched with the rest of the squad.

Sophie smiled, finally understanding what the towels meant. She climbed out of the pool on her hands and knees, letting the girls wrap

her in her new towel. They pulled her to her feet and helped her back to the pavilion where she'd be fed water and fruit. A smattering of 'good jobs' and 'congratulations' surrounded her on the way.

"Soph!" Coach faced her head-on, and Sophie perked up.

"Yes, Coach?"

"*That* was a *rough* race," he said.

"Oh."

"And that's okay. The first one's always like that. Our next meet is in one week. You want to do it again?"

Sophie smiled and nodded. "I'll get under two minutes by then. I promise."

"Good." He ruffled her hair. "I expect nothing less."

Coach walked away as the dull whine of a megaphone sounded. The results were being announced, but Sophie wasn't listening. She glanced over at Olivia, who had snuck a glance of her own toward Sophie. They flashed a smile at one another, and then pretended they hadn't both been caught making eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Election Day

THE DAYS flew by, and Sophie found joy in the little things. Sometimes, it was the delight in giving an off-the-cuff compliment to a friend, and other times it was the enjoyment that came from learning something new. The process became more important than the destination, and this motivated her to try harder, even in situations that seemed hopeless.

For the rest of the week, she showed up to swim practice an hour early to let Katelyn and Olivia help her with her form. When the weekend rolled around, she found herself excited to work amid the release of *Midday Noon*, a story about how hard people will fight when they have nothing to lose. The moral was something about the inevitability of death, but the theme didn't land amid the *insane* footage of Liam Neeson beheading a zombie with a walker. And with the movie running out of budget around the third act, the director was forced to improvise with amateur-level special effects. These effects were so bad that Sophie was convinced she would have done a better job had she applied the effects herself. And that gave Sophie an idea.

What if the esports computers were used to create a CGI elective?

Sophie worked the idea into her final speech, which was building into a work of art. With each rewrite, she swore it was her new magnum opus—only to hate it an hour later upon reading it again. In less than a week, she would give her speech on the morning announcements beside Tay. After that, her fate was in the hands of

the senior class as she was determined to keep her word to Tay by not cheating the outcome.

Monday was devoted to her studies and Tuesday to a swim competition. There, she broke the two-minute barrier and finished second-to-last—both huge victories. On Wednesday, she spent the night with Katelyn playing Battleship and bonding over tea. They had such a good time that they decided it'd be a new midweek tradition. And then came Thursday.

Voting day.

Sophie woke up extra early to work on her hair, clothes, and makeup. She spent an hour in the mirror getting every detail *just* right before eating breakfast like a princess. It'd be a nail-biter of a day, she knew, but by the end of it, she'd either be class president with the hope for Harvard still intact, or she'd be celebrating Tay's victory as a friend. It was going to be okay.

"Are you ready?" Tay asked, catching Sophie outside the A/V room before school. They were both a bit early, beating the morning announcements crew in their nervous excitement.

"I am," Sophie said. "Want to read my speech?"

"Only if you'll look over mine."

They each withdrew their notes and swapped papers. For a few minutes, they read, and at the end, lifted their eyes to make eye contact.

"We wrote the same stuff," Sophie said. "It's almost word for word."

"Yeah, but you added a CGI elective based on my work, and I added more Driver's Ed routes based on yours," Tay said. She lowered her arm. "Sophie, do you want to just combine our speeches?"

"What?"

"Maybe we do this together," Tay said. "We've spent all election season apart, and I think it would be fitting to join together now."

"You know what?" Sophie folded her paper and stuffed it into her back pocket. "I think that's a great idea. Also, I was planning a way to meet up for the winner's announcement. They'll do it a few

minutes before the end of seventh-period. If we both ask our teachers to use the ladies' room before the bell rings, we can be together."

"Are you sure you don't want to tell me the results now? This is one of those days I wouldn't mind a quick meditation."

"I promised you I wouldn't cheat, and knowing the outcome might change the outcome," Sophie said. "Whatever happens, I want to go through it together. So, bathroom plan?"

"Yeah, bathroom plan."

Mr. Pittman rounded the corner with a coffee in one hand and a donut in the other. He carried the same dazed look as many of the other teachers, his eyes half-shut as he adjusted to the new day.

"Who's first?" Mr. Pittman asked, fumbling with the school's ancient locks.

"Actually," Tay said, "we're going to go together."

Mr. Pittman thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Can't say anybody's done that before, but I'm game. Let's do it."

The door opened, and they were led into the A/V room. It was mostly empty, save for a green screen, camera, and computer. Mr. Pittman turned the camera on and sat at the computer, leaving Sophie and Tay to take their positions in front of the green screen. After fumbling with a few settings, Mr. Pittman had the ladies standing in front of the Capitol Building. Sophie wished they could be standing in front of the school instead.

"Alright. Are you ready? We're live in 3... 2..."

The recording light turned red and Mr. Pittman pointed.

"Good morning. I'm Tay."

"And I'm Sophie."

"And you might be wondering why we're up here together to deliver our final speech. For that, there's a simple reason. Right, Sophie?"

"Right." Sophie straightened. "We're here to announce the official merging of our campaigns. During the course of the election, we each brought strengths and weaknesses to the table. Upon further analysis, we realized a simple truth: that our visions had the synergy that could combine to do the most good for the most people. As such,

we've gone through the necessary steps to add an additional policy to our platforms."

"That's right," Tay said. "From here on out, the non-winning member of the runoff election will assume the position of Vice President. As VP, they will have an equal say in setting agenda priorities."

"Exactly," Sophie agreed. "So, this election season, let's cast our worries aside and cast our votes with hope. In the end, you'll get the best of both campaigns."

"This year, it doesn't matter who you vote for, because it's not us who'll win—it's you. The people we serve."

"Thank you for giving us the opportunity to come together," Sophie said.

"And let the voting begin."

They each gave a thumbs-up, and the camera clicked off. An impulse rushed through them, and the two girls hugged. It was over. Finally over. Their forced rivalry finished. And once the results were announced, they could focus on what mattered: serving others. It was all Sophie looked forward to.

"I think that went well," Mr. Pittman said. "Now, here are your passes. Good luck."

Tay gave Sophie another hug, and then they split.

As the day progressed, Sophie learned the depths of her anxiety. Even though she'd crossed "becoming class president" off her list of wants weeks ago, she learned today that her desire was still very much present. Sure, she'd still become VP if she lost, but that wouldn't be enough—she wanted to win.

Still, she resisted the urge to cut to the end. And she was thankful she did. For as much dread as she felt about the fear of losing the election, there was a lot of joy in the waiting too. Many of her classmates—some she'd barely spoken to—went out of their way to let her know they voted for her, and today, she felt like a celebrity, complete with some haters.

And nobody was a bigger hater than Ms. Jackson.

"Students, clear your desks." Ms. Jackson's gaze was a laser

pointing at Sophie's forehead. "It's time for a pop test."

The class groaned, but Sophie smiled. She'd been expecting this. After all, Ms. Jackson had a history of issuing tests on days when Sophie couldn't check for them. It didn't take a seer to catch the pattern. And though she was ready for the test, another part of her knew it didn't matter. Her grade was already demolished, and a D+ was her new ceiling. Of all the things that could've destroyed her, this wasn't it.

With the test distributed, Sophie blazed through the questions. Surprisingly, she found the work to be almost fun, like putting together a puzzle. It turned out that if she was ready for it, then tests wouldn't be a problem. They were just an exercise.

She solved the final question—the first student to do so—and stood, slinging her backpack around her shoulders. There was an air of victory as she strutted to the front and handed the test to Ms. Jackson. The test was thorough. Complete. Correct. She waited for Ms. Jackson to notice this, but the teacher simply placed it on her desk and started a pile.

"I'll have it graded tomorrow," she said, not looking up.

Miffed, Sophie scrunched her lips. Then she shook it off. She needed something else. "Can I use the restroom?"

Ms. Jackson looked up from beneath her eyelashes. "Yes, you may go meet Tay in the ladies' room for the announcement of the winner."

Sophie opened her mouth to lie about her intentions but realized how silly that would be. Not only was this "guess" too specific for her to conclude that Ms. Jackson hadn't checked the future to see it coming, but digging a hole when she got the response she wanted would just be foolish. So she smiled and turned heel, heading out into the hallway.

As the door closed behind her, she caught a glimpse of Tay creeping down the hall, escaping her class the same way Sophie had. They made eye contact and shared a goofy face, marching to the bathroom as though this wasn't a planned gathering—just in case a teacher rounded the corner and caught them. Once safe inside the rest

room, they broke their composure and laughed. For a few minutes, they delighted in stories about how they got out of class early, and it was pleasant to forget that only one of them would walk out as president. But when the intercom sounded with the end-of-day announcements, they sobered and stiffened.

“I’m going to be so happy for you when you win,” Tay said, slipping her hand into Sophie’s.

“No, it’s definitely you.” Sophie squeezed. “You had such an amazing campaign.”

“And now,” the announcer said, “it’s time to announce the winner of the presidential election. The lady who will be responsible for the senior class next year, by a margin of—This can’t be right.”

There was a scuffle, and the intercom went silent. Nobody breathed. Finally, the system pinged again.

“Sorry about that,” the announcer said. “By a margin of nothing, the senior class presidential election has ended in a tie. Sophie Vedas and Taylor Jardine, please report to the principal’s office for a proper resolution. Thank you. Seniors—you’re free to go.”

Sophie and Tay stared at one another, not sure what to do next. While waiting, their collective emotion had swelled to such a degree that it *needed* to be popped. But now, it had to be stifled. Bottled up. Compressed.

“Did she say we tied?” Tay asked.

“Yeah,” Sophie said.

“So...”

The principal’s office was a stuffy room, half-heartedly decorated with fake antiques the likes of which one might buy at a Scholastic science fair. The statuesque bust of a philosopher sat in the corner, and the five balls of a Newton’s cradle dangled untouched on the desk. Sophie and Tay sat across from the principal as he went over the results, and Sophie stared at the cradle, desperate to get the balls rocking back and forth.

“Seeing that this was a runoff already, there’s not much we can do in the manner of another vote,” Principal Douglas said.

“Can’t we both be president?” Tay asked. “It’s the simplest solution.”

“Unfortunately, our district requires the class president to be registered in a central database, and that system won’t allow me to input multiple names. This system is what colleges use to verify the information on your applications, so it’s not just a matter of formality.” The principal folded his hands on the desk. “If one of you doesn’t step down by choice, then I’ll have to flip a coin to determine the winner. Does anyone want to volunteer?”

Sophie and Tay exchanged a glance. Both of them knew they’d do *anything* for the other person—but maybe not this. At least not on a whim.

“I thought not,” he said. “I’ll give you until Monday to come up with a better solution. After that, it’s up to chance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Election Results

USUALLY, SWIM practice was a place of peace—somewhere to think about the world while everything else was drowned out around her—but today, after the meeting with the principal, she craved to be anywhere else but inside her own mind. Her thoughts swirled as she considered her next move. Should she wait for the coin flip and absolve herself of control? Give the presidency to Tay? A temptation swelled within her to look a year into the future and learn what would become of her college applications, but she quite literally didn't have the mental fortitude to stay in a meditation that long.

As she dried off in the locker room, she prayed for another way to get an answer, and that prayer was answered with a well-timed call. As she opened her locker, she found her phone vibrating on top of her dry clothes, a Cambridge area code front and center on the screen.

“Hello?” Sophie answered in a rush, the scent of dry chlorine clogging her nose.

“Hi, is this Sophie Vedas?”

“Yes,” Sophie said. Her hands were shaking.

“This is Cathy, your Harvard advisor.”

“I know,” Sophie said. Then she cringed. “I mean, how are you?”

Cathy chuckled. “Good. On our last call, you requested I follow up today. It says here that today was the student government election. How'd that go?”

Sophie paused, then gave a dry laugh. “I tied for the role. We're

figuring out how to resolve it.”

“Mmm.” Cathy thought a moment. “You’re definitely going to want that position on your résumé. Now, I can’t advise you to lie, cheat, or steal, but *everything* contributes to your application—you get what I’m saying?”

Sophie paused. “I—I understand.”

Olivia passed and, seeing Sophie’s worried expression, gave her a big smile. Sophie gave a toothless smile back and waved.

“Now, looking here, it says that I advised you to pick up a sport. Did you do that?”

“I joined the swim team,” Sophie said, happy to have something to redeem herself. “I’m actually finishing up with it now.”

One of her teammates slammed a locker, and the sound echoed around the room.

“That’s a huge win. With that, the presidential title, and valedictorian status, you should start planning your move to Massachusetts.”

A pang of despair washed over Sophie. “Yeah, so... What if a grade slipped?”

Cathy paused, and the two mouse clicks she made on her end punched through Sophie like a pair of bullets. “By how much?”

“My Physics teacher wants to give me a D. It’s totally unwarranted, and it’d drop me to third in my class.”

“Interesting.” Cathy clicked a pen. “Well, if you *really* want Harvard, you’ll get that fixed. I recommend you do whatever it takes to get that grade back up.”

“I understand.”

“I’ll make a note to check in at the end of the semester,” Cathy said. “Do you have any other questions?”

“No,” Sophie said, a hollow feeling in her chest. “Thank you.”

The call ended, and Sophie sat on a thin bench, doing her best to compose herself before leaving. How far would she be willing to go to get her grade back? Would she lie? Cheat? Steal? She used to, and that worked for a while. But now...?

The next day should've been the best Friday of her life—a victory lap to celebrate the end of her stressors—but instead, it was a test of patience. A slog toward seventh period where her fate would be decided by a few choice words she hadn't prepared yet. She'd solved her problem in perhaps the weakest way ever—by having an honest conversation with Ms. Jackson. And she decided she was going to do it raw. No rehearsals, no manipulations, no games. Instead, Ms. Jackson would control her future.

In ceding this power, she made an agreement with herself. If Ms. Jackson gave her the chance to fix her grade, she'd let the coin flip determine the presidency—and Harvard. And if Ms. Jackson rejected her plea, she'd drop out of the election and find a new path for herself.

In today's class, Ms. Jackson opted not to teach. Instead, she put on a documentary about spacetime and spent the class inputting yesterday's test grades. About halfway through class, Sophie's phone pinged and her test score flashed on screen. One hundred percent. A perfect score. Her eyes lifted, and she found Ms. Jackson staring back, inviting her to speak after class. Sophie nodded and resumed her waiting.

After an eternity, the documentary ended, and the bell rang. Everyone stood to leave. Everyone but Sophie. She stayed in her seat for a minute, long after the last student filed out and the door closed. The fact that Ms. Jackson didn't acknowledge this odd behavior meant she'd seen it coming. It meant Sophie's fate had already been sealed.

But Sophie still needed to see it through. She stood and approached the desk, feeling like a criminal pleading innocence before her judge—her executioner.

“Let's cut to it, Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said, speaking first. “You're going to tell me about your call with Harvard. I'm going to tell you about our agreement not to expose you for cheating, and you're going to plead with me that you've changed. Am I right?”

Sophie nodded, afraid to speak. Clearly, some version of her had already said its piece; Sophie trusted them to have spoken well.

“I've considered it greatly,” Ms. Jackson said, leaning back in her

throne. “Your recent test score tells me you’ve decided that learning is a worthwhile endeavor, even if it doesn’t pair with your grade. In this way, you’ve shown me that you’ve detached yourself from external outcomes—at least on a superficial level. This has convinced me to adjust my approach. Tell me: have you seen this interaction before?”

Sophie shook her head. Her eyes were wide, like she was riding a roller coaster. No matter how scary things got, there was nothing she could do to alter the track—she was on the ride until it was over.

“I thought not.” Ms. Jackson leaned forward. “So, look. I’m a teacher. My reason for being is that I am called to transform people, and I take that responsibility seriously.”

Sophie drew a sharp breath.

“You see,” Ms. Jackson continued, “you’re reaching the end of what I can teach you, and as such, I believe it’s time to offer you a final exam. Tonight, I’ve been invited to an initiation ceremony along with my closest friends. I’m expected to be there at five o’clock, but that feels too easy. I figured it’d be fun to make this a challenge for you. The rules are simple. If I arrive early or on time, you keep your low grade. But if I knock on the door a minute past five, you’ll get your A back. Do you understand?”

Sophie nodded.

Ms. Jackson nodded and stood, the chair screeching behind her.

“You have less than three hours to find a pathway toward victory. It’s seer against seer, and to win, you *must* beat fate.”

What did she mean by that?

“Good luck, Sophie.”

With that, Ms. Jackson stormed out of the room. Sophie stayed put a moment, thinking about the next steps. Each piece of information must’ve been vital, and each part left out was one that needed to be answered. Where was it? How was she going to stop Ms. Jackson? What was the initiation for, anyway?

The last question didn’t matter, but to answer the first two, she was going to need help.

The hallway was extra long today; the double doors extra heavy.

Sophie was relieved, however, to find that the Ledge was fiercely populated. And it wasn't just Marc and Tay waiting for her—Olivia was there too.

“There you are,” Marc said. “What took you so long?”

Sophie's eyes swept over the group, lingering on Olivia. She debated how much to say. Should Olivia know the truth? Could she be trusted? Then Sophie laughed. Of course she could be trusted.

“Ms. Jackson made me an offer to get my grade back,” Sophie said.

“Like, your A grade?” Tay said.

Sophie nodded. “She has a meeting tonight at five and said that if I can make her late, she'll give me my grade back.” Sophie turned to Tay. “Look—if I lose this, there's no point in being president. The only path to Harvard involves a perfect résumé. That means it's in your best interest for me to lose. Knowing this, if you don't want to help me, I completely—”

“Shut up,” Tay said. “Of course I'm helping you. I need to become class president as well to boost my application to Stanford, but if fate makes me change my plans because I won't help a friend, then my beef is with fate—not you.”

Sophie stared at Tay as though she were a super person. That's it? She would just choose to accept fate? That was something you could do?

“Wait, Ms. Jackson has powers?” Olivia scratched her head. “Is she a witch? I mean, I always suspected so, but...”

Sophie faced Olivia, her hands folded at her chest. “Look, this is going to be a little hard to believe, but... I see the future when I meditate. And so does Ms. Jackson. I know that's hard to believe, but—”

“Oh, no. That makes perfect sense.”

“It does?”

Olivia shrugged. “Your sister has alluded to it a dozen times. I thought she was exaggerating, but I guess not. Besides, you need all the help you can get, right? So count me in.”

Sophie smiled, her emotions welling.

“Alright, look—we don’t have a lot of time,” Marc said, glancing at his watch. “It’s two o’clock. If we’re going to execute a perfect plan, we’ll need to get started. Let’s take our cars to Sophie’s and settle there. Any objections?” He waited a moment. “Good. Let’s go.”

Sophie broke off to ride with Olivia. This was it. Three hours was all she had to change her destiny.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Make Good Decisions

WITHIN TWENTY minutes, there were three cars in Sophie's driveway and four people in her room. The friends sat in a circle on the floor while Sophie gave a short explanation of her power to Olivia.

"The most important thing is that you trust me no matter how crazy I sound," Sophie said. "We call it rule number one."

"Got it," Olivia said.

"Alright," Sophie said. "So we're waging war on another seer, and my entire future is on the line. Are we ready?"

Marc, Tay, and Olivia nodded. Sophie nodded in return and closed her eyes, listening to the dull ringing in her ears. After a moment, a vibration rippled through her soul, and Sophie was pulled forward into a new domain. With this, the battle began.

===MEDITATION===

"Alright," Sophie said. "Our first problem is to figure out where Ms. Jackson is going. Tay, remember that time we got the GPS tracker?"

Tay shrugged uneasily.

"Right—that was in another meditation. Okay, well... we're going to get a new tracker and try that again. This time, though, we'll need a strong adhesive."

"I have a tube of instant cement in my car," Marc said. "Accidentally took it from a worksite."

“Go get it.”

Marc left and returned with the tube. Sophie scanned the directions and nodded.

“Now, this’ll be a quick-and-dirty operation,” Sophie said. “Olivia, stay here with Marc. Tay, come with me.”

Sophie stood tall. She could practically hear heroic music reaching a crescendo before—

“Wait,” Olivia said. “You just blinked. Are we in a meditation now?”

Sophie smiled and softened, dialing back her urgency for Olivia’s sake. “Yeah,” she said. “We’re in a potential future now.”

“Cool.” Olivia looked at her hands as though they belonged to someone else. “Well, good luck!”

Sophie let herself smile and led Tay out of the room. They skirted down the stairs and headed for the door. Sophie gave a small wave to her Mom, who was packing things into her purse.

“Oh, where are you going?” Mom asked.

“Just out,” Sophie said.

“Make good decisions.”

Sophie nodded knowing she’d have to make the *best* decisions to win. She pushed through the front door with Tay and followed the sidewalk toward the driveway.

“Hey, I remember you mentioning the GPS thing before,” Tay said, breaking off from Sophie’s side to go to the driver’s seat. “Didn’t that plan fail?”

“It did,” Sophie said, climbing into shotgun. “But this time, Ms. Jackson’s on a schedule, so she can’t shake us to ditch the tracker. Besides, the tracker’s only half the plan. Once it’s affixed, you’ll park somewhere semi-visible. If she spots us, she’ll try to run away without finding the tracker. But if she notices the tracker, she won’t look for us. Either way, we’ll learn where she’s heading—and if we don’t, we’ll just have to try another time. You think it’s a good plan?”

“I don’t know,” Tay said. “I trust you though. Rule number one and all that.”

Tay’s car jolted into reverse, and she drove off. Their first stop

was to get a tracker. Sophie led Tay to an electronics store in Bristol and had the device picked out in minutes. Then they were back on the road. On the second leg of the drive, Tay slowed down, expecting the speed-trap cop to be waiting in his usual spot. He was there, but he was sleeping, propped back in his seat and cuddling with his K-9. Tay and Sophie spent a good moment laughing about it, fogging up the windows before forcing themselves to sober.

After weaving through a few back roads, Tay pulled into Ms. Jackson's neighborhood and rolled through her cul-de-sac. By this point, they had discussed the plan three times over. Now, it was time to execute.

Ms. Jackson's house came into sight, perfect as always. The grass was mowed, the topiary well cared for—even the mailbox looked freshly painted. With the Forester's engine rumbling softly, Tay hit the brakes, and Sophie slipped out of her seat. She tiptoed onto the driveway and stuck the tracker under the bumper. Then she sprinted back to safety and closed the car door with the lightest *thud* she could manage. Tay rolled away, finding a spot behind a pair of trees. Though their line of sight was mostly blocked, they could still see all of Ms. Jackson's yard if they angled their heads a particular way.

"So, what's next?" Tay asked.

"Now we wait."

They didn't have to wait long. As soon as Tay got comfy, Ms. Jackson stepped onto the porch wearing a scowl. The rest of her face was scrunched with the wrinkles of agitation. By all counts, she looked horrid. She stomped across the sidewalk and climbed into the driver's seat of her car. With bated breath, Sophie watched, hoping Ms. Jackson would close the door and drive away. But that didn't happen. Instead, Ms. Jackson leaned over the steering wheel and rummaged through her car. Then she leaned back, standing tall with a wooden baseball bat.

Tay's jaw dropped, but Sophie was more surprised to find that the bat wasn't dressed with spikes. At this point, nothing about Ms. Jackson would be a bridge too far.

Ms. Jackson rested the bat on her shoulder before circling the car,

tugging at her sleeve to loosen the fabric. Once beside the trunk, she bent and inspected the area, moving her face closer and closer until—

“Oh, no...”

She lifted off her shoulder, took a huge wind-up, and—

Whoosh! Crack!

Wood met with bumper. Plastic and foam rained down, and the tracker was suddenly nothing more than a pile of scrap.

“It’s okay,” Sophie said. “Now she’ll get in and drive away.”

“Are you sure?”

Sophie wasn’t.

As Ms. Jackson tossed the bat back inside her car, she leaned back in past the steering wheel and pulled down the glovebox. After filtering through a few papers, she removed something shiny. Sophie squinted until she recognized the item.

A knife.

In the hands of her teacher, it was extra intimidating. That feeling intensified as Ms. Jackson craned her neck toward Tay’s car, an undeniable craze in her eyes.

Tay pushed the lock button. The doors *thunked* around them.

“Sophie, what happens if I die in a meditation?” Tay asked.

“You’re not going to die,” Sophie said, only half sure she was speaking the truth. “She’s just playing games.”

Sophie’s confidence dipped as Ms. Jackson approached, the knife glinting by her side. This was just like those straight-to-DVD horror flicks her and Tay had devoured last summer.

“Do I drive away?” Tay asked. “I want to drive away.”

“Let’s just see what she does.”

Ms. Jackson placed one foot in front of the other until she was adjacent to Sophie’s window. There, Ms. Jackson took a knee on the asphalt, lowering out of sight. Tay and Sophie exchanged an uneasy glance. There was a *pop*, and the car sank an inch at a time.

“Did she just slash my tire?” Tay looked at Sophie with wide eyes. “Did your *physics teacher* just slash my tire, Sophie? I swear to God, if this isn’t a meditation—Ah!”

Ms. Jackson stood, and Tay fumbled with the lock button again,

pressing it six times in succession. But Sophie was growing tired of Ms. Jackson's game. Lazily, she rolled down her window. Outside, a sharp *hiss* needled the air as the car sagged further.

"What is your problem?" Sophie asked.

Ms. Jackson ignored the attitude. "Have I given you a code yet?"

"No." Sophie shot her a snotty look.

"I figured." Ms. Jackson scoffed. "A tracker? Really? I bet your backup plan was to follow me, wasn't it?"

Sophie scrunched her face, embarrassed to have been read so easily.

"Look, here's your first lesson," Ms. Jackson said. "Don't rely on your power when facing problems your brain can solve. I've given you enough information to figure out where I'm going. All you need to do is *think*."

Sophie looked away, out through the windshield, as the car leveled. By now, she was leaning to one side, the tire fully deflated.

"And here's something more personal," Ms. Jackson said, changing her tone to something that cut a little deeper. "Have you ever considered that your attempts to become valedictorian mean you'll be stealing the title from Tay? Is that who you want to be?"

"No," Sophie said quickly.

"Then why are you chasing Harvard so hard?"

Why *was* she chasing it? It was an uncomfortable thing to think about, but she *was* impeding Tay's life in her pursuit of Harvard. And why Harvard anyway? What made that accomplishment *more important* than supporting Tay?

"The next time I ask for a code," Ms. Jackson said, "you tell me '813.' The second code comes when you impress me—and not when you do something halfway like this." She turned on her heel and strode away.

Sophie watched her depart, her cheeks sucked tight to her teeth. Was this a game to her? Between the codes and questions, it seemed that way. Either way, Sophie was sure of one thing: she'd lost this round. She closed her eyes, drew a breath—

===REALITY===

—and sputtered to life, back in her bedroom with her friends. While nobody expected the first attempt to succeed, they weren't sure it'd fail either. Sophie looked at each of them—spending an extra moment on Tay—and shook her head.

“A tracker's not going to work,” Sophie said, rubbing the side of her head. It'd been a while since she'd used her power; her tolerance wasn't what it used to be. “But she said we have enough information as is.”

“How's that?” Marc asked.

“I don't know.” Sophie frowned. “But she gave me a code: 813. Does that mean anything to you?”

They all shrugged.

“Was there any other context?” Tay asked. “Just a code? Is it a gate code or something?”

Sophie shook her head. “She didn't say *anything* helpful in terms of a destination.”

“Then if we're supposed to have enough information to figure it out already,” Tay said, “we have to assume the code is for something later. That means she must've said something to you earlier, right?”

“Maybe she tipped you off in the classroom,” Marc said. “Can you remember any details? Any awkward phrasings?”

“I can't think of anything too out of place.” Sophie stared at the ceiling, trying to recount Ms. Jackson's exact words. “She said... She said she needed to be at an initiation... at 5:00 p.m.... with her closest friends... and—”

“Oh, I got it.” Marc looked Sophie dead in the eyes. “She's going to Rick's in Calisette Hills.”

The trio of girls stared, dumbfounded.

“Think about it,” Marc said. “Ms. Jackson's the same age as my mom. Do you know how many friends my mom has? Like, three—*at most*. We've already caught Ms. Jackson hanging out with, like, *six* people. That's wild, right? Do you really think some super old 35-year-old high school teacher has more than six friends? Because I don't.”

It made sense. In fact, it was entirely plausible. But Sophie needed to be sure.

“I’ll be right back,” Sophie said. “I can drive up to Calisette in a meditation and check.”

She closed her eyes and slipped away.

Outside the meditation, her friends waited in silence. Olivia opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“Hey, don’t be nervous,” Tay said. “Once you’re in the group, you’re in for good. This isn’t exactly something you can talk about with others, you know? So, what’s on your mind?”

“Oh.” Olivia rubbed her hands together nervously. “I was just thinking that—maybe if we needed more help—I could get the swim team together. There are a lot of seniors who’d love to cause chaos around town, you know?”

Marc and Tay shared a look. Halfway through their consideration, Sophie snapped awake.

“Ungh.” Sophie brushed a tear from the side of her face. “Okay, so she *is* going to Rick’s. While there, I timed how long it would take to go between places. Since the speed-trap cop is sleeping, we can go a little faster, but the main takeaway is that we have to leave by 4:00 p.m. After that, we don’t have time to reach Ms. Jackson before she leaves her house.”

“Okay. It’s 3:00 p.m. now,” Marc said. “That gives us an hour to solve this.”

“It’s plenty of time.” Sophie pressed a finger to her head. “Okay, so now that we know where she’s going, our next question is: how do we stop her from arriving on time?”

“Do you need legal or illegal ideas?” Olivia asked. Amid Tay’s gasp, she felt compelled to add, “What? I’m just clarifying.”

“Legal,” Sophie said. “Because if it works in the meditation, we’ll have to do it for real.”

“Got it.”

They all looked at the floor and spent a minute thinking, then another. Each second that *ticked* away was irrecoverable—but what were they to do? Sophie only had the stamina to endure a few

meditations, so she couldn't waste them brainstorming. But as the clock hit 3:10 p.m., things were getting dire. In a moment of desperation, Marc shook his head and spoke.

"We could set her car on fire," he said.

"Is that legal?" Sophie deadpanned.

"It is if we don't get caught." Marc shrugged. "Look, I'm just throwing out ideas. We've spent ten minutes thinking on this and have nothing to show for it."

"What if we just, like, held her front door shut?" Tay said. "It's not illegal. It's just weird, right?"

"She'd leave through the back door," Sophie said.

"Or the side door," Marc said.

"Or the garage," Olivia added.

"Or a window."

"Or—"

"I get it," Tay said, holding up both hands. "I get it."

The group sank into silence again, staying there until a soft *knock* sounded at the door.

"Hello?" Katelyn peeked her head in. "Whoever parked behind Mom is blocking her in."

"That was me, sorry," Olivia said.

Katelyn twisted her face in shock. "What are you doing here?"

"We're trying to inconvenience Sophie's teacher," Olivia said plainly.

"I'll probably regret asking," Katelyn said, "but why?"

"For justice, I think."

"Because she issued a challenge," Sophie said, smirking at Olivia. "If I win, I get my perfect life back. If I lose, I lose Harvard."

"Cool. Cool, cool, cool." Katelyn stepped into the room and sat against the wall. "Maybe I can help. Olivia still needs to move her car, though. Mom's got plans."

Olivia perked up, a manic idea in her head. "So what you're saying is if I don't move, your mom is stuck, right?"

"I don't see why that's exciting," Katelyn said.

Olivia turned to Sophie. "What if we used our cars to surround

Ms. Jackson's car? If she can't drive—what then?"

"Then she'll take a RydeShare," Marc said.

"Actually," Sophie said, "there are only a few drivers that service Bristol. It's not crazy to think that we could book every car in the area and prevent her from using the system. It's worth a try, right?"

Everyone agreed. Sophie straightened, closed her eyes, and prepped for round two. This time, the meditation came more slowly as her brain churned with new thoughts. Chief among them was the consideration Ms. Jackson had implanted. What *was* she chasing Harvard for?

No, she thought. That can be answered later.

All her energy gathered in the center of her forehead, and she forced herself to push against the veil that held her firmly in space and time. And with a gentle push—

===MEDITATION===

Sophie stood, and the entire group thumped downstairs behind her. Olivia walked with an unnatural gait, as though she were pretending this was normal but couldn't commit to the bit.

"This is really cool," Olivia said, repeatedly clenching one fist as though it'd feel different the more she did it.

"I'll ride with Olivia," Sophie said. "Get her grounded."

"Great," Olivia said. "I have so many questions."

"I know," Sophie said.

"Everyone knows," Katelyn added.

The group filtered through the front door, passing Sophie's Mom on the way. She was waiting by the door with her brown purse slung over her shoulder and a pair of sunglasses already framed on her face.

"Oh, I only need one person to move," Mom said. "Everyone else is fine."

"We're heading out," Sophie said. "Lots to do."

"Oh, okay," Mom said. "Make good decisions."

Mom trudged behind them, walking with that sense of purpose all adults seemed to have. Sophie hopped into Olivia's car—a sturdy

Toyota—and sank comfortably into the seat. It was a modest interior, mostly clean except for a single bag of fast food that Olivia placed in the back with a shameful apology. Her car started with ease, and she backed out into the road behind Marc and Tay.

“So, where are we going?” Olivia asked.

“Follow them. But if you get lost—” Sophie typed the address into her phone, “—this’ll get you there too.”

In the rearview mirror, Sophie saw her Mom backing out of the driveway

“Man, this is so strange.” Olivia was staring at her hands as she trailed behind Tay’s Subie. “Sorry I keep bringing this up, but everything feels so real.”

“That’s because this *is* real,” Sophie said. “I mean, from your perspective, this is a normal continuation of your day. Maybe it’ll help to think of this as a dream; one where you’ll wake and forget what you were dreaming about.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. How long have you had your power anyway?”

Sophie shrugged. “I had fragments of it all my life, but I learned to control the flow of it just a couple years ago.”

“And do you like it?” Olivia asked. “Seeing the future?”

“Wouldn’t anyone?” Sophie watched the ragged apartments of Coalview blow past. “Actually, maybe that’s a better question than I’ve ever asked about it. Precognition has its ups and downs.”

“What’s bad about it?” Olivia asked.

“Honestly, it’s made me really lazy,” Sophie said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I was a good student before developing my power, you know? But being able to cheat without consequence has been too tempting. And in a funny way, the more I used my power, the harder things became. I mean, up until a few weeks ago, I was checking the future days in advance, just to know if a test was coming. You know what would’ve been a better use of time? Studying for an hour.”

“But can’t you have anything you want?” Olivia asked. “You don’t need to go to school if you can just, I don’t know—win the

lottery.”

“Sure, but having money for money’s sake doesn’t do any good.” Sophie thought of the poor souls who sold their life for a place on the hills. “I want to earn my comfortable life.”

“Is that why you have your heart set on Harvard?” Olivia asked. “Even with your power, it’s a worthy challenge?”

“Maybe...” Sophie let the words settle in her heart, debating how true it was. “I think Harvard feels like the best *how* when it comes to living my life. The problem I have is that I don’t know *why* I want to live it. I just want the best one—no wasted opportunities, you know?”

“Oh, you’re struggling with purpose.” Olivia considered how much she wanted to say. “Look, can I tell you a secret?”

“Actually,” Sophie said quickly, “I’d prefer you didn’t. It’s nothing about you, it’s just—look. I used to spend a lot of time with Tay in meditations, and in them, I learned so much about her. Over time, I grew feelings for her; feelings she had no context for. Feelings she couldn’t understand—because it wasn’t *her* who told me those things. All the times I thought *we* were going on an adventure? It was just me going with her reflection. I don’t want to make that mistake again. Not with you.”

“Got it.” Olivia nodded a stern affirmative. “No secrets in meditations, then. Do me a favor and remind me of that in reality, will you? Maybe that could be Rule Number Two—no secrets.”

“I like that,” Sophie said. “I think I’ll use it.”

They arrived at Ms. Jackson’s house, the caravan still together. Ms. Jackson’s car was still in the center of the driveway. One by one, they parked in their assigned spots—Marc on the left, Tay on the right, and Olivia behind. In this formation, there would be no chance for her to escape.

“So, if this works, we’ll do it again for real?” Olivia asked.

“That’s the plan,” Sophie said. “In the meantime, let’s see how many RydeShare drivers are nearby.”

They all clambered out of their cars and met in the road. Once the app was open, Sophie saw that only two RydeShare drivers were active in the area. She booked one for Marc and one for Tay. They

arrived quickly, and soon, her closest friends were gone. A few minutes later, two more drivers took to the road, and Sophie immediately booked them for Katelyn and Olivia. It didn't take long for them to be carted away, leaving Sophie alone on the street.

This was it. Ms. Jackson needed to leave in the next five minutes or she'd be out of time. Her car was cornered, and even if a new RydeShare took to the road, it'd never arrive on time. The only thing left was for Ms. Jackson to comprehend the trap she'd laid—and abandon hope.

The front door creaked, and Ms. Jackson strode out. She took one look at the cars, then another at Sophie. Politely, she waved, and Sophie returned the pleasantry by flipping her the bird.

“Checkmate,” Sophie said. Then she cringed. When they did this for real, she'd need a better line than that. “You're blocked in, and all the RydeShares are gone.”

Ms. Jackson smiled. Wordlessly, she walked down her driveway and curled her fingers under the door handle. With a heavy jerk, she slammed her door open—right into the side of Marc's car. The metal caved instantly, cratering the side.

“No way,” Sophie said.

She did this two more times. Then, with her door a few inches wide, Ms. Jackson sidled through the gap and sank into the driver's seat. Amid the damage she did to her own car, she had to slam the door three times to get it to close properly. Then the ignition turned over, she shifted into Reverse, and—

“No fucking way.”

Ms. Jackson hit the gas, backing into Olivia's car with enough force to shove it back a foot. Then, she inched forward and did it again. And again. And a fourth time. Metal crunched and plastic rained as her tires dug into the concrete driveway, leaving skid marks in her wake. She pulled the steering wheel hard left and smashed Marc and Tay's cars too, knocking them a little wide at the extremes. By the time she finished, her trunk was flopping up and down, Olivia's car was obliterated, and the other cars were badly damaged—but there was a gap large enough to squeeze through. With the final scent of

burning rubber, Ms. Jackson angled her car and rammed out of Sophie's trap, losing both her mirrors in the process.

Slack-jawed, Sophie watched as Ms. Jackson pulled beside her, the husk of her car barely hanging on to the frame. Ms. Jackson hit a button, and her window rolled down halfway before stopping with a *crunch*.

"I see you're trying to keep things legal," Ms. Jackson said. "That's smart. But I still know this is a meditation. You know how I know?"

"Enlighten me," Sophie said, already well over this bullshit.

"Because I know you wouldn't dare let your friends' cars be wrecked. Not even for Harvard."

Sophie stared at the ground.

"Let me ask you a question," Ms. Jackson said. "Why do you want to get into Harvard?"

"Because it'll give me the best chance to help the greatest number of people," Sophie said.

"If you truly believed that," Ms. Jackson said, "you wouldn't let a little property damage get in the way of your goal. Think about it. If the only thing you needed to do to save the world was blow up these three cars, would you do it?"

"Of course," Sophie said.

"And yet..." Ms. Jackson gestured toward the damage. "The question becomes this: if you wouldn't do *anything* to get into Harvard, then what is the thing that's more important than your school? The idea that there's something stopping you means you're being drawn to a higher calling. Do you understand? Figure that out and you have all your answers."

Sophie looked up, her eyes narrowing.

"Have I given you a code yet?"

"813," Sophie said, her tone short.

"Interesting," Ms. Jackson mused. "The RydeShare part was a great bit of foresight. It tells me you're thinking critically. You're not wasting time. Okay. You've earned my second code. It's 808. You have one more code to earn, but that one's special."

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’ll only give it to you if I arrive late.”

Sophie smiled. “I look forward to having that code in the next two hours.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Ms. Jackson said. “Beating me won’t just be hard—it’ll be impossible.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes.

“You see, Sophie, I’ve known how this ends since the moment we spoke in my classroom, because I’ve already dreamt of my safe arrival,” Ms. Jackson said, smiling wickedly. “You can’t win, Sophie—not unless you change your fate. Until then, though, it’s just Sophie against the inevitable. It always will be.”

Ms. Jackson hit the gas. The wheels spun out, a steady smoke fuming in Sophie’s face. Sophie coughed and waved it away, her eyes trailing Ms. Jackson as she shrank down the road. Before she turned the corner, though, Ms. Jackson’s hand stretched out the window to return Sophie’s middle finger.

Sophie cursed a string of words, and woke up.

===REALITY===

“How’d it go?” Tay asked.

Sophie sat still, her mouth agape. She looked at each of her friends—finding Olivia missing, likely moving her car for Mom—and thought of words to say. Before she could speak, though, a terrible pain erupted in her forehead. The tips of her nerves seared with fire, and she clenched her teeth to keep from shouting.

“What’s wrong?” Katelyn asked.

For several more seconds, Sophie suffered until the burning sensation settled to a sharp tingle. She worked to catch her breath.

“Each time I meditate,” Sophie said, “my brain has to process everything I did in a fraction of a second. I’m not sure how many more meditations I have in me. Things aren’t looking good, either. We blocked her in, but she damaged all our cars to escape.”

“So that attempt was a waste?” Marc asked. “It’s 3:35 p.m. We’re

running tight on time.”

“I wouldn’t say it was a waste. I *did* get a second code out of it. But I still don’t know what the codes are for. Hell, I don’t know if the codes even matter.”

“Why wouldn’t it matter?” Tay asked.

“Because...” Sophie sighed. “Because Ms. Jackson said there’s a third code she’d only give me if we beat her. The problem is that she also told me that she dreamt of her safe arrival. Those dreams can’t be changed. Her fate is sealed.”

“Couldn’t she be lying?” Katelyn asked.

“I don’t think she is,” Sophie said. “I should’ve known she wouldn’t make a bet without knowing how it’d turn out. I’m sure of it.”

The door opened, and Olivia crept inside, closing the door softly behind her.

“What did I miss?”

“It’s hopeless,” Sophie said.

Olivia seemed unfazed. “Well, what do you usually do when things get hopeless?”

“I call Phoebe.” It was meant to be a throwaway comment, something to dismiss the idea of hope, but Katelyn gave Sophie a look like she’d just said something incredible.

“If there’s anyone who would know what to do,” Katelyn said, “it’s her. Call her.”

Sophie nodded, slowly at first, and then wider. With a sharp breath, she pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts. Phoebe answered right away.

“Hello?” Phoebe said. “Is everything okay? It’s the middle of the day. Is something wrong?”

“I’m fine,” Sophie said. “You’re on speakerphone, by the way.” There was a chorus of “hellos” from around the room, and Sophie recounted a short version of what was happening.

“This is Ms. Jackson?” Phoebe said in disbelief. “Sweet ol’ Ms. Jackson?”

“She’s not sweet,” Sophie said bitterly.

“She’s old, though,” Olivia added.

“Well, alright,” Phoebe said, giving a light chuckle. “So what do you want from me?”

“Would it be possible for you to scout the future and tell me what we end up deciding in real life?” Sophie asked.

“It won’t work,” Phoebe said. “In my vision, you’ll sit there for two hours not taking this seriously. Trust me. If you’re going to succeed, you can’t take shortcuts.”

“But I don’t think there’s a way to succeed,” Sophie said. “Am I supposed to give up?”

“Of course not,” Phoebe said. “Look—I know Ms. Jackson well. Isn’t she trying to teach you something?”

Sophie closed her mouth. There were elements of a lesson being dropped around her, but nothing concrete, right? Just questions. Why Harvard? What was her higher calling? What kind of a person did she want to be? Those weren’t good questions, were they?

“It sounds like she just wants me to think,” Sophie said.

“Then think.”

“But she had the dream,” Sophie said. “The unchangeable dream.”

Phoebe drew a deep breath on the line. “So what?” She said casually. “Change what it means to win. All she gave you were rules and a finish line—you get to do with that what you will.”

“And what should I do with it?” Sophie asked.

“Whatever you can. If you’re fighting fate, you have to make things inevitable. Set a trap so broad it’s impossible to avoid. Use the whole city if you have to. All I know is that every minute you’re talking to me is a waste. I can’t solve this for you.”

“Okay, sis,” Sophie said. “I love you. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“At a normal time?” Phoebe asked.

“Yes. I love you.”

“Love you too, sis.”

The line silenced.

Sophie looked around the room. The faces of her friends were blank and despairing. There were no answers. No hints. No leads.

Nothing. Each of them wanted so badly to help Sophie, and yet there was nothing left for them to do. Sophie sighed. It was time to call this off, but she didn't want to disappoint her friends. After all, they were all giving Sophie everything they had. Not just in terms of effort, but in terms of life. Katelyn was giving out her time, Olivia her trust, Marc his talent, and Tay—she was ready to give up parts of her future. All this because they loved her.

And Sophie loved them back—more than she loved her grades. More than she loved Harvard. More than she loved the idea of beating Ms. Jackson.

Suddenly, the question of *how* to stop Ms. Jackson seemed irrelevant. *Why* should she stop Ms. Jackson?

And with the question alone, her life realigned. Pieces clicked into place, and she knew what she had to do. But before she could act, Tay directed the attention of the room.

“Look,” Tay said. “At this point, I just want to know if we can do it. It’s 3:55 p.m. We have five minutes left to pick a path, and I think I’ve crafted a plan that could work. We’re going to need the swim team, a bottle of melatonin, and some muscle. The only problem is that we’ll need to start right now. Sophie, I don’t think you have the time—or the stamina—for another meditation. Do you want to rehearse my plan and risk missing our window, or do you want to run this plan without knowing how it’ll end?”

Sophie’s whole body clenched. Tay was asking Sophie to give up control. Sophie swallowed, and then made the best decision of her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Journey to Rick's

MS. JACKSON twisted her wrist, flicking on the last bit of eyeliner that would complete her outfit. She glanced at the clock. It was 4:15 p.m. She had five minutes to spare before it was time to leave. Still, there was no sign of Sophie—not around her house or on her security cameras.

Maybe this is reality, she thought. Or maybe it wasn't. Either way, the truth would reveal itself. After all, a week ago, the universe had given her an unchangeable dream wherein she arrived at her meeting on time. Fate was on her side; Sophie never stood a chance.

But that wasn't the game she was playing. Not really.

Her watch beeped the first two notes of her alarm, and Ms. Jackson tapped it silent. It was time to leave. Cautiously, she stepped out into her driveway, expecting Sophie to jump out of the bushes or leap from the roof, but all was quiet. Not a squirrel stirred up and down the cul-de-sac.

Ignoring the nagging sensation that crept up the back of her neck, she pulled her blouse tight and lowered herself into the car. Half-expecting the vehicle to be damaged or inoperable, she turned the key and found everything in order. Reality seemed more and more likely. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and departed.

Suburban houses blurred past. Around each corner, she searched for signs of an ambush, but there was nothing. From here to the end of the neighborhood, the drive was smooth. Uneventful. Yet, a sense

of paranoia grew with each turn. It's not like Sophie to give up without a fight, she knew.

She turned from her neighborhood and entered the wider suburban area. At this point, it was a straight shot to the highway, and she still hadn't come across a single obstacle. Perhaps Sophie had already learned her lessons—but then, shouldn't there have been a message from Bonnie?

At the light before the on-ramp, Ms. Jackson watched the first sign of trouble brew. An unnatural crush of traffic held a thousand cars bumper-to-bumper. She'd expected traffic to be slow, but this was exceptional for a Friday at 4:23 p.m., even in SoCal. It was so bad that when it came time to merge, she had to cut off a car to do so.

From here, the road dipped, and she saw the source of trouble less than a mile ahead. Three cars were driving side-by-side going half the speed limit. Together, they formed a rolling roadblock.

Maybe this is Sophie's doing, Ms. Jackson thought. The timing of the jam was too coincidental for it to be chance, right? But she couldn't be *certain*, certain. Not yet. Even so, this would hardly present a problem. In the dream, Ms. Jackson arrived with a clean, undented car. That meant from now until she arrived, the universe had given her permission to act with reckless abandon—and she took her free will seriously.

The engine revved, and Ms. Jackson sped forward, cutting off one car after another as she bolted from lane to lane. Amid a series of honks and squeals, she drove around each car—still progressing slowly—until she arrived behind the troublemakers. She peered through each rear window, squinting to glimpse the drivers. While she recognized each as students from her school, she didn't know any of them in particular.

Must be a prank or something.

With a heavy foot, she crossed into the leftmost shoulder, nearly clipping the Toyota in the far lane. Debris kicked up behind her and rumble strips blared. *Krr, krr, krr!* Amid the uneven terrain, she struggled to gain enough traction to pass. After several seconds of sustained effort, though, she managed to pass the rolling roadblock

and merge onto the empty road ahead.

The traffic jam only slowed her a few minutes, and she could make that up by speeding a bit. Her foot pressed harder, and her car moved deeper down the empty road.

If this was Sophie's doing, it wasn't a good plan, Ms. Jackson thought. Instead of stopping her, it gave her a clean path forward—no further delays. Overcoming the traffic jam was too easy, and if that was all Sophie had in store for her, it wouldn't be enough for the second code—if this was a meditation, of course.

Whoop, whoop!

The siren of a police cruiser wailed, and Ms. Jackson grinned with amusement. This was interesting. Finally.

Getting a police officer involved seemed a little out of reach for Sophie, so it was an impressive delay—if she was, in fact, behind it. In the rearview, the officer veered left and right, unable to keep to a straight line. While this was suspicious, Ms. Jackson didn't want to chance a thing. She coasted off the highway, stopping on an empty stretch of road. There, she shifted into park and waited for the officer to approach.

But he wasn't moving—at least not quickly. Instead, the cop fumbled around his vehicle as though it were a spaceship, adjusting the tablet and flipping switches at random. A slew of nonsensical sirens echoed in response to his jabs at the soundboard, and if Ms. Jackson thought this was strange, it was nothing compared to how the officer's dog was acting. The K-9, usually neutral and obedient, was growling and barking at his companion. Either they were new partners, or—

Sophie wouldn't dare... Would she?

Her hand itched to shift the car into drive, but a nagging doubt kept her from moving. Her dream only showed the arrival, not the journey, so if she ran from the police, it would be entirely possible that she'd escape and arrive on time—but later be arrested. No. She couldn't run until she was certain.

After several minutes of waiting, the cop opened his door and clambered to his feet. There, he struggled to stay upright, holding both

his hands between him and his dog. The dog snarled as the door closed, and the officer drew a breath. Slowly, he turned toward Ms. Jackson, an empty look on his face, and limped in her direction. His shaky feet carried him up to her window, and Ms. Jackson looked up to his lazy eyes.

“License and...” His voice slipped away. He cleared his throat. “License and registration.”

Ms. Jackson withdrew the papers and presented them to the cop.

“May I know what I’m being pulled over for?” Ms. Jackson asked.

The officer didn’t respond. Instead, he looked over everything with a critical eye. When Ms. Jackson asked her question again, the man snapped from his daze.

“Speeding,” he said suddenly, as though this was a spontaneous idea. “63 in a 55.”

“That’s a mistake,” Ms. Jackson said. “I was going *much* faster than 63.”

The officer looked like he was about to say something, but he glitched out, mouth wide open. As if gripped by paralysis, the man stared, and stared, and stared. Ms. Jackson tapped the steering wheel with her thumb, patience running thin.

“Can we hurry this along?” Ms. Jackson said, slumping back against the headrest. “I have somewhere to be. Let’s write the ticket and be on our way, yes?”

The man shook his head and pivoted, taking her ID with him back to his cruiser.

“Excuse me,” Ms. Jackson unbuckled her seatbelt and exited her car. “Can I have my license back?”

“I’ll have to... run... through the...” the officer’s voice descended to silence.

Ms. Jackson’s suspicion escalated. She glanced at her watch, finding it to be 4:36 p.m. She had to be back on the road in four minutes, or else she wouldn’t make it to Rick’s on time. The mounting pressure fed her a grain of audacity, and she knew that—right or wrong—it was time to call the officer’s bluff.

“That’s enough, Marc,” Ms. Jackson said, taking a leap of faith.

“Give me my papers and leave the cop alone.”

The officer stiffened and turned. Thoughts flickered across his face until finally, he lost composure, all but confirming that Marc was the man driving the body.

“How’d you know?” he asked.

“Your dog told me,” Ms. Jackson said, gesturing the snarling animal in the cruiser. “They always know. It’s a bold move to dreamwalk an officer, Marc, but it still won’t be enough. Tell Sophie to try again.”

“Tell her yourself,” Marc said. “I expect you’ll be seeing her around 5:01 p.m.”

“Oh, you think you’re so—”

Before she could finish, the officer crumpled to the ground. He lay there a moment before waking in a daze, shocked by the brightness of the sun, Ms. Jackson’s ID sliding a few inches beside him.

“Ungh.” He held a hand up to his head, pushing back a migraine. “Where am I?”

Ms. Jackson debated her options. She could leave without her ID and risk the officer suspecting she’d done something to hurt him, or try to recover her license and shake him off. She couldn’t risk choosing the wrong option. With an exasperated sigh, she took action.

“Oh my goodness,” Ms. Jackson said, her face melting with concern as she rushed to the officer’s side. “Are you okay? You passed out.”

She knelt beside the cop and placed a hand on his forehead, strategically blocking his view. With her other hand, she picked up her license and pocketed it.

“Oh, you’re so warm.”

“Ah, I...” He looked around and gained his bearings. “Maybe it’s heatstroke. I think I’m okay.”

“Great. That’s great.” Ms. Jackson’s empathy slipped away. She stood and took several steps toward her car. “I’ll leave you to it. Have a good day.”

Her departure was abrupt as she practically sprinted back to her car. It was now 4:40 p.m., and she was still just about 20 minutes away.

Any further delay would mean she lost. As such, she sped back to the highway, merging ahead of the pace-setting pranksters by a margin of a single car length.

Now she had confirmation that Sophie was working to slow her down, but the question remained: was this a meditation, or reality?

The road sloped into the foothills of Calisette, and Ms. Jackson settled in for the final stretch. The mansions grew bigger as she climbed higher and higher, but the road was still clear. No surprise deer, no orange cones, no spike strips—nothing got in her way. Which was odd. This was where she expected some Hail Mary play, but nothing came. Perhaps she was safe.

Rick's house rolled into view at 4:58 p.m. She parked behind a half-dozen cars and scrambled for her purse. As the car door closed, she breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed. Finally, this was unfolding exactly as she'd seen, which meant—

The door to a bright red Subaru slammed open, blocking Ms. Jackson from moving forward. She screamed as two girls leaped out and attacked her. One girl grabbed her arms; the other grabbed her feet. Together, they pulled, sweeping the teacher off the ground and holding her aloft as though they were going to throw her into a pool. Ms. Jackson flailed, trying to break free, but it was no use.

“Time, time, time.”

“4:59,” came a voice from the car. “Hold tight!”

Ms. Jackson recognized the voices, and she looked at the girls keeping her restrained.

“Sophie? Katelyn?” Ms. Jackson looked at the girl in the car. “Tay?”

“We got you,” Sophie said. “You’re going to be late.”

“No.” Ms. Jackson pulled and yanked. “Not if I—” A watch beeped. Despair settled. She'd lost. This was a meditation after all.

“Yes!” Sophie said. “Yes, we did it!”

Ms. Jackson went limp, her body becoming dead weight. She stared up at the sky, noticing how beautiful it was. Then she laughed softly to herself.

“Well done, Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said. “You can put me down

now.”

Sophie and Katelyn dropped Ms. Jackson on the grass. There, she rolled to her knees and sputtered for air. With a final deep breath, she got to her feet and smiled, watching Tay, Sophie, and Katelyn jump in a circle to celebrate their win. This was the game, Ms. Jackson knew, but it was still painful to lose, and she felt it in her gut by means of a tightness that stabbed her.

On the street, two new cars pulled up to the house. One was a rusted Hyundai belonging to Marc, the other was a Toyota with a driver she didn't recognize—the same Toyota that helped with the roadblock. They rushed out to embrace Sophie, and Ms. Jackson stayed quiet, letting them have their moment. They'd earned it.

“Your plan worked,” Sophie said to Tay.

“It was more like pieces of all our plans,” Tay said. “A perfect storm of meteonadocane proportions.”

Ms. Jackson took a step forward, and the celebration simmered. “I'm impressed, Sophie,” she said. “You did it.”

“Now I'll go do it for real,” Sophie said.

“Not so fast,” Ms. Jackson said. “If you've gotten this far, then I imagine you've received some codes?”

“813 and 808,” Sophie said. “What do they mean?”

“Maybe the third code will help you figure it out: 3875.”

“It doesn't.”

“That's okay. You have what you need. Take these numbers back to the real world and learn the truth of what you can do for the world.”

“I...” Sophie considered the codes. “Am I supposed to do this in real life?”

“You know the answer to that,” Ms. Jackson said. “I've already had my dream.”

“Right. So, what happens now? If we're not going to stop you for real, then what next?”

“You tell me,” Ms. Jackson said. “What do you want?”

“I want you to pass me,” Sophie said. “To honor your end of the deal and stay out of my way for Harvard.”

“Is that *really* what you want?” Ms. Jackson said, her features

shifting to a sternness Sophie recognized from class. “Have you not considered what I’ve said? That there might be a higher calling? You’re so attached to prestige, but let me ask you this: if there were something better for *you* than Harvard, would you not seize that opportunity?”

“Of course I would,” Sophie said. “But we’re talking about Harvard.”

“No. We’re talking about destiny.”

“Then what’s my destiny?” Sophie asked.

“Look at your gifts. Consider your values. Then decide for yourself.” Ms. Jackson turned and strode to her car. With the car door open, she looked back at Sophie. “I’ll see you tonight. Don’t try another time. You’re ready.”

Ms. Jackson disappeared under the roof of her car, started her engine, and left.

Sophie stared at her as she left, delaying her waking. Now that she knew it was possible to beat Ms. Jackson, she knew what needed to be said next—and it wasn’t going to be an easy thing to swallow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Up to Fate

SOPHIE SNAPPED upright and found her breath hard to come by. She looked each person in succession before lowering her gaze to the floor. Nobody wanted to break the silence, but each of them leaned forward, beckoning Sophie to speak. Finally, she did.

“Tay’s plan?” Sophie said. “It worked.”

The group cheered. In a flurry, they scrambled to their feet. Olivia pulled out her phone, the swim team group chat front and center. Marc was reaching for his melatonin, prepping to sleepwalk. Tay stood, ready to direct the operation. But Sophie stopped them all.

“We’re not going to do it, though,” Sophie said. “We’re going to let Ms. Jackson go free.”

Protests erupted.

“What?”

“No!”

“You can’t—”

Sophie raised her arm, and they quieted.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said.

The room stewed in a mix of emotions. As the silence settled, Katelyn was the first to stir.

“Sophie,” she said softly, “we can’t give up—”

Katelyn didn’t finish her sentence. Somewhere in the room, a watch *beeped*. It was now 4:00 p.m., and their window for action had closed.

“This isn’t giving up,” Sophie said, standing. “I’m doing what I should’ve done a long time ago and accepting the things I’ve ignored for too long. Tay—” Sophie gave an apologetic look to her friend “—I never earned my grade. I cheated the whole way, and I don’t deserve to be valedictorian. I don’t want to live a life at Harvard knowing that my success came at your expense.”

“I’ll be okay,” Tay said. “I’ll find another way to get where I want to be. Look, it’s not too late. Maybe we send Olivia and the swimmers directly to Calisette Hills while Marc does the cop segment first? Then we can—”

“No, Tay. You don’t understand. I don’t think stopping Ms. Jackson is the winning play anymore. It never was; that’s her point. Being true to myself is what matters. Living a life of virtue is what matters. It shouldn’t be on you to scramble for a new path—it’s on me to find one of an infinite number of ways to get into Harvard. Or maybe not. Shit, I still don’t know what I want to major in. Harvard might not even be the best fit. I have a lot of thinking to do.”

Tay thought this through for a moment. “Okay, well if you’re giving up your grade for me, then I’m giving up the election for you. It’s only fair.”

“Absolutely not,” Sophie said. “Both of us worked our asses off for that election, and that was the one place I refused to cheat. No—we both deserve that election, so I want to take that to the coin flip. Let’s leave it up to fate.”

“This is an odd change of pace,” Marc said, observant as ever. “Did Ms. Jackson tell you something?”

“I.. yes and no.” Sophie told them the whole story, ending with the last four digits of the code. “And that’s everything.”

“Hmm,” Marc said. “Does 3875 mean anything to anyone?”

Eye contact was scarce around the room. Nobody had an idea.

“Well, okay,” Tay said. “Let’s place all the codes beside one another. What was the first code?”

“813,” Sophie said. “Followed by 808 and 3875.”

Tay tilted her head, something about the order scratching at her brain. She mouthed the numbers, trying to figure out why they were

familiar. There was a cadence, a flow that made sense. Finally, her eyes lit as the solution hit her, and Sophie swooned with adoration. Platonic admiration, she was delighted to report.

“It’s not three separate codes,” Tay said. “It’s one code. A phone number. (813) 808-3875. Call it.”

Sophie withdrew her phone and typed the numbers. With her eyes locked on Tay, she lifted the phone to her ear. It rang once... twice... The tension in the room clung like humidity. And then—

“Hello, Sophie,” a familiar voice said on the other end of the line. “You’ve reached the Third Eye Network.”

“Who’s this?” Sophie asked.

“Congratulations on passing your final exam. We look forward to seeing you soon. Bring DeMarcus, Tay, and whoever else helped you. We’ll be ready when you arrive.”

“Arrive? I don’t—”

But the line was already dead. Sophie lowered the phone.

“What’s with all the stupid mysteries?” Katelyn said. “I wish they would just tell you what’s going on.”

“It’s another puzzle,” Olivia said. “Maybe if we search for Third Eye, we’ll find an address for a headquarters or something.”

“No, it’s too common of a phrase,” Katelyn said, already sifting through Google results.

“What’s a third eye for, anyway?” asked Marc.

“Isn’t that a spiritual thing?” Tay said. “I went to yoga class once and they were talking about third eyes. They let you see into other dimensions? Is that right?”

“It says here that it’s for seeing truth among illusion,” Katelyn said.

“Maybe it’s a physics thing,” Sophie said. “That would make sense for Ms. Jackson. If you have one eye, you see in two dimensions. Two eyes and you see in three dimensions. But if you have three eyes, you’ll see in four dimensions.”

“What’s the fourth dimension?” Olivia asked.

“Time,” Sophie said. “Having a third eye means you can see through time. This is a group of seers.”

The reality of this swelled around the room, matching the excitement bubbling in Sophie's chest. Maybe she wasn't alone after all. Maybe there were people like her that could help her develop her power.

"I think," Sophie added quickly.

"But why did Ms. Jackson give you their phone number?" Tay asked.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Marc looked over the room. "Ms. Jackson's going to an initiation, right? But initiations are for new members. We thought it was Ms. Jackson getting initiated. It's not. Sophie is."

"No, that couldn't—" Sophie shook her head. "But she—"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Tay said, standing. "If Marc's right, we should get ready. You heard the lady on the phone—we're coming with."

"But what if we're wrong?" Sophie asked.

"Then we're wrong, and life moves on," Tay said.

"Better yet, what if we're right?" Katelyn said.

"You could check," Marc said, "but I don't think you should. It'd ruin the surprise. How are you feeling about taking a chance today?"

Sophie smiled and nodded. "For once, I'm feeling good about it."

"Then let's get going," Tay said, pushing Sophie into the bathroom.

Sophie plopped onto the counter while Tay dug through the makeup drawer and plucked out a few select supplies. After a comment about how much more Sophie needed in her collection, Tay got to work, determined to do things right. First, she smoothed foundation into Sophie's face, then applied eye shadow, blush, and a layer of lipstick.

In twenty minutes, Sophie was ready. She checked herself in the mirror, straightened her hair, and smoothed the wrinkles of her shirt. Then she shook her head and pushed Tay out of the room, prepping a new set of clothes. If this was for her, she wanted to look nice.

Surprisingly, the shift from messy to polished took only minutes, and by 4:30 p.m., she stepped out of the room to a smattering of polite

whoops and cheers. Sophie played into the bit, giving a twirl, and then gathering her friends like they were chickens. As a group, they stomped downstairs, waving goodbye to Sophie's dad on their way to their cars.

"Do you guys want to pile into the Subie and go together?" Tay asked.

"Actually, can I ride with Olivia alone?" Sophie asked. "I'd like to chat about something."

Everyone agreed, and Sophie took shotgun in Olivia's car. Already comfortable with the seat, she slouched. Realizing this was a bad habit, she straightened and pulled the fabric tight around her so it wouldn't wrinkle again.

"We're not in a meditation now, are we?" Olivia asked, shifting into reverse.

"No," Sophie said.

"Good," Olivia said. "I can never tell. Honestly, the whole time, it felt like I was never in a meditation."

"That's because *you* weren't," Sophie said. Amid Olivia's look of confusion, she placed her hand on her arm. "Look, I understand it's confusing. You don't need to worry about it."

Olivia accepted this and turned her attention to the road. "So, why did you want to drive with me anyway?"

"Because you told me to do so in one of the meditations," Sophie said. "We were talking about my lack of purpose, and you were about to tell me a secret, but I didn't want to learn something about you in a meditation. Ever since my adventures with Tay, I think it's a new rule. Rule number two: no sharing secrets in meditations."

"Oh, interesting." Olivia chuckled. "Well, based on what you've told me, I can guess what my secret was. I wouldn't call it a secret, per se, but—" she cast a nervous look at Sophie, "—I'm really into philosophy, and—"

"Oh my *gosh*. What is it with me liking girls who are into philosophy?" Sophie blurted. Her eyes widened as she realized what she said, and she turned to Olivia, red in the face. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Did you just say you like me?"

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “I mean, I’ve been thinking about you a lot. And I think you’re really cute. So, I think...” This next part was always hard to say. “Yeah. I’m getting a crush on you. I’m sorry if that—”

“Good,” Olivia said. “I like you too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Let’s go on a date this weekend and see where things go.” She gave Sophie a playful smile. “I’ll plan it, though. I’ve seen how your plans work out. They’re not very good.”

“Stop.” Sophie gave Olivia a gentle push. In return, Olivia gripped Sophie’s hand and held it. A brilliant warmth rushed over Sophie—which was a terrific change of pace from the violent electricity she used to feel around Tay.

“Yeah, so...” Olivia relaxed and drove with one hand. “I like Nietzsche, and he said something to the tune of, if you know exactly why you’re doing something, you’ll be able to withstand whatever pain you need to get it.”

“Funny enough, I’m familiar with the saying,” Sophie said. “She who has a *why* can withstand any *how*. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, but I still don’t know why I want to live my life, you know? Not when it comes to purpose anyway.”

“You’re just too close to the issue,” Olivia said. “If you can order your thoughts, you can start getting some answers. You want the chance to save the world, yes? But you wouldn’t hurt your friends to do so, right? That means your friends are more important to you, doesn’t it?”

“Isn’t that a bad thing?” Sophie said.

“You don’t need to objectively rank your feelings on morality,” Olivia said. “You just need to feel them, understand them, and be authentic to them. Someone else can sacrifice their friends to save the world—that’ll be their purpose. But if *you* chase the wrong thing, you’ll miss the mark anyway. Just help the people in front of you, and that’ll be enough.”

“I just feel like ‘helping people’ is a pretty weak *why* for living,” Sophie said. “It’s not specific enough. Or broad enough. It’s just generic.”

“And yet, the world would be perfect if everyone believed it.”

Sophie grunted agreement.

“Look, if it were possible for one person to fix every problem with the world, it’d already be done,” Olivia said. “You’re talented and gifted, but you don’t need to shoulder the whole world. Just be a girl.”

The road dipped, and Sophie saw the sleeping officer on patrol. Another cop was behind him, their red and blue lights flashing. Just as she was taking in the situation, Marc sent a text:

I called the precinct and told them Officer McCivilForfeiture was asleep. I hope he gets fired.

Sophie smiled and turned her attention back to the road. Soon, the electrical wires disappeared as they transitioned into Calisette Hills, and the beautiful architecture of too-big houses dominated their view. Sophie watched them with a new sense of peace. She knew from Marc that the people up here didn’t value others. From the outside, they had great lives—but the second you delve deeper and saw how much life they sold in their pursuit of, what? Some bricks on a hill—you realized how much it wasn’t worth it. No, that wouldn’t be her.

Rick’s house came into view at 5:15 p.m. The driveway was filled with cars, but there were several spaces still available on the street. Tay parked first, and Olivia stopped behind her, letting go of Sophie’s hand to shift to Park. Sophie kept her hand still an extra moment, already missing the warmth.

Finally, Sophie unbuckled and stepped out into the road. She met her friends at the edge of the driveway and looked up at the large house. The last time she was here, she was a completely different person. It was odd being at the scene again with Marc and Tay, their relationship patched and stronger than ever.

“You ready?” Tay asked.

“Maybe I *should* check to see if I’m supposed to be here,” Sophie said. “It’ll be quick, and—”

Marc gave Sophie a gentle push, and the rest of her friends did what they could to drag her to the porch. Once there, they plopped Sophie upright and gave her the chance to straighten. Her finger hovered over the doorbell, but before she could press it, the front

door opened on its own. And in the doorway, a familiar silhouette appeared.

“Welcome,” Ms. Jackson said. “We’ve been expecting you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Third Eye Network

SOPHIE LOOKED up at her teacher, feeling small. This was so much worse than running into your teacher at the grocery store. It was like knocking on their door while selling Girl Scout cookies. Of all things, she wasn't prepared for the encounter to be this excruciating.

"Hi," Sophie said, emboldened by Olivia, who was poking her in the back. "I hope I'm in the right place."

Ms. Jackson stepped aside to let Sophie enter. Sophie peered past her into the darkness, finding the room sparse, lit only by a few candles.

"Well?" Ms. Jackson said.

Carefully, Sophie took a step inside, finding the air cold. Her hair stood on end as she moved deeper into the room. Her friends followed, and Olivia slipped her hand into Sophie's. With the warmth returning, Sophie straightened. She'd already beaten Ms. Jackson in a fight against the inevitable—she could face anything.

Suddenly, the lights flicked on, and a dozen people popped out from behind furniture.

"Congratulations!"

Someone blew into a party favor, and Sophie flinched, letting go of Olivia's hand. There was a *crack* and *fizz* as a can of soda was pressed into Sophie's hand. A shower of multi-colored confetti rained over her, and before Sophie had the chance to grasp what was

happening, a flurry of strangers rushed up to shake Sophie's other hand.

Finally, the train ended, and Sophie let out a breath of relief. Her eyes swept over the room and between the banners and décor, she found a cake sitting on the kitchen table with icing that read:

Congrats, Sophie!



Her gaze shifted to the crowd. Among the half-dozen people she didn't know, there were a few she recognized. Ms. Jackson, obviously. Bonnie was there too. And—

“Mom?!”

Mom rushed in to give her a hug. “I'm so proud of you,” she said. “I knew you could do it. You must've made some very good decisions.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I'm a member,” Mom said. “Here, your teacher will explain.”

Ms. Jackson stepped to the center of the room and everyone quieted.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Ms. Jackson said. “Today, we welcome the newest recruit of the Third Eye Network—Sophie Vedas.”

There was a smattering of applause. Sophie stood closer to her friends, practically huddling for moral support. Ms. Jackson turned to her, the sharp and curated look she carried melting into something warmer.

“You've been my most incredible student,” Ms. Jackson said. “First and foremost, I'd like to apologize for my style of teaching. I know I've come across as cruel and callous. In the coming days, you'll understand that this has been a role I've played, not the totality of who I am as a person. We'll talk about your grade on Monday after class. In the meantime, congratulations on your success.”

“How do you know I succeeded?” Sophie challenged.

“Because you called me,” Bonnie said, holding up her phone.

“Your teacher gave you three codes that corresponded to my phone number, each one meant to be given in specific circumstances. If you got the last four digits, it meant you succeeded.”

Of course, Sophie thought, finally recognizing Bonnie as the voice who had spoken on the other end of the line.

“Now,” Ms. Jackson said. “Here in the real world, we don’t know *how* you succeeded—only that you did. The floor is yours. Please tell us about your journey.”

Sophie drew a deep breath through her nose, practically tasting the buttercream scent that hung in the air from the refreshment table, and stepped to the center of the room. For the next fifteen minutes, she shared everything relevant to her journey from start to finish. Each person listened with awe, her mom with an extra glimmer in her eyes. Sophie concluded by talking about her choice to abandon the plan and let fate play out on its own.

“And that’s it,” Sophie said.

“You did great,” Ms. Jackson said. “Now, this *is* an initiation party, but the decision to join our group is still yours alone. For the next few hours, you’ll have the opportunity to introduce yourself to as many people as you can to learn about the group and make your final decision.”

“Don’t you know what I’ll decide?” Sophie asked.

“Never confuse *knowing* the future with *deciding* it,” Ms. Jackson said. “You always have free will—use it. Oh, and Marc? The bathroom is down the hall, one door on the other side of the bedroom.”

“Thanks,” Marc deadpanned. “I’ll remember that.”

The party was lovely. Amid fruit juices and cracker plates, Sophie walked from group to group to meet the members of the Third Eye. They were all dreamers in the traditional way, seeing glimpses of the future offered up by the universe. When one of them had a dream, they called Bonnie to have it recorded—that was why her phone number was used as the code. Then, once a month, they met with Ms. Jackson—the only one other than Sophie who could explore the

branching timelines—and she would plan ways for the world to move past its tragedies. Should Sophie choose to join, this would be her fate too.

The music kept the energy high as Sophie introduced herself to a pair of happily married men. They'd met in the group, which allowed them to use the cheesiest lines about fate she'd ever heard. But more importantly, they shared stories about an earthquake response team they helped form, a tsunami warning they were able to issue early, and a full evacuation they performed in Nebraska to move a town out of the path of a tornado. Sophie felt lighter having heard their stories. Not only were there others who dealt with the same dread she did, but they weren't dispirited in their fight against fate. Instead, their failures invigorated them, and she knew she wanted that for herself.

Eventually, conversation fizzled, and Sophie scoured the party for Olivia. She found her standing next to Tay, back to the wall, sipping Coke from the can. Sophie approached and squeezed into the tight space between them, touching shoulders on either side.

"So, what do you think?" Tay asked. "Is this it?"

"It feels too good to be true," Sophie said. "I always wondered how my power fit into the world, and this seems like a convenient answer. It feels like purpose."

"You were really stressing about that, weren't you?" Olivia asked.

"In the past year, I must've spent a combined two years in meditations just worrying about Harvard," Sophie said. She let out a heavy sigh. "In the end, fate caught up with me anyway—in a way I would've never expected. Honestly, I regret how much time I wasted."

"Don't," Olivia said, lifting the can to her lips. "It all prepared you for this."

"Are you sure you want to give up Harvard?" Tay asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Sophie said, sipping the rest of what was in her cup. "I should figure out what to major in before deciding on a college." Her eyes landed on Bonnie, and she felt pulled in that direction. "I'll be back. In the meantime, do either of you know about Nietzsche?"

Olivia and Tay gave excited glances to one another, and Sophie slipped away, approaching Bonnie with all the ferocity of a shy kitty.

“So, what do you think?” Bonnie asked. “Do you want to join?”

“I think so,” Sophie said. “I’ll need to think about it. How big is the network, anyway? Is it just us, or...?”

“That’s harder to answer than you might think,” Bonnie said. “We’re one part of a bigger mission. In fact, I have contacts in D.C. who help organize our information. In particular, there’s a library in an underground facility that keeps a record of our reports. I imagine there are dozens of groups worldwide who record their dreams there.”

“My sister’s in D.C.,” Sophie said.

“Yeah. That’s a fun coincidence.” Bonnie’s voice was too even to be free of subtext.

“So, if I join the Third Eye, can I still go to Harvard?” Sophie asked.

“You can do anything you want,” Bonnie said. “But you have to figure out what you want first.”

“Maybe I just want to help people,” Sophie said.

“You don’t need an education to do that,” Bonnie said. “You don’t need *anything* to do that. If that’s what you want, you can just go out and do it. If that’s your purpose, then there are no wrong answers to how you live your life.”

“Okay, thanks,” Sophie said. She gave a polite nod and broke off from the conversation. Looking around the room, she looked for the next group to talk with and found Marc speaking with an older, pasty-looking man in the corner. She wandered toward them, finding their conversation growing more audible as she approached.

“It’s not worth being anxious about your job, you know,” Marc said. “You could retire to Bristol tomorrow if you wanted. Why do you feel you need all this money?”

This seemed a bit private, so Sophie veered away, moving back in the direction of Olivia. Since she’d last been there, Katelyn had joined the group, a buttercream soda in hand. Both girls were facing Tay, halfway through their pitch on why Tay should join the swim

team. Surprisingly, Tay seemed to be on board.

“You know, I’ve been looking for a sport,” Tay said.

“A word of warning,” Sophie said, stepping up to the group. “When Coach asks what stroke you want to swim, you tell him breaststroke, okay?”

By the end of the night, Sophie had spoken to just about everyone. Her biggest takeaway was that, by joining this group, she’d be part of something bigger—a network of dreamers from around the world. And as the clock ticked closer to midnight, Sophie made up her mind.

“So, are you ready to make your decision?” Ms. Jackson asked.

“I think I want to join, but it’s a lot of pressure. What if I make a mistake?”

“*When* you make a mistake,” Ms. Jackson said with a warm smirk, “we’ll be here to support you. So will Marc, and Tay, and Katelyn, and Olivia. You’re still not over the idea that it’s you and you alone who has the power to save the world. That’s not possible. Just be one of the good ones, and together, we’ll make it happen. You’re not alone, Sophie. None of us are. Stop making your decisions like you are.”

And finally, Sophie understood.

“Okay. I’d like to join.”

“Good.” Ms. Jackson turned to the audience, tapping her wine glass with a small spoon. “Everyone, may I have your attention, please! Thank you all for a wonderful evening. Sophie has made her decision to join the Third Eye Network. Now, are you ready to be sworn in?”

“I am,” Sophie said.

“Then repeat after me.”

Sophie listened and recited. “I, Sophie Vedas, have been gifted with the power of prophecy. I vow to use my gift to serve the good of humanity. What cannot be changed, I shall accept. What can be mended, I shall mend. I, Sophie Vedas, take this oath as an expression of my own free will. I, Sophie Vedas, take this oath as a vessel of fate.”

Applause filled the room, and Sophie smiled, knowing that this moment was what it was all leading to. This felt like her destiny.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Ledge

THREE DAYS after the ceremony, Sophie sat at her desk as though it were any normal Monday. Her eyes locked on the clock, an old analog with a *tick* that knew nothing of the future—unlike herself. As the second hand neared its peak, the other students stirred, packing slowly as though the teacher couldn't see them. But Sophie didn't move. She knew that in just a few seconds, she'd be called to the front by Ms. Jackson, and there, next to a faded poster of Stephen Hawking and a diagram of Newton's Laws, she'd have to—well, she didn't know what she'd have to do. The only thing she knew was that Ms. Jackson wanted a word.

The old clock ticked, and the final bell rang. At this, Ms. Jackson came out smiling.

“Sophie, a word please.”

Sophie tensed, not sure how to respond. Her classmates stared at Sophie suspiciously, but Sophie didn't care. She was okay.

“Sure thing,” she said, loose and casual. Authentic.

She stood and approached Ms. Jackson's desk, her blouse clean and crisp, her tight ponytail swinging side to side. Today, with her well-kept appearance and tidy details, she almost looked more put-together than her teacher.

As the last student left the room, Ms. Jackson pushed aside her work and gave Sophie her undivided attention.

“How do you feel?” Ms. Jackson asked.

“It’s weird,” Sophie admitted. “I’ve hated you all semester, but now we’re supposed to be friends? This is going to take a little adjustment.”

“I understand,” Ms. Jackson said. “Maybe this will help.”

With a flick, she propped open her binder and spun it around. On the page, Sophie saw her grades. Every score from the past few months had been adjusted.

“For what it’s worth, I never intended to bury you,” Ms. Jackson said. “I only wanted to give you a push. Your mom did too. That’s why she told me when you were skipping meditations.”

“I understand,” Sophie said, making a note to talk with her mom about that. “I was using my power all wrong.” She paused, looking down at the grade book. “Uh, actually, could you lower my grade to a B-minus? That’ll push me a notch lower than Tay in the class rankings.”

“If that’s what you want, then consider it done,” Ms. Jackson said, pulling the binder back toward her and scratching out a few numbers. “Did you figure out what you really want yet?”

“I’m still working through that,” Sophie said. “Learning about the Third Eye definitely changes things. After some reflection, I’m starting to think that purpose isn’t something I get to choose for myself. Maybe purpose is an emergent property of experience. So right now, I want to go out and experience all the messy things life has to offer. Success, failure, reality—just more, you know?”

“Indeed. Well, there’s a Third Eye meeting this Saturday. Come well-fed and hydrated—you’ll be there a while.”

“Will do,” Sophie said.

“Great,” Ms. Jackson said. “Now, I believe you have to be at the principal’s office for a coin flip, don’t you?”

“That’s correct,” Sophie said, tightening the straps of her backpack. Though her goals may have realigned, she still wanted to be class president. That’d be a hell of an experience. “I’ll see you this weekend.”

“I’ll see you there.” Ms. Jackson turned toward her stack and pulled a pile of half-graded worksheets to the center of her desk.

Sophie was almost out the door when Ms. Jackson spoke again behind her. “And Sophie? Say hello to Phoebe for me, would you?”

Sophie nodded, then pushed into the hallway. Habitually, she’d turn toward the Ledge. Through the small slits of glass in the double doors, she saw Olivia and Marc chatting up a storm. But today, Sophie had plans. She turned on her heel and came face-to-face with Tay. They exchanged a long, warm hug.

“Do you know how this coin flip ends, yet?” Tay asked. “I don’t think I’d mind knowing today.”

“I haven’t a clue,” Sophie said. “We’ll learn the results together.”

And together they bounded through the hall toward the principal’s office, passing a few girls from swim team on the way—all of them wishing her luck. Finally, they arrived at the principal’s office. After a firm knock, Mr. Douglas let them in.

“Are you two ready?” Mr. Douglas asked, returning to his desk to rifle through a drawer.

Sophie and Tay took their seats across from him and waited as he dug out something to flip. Finally, he found an old coin. Sophie looked at it, feeling a surprising calm. Somewhere in the offshoots of time, her fate had already been sealed. All that was left now was to see what lay beyond the veil—the old fashioned way.

“Before we begin,” Mr. Douglas said, “would anyone like to withdraw?”

Sophie and Tay looked at each other, smiled, and shook their heads. Tay reached over and grabbed Sophie’s hand. All year, this presidential election felt like something Sophie was going through alone, but in this moment, she knew she was never truly alone.

“We’re happy to leave it to chance,” Sophie said.

The principal nodded and held up the coin. “If this lands on heads, Sophie is the winner. If it lands on tails, Tay wins. Any questions?” After a pause, he smiled. “Here we go.”

Sophie watched with a steady heart as Mr. Douglas placed the quarter on his thumb. Then he flicked the coin into the air.

For the first time ever, Sophie trusted that, win or lose, she’d get what was best for her. After all, what use was it to think anything else?

The coin flipped and landed on the principal's empty desk, upright and spinning. It wobbled back and forth, changing fate several times. As it settled, Tay leaned forward; Sophie leaned back. She didn't need to catch a glimpse of her fate. Instead, she reminded herself of her oath.

What cannot be changed, I shall accept.

The coin settled, and the principal looked up at the girls, ready to declare the winner. He opened his mouth and said—

EPILOGUE

“HEADS.”

POST CREDITS

The Saturday after the ceremony, Sophie was invited back to Rick's house for initiation. She sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by the Third Eye. Ms. Jackson played with the thermostat, white tendrils of smoke creeping out of the vents.

"How long do you want me to stay under?" Sophie asked, her eyes drooping as she took her breath of the mysterious gas.

"Three months," Ms. Jackson said, her voice stern.

"What? I've never—"

"You will," Ms. Jackson said. "You must. This is an initiation. It's not meant to be easy. You'll only have to do this once, but once you do, you'll understand why we exist."

Sophie slumped, too tired to speak more words. The ladies of the Third Eye took turns watching over Sophie as she slept, waiting for her to awaken. Eight hours passed, then sixteen, then twenty-four, then more. Finally, on some unsuspecting moment, Sophie's eyes snapped open, red and swollen. She screamed and gripped her head, a thousand migraines hitting at once.

"What did you see?" Ms. Jackson asked, leaning forward to hear Sophie whisper.

"The apocalypse." Sophie looked up through her tears. "Billions of people are at risk..."

"So now you understand. We need to stop this, and we need your help. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

"Just one," Sophie said, her brain freeze drying up. "Who the fuck are the Briars?"

Author's Note:

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