

SOPHIE AGAINST THE INEVITABLE

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Special Thank You To: Holly Joy Jackson

64,000 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	11
Lottery Winnings	
CHAPTER THREE	17
Verbal Warning	
CHAPTER FOUR	24
Calisette Hills	
CHAPTER FIVE	35
Mounting Anxiety	
CHAPTER SIX	44
Internal War	
CHAPTER SEVEN	50
The Prophecy	
CHAPTER EIGHT	58
Swim Practice	
CHAPTER NINE	65
Debate	
CHAPTER TEN	76
The Search for Answers	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	84
Ms. Jackson	
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	90

The Weight of the World

CHAPTER THIRTEEN	98
Marc	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	110
Sophie's Job Quest	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....	121
The Thirteenth Amendment	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	132
One of the Good Ones	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	142
Midnight	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	151
Breathing Room	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	158
A Gamble	
CHAPTER TWENTY.....	169
Swim Meet	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	178
Election Day	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	185
Election Results	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.....	190
Make Good Decisions	

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR 205
 The Journey to Rick's

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE 213
 Up to Fate

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX..... 219
 The Third Eye Network

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN..... 226
 The Ledge

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, 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 meditations 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 one second more, and the final bell rang. At the sound, 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, "—disappointing test grade."

Eyes turned, and Sophie's face burned. One kid *oohed*, 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 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 bun.

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 rebuttal with a pathetic quaver. A deviation this early, even one this small, could send the future spiraling out of control. Thinking fast, she fumbled 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** and let the number speak for itself. Sophie didn’t respond, and the room simmered until only the hum of fluorescent lights could be heard. The winning meditation revealed that this moment was crucial to getting what she wanted. Maybe the silence diffused the tension, or maybe it just gave Ms. Jackson time to think. Sophie never knew *why* things worked, she just followed the script when they did. And so, seven excruciating *ticks* passed before Sophie 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 but... I’ve been so busy and...” Her voice trailed off.

“Putting things off is an odd habit for a junior 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.

The mention of Tay sent a lightning bolt through Sophie, but she covered it with a sigh and a slump, overacting a bit. “I can’t. I need every advantage to get into Harvard. 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—but you have to give me another chance.”

And that was it. The fight was over, her script run through. Surely, the makeup test was hers.

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

Several seconds passed as Ms. Jackson thought. As Sophie waited, her 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 be more diligent, I’ll offer 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 gave a confident nod.

“Good. You may go.”

Sophie turned to gather her belongings, breathing out a sigh of relief. This timeline could’ve been much, much—

“And Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said.

A shiver ran down Sophie’s arms. This was new. “Yes?”

“Say hello to Phoebe, for me, would you?”

Sophie tilted her head. “My sister?”

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

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

“Naturally.” 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.

The Ledge was a wall outside school with a smiley face graffitied on the front. There was nothing special about the spot, but for sixty-four school days straight, she, Marc, and Tay had met there to hang out, and she wasn’t going to be the one to break that streak. Fortunately, the Ledge was close, and with a heave, she pushed through the double doors and stepped out onto the terrace. There, 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.

Her eyes adjusted quickly, and 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, and Sophie was hoping it’d be his last, especially as Tay leaned against him with one hand on his chest, laughing at something stupid he’d just said. It probably wasn’t even funny.

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

“You must’ve been out late, Marc,” Sophie said.

“You guessed it.” His voice sagged in a way that matched his appearance. “So, 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, who was now neck-deep in his phone. “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. Luckily, 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 his paid bots. What made him irresistible to Tay, however, was the mustache. This guy had the biggest, bushiest mustache of all the boys in the school. 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 obsession up in a conversation—especially since she’d already gotten Tay a copy of *Human, All Too Human* as a gift and was hiding it in the bottom of her dresser for the right time—but since this secret was learned via meditation, she was forced to keep it bottled.

The boyfriend looked up from his phone and took a second to orient himself on the conversation. “Hm? Oh, sorry. 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 go do that,” Sophie said, blurring the line between encouragement and dismissal. “Like, right now. Grades are super important. They define literally everything about your future.”

“Yeah. 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 mansion on Calisette Hills again. If we do, we get to pick any film, *and* you get to have a little shut eye.”

“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 much faster at entering the meditations. I can jump ahead and let you know when it’s time to do your dreamwalking thing.”

Marc wobbled his head back and forth.

“Plus, you’ll get to see Buck,” Sophie added in a sing-song voice.

“I’m in,” Marc said. “Tay?”

“It sounds fun,” 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 *Meteornadocane*, 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, you know?”

Sophie and Tay exchanged a quick glance, laughter bubbling up.

“What?” Marc looked between them. “Oh. Not like that! Gross.”

“Sure,” Tay said. “Regardless, I don’t want to drive an hour just to have a quick watch party. We really ought 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 really efficiency-maxxing your time off?” Marc asked.

“I efficiency-max *all* my times,” Tay said.

“But, do you *really* want to know whether *Gophertopia* is better than *Meteornadocane*?” Sophie deadpanned.

“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 corrected. “But my visions pass in real time. It’ll take hours to get the answer.”

“Pleeease?” Tay flashed her best puppy-dog eyes.

Sophie decided she would stay strong. Put her foot down. Take charge of the situation.

But her resolve didn’t last long.

“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 at 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—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. This *was* a safe space after all, and her meditations were always perfectly consequence-free. Maybe she *should* confess.

But as she opened her mouth to speak, she found her vocal cords had wound themselves so tight she couldn’t even whisper.

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

Or what if she does?!

Or what if she needs time to think?

Abh! I don’t know!

Indecision shoved 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, and she faced Sophie with narrow 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. Things weren't right.

Stupid. Stupid! Ugh! How could I be so stupid?!

"Um... Sophie," Tay whispered. "I'm flattered... but... we... I... I'm sorry."

Rejection. Outright rejection.

The world seemed to darken, and reality faded at the seams. Panic compounded the effect, and pieces of the world tore away.

"W-Why?" Sophie tried to whisper, but amid the turmoil, she wasn't even sure her voice came out all the way.

Maybe Tay was committed to her boyfriend. Maybe Tay needed time to think. Or maybe Tay couldn't love Sophie under *any* circumstance. But Sophie couldn't stay with the meditation long enough to find out. Her breath caught. Her chest ignited. And each *thump* of her heart seemed to hammer through her skull over and over again, until—

Sophie hurtled back to reality, having been expelled from the entrails of time. She tumbled violently through the veil until cold, concrete reality slapped her across the cheek. All at once, the school blurred into focus, and the bright sun was beating hard upon her face.

This... This had never happened before.

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CHAPTER TWO

Lottery Winnings

SOPHIE OPENED her eyes. Her mind blazed through questions, and her heart busied itself by filing away all the complex emotions she'd just experienced. Above her, she found the fuzzy outlines of Marc and Tay, hovering. 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. "Tay, you said it's a DVD at the gas station?"

"Yeah," Tay said.

"And do you need prune juice to go with that?"

"Shut up. 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—How did the three of them have only \$4 between them? Nobody wanted to admit it, but the stash of candy wrappers in the backseat of Tay’s Subaru was probably the answer.

“Unless we’re incredibly unlucky, it should be 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.

“You look upset,” Tay said.

“I do?”

“Yeah, you never kick rocks,” Tay said. “You’re worried about something, aren’t you?”

Sophie’s eyes went wide and a flash of horror swept through her. Did she talk in her meditations now?

“It’s the election, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Sophie said, releasing the breath she’d been holding. “I’ve been nervous about it since they announced we were the only two running.”

It wasn’t technically a lie, but it also wasn’t fun to bank on a technicality with Tay.

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

“I don’t either,” Sophie said. “But it’ll be fine. 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... And I feel like you have, uh, an advantage over me that I can’t exactly compete with.”

Sophie opened her mouth to inquire, then stopped herself short. Of course—precognition.

“I was hoping you could promise me something.” Tay’s eyes locked to the pavement, and she started kicking her own rock around. “Can you promise you won’t use your powers to win?”

“Yeah, of course.” Sophie tried to sound casual, but she’d accidentally kicked her rock way too hard, and it skittered out into the street. “I wouldn’t dream of cheating.”

Right? I wouldn’t cheat against Tay?

Tay stayed quiet as though she were trying to pull more words out of Sophie, but when none came, she relaxed. But that relief didn’t pass to Sophie. Instead, dread seeped in.

It’ll be okay, she told herself. I can still win without my powers.

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

The rest of the walk was silent, and Sophie’s stomach felt like it was recovering from a gut punch. How was she supposed to win without knowing the future? There was no way, right? It’d take a monumental amount of effort, and—

Marc jumped back in with the group and asked about what he’d missed. Tay fed him some vague details as the gas station came into view, and Sophie deflected by mentioning how dirty the shaved-ice banner had become. Regardless, that was where she always did her meditations and today was no exception. She took her seat beneath the sign and drew a few breaths to calm her mind. From this vantage point on the hard concrete ground, her friends looked exceptionally tall.

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

“I’d be stupid to do it,” Sophie said. “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 could do 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, as her thoughts were pulled toward Tay. First the rejection and now the election? The more she pushed these thoughts away, the more overbearing they became, and each new thought was a firework that spooked off her peace.

Forget it, she thought. Look for 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, but with a burst of concentration, she got through it with a working plan. 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 while she was distracted, Sophie gave Marc a reassuring nod. After a moment, Tay held out the dollar, and Sophie snatched it away. With a swagger, she stepped into the gas station. Marc and Tay entered behind her and, having seen this trick a dozen times before, split 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 low-stakes crime syndicate, and she 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. A moment later, the three of them were piling stacks of snacks at the register, and Sophie paid for the haul—including the movie, to Tay’s relief. With whatever remained, she booked them each a RydeShare taxi. It was always slow this time of day, and Sophie booked all three drivers who were active in the area. The first would take Sophie straight home while the other two would take Marc to his junker car and Tay to her Subie at the school. She could’ve booked them a RydeShare to split, but there was enough money for them each to have a pickup, and Sophie felt like showing off.

“Pick you up at 6:30,” Tay said, waving as Sophie climbed into the back seat of her RydeShare. “After Chipotle.”

“Right. After Chipotle.” Sophie stuffed her feelings. “Marc, don’t forget to bring your melatonin this time.”

“I won’t.”

The car door closed and Sophie buckled up. Her gaze lingered on Tay as the car pulled away, 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 advantages too, but Sophie couldn’t exactly ask her to stop being pretty, now could she?

CHAPTER THREE

Verbal Warning

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 Winona Fighter 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, pausing only to swallow the last bite in 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, and the only way to get better was to work hard. 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, but this was just a formality. 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.

"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."

Dinner ended on a quiet note, and afterward, everyone split. Katelyn rushed to grab her Hello Kitty towel—something Sophie wouldn't be caught dead with—while Mom and Dad prepped the car. Sophie wasn't long behind them as Tay rolled up in her red Forester, a hand-me-down from her aunt. Practically bouncing, Sophie raced out

the front door. Marc was already in the backseat—he'd need that space later—so Sophie took shotgun beside Tay. Even though they weren't touching, she could *feel* Tay beside her, and this had her vibrating.

"How's traffic?" Sophie asked.

"No delays on the way to Calisette."

"Cool. Let's go."

Tay hit the gas. 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 Forester like it was a spaceship. To be fair, it was out of place. It seemed like every other house 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 cars come from?—but the rattle of the road swallowed her voice, and she chose instead to let her mind wander.

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. Time to meditate. 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, and 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 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 grazed her arm and the meditation shattered. But before that—

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 I was going the speed limit."

"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 and she parked beneath its

golden glow. 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 traffic stop.

The officer glared through Marc's open window. Marc folded his hands and locked eyes with the back of Tay's seat. 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 into 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 placed his license into Tay's hand. In an intentional contrast, Sophie moved haphazardly 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 her hands closed into fists. Sophie held her breath and realized Tay had done the same.

“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 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.

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

CHAPTER FOUR

Calisette Hills

IN MINUTES, suburbia melted away, and they reached the outskirts of Calisette Hills. The world shifted to reflect the aesthetic of excess wealth. Every square inch of this neighborhood had been curated to an obsessive degree. The grass was thick, the pavement smooth, the fences white. All 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 get the front door open. “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 whirled 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 lay back in his seat. His dark skin melded with the shadows, and he closed his eyes, slipping into a dream.

“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 looked half asleep. 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 of 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, passing the dog and approaching the man at the door.

“That you, Marc?” she asked the stranger, just to be sure.

“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,” 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. A spread of Skittles, cookies, and Lays took over the coffee table.

The movie was terrible—legitimately bad. What seemed like a ripoff of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* quickly became a retelling of the movie *A Bug’s Life*. At some point, the animation dropped off to picture stills with voice-overs, and soon, Tay was lost in her phone, texting Devin or whoever.

By the time it was over, Sophie was responsible for an entire grocery bag worth of trash while Tay had only indulged in a protein bar. Marc returned to a silent credits roll, absolutely filthy. He was outdone only by Buck who rushed over to the soft white carpet and buried his head in the fabric.

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

“It was...” Tay paused. “Are you *sure* it’s better than *Meteornadocane*, Sophie?”

Sophie didn’t bother to answer, as that would force her to admit she was a liar. And she *wasn’t* a liar; she only had half the truth. Instead, she shrugged.

“Well, it was something,” Tay said. “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 roofing tiles.

"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.

Shit.

"I wish I had some sort of power," Tay said.

Sophie pretended 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!*” 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? You guys are like super-people, and I just feel... I don’t know. Powerless.”

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 panicked.

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 harbor, or do you think she’d just keep herself awake by yawning all night?”

“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,” Sophie said, the lie bubbling like acid in her chest. “It’s all good.” 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 be as smooth.

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. Okay. Something to work with, Marc thought.

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. That was on par for the people up here on the hills.

“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. Get out!”

Rick stormed out and returned to his desk, muttering under his breath the whole way.

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 basked in *schadenfreude*. This guy wouldn't survive a day in Coalview. What a loser.

Marc pushed his judgment aside. He needed 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 was 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. The longer Marc waited, the more he couldn’t figure out what was so hard about the decision. It was a million-dollar salary—what’s the holdup?

“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. 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 handcuffs from the change.

Where’s the common ground...

Emotions rolled through them both, and Marc dug through the trenches of his psyche to find a way to relate to him. 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... with just the right twist of nuance... they became as one.

Suddenly, Marc 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, *bad*.

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 knocked 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 bolt of dread piercing his heart.

Someone 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. And 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 FIVE

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 enough control to look. With the adrenaline surging, the already weak connection was slipping. “You should be more careful before your power gets you into any more trouble, DeMarcus.”

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 something small and black, “but it’s quite invasive, isn’t it?”

Marc said nothing.

“Tell Tay I said hello,” Ms. Jackson said, pressing metal prongs against the skin on Rick’s arm, “and tell Sophie she needs to do better. Be more diligent. Stop lying and cheating. Can you do that for me?”

A soundless ‘yes’ formed on Marc’s lips, and that was enough.

“Thanks.”

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 from the mere memory of the electrical surge.

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?"

"Ms. Jackson was fucking *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 dreamwalking, 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 Ms. Jackson was in there?"

"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 *lied*?” 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?” Tay’s 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 you broke it. You *broke* it, Sophie. You broke our line of trust. How can we trust you if you’re lying?”

Tay let this question linger, knowing the silence would stab the longer it simmered. 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.

“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.

The scent of chlorine bombarded Sophie as she shuffled through the front door. 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," 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."

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 grown to match 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.

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 just cope, however, as Phoebe had always been an early riser. But whatever. That didn't matter. She dialed her sister's number anyway.

"Hello?" Phoebe's groggy voice answered.

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

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. 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. "Before we get into it, I miss you."

Sophie paused and sat with the hollow feeling in her body. Every day without Phoebe felt harder than the last. Someone once told her it was a blessing to feel your heart squeeze when someone you love becomes distant, because the pain you feel is equal to the love you shared. Whoever said that was stupid.

"I miss you too."

"So, what's wrong?"

Sophie drew a breath, somehow more at ease. “I had a problem with my power today. 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 was all gray and faded. And then, it wouldn’t work at all. Phoebe... What’s happening to me?”

The line went silent as Phoebe paused to think. “I need more details. What were you doing when that first meditation broke?”

“I—” Sophie paused, nervous to answer. Finally, she relented. “I was trying to see if... if this girl Tay liked me.”

“Sophie!” Phoebe’s voice cracked with excitement. “Oh my goodness. My little sister is growing up! Is she your first crush?”

Sophie blushed, and her silence spoke louder than words.

“Sorry, I mean, that’s cool,” Phoebe said, very, very tactlessly. “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 Tay’s rejection.”

“Ahh, I get it. Sophie... have you—and this might be a stupid question—but have you ever had anxiety before?”

Anxiety? Me? She scoffed, then gave it real thought. “What does it feel like? Like, on the inside?”

“Uhm...” Phoebe clicked her tongue. “Have you ever felt like your mind won’t stop fixating on the past? Or maybe you’re feeling suffocated by stuff happening in the present? Or has your stomach ever knotted up

while you were thinking about the future? That's anxiety. It's like..." Phoebe paused. "It's like feeling emotionally out of breath at a time when you can't stop running."

"Oh, that's exactly how this feels."

"Right. Makes sense."

"So, it's anxiety?" Sophie said.

"It's anxiety."

"And why does that matter?"

"Well—" the phone crackled as Phoebe sat up in bed, "—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—there are thousands of seers 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 when you want nothing, or when you want one thing so much it drowns out everything else. After all, if you're thinking too much, then you're too distracted to meditate."

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

"Hold on, let me get you the number for the Buddha," Phoebe said with a chuckle.

Sophie felt like her sister's laughter was 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. But if you're going to get your power back, you'll have to either eliminate all your anxieties or obsess over one issue in particular. Nothing else will work."

“Well, I can’t erase all my anxieties,” Sophie said. “I won’t even have answers on Harvard until next year.”

“Then I recommend you put on some music and choose one thing to obsess over. And I mean *really* obsess over it. If you can sideline your other problems for a bit, you can find a meditation again.”

“You promise?”

“Never,” Phoebe said. “But I’ll hope for you.”

“Thanks,” Sophie said.

“I wish I could do more to help, but I have to go. It’s a big day tomorrow. If you need anything, call me later, okay? Preferably when the sun is up in California.”

“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 did anyone ever get their shit together?

CHAPTER SIX

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 furious at her for lying, Sophie couldn't stomach the thought of facing her over and over again. That was something that needed to be handled later. Voting day for class president wouldn't be for months, and Harvard admissions not for years—surely, those things could be pocketed. Logically, it followed that, with Ms. Jackson busy all night at her girls' club, it was unlikely the pop test would be tomorrow. That meant the biggest question of the evening was also one that was easy to obsess over: What was Ms. Jackson doing at Rick's house?

Sophie closed her eyes and focused on the situation. In the center of her mind, the bad night played out again and again, and Sophie convinced herself that she could win her friends back by figuring out why Ms. Jackson was at Rick's. She just needed to...

Suddenly, the world faded away.

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Sophie's eyes opened in a new world. A meditation. Thank god. 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. Ms. Jackson's class. She glared at her teacher all through the lecture, and when the final bell rang, it was her turn to strike. She approached the front desk, and in the safety of the meditation, she decided she would get answers no matter what.

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

"How did you know about Marc last night?"

Ms. Jackson moved her eyes to meet Sophie's gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about." She looked back at the paper.

"We went to a house last night," Sophie said. "Marc possessed the guy there, and you recognized him while he was dreamwalking 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 sat back in her chair and let her eyes glint. "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, and a dark thought crossed her mind, but she put down her impulse to escalate. That wasn't who she was; it wasn't who she wanted to be.

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

"Marc's mistaken then," 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, her eyes moving back to the work on her desk. 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 kept rising to the top of her mind, and she couldn’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 just gone 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 the coming evening.

Sophie’s family huddled around the dinner table, a plate of spaghetti in front of each of them. Katelyn scarfed her food as usual, eager to carb-load before swim practice, while Sophie barely touched a noodle. Out of respect for how Sophie had asked to be treated in the past, Mom and Dad let their daughter sulk, trusting her to find solutions to her problems. Deep down, though, Sophie wished they’d ask about her feelings, even if it was just so she could 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 might be—Hello?”

“Hi!” A chipper voice sounded on the line. “This is Cathy from

Harvard University. Is this Sophie Valentine?”

“Hi, yes. How are you?”

“I’m great, thanks for asking. I’m calling today because we received your junior-year prescreening package. In my hands, I have your preliminary academic resumé and—” she flipped through the pages silently for a moment before coming back with an optimistic tone, “—it’s very strong.”

“Thank you! I—”

“But there were some gaps that need attention,” Cathy continued, suddenly down to earth. “You see, all Harvard applicants have a strong resumé. There are over 20,000 high schools in the United States alone—which means 20,000 valedictorians. At Harvard, we only admit about 2,000 people. So, you do the math.”

Math was, notably, a sore subject for Sophie.

“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?”

“Voting won’t happen ’til March 14th, but I think I have a chance of winning.”

“Ah, well, if you’re elected, you’ll have an *extremely* competitive application. Although...” Cathy’s silence lingered a little too long amid the sound of ruffled pages, “...I’d still like to point out how exceptional Harvard students are. There are thousands of picture-perfect class presidents across the nation, and we here at Harvard only accept the best of the best. While you’ve hit incredible milestones, I still 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 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.”

The phone beeped. The call ended. Sophie’s attention snapped back to the dining room where she found the whole family staring. 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 student,” Dad beamed.

“You’ll make a fine lawyer, or doctor, or anything else you want.” Mom 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—of anxiety. She only had a good package if she remained perfect—even then, that might not be enough.

And then what? Once she got in, what would she study? Medicine? Psychology? Business?

Whatever. It doesn’t matter. Harvard’s the goal.

Mom and Dad turned away to start gathering their belongings, and Katelyn moved closer, her eyes narrow with suspicion.

“They said your package was perfect?” Katelyn asked.

“They said it was strong,” Sophie said.

“What’s the holdup?”

“They want me to do a sport. 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 swim team,” Katelyn said. “Spring season just started.”

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

“That’s it?” Katelyn asked.

“That’s it.”

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Prophecy

HARVARD WAS all that mattered now, Sophie decided. That night, she 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 or memorizing answers from whoever had the best grade, but with the pressure mounting, she left nothing to chance. Each day passed 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. Maybe nothing would bring them back. Believing this was the only reason she could still use her power anyway, and so long as she sacrificed everything else in her life forever, her power would remain. Simple, right?

Friday came to a close, and after one successful week of avoiding even a single error, the cycle began anew. Saturday disappeared in support of test prep, and Sunday was cut short because of a migraine. It was the end of the weekend way too fast, and Sophie dragged herself to bed amid a head full of pain. Only another thousand weeks of perfection to go before she became president of the world—if that's what she wanted.

What did she want, anyway?

The hippocampus is in the center of the brain, Sophie thought, her mind ceaselessly 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 was in feats like this. And only when the pain dulled to a prickle did she find any comfort in sleep.

This peace was shattered, however, by an overly vivid dream—the kind Sophie used to get before she developed her abilities. This dream was a glance at an inevitable future. It was an omen of what was to come. A promise of 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 draft swept through the open room. If a tumbleweed had been present, 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. "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. But

when I repackaged the questions and removed the multiple-choice, you failed? If I had any doubts before, I don't anymore. You've been cheating."

"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 my class with a C-minus."

"That's not fair!" future Sophie shouted.

"It's more than fair." Ms. Jackson snatched the paper off the desk. "You'll get to pass, and we both avoid an investigation."

"And we can kiss Harvard goodbye," future Sophie spat.

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

"And you can kiss Harvard goodbye," Ms. Jackson repeated.

"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 fine. Believe it or not, Sophie, I'm here to help you. 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 her future.

“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 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, carving 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, leaving 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 lost herself to the memories. “Within a month, he took me out on a date, and the rest is history.”

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

“No,” Mom said, her voice soothing like honey. “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

you'll fail. 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 a span of three hours, your life could change in any number of ways—but you have to understand the 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 you don't remember what it's like to fail," Mom said. "It's humbling and something we should all do every now and again, if only to remember that nobody else cares when you fail. 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. Your future's bright, Harvard or not, okay? That's just the kind of person you are."

"I... 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. "I like taking care of you, Soph. Truthfully, sometimes I worry you don't need me anymore, so, it makes me happy when you ask for help. It always will."

Sophie smiled, unsure how to respond.

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

"Night, Mom."

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 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 just like that, Sophie was officially

the newest member of the swim team.

Sophie lowered her gaze and stared into her cereal as though the milk might give her a better idea on how to get into Harvard. It did not.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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 made a mistake.

“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.

Katelyn gave the same maniacal smile Coach had given.

“You’re with me, then. Come on.”

Katelyn jumped in the pool, 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 to the ledge 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 signal with Tay and Marc. 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, welcome to hell.”

This stroke must be awful.

“Look,” Olivia said, seeing the terror on Sophie’s face, “it’s actually 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. After a couple seconds, the next girl followed, and Olivia prepped, coiling her legs up against the wall.

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

“Yards.”

“What?”

But Olivia kicked 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 of embarrassment right then and there.

“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 set on fire than swim another lap. At least that pain would have an end to it.

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 would've been 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? Whatever. 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. That's weird, 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.

“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 got scheduled for next Friday. That Tay's a sniper, so you'll need some floaties to stay alive."

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.

"I knew it. Let's do it, lady. Good luck, cowgirl."

I can do this, Sophie thought, traversing 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 NINE

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. 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 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 a model student, but the pair made it easy, and she was impressed by the caliber of 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 physically—but 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 sleep to get to the visions where she only had the energy to check in on Ms. Jackson's pop test status.

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 used her time wisely by scribbling down debate ideas between races until, eventually, the energy of the meet pulled her in.

As times and placements rolled in, emotions overflowed. The boys were either screaming in joy or vomiting along the fence—or both. 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 the other swimmers by several strokes. After just one meet, Sophie had to admit it was fun to watch her sister crush.

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

Worse, the debate took place during sixth period, just before Ms. Jackson's class. That meant that, if she wanted to check for a pop test, she'd have to cut through the debate. She'd have to inadvertently 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. Today, she would see Tay. Not just see her—talk to her. With the whole school watching. Listening. Judging. This would hardly be a friendly reunion. And yet, it was coming all the same.

Morning and afternoon were a blur; the only thing that mattered was the debate, and time flew. It seemed the clocks in the school no longer ticked—they simply jolted from bell to bell. And though her teachers carried on like it was a normal day, she marched like a zombie between classes, knowing better. 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 who was shuffling extremely thorough notes. Seriously, how many papers did she have?

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, speaking to the girls on stage as much as to the audience of—

Sophie peered through the shadows. The whole junior grade was there to watch her fold. Hundreds of people.

"Would you mind introducing yourselves?" Mr. Mod faced Sophie.

"Uh, hi." Her voice wavered. "I'm Sophie Valentine, 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, in addition to many other leagues."

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 the enthusiastic student.

Sophie swallowed. While she'd been drowning—figuratively and literally—Tay had been preparing. Neither of them cared about eSports, Sophie knew, but Tay discerned that a portion of the class wanted it to happen, 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 audience. 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 hours at lunchtime 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 must 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. 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. And... 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. It was one lie, and you already know it was a mistake. And now, you didn't cheat, even 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."

Tay pushed forward and wrapped Sophie up in her arms, pulling her close so Sophie could cry into her shoulder.

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

Tay chortled, ugly and authentic. 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 not to seem too happy about this. She beamed a smile and 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 path that held the best outcome at the end. How could she know for certain?

CHAPTER TEN

The Search for Answers

OUTSIDE MS. Jackson's room, Sophie paused to fix herself. She straightened her hair, wiped her makeup away, 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-lesson 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.

At this point, I'd be lucky if 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 into 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 anything else?"

"No," Sophie said, pointedly.

"Good. Then have a nice 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 ridiculous. Do you think she planned it for debate day to make sure you were unprepared?"

"Actually, I think it's about my meditations. She knows more than she lets on."

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

The mention of Marc stripped Sophie of her breath. He was

probably already on the bus home, alone.

“Then let’s get some answers,” Sophie said. “Not just for me, but for Marc too. Are you free this afternoon to come to my place?”

“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 trust you.”

Sophie gave the most relieved smile of her life.

On the drive home, Sophie texted Katelyn to tell her that she needed the day off from swim practice. Her excuse was a bad case of DOMS, but Katelyn knew better. Regardless, Katelyn 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 pulled into the driveway. How far would she be willing to go? What was her plan? Would anything work to crack Ms. Jackson? They got out of the car, and each step toward her room was heavier than the last, weighed down by the morality of what they were about to do.

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 with an old friend. It was nice.

“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 mat. “At Rick’s, she was in a meeting, right? If we track her to the next meeting, we can learn about the members of her club and deduce why they’re there.”

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

“I mean—” Sophie thought a moment, “—would that be crazy? I can see the future. Marc can share dreams. Is it wild to think Ms. Jackson

is hiding something too?”

“I suppose not,” Tay said. “Let’s figure it out. 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 we’re going to do it anyway.”

Tay nodded and gave a confident smile. “Alright. Ready.”

With that, Sophie drew a deep breath and closed her eyes. Tonight, she was fueled by one desire, and one desire alone. 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 exactly?” 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 in a tight line. It wasn't the display of doubt that hurt Sophie the most—it was the fact that she deserved it. Something had to be done.

“Here, let me put you at ease,” Sophie said, taking slow steps toward her dresser. “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 told me in a meditation that you didn’t get all the gifts you wanted. So, I went out, and I got you exactly what you wanted, and I’ve been holding onto it for the right occasion.” Sophie opened the bottom drawer of her dresser and pulled out *Human, All Too Human* by Nietzsche.

“Oh my gosh!” Tay swiped the book from Sophie’s hands and clutched it against her chest. “How did you know? I was eying a copy of this just a few days ago!”

Sophie smiled. “Look, you’ll get this for real in the future, but you and I both know I’d never spoil such a surprise unless this was a meditation. Does it make you feel better?”

“Yeah, it does,” Tay said, placing the book back in the drawer as though it were a fragile antique. “Alright, consider me sold. Let’s get to business then.”

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 started 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, 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, jostling them in different

directions, and Sophie laughed as the pressure pushed 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.

"Hey, so what happened to your boyfriend?" Sophie asked. "You said you guys broke up?"

Tay gave Sophie a bewildered look. "He *shaved*."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," Tay said. "And that was after he ate Chipotle with his hands."

Sophie gave her a confused look. "Isn't that how you eat burritos?"

"He ordered..." Tay could barely contain her laughter. "He ordered a bowl, Sophie."

"No way."

"Yeah way."

As they cut through Bristol, they passed a police cruiser lying in wait. Tay was definitely speeding, but the officer paid them no mind. In fact, as Sophie took a longer glimpse, she found the cop was fast asleep, his eyes closed and his chin to his shoulder.

"Oof, that was lucky," Tay said.

"You're telling me," Sophie said. "Hey, we're getting close to Ms. Jackson's neighborhood. Take a left at the next light."

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, rolling to a stop 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 by her car and turned down the sidewalk. Suddenly, the teacher was making a beeline 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, Sophie 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, fighting to keep her voice strong. “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.

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 here. “You picked the one day I had the debate. 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 ELEVEN

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 the vision.

Sophie cursed, and Tay jumped.

"Ms. Jackson knew we were going to be there," Sophie said.

"What?"

"She knew *when* we were going to be there. Down 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, it has us pinned."

Tay nudged the card closer to Sophie. "Buy a GPS. We can stick it to her car. Maybe she'll take us straight to her coven."

Sophie eyed the credit card and nodded.

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

She closed her eyes and tried again.

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Safe in the meditation, Tay drove them to the store where they picked out the best tracker money could buy, charging it to her *emergency-only* card. The drive out to Ms. Jackson's house was slower this time, likely

because Sophie hadn't given away the gift to prove the meditation. 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 haunting now.

"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 under the bumper. Then, Sophie scrambled back to the car, and Tay hit the gas. In seconds, they were out of sight.

Sophie hit the ceiling with her fist. "Hell yeah. Now, we wait."

Tay knew exactly where to go—a quality gas station lay just a mile away. Once there, Sophie stayed in the car while Tay went hunting for snacks. Instead of nuts and protein bars, Tay came back with an entire box of Zebra Cakes. She dumped the contents between them.

"I didn't take you as a Zebra Cake girly," Sophie said, digging into her first one.

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

"You're checking now?" Sophie deadpanned. "Not before all that illegal stuff we just did?"

"Well, are we?" Tay asked, grabbing two cakes at once.

"Yeah," Sophie said.

"Oh, thish ish sho good," Tay said. She was suddenly holding only one cake. "I know I won't remember this later, but—" she gulped, "*god* I love sugar."

Sophie took a small bite of a cake and felt a pop of joy. Maybe she was more familiar with sweets or more focused on the mission, but the

feeling was nothing like what Tay was experiencing. She lowered the snack and looked over Tay, almost evaluating her. As always, Tay was in perfect shape, dressed in a nice-fitting shirt and designer jeans. A vine of insecurity twined around Sophie's heart as a flake of frosting dripped onto her shirt.

"Do you think I should put more effort into my appearance?" Sophie asked, brushing the crumb away.

"No, you're gorgeous," Tay said automatically.

"Can I get an honest answer?"

Tay swallowed and looked Sophie over. Then, she shrugged.

"I mean, you don't need to change anything, but you *could* put more effort in."

Even though Sophie had asked for honesty, it hurt to receive it.

"Why do you do it?" Sophie asked. "Diet. Run. Dress nice. It sounds like a lot of work."

"Because it's all I have control over," Tay said, reaching for another cake. "You're special, Sophie. You get to control every possible future, so if you want a specific outcome, you just find the path. But I have to swim through life blind and stack the deck in my favor. That means planning, prepping, and putting in the work. I mean—on the election alone, people are more likely to vote for someone who presents well, you know? But there's also health, power, self-esteem—I figured out early on that taking care of myself has no downside."

"Right..." Sophie caught a glimpse of herself in the side-view mirror and frowned. Then, she straightened out a strand of hair and ripped a thread from her shirt.

"Mmm, if the real me saw what I was doing, she'd throw a fit," Tay said, her mouth full. Then, she paused. "I mean, I am the real me... but, well..."

"You're real," Sophie said, dusting frosting off her fingers. "I mean, you always act like you're real—except for those rare moments when I get to see how you *really* feel about things. I'll remember your Zebra

Cake obsession and surprise you one day.”

Tay’s smile faded, and a fourth pastry found its way into her grasp. But it hovered only halfway to her mouth before being lowered to her lap.

“Sophie,” Tay said, her tone more inquisitive than usual. “How much do you know about me?”

“We’re best friends, so—a lot.”

“No, I mean... How much do you know about me that I don’t know you know? You must have a lot of memories with me that I don’t share with you, right?”

“I... yeah...”

“That’s weird, isn’t it?” Tay put the cake down. “In any other friendship, I would’ve spent exactly the same amount of time with you as you’ve spent with me. But you must’ve spent *days* with me that I don’t remember.”

Sophie shifted uncomfortably. It was true, but she didn’t want to say it out loud. Put this way, it seemed rather parasocial.

“Am I going to stop existing after this meditation?” Tay drew a sharp breath. “Like, when you wake up, will I just... *poof*?”

“Well...” Sophie shrugged. “Kind of.”

Silence.

By now, Tay had forgotten about the cake. “Well, I don’t remember what life was like before I was born, right? And that doesn’t bother me. This is kind of the same thing.”

“I guess so.”

In all her time with precognitive powers, Sophie had never realized how much she’d been asking from Tay. Here, Tay was rationalizing the equivalence of death just to help Sophie achieve petty revenge. That was a big deal.

And it begged a deeper question. How much had Sophie fallen for real Tay versus meditation Tay? Like, it’d be easy to convince herself that she’d fallen for the authentic Tay, but—wouldn’t the authentic Tay

be the one from the real world? The one with reservations and secrets and—

“You know, it feels so lame to admit this, but I’ve been really into Nietzsche lately,” Tay said.

“Nietzsche, really?” Sophie felt her heart dim. To Tay, this was a big moment. She was putting her soul out there for the very first time. But for Sophie? For Sophie, this wasn’t the first time she’d heard this.

“Yeah.” Tay sat up straighter and faced Sophie. “I want to be on your level. You’re not some average high schooler, Sophie—you’re an Übermensch. The next evolution. How am I supposed to keep up?”

Sophie smiled, but it was hollow. “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—until 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 out of Bristol toward Coalview. The road narrowed, but Tay stayed focused.

“Left at the light.”

“Straight ahead.”

“Run this light.”

“Go faster!”

The buildings deteriorated in quality and Tay’s car struggled to keep up. Ms. Jackson drove through all the worst parts of town, riding in circles until the sun dipped below the horizon. The streetlamps flickered on, assisting the moon in lighting the road, and still, Ms. Jackson continued her haphazard path away from them. Finally, the dot stopped moving in a dead-end alley.

“We 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 a wall at the end of a road, but Ms. Jackson’s car was nowhere to be found. What

was found, however, was the GPS tracker that'd been stripped from the bumper lying dormant on the ground. Above it, a line of white spray-paint graffiti stretched across a brick wall. The paint was dry and the script was familiar.

GO HOME, SOPHIE
TRY ANOTHER TIME



CHAPTER TWELVE

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 fumed.

Tay smiled. “I’m guessing it didn’t go well?” she said, nonplussed.

“I swear,” Sophie said, “in the next meditation, I’m going to strangle her.”

“What happened?”

Sophie told her everything—leaving out the gas station stop—and felt herself relax the longer the story went on. The irony of hiding their gas station conversation didn’t escape Sophie, but she wanted more time to figure out what to do about it.

“Alright, well, while you were meditating, I made a new plan,” Tay said. “I was thinking that maybe if we—”

“Actually—” Sophie raised a hand between them, “—I’m going to let it go.”

Tay blinked. “What?”

“Whatever Ms. Jackson’s doing... however she’s doing it... it’s working. She’s two steps ahead and pulling away. We’re beat.”

“So, you’re giving up?” Tay asked. “What about Marc?”

“I’m sorry, Tay. I—” Sophie shrugged. “I can’t do this.” It wasn’t

Ms. Jackson she couldn't face again—it was Tay.

Tay tried to look neutral, but the slope of her lips gave too much away.

“Okay,” she said. “I get it.” She stood and moved to gather her stuff.

“It's nothing you did,” Sophie said, standing to meet her. “It's just—”

“No, I know. It's fine.”

“Listen, Tay,” Sophie's voice softened. Tay stopped and faced her. “It's been a really rough couple of weeks, and I need to figure out what it is I want.”

Tay considered this a long time before nodding. “Okay.” She sounded sincere. “I'll see you on Monday.”

“Yeah,” Sophie whispered through the break of tears. “Monday.”

Tay stepped forward and gave Sophie a hug. Somehow, it was both painful and comfortable. Then, she left without another word.

As Tay departed, Sophie stood before her mirror. There, she straightened her hair and pulled a thread on her shirt—the same one she'd pulled at the gas station. Her eyes drifted to the meditation pad, and she shook the thought. There was too much rattling around in her head, and her fury against Ms. Jackson had evaporated. Meditation would be impossible right now.

I should've just gone to swim practice.

All weekend, Sophie returned to the meditation mat to see the future, but her brain was too full. Full of desires, full of memories, full of anxiety. Only once did she get close to slipping away, but a jolt of fear about Tay snapped her out of it. By the time Sunday afternoon 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. 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. Like, midnight on the west coast late.

“Hello?” Her older sister groaned on the line, not bothering to hide her sleepiness.

“Hi, Phoebe,” Sophie said, her voice stiff. “Uh, how are you?”

There was a strained silence.

“What’s wrong?” Phoebe asked. “It’s *really* late this time.”

“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, uhm, focusing on one thing?”

“Yes,” Sophie said, “but I can’t get back to that headspace.”

“So, you have too much anxiety, got it.” Phoebe yawned. “Well, it *was* dumb to rely on the obsession strategy—that was supposed to be a band-aid.”

“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. You know, the old-fashioned way.”

“The old-fashioned way?”

“Yeah. Confront your issues. Close some doors. Upset some people. You’re going to need to accept the consequences of the things you can’t control.”

“Noooo,” Sophie whined.

“Yeeahhh,” Phoebe replied, her tone more flat and less dramatic. “One by one, you’ll need to approach each anxiety and put them to rest.”

Sophie lowered her phone and put Phoebe on speaker. “So, like—I need to think about what’s causing me anxiety, then?”

“There’s a simpler way than brainstorming,” Phoebe said. “Just try to meditate again. Whatever thought stops you from reaching peace, write it down. Then, look over your list and get to work.”

Sophie sighed 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 said more sternly. “Now, it’s three in the morning. Do you need anything else?”

“No,” Sophie said. “Thank you for listening.”

“Of course, Soph. Now, call if you think of anything else. And in case you haven’t looked at a clock, I mean it. Figure this out and get some sleep. Love you, sis.”

“Love you too.”

Sophie hung up. Slowly, she got up from her bed and shook her legs out. Then, with the tiniest of steps, she moved to her mat and sat on it. Her eyes closed and, just as Phoebe had said, her brain blurted out one anxiety after another. It was practically screaming. Sophie wrote down each thought, and at the end, she saw how massive the list had become. How impossible it was to complete.

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 game Ms. Jackson is playing.

I want to win my first swim race.

Her stomach turned. The list required her to be perfect—now *without* precognition. She wasn’t sure she could pull it off. She scanned the list again, searching for a way to take a first step, but everything was so far away, so far out of reach. At this rate, it’d be years before she could see the future again.

Sophie laid in bed the rest of the night with closed fists and open eyes, staring at the bumps in the popcorn ceiling. By the time her alarm

blared, she'd named nearly a dozen constellations from the imaginary patterns above her. Defeated, she rolled out of bed and trudged downstairs. Katelyn was already there, a bowl of protein cereal and a plate of eggs before her.

"You comin' to shwim practish tonight?" Katelyn asked, her mouth full.

"I... I don't know..." Sophie answered, pouring a bowl of Lucky Charms.

"Olivia said she missed you," Katelyn said, swallowing her bite. "I missed you too."

Sophie looked up at Katelyn through her lashes, checking to make sure she was serious. For the first time all night—and morning—she cracked a smile. It was tight and toothless, but genuine.

"Alright," Sophie said. "I'll go to practice, but don't expect much. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Awesome."

This was the scariest day of Sophie's life. She kept her head low, taking no chances and making no mistakes. At lunch, she took her books to the library and got a head start on her homework. There, she actually had to study, which was so *annoying* given how quiet the library was, and though her phone was face down on the table, it called out to her through phantom rings and vibrations.

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? Seconds before the bell rang to start seventh period, Sophie shuffled into her seat and stared down at her desk.

But class proceeded as usual. Right away, Ms. Jackson proceeded to ramble, and Sophie worked to contain her anger. But the more her teacher's shrill voice sounded, the angrier she became. Sophie felt an urge to leave, but she didn't. She endured, clicking her pen and staring at the clock, willing the bell to ring.

Finally, it did.

Sophie stuffed her notebook and stood to leave, but Ms. Jackson stopped her—because of course she did.

“Sophie, a word please.”

Sophie stared daggers at Ms. Jackson. All around her, whispers of her name erupted from her classmates, and Sophie’s cheeks flushed red. She waited silently for everyone to leave before approaching the front desk. There, she stood beside the empty chair she was expected to sit in and looked down at her teacher.

“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. “25.”

Sophie looked away, unable to meet her teacher’s eyes. Briefly, she recognized this moment. She’d seen it before, right?

“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. But when I repackaged the questions and removed the multiple-choice, you failed? If I had any doubts before, I don’t anymore. You’ve been cheating.”

Sophie gritted her teeth. “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 my class with a C-minus.”

Anger boiled over. “That’s not fair!”

“It’s more than fair.” Ms. Jackson picked the paper off the desk. “You’ll get to pass, and we both avoid an investigation.”

“And we can kiss Harvard goodbye,” Sophie seethed.

Ms. Jackson looked at Sophie with eyes that sparkled as she

straightened a stack of papers on her desk. Sophie knew Ms. Jackson relished this. The idea of crushing dreams? It must be euphoric to her.

“And you can kiss Harvard goodbye.”

Something inside Sophie cracked. The armor protecting her ego fractured, and she confronted the fact that she wasn’t bulletproof. 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 fine. Believe it or not, Sophie, I’m here to help you. 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! That’s why you recognized it! 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. Then, she carried on toward the Ledge.

At the double doors before the terrace, she paused to collect herself, not wanting 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.

At least it’s over, she thought.

This was the brightest side she could come up with. The test was over, the prophecy complete. Now, she was even with the universe. Everything from here on out would be fresh and clean.

Finally ready, she pushed open the doors—but Tay wasn’t there. Instead, she was face-to-face with Marc.

Marc?

For the first time since their falling out, Marc was at the Ledge, and he looked like shit. More tired than usual. More defeated than usual. More... desperate?

“Hey, Sophie,” Marc said. “I need your help.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marc

MARC MET Sophie's gaze, stone-faced and unshakable. Now more than ever, Sophie wished she could've seen the future. More than *ever*, she felt unprepared for what was to come.

"Hi, Sophie," Marc said. "I need your help."

Sophie took a step forward, but she said nothing.

"My family is going to get evicted if we don't come up with \$200 by the end of the week. Can we go to the gas station for some scratch-offs?"

"Marc," Sophie said, her voice like a doctor's delivering bad news. "My power. It's... gone."

Marc tilted his head. "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. He looked back up with misty eyes.

"Can we try?" Marc pleaded. "I need this."

Sophie swallowed, then nodded. She thought of her mom who encouraged her to take more chances. If there was ever a time to try and fail, this was it.

"We can try," Sophie said, shrugging off her backpack. "But please don't hold onto hope." She took a seat beneath the graffiti smiley face

and leaned her head against the wall. Her eyes closed and her hands folded in her lap. Then, she began breathing. Deep in... deep out... But instead of the unfolding future, she only experienced pressure. Though she wasn't going to give up, Marc broke her concentration after thirty minutes.

"Listen, Sophie," Marc said gently. "This is really important. If you're holding back because I haven't been talking with you—"

Sophie opened her eyes. "Look, man—I'm trying my best here. I've been struggling."

"For as long as I've known you, you've been perfect with your meditations," Marc said, getting heated. "But now that I need you, you can't do it?"

"You think I'd risk your whole life to make a point?" Sophie's face twisted. "Do you still think I'm a liar?"

Marc didn't respond. In fact, he looked away.

"Seriously?" Sophie scoffed. "Yeah, I lied to you once—but that was a mistake. It doesn't make me a bad person. I'm *not* a liar. In case you haven't noticed, between the debate, my sinking grades, and the stench of chlorine in my hair, I've had a really rough few weeks."

"Oh, yeah. I can't imagine *anything* more stressful than *your* life." Marc stood and dusted off his jeans. "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 control. The hardest life in the world."

"That's not fair." Sophie was suddenly on her feet too. "Why don't *you* get a job? You could've earned rent by yourself by now."

"Get a job? Good idea! Why didn't I think of that?" Marc threw up his hands. "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.

He won't follow through, Sophie thought. Right?

"Fine," Sophie said. "Do it."

With a sneer, Marc stormed away. Sophie took a step to stop him, but stopped herself. He didn't deserve her right now. She took a pivot and marched in the opposite direction until she was home. There, she blasted music on her speaker and sobbed into her pillows.

When swim practice rolled around, she was eager to leave the house. At least in the water, there'd be no phones. No conversations. No distractions. And it was there in the pool, halfway between a flip turn and drowning, where she had an idea to solve Marc's problem.

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, but less thrilled to see him looking annoyed. Burdened. Spited. Without a word, she held up \$200 and placed it in his hand.

Marc eyed the money, his eyes twinkling. There was a moment of hesitation, and Sophie knew he was thinking about giving it back. But he didn't. She let out a breath of relief.

He hasn't robbed anyone.

"So, did your power come back after all?" Marc asked.

"No, you prick." She flared her nostrils and gave him a disgusted look. "I sold my speaker on marketplace."

Marc looked down at the money, then up at Sophie.

"Listen," Sophie said, trying to change the tenor of the conversation. "I'm sorry I lied. I put you in an awkward spot at Rick's, and I don't want to make that mistake again. If there was a way to prove that's how I feel, I'd do it."

Marc stared at Sophie, his eyes measuring every inch of her posture.

“There’s a way,” he said. With a shrug, he pulled off his backpack and reached deep inside to retrieve a bottle of melatonin.

“What’s this?” Sophie asked.

“Fifteen milligrams will knock you out in broad daylight,” he said, cracking the lid. “My power works through empathy, so if you let me sleepwalk with your body, I’ll know what you feel.”

“That’s what it’ll take?” Sophie gave him a disgusted look. “My word isn’t good enough?”

“Your words caused this in the first place,” Marc said. “If you want my trust back—”

“Say no more, asshole.”

Sophie grabbed three pills and swallowed them dry. In minutes, her eyelids grew heavy, and the gentle pull of sleep dragged her down. She lay in a shaded patch of concrete, and together, they fell asleep.

Fifteen minutes passed before Sophie opened her eyes. In that time, Marc had connected, passed through her mind, and departed. The ritual was complete. Coming out of it, Marc was more disheveled than Sophie—and for good reason.

“Holy shit,” Marc said, out of breath. He rolled his shoulders as though he’d experienced the weight of Atlas himself. “I’m sorry. I should’ve believed you.”

“You really should’ve.” Sophie turned to hide her face. Baring her mind and soul—being left completely vulnerable—left her reeling. She was shaking, so overwhelmed by emotion that she couldn’t process anything. Instead, she took on a thousand-yard stare and suffered from a quivering bottom lip.

“I can’t believe—I didn’t mean—” Marc slipped the money back into Sophie’s hands.

“I don’t want it.”

“No, I mean—come with me. Give this to Mom in person.” Marc closed her fist around the cash. “She can make you dinner and—”

“I have swim practice,” Sophie said, wiping her face. “In 3 hours.”

“Then I’ll text her so the food’s ready when we get there.”

Sophie stopped to consider. This *was* the first time that Marc had ever invited her to his house.

“Fine,” Sophie said, sniffing. “But not for you. For your mom.”

“Thanks,” Marc whispered. “That’s all I ask.” He paused. “I really should’ve believed you.”

Sophie wiped her nose. “You really should’ve.”

They stood and moved across the schoolyard, crossing to the back of the parking lot. The lot was empty this time of day, save for Marc’s decrepit junker of a car. The exterior was rusted, its peeling paint barely covering a smattering of dents. Mechanically, it wasn’t doing much better. No air conditioning, broken shocks, and a bad smell. To think that he drove this to school each day from—

Where did he live?

“Hold on. I’ve gotta—” Marc pulled a jug of water from the backseat and popped the hood. There, he poured the water into the radiator. When the jug was empty, he pulled out another container—this one a quart of oil.

“Isn’t oil expensive?” Sophie asked.

“It’s cheaper than a new car,” Marc said, steadying the funnel.

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, but he knew how to finesse it. In no time at all—except the ten minutes of prep work he’d just done—they were chugging along. But even the smooth asphalt around the school felt like the rocky roads of Coalview in this hunk of junk.

“So, why *does* your hair smell of chlorine?” Marc asked once they were off school property.

“I joined swim team,” Sophie said, her words still short.

Marc chanced an incredulous look. “Really?”

Sophie kept her gaze out the window. “Yeah.”

“How’s that been?”

“Good.”

“When’s your next competition?”

Sophie softened a little, appreciating Marc’s attempt to make things normal. With a heavy sigh, she faced Marc and relaxed.

“Coach says I’ll be competing in a couple weeks, but I hope it doesn’t happen.”

“You don’t want to race?” Marc tapped his thumb on the steering wheel. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not any good. I won’t win.”

Marc gave a stifled laugh. “You’ve never done competitive sports before, have you?”

“Well... no...” Sophie’s 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 wrong.”

“I am?”

“Yeah.”

The car sputtered, struggling on its journey to the speed limit.

“Let me ask you this,” Marc said. “How many people are there in a race?”

“Five,” Sophie said.

“So, that means there are four losers in every race, right? 80% of the people are going to lose every time they touch the water, right?”

“Right.”

“So, if all the swimmers were *only* there to win, how many people would stick with the sport?”

“Not a lot, I imagine,” Sophie said.

“So, you have to ask yourself: why do four losers go out and compete anyway? What’s in it that keeps them motivated?”

“My theory is that they’re masochists.” Sophie thought of Olivia.

“But maybe there’s something more.”

“There is,” Marc said. “Do you have a time on your race yet?”

“No.”

“Well, time yourself. Then, try to beat your time.” Marc put his whole weight into a right turn. “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 yourself. Take it from me, a guy who takes L after L and still steps up to the plate. So long as you’re a better person tomorrow than you were today, 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. He put the car in park and stepped out onto a driveway of pebbles.

“DeMarcus! DeMarcus!” A young boy, no older than seven with braided hair, rushed up to Marc from a corner unit. A little girl around four pattered behind him, her puffy ponytail bobbing up and down with each heavy step. Once by Marc’s side, they leapt on each of his legs and hugged tight.

“Jamal! Tiana!” Marc patted their heads. “This is my friend Sophie.”

Jamal and Tiana peeled off Marc and rushed to hug Sophie. She knelt to accept and smiled warmly.

“I didn’t know you had siblings,” 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.

Marc scooped Tiana up and carried her inside. Sophie followed into the musty apartment. Toys, clothes, and blankets were strewn across the living room, and a pile of trash was stacked neatly by 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 for the kids. 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 *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 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. It didn't.

“This is so nice of you, Sophie. It really is. I—” She paused to catch her voice. “We try so hard to make it work, but we just reached the end of our lease, and the landlords raised rent again. 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. 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 she was helping this family. Without her help, maybe they’d have found a different route to staying afloat, but maybe it would’ve been more desperate—like robbery. After all, as Sophie looked around the room, she wasn’t sure they could get \$200 for *all* their possessions, let alone the single speaker it took her.

“DeMarcus,” Mrs. Brown took a seat. “Did you get a call back from the hardware store yet?”

“No.”

“How about the bowling alley or the dollar store?”

“I’ll tell you when I get hired.” Marc shuffled away from his mother

and took a seat next to Jamal, pretending to be as enthused with the Red Power Ranger as he was.

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 thing.” Mrs. Brown chuckled. “He put regular dish soap in 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?” Marc turned from the T.V. “That nobody wants to hire me? That the whole town takes one look at the name DeMarcus and tosses the application?”

“Do you think these places are profiling you?” Sophie asked.

Mom looked at Marc, imploring him to be honest in his response, but Marc shook his head.

“Forget it,” 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 the Power Rangers. Tiana, however, stared up at Sophie with stars in her eyes before jumping into a tight hug. With her arms gripping tight, she whispered, “Next time, I’ll show you Ken.” 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. It looked like quite a bit. 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 and you’re still not hired?”

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. She swelled with excitement, but Marc dampened it.

“You shouldn’t,” he said. “I know I downplayed it earlier, but you have student government and Harvard and now swim team on your plate. If everything goes your way, you’ve got the chance to change the world. Me, though? I got no delusions. My opportunity is to give Jamal and Tiana a chance to succeed. Maybe one day, they’ll live in Bristol. That’s the shot I’m going to take.”

“Well, to be fair, I have my opportunities because I don’t have to worry about anything,” Sophie said. “Food, shelter, water, healthcare—it’s all covered by my parents. I didn’t do anything to earn it; they just supplied it. And then there were other things they paid for, like tutors and doctors and stuff. So, if I have the chance to pay my luck forward—”

“You’re right, but—” Marc shrugged. “There are thousands of families like mine. We all need help, and it’s people like you who can make changes in society to get us all what we need. Look, don’t get a job for me and my family—get a future that lets you help all the families like mine. Besides, maybe I’ll just get a job and our problems go away.”

“I still 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 all, but this is something I need for myself. Didn’t you feel it when I was dreamwalking with you? Those feelings you have are a two-way street, you know. That shame you feel? It’s in me too. How hard you are on

yourself? Well, empathy has to come from somewhere. And I hate myself every time I ask for your help. I need to be the man of the house, not you. We'll all be okay in time. 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. "Maybe we can go for a drive. It'll be like nothing happened, yeah?"

"Friday's good after swim practice, but..." Sophie smiled shamefully. "I don't want to pretend like nothing happened. I made a mistake, and if I'm going to be a better person, then we should remember my mistake. So, let's move forward knowing I'm fallible now, okay?"

Marc nodded with great respect. "Sounds good. 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 FOURTEEN

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've killed a lesser girl—but not her. Not today.

"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 stay late.

"Thanks for timing me," Sophie said, the wet 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 have another plan. Regardless of Marc’s request, having the money ready wasn’t going to be a bad idea. Besides, a job would look great on her applications. The only problem was...

“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?”

A pang of stress hit Sophie, and she tightened. Mom didn’t know she’d lost her power; she wanted to keep it that way. “Yeah, well, a bunch of my friends are getting jobs, and I want to join them.”

“Right,” Mom said, her eyes narrowing.

“Well, I think most places are doing applications online these days,” Dad said, oblivious to all the posturing around him. “Come to think of it, I know the guy who manages the movie theater. If you wanted a job there, I could put in a good word.”

“I’d love that,” Sophie said. She imagined sneaking popcorn between customers and catching clips of movies for free. “I’ll look for other jobs too, just in case.” Her mind now pictured herself pouring coffee beside an overflowing tip jar. Honestly, any job would do if it made a little cash and didn’t chew away at 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.

By Wednesday, Sophie had already received interview requests from three places, including the movie theater. She made a note of each one so she could share them with Marc. After all, these other places were going to need to look elsewhere for their workers, especially if she was offered the job at the theater.

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.

I want to get a job.'

She thought about crossing Harvard and valedictorian off 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 would become a star swimmer, and Harvard would overlook her grade. Maybe Ms. Jackson would have a stroke, and a new teacher would come to wipe her slate clean. Or maybe Tay would fail Calculus next year like she feared—which wasn't what Sophie wanted, but it remained within the realm of possibility. Either way, there wasn't much she could do to control these things.

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, but there was nothing she could cross off completely. Although...

I could get closer.

First, there was the matter of employment. She pulled up the

theater's email and scheduled her interview—a formality, she was assured. In less than a week, the job issue would be solved. Then, she turned her attention to grades, and she spent an hour studying. This contributed both to her valedictorian goal as well as her Harvard aspirations. Afterward, she focused on the presidential election by researching esports orgs who could sponsor the school. And finally, in the early hours of the morning, she fell asleep beside a video of swimming tutorials.

Finally, it was Friday. The final bell was extra sweet, and she relished knowing that she was going to spend the weekend completely and totally Ms. Jackson free—that demon wouldn't even appear in a vision. Even better, this was the day she'd make her proper amends with Marc.

He picked her up from the Ledge in his old car and drove them to his mom's for peanut butter and honey sandwiches. There, Tiana told Sophie she looked like a movie star and Jamal proclaimed he was going to be '*king of the pirates!*'

As the sun dipped and practice neared, Marc readied the car for their adventure. Jamal and Tiana insisted on coming with, but Marc was adamant against them.

"We can't take them to Calisette after your swim practice is over," Marc said, closing the hood with a *thunk*.

"But we're not doing a break-in today," Sophie said, her voice too low for Mrs. Brown to hear. "Not without my power."

"Doesn't matter. Not happening."

The drive to swim practice was smooth, but Sophie felt self-conscious about Marc watching her swim. He was sitting in the tiered aluminum bleachers, and she kept an eye on him between strokes to be sure he was absorbed with his phone and not staring at her floundering.

"Who's that?" Olivia asked at the end of practice, pulling out her Keroppi-themed towel. Sophie eyed it curiously, wondering why Olivia also had a Hello Kitty themed towel. Did they all?

“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 sexuality. But Olivia didn’t seem surprised.

“Yeah, me neither,” Olivia said so casually, she might as well have been saying she preferred strawberry over vanilla.

Sophie perked up. Did she mean generally, or...? But just as she was about to ask, Olivia was called to the other side of the pavilion by Coach. Rather than wait, Sophie gave a hug to her sister and rushed off. A turn of the key sent them rolling out of the neighborhood.

Sophie spent the ride to Coalview enjoying the rumble of Marc’s car. When she closed her eyes, she imagined herself getting a massage from one of those chairs at the mall. Honestly, it was pretty close. But as the streets got worse, Sophie was snapped from her comfort, and a deep breath out invited Marc in for conversation.

“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. We’ll have to be quick, though. I can’t ruin my sleep schedule.”

Marc accelerated—or rather, he pressed the pedal and the hunk of junk grumbled louder.

“By the way, I have 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 the Thai place at the mall all offered interviews.”

“Yeah.” Marc bit down on his lip, his thumb thumping the steering wheel. “I have applications in for two of those places already.”

“Oh. You’ll hear from them soon, then.”

“It’s been a month,” Marc said. “But maybe.”

The car sank into silence as they left Coalview and merged on the highway toward Bristol. The colorful sheen around the suburbs seemed more lifeless than usual.

“You looked like you were having a good time at practice,” Marc said, trying to start a new conversation.

“Oh, you saw that?” Sophie shrugged. “I had Katelyn time my split. I don’t think it’ll make 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 so she could earn three patches the night before her application was due. And now, she was going to fail her first swim race—but her parents would pay for extra time with a coach if she asked for one. Hell, Katelyn would do it for free.

“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.

“I’ve put in a thousand job applications. I’ve burnt a thousand meals. 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.

Marc 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 all those weeks ago. It was the same cop, too. Seemed like he had a preferred spot 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, and his hand was 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 a lesson.”

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. “You two look nervous. Any drugs in the car?”

Sophie’s face contorted. “What?”

“No, sir,” Marc answered quickly.

“That wasn’t unanimous,” the officer said. He took a heavy pivot on his right boot and squared against the car. “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.

“It’s in the Constitution!” Sophie pleaded.

“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 and read his name plate.

“Well,” Sophie started, “maybe your community shouldn’t be buying so many drugs, Officer Dinkle.”

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.”

A K-9 lunged out the driver’s-side door from the cruiser and

scrambled up to Marc's beater. It was a beautiful German 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."

Marc obeyed. Sophie slammed her door and followed Marc a reasonable distance away. The officer then 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 over the pavement.

"This is wrong," Sophie whispered to Marc.

Marc shook his head. "No, this is about right."

Sophie grimaced at the notion of how different their lives really were.

"How much is the ticket?" she asked.

Marc handed over the paper, and Sophie stared at the number. \$200? How were they going to get *another* \$200?

"Hoo, boy! What do we have here?" The cop was rifling through the trunk, and when he 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 in the back of their car?"

"That's for rent," Marc said, his eyes betraying grave 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 been paid."

"Well, it's true," Sophie said. "It's for rent."

The officer glared, finding Sophie's friendship with Marc to be somehow more offensive than anything else.

"Tell me, where do you guys work?" the officer said.

Sophie and Marc stumbled for an answer.

“No jobs and all this money?” He smirked. “I thought so.” Without further consideration, Officer Dinkle placed the money in his pocket and took a step toward his cruiser.

Something in Sophie broke. Maybe it was how blunt 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 take that!” 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 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. Jamal and Tiana—” Sophie choked on her words. “We didn’t get that money from selling drugs, and we’re not buying any either.” She drew a deep breath to collect 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. “Not after you called me a pig. You’ll need to prove your case 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 several thousand on a lawyer to get back \$1600?”

“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 your pretty little mouth, and carry on with your night. You both stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of your business. It’s as simple as that, alright?”

There was no more discussion. He whistled twice to recover his dog, got into his car, and pulled away.

It was over. The money was gone.

Sophie opened her mouth, but the look on Marc’s face made her close it. 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?

“Let it go,” Marc said. He stared absently at his car for several seconds. Then, he closed his eyes and tried not to cry, but for the thousand-and-first time in his life, he failed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Thirteenth Amendment

MARC AND Sophie were silent as they continued the drive to Calisette Hills. What was there to say? I'm sorry wouldn't pay the rent. Complaining wouldn't make them money. She couldn't even empathize properly because they felt different about the situation. 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. "I can't believe he thought you were the drug dealer in Bristol."

The despair in Marc dissipated, and he laughed. It was a sad laugh, but still...

"Sophie, there's no drug dealer. Or, rather, there's *always* a Black dealer, but there's always a white dealer too. All ethnicities sell drugs—but the existence of the *Black dealer*' means the cops can pull over any Black man who rolls through town. Get it?"

"That's messed up." Sophie sat up in her seat. "It has to be against the law."

"The law? It's the Constitution that lets them do this."

"What?"

“The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable search and seizure,” Marc said, straightening as though he were a professor sitting at a desk. “But the Founding Fathers never defined what was meant by unreasonable.” Marc dipped into the right lane to let another car pass. “And wouldn’t you know it—the courts left enough room in their definition to allow for racial profiling. It was over the moment the cop said I matched a description.”

“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 little bit of coke, and that means they can send him to jail to become a slave.”

“A slave?” Sophie squinted her eyes. “That’s an exaggeration, right?”

Marc gave her a deadpan look. “Slavery by the state is still a constitutionally protected right.”

“But the Thirteenth Amendment freed the slaves.” Sophie cheated a lot of her classes, but this was something she was sure of.

“The Thirteenth Amendment is what allows for it,” Marc said. “Seriously. Pull it up. Read it out loud.” When Sophie didn’t respond, Marc reiterated: “Do it.”

“Okay.” Sophie picked up her phone and punched in a search query. “It says: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” She looked up. “Holy shit. *Except as a punishment for crime?* Why did I always skim over that?”

“Now you’re getting it. Some people hide behind the words ‘*involuntary servitude*’, but I want you to think about it. You’re a Confederate state fighting to keep people enslaved. After the Civil War, the North writes that amendment. You interpret it as: slavery is legal as long as the person has committed a crime. With this in mind, what do you do to keep Black people enslaved?”

Sophie thought it over for a minute. “You make laws that target

Black people.”

“And that’s exactly what they did,” Marc said. “Did you know that courts historically issued longer sentences for crack users—a drug more commonly used by Black people—than cocaine users—a drug more commonly used by white people. They’re the same drug. The only difference is a technicality about how it’s produced and the skin color of the user.”

“I mean...” Sophie shrugged. “It’s not right, but people can always choose not to do drugs.” She felt uncomfortable with the words as soon as they left her mouth.

“Yes, but you’re imagining a system where everyone is playing by the same rules.” Marc slowed down as a car cut him off. “Again, there is an incentive for the state to jail people. The more people who are working involuntarily in prison, the more money the state can make off them. So, once jailing a citizen is incentivized, what do you think that does to sentencing rates? How about length of sentences? And what’s stopping a racist cop from planting crack on a Black person during a traffic stop? That’s not some Hollywood trope—it *actually happens*. I’m not saying all cops are like that, but *some are*.”

Sophie grew quiet and contemplated what Marc was saying. She was so used to a fair system—because for her, it generally was—that she found it hard to consider what it would be like to grow up Black. Even where they lived in California, she remembered voters had recently rejected a measure that would ban prison labor.

“It gets worse,” Marc said. “If a district changes zoning laws in a Black neighborhood, they can forcefully close locally-owned businesses. This means the people there will spend more money to get to stores. That leads to poverty. Poverty leads to crime. Crime leads to jail, and there, the state can profit off your labor without paying you.”

“If the incentives played a part in keeping people jailed, wouldn’t we see higher numbers of prisoners in the United States than in other countries?” Sophie asked.

Marc gave her a look, the flash of red from another car's brake lights lining his face. "Yes. And you do. The United States makes up 5% of the world's population but 20% of the world's incarcerated population."

"Holy shit," Sophie said. "Really?"

"Give or take a percentage up or down each year, it's true."

"Isn't there someone studying those things?" Sophie said. "Making recommendations on how to fix these issues?"

"Sort of," Marc said. "But our government is attacking the institutions who are studying systemic racism. If a university thinks it'll miss out on a grant because of critical race theory research, do you think they'll invest in that research more?"

Despair washed over Sophie. 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.

"How do you know so much about this?" Sophie asked.

"Haven't you ever wondered where my dad is?" Marc adopted a thousand-yard stare. "Jailed for possession of crack cocaine. It wasn't even his, but everyone in the car had to go to court. Lawyers said it'd be five years if he pleaded guilty; risking twenty if he fought it."

"Oh." Sophie sank in her seat. "None of this is right, Marc."

"I know." Marc shrugged. "But it's not all hopeless. We still have opportunities to succeed; we just have to fight in a way most people never notice. And look, I'll acknowledge that my stance on this is one-sided. Some people hide behind the words *involuntary servitude* or say that, since prison sentences end, it's not slavery. But with the way this amendment has been abused, I'll stand by what I said. I believe it's slavery, and I'm certain it should go away."

Sophie 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.

“We’ll get the money back,” Sophie said. “I’ll figure out my power and we’ll get you \$1,600. I’ll try and try until I get it right.”

“It’s okay,” Marc said. “My mom says God will protect us. I have to believe her.”

Sophie shook her head, and her eyes locked to a particularly large mansion. “How come you don’t steal from the richest of the rich? 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 the truth about money. If that’s all you care about, you become a monster. And I know that truth very, very well.”

“How so?”

“My power doesn’t work this high up the hill.”

“Is it the elevation?” Sophie asked.

“No. It’s because I can’t sleepwalk with sociopaths. My power runs on empathy, so if the target doesn’t feel anything, I can’t empathize with them. And up here? I haven’t found any good ones.”

“Who *does* live up here?” Sophie asked.

Marc lifted his hand off the wheel to point. “See that house? It belongs to a real estate guru with enough money to end poverty in half of Coalview—but instead he bought a yacht fleet. That four story mansion 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. That one belongs to the CEO of an insurance company who denied a record numbers of claims last year. They could all fix some part of the world, but instead, they want an oversized house on a hill. They’re trash.”

“I mean, they’re probably not all trash.” Sophie looked over the

houses again knowing that some part of her admired them. Some part of her had always dreamed of living in something like this.

Marc smiled. “Let me ask you this. If you had a billion dollars, what would you do with it?”

Sophie thought about her family. “I’d pay off my parent’s house. I’d buy you and your mom a nice place to stay. Everyone in my life would get a new car. And then... I don’t know. I’d probably end lunch debt for every student in California.”

“You can pause there,” Marc said. “Your gut instinct is to give it away. Improve the lives of others. Do something to give back to the country that made you rich. Not once did it occur to you to buy a huge boat or a private island. And now, consider this: of all the billionaires in the country, how many of them are doing that? We’re talking medical patents that could be bought and set free. Whole diseases that could be eliminated. Educational platforms that could be built and funded for a hundred years. And yet, almost no rich person is doing these things.”

Sophie sank in her seat, Marc’s dilemma clear. Anyone he *could* steal from had virtue, but anyone *worth* stealing from was safe from his power.

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 void of other people. They leaned up against the guardrail to observe the town like it all belonged to them. Sophie hugged her own arms to defend against the cold air and

stared at the valley, finding the lights enchanting—the closest she'd ever come to seeing fireflies.

"It's beautiful," she said.

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?" Sophie said.

Marc thought 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 know someone up here you should meet."

They got in the car and Marc shifted into reverse. The car stumbled backward, and they were off. Going down the hill 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."

"The kindest person in Calisette?"

"The kindest person anywhere."

Down and down they rolled, 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 unfolded from behind a pocket of trees. It was a modest abode, smaller than Ms. Jackson's. It had a brick façade and an active chimney. All in all, it could've been plucked from Sophie's neighborhood and dropped

on the hill.

“About a month ago, the night before we saw Buck, I noticed this place and got curious,” Marc said. “I tried to use my dreamwalking power on the girl inside, but I couldn’t do it. Not because she was a sociopath—but because she was too pure. So instead, we spoke, and she invited me in to share my life story.”

The front door opened, and a woman stepped out. 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.

“Sophie, I’d like you to meet State Representative Bonnie Delgado.”

Bonnie approached the car with a warm smile that cut Sophie to the core. She unbuckled and left the car beside Marc.

“It’s good to see you, DeMarcus.” Bonnie offered him a handshake. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Sophie.”

“Hello, Sophie.” She extended her hand and gripped tightly. Sophie lost her train of thought immediately. The way this woman carried herself emanated power.

“How do you know DeMarcus? Did he try his dreamwalking trick on you?”

“We, uh, we go to school together,” Sophie said.

“Ah, that makes sense. Speaking of school...” She turned to Marc. “I just got back from D.C. where I did a tour of a very peculiar kind of college. It’s for people with powers like yours. I’ve already said more than I’m allowed to, but I thought you’d want to know. When you graduate high school, I’ll connect you with their director.”

“You have that kind of power?” Sophie asked.

“To advocate for others? We all do.” Bonnie said. “So, what brings you two here? And why do you look like you saw a deer get hit by a car?”

Marc’s eyes lowered to the ground, and Sophie offered up their

story.

“We were driving through Bristol and an officer pulled him over for speeding,” Sophie said. “But Marc wasn’t speeding, and the officer stole \$1,600 from him.”

“Civil forfeiture?” Bonnie asked.

“Civil forfeiture,” Sophie confirmed. “If we don’t get the money back before Saturday, Marc’s getting evicted.”

Bonnie nodded resolutely. “Give me a minute.” She scrolled on her phone and dialed a number. “Hi. This is State Representative Bonnie Delgado... Yes, again. It would seem your precinct is still irresponsible with their use of civil forfeiture. Now, if you want a new margarita machine so badly, then I suggest—” There was a pause. “Oh. Excellent. I was hoping you’d bring this to court. Thank you. Alright, bye.” She hung up and shook her head.

“So?”

“So, they want to play hardball,” Bonnie said. “And that’s okay. Progress happens one court case at a time. I’ll be in touch with the NAACP and your case will be added to our roster. If I could fix your issue, that’d be great, but it still wouldn’t fix the system. That’s the end goal.”

Marc nodded, his gaze falling to the ground. “Well, thanks for trying.”

“But I understand that a prolonged court case won’t change the fact that you need that money by Saturday.” Bonnie reached into her bag and pulled out a checkbook. Moments later, she was handing Marc a check for \$1,800. “For both rent and the ticket.”

“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. “I don’t lend money—I give it freely. If you feel you need to pay it back, you may, but I’d rather you pay it forward once you’re in a position to do so. And I want to be clear—I won’t cover this bill again. From here on out, you’ll have to

walk your own path. Open a bank account, deposit the money, and drive with large sums of cash only when necessary.”

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... I actually think I just want to be you.”

Bonnie faced Sophie and gave her undivided attention. 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. “So—” she turned and pointed, “—I went to Bristol Community College. If you squint, you can see it from here.”

“Seriously? BCC?”

“Got my associate’s degree there before joining the Coast Guard. I was stationed in D.C. and Florida before discharging. From there, I took my benefits and earned a bachelor’s in political science. BCC again. This was my path; it doesn’t have to be yours. But education is education, and every school will teach from the same book. The difference for *me* was community. I wanted to serve *this* community; 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 else I can do, 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 choosing the right thing to fight for. It’s clear to me what *your* reason is. You think you want to help the world, but I think what you really want is to help any person who needs it—any person in front of you. If we all followed through on that, the world wouldn’t need any fixing. You feel me?”

“I think so,” Sophie said.

“Great,” Bonnie said. “I look forward to seeing you again. Until then, have a good night.”

Bonnie stepped off in her fuzzy slippers, leaving Marc and Sophie alone in the starlight. But on this night, none of the stars shone as brightly as Bonnie.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

One of the Good Ones

“BONNIE SURE is something, isn’t she?” Sophie said, watching the night ripple past as Marc’s car rumbled farther downhill. By now, the slope was subtle and they only occasionally hit the gas.

“She’s one of the good ones,” Marc said. “Maybe the only true one on the hill.”

They coasted around a bend, and the mansions slid out of view, swallowed by the slope. Soon, the landscape opened, and they passed Bristol Community College. Sophie eyed it with renewed inspiration. Harvard was still at the top of her list, but schools like Bristol Community College were now *on* the list.

As they rolled into Coalview, the city softened. Sidewalks split like tree bark and half-decayed apartments sagged by the busy road. They passed a mural of a child with angel wings, the paint 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? Somewhere around this part of town too, wasn’t it? Was this *déjà vu*, or—

Ms. Jackson. This was where Ms. Jackson had left that graffiti for her during the meditation.

Sophie sat up straight. She hadn't thought about the logistics before, but how had that message gotten there? There was no chance Ms. Jackson 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." Marc sat up in his seat and adjusted the rearview mirror. "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.

"Take a right," 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. The car twisted, and its headlights washed over the wall where the message had been in her vision. And sure enough, bright white graffiti glared back at her.

GO HOME, SOPHIE
TRY ANOTHER TIME



"Is that for you or a different Sophie?" Marc asked.

"It's for me." Sophie dug her tongue into her cheek, trying to figure out what this meant. Did Ms. Jackson really do this? Was she really working around the clock to thwart 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.

“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 somehow.”

“I have an idea,” Marc said. “If I can sleepwalk with her body, then I can figure out what’s going on in her head. Sometimes, when I’m entering the dreamwalking 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 badly as you do,” Marc said. “She wasn’t surprised to see me in Rick’s body. How did she know it was me? How could she have?” 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 Sophie’s new job, swim practice, and the second debate with Tay, she was too busy to meet again that week. But after school on Friday, they agreed to put the Ms. Jackson debacle to rest.

“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.”

The next day was Sophie’s job interview with the movie theater. Nervous, she arrived early with her best blouse and slacks. A young man

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 was to press play on a laptop, and she could watch as much as she wanted. It was a dream job—except for the butter smell that clung to her clothes.

On Sunday, she returned to work with a notebook, a pen, and a positive attitude, ready to get her life on track. During the first movie, she calculated her monthly take-home pay, and determined it was enough to keep Marc afloat. Then, she answered emails, coordinated with the CEO of a tutoring app, and prepped for a physics test. Ms. Jackson had no test scheduled, but Sophie sensed it coming. Halfway through her review, however, she was distracted by a rom-com and abandoned her work.

She paid for this on Monday, as Ms. Jackson *did* surprise the class with a quiz. At the end of it, Sophie was certain she scraped by with a C. Undoubtedly, this would tank her grade even farther, and under normal circumstances, this would've gutted her. But this week? It was fine. This week would be the last where Ms. Jackson held onto her secrets.

"Aren't you concerned about being valedictorian?" Tay asked at the Ledge that day. "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.

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. 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 Sophie.

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, with each entry solved through either time or choice. And only four more days until she could cross Ms. Jackson off the list.

On Tuesday, Sophie showed up to swim practice ready to think, but she was blindsided by Coach.

“You ready to race, Miss Valentine?” 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?” Coach clapped a single time and pointed with both fingers. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. Say no more, little lady. You’re fearless, Soph. That’s what I like about you.”

He walked away before Sophie could protest, and Sophie spent the rest of practice trying not to freak out.

Wednesday and Thursday nights were spent at meetings that would prepare her for the second debate against Tay. And by Friday morning, she was ready—not just to fight for the class presidency, but to end the mystery of Ms. Jackson once and for all.

Every class on Friday blinked past until Sophie found herself backstage with Tay, staring at curtains while the junior class filed into the auditorium. No matter how confident she felt now, the mental image of her crying during the last debate was still a dark cloud over her.

“You’re going to do amazing,” Tay said, looking over Sophie’s notes. “No matter who wins this election, the school can’t lose.”

On the other side of the curtains, the moderator adjusted the microphone levels at each podium. A knot of anxiety ruptured in Sophie’s stomach, and she swallowed hard. It was difficult to keep her

emotions steady, and harder still to withstand the urge to vomit.

“What are you doing tonight?” Tay asked. “No matter how this goes, we should celebrate.”

Sophie’s smile widened. “Marc and I are meeting up to cause some trouble with Ms. Jackson. Want to come?”

“You already know I do,” Tay said. “I’ll drive.”

Before them, the curtains rippled and a stagehand gave them a thumbs-up. Suddenly, Tay grabbed her hand, and Sophie felt like a lit sparkler. The curtains opened, and the junior class was unveiled. Panic returned to Sophie’s mind, but as Tay squeezed her hand tighter, she settled. Her eyes focused on the house, and she noticed something new. Nobody cared. Half the class was asleep, and the other half was buried in a phone. This put her at ease.

“Attention Juniors,” the moderator said. It was Mr. Pittman again. “Please welcome to the stage—Taylor Jardine and Sophie Valentine!”

Their hands unclasped, and Sophie strutted to her podium with a brilliant smile. Once at the stand, she glanced at Tay and found her glancing back.

“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 we can promote more community events. Using this billboard as our calling card, we can build a 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 drew a deep breath. “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 many useful services available to those with more resources. 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 create our school’s very own disbursement kitchen. Not only will this add purpose to our Driver’s Ed department, but it will ensure that all students have access to food.”

Those who were paying attention applauded, but a small group of girls erupted into cheers. Sophie peered through the darkness and found all the junior girls from swim team clustered in the back. She chanced a wink in their direction.

“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, staying connected is one of the easier tasks. We are, after all, the social media generation. As such, I’ve set up our class’s Facebook group where we’ll be able to organize future events. The Junior class can join today and

follow it for years to come.”

Mr. Pittman waited for more, but when nothing came, he simply nodded. It wasn’t much of an answer, but it was something. “Okay. Thank you, Tay. Now, Sophie, have *you* created any plans to facilitate class 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 each decade from next year on. While the world feels relatively stable, you never know when a shift in technology will change the means of communication. By hosting the reunion in such a predictable manner, even those of us who are hoping to escape civilization can attend. Put it on your calendars, 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. In turn, Sophie felt out of breath. They *both* wanted this; it wasn’t fair only one of them could have it.

“I want to note,” Sophie said, leaning a bit too far into the microphone, “that this plan is only possible because of Tay’s hard work in setting up prom.”

Tay found her composure and gave a soft smile.

“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? Tay?”

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 you see during Christmas time. Instead of pulling an angel from the tree with a gift written on it, students will ask for supplies that our community can provide. Podcast mics, video cameras, running shoes—the tools we need for our successes are not cheap. My goal is to create a school where *every* student can have access to explore the depths of their creative interests. 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, random luck *was* preferable to the current system, but it 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. The idea had good intentions, but it needed something more.

"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 to their tutoring staff. 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 \$12,000 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 had no doubts as to why she had a crush on Tay.

“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 on March 14th as they deliver their final speeches on the morning announcements. Voting will commence that day during lunch. 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 were the good kind.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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 follow-up questions with answers she didn't already know. 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 spread across the firmament. Eventually, she grew tired of work, and she turned her attention to the dazzling constellations. 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 Mom going to stop her from sneaking out? Lecture her about boys? Or was she going to 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. 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. 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. His tone reminded them all that this wasn’t going to be some fun outing to Bristol—it was a risky solo mission he was taking on behalf of his friends.

“Tay knows,” Sophie said. But when Tay gave Sophie a puzzled look, Sophie corrected herself. “Sorry. We did the GPS heist in a vision. Head toward Bristol and I’ll tell you when to turn.”

Tay smiled and set the car in reverse.

“So, how did you feel about the debate?” Tay asked.

“I’m just glad it’s over.”

“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 sat up in her seat. “The 50/50 raffle for the TutorMe app? So smart. You saved me there.”

“Oh, stop. The TutorMe thing was *such* a killer move. I’ve been using them for years. It never occurred to me to get it in the hands of the school.”

Sophie sighed. “I wish we could team up. We each spent weeks preparing, but it was only once we were together that we had our best ideas. It shouldn’t be like that.”

“Maybe we *could* team up,” Tay suggested. When Sophie gave her a sharp look, she continued. “What if the loser of the presidential election became something like vice president? Then—”

“Then we’d get to spend the whole year together,” Sophie said. “We’d each have a role for our applications, and the school would get a presidential 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. This was the first time since the mishap at Rick’s house that he would be using his powers. What if it all went wrong again? Ms. Jackson wouldn’t be an easy target. She’d already proven herself to be a match for Sophie—what if she could overcome him too?

Sophie called out the rest of the directions, and soon, they were pulling into Ms. Jackson’s neighborhood. Tay coasted to a stop just one house down.

“You ready, Marc?” Tay asked.

“Yeah,” he said, snapping from his reverie. “I’m ready.” He swallowed another melatonin pill—his second since leaving his house. By now, his arms felt like rubber, but his legs were still too jittery as adrenaline boiled through his system.

“You don’t have to do this,” Sophie said. “Any information helps, but if you learn she’s a sociopath, just get out of there, okay?”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said, lying back in the seat. “Wish me luck.”

Over the years of Marc’s dreamwalking adventures, he’d invaded more than a hundred dreams. In that time, he’d encountered a variety of workplaces, parks, and homes. He’d found himself walking on white beaches and exploring vast cathedrals. Sometimes, he popped into

paradises full of women, parties, and music. Sometimes, he popped into nightmares fueled by zombies, aliens, and clowns. With all this experience, he thought he'd seen it all.

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 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.

Someone grabbed his leg.

Marc kicked out, but the slender hand that trapped him was pulling too hard. His heart rate tripled as he was dragged against rock. Fear compounded. Pain wasn't usually part of his dreams. Something was wrong. *Very* wrong.

Marc suffocated in the dirt until the hand let go.

"Hello, Mr. DeMarcus Brown."

Marc scrambled to his back and looked up at Ms. Jackson from the ground. Nobody had ever anticipated his arrival in a dream—but of course Ms. Jackson had. She was ready for *everything*.

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 breath. Then he swallowed, losing his nerve. Even from six feet away, Ms. Jackson emanated a creepy, unraveling, bone-chilling

energy. What would the inside of her brain feel like?

I have to see this through, he thought. Slowly, he rolled to his knees and propped himself up.

"I don't have to tell you that this is incredibly invasive, do I?" Ms. Jackson tutted. "Look, I know what you're here for. Ask your question."

"How are you always one step ahead?" Marc asked.

"You came all this way to ask that?" Ms. Jackson gave a single curt laugh and shook her head. "Ask your *real* question."

Marc drew a shallow breath.

"How can we beat you?" he asked. "Get you off our case."

"No, Marc. That's Sophie's question. She'll get that answer later. 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.

Or—no. Maybe he had it backward. Maybe it was him that was the problem. He was never prepared. Never ready. Never perfect. What was wrong with *him*?

"Why do I always fail?" Marc asked.

"Oh, you're *so* close," Ms. Jackson said. "As a teacher, I'll answer that, but you should consider the question that's deeper in your heart. Why do you fail, Marc? It's because you believe failure is your destiny, that's it. But still—that's not your question. *Think*, Marc. Why are *you* here? Why did *you* agree to see me tonight?"

A dark rumbling echoed in the distance, and Marc knew what question he needed answered. Bonnie had alluded to it, but Ms. Jackson was begging him to say it aloud.

"Am I alone?" Marc lifted his chin. "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. “How did you know I was in Rick’s body? That I can sleepwalk? And who were the others there? Is it because that’s what you do too?”

“I’ll make you a bargain,” Ms. Jackson said. “I’ve been wondering how *your* power works the same as you’ve been interested in mine. So, why don’t we trade what we know?”

“So, you do have a power?”

“Come find out.”

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.

“Like this.” Marc flexed his fingers, breaking through his paralysis. A warm sensation flooded his arms, and his brain fired up 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 he was met with terror. This wasn’t surprising; most of his victims were afraid of him. But as he pressed harder—he realized his mistake.

She *was* afraid—just not of him.

No. Her fear was supreme. Cataclysmic. Existential. Her deepest worries echoed through both their minds:

What if it’s hopeless?

What if we’re doomed?

How do we stop it?

What if we can’t?

It’s coming.

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. Apocalypse? How could he relate to that?

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—

“Ohh, I see,” Ms. Jackson said.

Marc felt a tug against his brain, sharp and invasive—and he realized his mistake. The link he'd formed with Ms. Jackson was a two-way street, a bridge that could be crossed from either direction. Petrified, his own insecurities rushed 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, unearned life. The burden of purpose his power provided. The nagging guilt that he'd never reach his true potential. He hadn't shared these thoughts with anyone—ever—and Ms. Jackson was pulling them out like poison through a siphon.

Marc tried to back away, but Ms. Jackson ensnared him. She gripped tighter, and through the tips of her fingers, a faint whisper slithered through his thoughts.

Surrender. Surrender.

Marc resisted, but the message grew louder and louder until...

His vision turned to black and—

—he opened his eyes in the back of Tay's car. The world was hazy and unrecognizable, and when he moved to speak, he found he couldn't. His body was no longer his own.

Somewhere deep in his mind, Ms. Jackson's fingers twiddled about, and Marc moved like a puppet on a string. Gangly and awkwardly, he sat up.

“Ah!” Tay clutched her chest. “You scared me. You okay? You were twitching. What happened?”

Marc’s mouth opened—or perhaps unhinged—and a rumble came from his throat.

“Ughhh.”

His tongue lolled around, and his lips moved in and out. Suddenly, he was a baby babbling incoherently.

“Marc?”

The real Marc clawed for control, but Ms. Jackson wasn’t letting him have it. There was another tug on Marc’s subconscious, dragging his true self deeper underwater. Then came a surge of electricity that realigned his neurons.

When he next spoke, his 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. Tay was fast behind her, slamming the door as though a ton of steel would hold Ms. Jackson hostage.

Marc felt a release, and then—

—he was back in the dream. His body fell backward as his energy realigned.

“Ugh. That was... different,” Ms. Jackson said, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “A lot harder than I thought.”

Marc stared at Ms. Jackson as though she were devil incarnate. Nobody had ever fought back against him like that.

“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 be more diligent. And you? You need to *choose* a better future for yourself. 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.”

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.

“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.

“What happened?” Sophie asked.

“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 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—not one built from anxiety, but one of certainty. 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.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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 divider lines running down the road. 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 Ms. Jackson 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 as far as she knew, only her and Phoebe could do it. *Maybe* Ms. Jackson could have spontaneous dreams like Mom, but meditating the future?

Only Phoebe would know.

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 that formed on her heart and dialed. The line rang only once.

“Sophie...” Phoebe said, her voice tired. “Why do you always call when it’s super late?”

“Because nobody has their crises at brunch. Besides, once it’s after 4 A.M., it’s morning time. Technically, 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 smart.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Sophie said, “but I have a question only you know the answer to.”

Phoebe sighed. “Go ahead.”

“How rare are we? How many people are there who can see the future?”

“Precognitors?” Phoebe thought a moment. “Maybe a few hundred thousand worldwide. Maybe more. It’s impossible to know for sure.”

“What about people like *us*? People who can see the branching lines of the future?”

“As far as I know?” Phoebe drew a deep breath and exhaled heavily. “Just you and me.”

“Seriously?”

“I could be wrong,” Phoebe said. “But of the hundred or so precognitors I work with, nobody else comes close to doing what we do. And for good reason. Everyone who’s tried has gone crazy. Like, asylum crazy.”

“Huh, I wonder why,” Sophie said dryly.

“Yeah, big mystery. Why are you asking this now, though?”

“Because I—I think my teacher can do it too. I need to know if that’s a possibility.”

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 the worst.

"It's possible," she said.

"Alright, well..." Sophie didn't know what else to say. "Thank you. That helps."

"Sure. Now listen, I love you more than anyone, but can you *please* call me in the afternoon like a normal person?"

"I'll make no such promises."

"Sophie—"

"I love you!"

"*Sophie!*—"

She hung up with a wide, playful smile. But the longer she sat in the dark, quiet room, the more the smile melted away.

I guess it's true, she thought. Ms. Jackson's a seer.

In a strange way, this was comforting. Now that she'd unmasked Ms. Jackson, she knew what she was fighting against. Unfortunately, this revelation also meant Ms. Jackson would be unbeatable.

On the bright side, the situation being hopeless was *still* an answer. They just wouldn't *ever* figure out what Ms. Jackson was up to. That meant she could scratch a line out of her list of wants. Realizing this, Sophie slunk out of bed and hobbled to her desk. There, she flipped open her journal. A pen *clicked* through her fingers, and she drew a line through: ~~*I want to know what Ms. Jackson is up to.*~~

She stared at the remaining entries and paused where it said: *I want to be class president.* Tay and her had talked about a solution in the car, but would it really be the same? She furled her lips and sighed. Slowly, begrudgingly, she drew a line through the statement.

Finally, she looked over all that remained. It was just two lines.

I want Tay to be my girlfriend.

I want to win my first swim race.

This was the final stretch, and only one of these things needed to go. 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.

You know, you could have your power back tonight if you quit swim team, Sophie realized. Then, she shook her head, finding the thought repulsive. *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 will stronger. She'd forged bonds with Katelyn, Olivia, and the other girls in her lane. No. Quitting swim team was out of the question. Which was odd considering how much she dreaded joining in the first place. Had she known Harvard was going to be taken from her later in the season, she'd have quit on day one. But by now, swimming had become a source of joy. A place of comfort. Something she looked forward to. And that made her wonder: When her meditations came back, would she ever choose short-term suffering for long-term joy again?

Her eyes looked at the two remaining items again, and a new thought hit her.

You need to get an answer on Tay, she realized. *And you have to do it now. If you wait until your power's back, you'll never make a move.*

She gulped. If that was what she was going to do, she wanted to do it before the swim meet on Tuesday. It was the only time she had.

"Ughh..."

With an exaggerated slump, she leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling.

It was now Saturday, which meant Sophie had to be at the theater. 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—if that was something Tay was interested in.

All that remained was to ask Tay for a night out. This was Sunday's task. Starting in the morning, she typed out a message, and then she edited it for hours. Every time she thought it was ready, she'd wait a few

minutes before picking it up again and tweaking a few details. Adding emojis, deleting words, changing up plans. It was impossible to stop overthinking, but by mid-afternoon, she had a message ready.

Reading over it one last time, she deleted a single word that made the text seem too enthusiastic and hit send.

Now, don't touch it, she told herself, placing the phone face down on her desk. *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 almost an hour later.

'Sounds fun!'

Sophie stared at the message, brimming with equal amounts of hope and despair. Tomorrow, she'd be spending the afternoon with Tay, and by the end of the night, they would be—

No. No expectations.

That night, she locked herself in her room and wrote the equivalent of real-life fan fiction, rehearsing her date with Tay through words. Tomorrow might just be the biggest day of her—

Knock, knock.

"Sophie?" Katelyn's voice sounded soft from the other side of the door.

"Come in," Sophie said, closing the journal and tucking it neatly into a corner on her desk.

Katelyn shuffled in, apprehension on her face. The door closed and she struggled to make eye contact.

"Katelyn?" Sophie stood. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," Katelyn said. "Sorry. I don't want to impede, but—are you busy?"

Sophie shook her head and took a seat on her bed. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing serious." Katelyn took a seat on the bed beside her. "I just wanted to check in on you. You've been acting... differently lately."

"Different good? Or bad?"

"Just different." Katelyn shrugged. "We've never been the closest,

so I understand if you don't want to tell me, but... Like, you've been really vibrant at swim and stuff, and there are also times where you're, like, sad and stuff. And I don't see the future, so it's just... I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Sophie wanted to choose her words carefully, but the truth sort of blurted from her mouth. "I, uh... lost my ability to see the future, and that's been, uh... weird."

Katelyn gave her a look and added this information to what she already knew. After a minute, she nodded. "That makes sense. Why'd it go away?"

"Too much anxiety."

"You?" Katelyn looked puzzled. "What's making you anxious?"

"I'm nervous about my grades, and my teacher, and..." Sophie smiled bashfully and looked at the wall. "And I'm going to ask Tay to be my girlfriend tomorrow."

"Aww, Sophie." Katelyn gave a wide smile and adjusted to face her sister. "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?"

Katelyn nodded. "Yeah. You know? The girl in our lane?"

"No, I know Olivia. Is she— Why her?"

Katelyn gave a half-shrug. "Because she thinks you're cute."

"Really?" Sophie tilted her head. "But she's only ever seen me in a swim cap and goggles."

The two girls shared a quiet laugh.

"They are ridiculous, aren't they?" Katelyn said. The room simmered back to relative silence. "So, are you ready for the swim meet on Tuesday?"

"No." Sophie sighed. "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 stick with it," Katelyn said. "I've

been doing this for eight years, but I didn't win a single race for the first *six years* of that."

"Really? I never knew that."

"Well, it's not like Mom and Dad came home flaunting every time I lost." Katelyn raised her eyebrows and tilted her head. "Honestly, people only talk about you when you succeed. When you fail, they just kind of forget you exist."

"Huh. Yeah." Sophie faced her sister. "You know... I'm sorry I never went to any of your meets. I've been in my own world for a while, and I want to be a better sister."

"Even after your power comes back?"

Sophie didn't answer right away, but Katelyn leaned into it, forcing Sophie to respond. The longer the pause lasted, the more Katelyn deflated. But then...

"Yeah," Sophie whispered. "Especially after I get my power back."

"Good." Katelyn stood. "Well, you have a big day tomorrow. I'll leave you be. 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 didn't want to be a better sister. No. It was that, for the first time ever, Sophie wasn't sure she wanted her power back in the first place.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A Gamble

SOPHIE WOKE on Monday with a burst of energy. School blurred past, and Sophie consulted her dating 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 plotted out six different contingency plans, and, oh god, this would be so much easier if she knew what was going to happen.

Nothing exemplified this better than Ms. Jackson's class. Here, in seventh period, all of Sophie's plans were thrown out the window. This was because Ms. Jackson... well... she didn't do anything. She pretended as though Sophie hadn't spent last Friday attempting to hijack her body with Marc. 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 toward the student lot, leaving Sophie and Tay to stare after him. For all the thinking Sophie did to make sure his rent was covered, it turned out that Marc really could solve the problem by himself. And in doing so, he took the burden off Sophie to save. That meant...

“The night’s on me,” Sophie said. “I have cash to burn. 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. 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 about the power of friendship whilst 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, making fun of the ninja whose rubbery sword was never fixed in post.

“So, what’s next?” Tay asked, squinting against the lobby lights. “You hungry?”

“We should get concessions,” Sophie said.

“After the movie?” Tay gave her a look.

“Oh, did I not tell you we were doing a double feature?” Sophie stepped in line for popcorn. “They let me rent a private auditorium where we can play anything we want. Grab dinner, and I’ll show you what we’re watching.”

One concession run later, and they were walking to the next auditorium with a pair of personal pizzas, a giant pretzel, a bag of gummy worms, freeze-dried Skittles, and two jugs of soda.

Sophie jumped ahead as they moved into the dark room. “For the first time on the silver screen,” she said dramatically, “I present—”

Tay paused to read the title that’d been frozen on screen, and a giant smile brightened her face.

“Meteornadocane?” Her starry eyes reflected the projector.

“You once told me that you wanted those straight-to-DVD movies to show on a big screen, 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.”

“You got ripped off,” Tay said, running headlong into the theater.

“Worth every penny.”

Sophie followed her, and they sat in the middle of the room. Tay looked around the room with the wonder of a child who’d just seen their first magic trick.

“This is so cool,” Tay said.

“I have one more surprise for you,” Sophie 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, 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 a black hole spontaneously forming between the systems, thus forcing the two disasters to team up to defeat it? Chef’s kiss. Brilliant. That kind of twist would *never* make it into a reasonable film.”

Sophie checked her phone for the time. 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 cut her short.

“Oh, we’re not done,” Sophie said. “I have a secret spot to show you. 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 still at home. After that would come the moment of truth.

“The Zebra Cakes were a ridiculous pull,” Tay said. “Did you know that I used to eat whole boxes in one sitting?”

“Really?” Sophie feigned surprise.

“Really. 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 only 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 a couple decades?”

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “We’d better get the yogurt now before it’s gone.”

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 and Cedar Caramel before landing on Citrus Grove Swirl. Tay, however, went straight for the Coconutty blend, no sample cup needed. They filled each cup to the brim and then dumped toppings on it, from M&M’s to chocolate chips to tiny slices of cake.

Sophie paid for the lot and led them out 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 out on that one.” Tay chuckled and took another bite of her yogurt. Her eyes were pulled to the sky, where she watched the first star twinkle out from under its dark blanket. “Is this because you’re nervous about the election? I won’t be mad if you win, you know. 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. Even working?” Tay let the spoon fall into her cup and faced her friend. Her swing stopped moving. “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 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 it wasn't the perfect time. It'd only be perfect after the final surprise.

At the top of the hour, fairy lights flickered to life across the banyan branches, draping it in a warm glow. Beneath this regal display, they finished their froyo and kicked their feet back and forth. Their swinging got more and more aggressive until finally, Tay flung herself from the swing and stumbled to a clean stop. Sophie plopped to solid ground behind her, nearly tripping as she landed.

"You got anything else planned or is it time to take you home?" Tay asked.

"Both," Sophie said, dusting herself off. "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. It dawned on her that she *could* meditate right now if she chose to. After all, who could care about a swim competition in a moment like this? The future was hers if she wanted it.

But no. It was time to commit. To live with consequences. To gamble her whole future.

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. Which was what, exactly? Surprisingly, Sophie realized it wasn’t Tay she wanted from this moment. What she wanted was to face reality. Moments like this were few and far between, and up until now, she had no idea how desperately she just wanted something to be *real*. And now, here it was.

“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 flattered, Sophie,” Tay whispered. “But... I’m... I’m straight. Like, *definitely* straight. And I love you. I do. But I don’t think that means I could love you, like, romantically.”

So that was it, huh? That was what the truth felt like?

Sophie felt like a broken inflatable tube man, hunched over and defeated. This outcome was unavoidable, and she realized her fate had been written in ink from the start.

“I was just hoping, you know?” Sophie looked to the carpet. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. No. I think— You should—” Tay sighed. 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. “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. “And you’re not supposed to know that. There’s only one place you would’ve gotten that information from me.”

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 so flawed in the first place.

“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.”

“Yeah,” 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 learn what it is. What’s your goal.”

“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. “This is a task list.”

“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. “Tell me—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 anymore."

"Well, figure that out and you'll never have to struggle again. If you're guided by a single *why* for living—a self-defined purpose—then the right thing will become clear. 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 into Sophie's hands. "The book is yours." She stood and opened both arms. "We're friends forever. Okay?"

Sophie stood and accepted the hug.

"Be safe driving home," Sophie whispered.

Tay wiped a tear and nodded. Then, they pulled apart, and she left.

Sophie returned to her bed and laid her cheek along the pillow. In moments, the pillow was wet. There was a certainty in Sophie that her power was back, but now, there was no point to it. There was nothing more she wanted. Instead, she let her feelings flow through her knowing all too well that this was the one and only time she'd ever get to feel them.

Somehow, that made the suffering special in its own way.

CHAPTER TWENTY

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 fix her problems. Nothing would make her whole again.

For whatever reason, Ms. Jackson left Sophie alone again, and though the Ledge was filled with all three members, their time there was dominated by a quiet tension. When the group eventually split, Sophie stopped faking her smile and rushed home to brood.

There, she sat on the floor, listened to nothing, and stared at the wall. For a moment, she tested to see if her powers were back. They were—but what was the point? Without a purpose to her visions, she snapped back to reality with a sigh.

How was she going to get through the swim competition tonight? Worse, how was she going to get through dinner? It felt like she'd just come home and Mom was already calling her downstairs to join the family for supper. At the table, she picked at her spaghetti, slicing the noodles into smaller and smaller bits until they looked like rice.

“Eat a little,” Katelyn said. “You’ll need the carbs.”

Sophie shoved a tasteless morsel into her mouth.

“I’m excited for your first race,” Dad said, trying to spark a

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 lung capacity—only reality could build those things. No. Losing today was 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 she changed into her bathing suit, throwing a baggy shirt over the top for modesty. Just as she pulled gym shorts to her waist, a knock came at the door.

"What?" she called out.

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 softer.

"You're going to lose today," Katelyn said, her tone gentle. "And I'm still going to love you."

Sophie stared at Katelyn. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Look, we haven't been this close since Phoebe left for D.C., and I don't want you quitting and growing distant again. So, sometimes, losing is okay. Okay?"

Sophie felt a pull at the edges of her lips, and a natural smile landed on her face. "Okay."

Katelyn turned to leave the room.

"Wait."

Katelyn 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.

Finally, the pool came into view, and they piled out of the car together. Sophie dragged her plain blue towel behind her and held her goggles loose by her side. She followed Katelyn through the locker room.

“You know, I wasn’t planning to quit swim,” Sophie said, mid-stride. “Win or lose, I’ll be back on the team next year. I promise.”

Katelyn smiled, and they stepped outside into the golden sunlight. Sophie jumped as a flurry of voices reacted to her entrance from the stands

“Let’s go, Sophie!”

“You got this!”

“Yeah!”

“Go!”

Sophie looked to find Tay, Marc, Tiana, and Jamal sitting in the bleachers, waving for her attention. Her eyes darted between them, and she rushed in for a round of hugs.

“What are you all doing here?” Sophie said, giving Tiana the biggest hug of all. “Did you come to watch me swim?”

“Did you really think we were going to miss your first race?” Tay asked.

“Never,” Marc said. “And since Jamal and Tiana have never seen a pool, Tay thought it’d be nice to bring them along.”

“Can you teach me how to swim?” Jamal asked.

“Can you teach Barbie too?” Tiana asked, thrusting her doll in front of Sophie. Ironically, it was lifeguard Barbie in her tiny little hand.

“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 stood tall. “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 nod 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.

Coach barked an order for the group’s attention, and the swimmers quieted. At the front of the group, he announced that the normal order of events had been shuffled and taped the schedule to a pole. Sophie rushed up to check it. While her event—the 100 butterfly—was usually sixth in the lineup, today it was last up.

“Good luck, Sophie,” Olivia said as she passed, goggles already on.

“You’re up first?” Sophie looked at the schedule again. “On the 100 breaststroke?”

“Coach put me in. Back to my roots.” Olivia flashed the “B” sign with her fingers and strut out onto the terrace. Everything about her was calm, cool, and collected. And cute?

Had she always been cute?

“Good luck!” Sophie said.

Olivia shot a finger gun and strolled up to the starting block. There, she climbed on board and bent to grip the edge. Sophie watched carefully, taking notes. Olivia’s eyes narrowed. She took a subtle breath. Her muscles tightened.

BEEP!

The race began, and Olivia dove into the water beside five other racers. The breaststroke was Sophie’s favorite to watch. Each time the swimmer bobbed out of the water, the whole team shouted. And this one was neck-and-neck.

Olivia pushed to keep even with the best racer from the other school, and the last turn sent the girls screaming down the final stretch. By now, both teams were on their feet, shouting encouragement at their

school's champion racer. Olivia and her competition reached their last stroke together, extended, and...

Olivia lost. Second place.

Sophie readied herself to offer a moment of sympathy, but Olivia looked at the clock and cheered.

"Yes! Hahaha! Let's go!"

She pulled herself out of the water. It took her a solid minute to get back to the pavilion amid the line of hugs that awaited. When she got to Sophie, she giggled.

"Why do you look so confused?" Olivia asked.

"You lost," Sophie said.

"Yeah, but I *finally* broke a minute-ten." Olivia beamed. "I've wanted that time for a year."

"You don't mind that you lost?" Sophie asked.

"You think I'm out here to win an Olympic gold?" Olivia laughed. "No way. I'm just here to see how fast I can get. Now give me a hug."

The next race started—a long freestyle event—and Sophie made her way to sit with Tay. After a brief conversation about school, Marc took Jamal and Tiana over to the concession stand, leaving Sophie alone with Tay. Both of them stared out at the water as the boys coasted along, and it wasn't until the third or fourth lap that they started speaking.

"So, how are you feeling?" Tay asked.

"Nervous. Anxious." Sophie slouched. "Scared."

"You'll do fine."

"On my race? Yeah, I know. I was talking about us." Sophie faced Tay. "I'm worried things are gonna change between us."

Tay gave a casual look at Sophie. "Of course things will change, but that doesn't mean they'll get worse. We're still best friends. As far as I'm concerned, you simply gave me a perfect night out, and one day, I'm going to treat you to a perfect day too. Until then, if you need space, I—
”

"I don't need space," Sophie said. "I just... I needed an answer, and

now I have it.”

“Good.” Tay wrapped her arm around Sophie’s shoulders. “Sometimes the answer’s going to be no. Now you have it, and we can leave it in the past. As for your future, I want you to swim as hard as you can, okay? Because if you give up, it’s going to make all my cheering look extra silly.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Look, Katelyn’s next.” Tay pointed to the starting block where Sophie’s sister was third in line, loosening her shoulders for a medley race.

“I’ll be back.” Sophie stood and rushed to the pool’s edge just in time for the starting *beep* to sound.

From here, race after race proceeded, and Sophie watched as each racer celebrated and groaned. Sometimes, the races ended with hugs, sometimes with tears, and sometimes with vomit. Her anxiety mounted as the night carried on, until finally, she was next.

Sophie stepped gingerly around a myriad of puddles and headed toward the starting block. She stood behind the pedestal, knowing that once she climbed up, she *had* to race. With a heavy heart, she pulled herself up and looked over at the pavilion.

“Good luck, Sophie,” Katelyn shouted.

“Let’s freakin’ go!” Olivia shouted.

“You’re the best!” Tiana screeched from the stands.

And then came four dreaded words: “Swimmers, take your mark...”

Sophie leaned forward. 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 fire inside.

BEEP!

Sophie dove, and the cold water swallowed her up. She coasted for half the length of the pool before opening her eyes—and found her goggles had filled with water. Horror seeped in. She was going to be swimming this race blind.

I need to stop, she thought, her legs drifting toward the bottom. But an inch from the ground, the fire of competition came roaring back. Her friends were here. Her family was here. Even Tiana was here—what would *she* think if Sophie gave up?

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. For this first stretch, 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 as she realized there would always be a guide, even if she felt like she was going through this blind. Even better, she noticed she was gaining on the other school's slowest swimmer.

I might not be last.

She pushed harder, huffing bigger breaths of air. Her shoulders were burning by the second turn, and she distracted herself from the pain by thinking of music. The beat of her favorite rock song carried her through the race's third length. There, at the far end of the pool, she was tied with her competition.

But then came a moment where her spirit could no longer carry her. The voices of her friends had died away, and she was tapped out with no energy left. And yet, somehow, she kept going, finding power she'd never previously known about.

Three strokes to go. Her legs locked together and her arms heaved. Two strokes left. She grunted and pulled. One stroke—her body stretched, and with a final kick, she touched the wall.

And just like that, it was over.

She clung onto the edge of the wall and guzzled air. With one hand, she tore her goggles off her face and tossed them onto dry land. The other butterfly girls were hovering around her, beaming smiles. Why was

the world spinning?

“Look.” Katelyn pointed, and Sophie turned to see the scoreboard. At two minutes flat, she had indeed earned herself a last-place finish. But she’d also beaten her personal best by three seconds. This time would’ve been *impossible* for her just two weeks ago. It was concrete, measurable proof that she’d improved. And it felt so fucking good. What time could she get in another two weeks?

Sophie turned back to the girls in her lane and found that, in her distraction, they’d unfolded a towel. It was a dark towel with a cat on the front—Chococat from Hello Kitty. They held it out for her.

“What’s this?” Sophie asked, accepting Olivia’s help as she stumbled out to sit on the pool’s edge.

“It’s for you,” Katelyn said, draping the towel over Sophie’s shoulders. “All the butterfly swimmers have a Hello Kitty towel. This one’s yours.”

Sophie smiled and stood, hugging the fabric tight. A smattering of ‘good jobs’ and ‘congratulations’ surrounded her on the way to the pavilion.

“Soph!” Coach faced her head-on.

Sophie perked. “Yes?”

“That was a rough race,” he said.

“Oh.”

“The first one’s always rough. Wanna do it again next week?”

Sophie nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Coach gave a thumbs-up. “To be clear, you were gonna do it again next week either way.”

“I know.”

“Good.” Coach smiled. “Now, am I to understand you hit a new personal best?”

To this, Olivia and Katelyn posted up on either side of Sophie, standing suspiciously close.

“I did...” Sophie said carefully.

Coach nodded at the surrounding girls. “Get her.”

At once, Katelyn and Olivia latched onto Sophie’s arms and legs and pulled her off the ground. Her towel fell to the ground, and Sophie struggled to escape, laughing the whole time. The girls held tight and walked her to the edge of the pool before tossing her in. Sophie sank to the bottom and pushed herself off, pulling her hair away from her face as she surfaced.

Olivia was thrown in behind her—the reward for her own personal best. And as the results were announced, the two girls tread water together. Sophie flashed a smile at Olivia, and it was promptly returned. Moments later, they were carried away by the roar of celebration.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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 that should've been about how hard people will fight when they have nothing to lose. But the moral was lost amid *insane* footage of Liam Neeson beheading a zombie with a walker. And the special effects were so bad that Sophie was convinced she'd have done a better job if she applied the effects herself. Which gave her 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 real 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. But

she didn't have a lifetime to edit it—she had three days. No, wait—two. She looked at the calendar again—just one day.

And then, it was 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. By the end of the day, she'd either be class president, or she'd be celebrating Tay's victory. It was all going to be okay.

The first order of business was the morning speech. She caught Tay outside the A/V room a full twenty minutes before the bell was supposed to ring.

"Are you ready?" Tay asked. For the first time ever, Sophie caught Tay biting her fingernails.

"I am," Sophie said. "Want to read my speech?"

"Only if you'll look over mine."

They swapped papers. For a few minutes, they read and finished at the same time. Then, they made incredulous eyes at one another.

"Are you serious?" Tay said.

"It's, like, word for word the same speech."

"Yeah, but—" Tay held up the paper dramatically, "—you added a CGI elective based on my esports idea, and I added more Driver's Ed routes based on your pantry idea." She handed back Sophie's speech. "Do you just want to do our speech together?"

"What?"

"We've spent all election apart. Wouldn't it be fitting to join together now? For the speech, we'll riff about the Vice Presidency position and show the school how united we are. It'll be great."

"You know what? I'm in." Sophie folded her paper and stuffed it into her back pocket. After all the effort she'd put into it, this was a painful move, but it felt right.

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 as he fumbled 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. 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 a picture of the Capitol Building. Sophie wished they could be standing in front of the school instead.

“Alright. 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. “During the course of the election, we each brought strengths and weaknesses to the table. Through this, we realized a simple truth: our visions for the school could do the most good if they were combined. 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. “That means it doesn’t really matter who you vote for because the school will get both of us working hard to make your lives better. So, this election season, let’s cast our worries aside and cast our votes with hope. Because it’s not one of us who’ll win—it’s you,

the student.”

“Thank you for giving us the opportunity to come together,” Tay said. “And cast your votes at lunch.”

They each gave a thumbs-up, and the camera clicked off. An impulse rushed through them, and the two girls hugged. It was finally over. Their rivalry was done.

Tay laughed as she stepped back. “Let’s cast our worries aside and cast our votes with hope? Where did *that* come from?”

“It was a line I wrote and scrapped three separate times,” Sophie admitted.

“It’s a great line. Just a tad on the nose.”

“I think that went well,” Mr. Pittman said. “Good luck, ladies.”

Sophie left with Tay and they hugged again in the hallway. It lasted a solid thirty seconds before Sophie pulled away. By then, they were each a bit of a mess.

“So, that’s it?” Tay brushed a tear from her eye. “We find out results at the end of seventh?”

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “You know, if we both happen to be in the bathroom around then...”

Tay smiled and nodded. It was a plan.

As the day progressed, Sophie felt the full weight of her anxiety. Though she’d crossed ‘*I want to become class president*’ off her list of wants weeks ago, she learned today that her desire to win was still very much present. It was tough to resist the urge to cut to the end.

But she was thankful she resisted. For as much dread as she felt about the fear of losing, there was joy in 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 the haters.

And nobody was a bigger hater than Ms. Jackson.

“Clear your desks.” Ms. Jackson’s eyes were lasers pointing at Sophie’s head. “It’s pop test time.”

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 was busy; 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. Of all the things that could destroy her today, this wasn't it.

But again, Sophie was ready, and she blazed through the questions. Surprisingly, she found the work to be fun, like putting together a puzzle. It turned out that tests weren't all that scary if you knew all the answers.

She was the first student to finish. As she scratched in the final answer, she stood, slung her backpack around her shoulder, and strutted to the front of the class. There was an air of victory about her as she handed it 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 to start a pile.

"I'll have it graded tomorrow."

Sophie scrunched her lips. Then, she shook off the feeling.

"Can I use the restroom?" she asked bluntly.

Ms. Jackson looked up from beneath her eyelashes. "Yes, you may go meet Tay in the ladies' room while they announce the winner of the election."

Sophie opened her mouth to lie about her intentions but realized how silly that would be. Not only was this "guess" too specific, but digging a hole when she got the response she wanted would just be foolish. So, she smiled, turned heel, and headed for the hallway.

As the door closed behind her, she caught a glimpse of Tay creeping down the hall. They shared a goofy face and marched nonchalantly to the bathroom. Once inside, they broke their composure and laughed.

"I'm going to be so happy for you when you win," Tay said, leaning against the sink.

"It's definitely going to be you. You had an amazing campaign."

"Oh, stop."

Above them, the intercom sounded, and they sobered. Quietly, Tay slipped her hand into Sophie's and squeezed.

"Good afternoon!" the announcer said. "There's just one announcement before we release seniors, and that's to share the winner of the junior class presidential election. After months of fierce campaigning, the lady who will lead the senior class next year, is..." There was the sound of an envelope being torn open. Then a pause. After a scuffle, the intercom went silent. Nobody breathed. Finally, the system pinged again.

"Sorry about that," the announcer said. "The senior class presidential election has ended in a tie. Sophie Valentine and Taylor Jardine, please report to the principal's office to discuss a resolution. Thank you."

Sophie and Tay stared at one another, not sure what to do next. Their collective emotion had swelled to such a degree that it *needed* to be popped, but now, it had to be stuffed. Bottled up. Compressed.

"Did she say we tied?" Tay asked.

"Yeah," Sophie said.

"So..."

The principal's office was gaudy and half-heartedly decorated with fake antiques the likes of which one might buy at a school book fair. The statuesque bust of a philosopher sat in the corner, and the five balls of a Newton's cradle hung motionless 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.

"Seeing that this was already a runoff, 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 one class president to be registered in a central database," he said. "This system is what colleges

use to verify the information on your applications, so it's not just a formality." The principal folded his hands on the desk. "If one of you doesn't step down by choice, I'll have to flip a coin to determine the winner. Does anyone want to step down now?"

Sophie and Tay exchanged a glance. Each of them knew they'd do *anything* for the other person—but not this. Not on a whim.

"I'll give you until Monday to come up with a solution," he said. "After that, it's up to the fates."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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. Thoughts swirled as she considered her next move. Should she take the coin flip? 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 didn't have the 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 to change for the ride home, she found her phone vibrating, a Cambridge area code front and center.

Sophie answered in a rush, the scent of dry chlorine clogging her nose. "Hello?"

"Hi, 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. How'd the election go?"

Sophie paused, then gave a dry laugh. "It ended in a tie. 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. It all matters. You understand?"

Sophie paused. "I—I do."

"Good. Now, looking here, it says that I advised you to pick up a sport. Did you do that?"

"I joined swim team," Sophie said, happy to have something to redeem herself. 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, I'd say you should start planning your move."

A pang of despair washed over Sophie at the word 'valedictorian'. "Yeah, so... What if a grade slipped?"

Cathy paused. 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'll drop my class ranking to third."

"Interesting." Cathy clicked a pen. "Well, if you *really* want Harvard, you'll get that fixed. I'll make a note here to check in at the end of the semester. 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. How far would she be willing to go to get her grade back? Would she lie? Cheat? Steal?

Then, she shrugged and left the locker room without another worry. No. Of course she wouldn't lie, cheat, or steal. Instead, she'd talk with Ms. Jackson and see where that took her.

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. The whole day was a slog toward seventh period where a confrontation with Ms. Jackson was long overdue.

After thinking things over, she decided she'd have this conversation raw. No rehearsals, no manipulations, no games. 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. But if Ms. Jackson was set on giving her a bad grade, she'd drop the election so Tay could live the life she wanted. It was all or nothing.

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, silently 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 full minute, long after the last student had filed out. The fact that Ms. Jackson didn't acknowledge this meant she'd seen it coming. It meant Sophie's fate was already sealed.

But Sophie still needed to see this through.

She stood and approached the desk, feeling like a criminal awaiting judgment from their 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. In this way, you've shown me growth—at least on a superficial level. Tell me, did you meditate before this interaction?"

Sophie shook her head. It felt like she was riding a roller coaster, and now that she was on the ride, nothing could alter the track.

“I thought not. So, look. I’m a teacher. My reason for being is that I transform people. And I take that responsibility—” she leaned forward and folded her hands, “—very seriously. And you’re reaching the end of what I can teach you.”

Sophie drew a sharp breath.

“As such,” Ms. Jackson continued, “It’s time to offer you a final exam. Tonight, I’ve been invited to an initiation ceremony with my closest friends. I’m expected to be there at five o’clock. If I arrive early or on time, you keep your D grade. But if I knock on the door even a minute past five, you’ll get your slate wiped clean. Your job is to stop me from getting there. Do you understand?”

Sophie wanted to speak, but she was worried it’d ruin everything. Instead, she nodded.

Ms. Jackson nodded and stood, the chair scraping behind her.

“You have less than three hours to find victory. It’s seer against seer. Good luck. Enjoy your Friday night.”

With that, Ms. Jackson left 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 the initiation? How was she going to stop Ms. Jackson from travelling? And why did this matter?

She was going to need help.

The hallway felt 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, and they lingered on Olivia. *How much should I say?* she wondered. *Should Olivia know the truth? Could she be trusted?* Then, Sophie rolled her eyes. Of course Olivia could be trusted.

“Ms. Jackson confirmed she can see the future,” Sophie said. “She

made me an offer to get my grade back.”

“How?”

“She has a meeting tonight at five. If I can make her late, I win.” Sophie turned to Tay. “Look—if I lose this, there’s no point in being president, which means I’ll drop the election. It’s in *your* best interest for *me* to lose, so if you don’t want to help me, I—”

“Shut up,” Tay said. “Of course I’m helping.”

Sophie stared at Tay. That’s it? No questions?

“Wait, so Ms. Jackson can see the future?” Olivia scratched her head. “Is she a witch? I mean, she looks like one, but...”

Sophie faced Olivia. “Look, this is going to be a little hard to believe, but... I see the future when I meditate, and so does Ms. Jackson.”

“Oh. That makes perfect sense,” Olivia said.

“It does?”

Olivia shrugged. “Katelyn’s alluded to it a dozen times. I thought she was exaggerating, but I guess not. Well, you need all the help you can get, right? I have a car. Count me in.”

Sophie smiled, her emotions welling.

“Alright, look—we don’t have a lot of time,” Marc said, glancing at the time on his phone. “It’s two o’clock now. We have three hours to change Sophie’s life. Let’s get started.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Make Good Decisions

WITHIN TWENTY minutes, there were three cars in Sophie's driveway and four people in her room. They sat in a circle while Sophie explained 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. "My entire future is on the line. Are we ready?"

Marc, Tay, and Olivia nodded. Sophie closed her eyes and listened to the dull ringing in her ears. A vibration rippled through her soul, and Sophie was pulled into a new domain.

===MEDITATION===

"Alright," Sophie said. "Question one: where is Ms. Jackson going? Tay, remember that time we got the GPS tracker?"

Tay shrugged uneasily.

"Sorry, that was a meditation. Okay, well... we're going to get a new tracker and try that again. This time, though, we'll need a stronger adhesive."

“I have a tube of instant cement in my car,” Marc said. “Accidentally took it from a worksite,” he added.

“Go get it.”

Marc left and returned with the tube. Sophie scanned the directions and nodded.

“This’ll be perfect. 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. “From where I was sitting, it looked like you blinked. Are we... are we in a meditation right now?”

Sophie smiled, dialing back her urgency for Olivia’s sake. “Yeah. This is a potential future.”

“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 Mom who was packing things into her purse.

“Oh, where are you going?” Mom asked.

“Just out,” Sophie said.

“Naturally. Make good decisions.”

Sophie nodded knowing she’d have to make the *best* decisions today. 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 ditch the tracker. Besides, the tracker’s only half the plan. Once it’s affixed, you’ll park somewhere where we can watch her, and then we’ll follow her when she leaves. One of the two plans will work out.”

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 before forcing themselves to sober.

After weaving through a few back roads, Tay pulled into Ms. Jackson's neighborhood. 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 short, the topiary was well cared for, and the mailbox was freshly painted. With the Subie's engine rumbling, Tay tapped the brakes, and Sophie slipped out of the car. 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—and holding a baseball bat. It was resting on her shoulder, bouncing up and down as she circled the car. Once at the bumper, she pulled at her sleeve to loosen her blouse, and—

"Oh, no..."

Ms. Jackson swung.

Whoosh! Crack!

Plastic and foam rained onto concrete. In an instant, the tracker was scrap.

"Now she'll get in and drive away." Sophie crossed her fingers.

“Hopefully.”

Ms. Jackson tossed the bat aside and faced the spot where Tay had parked. From her back pocket, she withdrew something small and shiny.

A knife.

Ms. Jackson’s eyes were crazed as she held the blade between them and approached the two girls. Tay pushed the lock button, and the doors *thunked* around them.

“Sophie, what happens if I die in a meditation?” she asked, panicked.

“I don’t know,” Sophie said.

“I don’t want to find out.”

Ms. Jackson grew closer, and this was becoming just like those straight-to-DVD horror flicks she and Tay had devoured last summer.

“Do I drive?” Tay asked. “I want to drive.”

“Not yet,” Sophie said, grabbing the oh-shit handle even though they weren’t moving.

Ms. Jackson stopped adjacent to Sophie’s window, and without breaking eye contact, she took a knee. Suddenly, there was a *pop*, and the car sank a few inches closer to the ground.

“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 tired of the games. With heavy attitude, she rolled down her window. Outside, a sharp *hiss* needled the air as the car sagged further.

“What is your *problem*?”

Ms. Jackson ignored the tone. “Have I given you a code yet?”

“No.” Sophie shot her a snotty look.

“First attempt then. Figures.” 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 to solve 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 as the car leveled.

“The next time I ask for a code,” Ms. Jackson said, “you tell me ‘813.’ It means you’re trying. The second code comes when you impress me.” She turned heel and strode away.

Sophie watched her depart with seething rage. Between the codes and questions, it seemed like her life was becoming Ms. Jackson’s game. Either way, Sophie was sure of one thing: she’d lost this round.

Sophie closed her eyes, drew a breath—

===REALITY===

—and sputtered back to life. She looked at each of her friends and shook her head. While nobody expected the first attempt to succeed, this still brought the mood down.

“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, and 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.

“She didn’t say anything else helpful. Just that there would be more codes coming.”

“Then we have to assume the code is for something later,” Tay said. “Let’s forget it and focus on her destination. You have all the

information you need, yeah?”

“Maybe she tipped you off in the classroom,” Marc said. “Can you remember any details? Any awkward phrasings?”

“I can’t think of anything like that.” Sophie stared at the ceiling, trying to recount Ms. Jackson’s exact words. “She said... she needed to be at an initiation at 5:00 p.m.... with her closest friends... and—”

“Her closest friends?” Marc looked Sophie dead in the eyes. “She’s going to Rick’s in Calisette.”

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 35-year-old high school teacher has more than six friends? Because I don’t.”

It made sense, but Sophie needed to be sure.

“I’ll check on that,” Sophie said. 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 the town, you know?”

Marc and Tay shared a look.

“I’ll consider it,” Tay said. “I’m brewing a plan of my own as we go.”

Sophie snapped awake. “Ungh.” She 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 we must leave by 4:00 p.m. No later.”

“Okay. It’s 3:00 p.m. now,” Marc said. “That gives us an hour.”

“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, things were getting dire. In a moment of desperation, Marc spoke.

“Let’s just spit out ideas,” he said. “The best I’ve got is that we could set her car on fire.”

“Obviously, that’s illegal,” Sophie said.

“Only if we get caught.”

“What if we just, like, held her front door shut?” Tay said. “That’s not illegal. It’s just weird.”

“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, shuffling to her feet.

Katelyn twisted her face in shock. “Olivia? What are you doing here?”

“We’re trying to inconvenience Sophie’s teacher,” Olivia said plainly.

“I’ll probably regret asking, but why?”

“For justice, probably.” Olivia looked over at a corner of the room to ponder. “Come to think of it, I didn’t ask.”

“It’s because Ms. Jackson challenged me,” Sophie said. “If I win, I get my life back. If I lose, I lose it all.”

“Okay then. Cool.” Katelyn looked behind her to see if Mom was close, then stepped into the room. “Maybe I can help. Olivia still needs to move her car, though. Mom’s got plans.”

Olivia squinted her eyes, formulating something. “You’re saying that if I don’t move my car, your mom is stuck, right?” She turned to Sophie. “What if we used our cars to surround Ms. Jackson’s car? If Ms. Jackson can’t drive—what then?”

“She could take a RydeShare,” Marc said.

“Actually,” Sophie said, “there are only a few drivers that service the Bristol area. 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, and Olivia left the room. Sophie straightened, closed her eyes, and prepped for round two. 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 group thumped downstairs. They caught up with Olivia immediately. Sophie told her she was meditating, and Olivia’s gait became unnatural immediately. It was as though she were pretending this was normal but couldn’t commit to the bit.

“Wow.” Olivia clenched one fist as though it’d feel different the more she did it. “So, none of this is real? It’s so weird.”

“Okay, so I’ll ride with Olivia and get her grounded,” Sophie said.

“Great,” Olivia said. “I have so many questions.”

“I know.”

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 sunglasses 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.”

“Gotcha,” Mom said. “Make good decisions.” She 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 threw in the back with a shameful apology. Her car started with ease, and she backed out onto the road where they waited for Marc and Tay’s cars to join them.

“So, where are we going?” Olivia asked.

“Just follow Tay.”

Once Tay was moving, Olivia kicked her car into drive. At first, the hum of the road was enough to keep their minds full, but Olivia wasn’t accustomed to silence the same way Sophie was.

“So, how long have you had your power?”

Sophie shrugged. “I had fragments of it all my life, but I learned to control the flow of it just a couple years ago. I literally didn’t tell anyone about it—even my sisters—until just a few months ago.”

“And do you like it?” Olivia asked. “Seeing the future?”

“Wouldn’t anyone?” Sophie watched the ragged apartments of Coalview blow past. “Actually, it has its ups and downs.”

“What’s bad about it?” Olivia asked.

“It’s made me lazy,” Sophie said. “I was a good student before my

power, but being able to cheat without consequence has been... tempting. In an ironic way, the more I used my power, the harder things became. I mean, I was checking days ahead just to know if a test was coming. Recently, I've just been studying out of a book, and it turns out that that's *way* easier."

"But can't you use your power to get anything you want?" Olivia asked. "You don't need school if you can just win the lottery, right?"

"Sure, but I don't think it's money I'm after."

"What is it you're after, then?"

Sophie let the question weigh on her heart. "I don't know."

"So, 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 spent 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, 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 with her reflection. I don't want to make that mistake again. Not with you."

"Got it." Olivia nodded a stern affirmative. "No secrets, then. Remind me of that in reality, will you? Maybe it could be rule number two—no sharing secrets in meditations."

"I like that."

They arrived at Ms. Jackson's house, the caravan still together. Ms. Jackson's car was still in the center of the extra-wide 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 an 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. The Rydes arrived quickly, and in moments, her closest friends were gone. A few minutes later, two more drivers took to the road, and Sophie immediately booked them each for Katelyn and Olivia. That left 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.

The front door creaked, and Ms. Jackson strode out. She took one look at the cars and waved politely at Sophie. Sophie returned the pleasantry by flicking her off.

Ms. Jackson was unfazed. She sidled in between her and Marc's car and curled her fingers under the door handle. Then, with a heavy jerk, she slammed her door open—right into the side of Marc's car. The metal on both cars cratered instantly.

Sophie's jaw dropped.

Ms. Jackson did this twice more before squeezing 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 she turned the ignition over, shifted into reverse, and—

Sophie couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Ms. Jackson hit the gas, backing into Olivia's car with enough force to shove it back an entire foot. Then, she pulled forward and did it again. And again. And again. Metal crunched, and her tires left skid marks on the driveway. Then, she jerked the steering wheel left and smashed into Tay's car too. By the time she finished, each car was obliterated—but there was a gap large enough for her to fit through.

Ms. Jackson's half-demolished car hobbled up to Sophie and squealed to a stop. The driver's side window started moving, rolling down halfway before stopping with a *crunch*. From inside the car, Ms. Jackson's spectacles peered up at Sophie.

"You know how I know this is a meditation?" she said.

"Enlighten me."

“Because you would never let your friends’ cars be wrecked like this—not even for Harvard.”

Sophie looked away.

“So, let me ask you a question,” Ms. Jackson said. “Why do you want to get into Harvard?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because it’s all you say you want, and yet, when presented with a choice between light property damage and achieving your dream, you seem to respect your friend’s property more. That means there is something inside you that you want *more* than Harvard. I want to draw that out. So, why Harvard?”

“Because I want to keep as many open doors as possible,” Sophie said. “I don’t know what I want to do with my life, but Harvard will give me the opportunity to help the greatest number of people.”

“If you truly believed that,” Ms. Jackson said, “you wouldn’t let property damage stand in your way. Think about it. If the only thing you needed to do to save the world was blow up three cars, would you do it?”

Sophie stayed silent.

“And yet...” Ms. Jackson gestured toward the damage. “And so, the question evolves. If you wouldn’t do *anything* to get into Harvard, then what is it that’s more important to you? Figure that out, and you’ll know what you’re destined for. Now, have I given you a code?”

“813.”

“Interesting,” Ms. Jackson mused. “You know, I tried to book a RydeShare, but they were out. Was that your doing?”

Sophie nodded.

“Great touch. The second code is 808. You have one more code to earn, but that one’s special.” Ms. Jackson raised her eyebrows. “You’ll only get that one if you win. And that won’t be possible.”

“Why’s that?”

Ms. Jackson gave a wicked smile. “Because I’ve already dreamt of

my safe arrival. You know the kind. Unless you can do what nobody else has ever done and change fate, you're destined to lose. Welcome to the inevitable, Sophie. Good luck."

Ms. Jackson hit the gas. The wheels spun, and a stream of smoke poured from behind the car. Sophie coughed and waved it away. At the end of the road, Ms. Jackson stopped, stretched her hand out of the window, and returned Sophie's middle finger.

Sophie clenched both fists and screamed in frustration.

===REALITY===

"How'd it go?" Tay asked.

Sophie sat still, her mouth agape. She looked at Marc, Tay, and Katelyn, 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 Ms. Jackson in, but she damaged all our cars to escape."

"So that attempt was a waste?" Marc asked.

"I wouldn't say it was a waste. I *did* get a second code. But I still don't know what they're for. Hell, we don't know if they matter."

"Why wouldn't they 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, and those dreams can't be changed."

"Could she be lying?" Katelyn asked.

“I don’t think she is,” Sophie said. “I feel so stupid. She wouldn’t have made this bet if she didn’t know she would win. I’m sure of it.”

The door opened, and Olivia returned.

“What did I miss?”

“It’s hopeless,” Sophie said. “Nothing will work.”

The room sank into despair, and Sophie felt the bitter pang of defeat. Her eyes drifted from person-to-person. She was asking a lot from each of them. Katelyn was giving out her time. Olivia was giving her trust. Marc was offering his talent. And Tay—Tay might literally be giving Sophie her entire future. They did 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 disappeared. *Why* should she stop Ms. Jackson?

“I don’t think it’s hopeless,” Olivia said, breaking the silence. “Tay has an idea.”

Tay shot a look at Olivia that suggested she wasn’t ready to share it. Then, she shrugged. “It’s a little half-baked, but...”

Sophie smiled, and a pang of truth hit her. Between the two of them, Tay was smarter. Stronger. Better. She represented everything Sophie wished she could be. For months, Sophie had used her power to maintain control of every situation, just to edge out Tay—but Tay was able to go lockstep with her, swimming blind. Sophie should’ve understood the truth sooner: Tay deserved the success Sophie had been stealing. All this time, it was Sophie who ought to have been Tay’s sidekick. Not the other way around.

As Tay began speaking, Sophie felt a shift in her heart.

“We’re going to need the drivers on the swim team, a bottle of melatonin, and some muscle,” Tay said. “The problem is that we don’t think we have time to run this in a meditation.” She faced Sophie. “Do you want to check this plan first knowing we might miss our window,

or do you want to run this plan live?”

Sophie drew a deep breath, and anxiety left her system. She knew what the answer needed to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Journey to Rick's

MS. JACKSON twisted her wrist, flicking on the last bit of eyeliner to 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 cameras.

Maybe this is reality, she thought. Or maybe it wasn't. Either way, the truth would reveal itself in due time. After all, 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 moved to her 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, and she was off toward Rick's without a hitch.

Suburban houses blurred past. Around each corner, Ms. Jackson 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 wasn't like Sophie to give up without a fight.

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, even in SoCal. It was so bad that when it came time to merge, she had to cut off a car just to get on the freeway.

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.

Ah, here we go, 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 hardly presented a problem. In the prophetic dream, Ms. Jackson saw the state of her car upon arrival—it was clean and undented. That meant from now until she arrived, the universe had given her permission to act with reckless abandon.

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 progressed slowly until she arrived behind the troublemakers. She peered through each window, squinting to glimpse the drivers. While she recognized each as students from her school, she didn't know any of them in particular. It certainly wasn't Sophie's friends.

Must be someone's idea of a prank.

With a heavy foot, she crossed into the leftmost shoulder, nearly clipping the truck 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. In the end, the traffic jam only slowed her a few minutes.

Is that it? Ms. Jackson thought. Sophie's terrible plan seemed to have backfired, and now Ms. Jackson was staring down a clean path with no further delays. If that was all Sophie had in store for her, it wouldn't even be enough for the second code.

Whoop, whoop!

The siren of a police cruiser wailed, and Ms. Jackson grinned. This was an interesting development. Finally. Getting a police officer involved seemed a little out of reach for Sophie, so if it was her doing, this was an impressive delay. She watched the officer behind her as it veered side-to-side and coasted off the highway to park on an empty stretch of road. There, she waited for the officer to approach.

But he wasn't moving—at least not quickly. Instead, the cop fumbled around his vehicle, adjusting the tablet and flipping switches at random. A slew of nonsensical sirens echoed, and if Ms. Jackson thought this was strange, it was nothing compared to how the officer's dog was acting. The K-9 in the back of the cruiser was growling and barking at the cop. Either they were new partners, or—

Sophie wouldn't dare. Ms. Jackson thought. *Would she?*

Her hand itched to shift into drive, but a nagging doubt kept her from moving. Her dream had only shown a clean arrival, but it gave no clues as to what the journey would entail. If she ran from the police now, she would risk arriving at the house on time—only to be arrested later. No. She couldn't run until she was certain this wasn't reality, and that line hadn't been crossed.

After several minutes, the cop opened his door and clambered to his feet. There, he struggled to stay upright. Slowly, he turned toward Ms. Jackson and limped in her direction. His shaky feet carried him up

to her window, and Ms. Jackson met his lazy eyes.

“License and...” His voice slipped away. He cleared his throat. “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, seemingly disinterested. 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.

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.

“Look—Officer Dinkle? 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 pivoted and walked away with her ID. On the way toward the cruiser, he nearly collapsed with each heavy step.

“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 meant that—right or wrong—it was time to make her judgement call.

“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 what she suspected.

“How’d you... know?” he asked.

“It was the dog,” Ms. Jackson said, nodding at the animal in the car. “They always know.” She shook her head, debating how much time she had to scold him. “It’s a bold move to dreamwalk with an officer, Marc, but it won’t be enough. Make sure to call Sophie and tell her to try again.”

“Tell her yourself,” Marc said. “You’ll be seeing her—” he clenched his teeth, “—around 5:01.”

“Oh, you think you’re so—”

Before she could finish, the officer collapsed. He lay on the dirt a moment before waking in a daze, shocked by the brightness of the sun. In falling, Ms. Jackson’s ID had slid a few inches away.

“Ungh.” He held a hand up to his head. “Where am I?”

Ms. Jackson debated her options. She could leave without her ID and risk the officer’s suspicion or try to recover it discreetly. She was 90% sure this wasn’t reality—but she couldn’t risk choosing the wrong option.

With an exasperated sigh, she took action.

“Oh my goodness.” Ms. Jackson’s face melted 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.

“Ah, I...” He looked around and gained his bearings. “I think I’m okay.”

“Great. That’s great. It’s probably heat stroke.” Ms. Jackson dropped her empathic act. 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. The officer was barely off the ground by the time she was driving again. It was now 4:40 p.m., and she was roughly 20 minutes away from Rick’s. Even a minute more of delay would mean she lost to Sophie—which, as

she thought about it, wasn't truly a concern. The dream, after all.

Regardless, she merged back onto the highway, barely beating the pace-setting pranksters who were still trickling up the highway. Getting caught by traffic twice would've been a great plan—but it seemed that Sophie failed to plan things out all the way. That seemed more like her.

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, at last, she was safe.

Rick's house rolled into view at 4:59 p.m. She parked behind a half-dozen cars and scrambled out of the car, breathing a sigh of relief. This was finally unfolding as she'd seen, which meant—

The back door to a red Subaru slammed open, blocking Ms. Jackson from moving forward. A girl emerged. At the same time, a second girl jumped out of a nearby truck. Ms. Jackson screamed as the two girls attacked. One girl grabbed her arms; the other grabbed her legs. 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," one of the girls shouted.

"Just a little longer," came a voice from the car. "Olivia, Katelyn, hold tight!"

Ms. Jackson recognized the voice from the car. "Sophie?"

"We got you." Sophie stood to show her face.

"No." Ms. Jackson pulled and yanked. "Not if I—" A cell-phone alarm sounded. It was officially 5:01. Ms. Jackson went limp. She'd lost.

"Yes!" Sophie jumped from the car. "We did it!"

Ms. Jackson stared up at the sky and spent a moment noticing how beautiful it was. Then she laughed softly.

“You can put me down now,” she said.

Tay 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 Olivia, Sophie, and Katelyn jump in a circle to celebrate their win. The driver-side door of the Subaru opened, and Tay joined in their fun. Then, on the street, a new car pulled up to the house, and Marc stepped out with a big smile.

“I told you,” Marc gloated. “5:01.”

Ms. Jackson let them have their moment. They’d earned it. Excited chatter burst from the circle of friends as they briefly shared their part of the story. As the celebration simmered, Ms. Jackson approached the group, and all five of them grew silent.

“I’m impressed, Sophie,” Ms. Jackson said. “You did it.”

“Actually, this was all Tay’s idea,” Sophie said.

“Well, she did good. Was the traffic jam your doing?”

Tay nodded. “We had drivers from the swim team set it up.”

“Good. Well, if you’ve gotten this far, Sophie, I imagine you’ve received some codes?”

“813 and 808,” Sophie said.

“You’ve earned the third code. It’s 3875. Take these numbers back to reality, and...” she shrugged. “You’ll see.” Ms. Jackson dusted off the grass from her bottoms. “Now, I’m sure we had several chats through your meditations. Have you considered what I’ve said?”

Sophie looked away. “I’m still working through it.”

“Well, here’s what I hope you’ll consider most,” Ms. Jackson said. “If there were an opportunity for you that was better than Harvard—something you never knew existed before—would you go for it?”

“Of course,” Sophie said.

“I hope you mean it,” Ms. Jackson said, taking a step toward Rick’s door. “Your diligence has finally paid off. You’re ready.”

Sophie stared after Ms. Jackson as she entered the house. Now that she knew it was possible to beat Ms. Jackson, she had to break the news

to her friends in reality.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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.

“Tay’s plan worked,” Sophie said.

The group cheered. In a flurry, they scrambled to their feet and got to work. Olivia pulled out her phone, the swim team group chat front and center. Marc reached for his melatonin and was popping open the lid. Katelyn was stretching. But Sophie stopped them all.

“We’re not going to do it, though,” Sophie said. “We’re going to let Ms. Jackson go free.”

They paused. Then—

“What?”

“No!”

“You can’t—”

Sophie raised her arm, and they quieted.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said.

The room grew stale as they stewed in a mix of emotions.

“Sophie,” Katelyn said softly. “We can’t give up—”

Katelyn didn’t finish her sentence. Tay’s phone alarm sounded. It

was now 4:00 p.m., and their window for action had closed.

“We’re not giving up,” Sophie said. “I’m doing what I should’ve done a long time ago. 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 can send Olivia and the swimmers directly to Calisette 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, and that was her point. She wanted me to consider what my powers could do. What they could *really* do. I have a lot of thinking ahead of me.”

“This is an odd change of mind,” Marc said. “Did Ms. Jackson tell you something?”

“I... yes and no.” Sophie shrugged, not wanting to talk about it.

“Did she give you a third code, at least?”

Sophie told them the whole story, ending with the last four digits of the code. “And that’s everything. We still don’t know what the codes are for, though.”

“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 rhythm that made sense. Finally, her eyes lit.

“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.”

Sophie’s voice caught. She moved to speakerphone and held the phone in the middle of the group.

“Congratulations on passing your final exam,” the voice continued. “We look forward to seeing you soon. Bring DeMarcus, Tay, Katelyn, and Olivia. 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 in Google, we’ll find an address or something.”

“No, it’s too common of a phrase,” Katelyn said, already sifting through search 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, thinking back on her Physics lessons. “Having a third eye means you can see through time. I think...” a spark of excitement grew inside her. “I think the Third Eye is a group of seers.”

“But why did Ms. Jackson give you their phone number?” Tay asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Olivia looked over the room. “Ms. Jackson’s

going to an initiation, right? Initiations are for new members. Ms. Jackson isn't getting initiated to her own club of friends—Sophie is.”

“No, that couldn't—” Sophie shook her head. “But she—”

“If Olivia's right,” Tay said, “you should get ready.”

“But what if we're wrong?” Sophie asked.

“What if we're right?” Katelyn countered.

“You could check the future and see,” Marc said, “but I don't think you should. It'd ruin the surprise. How are you feeling about taking a chance?”

“For once,” Sophie said, “I'm feeling good.”

“Then let's get going.”

Tay pushed Sophie into the bathroom where she plopped onto the counter. Drawers flew open as Tay plucked out makeup and supplies. Then, Tay got to work. She smoothed foundation into Sophie's face, applied eye shadow, blush, and added a layer of lipstick.

In twenty minutes, she became perfectly presentable from head to toe. As a group, they descended downstairs and disbursed into their own cars. Katelyn and Marc rode with Tay while Sophie took shotgun in Olivia's car.

“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, it feels like I was never in a meditation at all.”

“That's because *you* weren't,” Sophie said. “*You* never will be.” Amid Olivia's look of confusion, she placed her hand on her arm. “Look, 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 come with me anyway?”

“Because the meditation version of you told me to do so,” Sophie said. “We were talking about my search for purpose, and you mentioned you had a secret.”

“Oh, interesting.” Olivia chuckled. “I wouldn’t call it a secret, per se, but—” she cast a nervous look at Sophie, “—have you ever heard of Albert Camus and his philosophy of absurdism?”

“Oh my *gosh*. What is it with me liking girls who are into philosophy?” Sophie’s eyes widened as she realized what she’d blurted. How did Olivia keep getting this stuff from her?

“Did you just say you like me?”

“I, uh... yeah,” Sophie said. “I mean, I think you’re really cute. So...” This next part was always hard to say. “Yeah. I like you.”

“Good,” Olivia said. “I like you too. Let’s go on a date this weekend and see where things go.” She cast a playful smile at Sophie. “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 took Sophie’s hand and held it. A brilliant warmth rushed over Sophie.

“Yeah, so...” Olivia relaxed and drove with one hand. “Camus’s work is all about finding purpose in life.” She launched into a ten-minute explanation of the *Myth of Sisyphus* and how there can be meaning in the mundanity of life.

“The bottom line is this: if it were possible for one person to fix every problem with the world, it’d already be done,” Olivia said. “You’re 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 told Bonnie that Officer McCivilForfeiture was asleep. I hope he gets fired.

Sophie smiled and turned her attention back to the road. Soon, the beautiful architecture of too-big houses dominated their view, and Calisette was upon them. Rick’s house came into view shortly after five, and the driveway was filled with cars. Ms. Jackson’s perfect, pristine-looking car was in the back. Tay parked on the street, and Olivia parked behind her.

They all met at the edge of the driveway and looked up at the large

house. It was odd being at the scene of her trauma again, though her relationship with Marc and Tay was stronger than ever for it.

“You ready?” Tay asked.

“Maybe I *should* check to see if I’m supposed to be here,” Sophie said.

“Let’s go.” Olivia took Sophie’s hand and dragged her up toward the door. There, she shunted Sophie ahead of the group and waited for her to ring the doorbell. But 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-SIX

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.

Sophie took a careful 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 once more. With the warmth returning, Sophie straightened. She'd already beaten Ms. Jackson in a fight against the inevitable—now, 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. 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 several 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 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 Valentine.”

There was a smattering of applause. Sophie stood closer to her friends, practically huddling for moral support. Ms. Jackson's sharp and curated look melted into something warmer as she faced Sophie.

“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, and in the coming days, you’ll understand that this is a role I’ve been playing—not who I am. In other words, we’ll talk about your grade on Monday after class. In the

meantime, congratulations on your success.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said. “But how do you know I succeeded?”

“Because you called,” Bonnie said, holding up her phone. “Since the last four digits of my number were only given if you stopped Ms. Jackson from arriving on time, it means that you made her lateness inevitable in some meditation.”

“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, practically tasting the buttercream scent that hung in the air from the refreshment table. For the next thirty minutes, she shared everything relevant to her journey from start to finish. Each person listened with awe, her mom with a beam of pride. 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, seeing as this *is* an initiation party, the decision to join our group is yours alone. For the next few hours, I’d like you to introduce yourself to all our members and learn about the group before making your final decision.”

“Don’t you already know what I’ll decide?”

“Never confuse *knowing* the future with *deciding* it,” Ms. Jackson said. “Maybe I’ll make that a lesson for our next recruit. 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 job 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 visions she did, but they weren't dispirited by their fight with fate. Instead, their failures invigorated them. She wanted that for herself.

Eventually, conversation fizzled, and Sophie scoured the party for Olivia, finding her standing next to Tay. They were sipping Coke with their backs to the wall, locked in conversation. Sophie approached and squeezed into the space between them, touching shoulders on both sides.

"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 the answer."

"You were really stressing about that, weren't you?" Olivia asked.

"In the past year, I must've spent two years in meditations just worrying about Harvard," Sophie said. She let out a heavy sigh. "I feel like if I choose this, all that time was wasted."

"Don't think like that," Olivia said. "All the work you put in to get to Harvard *prepared* you for this. Effort is never wasted. Trust."

"You're right. Besides, maybe I should pick a major before I pick a college." Sophie's eyes landed on Bonnie, and she felt pulled in that direction. "I'll be back. In the meantime, do either of you like philosophy?"

Olivia and Tay gave excited glances to one another, and Sophie

slipped away to approach Bonnie. While she wanted to present as strong, she feared she came across like a shy kitten.

“Hey,” she whispered, losing her voice in front of her hero.

“So, what do you think?” Bonnie asked.

“I... I’ll need to think about it,” Sophie said. “How big is the network? 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 hundreds 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.

“Gotcha. 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.”

“I think 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. But I know you want more direction than that. We both know it.”

“You’re right,” Sophie said. “But I still don’t know what direction that is.”

“Nobody needs to have their life planned out at sixteen, okay? I’ll be here when you want to talk about it. But tonight, finish making your rounds—we’ll want to know if you’re joining by the end of the party.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Sophie nodded and broke off from the conversation. Looking around the room, she found Marc speaking with an older man in the corner. She wandered toward them and overheard their conversation.

“—not worth being anxious about your job, Rick,” Marc said. “You

could retire to Bristol tomorrow if you wanted. Why do you need all this money, anyway?”

Sophie didn't want to disrupt their conversation, so she veered back toward Tay and Olivia. By now, Katelyn had joined the group, and they were halfway through a pitch on why Tay should join swim team.

“You know, I've been looking for a sport,” Tay said. “Maybe swim team would be fun.”

“A word of advice,” Sophie said. “When Coach asks what you want to swim, tell him breaststroke.”

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, taking a quiet moment with Sophie in the corner of the room.

“I think I want to join,” Sophie said, “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 still believe it's you and you alone who has the power to save the world, and that's not true. You're not alone, Sophie. None of us are. Stop making your decisions like you're the only one with the answers.”

And finally, Sophie understood. She'd spent so long pretending her ideas were the only ones that could lead to the right outcome, but that wasn't true. After all, it was Tay's plan that worked, not hers. Maybe trusting others to have the answers was something she needed.

“Okay,” Sophie said. “I've made my decision. I'd like to join the Third Eye Network.”

“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 room burst into applause.

“Now,” Ms. Jackson said, speaking again to quiet things down, “are you ready to be sworn in?”

Sophie nodded.

“Then repeat after me.”

“I, Sophie Valentine,” she recited, “have been gifted with the power of prophecy. What cannot be changed, I shall accept. What can be mended, I shall fix. I take this oath as an expression of my own free will. I take this oath as a vessel of fate. As a member of the Third Eye, I vow to use my gift to serve the good of humanity—as fate ordained.”

A second round of applause filled the room, and Sophie smiled, knowing that this was the moment it was all leading to. This was her destiny.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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—like herself, now. 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.”

Her classmates stared at Sophie suspiciously, but Sophie didn't care. She was going to be okay.

“Sure.”

She stood and approached Ms. Jackson's desk, her blouse clean and her pants crisp. With her tight ponytail, she almost looked more put-

together than the teacher. Almost.

As the last student left the room, Ms. Jackson pushed aside her work.

“How do you feel?”

“It’s weird,” Sophie admitted. “I’ve hated you all semester. Now we’re supposed to work together? This is going to take some 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 you were overdoing your meditations—and then skipping them.”

“I understand,” Sophie said, making a note to talk with her mom about that. “She thought I was using my power wrong.”

Ms. Jackson nodded. “So, did you figure out what you really want yet?”

“I’m still working through that,” Sophie said. “I’m starting to think that purpose isn’t something I get to choose for myself. Maybe purpose just emerges from life. Right now, I want to go out and experience all the messy things life has to offer. Success, failure, reality—just more, you know?”

“That’s how you find your dharma, yes. Well, there’s a Third Eye meeting this Saturday. Come 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, yes?”

Sophie tightened the straps of her backpack. “Right. I’ll see you this weekend.”

Ms. Jackson nodded and pulled a pile of worksheets to the center

of her desk. Sophie stepped toward the door, appreciating the mountain of events that had to happen to bring her to this point—the good and bad alike. She was almost out the door before Ms. Jackson spoke again. “And Sophie? Say hello to Phoebe for me, would you?”

“Of course.”

Sophie pushed into the hallway and turned toward the Ledge. Through small panels of glass in the doors, she saw Olivia and Marc chatting up a storm. But today, Sophie wasn’t going to join them. She turned around and came face-to-face with Tay.

“Hey, Sophie!” They exchanged a warm hug. “You ready?”

Together they wound through the hall toward the principal’s office, passing a few girls from swim team on the way—all of them wishing her luck.

“You sure you don’t know how the flip goes?” Tay asked. She was biting her nails again.

“I’m sure,” Sophie said.

They arrived at the principal’s office, and after a firm knock, Principal Douglas let them in.

“You two ready?” Principal Douglas asked, returning to his desk to rifle through a drawer. After a moment, he found an old coin and held it up between them.

Sophie and Tay took seats across from him. Sophie stared at the coin blankly—surprisingly 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,” the principal 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.

“If this lands on heads, Sophie is the winner. If it lands on tails, Tay wins. Any questions? No? Here we go.”

Principal Douglas placed the quarter on his thumb and flicked it through the air. For the first time ever, Sophie trusted that, win or lose, she'd get what was best for her.

The coin landed on the principal's empty desk and spun upright. As it slowed, it wobbled, changing fate several times over. Tay leaned forward; Sophie leaned back and remembered her oath.

What cannot be changed, I shall accept.

The coin settled.

Author's Note:

Thank you so much for reading this book! You didn't have to, and I appreciate it. I choose not to paywall the things I create as they're written for audiences who might be short on cash. But if that's not you and you'd like to support my writing, please consider one of these sources:

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POST CREDITS

The Saturday after the ceremony, Sophie was invited back to Rick's. She sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by four members of the Third Eye. Ms. Jackson played with the thermostat and white tendrils of smoke crept from the vents. Mela gas, she called it.

"How long do you want me to stay under?" Sophie asked, her eyes heavy as she breathed the gas.

"I want you to look three months to the future," Ms. Jackson said.

"I've never—"

"You will. You must. Once you do, you'll understand our purpose."

Sophie slumped, too tired for words.

For the next few days, the ladies of the Third Eye watched over Sophie as she meditated until finally, Sophie opened her eyes—her bloodshot eyes. Sophie screamed and pressed her fingers deep into the sides of her head. A thousand migraines crushed her skull at once. Lightning seared her nerves.

"Did you see it?" Ms. Jackson asked. "The apocalypse. It's coming."

Sophie's hyperventilated breaths levelled out. "Unless..." Sophie said, "...we can stop it."

[This narrative will continue in The Meditators Trilogy.]

[You can read Book 1 of The Meditators Trilogy, *The Living Dreamcatchers*, for free at www.AdamMandias.com]