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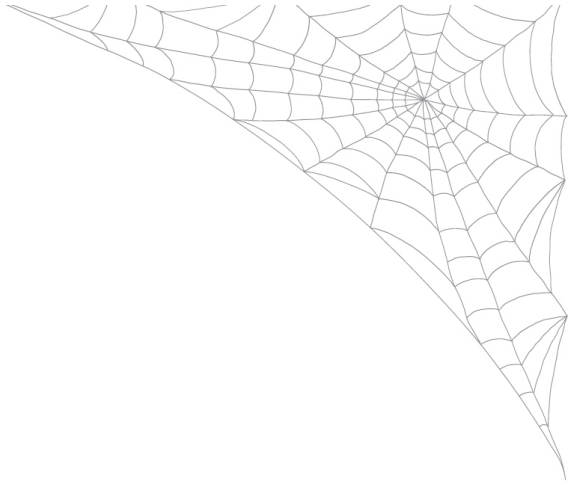
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CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO TANGLEWOOD

Deja was a strong advocate of eating the rich, but she had to admit: they had some cool aesthetics.

This time of year, the campus of Tanglewood Preparatory School was a rippling sea of red, orange, and yellow leaves. Stone buildings with moss-stained walls were topped by tall spires, the tips of which were lost amidst a low-hanging fog. In the distance loomed vaporous mountains, like a trembling shore. Clouds swallowed the autumn sun, enveloping the afternoon in a chilly gray.

"So, this is New England?" Deja asked. She turned away from the window. "It's mad depressing up here."

Across the small room, an elderly woman sat at a desk. With her graying pixie cut and dark pantsuit, it looked as though she had absorbed the dreary weather. Her attitude must have been affected too; she glared at Deja.

Unfazed, Deja dropped onto an overstuffed couch and propped her feet onto an ornate coffee table. Her brown sneakers—which had definitely not been brown when she got them—showered dirt onto the polished surface. The gray woman made a small, indignant squeak that Deja ignored.

She subtly placed a hand below her collarbone. Aunt Cybele was scared of planes, and anyway she was too busy with her salon, so she had been unable to drop Deja off at Tanglewood. But through the mystical ways of their family, Deja's aunt had found other ways

to make sure she was not alone. And as Deja felt the necklace hidden beneath her shirt, she felt reassured; the small charm was a reminder that her family's support was with her everywhere she went.

Deja extracted her phone from her pocket, and her gratitude turned into irritation. The cracked screen showed that it was now ten minutes past the time she was supposed to meet with Headmaster Egleston. As the headmaster of the best secondary school in America, Egleston was a highly educated man. He had an M.Ed., a PhD, and probably other parts of the alphabet too. But as educated as he was, apparently, he had never learned punctuality.

Deja leaned onto the armrest, straining to hear what was happening on the other side of a nearby wooden door.

"This is your fourth year at Tanglewood," said the muffled voice of a man who must have been Headmaster Egleston. "Even though you skipped a grade, you've had plenty of time to adjust. Yet from your record, I see you haven't joined any extracurriculars. Tell me, is it ego or disinterest that keeps you from participating in school organizations?"

The person to whom Egleston spoke was too quiet for Deja to hear.

After a moment, Egleston sighed. "Although strongly encouraged, extracurriculars are not required. If you wish to continue making excuses for your antisocial behavior, there is little I can do. I just hope you know that being a bright student does not justify narcissism."

A moment later, the door swung open, and out walked a girl. Like the other students Deja had glimpsed earlier, the girl wore a black, violet-trimmed blazer over a white-collared shirt, a violet tie, and a black pleated skirt. Deja thought the girl was pretty, with her short afro hair and skin the same color as brown sugar. Her most striking feature was her large brown eyes, which quickly found Deja.

"You're new," she said to Deja.

Deja was surprised to hear the girl had a New Orleans accent; she had not expected to meet anyone from her home state,

Louisiana, all the way up here in Connecticut.

But it was clear the girl was a different type of Southerner. Her accent was round and regal, much like a Southern belle. Deja, on the other hand, had the type of country accent that, well, made elderly secretaries turn their noses up at her.

"And you're a narcissist," Deja replied, using what she had heard the headmaster say against the girl.

Too late, Deja remembered she had promised her aunt that she would at least try to make friends at her new school. *You always jump at the slightest spark to set yourself on fire,* Aunt Cybele once told her. *It ain't cute. You burn everyone around you.*

But in this moment, Deja did not care. She was annoyed about her delayed appointment with the headmaster, and the girl was the easiest person to blame for that.

She expected the girl to huff and storm away. That was what most people did after speaking to Deja. But the girl merely shrugged at her rudeness. "Not really," she said. She looked Deja over. "I like your shirt."

Deja glanced down at her oversized tee, which displayed a large picture of Malcolm X. "I bet you do," she said.

She watched closely, gauging for some sort of reaction. The girl's expression remained neutral. Contemplative.

"Hm," was all she said, then she walked away.

Deja did not know what was most irritating about the girl: that she had held up Deja's appointment with the headmaster, or that she had been admirably calm in the face of Deja's goading.

As she moved around Deja to the office door, Deja turned in place to watch her leave. She only realized she was doing this when the girl paused at the door to give Deja a small smile. Shock jolted Deja, and she quickly looked away.

She pushed aside any lingering thoughts of the girl as a second person emerged from the adjacent room, this time an old, portly man. He was bald, but as though his hair had migrated south, his round face sported a salt-and-pepper goatee.

The gray woman said to him, "Your next appointment is here, Headmaster Egleston."

The man smiled at Deja. “Ah, yes, Miss Freeman. Come in, come in.” To the woman, he said, “Thank you, Ophelia.”

“Yeah, good girl, Ophelia,” Deja said, following Headmaster Egleston into his office.

She smirked as the door closed behind her on a scowling Ophelia. At least she had gotten a rise out of *someone.*

Like the previous room, the headmaster’s office was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Draped over the dark wood floor was a rug so shabby that it must have cost a fortune. Opposite the door, sandwiched in between two bookshelves, was a handsome mahogany desk with a large leather chair behind it.

“Miss Freeman,” Headmaster Egleston said, “it is my absolute pleasure to finally be able to say, welcome to Tanglewood Preparatory School.”

He offered her a pudgy hand. In her mind, she heard her aunt’s voice nag her about manners, and Deja reluctantly shook his hand. Her palm tingled.

Warm sunlight filtered in through the headmaster’s office. Egleston, much younger with tufts of brown hair atop his head, stood at the center of the office. He extended his hand to a preteen girl who looked just like Deja—her mom, at a younger age than Deja was now.

“Welcome to Tanglewood Preparatory School,” the younger Egleston told Deja’s mom. She grinned as she shook his hand.

With a gasp, Deja wrenched her hand away. No matter how many visions she received over the years, she still never knew when they would pop up or what they would show. An image of her mom was the last thing she would have wanted to see in this moment. The sudden glimpse of the past caused resentment to surge within her.

The gray light of the present, cloudy day replaced the sunlight from her vision, and Egleston was once more an older, bald man, staring at Deja.

Suppressing her shock and anger, Deja walked away. The floorboards creaked as she stopped at the nearest shelf and ran a finger along the spine of a leather book. She was unsurprised to see a layer of dust now coating her skin. Tanglewood seemed like a

school that cared about books more for decoration rather than function.

Visibly confused but recovering quickly, Egleston walked to his desk. “I apologize for the delay in your enrollment. There were difficulties transferring all your credits from your former high school. However, I am happy that you are finally here, even if it is two weeks into the term. You’re coming from a public high school in Sweetwater, Louisiana, correct?”

“Yup.”

Headmaster Egleston waited, probably expecting Deja to elaborate on her accomplishments at her old school, or how excited she was to transfer. But she was still thinking of the vision of her mom. Speaking with the headmaster all those years ago, she had looked happy to be here—which made Deja feel the opposite.

When he realized that was all she had to say, he cleared his throat. “Great. Naturally, then, I expect this will be a bit of an adjustment for you, given that Tanglewood is a boarding school for grades seven to twelve. We strive to make all our students feel welcome, so if you need help finding your place here on campus, please, don’t hesitate to reach out to me, your teachers, or any of the counselors at our wellness center.”

As Egleston spoke, Deja had slowly made her way around the room, inspecting the books, plaques, and trophies clustered on the walls. Now, instead of responding, she paused at a plaque that caught her eye. Across the top, in bold letters, was *Outstanding Junior Award.* Below was a list of names, one for each school year. It ranged as far back as the early 1900s. She reached out and ran a hand over the award recipient from seventeen years ago.

“Right, then,” Egleston said after another uncertain pause. “Well, as you know, Tanglewood Prep is known for our commitment to students’ academic, creative, and all-around excellence. This is exemplified by our motto: *et nos in via lux.* It means—”

“‘We light the way,’” Deja finished for him, still examining the plaque. The Latin phrase had persistently come up during her thorough research of this school.

“Precisely. The torch is our emblem because ever since 1734, Tanglewood alumni have lit the way for each generation. We have produced some of the finest leaders, artists, and thinkers that the world has ever seen. As such, we have quite the reputation to uphold, and we expect each of our students to meet our high standards. You are a fortunate young lady, indeed, that Salt & Light Baptist Church chose you as one of the five Southern students to receive their full scholarship. I am excited to see how you use this chance that you have been given.”

At last, Deja tore her eyes away from the plaque. The headmaster was giving her the same look that she had received from the secretary outside, some of her teachers at her old school, and everyone else who thought that her box braids and country accent were a sign of low intelligence.

She smiled. “Did Salt & Light give me my 4.2 GPA too?” she asked.

Egleston looked flabbergasted. “Pardon?”

“Did they give me my perfect score when I took the ACT in seventh grade?” Deja pressed on. “Did they give me the awards I’ve won from poetry competitions, or my hundreds of hours of community service, which were personally recognized by the governor of Louisiana?”

Egleston extracted a violet handkerchief from the pocket of his suit and dabbed his brow. Deja stared at him coolly, savoring his discomfort. Then, she said, “I wasn’t *given* anything. I earned my scholarship, and I earned my place here at this prehistoric school.”

She turned back to the plaque, running her hand across the name again. “Just like my mom. *Renée Freeman*,” she read, and her anger leapt like a flame within her. “You remember her, Headmaster?”

“Oh!” Egleston said, sounding pleasantly surprised. “Freeman—I didn’t even realize you were related. Yes, of course I remember Renée. She was one of Tanglewood’s best students. I was sad to see her go. Tell me, how is she these days?”

“She’s dead.”

Awkward silence dropped atop the room.

Maybe Deja was supposed to say that with more remorse, or sadness. But as her heart raced, each beat pumped only rage through her.

For Deja's entire life, she had been measured against a mom she never knew. She was only here, at Tanglewood, because she had been pushed to follow in Renée's footsteps. Deja's aunt and all their family friends in Louisiana tried to make her mom out to be a role model, but Deja found it hard to respect someone who had gotten herself killed, leaving her daughter behind.

When Deja realized her fists were clenched, she folded her arms over her chest, leaning against a bookshelf. For several moments, the only sound in the room was that of a grandfather clock. Each tick seemed to pound against the inside of Deja's head, making her head ache as she attempted to restrain her anger.

Finally, Egleston said, "I'm sorry to hear that. She had a brilliant mind."

"I've heard." When people told Deja about Renée, that was the most common thing they said about her. If only her mom had been smart enough to make better choices.

"Well," Egleston began, then stopped, unsure how to proceed. He dabbed his handkerchief at his temple again, looking far more tired than when Deja had first entered his office.

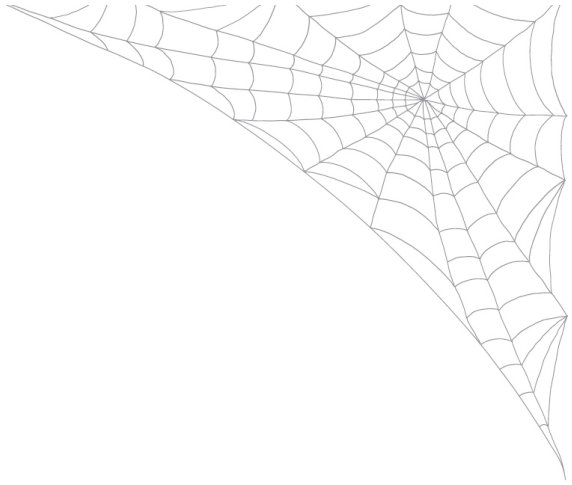
"Once you leave here, my assistant, Ophelia, will escort you to Bartleby Student Center," he said, apparently deciding on dismissal. "There, you will receive your student ID and your uniform. The uniform is paid for by the school, though you will need to buy your own pair of dress shoes." He glanced with ill-concealed disapproval at her outfit. "Bartleby also has bins filled with donations made by students from past years, if needed.

"I know you only have two years at Tanglewood, Miss Freeman," Egleston continued, "but I hope you will still make your time here as fulfilling as possible."

"Oh, I plan to," Deja said, looking back at Renée's name engraved into the plaque.

My junior year will definitely be fulfilling, Deja promised silently, *because I won't make the same mistakes my mom did.*

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CHAPTER 2

CLASS PRESIDENT

Tóbi always shot for the moon because if she missed, she knew she would land among the cold vacuum of space, forever adrift.

In other words, she had no choice but to win junior class president.

“The chorus page hasn’t reposted your campaign flyer yet,” Caitlyn ‘Lynn’ Patel announced.

She scrolled tirelessly on her phone, its bedazzled case catching the room’s fluorescent lights. Lynn P. had always taken great care in accessorizing, from the silver jewelry shining against her brown skin, to the violet ribbon that tied up her long black hair.

“We can encourage them,” Jacqueline ‘Lynn’ Quigley said, absently twirling a finger in her brunette bob. “You know my friend Stella?”

The name did not ring any bells for Tóbi; she only kept track of people worth knowing. Lynn Q., on the other hand, had friends in just about every social circle at Tanglewood. It was why Tóbi kept her around.

“What about Stella?” Tóbi prompted.

“She’s choir leader this year. She’s so sweet, she totally deserves it! Anyways, there’s a chorus rehearsal later, so we can stop by, check on Stella, talk about that time I took her shopping in New York. And then we’ll remind her to support your campaign, because I’m sure she just forgot. She really is a sweetheart.”

“And if she still needs an extra nudge,” Lynn P. said, “we’ll let her know how much we loved the performance she gave at her parents’ anniversary party.”

She showed them her phone. On it played a video of a girl—who Tóbi assumed was Stella—singing, though her mouth was pitifully out of time with the music.

“I wonder what the chorus would think of their leader lip-syncing,” Lynn P. said.

“I’m sure she was just having trouble with her voice that day,” Lynn Q. said. She sounded sympathetic, but she smirked, flashing hot-pink braces.

Tóbi did not ask how Lynn P. got the video; she never did. Lynn P.’s magic was knowing every unfortunate thing about others, and like all magic tricks, learning how it worked would only spoil the effect for everyone.

So, Tóbi nodded. “Pay Stella a visit.”

“Once we have chorus’s vote, we’ll have all of the arts on our side,” Lucille reported.

The screen of her tablet was reflected in her cat-eye glasses, replacing her gaze with charts detailing Tóbi’s campaign efforts. As the daughter of a Nobel Prize-winning economist, Lucille always organized the world into data and numbers.

Tóbi was surer with each passing day that she made the right choice in choosing Lucille as her protégée; the eighth-grade girl reminded Tóbi so much of her younger self. Intelligent, ambitious. Not quite as stylish, but that was alright; Tóbi would help her grow into that.

Lucille removed a stylus pen from her cornrowed bun, and as she scribbled on her tablet, she continued, “But our numbers are still down with the athletes.”

Tóbi tensed. She knew that most athletes would be supporting *him*, since he was an athlete himself. But Tóbi refused to lose this election.

“You have friends on the softball team, don’t you?” Tóbi asked Lynn Q. “Their practice is happening now. Can you run to the fields and chat some of them up?”

“On it.”

Tóbi had not literally meant run, but Lynn Q. jogged out of the room anyways. Tóbi had always marveled at how much stamina Lynn Q. had—but then again, her parents did own America’s largest fitness empire.

To Lynn P., Tóbi said, “I’ll trust you to take care of chorus.”

She nodded, and once the Lynns had left, Tóbi told Lucille, “As for you and I, Little Me, it’s time to make the rounds.”

Lucille beamed, tucking her tablet into her Dior tote. She followed Tóbi out of the room, through Bartleby Student Center. As they emerged into the foyer of Bartleby, they were cocooned by chatter.

With classes over for the day, Bartleby brimmed with students socializing. Bordering the room, along poster-splayed walls, were tables where clubs promoted themselves. There was everything from hip-hop dance companies advertising their fall shows, to Culinary Club selling baked goods in a fundraiser.

“Miss Ẹkúndayọ!”

At the sound of her last name, Tóbi looked over her shoulder to see the headmaster’s assistant, Ophelia. She was followed by a very short, deep-toned Black girl with very long box braids. Tóbi was appalled by the girl’s poor fashion taste, which included a silver nose stud and a bandana tied over her head. Worst of all was the girl’s worn T-shirt, which was so baggy that it dangled off her tiny frame.

“I’m happy that we ran into you,” Ophelia said to Tóbi. “I’m having trouble recalling where Tanglewood’s donation bins are.”

“In the basement, next to the newsroom,” Tóbi responded. As the chair of the service committee, Tóbi had organized multiple school-wide clothing drives. “What do you need them for?”

“For Tanglewood’s newest student,” Ophelia said, gesturing to the girl. “This is Deja Freeman. She just transferred into the junior class.”

“That’s perfect.” Tóbi snapped her fingers over her shoulder, and Lucille handed Deja a campaign flyer. “Hi, my name’s Tóbi, and you’ve come right on time to vote for me for junior class president.”

The flyer displayed her full name—Olúwatóbi Ẹkúndayọ—along with a photo that had been taken during her freshman year ballet recital.

The photo captured Tóbi mid-performance, her limbs glowing black against her crisp white dress and her afro puff perfectly perched atop her head. She had never learned who took the photo; the photographer had submitted it to her ballet company anonymously. But despite the photo's mysterious origins, it was her favorite picture of herself.

Deja looked far less impressed as she glanced over it. "You expect me to participate in a process mimicking a system that cages and fetters the folks it's s'posed to serve?" Deja asked in a thick country accent. "That suppresses individualism and molds creativity into uniform, capitalistic devices?"

Whatever the hell that means, was what Tóbi felt like saying. Instead, she smiled. "Voting begins Wednesday."

"Viva la revolución."

Deja crumpled up the flyer and dropped it onto the ground—earning an indignant gasp from Lucille—before walking away. Ophelia gave Tóbi an apologetic look before hurrying after Deja.

Lucille remarked, "What a bitch."

"Language," Tóbi scolded. She agreed, but she couldn't have her protégée speak like that. Her parents had always emphasized that even if others could get away with such language, it was less tolerated from people who looked like Tóbi—another thing that Tóbi apparently needed to teach her protégée.

Tóbi made a mental note to refine Lucille's etiquette later. For now, they needed to focus on winning Tóbi more voters.

Their first stop was an Environmental Club meeting on Bartleby's second floor. The president, who was mid-speech upon Tóbi and Lucille's arrival, did not look pleased at the interruption. However, he and the rest of the club grew more welcoming with each contribution Tóbi made to the conversation.

"And not only does fracking pollute the air and oceans, but it's also way more expensive than wind and solar power," Tóbi found herself saying. She wasn't sure how she had gotten to this point, but

she was nevertheless invigorated by the sound of her own voice. “It’s not eco-friendly, and it’s not cheap. So, no matter which way you look at it, it’s completely unreasonable.”

Tóbi made a subtle gesture behind her back. Lucille jumped up immediately.

“Tóbi, I just remembered we’re going to be late for—”

“Oh, you’re right!” Tóbi said, standing. “Sorry, guys, I need to run. But I’m excited to continue this conversation on a larger scale once I’m junior class president.”

They pulled the same act with Astrology Club: “Leadership just comes so naturally to me, you know? I’m sure it’s because I’m a triple Virgo.”

And with Robotics Club: “Computers are the future. Coding has become a basic life skill, and as junior class president, I will renovate the robotics workshop so that everyone has a chance to learn programming.”

And with Anime Club: “My student council would only show subbed films at study breaks. Everyone knows the sub is always better than the dub!”

And on it went, Lucille and Tóbi hopping from room to room, worming their way into each club meeting. They stayed just long enough for Tóbi to use her surface-level knowledge of each topic to leave a good impression.

Sure, not everyone would vote for her; *he* was probably working just as hard to win supporters. But all the same, when Lucille left to attend her Mathletes practice two hours later, Tóbi was feeling better about her chances.

Outside the windows, the feeble gray light clinging to the sky gradually slipped into dusk. Tóbi felt her energy similarly trickling away, but she forced herself to smile at the people who offered greetings as they passed her. Fortunately, with it being dinner time, most students had migrated from Bartleby to the dining hall.

Tóbi would eat later; her fatigue, previously suppressed, was beginning to weigh on her. After long days of being around people, she often needed a moment alone to feel better. It was why Lucille and the Lynns were the only people she kept around her. Friends

were contacts to be managed, and those three drained her enough. The thought of overseeing even more friendships sounded exhausting.

She made her way to a nearby lounge and paused when a bulletin board caught her eye. The last time she had seen the board, her campaign flyer had been the largest thing pinned to it. Now, however, there was a new campaign flyer, one so large that it partially covered Tóbi's—and it belonged to her opponent.

It was a portrait of *him*, taken in front of the scenic woods that bordered Tanglewood's campus. He was illuminated by sunlight, making his golden hair glow and his brown eyes shine behind his circular wire glasses. Across it, printed in bold letters, were the words that had haunted Tóbi since the school year had begun: *Vote for Monte.*

Tóbi ripped the campaign flyer off the bulletin board.

Behind her, an amused voice said, "Resorting to sabotage, are we?"

Tóbi turned to see Ace Montalvo approaching her. As always, he radiated entitlement, from the swagger of his broad shoulders—as though they were used to shoving people out of his way—to his unkempt uniform, with his dress shirt untucked and his tie missing, making visible a diamond chain around his neck.

"Ugh," Tóbi said. "Don't you have someone's lunch money to be stealing?"

Ace grinned, his blue eyes glowing. He held up a few dollars in a bruised hand. "Way ahead of you."

Tóbi rolled her eyes. When T.W. Montalvo immigrated from Italy to America in the late nineteenth century, he had become one of America's greatest magnates, alongside Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and Carnegie. To this day, his descendants were some of the wealthiest people in the world. Montalvos were philanthropists and actors, governors and fashion designers. Ace's father was the CEO of a hotel chain, and his grandfather was an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court.

Ace did not need to steal lunch money. He only did it because he could.

“I don’t think there’s ever been so much doubt about who’ll become president for your class,” Ace remarked, tucking his plundered money in his blazer’s front pocket. “You’ve always won student council elections by a landslide.”

Tóbi’s frustration escaped her as an impatient huff. “That was before your older brother decided to run against me. I don’t get it—Monte has never cared about student council before.”

“You worried you’ll lose?”

Panic flared within Tóbi. “I’m ranked number one in the junior class,” she said quickly, much like a knight throwing up a shield. “I’m the chair of several committees, and the president of several more clubs.”

Ace easily pierced Tóbi’s weak defense. “And not only is Monte ranked number two in your class, but he’s also vice president to a few clubs that you’re president of. He’s just as good of a class president candidate as you are.”

Tóbi hated to admit it, but Ace had a point. It was something she had already thought of herself, the reality hovering over her like a dark cloud. Monte was just as popular as she was. It did not help that this year he was the captain of the lacrosse team, the first junior to ever hold that title in Tanglewood’s history.

Tóbi looked down at the poster in her hand, at Monte’s smiling face, and resentment rose within her. “Why in the world,” she asked, ripping up the poster, “would anyone choose silver when they could have gold?”

“Hey, I’m on your side,” Ace said. “And if you want, I can help you win this election.”

Tóbi looked up from her mutilation of Monte’s poster in shock, which quickly morphed into distrust. “You only help me when you want something,” she said. “So, what is it this time?”

“I’m Ace Montalvo. I’m just being the nice guy that I always am.”

At Tóbi’s clear skepticism, Ace said, “Okay, fine. Truth is, I’ve secured sophomore class president now that all my opponents have dropped out of the race because of … a change of heart … Which means, for once in my life, I have a chance at accomplishing

something that my brother hasn't: student council. You're not the only one trying to get out from under the golden boy's shadow."

Despite herself, Tóbi softened toward Ace. As dodgy as he could be, there was one thing Tóbi and him shared in common: they both were trying to prove themselves against their older brothers.

Tóbi's brother had been at the top of his class at Tanglewood, was a member of just about every club the school offered, and had graduated as valedictorian. Above all, his most impressive feat was being elected class president every single year of his Tanglewood career. In the eyes of Tóbi's parents, no one could measure up to her brother—a belief that Tóbi had spent her entire life trying to disprove. And if she lost her own class presidential streak this year, her efforts would suffer a major setback.

Finally, Tóbi said, "Fine. What did you have in mind?"

Ace's grin widened. "As you know, my brother is quite the artist," he said. "He uses art as a visual diary. There's one particular piece in his dorm that might give you some answers about why he's suddenly so interested in student council."

"What's the art about?" Tóbi prompted. "An embarrassing moment? A murder confession?"

"Trust me, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. But you will definitely know it when you see it."

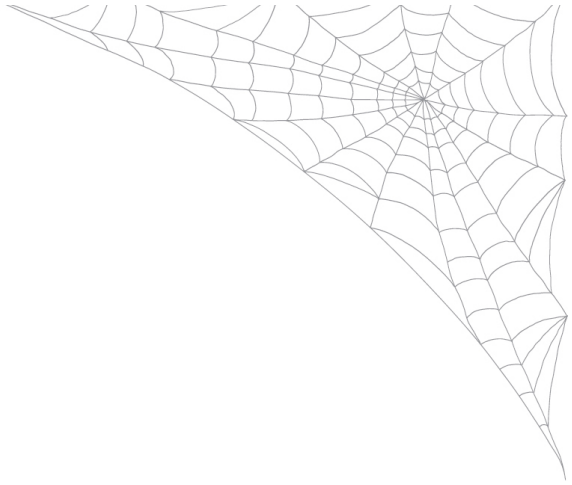
"You're being irritatingly ominous."

Ace glanced at his Rolex. "Listen, Tóbi, you know I love you, but I need to get dinner before the dining hall closes, and I won't make this offer twice. Just tell me, are you in or not? How badly do you want to be class president?"

She did not want it—she needed it. Sneaking into Monte's room meant breaking school rules, but for once, getting in trouble did not feel like the end of the world—not when the real end of her world would be never earning the same pride her parents had for her brother.

"Alright," Tóbi said at last. "I'll do it. I'm in."

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CHAPTER 3

HUNGRY

Deja would reside in a large, green-tinged building made of serpentine stone. Two crenellated parapets flanked its entrance, one on either side of arched double doors, and the top of the building was turreted. Deja was mostly exasperated by it, but a small part of her that she would never admit to was impressed; it looked like a castle.

The inside was lit by electric wall torches. Winding hallways were lined by great wooden doors. Deja noticed that next to each dorm's door was a personalized mini chalkboard. Most students had written their names on their board. Several boards boasted dirty jokes; others displayed social media handles. Written on one was the first fifty or so digits of pi.

As Ophelia led Deja up a grand staircase, she told her, "This is The Palace. It is where all Wildfire girls are housed. A faculty supervisor lives on the ground floor. If you have any questions about residential life, you may visit her. In addition to providing guidance, she also keeps an eye on The Palace and helps enforce all rules, like curfew. Wildfire students have the latest curfew, at 10PM, so—"

"Pause," Deja said when the term came up again. "What the hell is a wildfire?"

Ophelia cast her a withering look. "Wildfire is a title referring to Tanglewood's juniors and seniors," she explained impatiently, as

though it were obvious. “Freshmen and sophomores are called Flames, and seventh and eighth graders are Sparks.

“Before we continue, I should give you this,” Ophelia added, handing Deja a flat bag.

Deja was shocked to find a brand-new laptop inside. “Wanna give me a new phone too?” she asked.

“It’s from the school. To make it easier to complete assignments, Tanglewood loans every student a basic laptop.”

Deja glanced at the secretary’s Cartier bracelet, and she knew there was no point in mentioning that this “basic laptop” cost more than any other item she owned.

Ophelia stopped as they reached a door with a blank chalkboard. “This is your dorm. You will need to keep your student ID on you at all times. It gives you access to campus buildings as well as your dorm.”

From her back pocket, Deja extracted a violet plastic card. On it read *Tanglewood Preparatory School,* accompanied by the image of a torch, and her name and photo. Having just gotten it made at Bartleby, the freshly laminated ID was still warm. Deja held it to her dorm’s door handle, and the door unlocked with a small *beep*.

“Neat,” Deja said.

“Since you’re a scholarship student, you’ll be receiving a meal card. You can pick it up tomorrow at—”

Deja stepped inside her room and shut the door behind her.

A moment later, she heard Ophelia’s departing footsteps. Deja sighed in relief. She knew it was rude, but in her defense, the headmaster’s secretary seemed to dislike Deja as much as Deja disliked her. At least now they had both been put out of their misery.

She swiped her hand blindly against the wall until finding and flipping a light switch. An overhead lamp shed a feeble white light onto the small, square room. There was a bed in one corner, a desk in another, and a window between them. Two short bookshelves and a wooden wardrobe lined the wall adjacent to the door.

It was woefully bare. Impersonal—which, to Deja, meant that it was inhuman. In the foreign land that was New England, she craved

a space that could feel at least a little like home. Without wasting a moment more, she got to work.

Her suitcase had already been delivered to her dorm. She propped it open, removed her oversized tees and baggy jeans, and hung them inside the wardrobe. She lined her two additional pairs of colorful sneakers up outside the wardrobe doors. Knowing she would not find any good hair products here, she had brought her own from Sweetwater—some of which were concoctions her aunt had made herself. She carefully arranged them all in a corner of her desk.

Her most precious belongings were in her knapsack. Propping it on the bed, she began unpacking. Knitting needles and a roll of yarn; a plastic bag filled with crystals; an aged notebook, many of its yellowed pages separated from the binding; mini glass jars of plants, salt, coins, and teeth; lip gloss.

Deja dug two pillar candles out from the bottom of her bag. One was half the height of the other. She carefully positioned them side by side on her desk and took a slow breath. Then, she brought her hand to the tip of one, and she snapped her fingers.

Nothing happened.

Yeah, she had not expected anything to happen. She might be randomly afflicted by visions, but she had never been formally woven into The Web, the source from which women in her family drew energy to heal or physically alter people. For generations, weavers had been brought into The Web by their mothers, but Renée died before she could continue the tradition. Deja's grandma, or even her aunt, could have woven her into The Web in Renée's place, but they refused. They saw how Renée had struggled with being a weaver, and they feared the same would happen to Deja. It was just one of the many ways Deja's mom had messed up, then left Deja behind to deal with the consequences.

The last item Deja unpacked was her phone charger. Her phone had died earlier that day, and when she plugged it in to power it on, she found twenty missed calls from Aunt Cybele. Deja made to call her back, but her aunt beat her to it, a new incoming call taking over the screen.

Deja answered the call. “Hey.”

“Don’t you ‘hey’ me,” Cybele snapped. “You were s’posed to call me soon as you got to Tanglewood. How I know you ain’t get kidnapped or something?”

Her irritation infected Deja. “I showed you how to check my location.”

“Well, I forgot how to do it. And anyways, I need to hear your voice to know you’re okay. I get worried, alright? Damn.”

Deja softened. However tiring her own day had been, she knew her aunt must have spent even more energy worrying about Deja traveling alone.

“My bad, Cybele,” Deja said softly. “It’s been really busy.”

“But you’re settled in now?” Cybele asked. Her tone was gentler too. Deja and her aunt had similar tempers, but they always made up quickly.

Deja looked around her poorly lit, almost empty dorm room. “As much as I can be, I guess.”

Cybele grunted, half listening. Her voice became slightly more distant, her phone further from her face, as she said to someone else, “Hold your head like this.”

“You’re doing hair?” Deja checked the time on her phone. “It’s late.”

“Don’t worry, it’s my last client.”

Deja could hear the soft chatter of a television playing in the background, mingling with old-school R&B music. She leaned into the phone’s speaker, picturing Cybele standing in their plant-filled living-room-turned-salon, her own hair hanging in long blue braids as she braided someone else’s hair. Deja’s heart ached.

“Maybe Tanglewood could have waited another year,” she said. “I should be there in Sweetwater, helping you with the salon. Especially now that Granny’s … now that she ain’t there.”

From under her shirt, Deja removed her necklace. From the chain hung her grandmother’s earrings, a pair of small gold hoops. Deja grasped them tightly. It had been nearly a year since Deja’s grandma died, but the grief still felt fresh.

The same must have been true for Cybele, because there was a brief silence before her aunt cleared her throat. “No, this is what your granny would want. We’ve been trying to convince you to apply to Tanglewood for years. I always told you you’d get in soon as you applied—you’re a real nerd, just like your mom was.”

Deja recalled the vision of her mom that had come to her earlier when she met the headmaster, and a wave of bitterness washed over her. Her aunt and grandma had always compared Deja to Renée, like it was a compliment, but Deja’s mom was the last person she wanted to take after.

Around the time of Renée’s death, there had been the biggest surge of mentiscape usage the United States had ever seen, plunging the country into its worst drug epidemic since cocaine. The president had declared a new wave in the War on Drugs, and shortly after Renée dropped out of Tanglewood and got pregnant with Deja, she had become one of the many casualties.

If Renée had really been as smart as everyone said she was, surely, she would not have sacrificed her spot at the best secondary school in the United States for some drugs. If she had really been so smart, surely, she could have been responsible enough to stay alive to raise Deja.

“Hey,” Cybele said gently, making Deja realize she’d gone silent. “I’m proud of you. I know Renée would’ve been proud too.”

The statement was obviously meant to cheer Deja, but it had the opposite effect. Cybele had been in college when her little sister died, and she’d been forced to drop out to raise her infant niece. Why did Cybele not hate Renée for that? Why was Deja the only person in their family angry at Renée for derailing their entire lives with her recklessness?

“Thanks, Cybele,” Deja forced out between the frustration clumping at the back of her throat.

“And check the side of your bag—I slipped something in there that might keep you motivated.”

Her movements mechanical, Deja searched the side pocket of her knapsack. Her hand brushed paper that, when unfolded, turned out to be a smiling headshot of Renée. She wore a black-and-violet

Tanglewood uniform; it must have been a yearbook photo taken before her junior year, when her drug addiction had driven her to drop out.

Deja's frustration grew, threatening to constrict her airway. "Thanks, Cybele."

"Alright, then. I'll let you get some rest. But give me a call tomorrow, you hear? Good night, Deja Renée."

"'Night."

Deja ended the call—she always had to be the one to do that for calls with Cybele. Her aunt hated goodbyes, even if they were only temporary.

Deja looked down at the photo of Renée. It was like looking at her own reflection, if she did not have a silver nose piercing and had short afro hair instead of long black braids. Deja had her mom's face, her mom's name, and now, she was a student at Tanglewood, just like her mom had been. Her entire life, dictated by a person who had not even cared to stick around for Deja.

In a sudden surge of anger, Deja flung her phone forward. She regretted the action as soon as she initiated it—but luckily, she had a lousy throw, and the phone shot straight down onto her bed.

She looked at her mom's photo a moment more before she crumpled it into a ball and tossed it onto her desk. Kicking her sneakers off, she climbed onto the bed and drew her knees to her chest. Deja surveyed her quiet, empty dorm.

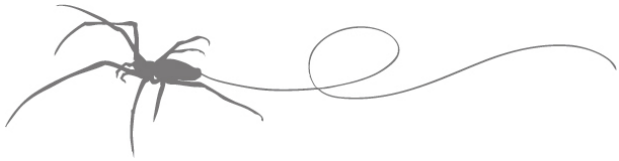
Not only was her aunt's house a salon, but it was also a small apothecary—a place people could come to improve themselves, inside and out. The house had been filled with the never-ending chatter of neighbors stopping by for some concoction, service, or just good company. This was the first time in Deja's life she was surrounded by nothing but silence.

Loneliness struck Deja like a hammer, cold and heavy. She willed herself not to crumple under its blow. Cybele had always wanted Deja to attend Tanglewood like Renée did, but it was not until Deja's grandma died that she finally gave in. Cybele's mom had been her greatest role model; it did not feel right for Deja to admit she did not feel the same way about her own mom. It did not even

make sense, hating the one person every human was biologically wired to love. Deja did not know why she did not have that instinct, but it was a defect she would deal with on her own. She would never burden her aunt with that, not when Cybele had loved her sister so deeply.

Deja suppressed her anger, even though the effort began to make her head ache. Stiffly, she stood and lit one of her candles with a lighter, then turned off the overhead light. As she lay back down on the bed, she acknowledged that she should probably change her clothes before sleeping, but her Malcolm X shirt still had the faint, sweet-and-tangy scent of the herbs that were stocked in her house in Sweetwater, and she was not ready to give up her hometown just yet.

Darkness pressed onto her, cocooning her in solitude. But the candle she lit glowed a comforting spot of orange, preventing her from being swallowed by the void. She stared at the faintly flickering flame, straining to feel its warmth as the only sounds around her were her own breathing and the hum of the occasional car driving through the silent Connecticut roads.



There was something very wrong with this school.

Deja had felt it the moment she set foot on campus, a subtle discomfort that became unbearable in her sleep. Not in her dreams, but in their absence. Closing her eyes only plunged her into darkness, and each time she jerked awake, she was surer that there was something in Tanglewood's soil that needed to be healed from within. Something empty, yearning to be filled. Hungry.

The fourth time that Deja was shoved out of sleep, she gave up on it. She rose before the sun, even more tired than before she had lain down.

On the bright side, she had the communal bathrooms to herself as she freshened up for the day. After a shower, Deja assessed the uniform she had been given. In addition to two black skirts and a violet tie, Deja had received a black blazer with violet trim, as well as a violet vest and sweater. On the left breast of each piece was the school seal: a flaming torch with *et nos in via lux* arced over it, *Tanglewood Preparatory School* curved beneath it, and *1734* running across it.

It was a starter kit, and most students bought more uniform pieces as needed. Ophelia had informed Deja of this yesterday, clear skepticism in her voice, as though she doubted Deja could afford to do the same. It probably did not help that they'd had to search Bartleby's donation bins for a button-down shirt and a pair of slightly-too-big black flats for Deja.

She scowled at the memory of the secretary's condescension. Just because she was not filthy rich like most students at Tanglewood did not mean she was poor. Cybele ran the most popular salon in Sweetwater. Deja's greatest disadvantage was simply being unprepared for Tanglewood's strict dress code.

Her student ID had come with a badge holder and a violet lanyard to wear around her neck. After struggling to slip her ID into the plastic holder—her black stiletto nails complicating the process—she grabbed her knapsack then headed out the door. She still had about an hour before breakfast started, and she decided to use that time to familiarize herself with campus.

Outside, the sun peeked shyly over the woods that surrounded campus, blushing a pinkish light onto Tanglewood Prep. The brisk air smelled of morning dew as Deja made her way through a neatly trimmed, triangular courtyard surrounded by The Palace and two other buildings. Recalling the brief introduction to Tanglewood she had received from Ophelia last night, Deja recognized a pink, white, and purple house as The Dollhouse, where Spark girls lived. Flame girls resided in the third building in the yard, a stone cottage aptly named The Cottage.

As she made her way around campus, Deja noted that every building looked the same. Ivy trickled down each building's stone

exterior, curling over great rustic doors that were too heavy to open with just one hand. Their dark interiors were brightened by stained glass windows and elegant paintings lining wooden walls. Hanging from ribbed vault ceilings were chandeliers that cast golden light onto busts of old, bearded men.

Each empty classroom she peeked into boasted a large blackboard, tall windows with bookshelves positioned between them, and freshly waxed floors. Rather than the columns of small desks that classrooms had in Deja's old high school, Tanglewood's classrooms had just one large, oval table in the center of each room, wooden chairs positioned around it.

Plaques and signs told Deja that the buildings were named similarly too; essentially all were named after rich alumni who had likely slid the school a few million dollars just to have their names embedded into campus. And it was not just buildings—every single feature of Tanglewood's campus was claimed by some name. Gates, clock towers, statues. Even benches.

Tanglewood Prep was old, yet nothing about it felt sentimental. It was just one big contest to see which donor could land the biggest inscription. This campus was so cold—literally as well as figuratively, because Deja was quickly realizing she was not made for weather below 70°F—that she could not imagine what had made her mom want to leave Louisiana and come here. Sure, this was the best secondary school in America, but Deja's family was not the type to care about things like that. Then again, that only applied to the family that Deja knew. Her mom could have been completely different than her Aunt Cybele and her grandma—and by extension, her. Deja doubted she could ever relate to Renée, much less care to follow in her footsteps.

When breakfast finally opened, Deja made her way to the dining hall. Tall pillars were spaced along its front, one of which bore a plaque:

JONAH MAGRATH DINING HALL

In Memoriam

Jonah Magrath

Of the Class 1871

Devoted Scholar and Friend

1854-1925

Inside, the airy building was populated by a buzzing mass of black-and-violet uniforms. Deja shouldered her way through, returning each dirty look she received, until she made it to one of the five lines leading to the kitchen.

No sooner had she joined the line than yells pulled her attention toward the front. Three guys were cutting the line, laughing as they shoved people out of their way. To Deja's annoyance, instead of calling them out, the displaced people merely repositioned themselves behind the guys.

"Are you kidding me?" Deja said loudly. "Y'all just gonna let them get away with that?"

People looked at her and looked away, unresponsive. Deja's irritation only grew. She walked to the front of the line, reached up, and jabbed the shoulder of one of the cutters, a brunette guy. He turned around quickly, anger blazing on his face; he was clearly not used to being touched unwarranted.

"There's a line," Deja told him.

He scoffed and glanced at his two friends, one then the other, as though expecting them to tell him this was a joke. They looked as bemused as he did.

"I'm Ace Montalvo," he told Deja, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. He even flicked his hands up, as though he could not believe Deja did not already know that his name was a free pass to do anything he wanted.

"Oh, I know who you are!" Deja said. Ace grinned, but she went on, "You're the guy whose name I didn't ask for! Back of the line,

Ace Montalvo."

Ace's smile faded. One of his friends stepped forwards, but Ace held a hand over his shoulder, freezing the big guy in place. Ace looked over Deja, his sapphire glare softening.

"I've never seen you before," he said. "'Cause I definitely would've remembered if I had. You must be new, in which case, I don't think I've made the best first impression. How about we buy some breakfast then go sit somewhere I can reintroduce myself?"

"You must be cracked in the head if you think I'm gonna …" Deja began indignantly, but she paused as she fully processed his words. "Hold up—buy? This food costs money?"

She suddenly remembered Ophelia mentioning a meal card last night, and she mentally kicked herself for cutting the secretary's spiel short. That was exactly the kind of impulsiveness Cybele always warned her would come back to bite her.

"If you don't have any cash on you," Ace said, pulling Deja out of her thoughts, "I'll buy you something."

He chewed on a chain he wore. When Deja met his eyes, he grinned, his teeth as bright as the diamonds between them. Irritation prickled at Deja; she had no desire to owe this entitled bully a favor.

"I've lost my appetite," Deja said shortly. Without waiting for a response, she spun on her heel and left, her stomach rumbling.

Once outside the dining hall, she headed back to her dorm. It would be faster to grab some cash and catch breakfast before it ended; then she would pick up her meal card from Bartleby later, when she had more time.

But as she reached a fork in the path, Deja paused. One path led to a wrought iron gate, somewhat obscured by trees. A strange but pleasant feeling spread through Deja, like moving next to a fire on a cold day. Drawn to the warmth emanating from behind the gates, Deja headed toward it.

Within the gates was a circular garden bordered by towering trees. The area was caught in between seasons, with red and gold leaves scattered on the ground around bright, vibrant flowers. At

the center of the garden, water flowed off a tiered fountain, pouring into the pond below with a soft trickling sound.

Deja inhaled the crisp, honeyed air. Tension that had built within her all morning as she explored campus now seeped out of her. Tanglewood Prep was a quiet place, but this was the first part of campus that felt peaceful.

A boy was sitting on a nearby bench, reading a book. He looked so young, he must have been a Spark. Deja walked up to him and asked, "What is this place?"

The Spark startled, quickly looking up from his book. "Oh—hi. This is the Promise Garden."

"Tell me about it."

"Uh, sure," he said uncertainly, probably caught off guard by Deja's frank demand. "Well, there's a legend that says the first seeds were planted in 1861 by a student as a gift to his lover. He promised that he would be back from the Civil War to marry her by the time the flowers bloomed—that's why it's called the Promise Garden. Since then, eight thousand seeds have been planted every spring. No one knows who donates the money for them—there's a rumor it's the lovers themselves."

He added the last part with a nervous chuckle, as though expecting Deja to laugh with him, but she did not see it as a joke. "*Loving someone liberates the lover as well as the beloved*," she said. "Maya Angelou said that. Maybe that includes being free from time. Who knows, it could be that same couple still keeping up with their garden."

That explained why the Promise Garden felt so much better than the rest of the campus: it had been created out of love. Deja's grandma had always said that nothing, mundane or mystical, could be accomplished without love. It was one of the most powerful things on Earth—even more powerful than whatever evil might lurk in Tanglewood's soil.

The Spark was looking at Deja like she had two heads. Unbothered, she walked away, going to a tree and sitting at the base of it. There was still some time before classes began; no longer hungry, Deja decided to use that time to sit here in the garden.

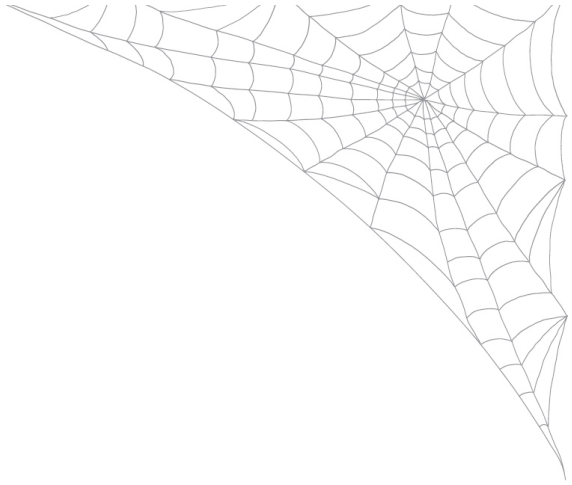
As she allowed the calm of the Promise Garden to wash over her, she noticed a cluster of flowers next to her. She hovered her hand over them. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, slowly, one of the flowers bent toward her, its silk petals brushing against her hand.

Deja smiled. She might not be in The Web, but sometimes, nature still spoke to her like it did her aunt and grandma. Maybe it could sense her blood, the kindness of where she came from. Almost unconsciously, Deja brushed a hand below her collarbone, feeling the chain from which her grandma's earrings hung beneath her shirt.

She was over a thousand miles away from home, her life completely changed. But at least with this garden, she had found one place that reminded her of her family's love.

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CHAPTER 4

IN HIS CLOSET

The lapels of Tóbi's uniform bore over a dozen pins. Each sported the name of a club, and most included the title *President* or *VP*.

Having so many extracurriculars meant that Tóbi's schedule was packed full mostly every day, and today was no exception. This morning, before classes, she had a meeting for Model UN. She spent her lunchtime at Debate practice. After classes were over, she tutored several Flame students before heading to a Mock Trial meeting. The final thing on today's schedule was ballet rehearsal, which she would attend later tonight.

Throughout the day, she had made sure to promote her campaign to as many people as possible. By day's end, Tóbi's limited social capacity had her running on fumes. With some time between the end of her meetings and the start of ballet rehearsal, she retreated to her dorm in an attempt to regain some energy.

The Dollhouse housed seventh and eighth grade girls, but it was where Tóbi resided because she was a prefect, acting as a cross between a rule-enforcer and a big sister. The Dollhouse was one of the few modern buildings on campus—but sometimes, not even its perks made her job worth it.

The moment Tóbi stepped off the elevator, she was cornered by two Spark girls, their overlapping voices scraping against her, wearing her down.

"Tóbi, if she keeps using my hairbrush—"

“For the last time, I never touched your stupid brush—”

“There’s red hairs in the bristles!”

“And?”

“You’re literally the only ginger on this floor.”

“Maybe someone broke into our room while you were sleeping. It’s not like you would hear them with how loudly you snore.”

“Girls,” Tóbi said. When that failed to make a dent in their bickering, she said, louder, “Girls, *please.”*

They fell silent, glaring at one another before both turning to Tóbi, awaiting her decision. But Tóbi was already reaching her limit.

“I need you to work this out among yourselves, okay?” she said, walking past them to her dorm at the end of the floral wallpapered hall. Almost there, she was almost there.

The girls followed behind Tóbi as she swiped her student ID against her door to unlock it. “If you two ever want to get anywhere in life, you’re going to have to learn how to problem solve. Show me I can trust you. Demonstrate some leadership. I’m here for you. But only if you need me. Like, really need me. Just keep me updated.”

She said all this very quickly as she stepped into her room and gradually closed her door. The girls opened their mouths, their expressions indignant.

“Good luck!” Tóbi said before they could speak, and she shut the door.

She let her yellow purse slide off her shoulder as she kicked off her heels. She turned on the electric kettle on her desk, shuffled to her bed, and collapsed onto the fluffy pink comforter just as the last of her energy escaped her.

Her phone rang.

She groaned. It took about five seconds of her brain urging her arm to move before she could lift her hand to accept the call on speaker.

“Olúwatóbi,” her mother said, her Nigerian accent stretching each syllable. “Kú ìrọlẹ o.”

“Good evening, ma,” Tóbi repeated. She did not bother lifting her face from the comforter, muffling her voice.

“Báwo ni?”

“I’m doing fine, ma. Thank you, ma.”

“Do you have any new grades? Last time you said you were studying for a calculus test.”

“Yes, ma. The test was on Friday, and we got results back today.” Tóbi lifted her head slightly, making sure her voice was clear as she said, “I got a 97 percent. It was the highest score.”

“Work on the 3 percent.”

Tóbi laid her head back down. “Yes, ma.”

“I pray your studies continue to go well.”

“Àmín,” Tóbi responded.

“God Almighty will continue to endow you with divine knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. You will live long and fulfill destiny. Hard work brings good results, in Jesus’ Name …”

Her mother’s stream of prayer continued to pour from her phone. Each time her mother took a breath, Tóbi mumbled *Amen* in Yorùbá. It was the same routine she’d had since moving from her hometown of San Francisco to Tanglewood: one of her parents called her at the beginning of the week, she updated them about her grades, and then they prayed for her.

Tóbi flipped onto her back, her soft afro hair brushing her face as she stared at the ceiling. Her mother’s prayer faded into white noise as her mind drifted to the election, and to Ace’s promise about what skeletons might lurk in Monte’s closet. She hated the thought of breaking school rules, but mirroring her brother’s class president streak might be her best chance at winning the praise of her perpetually unimpressed parents. They had two accomplished children, and Tóbi wanted them to finally see that.

It was still unbelievable how difficult this election was turning out to be. Tóbi had represented her class since they entered Tanglewood. She had planned countless school-wide events, had pushed many initiatives through administration, all to please her classmates. And in return, her class readily forgot her hard work and dedication. None of her efforts seemed to have stuck; she was beginning to wonder if they ever would.

The kettle whistled. Tóbi realized the only sounds around her were the soft bubbling of water and the muted arguments of preteen girls from adjacent rooms. She did not know how long it had been since her mother ended the call.

Tóbi propped herself onto her elbow. She looked at her short bookshelf, which was too small to store her many college prep books and AP textbooks, but just the right size to hold her American Girl doll collection. On the wall above the bookshelf hung a large poster of Michelle Obama.

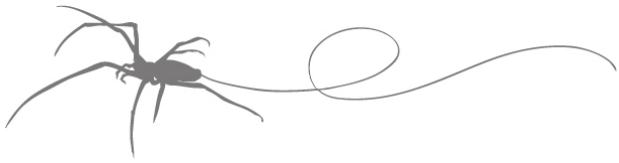
"What should I do, Mrs. Obama?" Tóbi asked.

In response, Michelle Obama smiled.

Tóbi's phone vibrated. She checked it to find a text from Ace: *He'll be out of his room for the next few hours. Window's open.*

Tóbi looked back at Michelle Obama's smile. It was the same bright smile, Tóbi was sure, she had maintained even while being largely unrecognized throughout her early career. It was the same poise that had allowed her to prove all her cynics wrong by becoming such a prominent figure in the political world—the same world that Tóbi planned to enter when she grew up. It was the smile that lit Tóbi's way ahead now.

"You're right, Mrs. Obama," Tóbi said, standing and turning off her kettle before grabbing her purse. "Others might overlook me now, but they'll soon realize they're wrong to do that. I'll make sure of it."



"I don't like this," Lucille said.

"I told you, you don't have to help me," Tóbi reminded her.

The Lynns, quick to believe Tóbi when she said she was retiring early for the night, had already gone to dinner after ballet. Lucille, however, had followed Tóbi from rehearsal, and once she caught

Tóbi not headed to The Dollhouse, Tóbi had been forced to reveal her plan.

It was now dark enough that the campus's lampposts were lit. In the glow of their yellow light, Lucille gave Tóbi a look from over the top of her cat-eye glasses that made Tóbi feel as though she were the younger one. "I can't just stand aside while you break into someone's dorm," Lucille said. "If you get caught, what will people think of me?"

Despite her nerves, Tóbi smiled; Lucille was becoming more like her with each passing day.

The boys' courtyard was across campus from the girls' courtyard, and it was similarly structured: a triangle-shaped lawn with dormitories occupying each side. The first was The Playhouse, a red-and-blue modern house for Spark boys. The second was The Barn, a residence that looked like Tanglewood had evicted livestock to make room for Flame boys.

Tóbi headed toward the third building: The Log Cabin. Built in 1891, it was Tanglewood's longest-standing residence hall. It had undergone countless renovations to make it safe and suitable for Wildfire boys, but even with the modern touches, it retained a rustic, cozy exterior.

"We can't just walk into a boys' dormitory after dark," Lucille said.

"Hence why we're going in through a window," Tóbi said, walking along the side of the building and scanning its second floor.

"But isn't this a bit extreme? We could have at least gotten someone else to do this for us."

"Ace made it clear that I don't want anyone else to see Monte's drawing. It's probably something that can be used against me too."

Tóbi came to a stop below what she knew to be Monte's room and was relieved to see that the window was indeed open.

"Trust me, we're being perfectly reasonable, Little Me," Tóbi continued. "Now, boost me into those branches."

Tóbi pointed to a tree. Lucille looked at it doubtfully, but after a moment, she sighed with a resigned nod.

Moving from the tree to Monte's window went smoothly. Lucille followed just as efficiently; their years of ballet training paid off. The most difficult part about the climb was dealing with the tree's grime.

"Do you have any hand sanitizer?" Tóbi asked, brushing dirt from her hands as they stood in the darkness of Monte's room.

"Let's focus on finding a light switch first," Lucille said. Tóbi heard the rustling of her searching the room. "Do you even know where the drawing will be?"

Tóbi felt a pang of unease as she recalled Ace's vague description. *You'll know it when you see it.* But she had already broken into Monte's room; if she dwelled on how shaky of a plan this was now, everything would fall apart.

"Ace said he doesn't know where exactly Monte keeps it, but don't worry," Tóbi said, as much to Lucille as to herself. "These dorms are plain and small. How hard could it be to find?"

There was a click, and light flooded Tóbi's vision; Lucille had found the switch. Tóbi blinked rapidly even after her eyes had adjusted to the light, trying to comprehend the sight before her.

So many pens. They were bunched in wide plastic containers. They were strewn alongside rulers and erasers and papers. Graphing paper, poster paper, lined paper, tissue paper—all of which sported sketches at different stages of completion.

Some sketches were scattered on the floor in crumpled, discarded balls. Most, however, were plastered to the walls, next to photographs and framed art, forming a mosaic wallpaper. Incredibly detailed drawings of eyes watched Tóbi from in between photos of city skylines; anatomically correct hearts were nestled next to paintings of cliffs by the sea.

"Yeah, how hard could it be," Lucille said dryly, inspecting a 3D cardboard floorplan that sat on a drafting table.

Tóbi knew that Monte aspired to be an architect—he was president of both Architecture Club and Art Club, after all—but she never would have imagined that someone as calm as Monte lived in such a chaotic space.

“Can you watch the door?” Tóbi asked, walking to the bed. “I’m not sure when he’s coming back. We need to make this quick.”

She moved to the nearest wall, searching the visual art hanging there, though nothing immediately stuck out to her. Lucille, on the other hand, did not move. “Tóbi, we’re never going to find one weird drawing,” she said. “This whole room is filled with art.”

“Remember when Ace got me in the same room as Tanglewood’s mayor so I could interview him for the social committee? And all the dirt he’s gotten on my opponents for past elections? He’s never given us a bad tip before.”

“We’ve never tried to take down Monte before. Think about it—he hates Monte too, but they’re still brothers. Why would he help us sabotage him? For all we know, this is a setup.”

Tóbi did not reply, half hoping that not acknowledging that possibility would make it false.

Lucille pressed on, “Scavenging someone’s room doesn’t seem like something Michelle Obama would do.”

With a gasp, Tóbi whirled around. “Don’t you dare bring Michelle Obama into this.”

“Why not? Because you know that she would be disappointed —?”

“Wait,” Tóbi said suddenly.

“I’m sorry, Tóbi, but it needs to be said. I can’t believe you made us miss quesadilla night for this—”

“No, seriously, Lucille.”

This time, Lucille fell silent immediately; Tóbi never called her by her name.

Tóbi had gone still, straining to hear beyond the door. Her blood became ice in her veins when she heard his voice again: “I need to get something, then I can walk over with you guys.”

“I told you to watch the door!” Tóbi hissed, taking Lucille’s wrist.

She hurried to flip the light switch off before pulling Lucille to the wardrobe. She threw its doors open, revealing school uniforms hung next to beige trousers, dress shirts, and cashmere sweaters.

Tóbi and Lucille had just barely scrambled inside when the dormitory door unlocked with a small *beep*.

Footsteps entered the room. Tóbi hardly heard them; her heart pounded too loudly inside her ears. Whatever it was that Monte needed, she hoped that it was not in his closet.

The footsteps neared, then stopped. Tóbi held her breath, and she swore that Lucille did too. After what seemed like hours but could not have been longer than a minute, the footsteps retreated. For a moment, Tóbi believed they were in the clear. But then—

"Actually," Monte said, "maybe I'll change before I go."

Though it was dark, Tóbi was still able to make out Lucille's look of horror. On the other hand, Tóbi's fear had completely evaporated, leaving only irritation.

"He knows we're here," she snapped, pushing open the wardrobe to the once more brightly-lit dormitory.

Sure enough, Monte was still fully dressed in his school uniform. Other people might have been fazed at discovering two people hidden in their room, but if this was anything out of the ordinary for Monte, he did not show it. He did not even look at Tóbi or Lucille as they stepped out of his wardrobe, his attention on his drafting table.

"You touched my floor plan," he said. He did not sound mad; he was merely stating an observation.

Still, something about him pushed Lucille to mutter, "Sorry."

"It's alright. Did you like it?"

Lucille opened her mouth, but it was Tóbi who responded.

"Don't talk to her," she said, moving protectively in front of Lucille. "This is between me and you. How did you know we were in here? Because we moved a piece of cardboard?"

Unfazed by the belittlement of his project, he responded, "It's how I knew someone had been in here, but I didn't know who until I walked to the wardrobe."

He paused to reposition the floor plan. Tóbi could not tell if he actually saw a difference, or if he just enjoyed making her wait. He had always been too good at that, making his silences just as loud as his words.

He was his younger brother's opposite in every way—his blond hair and brown eyes to Ace's brunette and blue, his cold patience to Ace's impulsiveness. If the two had been able to tolerate being in the same room together, Tóbi suspected that Ace's threats would pale next to Monte's quiet.

At last, Monte looked up. "Three years ago, for your fourteenth birthday, a Nollywood actor gifted you a supply of a custom-made, floral perfume from Chanel," he said, adjusting his circular glasses with his ring finger. "You are quite literally the only person in the world who smells like that, so logically, it had to be you. But what business could *the* Tóbi Ẹkúndayọ possibly have in my room?"

A thousand different excuses flipped through Tóbi's mind like shuffling cards, each less useful than the last. When Tóbi finally realized that she had nothing to play, she folded.

"I deserve to win class president," she said, "and Ace promised me there'd be an art piece in here that would help with that."

"Ace?" Monte repeated, caught off guard for the first time.

He glanced at the wall. It was subtle, an instinct quickly suppressed, but not fast enough for Tóbi to not notice. She eagerly looked at the wall too, but saw nothing of interest, the most notable art piece there being a large, framed drawing of a vase of flowers.

"Well, that's it then," Monte said, bringing her attention back to him. "Cat's out of the bag. You've discovered it, my dirty little secret: I own the wardrobe to Narnia."

"Just leave," Tóbi huffed, perching herself on the chair at his desk. "And take your lacrosse buddies with you so that we can leave, because I'm not going through the window again."

"Actually, I was thinking of inviting them inside. Maybe have a study session."

"You can't. If they see me here, they'll know I broke in, and by tomorrow morning, it's all anyone will be talking about."

When Monte did not respond, Tóbi felt her irritation morph into panic. "You can't let anyone know about this," she said.

Monte offered Tóbi a smile, one too small to contain any joy. "You break into my room, and you expect me to help you conceal it?"

“I didn’t find anything. This was a complete waste of my time, and you know it. You’ve already won—you gain nothing by humiliating me further.”

“Actually,” Monte said, “I haven’t won yet. Not in the way that matters. But now, you can help with that, because it’ll be a lot easier to win class president if I have no opponent to run against.”

Tóbi felt as though the ground cracked and swayed beneath her. “You’re telling me to drop out of the race?” she asked.

“No, I’m asking. While making your decision, though, keep in mind that if you choose to stay in the election, you may find yourself with a lot less voters after word gets out about tonight.”

There was a knock on the door. “Monte? You still coming?”

“I’ll be out in a moment,” Monte called, his eyes never leaving Tóbi. In a lower voice, he asked her, “What will it be? Do you choose to lose now, or later?”

The ground crumbled away, and Tóbi was falling.

“I’m happy we could reach an understanding,” Monte said, his voice coming as if from a great distance. He plucked a wallet from the mess on his bed and headed toward the door.

“What?” Lucille said. “No—Tóbi, are you going to let him do this?”

Lucille’s panic brought Tóbi back to her senses. “Wait,” she said, pushing herself to her feet.

Monte had nearly reached the door, but he paused, turning back to Tóbi. For a moment, Tóbi stared at him stupidly—she had not actually expected him to listen. She did not have a plan.

So, she said the only thing she could think of, the same question she’d been asking herself for the past two weeks. “Why are you even running for student council?”

“Because I want to be junior class president,” Monte replied, his hands held out like it was obvious.

But Tóbi shook her head. “No.”

Monte raised a brow. “No?”

“I’m the one in Legal Club and in Mock Trial,” Tóbi said, walking up to Monte. “I’m the one who made our Model UN team the best in the country—I’m the one who wants to become a politician when I

grow up! *I* am running because I want to be junior class president. But you? You're running like you're being chased!"

With each declaration, she had stepped closer to him until they were inches apart. Tóbi searched Monte's face, trying to see anything past his cool gaze, but it was like looking through a window made of bricks.

Tóbi glanced around the art-strewn dorm. Her gaze caught on the flower drawing that Monte had looked at earlier, and a thought occurred to her.

"Oh, wait," she said with a humorless laugh. "I think I get it. Being the eldest Montalvo must come with a lot of responsibilities, none of which probably involve making pretty doodles. You don't even want class president, do you? Is it just something you must do to finally live up to the Montalvo name, or else daddy won't give you your trust fund?"

Tóbi looked back at Monte, and her weak smile dropped. His expression hadn't changed, but his eyes had become harder, colder.

"Don't talk about my father," he said, his voice low.

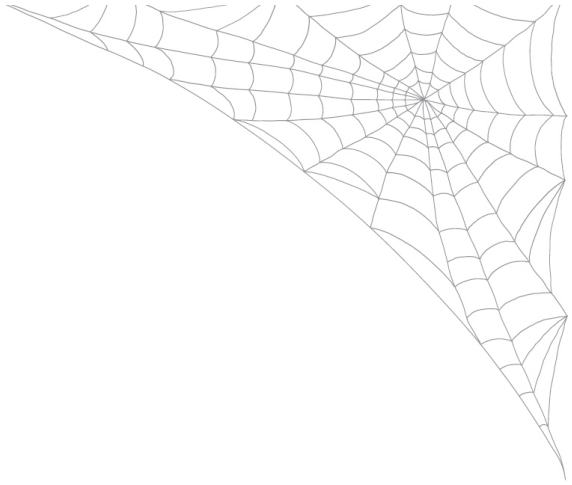
For the first time, Tóbi felt a twinge of fear. But it was not enough to make her back down.

"Don't take this away from me," she whispered. "Please, Monte. I need this election."

Monte turned around and walked away. But when he reached the door, he paused.

"You can drop down to class secretary," he said, and then he left.

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CHAPTER 5

A CHANCE

“I’ll leak that Monte won through blackmail,” Lynn P. suggested.

“That’ll just make people wonder what the blackmail is, and it’ll lead back to me,” Tóbi pointed out.

“I have a friend who works in the admin office,” Lynn Q. said. “I think she makes the ballot. I used to babysit her son, so maybe I can get her to put your name on the ballot last-minute?”

Tóbi shook her head. “People can vote anytime between today and Friday. If my name is put on the ballot before Monte votes, he’ll see it and tell everyone about yesterday. But if my name is on the ballot too late, everyone will have voted already.”

Lucille stopped her pacing to face Tóbi. “Look,” she said, “I know the whole wardrobe thing last night was embarrassing, but is it really the end of the world if it gets out? Is it worth giving up president for? We still have more friends than Monte does. They won’t abandon us over one stupid decision.”

They sat in a room in Bartleby with floor-to-ceiling chalkboards covering the walls, displaying collaborative graffiti. Tóbi had been staring at a drawn tree, but at Lucille’s comment, her gaze shifted from the wall to Lucille.

“What we have,” Tóbi said quietly, “are investors. Clubs and cliques like us because they benefit from having my name attached to them. If my name loses its value, becomes associated with trying

to cheat to win, then those investors disappear. Don't you ever confuse them for friends, Little Me."

Tóbi checked her smartwatch. First period began in fifteen minutes, which meant that in fifteen minutes, electronic ballots would become available to the student body. Juniors would see that Monte was the only option for class president, and that Tóbi was the only option for class secretary. The latter was due to the other candidates who stepped down after Tóbi asked them—or, when that had not worked, after the Lynns had gotten to them.

"It's over," Tóbi announced. "At least I still have a position on the student council."

Finally, the others looked as defeated as Tóbi felt. Lynn P. sniffed, and the other Lynn moved to her side, putting her arm around her shoulders.

Tóbi would have loved to cry too, but she did not have that luxury. Even now, as her world fell apart, she remained calm, because someone had to, and she did not trust anyone around her to do that for her.

All at once, Tóbi was exhausted; being around others only ever reminded her how alone she was, and how no one ever seemed able to support her in the same way she could them. "You girls should go to class," she said. "I'll catch up."

Lucille briefly rested her small hand on Tóbi's shoulder before the three of them left, closing the door behind them. Once alone, part of Tóbi wished they had not listened to her. But she could not fault them for doing what they always did, which was whatever she told them to.

Tóbi stared at the chalkboard walls, knowing she would need to leave Bartleby in the next ten minutes in order to be on time to her first class.

But ten minutes passed, and Tóbi was still sitting. After twenty minutes, Tóbi finally accepted she would not be going to class today.

She had never skipped before; she had never even been tardy. Then again, she had never lost class president either, so she was not really sure what the protocol for today was.

Tóbi retrieved her phone from her purse. She had countless messages asking where she was and why her name was not on the ballot. None of the concern felt genuine to Tóbi, not when it seemed like people only ever cared to check on her when she was not readily at their disposal.

The day had only just started, but already, Tóbi was running on empty. She stood, walked to a trash bin, and dropped her phone into it.

She left Bartleby. As she walked through campus, she passed a few violet-clad campus safety officers watching out for students skipping class. Recognizing Tóbi, they allowed her to pass without question. Little did they know that, for once, Tóbi was not following the rules. She wandered without permission and without a destination in mind. For so long, winning class president had been a fixed milestone in Tóbi's life, as guaranteed as her birthday or winter. Without it, she felt like she was floating.

Tóbi did not realize just how badly she needed an anchor until her wandering feet brought her to Rhoden Performing Arts Center. As Tóbi made her way through the halls, the building seemed to hum with life, its walls pulsing with muffled melodies that stemmed from Tanglewood's band, orchestra, and choir classes.

Ballet rehearsals were held in Rhoden's basement, but this early in the day, the dance studio was locked. However, Tóbi did not plan to go inside; she stopped by the wall next to the entrance, which displayed various framed photos of Tanglewood's current ballerinas.

Tóbi's photo was from her freshman year recital. She looked so flawless that she was sure anyone who saw it would think it was effortless. But Tóbi still remembered the skepticism she had faced from her fellow dancers when she had been cast in a lead role that year. Rather than deterring her, others' doubt had only pushed her to work harder. Sweat, tears, and hours upon hours of practice had gone into that performance. And when she had received a standing ovation at the end of it, Tóbi was sure no one remembered to doubt her. In that moment, the moment captured in the photo, Tóbi had finally proved herself.

It was something she had not quite achieved since. Sometimes, she wished she could have another breakout performance, just so she had another opportunity to showcase why she deserved others' respect. The closest she had gotten to having a spotlight since then was student council elections—but this year, Tóbi had not managed to put on a successful show.

Her heart twisted in her chest. She turned and had just made it up the stairs when tears blurred her vision. Upon finding the nearest empty practice room, she ducked inside, walked to the wall opposite the door, and sank down, only fully allowing herself to cry once she was hidden in the darkness.

Suddenly, the light clicked on, startling Tóbi. A tall, skinny guy with a beige-brown complexion walked into the practice room. He was missing his blazer, the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled to his elbows, and he had long brown ringlets that were wound in a messy bun. Tóbi recognized him as Fabien Clarke-Reynolds, one of her fellow juniors. She knew of him, but she did not know him personally. He was a loner who, as an expert musician, typically spent all his time here at Rhoden, even skipping his classes in favor of practicing.

Sure enough, despite it being the middle of first period, Fabien held a trumpet, evidently prepared to play. But when he spotted Tóbi, he froze, his hazel eyes wide. "Christ, what's wrong with you?" he asked in a thick English accent.

"Nothing, I just …" Tóbi began, quickly swiping away tears in an effort to look presentable. However, when she noticed that her makeup was also coming off, probably smearing on her face, she accepted it was a lost cause.

With a defeated sigh, she sagged against the wall once more. "I lost," she said.

"Oh, I was kind of being rhetorical. I don't actually care—"

"He competes with me for everything, but he's never wanted student council," Tóbi continued. Her frustration had been building all morning, and all it had taken was a simple invitation to open the dam for her feelings to pour out. "I thought my presidency streak was safe. He let me believe I could stay class president for all six

years at Tanglewood, just to cut me off when I was almost at the finish line."

Tóbi dropped her chin onto her knees. She was uncomfortably aware of her poor posture; she could practically feel the disapproving glares her parents would give her if they saw her like this.

But Fabien was not the type to notice such things. Even now, as she rambled, Fabien had leaned against the wall and began to play a low jazz melody, his eyes closed. This practice room was exactly the confessional she needed, with Fabien being too bored about her repentance to repeat it to anyone else.

Tóbi saw why Tanglewood did not punish him too harshly for skipping classes to practice; he was very good. It seemed less like Fabien was playing and more like the trumpet itself was singing.

"But you know what's weird?" Tóbi asked after a moment. "His interests might overlap with mine sometimes, but for the most part, all he cares about is architecture. That, and getting his lacrosse team to nationals. He already has a full schedule—I don't know why he decided to add student council to it."

Tóbi recalled last night and the dangerous look that had flashed across Monte's eyes when she mentioned his dad.

"I think," she added quietly, "his dad is making him run for president. Which is actually kind of insulting—haven't I been a good enough president? What can Monte do that I haven't?"

Tóbi had not thought that Fabien was actually listening to her, but at this, he opened his eyes and pulled his trumpet away from his face.

"Monte?" he asked. "That's the guy you lost to?"

Tóbi felt something in her chest constrict. "Yes," she said. "I lost to Monte."

Saying the words aloud made Tóbi's eyes sting with tears. They fell down her face and dropped into her lap.

"Oh no," Fabien said, pushing himself off the wall. "Oh jeez. Don't do that."

He walked up to her only to stand there awkwardly. Then, he patted her on her head. "There, there."

When this failed to calm Tóbi, he said, “I can’t believe you’re crying over a school election. This is so lame.” After a thoughtful pause, he added, “Then again, if I lost to a stiff like Monte, I’d cry too.”

Tóbi slapped his hand away. “I can’t believe how bad you are at cheering someone up,” she retorted.

“I wasn’t trying to. Though I guess I could help you feel better—but only if you’re done with the waterworks.”

Fabien proffered his hand to her. Tóbi hesitated; this was strange, her and him hanging out. They were from two different places in Tanglewood: Tóbi on top, and Fabien, well, somewhere below. She had no reason to continue talking to him—no reason except that it felt strangely nice to have a conversation in which Tóbi was not controlling both ends of it.

Blotting her face with her sleeves, Tóbi allowed him to help her stand then followed him out of the practice room.

Although Tóbi did not need to avoid campus safety officers because of their trust in her, the same did not seem to be true for Fabien. As he led her through campus, he made sure they ducked out of sight at all the right moments, apparently adept at avoiding patrols.

With first period ongoing, other than the officers, they ran into no one. The air was chilly, but there was no breeze, and the sun was caged behind thick gray clouds. Sometimes, with the school’s silence and old edifices, Tóbi felt like Tanglewood itself was stuck in time.

As they emerged from behind a tree—where they had hidden as they waited for a teacher to pass—it occurred to Tóbi that she had not introduced herself. Mentally kicking herself for her lapse of manners, she said, “By the way, my name is Tóbi.”

“I know, love.” He gave her an amused, sidelong glance. “I doubt there’s a person at this school who doesn’t know who you are.”

After the past few days, it came almost as a surprise to Tóbi to be reminded that her mark on this school was not as invisible as she had begun to believe. Fabien’s easy acknowledgement of her popularity was the best comfort he could have given her, and for the

first time in her recent memory, she felt herself fully relax despite being in someone else's presence.

"Aren't you going to tell me who you are?" Tóbi asked. "It's only polite."

It was a clear joke; she already knew of him, and he knew it. Just like her, he was one of the most recognizable people at this school—albeit for reasons much bigger than Tóbi's school-wide popularity.

Fabien brought them both to a stop. "This is who I am," he declared proudly, gesturing to a construction site that Tóbi recognized as Clarke-Reynolds Hall. "Welcome to Me Hall, the school's new performing arts center. To be completed by the end of next summer."

They had come to a large building, from which echoed the sounds of drills and hammers. Its stone skin needed paint, and there was a part of it that was still bare-bones, with scaffolding propped against it like a crutch. But even in its incomplete state, Tóbi could already see the grandeur of what the castle-like structure would become.

Fabien ducked under the yellow tape surrounding the building and held it up for Tóbi to do the same, but she hesitated. "Are we allowed to go in?" she asked.

"It's my building, mate. There wouldn't be an 'in' to go if I hadn't paid for it."

With a sigh, Tóbi crossed the tape. The building's interior consisted of airy hallways that were coated with drywall and dust, and tools littered the unfinished floors. As they walked through, construction workers nodded to Fabien or called out a greeting to him; it was clear that Fabien had been here many times before.

They started up a wide staircase that creaked ominously with each step they took. Fortunately, they reached a plain door unscathed. Fabien held it open for Tóbi, and she stepped onto the rooftop of a small turret.

This part of Clarke-Reynolds Hall, at least, seemed to be finished, because the stone felt stable as Tóbi walked to the edge. It nearly

came up to her shoulders, but Fabien easily folded his arms atop it, hugging his trumpet to his chest.

"How is this supposed to make me feel better?" Tóbi asked. It was not as though the view was extraordinary; they were only high up enough to be level with stone rooftops and golden trees.

"Look down," Fabien said.

Tóbi did. First period had just ended, and students were gradually pouring out of buildings, forming a sea of shifting black and violet.

"Can't see their faces from up here," Fabien said, resting his chin on his hand. "Can't make out their words either. It's nice. Feels like nothing can reach you, so nothing can get to you either."

He was right; Tóbi could not recognize anyone from up here. Not unless she tried—and she really did not feel like trying right now.

For a moment, they were silent, watching the faceless people wander to unknown destinations and listening to the muffled sounds that were their conversations.

Then, Fabien said, "I was gonna vote for you, y'know."

Tóbi waited for the pain of losing the election to flare, but it never came. The world was blurred up here, and what was previously a sharp topic had lost its edge.

"Oh yeah?" she asked.

"Yeah, I liked your promises for Tanglewood's performing arts. Everything—music, theater, and dance—is all cramped into Rhoden, which is a nice building, but not nearly as big as it needs to be. When I saw your campaign, I thought, 'it's about time someone cares enough to help the arts.'"

"You're helping too," Tóbi pointed out. "You're building this."

"Not to help anyone, though. I'm only building Clarke-Reynolds Hall to waste my mum's money."

Tóbi laughed. "What?"

Fabien, however, did not laugh. He looked uncharacteristically serious as he said, "After my mum took me in, she put a trust in my name. Out of guilt, probably, for being absent for the first twelve years of my life. As soon as I got access to it when I turned sixteen, I gave as much as I could to Tanglewood. But before I could waste all

the money, she found out about Clarke-Reynolds Hall, freaked out, and sealed the rest of it away in another trust that I can't touch 'til I'm twenty-five. It's not even like I need her money—my dad made sure I was plenty cared for in his will."

Tóbi's smile faded. She had not known the true reason behind Clarke-Reynolds Hall's construction, but she knew about Fabien's family drama. The entire world did.

It had been a moment that stopped Earth's rotation, that made people remember exactly where they were, when it was revealed that the world-famous jazz musician Jamie "Wildcat" Clarke had his son with Lady Madeline Reynolds, the Queen of the United Kingdom's great-niece.

Previously, Fabien had only been known in the jazz world as the son of Wildcat, and his mother was unknown. But four years ago, Wildcat died, and Madeline publicly claimed Fabien as her son. Her relationship with Wildcat had occurred long before she married her current husband, but that did not stop the media from their brutal investigation and speculation into Fabien. His face had been everywhere, and not many people had kind things to say about the biracial love child of the British royal family. It was no wonder he was less than excited when it came to his mother.

Tóbi did not know how to console him, so she did not try. "I can't believe you had money to burn and used it on Tanglewood—that's so lame," Tóbi said, mimicking him.

To her delight, Fabien's easiness returned. "Your accent sucks."

"Whatever." She nudged his shoulder playfully. "I'm leaving."

As they retraced their steps through Clarke-Reynolds Hall, Fabien asked, "You sure you're ready to go back?"

In part, Tóbi did not want to miss too many classes today. But mostly, Tóbi wanted to return because she did not feel as tired anymore. Socializing normally drained her, but strangely enough, her chance encounter with Fabien had recharged her.

"I think so," she answered. "Thank you for this, Fabien. Really."

He shrugged. "I needed to get you out of my practice room. Next time you need somewhere to go, go to that rooftop—and maybe I'll meet you there."

They shared a smile as they headed toward the heart of campus. But they had not gotten far when a boy barreled past, jostling them in the process.

“Watch it,” Fabien said indignantly, clutching his trumpet protectively.

“Whatever,” the boy scoffed. Then he noticed Tóbi, and his face blanched. “Crap, I’m sorry, Tóbi. It was an accident. I just didn’t want to miss the fight—Monte’s going rabid!”

With that, he sprinted away.

“Monte? Rabid?” Tóbi echoed in confusion. She never thought those two words could be in the same sentence.

Fabien mirrored her bewilderment. They looked at each other, then simultaneously turned and hurried after the boy.

A crowd had formed outside the school’s art and archaeology museum. People parted for Tóbi, but no one’s focus strayed too long from the center of the circle, where Monte fought a guy with freckles, whom Tóbi recognized as one of his lacrosse teammates.

Well, “fight” might have been too equal a word. Although Monte sported a black eye, Freckles was barely standing. It was all he could do to block Monte’s punches. Tóbi stared in shock; she had never seen Monte lose control like this.

“Fantastic,” Fabien said, laughing. He had pulled out his phone and was recording the scene.

“Someone has to stop this!” Tóbi exclaimed. “This is against school rules!”

“Oh come on, this is prime entertainment.”

But when Fabien saw Tóbi’s distress, he rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine,” he said, tucking his phone into his blazer. He handed her his trumpet. “Hold this for me—both hands.”

Only once he had double-checked Tóbi’s grip did Fabien jog into the fight, putting himself between Monte and Freckles. In the same moment, the headmaster’s assistant, Ophelia, rounded the corner, trailed by two campus safety officers.

“Stop it!” she screamed. “Stop it this instant!”

Campus safety pulled Monte and Freckles off each other, but Monte yanked his arm out of the officer’s grip. For a moment, he

looked like he would fight the officers, Ophelia, and anyone else who tried to get in his way.

"Monte?" Ophelia asked, blinking, as though she could not believe her eyes.

Monte's crazed expression passed as quickly as it had come, and he returned to his collected self. He moved to adjust his glasses, realized they were missing, then clasped his hands behind his back instead.

"Good morning, Ophelia," Monte said calmly. "I hope you're doing well?"

"I …" Ophelia began, then stopped. She glanced at Freckles—who was now slumped unconscious against an officer—and back at Monte. "I would have never expected this from you."

"Thank you, I value your faith in me." Monte looked around, seemingly just now noticing the crowd. He cleared his throat. "Show's over."

Although he did not yell, the crowd dispersed as quickly as if he had. Tóbi did not move; she refused to miss this. Monte noticed her, and a grimace cracked his cool mask. Tóbi wished she had not thrown away her phone; this would have made for a great picture.

"I'm sorry, Monte, but I'm going to have to give you detention for the rest of this week," Ophelia said.

Tóbi nearly rolled her eyes; the kid Monte fought was half-dead. Anyone else would have gotten suspended, at the least. But Tóbi was just happy to see that he faced any consequences at all.

Monte dipped his head graciously. "I accept whatever punishment you feel is necessary."

"Oh, but that'll include Friday," Ophelia said suddenly. "What will we do for the Bonfire? I would let you reschedule detention, but it's not like you can go like this to the Bonfire. There's a meteor shower occurring that same night, and a local news outlet is coming to cover both the shower and Tanglewood's Bonfire—what will they think of Tanglewood if the junior class speech is given by someone with a black eye?"

An idea occurred to Tóbi, and she stepped forward. "You're absolutely right," she said.

“Miss Ẹkúndayọ?” Ophelia asked, only now noticing Tóbi. “You’re not in class?”

“I was on my way when I saw Monte suddenly attack that poor boy.”

Tóbi knew she was being petty, but since Monte had already won the battle that mattered, the least she could do was take a win where she could. The chance to knock Monte down a peg, no matter how small, was something she would never ignore.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your issue with the Bonfire,” she continued. “Fortunately, I’d be happy to give the speech. I know it’s usually the class president who speaks, but I’ve given a speech for the past four years, so I can easily prepare another. And like you said, we can’t have a delinquent represent Tanglewood.”

“I don’t think she said delinquent,” Monte said quietly.

“I’m sorry, Monte, but I have to agree with Miss Ẹkúndayọ,” Ophelia said. “She will give the speech.”

Tóbi’s spirits soared. For a moment, with her confidence damaged, she had forgotten how central a role she held at Tanglewood—but the ease with which Monte’s job was designated to her was a welcome reminder. She began mentally going over possible approaches to her speech.

Ophelia continued to Monte, “Meanwhile, you and Mr. Clarke-Reynolds will be serving detention with me on Friday night.”

“Woah, woah,” Fabien said. “Me? I was trying to pull the two idiots off each other!”

“You mean to tell me that you were not abetting your friend?”

“Friend? I’m not his bloody friend, I hardly know the guy.”

Tóbi was barely listening; she had just remembered that the speech she had given after being elected class president in eighth grade was particularly good. She could rework it for Saturday, make it more specific to this year’s Bonfire—perhaps by incorporating something about the upcoming meteor shower.

Tóbi snapped her fingers. “Yes, that’s it!” she said, voicing her approval for her idea.

“What?” Fabien said indignantly, bringing Tóbi out of her head enough to realize that everyone’s attention was on her.

“Hm?” Tóbi asked, looking around.

“As you said you witnessed this, and I know I can trust your word, I asked you if Mr. Clarke-Reynolds helped Monte attack this student,” Ophelia explained. “And you’ve just confirmed it.”

Tóbi must not have heard the question because she was thinking about her speech—speaking of which, she wondered where she would be standing for it. It would make for a dazzling show if she stood in the direction of the meteor shower so that if it began as she spoke, it would be displayed behind her. She needed to look into that.

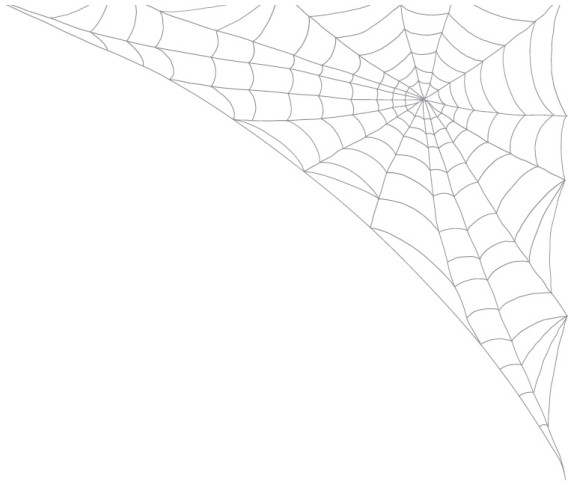
“Oh, okay,” Tóbi replied distractedly. “Please excuse me, I need to get going.”

“Are you serious?” Fabien asked. “Tóbi, tell Ophelia what actually happened. Tóbi. Tóbi!”

But Tóbi was already walking away, thinking of her upcoming speech. It needed to be perfect. And after the Bonfire, Tóbi needed to work harder than she ever had before. She might have lost the presidency, but she could still prove to her parents and anyone else who doubted her that she was capable of great things. She would take on more leadership roles, more projects, make herself stand out so much that it would be impossible to avoid looking at her.

But right now, she needed to go to class. What was she doing skipping? She was Tóbi Ẹkúndayọ, Tanglewood’s best student—but she would never be recognized as such if she kept breaking the rules.

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CHAPTER 6

THE PASTOR'S KID

Deja had arrived two weeks into the school year, but none of her teachers seemed to be very understanding about how much catching up she had to do.

By the time she reached the end of her first week at Tanglewood, she had a Pre-Calculus quiz to study for as well as two essays to write, one for AP English Language and one for Philosophy. Deja had never cared much about school; she only liked the ego boost she got from being good at it. But for the first time in her life, getting good grades took actual effort.

Even so, Deja wanted to add onto her already brimming workload. She'd heard about a creative writing workshop for poetry —something she had always enjoyed. She figured if she was going to be subjected to Tanglewood for the next two years, she might as well take advantage of the school's many resources, including the professional writers on its faculty.

She had been told that to join the poetry workshop, she would need to turn in an application, in person, by the end of her first week at Tanglewood. Her busy schedule resulted in her coming dangerously close to that deadline, with her finally making the trip to the administration building Friday evening, her application packet in hand.

A sign was near the building's entrance:

ALEXANDER HAMILTON HALL

Major General Alexander Hamilton and his soldiers

paused to rest here after the Battle of Tanglewood

in the Revolutionary War on December 3rd 1776

Deja jogged up a short flight of stairs leading to Hamilton Hall and scanned her student ID on a card reader next to the entrance. The reader flashed red instead of green, and the grand wooden doors would not budge when Deja pulled on the lacquered handles.

She let out a curse. With Hamilton being the administration building, it made sense for it to close for the weekend. And though evening had barely arrived, Hamilton must have closed early today because of the meteor shower and bonfire Deja only just remembered would be happening tonight. Students had been buzzing about it all week. From what Deja gathered, the Bonfire was an annual event during which Tanglewood celebrated its founding. This year, there would be the added entertainment of a meteor shower.

The few students and faculty members nearby, here on the northern end of campus, were all headed southwards to the Bonfire. Deja wanted to watch the meteor shower; she had never seen one before. But after missing the poetry workshop application deadline, she was in no mood to attend a school spirit event.

Her phone buzzed within her blazer's interior pocket. Without even checking, she knew it was a text from Cybele. Growing up, Deja had barely seen her aunt use her smartphone—she was always the first person to tell anyone that their problems could be traced back to "that damn phone." However, over the past week, not only had her aunt called Deja once a day, but she had also taken to texting her regularly.

In their check-in earlier today, Deja had casually mentioned her interest in a poetry workshop. Now, she saw that was a mistake; Cybele had sent her a photo of a worn copy of Maya Angelou's

famous poetry collection *And Still I Rise.* The accompanying caption read: *Found this in a box of your mom's old things. Think she studied poetry at Tanglewood too* 😊

Suddenly, Deja had no desire to join a poetry workshop, or even to ever write again. The impulsive thought passed as quickly as it came, but the anger that followed it remained. Deja had grown up being forced to listen to her grandma and Cybele credit Deja's love of literature as something she had inherited from Renée. But Deja did not want to believe that; if she could inherit that characteristic of Renée's, that meant she could also inherit whatever made Renée think getting involved with drugs was a good idea. Deja was determined not to go down the same path her mother had.

"Hey."

Deja whirled around. Standing behind her, at the base of the steps leading to Hamilton, was a girl with golden-brown skin and afro hair cut close to her scalp. She looked vaguely familiar.

"I met you my first day here," Deja realized aloud. "You're the narcissist."

"Eden," the girl corrected. "My name is Eden."

She had a musical Southern accent that was like molasses, sweet on the ears. It felt familiar enough to make Deja feel slightly less alone in New England. But she was still annoyed about missing the poetry workshop deadline, and frustrated about her aunt's latest comparison of her to Renée. And just as it always did, her mouth got away from her, replying, "Same difference, from what I heard of your conversation with the headmaster."

Eden remained impassive. "You're being mean," she observed.

Deja shrugged away a twinge of guilt. "*Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me,*" she said, reciting the Audre Lorde quote that occurred to her.

"Still. You don't need to be so mean."

Now Deja realized why Eden had stuck in her memory when so few people did: she was immune to Deja. People normally responded to Deja by retaliating or growing defensive, but Eden merely watched her with those big brown eyes of hers. It was like trying to electrocute rubber.

Deja had not realized how on edge she had been until she felt some tension leave her. Eden was right; Deja was angry, but that was no excuse to take it out on Eden, whose patience made Deja realize Eden did not deserve that.

"Whatever," Deja mumbled, looking away. It was the closest she would come to apologizing.

Eden seemed to accept it. She nodded toward Hamilton's entrance. "You trying to get inside?"

"Yeah, I wanted to apply for a class," Deja said, holding up her application packet. "Looks like I missed today's deadline, though."

"Mrs. Robinson is who handles class schedules for Wildfire students," Eden said. She tugged on one of her curls, pulling it taut then releasing it, allowing it to spring back into place. It seemed to help her think, because she continued the motion as she remarked, "I bet if you leave your application on her desk, she'll pick it up on Monday without even realizing it wasn't there last time she checked."

"That's a grand plan, Eden. Just one issue, though: Hamilton's locked."

"Oh, that's no problem."

Eden fished a laptop out of her messenger bag and perched it on her lap as she sat on the top step of Hamilton's entrance. Confused but curious, Deja watched from over Eden's shoulder. On her laptop was a coding screen that looked complicated, but Eden seemed to understand it just fine; she did not type for more than a few moments before a beep sounded behind Deja, who looked back at Hamilton to see that the card reader now shone green.

Eden stood, tucking her laptop into the crook of her elbow. She walked past Deja to the door, which now opened easily when she pulled on it. Holding onto the handle, Eden looked expectantly at Deja.

"Well?" Eden prompted. "You said you wanted to get in."

Deja snapped out of her shock. "Yeah—right."

Embellished wooden desks were positioned neatly around Hamilton's lobby. Deja found the one with a name plate that read *Robinson* and placed her poetry workshop packet on a pile of what

looked like other applications for different classes. She stared at the papers for several moments before she finally processed what had just happened.

"Hold on," Deja said, whirling around, "how the hell did you do that?"

Eden had walked to a counter, on which there was a large plastic bowl of candy. Sifting through it, she replied, "What, open the door? The firmware Tanglewood uses for card readers is really simple. Easy to get into."

Deja thought of the program she had seen running on Eden's laptop. Even if hacking into Hamilton's electronic lock system was easy for Eden, clearly, that did not mean it was an easy thing to do.

"You do this a lot?" Deja asked.

"Sometimes. Hamilton always has a bowl of candy in its lobby, and I just finished the last of my stash." Eden took a lollipop from the bowl and inspected it closely. Apparently satisfied, she stowed it in her pocket before turning back to Deja. "The Bonfire's starting soon, by the way. You should go. It's fun."

"Right, and that's why you're here instead."

Eden shrugged. "Large crowds make me uncomfortable."

She transferred a few more lollipops from the bowl to her blazer's pockets, then turned to her laptop, which she had left on a nearby table. As she picked up her laptop, Deja noticed the back of it was covered in stickers. One of the largest among them bore the logo of Salt & Light Baptist Church.

"Hey, that's my church," Deja said, pointing to the sticker. It was then she remembered that her church supported five scholarships, meaning there were four other recipients at Tanglewood. "Did you get a Salt & Light scholarship too?" she asked Eden.

"Kinda."

"What? It was a yes or no question."

"No." Eden's eyes darted to Deja, then to her bag as she placed her laptop in it. "My parents own Salt & Light."

A hazy memory surfaced in Deja's mind, one of the many mornings she had been dragged to Salt & Light Baptist Church for Sunday service. In it, Pastor Lovejoy and his wife stood on a stage,

smiling as bright as ever and holding a little girl in a frilly dress between them.

"Oh shit," Deja said. "You're Eden as in Eden Lovejoy?"

"Yeah," Eden said, casually, as though Salt & Light Baptist Church was not one of the most influential megachurches in the United States.

Over the past week, Deja had met kids from unbelievably rich families, but Eden was the first one she gawked at. The Lovejoys were practically Southern royalty, especially in Louisiana, with Salt & Light's main campus being in New Orleans.

"I never would've expected the pastor's kid to break into a school building," Deja said.

"It's not my fault. My mom stopped sending candy in her care packages, said it was for my own good. So, I have to come here to get it." She paused for a moment, then added, "It's not that bad, right? I'm only taking candy."

"I support minor crimes in most forms."

Eden gave her a small smile. "Thanks."

Deja smiled back. She was suddenly relieved her initial brashness had not scared Eden off; she liked Eden. And like the first time they met, Deja could not help but once again notice how pretty Eden was. Especially her eyes. They seemed to glow a warm brown, like amber stars as night quickly fell outside Hamilton's windows—

A group of teenagers sat in a clearing in the woods, gazing at the sky. A short distance away from them, at the edge of the clearing, was a girl, her skin nearly as dark and luminescent as the night. She wove through the tall, shadowed trees as carefully and as quietly as possible, like she did not want to be seen. But as Deja watched, the girl paused and glanced over her shoulder. Her dark eyes peered through her narrow glasses, searching her surroundings, until she seemed to look directly at Deja—and she frowned.

"Deja?"

Deja was yanked back to the present by the sound of her name. She once again became aware of being in Hamilton Hall's lobby. Eden stood in front her, wearing an expression of concern.

"You okay?" Eden asked.

Deja knew whenever she received a vision, she physically froze. From Eden's perspective, it must have looked like she had spent the past few moments staring blankly into space.

"I'm fine," she mumbled, dropping her gaze.

It was a lie; Deja was unnerved. She did not recognize the girl, but that was nothing new. Deja's visions were triggered by encountering an object or place. She would then see any person's past encounter with it, whether Deja knew that person or not. Over the past week, visions from different points in Tanglewood's past had randomly come to her. From the girl's style, Deja guessed the moment in her most recent vision had taken place in the early 2000s.

But what was odd about this vision was that a girl creeping through the woods had nothing to do with where she currently was, standing in Hamilton Hall. What was more, Deja's visions were strictly observations of the past. She was not actually transported there. And yet, Deja could have *sworn* that girl looked directly at her.

Deja shook her head slightly, trying to clear it. No, that was impossible. It was very dark in the vision; Deja must have just seen it wrong.

"Well, thanks a lot for your help, Eden," Deja said, somewhat distractedly. "I'll see you later."

"Will you?"

Deja had already been moving to leave, but the question confused her enough that she turned back to Eden. "Will I what?"

"Really see me later. I ask 'cause I usually can't tell when people are sincere, or when they're just being polite." Eden tugged on one of her curls. "So, do you mean it? 'Cause I'd like you to."

Deja found herself thinking of the charm she wore under her shirt. Her grandma's earrings were meant to provide Deja with comfort wherever she went. And though Deja had not known Eden for more than a couple days, Eden somehow felt just as familiar.

Whatever lingering uneasiness Deja felt from her vision dissolved. "Yeah," she said. "I mean it."

Eden smiled. "See you later, then."

Deja turned to leave once more, then paused. She had never been the best at making friends, but, she realized, this might be a good instance to try.

"Actually," she said to Eden, "the meteor shower starts soon. Big school events aren't my thing either, so I was going to find somewhere other than the Bonfire to watch it."

"Okay."

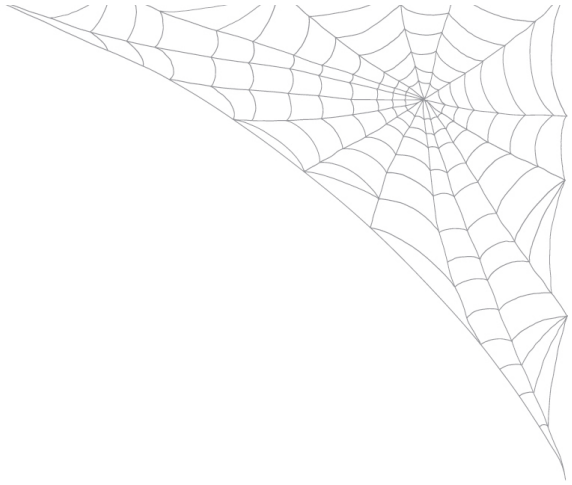
Eden said nothing more, but from the way she stared at Deja, it was clear she wanted to. Deja laughed. She could not help it; she could not believe she had found someone with even worse social skills than hers.

"Eden," Deja said, half exasperated, half charmed by her. "Do you want to watch the meteor shower with me?"

"There we go," Eden said with a small nod. "There's a deck at the back of Hamilton. We could sit there."

Deja gestured in front of her. "Lead the way."

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CHAPTER 7

SHOOTING STARS

“And as Tanglewood Prep adds another year to its long history of molding the next generation’s brightest minds, just like the stars that will be shining in the sky shortly, I am excited to light the way for my class alongside my fellow officers,” Tóbi said.

The end of Tóbi’s speech was met with enthusiastic applause. She stepped away from the podium, toward Headmaster Egleston, who stood on the edge of the stage. Beaming at Tóbi, he handed her a small, flaming torch. She stepped off the stage and walked to the giant bonfire behind it. Heat pressed against her, temporarily making her chinchilla coat unnecessary, as she tossed the torch into the fire.

Cheers rose into the night sky with the smoke. Tanglewood’s junior class broke off from the watching crowd, lining up to collect their own torches from faculty and toss them into the bonfire as well.

As Tóbi rejoined the crowd, people congratulated her on being elected junior class secretary. They were plainly curious about why she was secretary instead of president, why Monte had had a black eye since Wednesday, and why he was not here tonight. But Tóbi gave everyone the same response she had all week: a bright smile with as few words as possible.

After the Lynns added their torches to the bonfire, they caught up with Tóbi, engulfed in the fur of their designer coats.

“Great speech, Tóbi,” Lynn P. said.

Lynn Q. nodded. “I’m glad they let you give it. It’s only right that the junior class’s *real* leader speaks for us.”

“Thank you, girls,” Tóbi said. As Lucille joined them, Tóbi remarked, “I had a tough time following up Lucille’s speech, though. Congratulations on being elected eighth-grade class president, Little Me.”

Lucille beamed, and as the Lynns also praised Lucille, Tóbi felt a surge of pride; it was like looking at a reflection of her past self.

After the last few juniors added torches to the bonfire, Headmaster Egleston began announcing the results of the senior class election, which not only included senior class president but also student body president. Tóbi’s attention was drawn away from the stage as she noticed three guys who had just arrived and were pushing their way through the crowd, toward a concession stand.

Irritation clouded over Tóbi’s good mood. “I just noticed they have hot chocolate,” she lied to the Lynns and to Lucille. “I’ll get us some.”

Brushing off their offers to retrieve the hot chocolate on her behalf, Tóbi walked to the concession stand. She reached the table just as the guy in the center of the group, Ace, turned around, holding a steaming plastic cup.

“I need to talk to you,” Tóbi said.

“So talk.”

“Not here.”

She had been waiting all week to confront Ace, something made more difficult by her lack of a phone and by him never being where he was supposed to be. But she could not say anything just yet—she could feel the weight of people staring at her.

Her parents constantly reminded her that they had only come so far by having more patience than most others. They were often the only foreigners in the room, which meant it was much easier for them to be unfairly deemed unreasonable. Impatience broiled within Tóbi, but she knew if she let any of it show, it would circulate the school like a game of telephone, the narrative being

twisted against her and making it sound like she had thrown a temper tantrum.

Ace must have sensed her agitation. He handed his hot chocolate to one of his lackeys and said, “Don’t let this get cold.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Figure it out.”

Ace did not need to add *or else*; the guy got the message. Swallowing hard, he nodded and tucked the cup into the crook of his elbow with the care one would a newborn.

Tóbi took Ace’s arm, and as she pulled him to a less-populated area, Ace whined, “Don’t tug on my jacket so hard. This is real alligator leather, you know—”

“You set me up,” Tóbi hissed, whirling around to face him. “There was never any smoking gun in Monte’s room, was there? It was just a scheme by the Montalvo brothers who can’t seem to get along except when it comes to taking me down.”

Ace’s expression shifted to concern. He did not allow many people to get away with snapping at him, but for whatever reason, he’d always had a soft spot for Tóbi.

“I just wanted to help, swear,” he said. “I didn’t know Monte would return to his room so soon—and I definitely wouldn’t have expected him to make you drop out of the race.”

He spoke with a softness that grudgingly calmed Tóbi. “Then … you didn’t feed me false information?” she asked.

“I’m Ace Montalvo. My information is always good. If you fumbled the gift I gave you, that’s on you.”

Tóbi searched his face, but when she only saw sincerity, she deflated. She was still upset, but she knew now there was no point in directing that at Ace; his intentions had been genuine.

“By the way,” Ace added, “I’ve been meaning to ask you about something. There’s a new girl at Tanglewood. Southern, and too old to be a Spark, so she must have transferred. You know anything about that?”

Tóbi frowned, recalling the country girl who had ripped up her campaign flyer. “You mean Deja Freeman?”

“So that’s her name. Deja.” He said her name slowly, as though savoring it.

Tóbi was shocked; she could not recall Ace ever having a crush before. She had assumed his ego was too big for his heart to have enough space for another person.

“You’re into *her*?” Tóbi asked. “Of all people? She seems incredibly rude.”

A smile doodled across Ace’s face. “Yeah.”

Tóbi opened her mouth, then paused, thinking better of it. After a moment, she shook her head. “Whatever. I’m going for a walk.”

She patted Ace’s arm as she walked past him. Tóbi had hoped that confronting Ace would make her feel better, but unable to unload her disappointment onto him, she was forced to hold onto it. She was in no mood to return to the heart of the Bonfire and pretend that she was okay for Lucille, the Lynns, and everyone who was always watching her. So far, there was only one person in whose company Tóbi had not felt the need to pretend, and he was currently serving a detention because she had been too distracted by her own problems to be a good friend to him—but not for long.

As Tóbi headed off the field, some of the event’s adult chaperones offered her praise for her speech, which she accepted with a perfected mix of humility and gratitude.

“Leaving so soon, Tóbi?” one teacher asked her.

“Yes, I’m tired, I think I’ll go to bed early tonight,” she lied.

“Are you sure? You should at least wait until the—”

He was cut off by gasps from the other teachers around them. Above, a bright streak of light shot through the sky, earning murmurs of admiration from the Bonfire’s entire crowd.

“Look, there’s already another one,” a different teacher said, pointing to a new streak of light. “They’re coming remarkably fast.”

Tóbi had initially been as awestruck as those around her, but at the teacher’s comment, she was pulled down to Earth. She looked around, noticing that all of the adults’ attention was on the sky above, waiting for more meteors. It was the perfect distraction to sneak away without any further questions.

Tóbi left the Bonfire, and the more north she trekked up campus, the quieter her surroundings became. As she walked, she reflected on the circumstances that had led to Fabien's detention. She hoped he would not be upset with her. With all the classes he had skipped, what was one more mark on his record? And besides, Tóbi was, well, her. No one ever stayed mad at her for too long.

The meteors above came much more frequently than Tóbi would have expected, presenting an almost continuous stream of light that lit her way to Alexander Hamilton Hall. It was closed for the weekend, but as a student ambassador, Tóbi had more campus access than regular students.

As she walked through the narrow wooden halls, her spirits raised somewhat. What she loved most about Tanglewood's campus was the amount of American history it had witnessed, and Hamilton Hall's part in the Revolutionary War never failed to give Tóbi chills.

As she approached Ophelia's office, Tóbi heard a strange sound. It sounded like laughter, but she knew it could not be. Surely Fabien was miserable from being trapped with Monte. As for Monte, he was a robot. He did not laugh.

But to her horror, when Tóbi opened the door, she saw Fabien and Monte sitting across from Ophelia's desk, looking more like they were at a brunch than a detention. All three of them were laughing at a story Monte told, but when Tóbi entered, he broke off.

"Miss Ẹkúndayọ, this is a surprise," Ophelia said, but she was smiling too hard to look properly shocked. "Is everything okay?"

Tóbi hardly registered her words; all she could focus on was Fabien's hand resting on Monte's shoulder.

"No," Tóbi replied. "Not a single thing about *this*"—she gestured wildly at the scene before her—"is okay! I was actually starting to like you, Fabien!"

Fabien laughed in disbelief. "Is that why you landed me a detention?"

"I've come to get you out! But apparently, I'm too late, because you've already gone over to the dark side. What happened to Monte being a stiff?"

“Tóbi,” Fabien said, rising from his seat and walking up to her. “Tóbi, Tóbi, Tóbi.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Hear me out,” he said in a low voice. “Now that I’ve had detention with the bloke for a week and gotten to know him, he’s, well, actually pretty cool.”

Tóbi stared. “He corrupted you.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit dramatic?”

“Don’t you see?” Tóbi demanded, twisting out of his grip. “This is what he does! He tricks people into thinking he’s a decent person, and you’re falling for it!”

Monte cleared his throat. To Tóbi’s annoyance, she saw him rising from his seat to join them. “Tóbi, you shouldn’t blame him—”

“Oh, I don’t!” Tóbi said, turning onto Monte. “I blame you! Because Fabien is one of the few people I’ve met who can actually think for himself, and you just had to take him from me, didn’t you? Just like you take everything from me!”

“This is so cute,” Fabien said. “I can’t believe you guys are fighting over me.”

“Shut up, Fabien!” Tóbi said at the same time that Monte said, “Fabien, not now.”

“Oh, look—the meteor shower started,” Ophelia remarked. She had moved to a window and was looking outside. “We hadn’t even noticed.”

Monte’s gaze, made no less intense by one black eye, did not move from Tóbi. “What do you mean I take everything from you?”

Tóbi laughed harshly. “This golden boy act is getting old, Monte. Don’t pretend that you haven’t had it out for me since the ninth grade!”

“Is that what you think?”

“Brilliant,” Fabien breathed; he had moved next to Ophelia at the window. “Hey—does that shooting star look closer than the rest?”

Tóbi had mastered the art of poise, but when it came to Monte, she seemed to forget self-control. And looking at him now, with his feigned ignorance, she could feel her frustration dangerously

creeping to a boiling point. Feelings she had always been too polite to express rose within her, unable to be restrained any longer.

"Let's review, shall we?" she spat. "You join almost every club I'm in just to try to take away my leadership. You took junior class president from me. And now, you've even taken Fabien! You are the biggest, most annoying thorn in my side that I can't seem to get rid of!"

To Tóbi's surprise, Monte almost appeared wounded. But that was not possible. Only people with hearts had the ability to get their feelings hurt.

"It almost looks like it's headed this way …" Ophelia remarked. Then, firmly, she said, "We should leave."

"Tóbi, I …" Monte began, but he trailed off. This uncertainty, too, was something Tóbi had never seen from him.

But it only lasted a moment; in the next, any trace of emotion had vanished from Monte's face.

"You're right," he said, his voice deadly calm. "I don't even care about class president. I just thought it'd be fun to take it away from you."

Tóbi stepped back in shock. Despite her frustration with Monte, she had never thought he would say such a thing. Never thought his rivalry with her was this calculated.

"What did I do to make you hate me so much?" she whispered.

Ophelia hurried to where Tóbi and Monte stood. "You two can finish this discussion another time. I believe we need to clear out of Hamilton."

If Tóbi were not so determined to get an explanation from Monte, she might have thought more of the growing panic in Ophelia's voice. As it was, her focus was only on Monte, whose jaw worked as though he chewed on his tongue.

"Seriously," Fabien said, jogging up behind Monte, "Ophelia's right. We need to go. Like, now."

When it was clear that Monte would not say anything, Tóbi scoffed. She supposed it did not matter; nothing he said could justify his cruelty toward her anyway.

“Fine, Fabien,” she said, glaring at Monte. “I’ll go back to my dorm, and Monte can go to hell. Pardon my language, but I’m so over this.”

Tóbi whirled around and walked away. Behind her, she heard Monte say, “No, wait—”

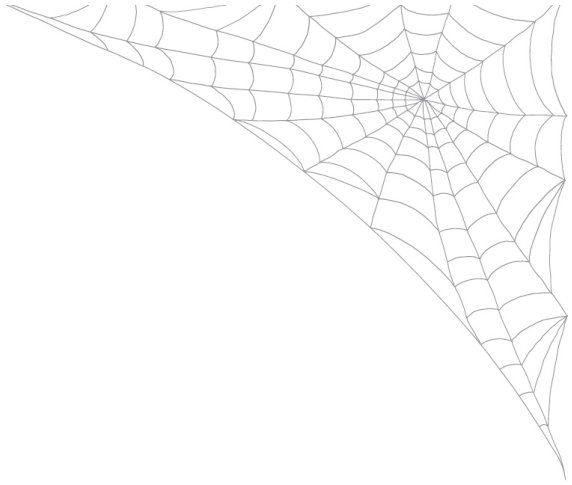
Boom.

Tóbi had just reached the door when a thud resounded around her, and the building shuddered so violently she was knocked off balance.

“Tóbi!” Monte yelled.

She felt his arms wrap around her just as a brilliant flash of light blinded her, and the windows shattered.

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CHAPTER 8

THE WEB

Deja raced through the woods, the light of the ongoing meteor shower illuminating her path.

"Deja," Eden called from somewhere behind her, "I don't think this is a good idea."

Deja paused, panting as she glanced over her shoulder. The woods had swallowed every sight behind her; the only thing she could make of Eden was the sound of sticks underfoot as she struggled to keep up.

She and Eden had been enjoying watching the meteor shower together from the back deck of Hamilton Hall—up until one meteor strayed from the others and crashed into the heart of the woods behind Hamilton. Deja felt slightly guilty for taking off after it so quickly; she could tell Eden was the type of person who preferred to avoid chaos. But she had been raised by weavers, women who dealt closely with nature. And a star falling clear out of the sky was a natural event that every one of Deja's instincts told her to check out.

She trudged on until she reached a cloud of dust so thick it blocked the sky and even the shooting stars. And yet, there was still light. This part of the forest had been razed into a massive crater, and sitting in its center was a gleaming rock about the size of a dog. It dowsed the night with a soft, golden light.

"Oh," Eden said once she caught up with Deja. Her skin shone a warm brown in the light, as though she stood in front of a sunset.

“Are meteorites usually gold? Or glowing?”

Before Deja could answer, rustling sounded behind them. They whirled around—only to see three students stumble into the clearing.

One of them was a petite girl with berry-black skin and a large afro pushed back with a violet headband. Maybe it was Deja’s disorientation from the meteor crash, but she kind of thought the girl resembled a fairy.

She realized she had met the fairy girl before—Tóbi. She had shoved a campaign flyer in Deja’s face.

Deja ripping up the flyer must have made a lasting impression on Tóbi, because she eyed Deja with blatant distrust. “What are you doing out here?” she demanded.

“Well, Tinker Bell, I’m obviously the one who pulled this out the sky,” Deja said, because that was what Tóbi’s accusatory tone had implied. In response, Tóbi rolled her eyes.

“We’re lucky it landed all the way out here,” said a blond guy with circular glasses. “Any closer to Hamilton, and the shock wave could have seriously injured us.”

“This lighting is fantastic, though. Take a picture of me, old man,” the third person—a British guy—said as he handed his phone to Glasses. He looked familiar, but Deja could not place where she had seen him before.

“I think we should go back inside,” said Eden.

Glasses nodded. “Let’s go. We told Ophelia we would stay put while she went to get help, and it would be best if we were there when she returns.”

“I want a piece of the meteorite first,” Deja said. Her aunt enjoyed collecting plants, crystals, herbs, and other natural materials. Deja was sure Cybele would appreciate an extraterrestrial piece to add to her collection.

British Guy stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “You’re taking the piss. We can’t go near a rock that just fell out of space.”

Deja frowned; she was pretty sure she had said “*I*,” not “*we*.” She was not going to tell them what to do, and they should do the same for her.

“You gonna beat my ass ‘bout it?” she asked.

“What? No, I’m not going to—”

Deja sidestepped him. She ignored the others calling after her as she jogged down the crater, toward the meteorite.

It was even stranger up close; it looked less like a space rock and more like tinted glass. In its smooth, golden surface, Deja could see the reflections of the others as they came to meet her. The rock even had an odd smell—nothing sulfuric, like Deja would have expected, but a scent as sweet as candy. Except as soon as Deja remembered that she did not like candy, the scent shifted into one that reminded her of her grandma’s sweet potato pie, her favorite food.

Deja had a strong, inexplicable suspicion that the rock would feel warm like a hug. She reached out to it, but her fingers barely grazed its surface when it split open, spewing forth a golden mist.

Deja gasped, only to inhale the substance. It burned her nose and throat, sending her into a coughing fit. She heard the others choking too. She could barely breathe, but strangely enough, she was not scared; the mist was so sweet that she did not feel as though she was in any danger.

Sure enough, her coughing soon subsided. When Deja opened her eyes again, she saw the space above her was now colored by an entire galaxy. Deep blues and vibrant purples swirled right over her head, starry threads weaving celestial bodies into the night.

Deja had grown up listening to women in Sweetwater recount their wonder from their first time seeing The Web, but no story could have prepared her. The sight flooded Deja with joy. She giggled, the sound unfamiliar but not unwelcome. She reached up and ran a hand through the galaxy. It was cold and soothing, rippling around her touch like a pond of water.

“Wow,” someone breathed behind her.

Deja looked at the others. They stared at the stars swimming overhead, awe lighting each of their faces.

Deja’s heart stalled as, for the first time, she felt a trace of fear.

They were not supposed to be able to see this.

Voices sounded in the woods, distant at first but growing nearer, accompanied by heavy footsteps. The golden mist had cleared

enough for Deja to see flashlight beams moving among the trees. The stars drained out of the space, and Deja felt the euphoria bleed out of her.

A moment later, a group of people emerged into the clearing. They wore the bulky suits and hard hats of firefighters. One shouted, “Hey! What are you kids doing in there? Get out before you hurt yourselves!”

Tóbi immediately left the crater. Eden and the two guys glanced above them one last time, as if expecting to see stars directly above them again, before they followed Tóbi.

Deja, however, quickly squatted next to the meteorite. It had lost its golden glow, and its surface seemed less smooth. Now, it was nothing more than a slab of rock—which made it easy for Deja to break off a small piece and pocket it.

As she stood and surveyed the woods, she was suddenly reminded of the vision she had gotten earlier in Hamilton Hall, while speaking to Eden. The tall, shadowed trees looked identical to the ones that mysterious girl had been navigating. She had been on Tanglewood’s campus, Deja realized. That explained the girl’s relevance to Deja’s present moment, the reason why the vision was triggered.

“That means you too, girly!” a firefighter called.

Rolling her eyes, Deja turned away from the meteorite. As she exited the crater, she saw that the headmaster’s gray assistant had arrived with the firefighters, and she was speaking with the other four.

“It’s lucky that the town’s fire department was on campus for the Bonfire. This situation could have been a lot worse, which is why I told you three to remain in Hamilton—and where did you two come from?” she added to Deja and Eden.

Her eyes narrowed on Deja, and Deja was sure she was recalling their first encounter. But before the assistant could say anything more, Glasses said, “We were curious about the crash, but you’re right, Ophelia. We should have stayed inside. I apologize for any inconvenience we’ve caused.”

Glasses' careful charm seemed to put Ophelia at ease. "Well, I'm just glad you all are okay," she said, though she was only looking at Glasses, slightly leaning into him. Deja was tempted to point out that he was both out of her league and age range.

"But," Ophelia continued, "if you begin to feel unwell in the next few days, please go straight to the clinic. Heaven only knows if there are any effects of meteorite exposure."

"We will, thank you. And we'll head back to our dorms now." Glasses looked at the four of them and nodded at the woods before walking that way himself.

His assumption of taking charge almost made Deja walk the opposite way, just to spite him. But the firefighters were inspecting the meteorite, and Deja did not want to subject herself to any scrutiny. Gripping the meteorite fragment in her pocket, she followed the others.

"Meteors don't usually bring a chunk of space down with them, right?" British Guy asked as they walked.

"I've never heard of anything like that," Glasses said, typing on his phone. Deja snuck a peek at the screen and saw that he was looking up information about meteors. "It's highly irrational. Maybe it was a hallucination."

Tóbi scoffed. "*You* might get hallucinations, Monte, but not all of us spend our days inhaling paint fumes."

Uncomfortable goosebumps ran down Deja's neck; she did not like hearing these strangers talk about something that only she should have seen.

"I have no idea what y'all are talking 'bout," she said loudly. If they were already doubting their eyes, Deja still had a chance of convincing them the stars they had seen were not real.

Or, at least, she could have, had she been a better liar. As it was, the only thing her declaration did was turn everyone else's disbelieving gazes onto her.

"You're the one who made the space rock vomit stars," British Guy said, "and you didn't even see the mess you made?"

Deja swallowed. "Nope."

“The thing was right above us,” Tóbi said. “There were a bunch of stars, constellations—oh, the word is escaping me at the moment. It starts with a ‘g.’”

“A galaxy,” Glasses offered.

“Don’t interrupt me,” Tóbi snapped.

“You reached up to touch it,” Eden said to Deja. “You laughed.”

This caught Deja off guard; she would not have expected Eden to pay attention to her when there had been an entire galaxy floating above them.

In her hesitation, British Guy laughed. “So, you did see it. Why are you being lame and denying it?”

“For the last time, I didn’t see whatever web y’all are talking ‘bout,” Deja snapped.

Glasses stopped and turned around. He looked at Deja as though seeing her clearly for the first time.

“No one was talking about a *web*,” he said.

The others had stopped too, staring at Deja. Under their curious gazes, the meteorite fragment felt uncomfortably warm in her pocket.

“Look, whatever it was you lunatics saw, I didn’t,” Deja said. “Take the old lady’s suggestion and get your heads checked out.”

She pushed past them, but she had not taken more than a few steps when someone took her arm. She turned indignantly—but her irritation faded when she saw that it was Eden who held her. Confusion colored her large brown eyes.

Suppressing her guilt, Deja shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said softly, removing herself from Eden’s grip. “I gotta go.”

She turned and continued through the woods. It pained her to distance herself from the one friend she had been beginning to make at this school, but that galaxy—The Web—was not something Deja trusted them with.

As she hurried through campus, she wove through crowds headed toward Hamilton Hall, no doubt curious about the meteor crash that they must have heard about by now. By the time Deja reached her dorm, slamming the door behind her, her heart raced as though she had just completed a marathon. Breathing heavily, she

scanned her dorm. It was disconcerting to see that nothing about it had changed despite her world having turned upside down.

A melody blasted through the room.

Deja startled badly. After a second of utter confusion, she realized that it was only her phone ringing.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket. The cracked screen displayed a call from Cybele.

"A *goddamn* meteor crash, huh?" her aunt said by way of greeting when Deja answered the call.

"You heard?" Deja asked. "Already?"

"I signed up to get news alerts from Tanglewood."

"So now you know how to use your phone," Deja mumbled.

"Hey, why the snark? This is cool. I thought you'd be excited." A note of panic entered Cybele's voice as she added, "Unless—are you okay? The text said no one was hurt, but—"

"It's true, no one was hurt. I'm fine," Deja quickly assured her aunt. She swallowed, then continued, "But I do have something to tell you. I was near the meteorite when it crashed, and when I checked it out after, I saw The Web. I wasn't the only one—there were four other kids with me who saw it too."

The Web was a guarded resource, known only by women whose mothers were part of it, and their mothers, and so on. The kids Deja met tonight were outsiders; there was no reason they should have been able to see it.

Deja expected her aunt to be as bewildered as she was. But to her surprise, Cybele said, "Well, that ain't unheard of. The Web is everywhere. Getting caught on it can happen to anyone. In fact, it does happen to most people at least once in their life, only temporarily. 'Course, normally they can't see The Web—they'll just think of its influence as luck, or manifestation. But I guess you could see The Web 'cause you come from a family of weavers, and maybe those other kids could see it 'cause they were with you."

In Sweetwater, being woven into The Web was treated as ceremony, a milestone to celebrate like a Sweet Sixteen or graduation, albeit one that happened earlier in a future weaver's life. Deja had not been allowed into The Web, but that had never

stopped her from dreaming of her own weaver ceremony. She had always imagined it would be joyful, with Cybele, her grandma, and their community in Sweetwater celebrating Deja joining a long line of women who had come before them.

But the reality was Deja's grandma was gone now, and her heart ached at the reminder that her grandma would never see her become a weaver. What was more, though Deja had foolishly allowed herself to feel hope at the appearance of The Web, from what Cybele said, it sounded like she would still not be joining it anytime soon.

"So even though I saw The Web, that don't make me a weaver now," Deja said.

"No, 'fraid not."

Deja's disappointment was quickly singed away by a spark of anger. "And why the hell not, Cybele?"

"Language," Cybele said warningly.

But Deja's temper was quickly becoming untamable. "You assume I can't handle being a weaver just 'cause Renée couldn't, but she ain't got nothing to do with me," she went on. "You handle The Web just fine, and you're the one who raised me. I'm more your daughter than hers—"

"That's enough," Cybele said sharply. She took a breath, clearly trying to compose herself. Then, in a calmer voice, she said, "I know you got a freakishly good memory when it comes to quotes. Alice Walker wrote something about mothers and daughters once—I don't quite remember it, but I know you know what I'm talking 'bout."

Sure enough, Deja did have an idea of what Cybele referred to. Reluctantly, she recited, "*How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mothers' names*."

"Exactly. Your mom is Renée Freeman, and she will always be part of you. Nothing can erase that, not even death. I mean, you think your granny ain't my mom no more now that she's gone?"

Guilt mingled with Deja's anger. "No, 'course I don't think that. I just mean …" Deja broke off with an audible sigh, because the truth was, she did not know what she meant, and trying to figure it out was only making her more frustrated. She tried again, "It just ain't

fair. Why would The Web appear to me if I'm still not a weaver? What does it want with me, then?"

"You said a few other kids saw it too. Could be The Web wants you to make some friends."

Deja laughed caustically. "You'd like that."

"Matter of fact, I would. Maybe if I knew you had someone looking out for you up there, I wouldn't feel the need to call you every day."

Deja nearly pointed out that Cybele would not need to call her in the first place if she were in Sweetwater, where she belonged, instead of being pressured to follow in Renée's footsteps. But Deja bit her tongue. Her anger had already offended her aunt; she did not want to risk hurting her further.

When Deja did not reply, Cybele said in a softer voice, "Hey, like I said: You seeing The Web is probably just an effect of you being related to weavers. Just like how you get random visions of the past without actually being in The Web. Don't worry 'bout this too much, alright? Focus on your new, exciting life at Tanglewood."

"Fine," Deja forced out. "Good night."

She hung up. She knew she would need to apologize to her aunt tomorrow for saying goodbye so abruptly tonight, but right now, Deja could not think about that. She could hardly even breathe. Her frustration was building within her. When she could not take it anymore, Deja grabbed a pillow from her bed and screamed into it.

Talking about Renée with Cybele was a minefield, except it always seemed to be solely up to Deja not to explode. She never knew what to say without making a wrong move. For someone who loved words so much, it was incredibly frustrating how often they failed her.

Deja plopped onto her bed. She placed a hand below her collarbone, where her grandma's earrings hung from a chain beneath her shirt. Guilt began to set in. Deja's grandma had been the kindest woman she knew. Deja wished she could be a good person like her grandma, instead of being so angry all the time. Maybe then she would not resent her dead mom so much. Maybe

then she would have an easier time making friends, like Cybele suggested she should.

Except even if she were to make friends, it would not be with the kids she had met tonight. Despite Cybele telling her not to worry about it, them witnessing The Web still bugged Deja.

Tóbi had called that Glasses kid *Monte*. Deja wondered if it was short for *Montalvo*; he kind of reminded Deja of Ace. He was blonder, and calmer, but there was a resemblance in how he and Ace walked, as though they expected the world to get out of their way.

Despite Deja's nonchalance toward Ace earlier this week, she was all too familiar with the Montalvo family; she had protested a few of Associate Justice Reginald Montalvo's rulings in the past. The Web originated for protection, to provide security to women who historically had none. It made Deja uncomfortable that Monte, a guy who came from a family that at times was the reason others needed protecting, had been able to see The Web.

The others had no connection to The Web either. Eden was from a wealthy Christian family, a group that was not the biggest fan of women and girls like Deja. And the British guy—since meeting him, Deja had come to realize why he seemed so familiar: He was Fabien Clarke-Reynolds, the biracial love child of the British royal family. Deja had followed the story along with the rest of the world. His life had been entertainment. And now, he was part of her life.

As for Tóbi, Deja did not know her background, but no doubt someone like her was easy to find. Deja grabbed her laptop and typed in Tóbi's full name, Olúwatóbi Ẹkúndayọ, which she remembered from the campaign posters that had been plastered everywhere.

Deja was torn between amusement and annoyance when she found that Tóbi's impeccable social media feed consisted of ballet recitals, various award ceremonies, and perfectly curated group photos. All the girl needed was a few pictures of her kissing some puppies and she'd be good to go.

Deja scrolled until she found a family photo from about a year ago. Tóbi stood in between an older, deep-toned couple, and behind

them was a large black-and-white building. The photo's caption read, *Congratulations to my parents for opening the first Zebra Rush in Hong Kong. Our restaurant is now on every continent in the world! (Except Antarctica, but only because our food's spice might advance global warming.)*

Deja glanced across her dorm at her trash can. In it, there was still a Zebra Rush takeout container she had gotten from the airport. It was no wonder Tóbi seemed so out of touch with reality—she was the heiress to a multi-billion-dollar fast food empire.

Deja moved to click out of the picture, but she accidentally liked it in the process.

"Crap," Deja muttered, quickly unliking the photo. She hoped Tóbi would not notice; the girl seemed haughty enough.

Deja's exhaustion was finally catching up with her. She closed her laptop then stood, stretching her arms above her head. Outside, the meteor shower had ended; it had been intense yet short.

It was then that Deja remembered the meteorite fragment she had taken. She had gotten it for Cybele, but with a twinge of guilt, she realized she had been too busy having an outburst to remember to tell her aunt about it.

The warm glow that had engulfed the fragment had long drained out of it. Now, it was nothing more than a jagged stone streaked with golden stains.

She set it onto her desk before curling up on her bed. Deja did not know when she fell asleep, but when she next opened her eyes, she knew that she was dreaming.

She stood in a vague room with nondescript features that was nevertheless familiar in the way all dreams were. The only aspect of the dream that was not fuzzy was Renée, unmistakable with a face so like Deja's.

She sat in the center of the room. Deja approached her carefully, debating how to address her.

"Renée?" Deja decided finally, because "Mom" probably would have been just as weird to Renée, since she had died a seventeen-year-old girl who had never really gotten to meet Deja either.

Renée did not respond; she did not even acknowledge Deja. Her head was bent over her lap in concentration—a book. She held a book. Deja had not noticed it before, but the dream convinced her that it had always been there.

Deja also realized that Renée was muttering something. “Dawn Novak. Dawn Novak. Dawn Novak.”

It was not just Renée; the entire dream seemed to be chanting it. Deja felt it as much as she heard it, the name racing through her veins. *Dawn Novak. Dawn Novak.*

Hesitantly, Deja asked, “Who’s Dawn Novak?”

The chanting stopped. Deja did not realize just how loud it had been until it was gone, leaving her empty, as though she had lost a part of herself.

Renée raised her head, and Deja’s heart jumped in fear. Renée had no eyes. Where there were supposed to be brown eyes, there were golden orbs leaking shimmering tears down Renée’s face.

But somehow, Renée was looking at Deja. The whole dream was, and only then did Deja realize this was not her dream. She was an intruder here; and now that she had said the name, the dream was aware that she was trespassing.

Dawn Novak. Dawn Novak.

The chanting started again, faster than before. It tore into Deja, reaching inside her as though trying to pull Dawn Novak out of her.

“I don’t have Dawn Novak!” Deja said, falling onto her knees. She raised her arms, trying to shield herself from the assault. “Renée, tell it I don’t know any Dawn Novak!”

But when she looked up, her mom was gone. Instead, there was a mirror in front of her that was slowly filling up with gold liquid. The more the liquid encased her reflection, the harder it became for Deja to breathe.

Dawn Novak. Dawn Novak.

The chanting was incessant now. It flooded Deja, until she could not think of anything but Dawn Novak. She was drowning in it—

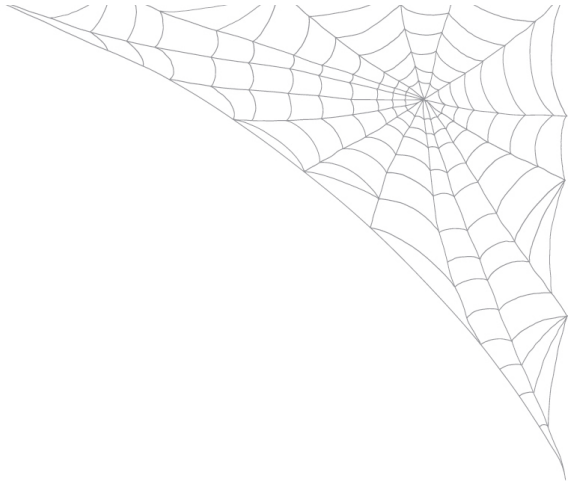
Deja jolted awake, sitting upright so quickly that she became dizzy. She gasped a few times, her hand pressed to her racing heart, before she was reassured that she could breathe.

That was new. Although Deja had received visions of Renée over the years, she had rarely ever dreamed of her. Certainly, she had never had such an intense dream about her. It was the closest Deja had ever come to confronting her mom face to face, and when the moment had come, for once, Deja felt none of the resentment she normally felt toward Renée. Instead, Deja had felt sorry for her mom—and a little scared.

A light drizzle sounded from outside. Though the dream had felt like mere minutes, it must have lasted for hours, because dawn was beginning to spill over the horizon.

Deja kicked off her tangled covers and got out of her bed. She was still tired, but she did not want to risk going back to sleep and having the same dream. Besides, she still had two essays to write.

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CHAPTER 9

THE DREAM

“Excuse me,” Tóbi called. “Can you turn that up?”

The group of Sparks sitting on a couch glanced at Tóbi. “Sure thing, Tóbi,” one responded quickly.

The Spark grabbed the remote and increased the volume on the lounge’s television, which was playing the local news. Normally, the news was Tóbi’s favorite channel, but today, she felt anxious as she watched.

“We have confirmed that the fallen specimen that landed at Tanglewood Preparatory School is indeed a meteorite,” a man with square glasses was saying. The text under him identified him as a scientist at a natural history museum. “We have never seen such a thing occur here in Tanglewood, Connecticut. When it landed on the school’s campus, it caused some minor property damage, but luckily, no one was injured.

“This meteorite was part of debris from the Spira meteor shower,” he continued. “The Spira meteor shower was visible from most of New England this past weekend, especially in towns like Tanglewood, which has minimal light pollution. There hadn’t been any predictions about a meteorite landing around Tanglewood Prep’s campus, but it’s not surprising, given the famous intensity of this particular shower, which averages nearly one hundred meteors per hour. In any case, we are very excited to study the meteorite,

after which we have agreed to donate it to Tanglewood Prep's Science Center to be put on display."

The frame changed from the scientist to two news anchors at a desk. "That is spectacular," one anchor said. "Perhaps Tanglewood residents who made a wish upon that shooting star will have their wishes come true."

The other anchor chuckled. "That's the dream. In other news, this month has seen an all-time high of mentiscape-related hospital emergencies in America. Up by almost twelve percent from last month. We'll now turn to a field expert who will tell us why this is, and why numbers may only continue to increase as we enter the colder months."

As the news began their daily analysis of the drug epidemic, Tóbi told the Sparks, "You can turn the television down. Thank you so much."

"Anything for you, Tóbi!"

Tóbi tucked her things into her purse and left the lounge. As she made her way through Bartleby, she reflected on the news segment. The meteorite crash had made national news, but beyond that brief mention, no one found it particularly noteworthy. After some initial excitement among students, conversation about the meteorite had already begun to fade.

Tóbi felt as though she was the only one dwelling on it. She had visited Tanglewood's nurse twice since Friday night, but both times, the nurse had affirmed the meteorite had no effect on Tóbi's health. And yet, given how poorly she had been sleeping the past few days, she could not help but think otherwise.

Tóbi was pulled out of her rumination when a girl waved at her. Beside her was a table, on which sat two large, open boxes. Each was filled with various posters and decorations Tóbi had used to promote her presidential campaign.

With the meteorite weighing on Tóbi's mind, she had nearly forgotten about her campaign materials—and she had completely forgotten about this Flame she had recruited to take everything down for her.

“It took all weekend,” the Flame said as Tóbi approached her, “but I think I got every last one of your decorations, Tóbi. There sure were a lot around campus.”

“Oh, wow, thank you so much,” Tóbi said, trying to remember the girl’s name. She was pretty sure it started with a *K*. Katherine? Khloe?

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, no, you’ve been a great help, um …” Kamila? Kayla?

Oh, whatever; Tóbi put her hand on the girl’s shoulder and gave her a smile.

The girl beamed. “No worries at all! You have my number if you ever need me again.”

With a final smile, the girl walked away, practically skipping down the hallway. Tóbi eyed the boxes; they looked heavy.

Luckily, in that moment, a group of football players was headed in Tóbi’s direction. As they neared, she wrapped her arm around a box, gave a half-hearted tug, and sighed.

One of the guys noticed. He nudged his friend, and they both walked over. “Hey Tóbi, need some help?”

A few minutes later, Tóbi happily walked through campus with the two football players trailing behind her, each carrying a box.

The sunset cast a fiery glow over campus, a sharp contrast to the chilly temperature. Tóbi drew her fur coat tighter over herself, and as The Dollhouse came into view, she told the football players, “You can place that junk in the nearest dumpster. Thank you so much for your help.”

As soon as she returned to her dorm, Tóbi turned on her electric kettle, then sat at her desk, pulling out her new phone. It was the latest model, an upgrade to the one she had thrown away. The few days she had been phoneless had been bliss, but eventually she had given in and ordered a new phone with expedited shipping. She needed to maintain her online profiles, and most importantly, she needed to pick up her parents’ weekly calls.

Right on time, her phone rang. This week, it was her father calling.

“Kú ìrọlẹ o,” her father greeted.

“Good evening, bàbá,” Tóbi responded.

“Báwo ni?”

“I’m fine, sir. Thank you.”

“Any new grades?”

“No, sir, but the election—” Tóbi began, but she broke off.

She was surprised to find her heart racing. She had steeled herself all week to tell her parents about the election, but she still was not prepared. The confidence she’d had while interacting with the Sparks, the helpful Flame girl, and the football players from earlier had vanished. She had earned the respect of many people, but there were so many more she still had to win over—her own parents being at the top of that list.

Swallowing her nerves, Tóbi tried again. “The student council election is completed now,” she said. “I lost the presidency.”

Tóbi braced herself—but her father merely said, “I see. Well, you’ve been class president for a while now, haven’t you? It is not as though you could keep it forever.”

In her shock, it took Tóbi a moment to respond. “But that was my goal,” she said. “To have an unbroken class president streak, just like my brother did.”

Her father laughed. “You are not your older brother.”

It was the casualness of the statement that made it especially cruel. Her father, oblivious to how deep a wound he had just inflicted, continued, “When your mother and I came to this country at the age of nineteen, all we had was four hundred and fifty dollars, a three-year-old son, and a dream. Olúwatóbi, are you listening?”

“I’m listening, bàbá,” Tóbi said, even though she had heard this story countless times before.

“We both wanted to attend university, but we could only afford for one of us to go. Your mother supported me by cooking meals to sell to my classmates. The òyìnbós loved her cooking so much they helped her get a food stand on a street corner. That stand eventually became a food truck, then a restaurant that multiplied after I received my business degree.”

This story was a double-edged sword for Tóbi. It was the paradigm of the American Dream, the story that inspired her to go into politics and serve a country where such a rags-to-riches journey could happen. It was also the story that her parents used against her as a weapon.

Her father continued, “Your older brother grew up alongside us struggling. Every day, he came home from school and helped us—cooking, cleaning, using his American accent to speak on the phone with bigoted investors. And while doing all that and struggling with his health, he soared through grade school. He received a full scholarship to the school that I pay full price for you. He won awards, had countless leadership positions, and graduated valedictorian.

“Your brother was an exceptional person, doing so much despite his limited circumstances,” her father concluded. “He will always be one of a kind.”

Tóbi closed her eyes. There it was, her greatest shortcoming: that she was not the brother she had never met.

After fighting sickle cell anemia his entire life, Tóbi’s older brother had lost the battle shortly following his graduation from Tanglewood. Tóbi had been born after his death, but her parents’ constant reminders of him made it feel like she knew him personally.

On the phone, her father went through his usual routine of praying for Tóbi, then hung up without even giving Tóbi the chance to return his goodbye, already decided that nothing she said was worth listening to.

Her kettle began to whistle. She stood to turn it off and tried to make herself a cup of tea, but her hands were shaking too much. It took her a moment to realize why: She was angry.

She had feared her father would be disappointed in her for losing the election, yet he had not even had any expectations for her to fail to meet. First it was her classmates overlooking her years on the student council and choosing a different president so easily, and now it was her father telling her that she never had a chance at measuring up to her older brother. No one was having trouble

processing Tóbi's loss, because no one had expected her to win in the first place.

No one except for her. With a determined nod at the Michelle Obama poster hanging on her wall, Tóbi sat at her desk. Beneath her uniform, she still wore a leotard from her ballet class earlier, but there was no time to shower or change. She decided to finish her Arabic essay tonight, earlier than she had originally planned, so that she could also work on a recycling initiative. It could make her eligible for Tanglewood's distinguished service award, an award her older brother had won. That was sure to impress those who underestimated her, most especially her parents.

As Tóbi wrote her essay, the steady clicks of typing filled the room. Outside, rain tapped against her window, accentuated by rumblings of thunder.

Her tea gradually cooled, and the storm outside raged, then dwindled. She rested her chin on her desk, staring dully up at her laptop screen as she trudged on with her essay. She had two more pages left, but she did not know what more about Arab culture she could include. She had already spoken at length about various cuisines, about music, about spiders—

Tóbi was following spiders.

As soon as she saw the string of spiders scuttling in front of her, she knew she was dreaming. It was the same dream she'd had for the past two nights, ever since the meteor shower. The strangest thing about it was that she was completely aware it was a dream, but that did not allow her any control over it.

The spiders marched forth into the darkness, to an indeterminate destination. They never looked back, but when Tóbi paused, they paused. When she quickened or slowed, they did the same. They were clearly meant for Tóbi to follow, and they allowed her to do so at her own pace. Perhaps that was why she trusted them so much; somehow, she knew that wherever the spiders were leading her, it was exactly where she needed to go.

Tóbi.

A voice drifted through the darkness. Tóbi ignored it, because it was not related to the spiders. But then the voice came again—

“Tóbi!”

Tóbi gasped as she jerked awake, like breaking the surface of water. Her eyes had been open this whole time, but only now did they see.

She was no longer in her dorm. She stood outside the school library, and in front of her was the school librarian, a tall and balding man.

“You know the rules, Tóbi,” he was saying. “Library is only open after midnight on weekends—hey, are you okay?”

Tóbi did not realize she was swaying until he put a steadying hand on her shoulder. She shook her head a little, like trying to dislodge water from her ears, as she grasped for her senses.

“Yes, sorry about this,” she said. “I can’t believe I forgot it’s Monday.”

“It happens. I won’t tell anyone I found you breaking curfew. Here …” He gave her a slip of paper she recognized as a nighttime hall pass, which faculty sometimes gave students to extend their curfew for extracurricular-related reasons. “You’ve volunteered in the library so often, I know you’re a good kid. I wouldn’t want you getting into trouble. That’s a pass for an extra thirty minutes on your curfew, in case campus safety tries to stop you. Just hurry back to your dorm, okay?”

“Sure. Thank you. Have a good night.”

As Tóbi walked back to The Dollhouse, she battled her disorientation by taking in everything around her. The dewy scent coating the post-storm air; the glowing lampposts splashing yellow light onto the dark path; the whispering wind curling its chilled fingers around her skin.

Tóbi had never sleepwalked before. She was just lucky that campus had been empty; had anyone seen her, she might have died from embarrassment.

She did not want to risk this happening under less favorable circumstances. She was certain her spider dreams were a result of the meteorite, even if she did not know how. She was also sure that strange new girl—Deja—understood something the rest of them did

not, but she clearly did not want to talk to them, and Tóbi was not going to beg her for any favors.

Fortunately, Tóbi had drifted off to sleep while wearing her lanyard, which held her student ID and phone. She extracted her phone and scrolled through her hundreds of contacts until she reached the *M*'s.

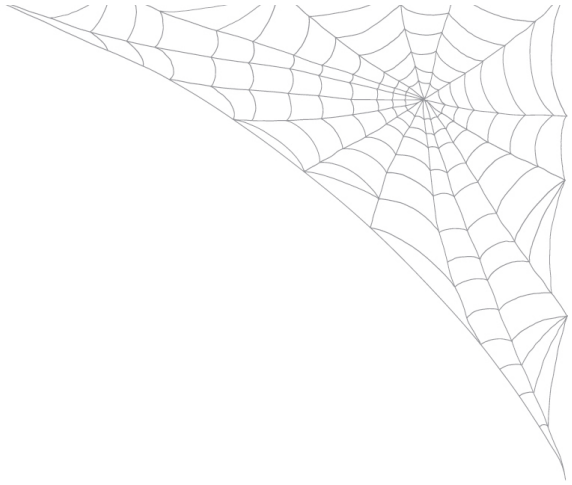
Her chat history with Monte consisted of short messages that merely confirmed meeting times or told the other person to check their email. But now, Tóbi typed out her first message to Monte that was longer than a few words.

I'm calling a truce. There's something strange about that meteorite, and we need to talk about it.

Tóbi did not worry about whether she was texting him too late; she and Monte were ranked at the top of their class, something that rarely allowed for a full night of sleep.

Sure enough, barely a minute had passed before Monte responded: *Tomorrow, seventh period, since we both have that period free. You choose the place.*

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CHAPTER 10

FAITH, TRUST

Deja's seventh period was gym class. It had not been her choice.

She would have sooner vacuumed the beach than willingly subjected herself to any form of exercise. However, the only way to be exempt from physical education at Tanglewood was to be an athlete. Deja would rather have gym for an hour a day than spend most of her time around jocks—especially since it was much easier to slack off in gym class than on a sports team.

Today was tennis day. Three courts had been set up in a large, spacious room. Deja's class was evenly distributed among them, students spectating from the courts' perimeters while they waited for their turn to play with their chosen partner. With there being so many people, it was easy for Deja to slip away.

She took shelter behind the bleachers, her exhaustion weighing her down as she sat. Every night since the meteor shower had been restless, with the dream about her mom haunting her. It always went the same way, escalating to such a feverish pitch that Deja would jerk awake, feeling as though her mind had been lit aflame.

Sometimes she tried speaking to Renée, but her mom only ever said one thing: *Dawn Novak*. Deja was sure she had received the dream from The Web, which meant that for whatever reason, Dawn Novak was someone Deja was meant to learn about. Deja must have looked up that name at least fifty times this past weekend, but none of her Internet searches ever yielded any significant results, leaving

her no closer to learning who Dawn was or why her name suddenly could not leave Deja alone.

With a sigh, Deja leaned her head against the wall behind her. She had not realized her eyes were slowly closing until they flew open upon hearing footsteps. When she saw who had come to join her, her heart leapt, and she quickly sat up straight, suddenly wide awake.

"Eden, hey," Deja said.

Like Deja, Eden wore Tanglewood's P.E. uniform: a violet polo shirt, a black skort, and black knee-high socks with sneakers. With how large the class was, Deja had never noticed that Eden had gym too.

She scooted to the side to make room for Eden as she sat next to her. She had not seen Eden since the night of the meteor shower. Deja had come to regret walking away from her. She had been anxious about the others being able to see The Web—but Eden was not like the others. She was the first person at this school who had been there for Deja, and Deja felt guilty for not having been there for Eden in return.

"You were right, by the way, about admin not noticing I snuck in my class application past the deadline," Deja said awkwardly. "I got into the poetry workshop. Started it today."

"I'm glad."

Eden said nothing more, allowing Deja to fidget in her discomfort.

When she could not take it any longer, finally Deja said, "Look, I'm sorry 'bout Friday night. I ain't mean to leave you behind like that. I was just freaked out."

"Well, we all were." Eden's voice was as soft as always. She was not mad; she was disappointed—and that made Deja feel worse.

The gymnasium's fluorescent lights slipped through the spaces of the bleachers, and the striped light illuminated Eden's appraising gaze. It felt as though she was looking through Deja, and Deja half hoped that was the case. Expressing her emotions had never been her strong suit, but that did not mean they were not there. Deja

hoped Eden could see past her underwhelming words to the sincerity in her apology.

The shooting stars from Friday night must have still been granting wishes, because after a moment, Eden sighed. “It’s alright, though,” she said, “‘cause you’re gonna make it up to me. The others and I are meeting to talk ‘bout Friday night. You’re coming too.”

Deja’s initial relief at Eden’s forgiveness now vanished. “I owe you one, I really do, but I ain’t doing that,” she said.

“You’re the only one who didn’t seem surprised on Friday. You must know why the meteorite’s affecting us. It’s only right you tell us.”

“The meteorite is affecting y’all?” Deja echoed, caught off guard.

Eden watched Deja closely. “And I’m guessing it’s affecting you too.”

Deja dropped her gaze. Part of her felt like she had already revealed too much about The Web. But she found that another part of her wanted to open up even more to Eden. It was not like she had anyone else to talk to about this; the only topic that upset Cybele more than Deja being woven into The Web was the topic of Renée. Deja had not bothered mentioning her recurring dream on calls with Cybele since Friday; it would just dig up too many old wounds for her aunt.

But Deja was tired of what she could or could not do being determined by the memory of her mom. The Web had come to *her*. Despite what Deja’s aunt tried to tell her, The Web was her birthright too; if it was calling out to her, she felt she deserved to answer.

“I’ve been having weird dreams about my mom,” Deja admitted. “I couldn’t tell you exactly what it means, though.”

“Maybe you should ask your mom. She might know something ‘bout it.”

“Nah, she won’t be of much help.” Deja swallowed hard. “She’s dead.”

“Oh—I’m sorry ‘bout that.”

“Don’t be. It’s her own fault.”

Deja said this with far more bitterness than intended. Embarrassed, Deja quickly looked at Eden, simultaneously anticipating and dreading how Eden would react.

But Eden appeared as calm as ever as she said, “That must make it harder to deal with.”

Somehow, the gentle response struck Deja harder than aversion would have. She had been policed her entire life about how she was allowed to talk about Renée, never allowed to say exactly how she felt for fear of offending someone. But Eden did not seem to think less of Deja for her feelings; she had glimpsed the ugliness of Deja’s anger, and she had not shied away.

“Yeah,” was the only thing Deja could say.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to figure this thing out ourselves,” Eden said. “But it sure would be a lot easier if we could all work together.”

Deja recalled her first day at Tanglewood, when she overheard the headmaster accuse Eden of narcissism. Deja almost laughed at the thought. The headmaster seemed to equate Eden’s quietness with aloofness, but Eden was the most empathetic person Deja had met at Tanglewood thus far.

Finally, Deja asked, “When’s this meteorite meeting happening?”

Eden did not bother trying to hide her triumphant smile. “Now.”

She stood and proffered her hand to Deja. Deja still had her doubts about discussing The Web with strangers, but when she took Eden’s hand and felt the warmth of her touch, she allowed herself to consider the possibility that she would not need to do this alone.

The girl with glasses walked quickly through what Deja now recognized as the woods bordering Tanglewood’s campus. It seemed she still was not going fast enough for her liking, because she broke into a run. Even as she stumbled over uneven ground and stray roots concealed by the night, she still did not slow her pace. She glanced over her shoulder, frantically searching behind her.

The gym’s white lights nearly blinded Deja as her eyes refocused. Deja found herself still holding hands with Eden—who watched Deja curiously.

“You froze like that on Friday too,” Eden commented.

Deja did not know whether to feel flattered or annoyed that Eden paid so much attention to her. “Would you believe me if I said I get visions of the past?”

“At this point, after seeing stars pour out of a meteorite, I think I might believe anything. But you can explain at the meeting.”

Deja’s palm felt colder as Eden slipped her hand out of her grasp and walked away. As Deja followed her, she blinked away the last remnants of the vision. It was the vision she had also had on Friday, when she was in Hamilton. Except the girl did not seem to see Deja this time, making Deja sure she had imagined it the first time. Instead, now the girl had been focused on running away. From what, Deja did not know.

But she did know she was tired of receiving useless visions all the time. They were the result of being part of a weaver bloodline but not being a weaver herself. If The Web was calling to Deja, maybe she could finally join it. Maybe then her visions would be replaced by proper weaving abilities.

Their coach was too busy cheering for the various tennis games to notice Deja and Eden leaving. The woman was a former Olympic athlete, so it was no wonder she got carried away by matches.

Tanglewood’s gym was an enormous building that held squash facilities, offices for coaches, two pools, three basketball courts, an indoor track, a weight room, a hockey rink, and more. She and Eden walked through its labyrinthine hallways until they reached the main lobby, which had a bolded inscription on the front wall.

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They stepped outside into the frigid air, and Deja cursed. It was mid-afternoon, but the sky was clouded gray. Deja wrapped her arms around herself, regretfully thinking of all the times she had

complained of Sweetwater's heat and humidity. Now that she had experienced New England, she did not think she would ever complain about the heat again.

Waiting outside the gym was a campus safety officer, recognizable by his violet uniform. Eden gave him two slips of paper. He examined them then nodded, returning the papers to Eden as he moved aside, allowing them to pass.

As they continued through campus, Deja asked, "Where'd you get those?"

"Tóbi," Eden said. "Admin likes her enough to give her extra hall passes when she asks for 'em."

Remembering Tóbi's haughtiness from the night of the meteor shower, Deja groaned. "I don't see why that fairy girl has to be there."

"I like Tóbi. I think she's cool."

"How'd she trick you into thinking that?"

"Once, when I was in eighth grade, I told her I liked her perfume, and then she sprayed some on me. I smelled like flowers for two days."

Eden did not elaborate, but she did not need to; Deja understood. In first grade, a girl named Simone gave her half of an orange, and Deja still thought about it to this day.

"This is where we're meeting—Clarke-Reynolds Hall," Eden said, bringing Deja to a stop.

They had come to a half-completed castle bordered by construction tape. "If I die, I'm suing," Deja said. "I know y'all got the money."

Eden laughed. Deja had not been kidding, but when she heard Eden's laughter—a twinkling sound that seemed to brighten the gray day—she could not help but smile.

They entered the building, and after climbing a few flights of rickety stairs, they emerged onto a rooftop. Along with Tóbi, Fabien was here. He sat against the wall, his legs drawn to his chest and his chin resting on his knees. Silver headphones were clasped over his ears, and his eyes were closed. He was still, save for a finger tapping against his leg.

“Oh, you brought Deja,” Tóbi observed. “Great.”

Deja scowled. *I’m doing this for Eden,* she reminded herself, to restrain herself from leaving.

The rooftop door opened, and out stepped Monte, brushing sawdust off his blazer. “Hello, everyone,” he said. “I apologize for the delay—I was on my way up when I fell through a stair.”

“Are you hurt?” Tóbi asked, more eager than concerned.

Fabien sighed loudly and unfolded himself from the corner. “I can’t believe I trust you with my spot and you go blab about it,” he said to Tóbi, moving his headphones to rest around his neck.

Monte’s good eye narrowed, his other eye still swollen from his fight last week. “You two have met up here before?”

“I’m sorry, Fabien, but we needed somewhere private to meet because I’d prefer not to be seen around certain people,” Tóbi said with a pointed look at Monte. “And besides, the meteorite’s effects may sound strange to eavesdroppers. Speaking of its effects, let’s start there—”

“Hold up,” Deja interjected. “Who put you in charge?”

“Oh, how presumptuous of me. My apologies.” Tóbi walked to a power box, dusted it off, and sat on it. “Please, proceed. How were you planning to conduct this meeting?”

Caught off guard, Deja could only stare. Before she could come up with a clever reply, Tóbi said, “That’s what I thought.”

Fabien chuckled, unfazed by Deja’s glare.

“Anyways,” Tóbi said, crossing her legs, “as I was saying. Would anyone like to share anything strange that’s been happening to them since Friday night?”

Eden cleared her throat. “I’ve been having nightmares ‘bout a library.”

“About being trapped in a library?”

“No. I’m just in a library.”

“I’m sorry,” Fabien said, “how is that a nightmare?”

Eden met his gaze evenly. “I don’t read.”

“I’m in a similar boat,” Monte said. “For the past few nights, I’ve been dreaming of a wall. I’m just staring at it, analyzing it.”

“You *would* dream about something that boring, old man,” Fabien said, grinning. “But I s’pose I don’t have any room to talk. My dreams have just been me looking for spiders.”

“Spiders?” Tóbi echoed, perking up.

“Yeah, the Khrystal Spider to be exact.”

“Okay, that’s odd,” Tóbi said. “I’ve been dreaming that I’m following spiders.”

Deja looked at them in amazement. Eden had mentioned The Web was affecting all of them, but Deja had not realized that meant they were also having odd dreams. For better or for worse, it seemed that she really was connected to these people somehow.

“Earth to Deja?” Tóbi said, snapping her manicured fingers and pulling Deja out of her thoughts. “I said, what did you dream about?”

Deja hesitated, but now she knew she could not figure this out on her own. “Dawn Novak,” she relinquished the name—but only that. She had come to trust Eden enough to tell her about Renée, but she did not know the others well enough for that yet.

“Who?” Fabien asked Deja.

“No idea. But it must be connected to y’all’s dreams, since we all received these dreams at the same time.”

“Except, from what I’ve found, meteorites don’t contain any radiation,” Monte said. “So, I don’t see how being exposed to one can make the brain dream a certain way.”

“Will you forget about the stupid meteorite?” Deja snapped. “It’s not important—it was just used to deliver these dreams.”

In The Web, visions were different than dreams. Visions were random, triggered by energy lingering in some environment, and they had an equal chance of being nonsensical or helpful. But dreams were much more intentional; weavers sent or received them as important messages. Her grandma had always told Deja how her favorite earrings—the ones Deja carried everywhere with her now—had been mailed to her by her sister. That same night, Deja’s grandma had dreamt of a terrible storm. The next day, she had taken her family to visit an out-of-state relative—just in time to avoid the worst of Hurricane Katrina.

Dreams were normally received from everyday objects. Deja had never heard of a meteorite containing a message. Nevertheless, it seemed to have functioned like a typical carrier.

“Coincidences don’t exist,” Deja continued. “We all ended up at that meteorite so that we could receive those dreams, which won’t leave us alone until we fulfill them. We can at least start with the first part of what the dreams must be telling us to do: find the spiders, then follow ‘em.”

“Yeah, no, you’ve lost me, mate,” Fabien said. “Since when can dreams be delivered like a package?”

“Since forever, even if you’ve never known about it. It’s one of the most basic ways The Web sends messages.”

“Web—you called those stars that on Saturday too,” Monte said.

“Yeah, I did.”

They waited for Deja to elaborate, and dread filled her. How did she explain her reality to rich kids who lived inside a private school bubble? It went against every one of her instincts. The Web’s exclusivity was not about ego, but protection; when The Web’s secrets were revealed, it never ended well. Women and girls like Deja had a long history of being harmed or shunned by outsiders—but then again, if these people had seen The Web, Deja supposed they were no longer outsiders.

“The Web is a system, of sorts,” Deja began slowly.

So slowly that Tóbi rolled her hands in a *hurry up* gesture. “No one’s taking minutes. You can talk faster.”

“Shut up. I’m trying.”

Deja looked up at the bloated gray clouds. She thought she felt a cold drop of water land on her face, and she spent a moment convincing herself she had imagined it before looking back at the others with a sigh.

“Okay, so,” she tried again. “Women in my family are called weavers because of their ability to heal or physically alter themselves and other people. And we have these abilities by being part of The Web, which gives us the energy to weave and also connects us to other weavers.”

Deja could practically hear the dial-tone sound as she looked around at their faces.

All except for Eden, who was smiling, her eyes alight with wonder. “You’re like Madame Monique,” she said.

The name did not ring any bells for Deja. “Who?”

“She’s from my favorite video game—*Charmborne.* She’s the most powerful Hoodoo queen to have ever lived. She trains you in rootwork, and with your help, you and her save the world.”

Fabien laughed. “You’re one of those lame *Charmborne* geeks?”

“It’s not lame,” Eden said hotly. “It’s one of the best games ever made. It’s fun, but also educational—you can learn lots ‘bout nature and all kinds of useful plants while playing it.”

Fabien smirked, and Tóbi rolled her eyes, but Eden appeared unfazed. Seeing the passion that radiated from her, Deja could not help but smile.

“Weaving is a subsection of rootwork,” Deja offered. “But while rootwork is practiced by all descendants of enslaved people, weaving is only for female descendants. Which is why I can’t figure out why The Web revealed itself to y’all.”

“I’ve been told I’m quite pretty, so I can see how your web couldn’t resist me,” Fabien said.

He winked at Deja. She put a finger to her mouth, miming a gag.

“Does this mean we’re gonna get powers too?” Eden asked.

Too. Deja faltered as she realized she had made it sound like she was a weaver. Well—she *was* a weaver, in all ways except practice. She had been raised alongside The Web, believed all the same weaver superstitions and had all the same herbal knowledge. The Web had always felt like hers, and she was too proud to admit she was not formally part of it. She was certainly too guarded to explain that the reason why was her mom’s bad decisions.

Besides, Eden looked amazed with Deja, and part of Deja did not want to lose the respect she was beginning to earn from her first friend at Tanglewood. Deja had already told Eden about her visions; technically, she was not fully lying about having supernatural ability.

“No, y’all ain’t gonna get powers,” Deja said carefully—another technical truth.

Eden shrugged. “Either way, this is so cool,” she said. “Before this, the closest I’d gotten to the world of *Charmborne* is walking past parlors in New Orleans. There’s some not too far from my house. My mom doesn’t like me going near them, though.”

Fabien’s smile softened into one more genuine. “You’re from New Orleans? That’s where my dad grew up.”

Deja knew that. New Orleans was an hour away from Sweetwater, her hometown, and whenever she had visited when she was younger, she had played at Wildcat Park, named after Wildcat Clarke himself. But Deja did not tell Fabien that.

“Most weavers are in the South,” she said. “It’s where weaving originated, but we’ve spread out since then.”

“So to clarify,” Monte said, “these dreams are like a puzzle, and putting them together will show us some larger picture?”

“Okay, you guys can’t be serious,” Tóbi said, standing. “Am I the only one who’s retained an ounce of sanity? I thought we were here to discuss the effects of meteorite exposure, not magic.”

As the others had spoken, Deja’s frustration had faded, even making way for the faint hope she would be understood. However, now her irritation returned tenfold.

“Listen, Tinker Bell, this ain’t no faith, trust, and pixie dust shit,” she snapped. “It’s not magic. The Web is a technology that, for centuries, certain women have used to get through life. You don’t get to decide what’s a real or right way for folks to survive.”

Tóbi crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay, then, if what you’re saying is legit, prove it. Do some magic—sorry, *weaving*.”

The air on the rooftop shifted. Deja looked around to see the others staring at her too, waiting. Her heart thudded in her chest. Weaving was not something that could be faked—but Deja would be damned if she was going to let some spoiled rich kids push her around.

“Fabien,” Deja said softly. “What do you have in your backpack?”

He quickly picked it up from the ground and began sifting through it. “Uh, there’s some sheet music, valve grease, a sandwich —”

“Give me the sandwich.”

His eyes wide, Fabien gave Deja a plastic-wrapped sub then stepped back, as though it were going to explode.

She held up the sandwich, showing it to everyone. “I’m gonna make this disappear.”

Their anticipation was so tangible it could be cut with a knife. Deja sensed them all waiting for her to do the impossible; even Tóbi’s frown had lessened.

Deja did a spin, ensuring all of them were looking at the sandwich. Then, she tossed it over the side of the roof. It must have hit someone, because a heartbeat later, from somewhere below, there came a faint voice saying, *“Ow.”*

Deja spread her arms wide in display. “Ta-da.”

Eden let out a large sigh, like she had been holding her breath. At the same time, Monte said, “Oh, wow,” while Tóbi said, “You have got to be kidding me.”

Fabien ran his hands through his brown curls. “Bro, that was my lunch.”

“Get this straight, assholes,” Deja said loudly, over their complaints. “I ain’t a circus act. I didn’t come here to put on a show. Y’all wanted a way to stop the dreams, and I’ve told you how. Take it or leave it.”

Deja needed them to take it. When The Web sent a dream, it was only the dreamer who could carry it out. She did not know how to find the spiders, and she could not recognize the wall or the library that might lead to Dawn Novak. She needed these people—but she was not about to bend over backwards to win their faith.

Tóbi scoffed. “You are so full of it, weirdo.”

She pushed past Deja, her red-bottom heels clicking against the ground. She had almost reached the rooftop door when Monte stepped in front of her.

“Tóbi,” he said quietly, “we saw an entire galaxy floating above our heads. I think it’s only rational to expand our understanding of

what's possible."

They held each other's gazes, a silent conversation passing between them. For two people who allegedly hated each other, they sure seemed to understand one another fairly well.

After a moment, Tóbi turned away. "Fine," she said to Deja. "But this better stop the dreams. I can't keep being sleep deprived—it's making me break out."

There was not so much as a bump on Tóbi's smooth black skin, but Deja was just glad she had not left.

"Good," she said, relieved. "Maya Angelou once said, *Hope and fear cannot occupy the same space.* Hesitation will only make all this harder. I can't force y'all to do this."

Monte adjusted his glasses with his ring finger. "I'll help. I like puzzles."

"This web stuff still sounds mad," Fabien said, "but I don't really care if it means having something fun to do for once."

Deja nodded and turned to Eden. "You in?"

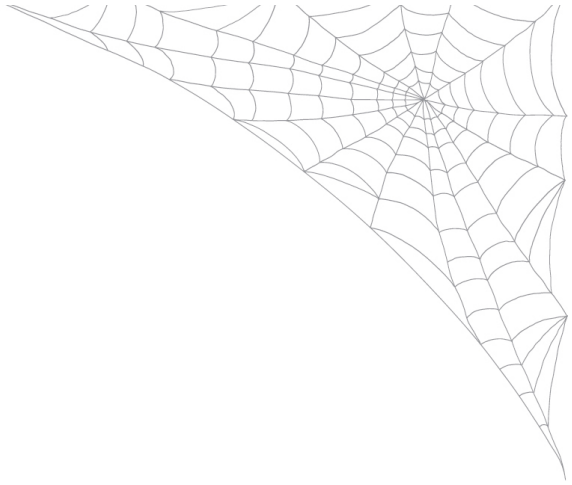
"'Course I'm in." What little light the day contained shone in Eden's eyes. "You're like real-life magic."

Deja had snapped at Tóbi when she used the term, but coming from Eden, it didn't feel nearly as offensive. A smile crept onto Deja's face, but when she remembered the others were still there, she cleared her throat.

"Good," she said, turning back to the others. "So, we can start with the most obvious task: getting the spiders."

Fabien grinned. "I can handle that."

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CHAPTER 11

SPIDER GUIDES

Tóbi stood at the front of the classroom. Across from her, Monte was standing behind a podium identical to her own. The rest of Tanglewood's debate team sat watching from an oval table as Mr. Collins, the debate coach, announced the final practice round for today.

"To conclude our meeting, there will be a rapid final round between our debate president and VP," Mr. Collins said, gesturing to Tóbi, then Monte. "The question is …"

He dipped his hand into a bowl filled with half-sheets of paper and pulled one out at random. "*How effective is drug prohibition*?" he read. "Very well. Tóbi, heads or tails?"

"Heads," said Tóbi.

Mr. Collins flipped a coin and caught it on the back of his hand. "Tails. So, Monte, you receive the affirmative stance. Tóbi, you take the negative. You have one minute to prepare an argument."

Tóbi and Monte skimmed their notes. In the silence, the rustling of their papers filled the air.

"Time," Mr. Collins said, pressing his stopwatch. "Monte, you now have two minutes to make your case. I will start the clock once you begin."

As Monte adjusted his glasses with his ring finger, he looked at the classroom at large. "Today, mentiscape is the most illicit drug used in America," he said. "As a psychedelic, its long-term use

results in permanent hallucinations, memory loss, and eventually, blindness. In the past year alone, the number of mentiscape-related hospital emergencies increased by 110 percent, from 26,300 to 55,200. This number is for issues directly caused by the drug, so it does not even include the significant number of emergencies induced by mentiscape, such as car accidents caused by intoxication. Therefore, prohibition saves lives because these numbers would only increase if drugs were legalized—"

"Time," Mr. Collins said. "Tóbi, begin when you're ready."

"Despite mentiscape's illegal status," Tóbi said, "the number of Americans who have admitted to using mentiscape on a routine basis has increased from four million to six million in the past five years. This shows that prohibition is ineffective. I further argue that it is also counterproductive. In urban populations, Black families are much more likely to live in inner-city neighborhoods. It is also in these areas where mentiscape can be obtained for as little as six dollars per dose. As a result, Black Americans are disproportionately punished by the law, showing that prohibition has become a weapon—"

"Time," Mr. Collins said. "You will now get five minutes to cross-examine each other's arguments."

"I'll start," Monte said, right before Tóbi could. "Tóbi, you mentioned the increase of mentiscape users from four to six million. I argue that number would be even higher without prohibition. In a recent study, 29 percent of the sample population said that they had never used mentiscape because of its illegality. This shows that, despite the rising number of users, prohibition does indeed discourage drug use."

Tóbi responded, "The question is not if prohibition discourages drug use, but rather if it *effectively* discourages drug use. Prohibition helping less than one third of a population can hardly be called a victory—especially considering that the number of people it harms is so much higher. Since the mentiscape epidemic began, the murder rate of Black youths has doubled because of increased crime created by the stringencies of prohibition. So, when you said that

prohibition saves lives, Monte, just whose lives were you referring to?"

"Well … economically, society as a whole benefits more from prohibition than legalization. Drug control is less expensive than the public health costs caused by drug abuse and addiction. Furthermore, the legalization of mentiscape would only put it in the hands of large corporations who would encourage the use of harmful substances for the sake of profit."

"Not necessarily. Legalized drugs could be produced and managed by the state in a way that eliminates advertising and reduces overall use."

"Maybe that would be an option in another country, comrade, but that scenario is not very likely to play out in America's capitalistic society—"

"Time," Mr. Collins interjected, setting down his stopwatch. "On their way out, the rest of the debate team will cast their votes for who had the stronger argument. I will announce the winner at our next meeting. But great job to you both—I found the two arguments equally compelling."

The debate team clapped for Monte and Tóbi, Lucille being the most enthusiastic with her applause. Tóbi blew her a kiss.

"There are still about fifteen minutes of lunch left," Mr. Collins continued. "I want to leave you time to enjoy it. Thank you all for today's productive practice. See you the same time next week."

Papers rustled and chairs scraped the floor as the debate team packed up their materials and rose from their seats. As they each placed a piece of paper into a bowl near the exit to cast their vote, Lucille came up to Tóbi.

"They have lemon tarts for dessert today," she said. "We should hurry before they run out."

Tóbi would have loved to eat lunch with Lucille and the Lynns as she always did, but unfortunately, she had other plans. "I'm sorry, Little Me, but I'm afraid you'll have to go to lunch without me today."

"Why …?" Lucille began, but she trailed off as Monte came up next to Tóbi.

“We’re working on a group project,” Tóbi said in response to Lucille’s apparent confusion. It was not completely a lie—this web thing was like a project, and they certainly needed to take care of it. Tóbi was dead on her feet from her lack of sleep over the past few days.

“Oh,” Lucille said. “Well, okay. Good luck on your project.”

“Thank you,” said Monte.

A chill froze over Lucille’s face. “Good luck, *Tóbi,”* she clarified.

Her chin held high, Lucille pivoted so abruptly that her cornrows swung over her shoulder as she left the classroom. Tóbi had never been prouder.

“I don’t think she likes me very much,” Monte remarked.

“Of course she doesn’t. I’m training her to be me.”

Tóbi glanced at Monte, and her good mood evaporated at the sight of the club pins on his blazer. Previously, his largest pin had been one that denoted him as the captain of the lacrosse team. Now, however, he wore a new pin that demanded attention: *Class President.*

“And I definitely don’t like you,” Tóbi said, turning to leave the classroom.

Monte followed behind her. As they made their way out of Bartleby and through campus, he said, “Fabien just texted me, everyone else is already there.”

The reminder she and Monte now shared a friend was just as unwelcome as the reminder that he had stolen what was supposed to be her fifth *Class President* pin. Tóbi walked faster.

However, Monte and his longer legs easily kept pace with her. “I thought you made a nice case, by the way,” he said.

When this was also met with silence, Monte sighed. “Tóbi, I’m sorry.”

She halted, and the people walking behind them apologized even though it was she who had nearly caused a collision.

“What?” Tóbi asked, sure she had heard wrong.

But Monte repeated, “I’m sorry for forcing you to drop out of the election. I wanted to win, but I shouldn’t have resorted to threats to

do so. I guess I just thought it was the only way I'd ever have a chance of winning against you."

Tóbi blinked; she never would have expected Monte to own up to his blackmail, much less apologize for it. It was surprisingly appreciated to hear Monte acknowledge that she was a worthy opponent, especially when it seemed like so many others underestimated her.

"Well," she said, recovering from her shock, "I'm glad you understand that you never had a real chance against me."

Although her irritation with him lingered, as she continued down the path, it was at a more normal pace.

"But now I have something new to worry about," Tóbi said with a sigh. "If only I hadn't gone to your detention this weekend. Then I wouldn't have been at the meteorite when it spewed toxic gas."

"It wasn't gas, remember," Monte said. "Deja called it The Web."

"Oh, right. The magical, technological web as described by the girl from Hicktown, Nowhereville."

"Perhaps," Monte said, "your issue is less with the concept of The Web, and more with Deja."

It was true Tóbi still held somewhat of a grudge toward Deja for how rudely she had dismissed her campaign. However, what really rubbed Tóbi the wrong way was Deja's secretive behavior. Deja was hiding something; Tóbi was sure of it.

"You can't blame me—something about that girl is very odd," Tóbi said.

"I don't know, I think she's even."

It took Tóbi a moment to process what he just said.

"Oh my god," she said. "Was that a joke?"

Monte glanced at her. "And if it was?"

"It would be the most disgusting thing I've ever heard in my life."

"Oh. Alright."

"I think I'm going to be sick—"

"Okay, I get it," Monte said impatiently.

Truth be told, Tóbi was more surprised than anything else. She had not known Monte possessed a sense of humor—if that pathetic

joke could be called that.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye. He wore his usual stoicism, but now she could not shake the funny feeling that there was more to him than she had known.

She still hated him, though.

They were silent for the rest of the walk to The Class of 1954 Library. It was a colossal, nine-story building that shelved hundreds of thousands of books. Tanglewood's library was the largest secondary-school library in the world, and Tóbi recalled that it had won an architecture award or something. Being an aspiring architect himself, Monte probably knew the boring details.

The entry room was a large atrium. On the far wall, the librarian sat behind a large wooden counter. In another corner, a student played classical music on a grand piano. The soft melody drifted airily around the cavernous room.

Tóbi and Monte climbed one of the room's curved double staircases until they reached the fifth floor. The smell of leather covers and aged paper coated the air as they walked through rows of books to a study room.

As Monte had said, Fabien, Eden, and Deja waited inside. Deja was looking outside the study room's window while Fabien sat on a couch, a plastic bin on the table in front of him. Next to him sat Eden, who was absorbed in a handheld gaming console.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Tóbi greeted.

"It took you long enough," Deja responded.

Tóbi's smile grew tight. "Some of us have lives," she said. "I apologize that you don't."

Deja's eyes narrowed. Her eyes were black, but sometimes the light shifted, and Tóbi swore Deja's eyes were actually a very dark violet. The purple sheen became more pronounced in moments like these, when Deja's temper surfaced.

Deja opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Eden came up next to her. They shared a look. Their silent conversation must have convinced Deja to back down because after a moment, she rolled her eyes and walked to the table in front of Fabien.

Tóbi eyed Eden suspiciously. Over the years, they'd had a few passing encounters, but Tóbi had never taken any particular notice of Eden until last year when she skipped a grade to join Tóbi's class. Tanglewood rarely let anyone skip a grade, and immediately, Tóbi had marked Eden as a potential threat to her spot as valedictorian. To keep her competition close, one day Tóbi extended an invitation to Eden to join her for lunch—but Eden had never responded. It was no wonder Eden seemed to have befriended Deja; they were both incredibly unsociable.

Deja pointed to the spiders in Fabien's container. "Tinker Bell, are these the spiders you followed in your dream?" she asked.

"Stop calling me that," Tóbi said. She glanced at the container. "But, yes, those are the spiders. I didn't think they'd be in Tanglewood."

"Khrystal Spiders are fairly widespread throughout North America," Fabien said. "They can be found any place that's dark and damp."

"Your dream told you all that?" Tóbi asked.

A rare scowl darkened Fabien's face. "No, the dream only told me the breed of spider. I knew the rest because my stepdad Stan is an entomologist."

He said it with so much disgust that Tóbi tried to recall if there were any stigmas around entomology. But when she glanced at the others, she saw they looked as bemused as she felt.

"O-kay," Deja said after a moment. "Sounds like you have a lot to unpack about Stan, but we're just gonna move on."

She picked the bin up from the table and tried to hand it to Tóbi, but the latter quickly stepped back.

"No, thank you," Tóbi said. "I don't do bugs. Just put them on the floor. They'll go where they're supposed to."

Deja stared at Tóbi. Then, she dropped the bin so close to Tóbi's feet that Tóbi jumped back with a shriek.

"What is your problem?" Tóbi demanded.

Deja shrugged. "You said to let them on the floor."

"You are the most immature, the most infuriating—"

“You’ll have to finish that probably true sentence another time,” Fabien said, stepping in between them. “Our spider guides are getting away.”

Tóbi looked just in time to see the spiders crawl beneath the door. She gave Deja a final, cold once-over before leaving the study room, allowing Monte to hold the door open for her.

The spiders had not gotten far—they were making their way through one aisle of books, toward the staircase. As Tóbi followed them, Fabien said, “Eden looked around the library earlier and couldn’t find anywhere that looked like her dream. Are we sure the spiders are right?”

“Yes,” Tóbi said with a certainty that surprised her. “This is where we’re supposed to be.”

She remembered how much she had trusted the spiders in her dream, a faith that she also felt now. But it was more than a feeling that convinced her—the library was where she had ended up when she sleepwalked.

When they reached the staircase, they were forced to pause each time the spiders crawled down a step. Fortunately, with most of Tanglewood’s students at lunch, there was no one to witness their strange follow-the-leader.

The spiders led them to the first floor and along the edge of the atrium until veering off through an aisle of bookshelves. Tóbi and the others turned a corner leading to the back wall, and the spiders were gone.

Deja grabbed Tóbi’s arm. “You were supposed to make sure we didn’t lose them.”

Tóbi peeled Deja’s hand off her, inspecting Deja’s nails. “First of all, you need to take better care of your cuticles,” Tóbi told her. “Second, we didn’t lose them.”

Had Tóbi so much as blinked, she would have missed it. She walked to the wall, which was illuminated by the yellow glow of an electronic torch.

“I’m fairly confident I just saw the spiders walk through here,” she said, running her hand along a crack in the wall.

“That’s the wall from my dream,” Monte said suddenly.

“How do you know?” Eden asked.

There was nothing that distinguished this wall from all the other tan brick surfaces in the library. But as an aspiring architect, Monte must have been familiar with building materials; his eyes scanned it as though he were reading an interesting book.

“Most of the library is limestone, but these”—Monte gestured to a portion of the wall—“are sandstone bricks. Limestone and sandstone look very similar, but there are still slight differences in their textures and colors. The wall I’ve been dreaming of is sandstone, a material that is uncommon throughout Tanglewood’s campus. This has to be it. Also …”

He reached up and tugged on the electric torch hanging on the wall. With a slight creak, the sandstone portion swung away from the rest of the wall, hinging on the crack Tóbi had pointed out. Behind it was an arched wooden door, which the spiders must have crawled under.

“This is a false wall,” Monte concluded.

Fabien let out a low whistle. “Nice work, old man.”

“Anyone have a key?” Eden asked, pointing to the large, rusted padlock hanging from the door’s handle.

“Deja,” Tóbi said, “weave the lock open.”

Deja’s eyes widened. “Yeah—sure.”

“Hold on, there’s no need,” Monte said. He stepped forward and grasped the door’s handle, which, despite the lock, easily turned. “It’s a dummy lock,” he explained. “Looks like it’s just painted plastic. Maybe whoever set it up couldn’t access a real lock, but still wanted to deter others from trying to get inside.”

Tóbi watched Deja closely. She could have sworn Deja looked relieved. The galaxy over their heads, the dreams, and now the spiders’ strange behavior proved there very well might be something supernatural going on, but Tóbi was still skeptical about how Deja fit into all of that.

“What a pity,” Tóbi said. “I would have loved to see you weave, Deja.”

Deja’s expression immediately shuttered. “Weaving is energy. I ain’t wasting it if I don’t have to.”

Before Tóbi could probe further, Deja kicked the door open, and the others followed her through it. Tóbi let out an irritated huff, but nonetheless she followed the others' leads and pulled out her phone's flashlight as they entered. There were only two things in the room: an elaborate but moldy rug on the floor, and a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in one corner. Tóbi did not know which was the stronger smell: the mildew on the rug, or the crisp scent of the room's many old leather books.

"How long have weavers existed?" Monte asked Deja.

"I don't know. A few centuries, at least."

"But how have weavers stayed hidden for so long? If weaving can break the bounds of reality, that would surely attract the attention of outsiders."

Deja scoffed. "Who said weavers break reality? I told you, weaving ain't magic. Nature might react to us, but we don't control it directly. Weaving only works on people, and even then, we can't do anything that's not already possible. Weavers can make someone age faster, but we can't make them younger. We can't fly, or turn someone purple, but we can enhance people's strength or speed. Or we can manipulate emotions, like making people fall in love. That's a common ask. Doesn't work if the subject is a sociopath, though."

"Because you can't do anything that's not already possible," Monte echoed, and Tóbi could practically hear him pushing up his glasses. "And falling in love requires a person to have empathy in the first place."

"Yeah. Like I said, weaving is a technology. It just helps us work with what we got."

"Okay, so what if—?"

"You've reached your question limit for today," Deja said. "Try again tomorrow."

She shone her flashlight around the room until she found Eden. "Is this the library you saw?" she asked her.

"Yes," Eden said. She stood at the bookshelf and held one of its tomes, inspecting the waxy, yellowed pages. "And this is the name you dreamt of. *Property of Dawn Novak*."

Deja rushed to the bookshelf, taking a book for herself. “All of them have her name,” she murmured. “These look like her diaries.”

“Why does she mean so much to you?” Tóbi asked.

Deja looked up, and when she saw how closely Tóbi watched her, she closed the diary, diluting her curiosity into a more casual expression. “I plan to read every single one of these diaries,” she said to the room at large, ignoring Tóbi’s question. “I don’t expect y’all to help. We’ve done what the dreams asked, so they’ll leave us alone. You can go get some rest.”

“What?” Fabien said. “Other than my music, I’ve found literally nothing interesting at this school until these dreams. I’m not leaving when the fun’s only just starting.”

Monte added, “Plus, it’s irrational to think you’ll be able to finish all these diaries anytime soon, Deja. Being a student at Tanglewood only gets busier. But if the reading is divided among five people, it’ll get done faster.” He adjusted his glasses. “Also, for what it’s worth, I’d like to know who Dawn Novak is too. I hate leaving things unanswered.”

“And there’s The Web,” Eden said. “It personally gave us the dreams that led us here. Don’t that mean something?”

Deja’s conflicted expression made it clear to Tóbi that it did, in fact, mean something.

After a moment, Deja huffed. “Whatever. But only because I don’t trust y’all to not go blabbing about it anyways.”

Tóbi looked at Deja through narrowed eyes. Ultimately, she could not use these diaries as leverage over others, nor did *Read forgotten diaries* look good on a resume. And yet, she still wanted to read them; she was curious about this magical web thing—and about Deja. The girl was suspicious, and Tóbi could not help but want to know what she was hiding.

Tóbi walked up to Deja and took the diary out of her hands. “And I’ll help too, of course,” Tóbi said. “Who knows what fascinating secrets may be revealed.”

Deja’s eyes narrowed, as though she could sense that Tóbi referred to more than the diaries. Tóbi gave her a smile that did not reach her eyes; she was onto Deja, and she wanted Deja to know.

Apparently oblivious to the tension between them, Fabien whooped. “Brilliant, gang’s all here,” he said. “So, how’ll this work? We each take about five books back? Maybe I’ll just do two—it’s been a while since I’ve read something that’s not music.”

Deja eyed Tóbi for a moment before she looked away. “No,” she said sharply to Fabien. “None of the diaries leave this room. I don’t want anything happening to them. If you want to read, you have to come here.”

Tóbi mentally kicked herself; she had been so distracted by the supernatural that had suddenly entered her life that she had not realized she just practically added yet another extracurricular onto her already very full schedule. “I can’t come back after school today,” she said. “I have ballet and a student council meeting.”

“I have that same meeting, and I have chess club,” Monte said. “Tomorrow isn’t good either—I’m photographing an event in town for the yearbook committee.”

“Crazy how y’all are telling me problems like you expect me to solve ‘em,” Deja said dryly.

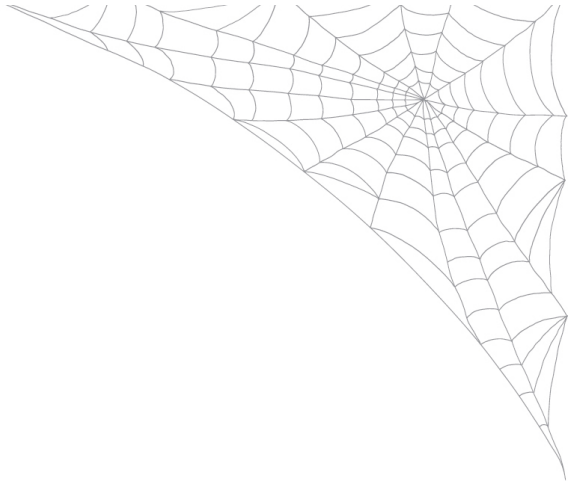
“Okay, how about this,” Tóbi said. “Come here whenever you can. After reading, update the group about significant information, and let us know how far you read so the next person can pick up where you left off. Yes?” She looked around to see them nodding. “Yes, good. Now that that’s settled, I’m leaving. Class starts in two minutes, and unlike all of you, I have a sparkling reputation to uphold. Have a nice day!”

Tóbi returned the diary she held to the bookshelf then left the room, turning off her flashlight as she reentered the golden light of the school library. She walked down three book aisles before pausing to lean against a shelf. She closed her eyes and breathed, something she often did in between social encounters to prevent other people from draining all her energy.

But as she breathed, she found that she was not as tired as she usually was after socializing. Not even arguing with Deja or being subjected to Monte’s presence had drained her. She felt fine—energized, even.

She frowned for a moment. Then, she shrugged and headed to class.

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CHAPTER 12

AUTUMN LETTERS

TINKER BELL
SEPT. 23 12:24PM

► Hi Deja, this is Tóbi. Monte asked me to inform everyone that he left off on page 59 of the first diary. So far, there's no identifying information about Dawn Novak, but he believes these diaries could have been written centuries ago given their condition.

K. ◄

SEPT. 25 7:06AM

Tell The Others I Got To Pg. 221 And Dawn Novak Was An Orphan. ◄

► Okay.

► You know what, I'm just going to make a group chat.

No. I Don't Want Them To Have My Number. It's ◄
Bad Enough That You Do.

► Grow up.

"To Grow Up Costs The Earth, The Earth. It Means ◄
You Take Responsibility For The Time You Take
Up, For The Space You Occupy. It's Serious
Business." -Maya Angelou

Growing Up Costs Too Much. I Can't Afford It. ◄

DAWN NOVAK DIARIES

SEPT. 25 7:20AM

Tóbi: Good morning, everyone. Deja got to page 221 of the first diary and discovered that DN is an orphan. For future updates, please do them yourselves in this chat.

EDEN LIKED TÓBI'S MESSAGE.

Fabien: Tóbi said "I'm not your carrier pigeon" LOL

SEPT. 25 11:56AM

Monte: i asked the school librarian if he has heard the name Dawn Novak and he hasnt so these dia

Monte: diaries

Monte: sorry i accidentally hit send before i was done

Monte: let me try again

Monte: these diaries arent owned by the school

Monte: therefore it is unclear how the diaries of an orphan wound up in here in Tanglewood Prep

SEPT. 27 4:42PM

My APUSH Class Today Answered That For Us: ◄
The Great Orphan Crisis.

Tóbi: My class covered the same thing. Later I looked it up and found that apparently during that time, the government forced Tanglewood Prep to provide housing for about one hundred orphans.

Monte: the worst of the U.S. orphan crisis was from 1891 to 1908

Monte: and the diary entries are dated '99-'01

Monte: DN must have written these in the late 1890s and early 1900s over the course of a few years

Fabien: Her teenage years, seems like

Fabien: BTW since it appears we all have APUSH can someone send me tonight's hw plz because I skipped today

Eden: *1 Image Attachment*

Fabien: Tysm m8 ily

SEPT. 30 9:14PM

Eden: second diary finished. DN is bullied and usually sad.

Dawn Novak Update!!! <3
From: fclarkereynolds@tanglewood.edu
To: oekundayo2@tanglewood.edu, elovejoy6@tanglewood.edu, +2 more
Oct. 2 9:08AM

Morning!

I had to look up your emails in the school directory because some old hag caught me with my mobile and confiscated it for ONE whole week! Did you know Tanglewood has a "No Cellphone" policy during the school day?? I guess this is what I get for going to class for once.

Anyways, I got to page 98 on the third diary. This stuff is SO depressing. I thought her diaries would be spicier, but literally all she writes about is getting bullied. Sad. Glad it's not me though!

xoxo,
Fabien

[no subject]
From: elovejoy6@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 2 9:10AM

made listserv to make emailing easier.

Third Diary Finished
From: dfreeman34@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 2 6:09PM

Fabien, I hope this email finds you before I do.

I told you to stop bringing food to the library. I'm sick of finding your damn crumbs in these journals.

For the rest of y'all: I finished the third diary. Dawn mentions she's real tired but is still trying to work harder. This was before child labor laws, so I guess Tanglewood put her to work.

Deja

Halfway Through Fourth
From: monte@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 2:07AM

Hello,

Apologies for the late email, just didn't want to forget to note that Eden and I made it halfway through the fourth diary.

DN's bullies got hold of her diaries and set them on fire. It seems these are the diaries that survived. Since that incident, DN has been increasingly paranoid that her diaries will be discovered again, which explains why they were hidden in a secret room in the library with a fake attempt at a padlock.

Best,
Monte

Re: Halfway Through Fourth
From: fclarkereynolds@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 2:11AM

How did you get into the library so late?? And are you still there? Because I'm about to break out of the ole Log Cabin to join the party.

Cheers,
Fabien

Re: Halfway Through Fourth
From: monte@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 2:12AM

Eden wired our student IDs to unlock the door. We were about to leave, but I guess we can stay a while longer. I have a 3D digital art project due tomorrow, so it's not like I was planning to sleep tonight anyways. Eden says she can wire your ID too. Take the long way through North Campus to get here—that route has a smaller chance of crossing paths with campus safety.

Best,
Monte

Re: Halfway Through Fourth
From: dfreeman34@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 2:17AM

Bet. I'm on my way too.

Deja

for the record
From: elovejoy6@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 6:58AM

we read to page 256, seventh diary.

Reminder + Update
From: oekundayo2@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 3:42PM

Good afternoon,

I would like to remind you all that as Wildfire students, we have a strict curfew at 10PM on weekdays. However, I can see how you were led astray, given that the junior class president—who is supposed to be a role model—encouraged this behavior.

As for DN, I finished the seventh diary, and I have come to a realization: Dawn Novak was Black. I think this puts her bullying into perspective; given the time period, the harassment she faced was most likely racially motivated.

Sincerely,
Tóbi Ẹkúndayọ

Tinker Bell's Right
From: dfreeman34@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 3 10:01PM

DN is definitely Black, and her bullies definitely acted out of racism. At end of the eighth diary, she writes about finding a noose on her dorm's door.

Deja

CYBELE
OCT. 5 11:11PM

► *1 Image Attachment*

► Found this in an old album. Me, your mom, and Granny at the airport, right before your mom left for her first year at Tanglewood. She was so excited, she wore her uniform on the plane.

► Send me a photo of you in your uniform when you have the chance, alright? I'm sure you look just like your mom.

OCT. 6 1:32PM

► I can see when you leave me on read, you know.

So You Figured Out How To Turn On Read ◄
Receipts.

1 Image Attachment ◄

Here's The Photo. Since You Asked. ◄

CYBELE LOVED YOUR MESSAGE.

Fwd: Pumpkin Carving Study Break!
From: oekundayo2@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 8 7:00AM

—Forwarded message—-

Hi Tanglewood Torches!

Are you looking for a fun way to relax, or at least need an excuse to procrastinate? Get into the fall spirit by carving a pumpkin with the social committee this Saturday at 1PM. All are welcome!

All the best,

Tóbi Ẹkúndayọ
Chair of the Social Committee

Fwd: Discuss Policy with a Senator!
From: oekundayo2@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 10 10:22AM

—Forwarded Message—

Have you ever wondered how policy is created?

Join Legal Club tonight, from 6-7PM, as we speak with a Connecticut Senator about the process of creating policy, using the most recent bill in the War on Drugs as an example.

Feel free to reach out to the president of Legal Club (oekundayo2@tanglewood.edu) with any questions.

See you tonight,
Legal Club

DAWN NOVAK DIARIES
OCT. 11 8:13AM

Fabien: I GOT MY CELL BACK!

Fabien: But that's the only update I have because
I've been too swamped to read the diaries

EDEN EMPHASIZED FABIEN'S MESSAGE.

Monte: ive also been extremely busy

Yeah, This Workload Is Crazy. Tanglewood Kinda ◄
Sucks.

Monte: well i hope so

Monte: if the world didnt suck then we would fall off it

Fabien: …

DEJA HAS REMOVED MONTE FROM THE CHAT.

Tóbi: Anyways. Stop by Bartleby to grab a healthy snack! Courtesy of me and the rest of the wellness committee.

Tanglewood Bullies?
From: monte@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 11 5:23PM

Hello,

I'm almost halfway through the ninth diary. From select descriptions**, I believe that DN's bullying was at the hands of Tanglewood students, not her fellow orphans.

Also, can you please add me back to the group chat?

Thanks,
Monte

**Source: on page 108, DN writes about the "ugly-ass uniforms" worn by the boys who harassed her

DAWN NOVAK DIARIES
OCT. 12 9:39AM

EDEN HAS ADDED MONTE TO THE CHAT.

Tóbi: Eden and I started the tenth diary, and things are getting kind of scary. At one point, Dawn writes that after getting harassed, one of her bullies told her “if her skin is like dirt, maybe she should be buried in it.”

Fabien: OMG did they end up killing her? Is that how she died?

I’ve Tried Looking Her Up. There’s Nothing. She Was A Black Orphan In The Early 1900s. If They Did Kill Her, It Wouldn’t Have Been Hard For Them To Cover It Up. ◄

Fabien: :/

OCT. 14 7:40PM

Fabien: Come to the second floor of Bartleby! Deja, Eden, and I made hot chocolate, and it tastes mug-nificent! (how was that for a pun, @Monte?)

Monte: i liked it

Monte: i am also on my way

Tóbi: I can’t come. I need to wash my hair.

Monte: so come when youre done

TÓBI LAUGHED AT MONTE’S MESSAGE.
DEJA LAUGHED AT MONTE’S MESSAGE.
EDEN LAUGHED AT MONTE’S MESSAGE.

Monte: i dont understand

Fabien: It's alright, old man. It's alright.

CYBELE
OCT. 15 8:03PM

► Tanglewood just sent me your midterm progress report. All As and Bs!

► Keep up the good work. You're making your mom proud.

You deleted your message. ◄

Thanks. ◄

► There's a full moon soon, by the way. We can still observe it together, even though we're miles apart. Just know while you look at it, I'll be on the other side, looking at it too.

► Love you, Deja Renée.

Love You Too. ◄

DAWN NOVAK DIARIES
OCT. 19 4:00PM

Fabien: Eden and I are having a study sesh Saturday night. Who's in?

Tóbi: Make it at seven, and I can come.

EDEN LIKED TÓBI'S MESSAGE.

Monte: ill join you

Fabien: Nice. What say you @Deja?

Can't. It's A Full Moon. ◄

Tóbi: ?

OCT. 20 4:53AM

Eden: *1 Video Attachment*

Eden: fabien gives lovely performance.

OCT. 20 9:04AM

Wow. You Play Trumpet Almost As Good As Your ◄
Dad Already.

EDEN EMPHASIZED DEJA'S MESSAGE.

Monte: really nice job man

Fabien: Much appreciated guys :)

Tóbi: You sound great, Fabien!

Fabien: If you mean it, you'll show it to your friend
with the bob and tell her I'm single

Tóbi: What happened to the other girl? The Flame?

Fabien: Fizzled out. C'mon help me find someone
else who can light my way

Lol Hook Him Up, Tinker Bell. ◄

EDEN EMPHASIZED DEJA'S MESSAGE.

Tóbi: Oh, alright.

Fwd: Mental Health Awareness
From: monte@tanglewood.edu
To: DNSERV@tanglewood.edu
Oct. 23 12:17PM

> —Forwarded Message—
>
> Hey Juniors,
>
> Does your workload have you feeling stressed?
>
> Your mental health and wellness are important to Tanglewood. So, we're giving you stickers! Courtesy of the administration. Receive yours at Bartleby on Monday at 6PM!
>
> Hope this helps!
>
> All the best,
> Your Junior Class Council
> Monte, Paisley, Tóbi, Gavin, and Camille

DAWN NOVAK DIARIES
OCT. 25 5:51PM

Monte: Deja my brother keeps asking about you

Monte: is it okay if i give him your number

Ace? No Thank You. ◄

Fabien: Idk you two seem alike. Maybe you should give the bloke a chance

I Know You're Not Giving Relationship Advice ◄
When You Can't Even Keep Someone For Longer

Than A Week.

TÓBI LAUGHED AT DEJA'S MESSAGE.

Fabien: Tóbi???

Tóbi: My finger slipped.

OCT. 26 1:13AM

Fabien: OK me and Eden are reading through the 11th diary and DN is scared for her life. She mentions most of her bullies are on the rowing team, and the harassment from them is getting worse. No authorities are helping her, even though her bullies' latest attack injured her again

I'm Almost Done With My Pre-Calc Homework. ◄
I'll Join Y'all In A Minute.

Tóbi: Does curfew mean anything to you people?
What happens if you get caught?

Aw, Sounds Like You Care About Us Tinker Bell. ◄

EDEN LIKED DEJA'S MESSAGE.
TÓBI DISLIKED DEJA'S MESSAGE.

EDEN LOVEJOY
OCT. 31 3:02PM

► i think the others are going to that halloween party tóbi mentioned the social committee is throwing. are you going to it too?

Depends. Are You? ◄

► no. there's a charmborne movie adaptation i like watching every halloween.

K Have Fun With Your Geek Thing Then. ◄

► i was going to ask if you want to watch it with me.

Yes. ◄

► you sure? it could turn you into a charmborne geek too …

Sounds Terrifying. Perfect For Halloween. ◄

Your Room or Mine? ◄

► we can do mine. i have a pc.

Cool. ◄

► cool.

DAWN NOVAK DIARIES
NOV. 4 12:00AM

Eden: monte's 17th birthday.

Fabien: HAPPY B'DAY OLD MAN!!

Happy Birthday. ◄

Monte: thank you everyone

Fabien: Do you have plans???

Monte: my father offered to take me out to dinner

Monte: so no i do not have plans

Fabien: Brilliant, you'll celebrate with us. I'll nick a cupcake from the dining hall for you

I Have Candles I Can Bring. ◄

EDEN LIKED DEJA'S MESSAGE.

Monte: nice

Monte: i will see you all later

Monte: all of you are coming right

NOV. 4 12:20AM

Tóbi: I suppose I can spare a few minutes.

MONTE LIKED TÓBI'S MESSAGE.

NOV. 8 7:58AM

Eden: halfway through the last diary.

Eden: i know who dawn novak is.

Tóbi: Who?

Fabien: …

Fabien: Eden pls don't leave us hanging

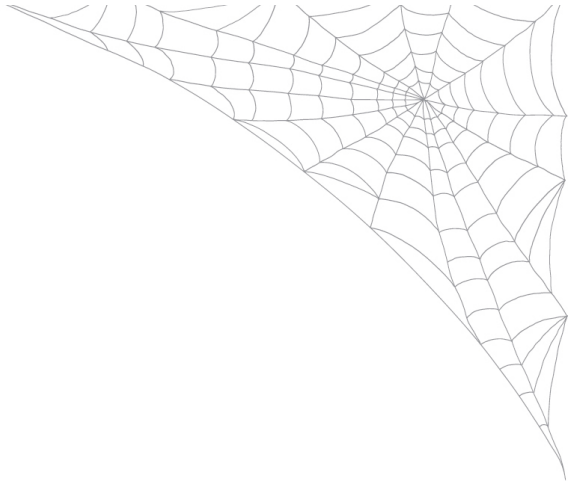
DEJA EMPHASIZED FABIEN'S MESSAGE.

MONTE EMPHASIZED FABIEN'S MESSAGE.

Eden: in class. text later.

Fabien: Why do most of Eden's texts read like clickbait LOL

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CHAPTER 13

COMMON THREADS

Earlier today, the sun had peeked its head out for some time. But when it saw that everyone was too busy doing homework, it went to sulk behind the clouds, and the sky had been throwing a stormy tantrum ever since.

Rain lashed at the window and wind jiggled the dark windowpanes of The Log Cabin as Tóbi entered its common room. Immediately, she was enveloped by warmth. The Wildfire boys' common room resembled a winter lodge, with a vaulted ceiling sporting wood beams and a merry fire crackling in a great stone fireplace. Throughout the room, animal pelts and framed nature photographs hung on cedar walls.

Various guys sat on tan leather chairs and wooden rocking chairs, socializing or completing homework. Tóbi greeted many of them as she walked to the center of the room, where The Log Cabin's faculty supervisor sat at a table with a visitor's log. After signing in, she made her way to the grand staircase at the back of the room and climbed it to Monte's floor.

Like all other Tanglewood residences, each door lining the hallway had a mini chalkboard hanging next to it. Monte had drawn a mountain range on his, the sketch so detailed that it looked like a black-and-white photograph.

When she entered Monte's room, Tóbi stifled a gasp. The last time she had been in here, when she had broken in with Lucille, his

room had been chaotic enough. Now it was even worse, with textbooks and graded assignments mixed into the art supplies scattered across Monte's desk and floor. The 3D floor plan Tóbi had encountered on Monte's drawing table had been joined by several more.

But what most caught Tóbi's attention was one of his walls. He had cleared the wall's paintings and sketches to make room for pages and pages of notes, several connected with red string. Photos were scattered among them, and when Tóbi saw one of the hidden room in the library, she realized with a mixture of exasperation and amusement that the wall was dedicated to piecing together everything they had discovered about Dawn Novak thus far.

Everyone else was already here. Fabien sat on the floor, leaning against Monte's bed. Positioned directly across from the door, he noticed the wonder on Tóbi's face as she entered, and he laughed. "I know, I think the old man's gone off the deep end."

"And he's pulling us under with him," Deja said. She sat cross-legged on Monte's bed, her chin on her fist and her elbow on her knee so that her long box braids fell in a curtain around her. She wore a hoodie under her Tanglewood blazer, making Tóbi wonder if she owned a coat.

Monte turned away from the Dawn Novak wall, pushing his glasses up with his ring finger. "We've learned a lot, and it's helpful to keep track of all the common threads," he said.

He moved to close the dorm's door, but Tóbi said quickly, "Doors must stay open when hosting members of the opposite sex."

She looked around at her friends' exasperated expressions. "What?" she asked. "It's the rules."

Fabien shrugged. "If anyone spots me hanging around Monte while he's in mad-scientist mode, I'm pretending like I don't know any of you."

As Tóbi took the chair at Monte's desk, Monte announced, "Now that we've finished reading the diaries, I called us here today to plan our next steps in investigating Dawn Novak. Since her diaries stopped so abruptly, it's hard to say what became of her, whether she successfully got away from Tanglewood, or—"

“If she was murdered,” Deja finished.

Monte pointed at her in agreement. “Precisely. And given how badly she was bullied, I think we can all agree that her being killed is our leading theory. But we cannot rule out other possibilities yet—especially when we need to take into account the information contained in the final diary. Eden, if you would please share what you’ve found?”

Eden had settled on the windowsill, her legs drawn to her chest. Now, she rose to hand her phone to Fabien, who held it at an angle so that Deja could look at the screen as well.

“In her last diary, Dawn is really frustrated,” Eden said. “She goes on about how hard she works, and how disappointed she is that she’s never been formally recognized for it.”

“Recognized?” Tóbi asked. “In what way?”

“According to her, she’s been at the top of her class for the past few years,” Eden explained. “The top of her Tanglewood class. We thought when she talked about the hard work she did, she was talking ‘bout labor, but we were wrong. Dawn wasn’t just any random orphan—she was a student here.”

Deja slapped her forehead. “Duh! How didn’t we see it before? How else could a Black orphan in the early 1900s have known how to read and write? Dawn must’ve been one of the first Black students to have ever attended Tanglewood.”

“That also explains the bullying she was subjected to,” Monte said. “No doubt her peers found it hard to accept that someone like her was a better student than them.”

“But if she was a student here, why didn’t the administration do anything about how bad her bullying was?” Fabien asked.

Eden shrugged sadly. “It was a different time.”

Shaking his head, Fabien handed Eden’s phone to Tóbi, and she saw that it displayed a picture of one of the very last diary entries. Dawn wrote endlessly about how much she had accomplished, listing her academic achievements with an almost manic repetition. As Tóbi skimmed the entry, she felt her heart grow heavy. The handwriting was much different than hers, and these diaries were long before her time, yet Dawn’s fervent desire to feel appreciated

made Tóbi feel as though this was something she herself had written.

It was not the first time Tóbi had felt this way while reading Dawn's words. She had initially agreed to read the diaries in order to find out what Deja's deal was, but the more she read, the more she became invested in them for herself. And with this new realization that Dawn had been a high-achieving student, now more than ever, Tóbi wanted to know what had happened to her. Dawn had been a Black student who had worked hard for recognition at this school, even at her own risk; if she had succeeded in the end, then maybe Tóbi could too.

"Her peers were just jealous," Tóbi decided aloud. "But I need to know if she proved them all wrong and made it to graduation—probably at the top of her class."

As she said this, Tóbi looked around at everyone, but when she caught Monte's eye, she paused. Unlike the others, who were nodding in agreement, Monte looked contemplative. The intensity of his gaze made Tóbi uncomfortable; it felt like he could see through her words, as though she had just spoken about herself instead of Dawn.

Tóbi felt heat rush to her face and, not for the first time, was grateful that her skin was dark enough that blushing did not show. "*We* need to know," she corrected herself.

Monte analyzed her for a moment more. Then, to Tóbi's relief, he looked around at the others. "Since she was a student, Tanglewood will have her record," he said. "It's likely to have some useful information for us."

"I don't s'pose the administration lets students just waltz into the record room?" Deja asked.

"I'm sure between Tóbi's connections and mine, we'll be able to find a way," Monte said.

He glanced at Tóbi. She dropped her gaze. When she saw that she still had Eden's phone, she held it out to Eden, determinedly avoiding Monte's gaze to prevent him from seeing her approval about his idea to work together.

A knock sounded, and they all looked to see The Log Cabin's faculty supervisor standing in the doorway. "Thirty minutes until curfew," he reminded them. "Fifteen minutes until The Log Cabin closes to guests and your visitors have to leave, Monte."

Monte subtly leaned against his evidence wall, partially covering it. "Sure, thanks for the notice."

The supervisor continued down the hall, peeking into other open dorms to give them the same warning. After he had gone, Monte returned his attention to the others. "Before we conclude, there is one more thing we should discuss—what are you doing?"

Tóbi followed his gaze across the room. Eden had been walking back to the windowsill, but she came to a stop in front of an art-strewn wall and was inspecting a framed sketch of a vase of flowers.

"Did you draw this?" Eden asked.

Monte hesitated, then said, "I did."

Tóbi frowned; she had never seen him fazed. Now, however, she could have sworn he seemed nervous.

Eden looked at the flower sketch, pulling one of her curls taut and releasing it, allowing it to spring back in place. Then, she turned to Monte.

"I like it," she said.

"Thank you. Anyways, it's getting late, so let's start wrapping up," he said abruptly.

Rather than returning to the windowsill, Eden rerouted to sit on the ground next to Tóbi's chair. Tóbi eyed her warily. After spending weeks investigating Dawn together, Tóbi wanted to like Eden, but she still could not fully move on from when Eden had ignored her invitation to lunch last year.

Nevertheless, when she heard Eden sniff quietly, she pulled a pocket-sized tissue pack out of her duffel bag. It was more out of instinct than kindness; her parents had pushed her into the habit of carrying tissues around since she was young. According to them, sniffing was annoying and thus bad manners.

Tóbi offered the tissues to Eden, but Eden only stared. Tóbi prompted, "It's a handy thing to keep with you in cold weather."

"Okay," Eden said, finally accepting the tissues.

“For our final order of business,” Monte said, bringing their attention to him, “I think we need to talk about The Web.”

“What about it?” Deja asked, a little too sharply.

“Well, we know The Web is a system based on intentionality. In order to weave, weavers must focus on receiving energy from The Web and channeling it into whatever task they are trying to achieve. Am I correct, Deja?”

“Yeah,” Deja said slowly. Tóbi could not tell if she was hesitant to say more, or shocked to see Monte had hung on to the few bits of information he had managed to pry out of her over the past several weeks.

“Which leads me to believe there must be a reason we each received the specific dream that we did,” Monte said. “The Web gave me a dream about a sandstone wall, something that would probably be unremarkable to anyone else in this room, but I had an eye for it because of my architectural studies. Eden, you like technology more than the humanities, so you were most likely to find a dream about a library strange. Fabien, you’re the only one here with an entomologist for a stepdad who had told you about the Crystalline Spider.”

“Khrystal Spider,” Fabien corrected, then he scowled to himself. “I hate that I know that.”

“And Tóbi, your dream had you following those spiders, didn’t it?” Monte asked.

“Yes, which has nothing to do with me. I hate bugs.” Tóbi considered for a moment, then added, “Although, the dream made me sleepwalk, and I hated that more. It would have been so embarrassing if someone caught me doing that.”

“It’s like The Web knew the best way to get to you was by targeting your reputation,” Monte remarked. “So if each of our dreams were catered to us, the one thing I can’t figure out is what does Dawn Novak have to do with you, Deja?”

They all turned to look at Deja, who had gone rigid. “I don’t know who she is, obviously,” she said. “Or else I wouldn’t be here, trying to figure it out with y’all.”

“Sure,” Monte said, “but there must be a reason why The Web thought you would be most likely to take notice of that name. I mean, how exactly did the dream tell you her name? Was there anything particularly notable in your dream?”

Deja avoided the others’ gazes, chewing on her lip as though there were something she wanted to say but not sure if she should.

Tóbi’s phone rang loudly. Deja seemed to quickly grasp onto the interruption, snapping, “You can’t mute your phone for ten minutes?”

“I apologize everyone, I thought I had,” Tóbi said. She checked the caller, then declined and typed out a text message to them instead. “It’s from a member of Legal Club. We’re in the middle of organizing another talk with the senator who visited Tanglewood last month to talk about the War on Drugs, since that event had such a good turnout.”

“Why do you and your legal buddies have to be so anti-fun?” Fabien asked with a grin. “Mentiscape trips are mad. I once watched a documentary of some chick who curated her hallucinations. Whenever she used, she surrounded herself with photos of things like castles, luxury cars, a hot husband. She did it for years until she took enough mentiscape to hallucinate permanently. To this day, the only thing she sees is all she’s ever wanted.”

Tóbi wrinkled her nose. “But she doesn’t actually have any of that, she just thinks she does. She’s blind to the real world, and mentiscape convinced her brain otherwise. That could be dangerous.”

Fabien shrugged. “I mean, yeah, maybe if the reality your mind conjures up is the bloody apocalypse or something. But if you control it like she did, I dunno, I reckon it might be fun to live in my dream world.”

“Ain’t nothing fun ‘bout mentiscape,” Deja said so harshly that everyone flinched.

Her black eyes flashed violet as she continued, “Know what we call it back in Sweetwater? Venom. It’s serious—it ruins lives. That idiot you’re talking ‘bout is probably locked up in some institution so she doesn’t jump off a cliff thinking she’s diving into a pool.

Don’t you ever go anywhere near that drug, not unless you want a head full of poison.”

“Christ, Deja, okay,” Fabien said, sitting upright to face her. “I know. I was only joking …”

Fabien helplessly looked around the room, but everyone else was similarly at a loss for words. Deja seemed to realize the alarm her outburst caused because she dropped her gaze, picking at a hole in her tights.

“Don’t make those types of jokes ‘round me,” she mumbled.

Tóbi stared at Deja, nonplussed. Deja was always ill-tempered, but that was just who she was. This, however, was something different. Personal.

Sometimes, Tóbi felt she and Deja had become closer over the past month, even if they were prone to arguing. But other times, like now, Tóbi was reminded that their bickering was not what created distance between them—it was the fact Tóbi still knew virtually nothing about Deja.

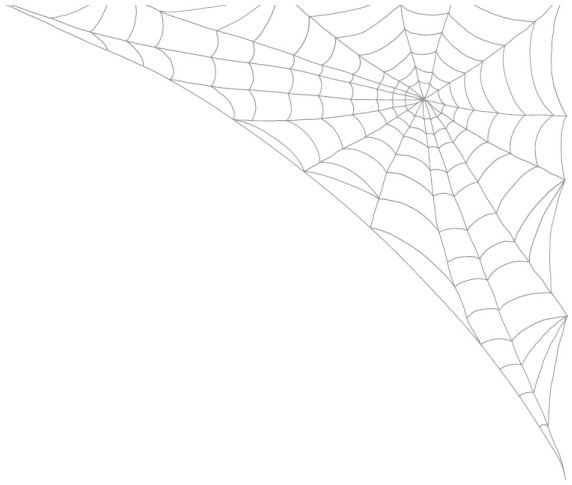
After a pregnant pause, Deja stood, slinging her knapsack over her shoulder. “There’s less than twenty minutes ‘til curfew, and the girls’ courtyard is all the way on the other side of campus,” she said. “I should get going.”

“I’ll walk back with you,” Tóbi said, and as she rose to her feet, she brainstormed ways to press Deja for more information on the walk back.

But Deja held her hand up. “Nah, I’m gonna take my time, and I know how important following the rules is to you. Wouldn’t want to make you miss curfew.”

Before Tóbi could think of how to respond, Deja left the room.

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CHAPTER 14

LAID BARE

In the middle of November, a blizzard hit Tanglewood.

For three days and three nights, snow sprinkled from the sky. Swirling wind spread iced layers over rooftops, roads, and trees until the entire world was frosted with white.

Because Tanglewood Prep did not believe in snow days, students had to trek through several inches of snowfall. Few made it to their classes unscathed, for campus had become a battleground.

During the day, students were pelted by snowballs in surprise attacks by their friends. At night, snowball fights broke out across campus, joyful shrieks sounding as volleys of snow flew under lamplight. And in times of peace, students came together to build snowmen of all sizes and artisanship, scattered through the campus like watchful sentries.

Tóbi had no time to welcome the arrival of winter. Her teachers had held a secret meeting in which they unanimously decided to squeeze in as many assignments as possible before mid-year exams.

Or, at least, that was what it felt like, what with the looming mountain of essays, packets, and quizzes she needed to ace if she was going to maintain her number one class ranking.

Tóbi's ballet instructor had gotten the memo to overload her schedule as well, for she had volunteered Tóbi for a Christmas performance in town. The extra practices piled atop regular rehearsals, causing ballet to consume most of Tóbi's evenings.

It was on one such evening, during a brief water break, that Tóbi checked her phone to see an email asking confirmation for a social committee event. She had just begun typing out a response when a thick Russian accent sliced across the light chatter in the room.

"Tóbi!"

Crap—she had forgotten to keep an eye on their instructor. Phones were not permitted during rehearsal, not even during breaks. Normally Tóbi followed the rules, but lately she had been so swamped by all her extracurriculars that her phone was practically attached to her hand.

She looked up to see a tall and thin woman walking up to her. Her sleek black ponytail emphasized her pale skin.

"By now, you should know phones are strictly forbidden in my dance studio," she said.

Tóbi hated being reprimanded, especially in public. Her face burned under the gazes of her fellow ballerinas.

"I apologize, Madame. It won't happen again."

Tóbi slipped her phone back into her duffel bag. Their dance instructor took a step toward her, her chin raised even while she looked down at her. Tóbi strained to not allow so much as a bead of sweat to run down her face.

"No, I don't expect it will," their dance instructor said after a moment. To Tóbi's relief, she turned away, and as she walked to the front of the room, she announced, "Take your positions, everyone. We will run the full show once more."

For the first time, Tóbi wished her place was not at the center of the room, where it felt as though her faults were laid bare for all to see. All she wanted was to hide until the sting of being reprimanded wore off. But as always, instinct overtook her emotions, and for the next hour, she painted a smile over her anxiety, her face sore from forcing the expression.

As rehearsal came to an end and everyone began packing their belongings, their instructor said, "Good work, everyone. We are looking in good shape for the performance. Tóbi," she added. "A moment, please."

Tóbi's heart dropped to her feet. She willed herself to keep calm as she met her dance instructor in a corner of the room. She braced herself, waiting to receive punishment for the phone incident.

But to her surprise, her dance instructor said, "You've had a lot on your plate recently."

The uncharacteristic softness in her instructor's tone caught Tóbi so off guard that it filled her with more anxiety than if her instructor had yelled at her.

"Kind of," Tóbi said evasively. "But I promise I won't let my workload distract me during rehearsal again."

Ballet had always been one of Tóbi's favorite extracurriculars. This year, her schedule had been so hectic that she had not been able to dedicate as much time to it as she used to, but that did not mean she did not still care about it.

Tóbi's dance instructor gave her a long look. "Your understudy for the holiday performance has kept up well with rehearsals," she said finally. "I've decided to give her the chance to perform her first lead role. You're dismissed from rehearsals for the rest of the semester. I hope you'll return from winter break rejuvenated."

Her dance instructor gave her a brief pat on the shoulder before walking away. In her shock, Tóbi could only stare. *A chance to perform her first lead role,* her dance instructor wanted to give to Tóbi's understudy. Freshman year, no one had given Tóbi a chance for her first lead role; she had to take it herself. This year, she was spread too thin to put her all into ballet like she used to, but she had still given it her best, painstakingly squeezing hours of training in between her other commitments. But it would seem her best was not good enough; if she could not give her all, then none of her efforts were appreciated.

Numb, Tóbi walked to her duffel bag. As she donned a Tanglewood tracksuit over her leotard, Lucille and the Lynns came up to her.

"What was that about?" Lynn P. asked.

Tóbi swallowed the growing lump in her throat and somehow, when she spoke, she managed to keep her voice light. "Madame doesn't think I can do this performance, so I'm out."

“That sucks,” Lucille said. “But whatever, right? You’ve been so busy lately anyways. It’ll be a nice break.”

Tóbi looked up from her bag in amazement. She had not known what reaction she had expected; perhaps for the others to be as disappointed in her as she was in herself—but they were already moving on.

“Oh, I just realized—the performance is the same day as my Mathletes competition,” Lucille said.

“You can make both,” Lynn Q. assured her. “You know my friend Hannah? She’s on your team, and she has a car. I can convince her to get permission to leave campus that day so she can drive you into town for the performance right after your guys’ competition.”

As they packed up their belongings, they continued discussing a plan for Lucille. Realizing that the world would not implode after her removal, Tóbi breathed a little easier as she donned her duffel bag—but she still could not relax completely. Lucille was not wrong; Tóbi could use the break from ballet. And yet a small part of her wanted to turn around and continue rehearsing, trying to prove her instructor wrong for removing her from the show.

In the end, she pushed the thought aside and left the dance studio, Lucille and the Lynns trailing behind her. They climbed the stairs and had just reached the ground floor of Rhoden Performing Arts Center when one of the practice rooms along the wall opened, and Fabien stepped out.

“Tóbi,” he greeted with a grin when he spotted her. But when he noticed Lynn Q., he froze, his hazel eyes widening in surprise. “Oh—hey.”

Tóbi glanced at Lynn Q., whose expression had soured at the sight of Fabien. “Didn’t you lose that?” she asked, nodding to the phone in his hand. “That’s what I would’ve thought, considering you never texted me back.”

Fabien scratched the back of his neck. “I’ve been meaning to get around to that. Just been busy, y’know?”

“Too busy for your own girlfriend?”

Fabien looked alarmed. “We’re dating?”

Lynn Q. scoffed. “Not anymore.”

She stomped away. After aiming an indignant *hmph* at Fabien, Lucille followed her. Lynn P. looked between them and Fabien uncertainly before telling Fabien, “My parents and I were huge fans of your dad. Especially his third album—his song ‘Maddy’ changed the face of jazz—”

“Patel!” Lynn Q. called sharply.

Lynn P. jumped. “I mean—you were a terrible boyfriend to my friend. But it was really nice meeting you. But you’re still a jerk.”

She hesitated, seemingly torn between shaking Fabien’s hand and giving him a dirty look. In the end, she decided on a small wave before scurrying to catch up with Lucille and the other Lynn.

Tóbi turned to Fabien, her hand propped on her hip. “You promised if I hooked you up with Lynn Q., you’d actually pay attention to her,” she told him.

“I did, for like two days.” When Fabien saw the judgment on her face, he added, “What? So I got bored. Is that a crime now?”

Shaking her head, Tóbi turned and continued down the hall. As Fabien walked alongside her, Tóbi remarked, “I guess now I owe her an apology for introducing her to you in the first place.”

“No apology needed—knowing me is a pleasure.” When Tóbi gave Fabien a skeptical expression, he laughed. “Well, if she is upset with me, just tell her not to be,” he said. “She does everything you tell her to. It’s why you keep the Lynns around, innit?”

He was not wrong. Lynn P.’s family was America’s leading importer of curry powder—among other spices common in Nigerian cuisine—and the Patels had done business with the Ẹkúndayọ s’ Zebra Rush restaurant for years. Similarly, Lynn Q.’s family regularly incorporated grocery-bought Zebra Rush frozen meals into their fitness empire’s diet plans. Tóbi had welcomed the Lynns into her circle in an attempt to please her parents, but over time, she had learned how to use them for her benefit.

“Still,” Tóbi said, “you’re who’s my real friend, and that’s all the more reason why I expect better from you.”

Fabien grinned. “We *are* real friends, aren’t we?”

“Is that the only thing you heard from what I just said?”

“Honestly, you and the rest of our little Dawn Novak crew are the realest friends I have too,” Fabien continued. “Those diaries were grim, but investigating them is the most fun I’ve had at this school, and it’s because I get to do it with you guys.”

Tóbi could not help but soften. For so long, she had felt she could only get the most out of socializing if she controlled all aspects of her interactions. But for the first time in her life, she had found people whom being around did not exhaust her.

“Same,” Tóbi admitted with a small smile. “It has been nice hanging out with you all—except for Monte, of course.”

Over the past few weeks, Tóbi had tried to minimize her contact with Monte, only hanging out with him if the others were present. Admittedly, he was proving to be not as bad as she thought; sometimes, he could even be pleasant. But she could not forget that he was the reason why she now had to work twice as hard if she was going to live up to her older brother’s legacy and impress her parents.

“You still don’t like him?” Fabien asked. “Sure, the student council beef might’ve sucked, but what about the messes he’s cleaned up for you?”

“Such as?”

“You don’t know?” Fabien asked, shocked.

Tóbi scoffed. “I obviously don’t, and you’re obviously stalling to try and think of something.”

“No, really I …” Fabien began, then broke off with a shrug. “Well, I’ll just say this—go on and ask Monte what ruffled him enough to earn that shiner back in September.”

They had come to the empty classroom they had all agreed to meet in. Tóbi came to a stop, still turning over Fabien’s words. She had never given much thought as to why Monte had fought his lacrosse teammate. Who cared? It had nothing to do with her—or at least that was what she had thought.

“After you,” Fabien said, pulling Tóbi out of her thoughts and holding the door open for her.

Tóbi eyed him suspiciously. However, when he only smiled, she sighed and went inside. Eden and Monte sat together at a table,

Eden's laptop open in front of them.

As Fabien and Tóbi sat across from them, Monte looked up from the screen. "Great, you guys are here. Eden was just telling me she'll be able to get us into Hamilton Hall after hours."

"I've gotten through the electronic lock before, I can easily do it again," Eden said. "I should be able to disable the video surveillance too."

"Oh great idea, I didn't even think of that. How did you learn how to do all of this? It's incredible."

Eden made to respond, but Tóbi interrupted, "Sorry, what are you two talking about?"

"Right—we probably should've led with that," Eden said to Monte, who shrugged in agreement. To Tóbi, she said, "We're breaking into Hamilton."

"Breaking into …?" Tóbi repeated indignantly. "Breaking and entering is a crime! I can't do that."

"Do it again, you mean?" Monte asked.

Fabien gasped, leaning forward onto the table. "Again? Is there something you'd like to share, Tóbi?"

"I plead the fifth," Tóbi said, glaring at Monte.

"Have you been granted access to the record room?" Monte asked.

Tóbi's frown lessened. This past week, despite being on great terms with several administrators, they had all apologetically denied her request to look through student records from the early twentieth century. In addition to it being a confidentiality concern, she had been told, the paper records were old and too fragile to be handled by students, even if that student was Tóbi.

"I haven't gotten permission either," Monte said, correctly interpreting Tóbi's silence. "I've only gotten confirmation that old records are kept in the basement. If there were a more logical approach, of course I'd take it. But ultimately, this is the only way we'll be able to get our hands on Dawn's student record."

Tóbi hated when he was right, which was most of the time. Which was why she hated him.

“Next Thursday is the best day to go,” Tóbi said reluctantly. “Most people will be going home for Thanksgiving, so we have less of a chance of being seen.”

Monte nodded. “I agree, though I understand if you guys already have plans for Thanksgiving break.”

“Nah,” Fabien said. “I’m not flying across the pond to celebrate an American holiday in London.”

“I can stay too,” Tóbi said. Her parents were Nigerian; Thanksgiving was hardly a priority to them.

Eden tugged on one of her curls for a moment before picking up her phone. “I need to tell my mom I’m spending Thanksgiving here,” she said. “It’s an important holiday for us, but I’d rather spend it with y’all this year.”

Fabien lightly bumped his fist against her arm. “‘Preciate it, mate.”

Tóbi watched Eden, surprised she would make the sacrifice. Tóbi knew Eden and Deja hung out often, but she had assumed Eden did not like the rest of them, given how little the girl spoke. Then again, after seeing Monte talking so animatedly with Eden, and seeing Fabien’s fondness for her, perhaps Tóbi had been too quick to judge Eden’s quiet.

“Great, so if Deja says she can stay over Thanksgiving break, we’re all set,” Monte said, bringing Tóbi’s attention to him. “Speaking of which, where is she?”

“I told her we were meeting here tonight,” Tóbi said. She checked her phone and was annoyed to see she still had no messages from Deja. “She never answered.”

“Wonder if it has to do with the full moon,” Fabien said. “Witches dig that, yeah?”

“Don’t let her hear you call her that,” Monte said. “I made that mistake once, and she threw a stapler at me.”

Fabien laughed, but Tóbi was not amused. “She can’t be mad when we’re wrong about her when she doesn’t even tell us anything,” she said.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Monte said. “Other than her occasional throwing of things, she’s been patient with my questions about The

Web."

"What about questions about her family?"

Monte shrugged. "I haven't asked. It's not my place."

"Yeah, it's not like we talk about our families," Fabien chimed.

"Because everyone already knows our families. Plus, you have mommy issues, and you have daddy issues," Tóbi said to Fabien, then Monte. "But Deja is a weaver, and weaving is a family practice. Yet we've never heard her talk about the other weavers in her family. We don't even know for sure if she's telling the truth about being a weaver."

"Come off it," Fabien said. "A galaxy popped up right in front of us, and we all experienced those weird dreams. I know Deja hates this word, but that is definitely magic right there."

Monte added, "Plus, Deja was right about the dreams—they went away once we solved them, and they did lead us to Dawn Novak."

"Fine, The Web is real, and Deja seems to know a lot about it," Tóbi conceded. "But does that mean she's *part* of it? I mean, in the time that we have known her, has anyone actually seen her weave?"

"She gets visions sometimes," Eden said. "I've seen it."

"You see the visions that she gets? Or she only tells you about them?"

When Eden did not respond, Tóbi threw her hands up in exasperation. "So no one knows for certain that she's a weaver. This girl just crashed into our lives like that meteorite, and we follow her blindly."

"You're right there with us, sweetheart," Fabien reminded her.

Tóbi was about to argue, but she realized he was right—she had allowed Deja to pull her into this wild Dawn Novak chase too. Deja had lured Fabien into this with a cure for his eternal boredom, Eden with the prospect of seeing her video game in real life, and Monte with a puzzle that, like all puzzles, he could not resist solving. Everyone's initial motivation for investigating Dawn Novak was clear—everyone except for Deja.

But not anymore. Tóbi fished her laptop out of her duffel bag; it was time to lay Deja's secrets bare.

“What are you doing?” Eden asked.

“Looking up Deja,” Tóbi said. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of this earlier.”

“I don’t think she’d like this,” Eden said.

“It’s fine, she doesn’t like anything,” Fabien said, dragging his chair next to Tóbi. “And I’m curious now too.”

Tóbi typed *Deja Freeman* into the search engine. Few relevant results appeared, among which were a barely active social media page and some articles about poetry contests Deja had won in Louisiana over the past decade.

“Nothing,” Tóbi said. “I think her surname is too common.”

“Try including her middle name, if you know it,” said Monte, who now leaned on the back of Tóbi’s chair.

Surprisingly enough, Tóbi did know Deja’s middle name. With all the school events she organized, Tóbi often encountered students’ names, as recorded in the school’s system, to send out invitations. And with her friends being the first people she thought to invite to events, Tóbi easily recalled Deja’s full name.

“*Deja Renée Freeman,*” Tóbi murmured as she typed it into the search engine.

Eden was the only one who remained seated. “Tóbi,” she said quietly.

“Deja liked one of my old posts,” Tóbi said defensively, because something about Eden’s tone made Tóbi feel guilty. “It was when we first met. She was probably looking into me. It only makes sense we do the same to her. If she’s lying about being a weaver, who knows what else she could be lying about.”

“Hold on, what’s this?” Fabien asked.

He pointed to an article that had appeared: *Mentiscape Dealer Convicted of Murder.*

Tóbi clicked on the article and began reading aloud, “On *Monday, twenty-five-year-old mentiscape dealer Terrell Davis was found guilty of murdering his nine-months-pregnant girlfriend Renée Freeman, aged seventeen, in Tanglewood, Connecticut during a fit of anger …*”

Tóbi trailed off, looking at the two people pictured in the article. One photo showed a man scowling into a mugshot, but the girl

pictured on the right could have been Deja. She even wore the same Tanglewood uniform.

"This article was written sixteen years ago," Monte said. His voice was abnormally loud in the sudden stillness that had seized the room.

"So," Fabien said slowly, "you're telling me that—?"

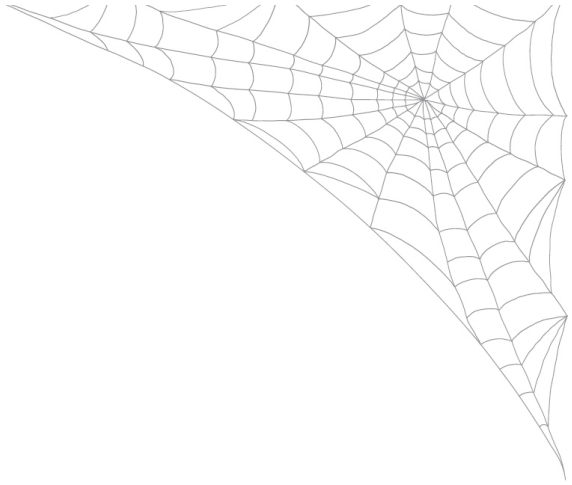
Tóbi barely had time to remove her hands from the keyboard before her laptop slammed shut with so much force that there was an audible *crunch*.

They had been too absorbed in the article to notice Deja entering the room, but now she stood before them, one hand on Tóbi's laptop. Her eyes burned with an anger so black it was violet.

"Stay out of my life," Deja spat.

She stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

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CHAPTER 15

UGLINESS

Deja lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling as Lauryn Hill blasted in her earbuds.

The full moon illuminated her dorm. Growing up, Deja's grandma had always spoken about the moon as though it were sentient, a calm and patient listener to everyone it gazed upon. Deja had gotten into the habit of talking to the full moon to unload what was on her mind. After her grandma died, when she spoke to the moon, Deja had begun to feel like she was speaking to her grandma. She imagined her grandma up there with it, still watching over her, still listening.

Earlier tonight, she had told her grandma and the moon about her friends. About how she had not expected to make friends at Tanglewood, but she had anyways. About how, at this point, part of her motivation for investigating Dawn Novak was just to be around them. She still sometimes instinctively sought to push them away, but deep down, she was glad that she had found people she belonged with in New England—or so she had thought.

Who did they think they were, looking Deja up like that? They had no right to snoop around in her life—especially not that part of her life. The part that she could barely even admit to herself.

Deja felt a lump form in the back of her throat. Maybe if Renée's cause of death had just been an overdose on mentiscape, it would not have been as devastating as it was. But knowing that it was her

biological dad who had killed her mom, her own family that had torn itself apart, made Deja's resentment all the more potent—a poison that had only strengthened with each passing year, infecting Deja with constant anger.

Deja had always tried her best to suppress her family history. She had hoped if she could deny that part of herself, it would not be true. But now her friends had seen the full extent of the ugliness she had been born into. She was angry she had been exposed, but she was also ashamed; as hard as she tried not to, she had grown to like her friends. She doubted any of them could like her back now that they knew the truth.

Her door opened, light from the hallway flooding inside. Deja quickly sat upright to see Tóbi entering her room.

"How the hell did you open my door?" Deja asked, ripping her earbuds out.

Tóbi held up her student ID. "Eden figured out how to give me access."

Deja's shock quickly morphed into anger. "You can't just barge in here."

"You gave us no choice," Tóbi said. "You wouldn't answer our calls, or when we knocked on your door, and we need to talk to you before curfew hits."

Tóbi walked to Deja's bed and sat on the end of it. Deja braced herself; she had no desire to be pitied.

Tóbi said, "I knew you were rude, but I didn't know you were also selfish."

Deja would have been less shocked if Tóbi had slapped her.

"Selfish?" she echoed.

"That's what you are for not telling us about your mother," Tóbi said. She picked up a Tanglewood sweater lying on Deja's bed, inspected it, then began folding it.

"Why do you insist on taking on the entire world all by yourself?" Tóbi continued, folding another one of Deja's uniforms. "Believe it or not, Fabien, Eden, Monte, and I are your friends. It's insulting that you didn't think you could share the truth about your mother with us. We would have understood."

Deja thought she had been saving her friends from being burdened with that knowledge, in the same way she repressed her anger to avoid offending her aunt. It never even crossed her mind her friends would care enough to support all of Deja, not just the parts of her that were easier to stomach.

Tóbi was still folding Deja's scattered clothes, stacking them neatly on the edge of the bed.

After a moment of watching her, Deja cleared her throat. "This is the worst apology ever," she said.

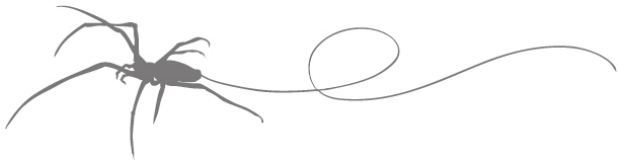
"Apology? What do I have to apologize for? You're the one who was so secretive that we had to turn to the Internet just to learn who you are. But that ends now, got it? You can throw yourself a pity party tonight, but come morning, you're going to meet us for breakfast and actually talk to us."

After folding the final garment, Tóbi stood. "And clean your room," she added, gesturing to the mess on Deja's floor. "An organized space is essential to productivity."

With that, Tóbi left Deja's dorm.

Deja stared at the door. She could not believe that just happened. Even more unbelievable was how relieved she was; perhaps she would not be losing her friends after all.

She lay back down, and when she looked up at the ceiling, she felt none of the restlessness she had before. It was not long before she drifted off to sleep.



The next day was Saturday, and it was the first Saturday Deja found herself wishing she had class.

Had there been class today, she could have used running late as an excuse to skip breakfast. Despite Tóbi checking on her last night, a part of Deja still feared how differently her friends might treat her now. Anxiety bubbled in her stomach as she clasped the chain

holding her grandma's earrings around her neck, which today only offered a small amount of comfort. She wore her Malcolm X tee over her hoodie and used a white scarf to tie her long braids in a high ponytail. It was her favorite outfit, and what she usually wore outside of class.

She dressed as slowly as she could, but even after she was done, her friends affirmed in the group chat that they were still waiting for her. Monte and Tóbi had even put their hectic schedules on hold.

And so Deja made her way to the dining hall, her steps heavy. Since uniforms did not need to be worn on the weekends, the hall was full of students wearing designer winter gear.

Deja's friends sat at a corner booth, Eden and Monte on one side, and Tóbi and Fabien on the other. But as Deja approached, Monte gave Deja his seat then pulled up a chair for himself at the end of the table.

"You don't like chocolate chip waffles, right?" Fabien asked her.

"What?" Deja asked, caught off guard. For all the greetings she had prepared herself for, that was not one of them.

Fabien gestured to the center of the table, where there was a large plate of waffles. "Oh," Deja said. "Nah, I'm good."

Fabien said, "See? I told you she doesn't like chocolate. We didn't need to save them for her."

Disapproval was plain on Tóbi's face as she watched him move the last few waffles to his syrup-coated plate.

"I meant you shouldn't eat them because they're unhealthy, not just because they were saved for her," Tóbi said. "Michelle Obama emphasizes the importance of young people eating healthy. For your first meal, you need something nutritious—like oatmeal. Eden likes the oatmeal I ordered for her. Right, Eden?"

Eden shrugged. "It's alright with a little sugar," she said, although her bowl looked to be more sugar than oatmeal.

"In Fabien's defense," Monte said, "at least the waffles are multigrain."

"Are they really? Cheers! I was being healthy, and I didn't even know it."

Tóbi sighed, returning to her own bowl of fruit. “I give up. When you feel sluggish by noon, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The knot that had been in Deja’s chest all morning loosened as she listened to her friends bicker. She had been prepared for them to treat her delicately, like she was something fragile that they needed to tiptoe around, or to be so disgusted that they lost their appetites. But nothing had changed, even though they now knew about Renée. Maybe Tóbi had been right; maybe she could have told them earlier, and they would not have run away.

At the realization, Deja calmed enough to gather her thoughts. She cleared her throat, and the others quieted immediately.

“To be fair, I never said I was a weaver,” Deja said without preamble. “But … I let y’all think it. ‘Cause I wanted it to be true—and it *is* true I grew up around weavers. I was just never allowed to join The Web. My aunt and my granny didn’t want to weave me in because my mom—she couldn’t handle The Web.”

Deja’s tongue felt dry and awkward in her mouth. She was not sure if she had ever talked about her mom’s full story out loud. Years of pushing it down had made it curdle within her, and her words came out lumpy as she tried to empty them.

Deja’s friends did not push her, merely continuing to eat their breakfasts in patient silence. It was this unspoken support that motivated Deja to keep trying to figure out her words.

“Being a weaver got to Renée’s head, I’ve always been told,” Deja said. “Had her thinking she was invincible. She got into mentiscape, thinking she could handle it, but she ended up addicted. Except that hardly ended up mattering, ‘cause in the end it wasn’t drugs that killed her. It was a drug dealer—my dad.”

Deja swallowed hard. If she did not, she was afraid she might vomit. She had never met her father—his name was never even spoken in her house. Deja might have had conflicted feelings toward Renée that her aunt and grandma did not share, but when it came to her other parent, they were all united in their hatred for Terrell Davis.

After a moment, Deja continued, “Renée was pregnant when she got shot. The doctors saved me, but they couldn’t save her. Before

she died, she told my grandma and my aunt Cybele to never weave me into The Web. They didn't know why Renée wanted that. They just respected it.

"I transferred to Tanglewood 'cause Renée attended this school too, and it made my aunt happy for me to come here," Deja concluded. "Then the meteorite happened, and the dreams. I dreamt of my mom talking 'bout Dawn Novak. I dunno why my mom was in that dream—I think The Web just knew that'd get my attention. But this is the first time The Web has appeared to me, and I just feel like if I complete the task it's given us, maybe I can finally join it. So, that's why I've been using y'all to learn who Dawn was. And now that you know the ugly truth, if you don't want to be part of this anymore, I guess I get it."

Unpacking her full story left Deja feeling exhausted, like she was recovering from a terrible head cold. She had not realized just how emotionally congested she had been all this time until now that it felt easier to breathe.

Still, her heart pounded as she kept her gaze on a crumpled napkin on the table. If any of her friends chose to walk away, she did not want to see them do so.

"Unbelievable," Fabien said.

Deja braced herself. But Fabien continued, "We've done all this sleuthing, and you still think you're using us? Mate, we wouldn't be here, about to break into Hamilton, if we didn't care too!"

Deja looked up, and to her amazement, she saw the same sentiment reflected on the others' faces.

"I—wait, pause," Deja said, realizing what Fabien just said. "Break into Hamilton?"

"Last night, we agreed to stay here during Thanksgiving to search Hamilton Hall for Dawn's school record," Monte said. "You think you could stay on campus too?"

Deja had already been planning to stay on campus; flights between Louisiana and Connecticut were not cheap enough to buy multiple times a year. She and her aunt had agreed Deja would only come home during the school year for Christmas.

“Sure—but is searching Hamilton still the move?” Deja asked. “Even though you now know all that stuff ‘bout my past?”

“Stop trying to get rid of us, it’s not going to work,” Tóbi said.

Eden nodded in agreement. She took Deja’s hand under the table and gave it a quick squeeze before letting go. Gratitude flooded over Deja—and something else that made her heart flutter.

She forced her voice to stay level as she said, “Well, alright then. I guess we’re breaking into the school’s records on Thursday. We better not get caught, though.”

Monte adjusted his glasses with his ring finger. “If we do, we could avoid getting in trouble, depending on our lie ability.”

He looked around the table but only met blank stares.

“Like liability,” Monte said. “But lie, space, ability.”

“Explaining it doesn’t make it funnier,” Tóbi said. She glanced at her phone. “We should start walking to Bartleby, Monte. The Sparks we’re tutoring will get there soon.”

“I’m headed to Me Hall to practice, so I can walk with you lot ‘til Bartleby,” Fabien said.

Monte seemed disgruntled from his failed joke, but when he turned to Deja, his expression softened. “We can all meet up tonight for a study session?” he asked.

The question should have been a mutual decision among all of them, but Deja’s friends seemed to be waiting for her to decide. “Yeah, I’ll see y’all later,” she said.

Smiling, Monte, Tóbi, and Fabien stood from the table. As they left, Tóbi gently patted Deja on the shoulder, while Fabien dropped the last waffle onto her plate and told her, “Just try it. Healthy is overrated.”

After the others had gone, Eden asked Deja, “What’re you up to?”

Deja mentally cringed as she thought of the mountain of homework currently looming over her. “I should get started on an essay,” she said. “First, though, I wanna take a walk.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

After exhausting her capacity to express herself, Deja was glad she had not needed to say Eden was invited, that it was just

understood between them.

Outside, it was a bright but chilly day, with patches of snow shining in the sun. As Eden and Deja walked past a bench, its inscription caught in a ray of sunlight:

Named in honor of

SIMON ROCKTON

Class of 1748

Signer of the Declaration of Independence

Member of the Continental Congress 1776-1777

Eden pulled a pack of lemon drops out of her pocket. Deja watched her struggle to open the candy for a moment before holding her hand out. “Give it.”

Eden handed the lemon drops to Deja, who ripped the pack open with her teeth.

“Thanks,” Eden said as Deja returned it to her.

They wandered through campus, the only sound between them being Eden’s chewing. After a while of this comfortable silence, Eden asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“I mean, I can’t stop you.”

Eden opened her mouth, but she paused, seemingly uncertain. Noticing her hesitation, an Audre Lorde quote occurred to Deja. “*When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid*,” she said. “*So it is better to speak.*”

“Well,” Eden tried again, “earlier this year, when you first told me ‘bout your mom, you said her death was her own fault. But from what you explained at breakfast, I don’t know, it don’t really sound that way.”

Deja’s anger flared. “Renée wouldn’t have gotten shot if she hadn’t been messing with drug dealers in the first place.”

Eden pulled on one of her curls. “Sure, I get that. But … well, in the article the others and I found last night, I noticed Terrell was a little older than Renée. And I’m just wondering, maybe it’s not completely fair—”

“You know what ain’t fair?” Deja snapped. She came to a stop, making Eden do the same. “My mom dying the same exact day I was born, then being forced my whole life to hear ‘bout how great she was, how she could do no wrong, even though her own mistakes are what killed her.”

“Right—I’m sorry,” Eden said quickly. “I shouldn’t even have brought it up.”

Deja recoiled at Eden’s quick acquiescence. She had done it again—she had allowed her anger to get the best of her. For all that Deja had revealed at breakfast, none of it had been the ugly truth. The true ugliness in her life was her own bitterness, a beast she tried but too often failed to tame.

“I know how selfish I sound when I talk like this,” Deja said, almost pleaded, as though trying to make a case of herself. “I know I sound like a horrible person.”

Eden frowned. “Wait—I ain’t say all that.”

But in her growing panic, Deja could not stop herself from insisting, “It’s not like I think Renée deserved to die. I’d never defend Terrell—he’s a bad person. Trust me, I know that. But I’m mad at Renée too. I know that ain’t right, I just haven’t figured out how to let my grudge against her go. But I’m trying, Eden. I really try.”

“I know, Deja,” Eden said. “I’m sorry.”

She wrapped her arms around Deja. Several lemon drops fell out of the packet in her hand onto the snow. Despite the cold, Deja’s eyes burned. Tears rushed forth freely, streaming down her face.

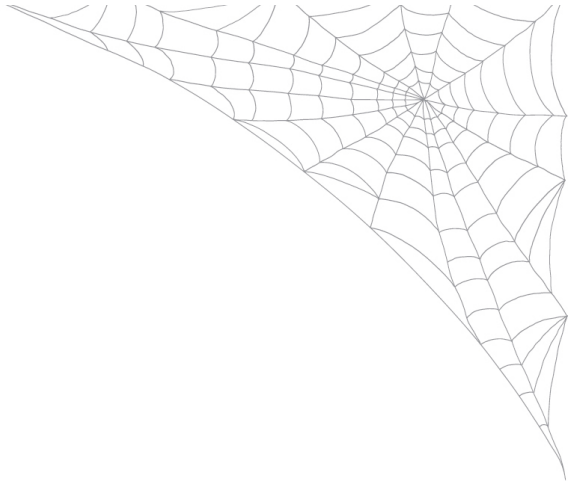
“Please don’t think I’m a bad person, Eden,” Deja whispered.

“I *don’t* think you’re a bad person,” Eden said. “I really don’t.”

Eden’s heart beat quickly but steadily against Deja as her embrace enveloped Deja in a warm, comforting cinnamon scent. Deja wanted to thank her, but she did not know how. Instead, she closed her eyes, trying and failing to stem her tears.

All the while, Eden continued holding Deja tight, rubbing circles on her back.

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CHAPTER 16

OUR GENERATION

The following Wednesday, fleets of limos and luxury cars lined up along the street leading to Tanglewood Prep, waiting to drive students to the airport. By Thursday, most students had gone home for Thanksgiving. With Deja and her friends being some of the few kids who had signed up to stay on campus, Tanglewood was virtually empty save for them.

Sunset on Thursday found them waiting on the outskirts of the woods near Hamilton Hall. They stood around Eden, who sat on a rock, her laptop perched on her lap as she hacked into Hamilton's system. As dusk crept in, the air chilled rapidly, and Deja noticed that Eden paused every few minutes to rub her hands for warmth.

"If I were rich," Deja said loudly, "I'd simply buy a pair of gloves."

"Gloves are too bulky to type with," Eden said without looking up.

She rubbed her hands again. Deja had just begun to get used to New England's low temperatures, but seeing how it disturbed Eden, she was irritated with the cold all over again.

Deja forced herself to look away. Her gaze landed on Tóbi, who was tying a scarf as black as the rest of her outfit over her head.

Amused, Deja asked her, "You preparing for your mugshot?"

Tóbi gave Deja a severe look. "Don't even joke about that. Being seen breaking into Hamilton could derail my future. That's why I'm

taking precautions to make it harder for me to be recognized."

She donned large sunglasses that obscured most of her face, and Deja scoffed. Gesturing to Tóbi's Prada high-heeled combat boots, Deja said, "There's nothing inconspicuous about those shoes."

"Well, just because we're criminals doesn't mean we have to be ugly," Tóbi said.

Deja looked from Tóbi to Monte. He met her look of disbelief with a shrug and a shadow of a smile.

"Finished," Eden announced. "Door's unlocked. And the surveillance cameras are looping the feed from a few minutes ago, so they won't see us."

"Was anyone inside?" Monte asked.

"One janitor, second floor. He was sitting in a classroom scrolling through his phone. He shouldn't be a problem if we're quiet going to the basement."

Monte nodded then looked around at the rest of them. They all exchanged the same determined look. Then, as one, they turned and made their way to Hamilton Hall.

They were able to enter the administrative building without anyone needing to swipe their student ID, thanks to Eden. After closing the heavy wooden doors as softly as they could behind them, they each retrieved their phones to use as flashlights.

"I've always found Hamilton to be one of the more architecturally impressive buildings on campus," Monte whispered, looking around. "I like its gothic elements, like the buttresses on the outside of it."

Fabien snickered softly. "Oh, you like buttresses?"

"They're spectacular."

As Monte quietly elaborated on his love of buttresses, Tóbi pulled Deja back to walk alongside her, behind the others.

"I have a favor to ask you really quick," she said. She wrapped her arm around Deja's, engulfing Deja in her flowery scent—

The girl ran through the woods surrounding Tanglewood, stumbling over uneven ground. She slowed to pause by a tree, a hand resting on it as she hunched over, trying to catch her breath. She looked upward, and Deja's point of view panned up as well. Stars streaked through a clear

night sky, illuminating the night in flashes of silvery light that did not quite pierce all the way through the trees' canopy, to the forest floor.

"—and I know you hate school events, but we really just need a few more seats filled to make the talk look like a success," Tóbi was whispering as Deja came back to the present moment.

Deja had stopped walking when she received her vision, and Tóbi had stopped with her. It seemed she had been trying to convince Deja to help her with one of her many extracurriculars.

"Sorry," Deja said, "what? I didn't hear you—I was getting a vision."

Tóbi hummed. "So you really do see visions. I thought you lied to Eden about that." Deja gave her a dirty look, and Tóbi said, "Hey, I was right that you were lying about *something,* wasn't I? So, let's hear it. What was your vision?"

Deja was still trying to process that herself. She recognized the girl—Deja had already seen her twice before. Those visions had not been memorable, especially with all the glimpses of other random moments that had come to her since. But it was getting strange that Deja kept seeing this same girl.

Not only did Deja see the same girl, but she also saw the same moment, slightly more detailed than before. This vision had revealed that the girl was running through the woods on the night of a meteor shower—it must have been the meteor shower that happened back in September.

"It was nothing," Deja decided. She had seen the moment three times now, but there was still nothing notable about a girl in the woods. Tonight, Deja only wanted to focus on getting Dawn's student record.

"You sure?" Tóbi peered at Deja from over the top of her sunglasses. "If there's anything bothering you, you can talk to me. You know that, right?"

Deja softened. She wanted to tell Tóbi that when they first met, she had thought Tóbi was a conceited, spoiled rich girl. And Deja wanted to say that she had been right, but at the same time Tóbi was surprisingly kind to those she cared for, and Deja was grateful

to be one of those people, because Tóbi was someone she had grown fond of in return.

In the end, Deja conveyed affection the best way she knew how. “Yeah,” she said. “And you know that you look like an old Russian woman right now?”

Tóbi pushed Deja away. “Whatever,” she said, but she was smiling slightly.

Deja felt lighter as she and Tóbi caught up with the other three, who were still speaking in hushed voices about buttresses.

“Are there buttresses on the rear ends of buildings?” Fabien asked.

“There can be,” Monte said. “And the larger a building is, the larger the buttress needs to be.”

“I bet you love large buttresses, old man.”

“They are more difficult to work with. If they’re not set properly, they’ll constantly shake.”

By now, Monte had caught onto Fabien’s implications, even grinning with him. They seemed to be sustaining the joke for Eden, who was trying and failing to contain her laughter.

Deja could not blame them for wanting to draw out Eden’s laughter; she had the kind of laugh that filled up the entire room and everyone in it. Deja hated drugs, but when Eden laughed, Deja felt that she could understand how easy it was to become addicted.

But they had work to do. So, reluctantly, Deja said, “Yo, Dumb, Dumber, and Dumbest, shut up before the janitor upstairs hears us. Let’s just get the record.”

They had come to a stairwell leading down. They descended the stairs to the basement and were met by a heavy door which, once again, easily opened for them thanks to Eden’s hacking skills.

Their flashlights scanned the spacious basement, illuminating dozens of filing cabinets and boxes lining the bare walls. Deja walked to one cabinet and opened a drawer. Within were what looked like a couple hundred folders squeezed together. Deja pulled one out at random.

The folder held papers so old that they were stiff and crinkled. Deja handled them carefully as she thumbed through them. The

sheets listed a student's identifying information—name, birth date, address—as well as their classes, teachers, and extracurriculars. There were six sheets in each folder—one for each year the student had been at Tanglewood.

Her friends were similarly inspecting the cabinets. "Looks like each drawer is one academic year," Fabien remarked. He tapped the front of the cabinet next to him, which had *1916-1917* engraved on it.

"We don't know the exact years Dawn attended Tanglewood, but we do know her diaries were written between 1899-1901," Monte said. "That makes five possibilities for Dawn's graduation year: Class of 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, or 1905. I assume a student's file is kept in their final year, but since we don't know if Dawn made it to graduation, it would be safest to go through all the cabinets corresponding to the possible years she could have been at Tanglewood: 1895-1905. That's ten academic school years to search, and there's five of us. We can each take two cabinets."

He gestured to Fabien, and together they removed the drawers corresponding to the years Monte mentioned, spacing them out on the floor.

As they all began sifting through the folders, Monte remarked, "Looks like my drawers aren't alphabetized."

Tóbi groaned. "Mine neither," she said. "What, did decent organization only begin with our generation?"

"Yeah, it's called a computer," Deja said. She skimmed her own drawers to see that, just like the others, its names were not in order. She merely shrugged. "Quit whining. The sooner we start looking, the sooner we find Dawn's file."

There were sighs, but everyone got to work. The sounds of papers rustling filled the otherwise silent basement for several long moments.

Eventually, Tóbi announced, "There's no Dawn Novak file in either of my drawers."

"Mine don't have Dawn's file either," Monte said a moment later, and soon after, Eden echoed the same sentiment.

Deja's heart sank as she thumbed through the last of the files in her second drawer. "Nothing here."

"Do you have Dawn's file, Fabien?" Tóbi demanded.

"Just give me a moment, will you?" Fabien grumbled without looking up from his drawer. "I'm still on my first drawer. I dunno how you lot are so fast."

"You might wanna hurry up," Eden said. She had returned to her laptop, which showed footage of the security cameras she had left running as normal on the second floor. "The janitor ain't upstairs anymore. He must have come downstairs."

"Go find a way out of Hamilton," Deja said. "I don't want you getting in trouble if he finds us here."

"If you ain't leaving, neither am I," Eden protested.

"Well, *I'm* leaving," Tóbi declared. Her Prada boots clicked against the floor as she walked to the basement door. "I'm not getting a mark on my record for this. This is not how my political career dies!"

Monte held the door open for her, then he glanced back at Deja and Eden questioningly. Deja said to Eden, "I'll help the world's slowest reader"—she nodded at Fabien—"with his second cabinet. We'll catch up when we're done. But you need to help the others get out of Hamilton without running into the janitor."

Eden still looked disgruntled, but she must have seen reason in Deja's words, because she nodded and left the basement, monitoring Hamilton's cameras with her laptop balanced on her arms.

"We'll wait for you in the woods in front of Hamilton," Monte said before following after Eden and Tóbi.

Deja quickly squatted next to Fabien's second drawer and searched the folders. Her heart beat fast with anticipation, sure that with each folder she thumbed through, the next name she read would be the one she sought. She did not realize she had been holding her breath until she reached the last folder in her drawer—and it was not Dawn's.

"Fabien, you ain't done yet?" Deja snapped, the question coming out more forceful than intended in her growing sense of urgency.

As he flipped through the last few folders in his drawer, Fabien said, “I have three … two … and one.” He looked up at Deja apologetically. “Nothing.”

Bitter disappointment rose in Deja’s mouth like bile. With Dawn’s diaries having ended so abruptly, her student record was the one thing Deja could think of that might have shown what became of Dawn. Without it, it was getting more and more difficult to deny that Dawn was probably killed at the hands of her bullies.

Deja said, “I guess we should put the drawers back in the cabinet ‘fore we leave—”

“Hey! What do you kids think you’re doing down here?”

Deja’s heart leapt as the janitor appeared in the basement’s open doorway. She had not noticed him because he had turned off his flashlight, probably to investigate noises he heard, but now he switched it on. Deja hid her face with her arms just in time to prevent the janitor from getting a good look at her.

“New plan,” Deja said. *“Run.”*

She rushed to a filing cabinet near the door and pulled it over. With a yelp, the janitor ran to catch it before it hit the ground. In the same instant, Deja and Fabien ran past him, out of the basement.

Deja’s distraction had only bought them a few seconds—before long, the janitor was chasing after them.

“Stop!” he yelled.

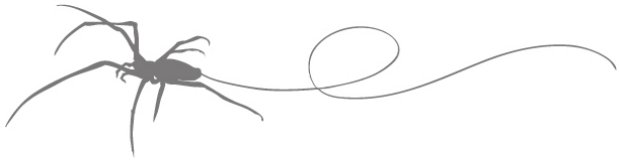
“Go, go, *go*,” Fabien urged Deja, as though they were not already running as fast as they could.

They dashed through Hamilton and hurtled out the front entrance. The ground was still somewhat slippery from snow, but they dared not slow their pace as they sprinted toward where Monte, Eden, and Tóbi stood outside.

“What’s wrong …?” Monte began to ask, but broke off, his eyes widening as his question was answered in the form of the janitor bursting out from Hamilton.

“Just go!” Deja said as she and Fabien ran past them without stopping.

She did not glance back, but she knew the other three were running behind them by the sounds of their footfalls. From somewhere far behind them, the janitor called out again, but his words were eclipsed by the crackling of branches underfoot and their heavy breathing—and, surprisingly, their laughter.



“I saw my life flash before my eyes,” Fabien said, laughing. “It was wicked!”

Following their narrow escape, once it was clear they had lost the janitor, they stopped to catch their breath. As their adrenaline faded, they had realized they were hungry. Earlier today, the dining hall had served a Thanksgiving meal to students who remained on campus, but Deja and her friends had long missed it. Fortunately, Monte was able to get permission from The Log Cabin’s faculty supervisor to have food delivered to campus. Deja and her friends had looked up takeout places online and found only one place nearby that was open for the holiday: a Zebra Rush in the next town over.

To meet their delivery driver, they had walked to the Fleming Gate, which was a great wrought iron gate topped by the Tanglewood Prep crest. The gate had marked the school’s official entrance for over one hundred years. It was flanked by two stone pillars, one of which had an inscription:

NEAR THIS SPOT LIE THE REMAINS OF NELSON

FLEMING THE GENEROUS GIVER OF THE LAND

UPON WHICH THE ORIGINAL BUILDINGS OF THIS

SCHOOL WERE ERECTED

With two hours until curfew, Deja and her friends had decided to eat in Bartleby. They had settled in a lounge that had graffiti-covered chalkboard walls and a fire roaring in its stone hearth. Their failure to find Dawn's record lingered in the back of Deja's mind, and she knew she was not the only one. However, the exhilaration of their narrow escape from Hamilton had raised their spirits, and at least for tonight, they seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement to put the failure aside as they dined on steaming cartons of jollof rice and savory meat stew.

"I think that's the fastest I've ever run," Fabien continued. "You should've seen it—I was like *go,* and Deja was like *ahh*! She was so scared."

"Bull," Deja said. "The scream was yours."

"But in the end, we made it out, didn't we?" Fabien asked. "We totally smashed that break-in! Hey, pass the plantain?"

Monte handed him a carton of fried plantain, then he leaned back on the sofa next to Deja. He combed a hand through his blond hair in apparent fatigue.

"That was one of the most stressful things that's ever happened to me," he said, "and that's saying something."

"Cheer up, old man," Fabien said. "A little fun is good for the soul. You only live once, right?"

"God, I hope so."

"I'm just glad we didn't get caught," Tóbi said. She had shed her headscarf and sunglasses, and she was curled onto a sofa next to Eden. "Something like this on my record would give my future political opponents all the ammunition they need."

Deja rolled her eyes. "There you go again, talking 'bout your future campaigns. What are you even gonna run for?"

Tóbi took her time cutting a meat pie with a plastic fork and knife, which she insisted on using even though meat pie was a finger food. Then she answered, "After practicing law for a few years, I'm going to run for district attorney. After I win that, I'm going to run for governor of California. And then, eventually, I'm going to be president."

Fabien choked on his malt beverage. “Of the colonies?” he spluttered.

“The United States, yes.”

Deja groaned. “You’re gonna make me protest against you?”

“You won’t need to,” Monte said. “With Tóbi in office, I’m sure things will actually get done.”

They laughed—everyone except for Tóbi.

“That’s the plan,” she said. “Because I think America is the greatest country in the world, but I also think there are so many ways it could be better. When I’m president, I’m going to make it into a country we can all be proud of.”

She crossed her legs, sitting up straighter as she added, “And, if you guys are lucky, maybe you’ll still be friends with me.”

Tóbi’s eyes shone black with determination. No one was laughing now; there had been a shift in the room, and the air seemed to crackle with electricity.

Fabien rose to his feet. The others just barely cleared their food off the table as he stepped onto it.

“Hey—!”

“What are you—?”

“When my dad got sick,” Fabien said loudly, over their complaints, “his lungs stopped working well. To cheer him up, I picked up his trumpet, and I played at his bedside every day, right until the day he died. I’ve played every day since, and I’m going to keep playing my way into a legendary jazz career of my own. And when I perform in New York, Paris, Cape Town, and everywhere in between, the concert halls will be packed full every single time.”

“And I’ll be in one of those seats,” Monte declared. “In the VIP section, because I’ll be the one who designed the hall. In fact, any time you find yourself in a major city, just assume the entire skyline was designed by my architecture firm.”

Eden cleared her throat. “I’m going to have a cottage in the middle of the woods, really far away from people.”

“I can design that too,” Monte said. “What kind of cottage do you want?”

Eden pulled on a curl. “One with a door?”

Monte raised an eyebrow, smiling. “You make a tough order, Eden, but I’ll see what I can do …”

“Hold on,” Tóbi said suddenly. “Deja still hasn’t said what she wants.”

Deja nearly flinched; she had hoped no one would notice. She enjoyed listening to her friends’ dreams, but she found herself uncharacteristically shy about the thought of sharing her own.

“This is stupid,” Deja said, trying to make them back off.

“Oh, come off it,” Fabien said, sitting on the table, in front of her.

“We’re pouring our hearts out here. It’s only fair you do the same.”

Monte nodded, placing his arm over the chair behind Deja. “It’d be logical too. You’re in a room with our generation’s very brightest __”

“Et nos in via lux,” Fabien sang.

“Precisely,” Monte said. “But we can’t help light your way if we don’t know where you’re going.”

“I think you should tell us,” said Eden. She gave Deja a small, encouraging smile that made Deja’s face become warmer than it already was.

“No, you have to tell us,” Tóbi said. “We’re just going to keep bugging you until you give in.”

“Okay, fine!” Deja snapped.

They leaned into her. Uncomfortable from the sudden attention, Deja looked down at her lap. She picked at her nails for a moment.

Then, very quietly, she said, “I write poetry.”

“She writes poetry!” Fabien and Monte exclaimed.

“That’s perfect,” Tóbi said. “You can be my Poet Laureate.”

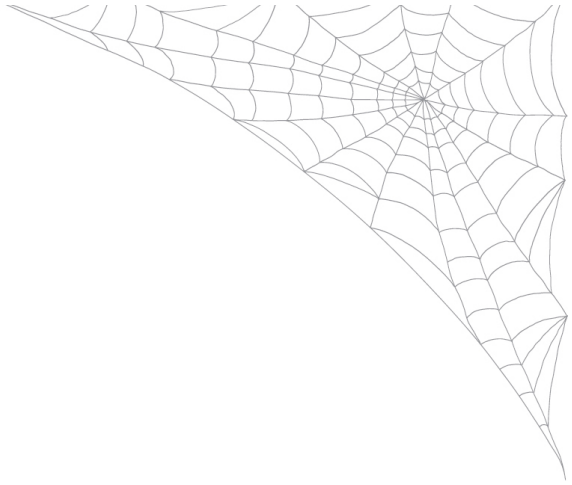
“I’ll frame one of your quotes to hang in my cottage,” Eden said.

Deja looked at her friends in amazement. She had placed in poetry contests across Louisiana throughout her life, but she had never admitted to anyone that she was passionate enough about it to pursue it as a career. Her friends’ easy acceptance warmed her even better than the fireplace.

“All of you are so stupid,” she said, her face burning.

But as the night stretched on, and her friends continued passionately discussing their futures, Deja found herself smiling. Sitting around the fire should have paled in excitement to breaking into Hamilton, and yet, Deja knew this moment would become the most memorable part of today. Nothing in particular happened, not really. But as they spoke, it felt as if the world was opening up around them. And for one night, anything seemed possible.

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CHAPTER 17

A NEW CHAPTER

As winter break approached, Tanglewood Prep buzzed with excitement for holiday plans. Plans to take yachts to private islands; to attend banquets in the German countryside; to shop for gifts in New York and Milan—all in the same day, thanks to family jets.

Just the same old festivities Tanglewood students were accustomed to.

Tóbi, however, had trouble getting into the holiday spirit. She tried not to show it, but the dead end they had hit in their Dawn Novak investigation weighed on her. The bleaker the outcome of Dawn's story seemed, the more Tóbi could not help but feel as though all her own efforts at Tanglewood would be in vain.

A part of her still wanted to believe that, to feel appreciated, all she needed to do was work harder. Since the end of Thanksgiving break, she had shifted her focus to her hefty to-do list, letting it consume most of her time. Tonight was no different. She sat in a room in Bartleby, planners and assignments spread out on the table before her. With one hand, she typed out emails on her laptop, and with the other, she updated group chats.

Had she a third hand, she would have used it to scroll through the photos on her tablet, deciding which to choose as her weekly social media post. But luckily, Eden, who had somehow already finished all her work, had volunteered to do that for her.

“This one?” Eden asked, turning the tablet around to show Tóbi a photo.

Tóbi inspected the picture before shaking her head. “I have a hair out of place.”

Eden zoomed in on the neat high puff Tóbi wore in the picture. “I don’t think anyone would notice,” she said.

“No, everyone would notice,” Tóbi corrected. “I’m one of the most followed people at Tanglewood. Everything I post is heavily scrutinized, because people always try to poke holes in my life to feel better about theirs.”

Growing up, Tóbi’s parents had been strict about keeping her away from the Internet, unwilling to invite public scrutiny onto their family. A family of immigrants achieving the American Dream was a romantic notion, but it only took one slip-up to make others question if that success was not better deserved by a different kind of immigrant, one not from Africa. But Tóbi had wanted to prove that she could be helpful to her parents in this way, and two years ago, they finally allowed her access to social media. She had since brought the online profiles for her family’s restaurant a notable following. Although her parents hardly acknowledged her contribution, Tóbi still felt a familial obligation to ensure her online presence depicted her life as nothing less than perfect.

Eden asked, “Have you ever tried posting something just for yourself?”

“What?” Tóbi asked, surprised. “What’s the point of that?”

“It could be fun, doing what you want instead of what you think others want from you.” Eden shrugged, returning her attention to the tablet. In a much softer voice, she said, “I just wish you wouldn’t put so much pressure on yourself.”

As Eden continued scrolling through photos, Tóbi could not help but stare. When Eden had ignored Tóbi’s invitation for lunch last year, Tóbi had assumed Eden thought she was too good for Tóbi. And yet, as they had gotten to know each other in the past few months, nothing Eden did had so much as hinted at an ego. She was just quiet—and Tóbi could not believe she had ever mistaken that for arrogance.

She wanted to ask Eden why she was clever and driven enough to skip a grade, yet she was not involved in anything on campus, or why she did not seem to have any other friends despite being so kind. But before Tóbi could find the right words, there was a knock at the door, and Deja, Fabien, and Monte entered.

"We're going to dinner," Fabien announced.

Pulling herself out of her thoughts, Tóbi gestured to the laden table. "I'm busy," she said.

"At least free Eden," said Deja.

"It's okay," Eden said. "I've already eaten something today."

Monte raised an eyebrow. "You're supposed to eat three things a day, Eden."

"There were at least three M&Ms in the packet."

The others exchanged concerned looks. Tóbi sighed.

"Thank you for your help, Eden, but you should go eat dinner," she said. "Real food, not just dessert."

Fabien wrapped his arm around Eden's shoulders, and as he guided her out of the room, he said to her, "Sometimes, I don't know how you're still alive, mate."

"Don't work too hard," Deja warned Tóbi.

Tóbi smiled, but as soon as they left the room, her smile dropped. There was still so much to plan, to finalize, to study for. There was no way Tóbi could work too hard, not when it felt like she was never working hard enough.

She had just sent her tenth email that night when a new message from Headmaster Egleston popped into her inbox.

Re: Wildfire Prom Plans

From: egleston@tanglewood.edu

To: oekundayo2@tanglewood.edu

Dec. 1 5:59PM

Dear Tóbi,

The faculty and I have reviewed your budget proposal concerning the decorations for Wildfire Prom, and it has been approved.

> We were very impressed with your level of detail and consideration. Not only are you the first female chair of Tanglewood's prom committee, but you are also by far the most efficient. Honestly, I do not know how Tanglewood functioned prior to becoming coeducational relatively recently. Thank you for all that you do.
>
> Sincerely,
> Headmaster Egleston

Pleased, Tóbi reread the email, particularly the part where Egleston complimented her efforts. She had been upset when, at the beginning of the school year, another student had initially been made chair of the prom committee, particularly because that student's plans seemed so lacking compared to hers. But after a few weeks, the holes in the former chair's plans became too glaring to ignore, and the committee's faculty supervisor rightfully replaced the former chair with Tóbi. She supposed late recognition was better than none—but like hunger that had been ignored for too long, rather than satisfying Tóbi, the tiny morsel of recognition only made her crave more, meaning she needed to work even harder.

But first, Tóbi wanted to call her parents. She'd had her weekly check-in with her father yesterday, and the call had been shamefully short after having no new grades or developments to give an update on. But now, with her plan for prom having been approved, she had something to show her parents.

She called her father, but after a few moments of ringing, the call was sent to voicemail. She tried her mother next, only for the same thing to happen. Tóbi suppressed her disappointment; her parents were very busy, after all. And anyway, she should have known better than to try talking to them; her parents were the ones who usually called her, not the other way around, and they never did so outside their weekly allocated check-ins.

She turned back to her other work—then something occurred to her. Frowning, she scanned the end of the email again. Coeducation at Tanglewood began recently? But had Tóbi and her friends not

concluded that Dawn attended Tanglewood in the early 1900s, around the time the school had welcomed its first Black students?

There was a knock at the door, and Tóbi straightened up as Monte entered. She waited for another person to appear, but to Tóbi's surprise, Monte had come alone.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"You need to eat," he said. When Tóbi began to protest, he added, "I know, you're busy. That's why I brought you something."

Tóbi's stomach growled. Hoping Monte had not heard it, she accepted the salad he gave her and said, "Thank you."

Monte took the seat next to her. "Aren't you going to take a break to eat?" he asked.

"I can eat and work," Tóbi said. Why was he still here?

"Let me rephrase—you should take a break to eat," Monte said.

"I don't have the time. So, thank you for the food, but I'm going to get back to work now."

She began writing in her planner, hoping he would understand the dismissal.

Instead, he said, "I have several events to plan myself, so I get how stressful it can be. Maybe I can help you."

"Help?" Tóbi laughed, setting down her pencil. "You are the last person I want help from. You're the reason I have so much work in the first place."

Monte sighed, leaning back in his seat. "You're talking about the presidency."

"Of course I'm talking about the presidency," Tóbi snapped. "Why else would I have taken on so many additional extracurriculars this year? I need to make up for losing the election."

She picked up her pencil again, but before she could write, Monte plucked it out of her hand.

"What is your problem—?" Tóbi demanded.

"You have nothing to 'make up for,'" Monte interjected. "You have nothing to prove. Even if you didn't win class president this year, you are still one of the most impressive students that

Tanglewood will ever have. And if others can't see how exceptional you are, that's their mistake. Not yours."

What Monte did not understand was that the "others" who overlooked her accomplishments were mostly her parents. And if the judgment was coming from her own family, how could they not be right about her?

And yet the intensity of Monte's gaze rendered Tóbi momentarily speechless, preventing her from arguing. His praise of Tóbi's character seemed genuine, and despite herself, Tóbi was compelled to believe him too.

When she managed to find her voice, Tóbi asked, "Can I have my pencil back?"

"Take a bite of the salad first."

"I really need to keep working."

"Just one bite."

Tóbi rolled her eyes. She stabbed a plastic fork into the salad and shoved a chunk of lettuce into her mouth. Then she proffered her hand to Monte.

"Pencil," she said, her voice somewhat muffled.

Monte dropped the pencil onto her open palm. If Tóbi had not already known he was emotionless, she would have thought Monte appeared faintly amused.

She chewed slowly, watching him inspect one of the table's many flyers. First he tried to encourage her, and now he was making sure she ate. It was not how rivals typically treated each other.

"Why are you being so nice to me lately?" she asked him.

"I'm as nice as I've always been."

"No, the guy who's offering to help me is not the same guy who stole my presidency. And I don't like having to be worried about who's going to show up today."

"The guy who stole your presidency isn't proud of that, and I promise you'll never have to see him again," Monte said, still examining various papers on the table. "We've had it out for each other since the ninth grade, and I think we can both agree it's

getting old. So, maybe it's time to put an end to that feud, begin a new chapter."

"Because of the Dawn Novak investigation?" Tóbi asked.

"No, I've been thinking about this for a while." Monte adjusted his glasses before adding, "Although, I am grateful to the investigation for giving me an excuse to talk to you."

At last, Monte looked up. Tóbi had never noticed the layers in his eyes until now. It was like looking at a melted palette, colors melding together to create an ever-shifting brown.

When she realized she was staring, Tóbi quickly turned back to her work. As she organized her planner, Monte began filling out a club T-shirt order form on the table. The scratching of their pens against paper were the only sounds in the room.

The ease with which they worked alongside each other made Tóbi recall what Fabien had said shortly before Thanksgiving break, when he had implied Monte had helped her.

"Fabien mentioned something once that I've been meaning to ask you about," she said slowly.

When she did not go on, Monte looked up. "What did he say?"

"He said … well, he implied, that your fight in September—the one that you got detention for—had something to do with me."

"Yes, that's true."

Tóbi did not know which shocked her more—that Fabien was right, or that Monte had confirmed it so easily.

"Monte, why did you fight that guy?" Tóbi asked.

"He was one of my teammates who was outside my door the night you broke into my dorm. Turns out they heard us arguing and figured out what happened. When I asked them not to mention it to anyone, they all agreed—except him. I found out he was going to post about it, and I got, ah, upset."

Tóbi stared, nonplussed. "You're lying," she said.

"You can ask them. It's not a secret."

"But—did I hear correctly that you broke his jaw?"

"It was not my most rational act," Monte admitted with a shrug. "I've since sent him flowers and a card. His mother has told me his physical therapy is going well."

Tóbi laughed. Monte looked surprised. She did not blame him—she had not expected herself to laugh either. But his shock only made her laugh harder.

A rare smile broke over Monte's face. He rarely wore joy so unguardedly; it aged him backwards, making him look like the seventeen-year-old she often forgot he was.

Tóbi's phone vibrated, and her heart skipped a beat when she saw a call from her mother. "Excuse me, I should take this," she said to Monte, who gave her a nod as she left the room.

As Tóbi walked to the stairwell at the end of the hallway and sat on the top step, she answered the call. "Good evening, ma."

"Olúwatóbi, I saw your missed call. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, ma, I'm fine."

"I just refilled your account a few days ago."

Tóbi frowned. "I didn't call to ask for money."

"Oh. So, why did you call?"

It was not the most inviting note, but Tóbi was sure that would change after she shared her news. "I mentioned a while ago that I submitted a proposal for this year's prom," Tóbi said. "And I wanted to tell you that it's just been approved!"

"Prom?"

The indifference in her mother's tone came as a sharp surprise, pricking the pride that had been swelling in Tóbi and deflating her almost immediately. "Yes, I'm the chair of the prom committee. I've told you this before." Then, afraid she had sounded rude, Tóbi added, "Ma."

"Oh, okay." After a pause, her mother asked, "Are you in Business Club as well?"

"No," Tóbi said reluctantly.

"Your brother was in Business Club when he attended Tanglewood. He was always very passionate about that sort of thing, very savvy too. He planned to work on Zebra Rush's executive board when he grew up, you know. I wish you would do the same."

Tóbi shrugged helplessly. "I want to go into politics."

"We'll see. Maybe you'll change your mind."

"I … don't think I will."

“Hm.”

Silence.

“Well,” Tóbi said, “that’s all. I just wanted to give you that update.”

“Okay, then. Stay blessed, Olúwatóbi, and continue to do well in your studies. O dáàbọ.”

“Goodbye, ma,” Tóbi echoed.

She moved to end the call, only to find her mother had already hung up. Tóbi rested her arms on her knees and her head on her arms.

She was tired. Speaking to her parents made her tired.

After a moment, she forced herself to stand and begin heading down the hallway. She had been proud that her hard work on the proposal paid off, but that was just one thing. It had been premature, celebrating when she still had so many things left to do. She was glad her mother had given her that reality check. Positively grateful.

In fact, Tóbi was so grateful that it must have shown on her face, because as soon as she entered the room she had been working in earlier, Monte jumped to his feet.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

“Ugh,” Tóbi said. “I forgot you were in here.”

“Tóbi, what happened?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tóbi snapped. “I just really need to get back to work. So, if you’re not going to help, then please leave, because I can’t talk right now.”

Monte walked up to her. For a moment, she thought he was going to walk past her, leaving as she had told him to. She panicked, worried she had upset him just as they had begun to be on decent terms—but then Monte pulled her into a hug.

“Okay,” he said. “We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

Tóbi was rigid with shock for a heartbeat before she broke down completely. Monte wrapped his arms tighter around her, holding her together. Despite it being winter, he smelled like a summer ocean breeze.

After a moment, Tóbi realized aloud, “My makeup’s staining your sweater.”

She tried to wipe a smudge off Monte’s chest to no avail.

“It’s alright, I’m sure it’ll wash out,” Monte said.

That made Tóbi cry harder.

“What is it?” Monte asked, alarmed. “What did I say wrong?”

“You can’t machine wash cashmere,” Tóbi sobbed. “It’ll damage the fibers.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll get it dry-cleaned. I promise.”

Tóbi thought she heard a smile in Monte’s voice, but when she looked up at him, his expression was earnest. With a sniff, she nodded and rested her head on his chest once more. He placed his chin on the top of her head, slightly rocking them from side to side.

After a few minutes, Monte asked, “You probably have to get back to work, right?”

“I should,” Tóbi said. She glanced at the table and the tasks Monte had started. “You should too.”

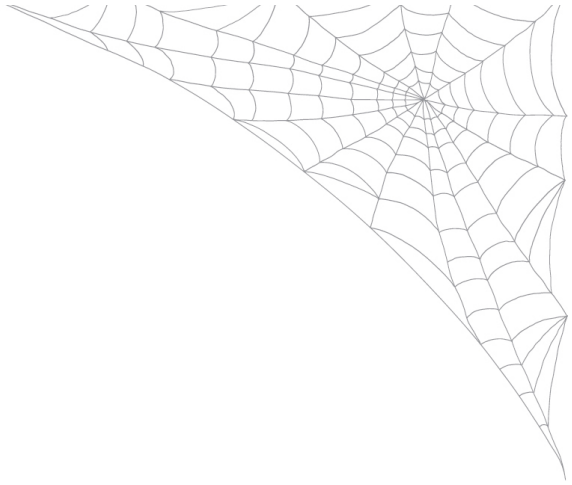
“It’d be logical,” Monte agreed.

Yet he did not release her, and Tóbi did not try pulling away.

“We can also stay like this for a little longer,” Monte added.

“Sure,” Tóbi said, closing her eyes. “Just a little bit.”

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CHAPTER 18

ONE GENERATION AGO

After dinner, Deja and Eden retired to The Palace's common room, a stone den lit by the warm orange glow of an elaborate fireplace. Deja sat at a table, knitting. At first, she had been hesitant to knit next to Eden, lest Eden ask what she was making. But fortunately, Eden was preoccupied; the whole time she had been sitting across from Deja, she had been speaking on the phone with her mom. Deja knew it was her mom because that was the only person who could get Eden to speak on the phone.

"Yes, I've eaten something other than candy today," Eden was saying. "Yes, I promise … Okay … Okay, love you. Bye."

Eden hung up and stowed her phone in her jean jacket. She picked up her can of juice and drank it through a Twizzler, then she ate the Twizzler.

Deja watched in mild concern. "Your teeth are gonna rot," she told Eden.

"Not today, though," Eden said, starting on another Twizzler.

Shaking her head, Deja continued knitting. Eden took a handheld game console out of her backpack and turned it on.

Deja asked, "You playing *Charmborne*? You still trying to fight that alligator-looking guy?"

"First of all," Eden said, "you don't fight folks in *Charmborne*, you duel. Second, if you're talking 'bout Bayou Boss, he doesn't look like an alligator—he is one. And third, no, I beat that level already.

Now I'm trying to find some cattail for Madame Monique's potion." She glanced up from her video game. "Y'know, you wouldn't have to ask me 'bout *Charmborne* all the time if you just played it yourself."

Deja scoffed. "I don't ask 'bout that dumb game that much," she said.

They both knew she was lying; she had asked Eden about the game nearly every day for at least the last month. However, it was not from a place of interest. Deja had never cared for video games, and half the time when Eden spoke about *Charmborne*, she might as well have been speaking French for how much of it Deja grasped. But Deja just enjoyed hearing Eden's voice, and *Charmborne* was the easiest way to get her to talk.

So, Deja said, "Tell me more 'bout beating up the crocodile."

"He's an *alligator*, Deja," Eden said. The exasperation in her voice nearly made Deja smile.

Nonetheless, Eden began to indulge Deja. But her gaze strayed to the common room's entrance, and she paused. "Tóbi?"

Deja glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, Tóbi was entering the common room.

"You lost?" she asked as Tóbi came up to their table. "This ain't The Dollhouse, and curfew hits soon."

"I know, I would've come earlier, but I got distracted and only just remembered," Tóbi said, pulling out her laptop.

She showed them her screen. On it, a page from the school's website displayed a timeline of Tanglewood Prep's history.

"Headmaster Egleston mentioned that Tanglewood became coeducational relatively recently," Tóbi said. "And it's true. Girls weren't able to attend Tanglewood until 1988."

"But what about Dawn?" Eden asked, grasping the significance of this information before Deja did. "She attended Tanglewood in the early twentieth century as one of Tanglewood's first Black students."

Tóbi shook her head. "We were wrong. Yes, Tanglewood welcomed its first Black student in 1899—its first Black *male* student. But no Black girl was admitted until a few years after the

school opened its doors to all girls, making them the very last group to enter Tanglewood."

"You're telling me those entries dated '99-'01 weren't written in the early 1900s, but in the early 2000s?" Deja asked in disbelief. "But her diaries looked ancient."

"Her bullies did try to burn them once," Tóbi reminded her. "The fire damage must have made them look older than they were."

"That's why we couldn't find her school record," Eden said suddenly. "We were looking in the wrong century, and Tanglewood shifted to electronic recordkeeping like forty years ago."

Deja's heart leapt at the realization that there was still hope of them finding Dawn's record. "Can you access the school's database?" Deja asked.

"It's protected, but it's easy enough to get into." Eden retrieved her laptop from her backpack. "I can do it right now."

"I'll move my laptop off the table so that you can—oh!" Tóbi began, but in the process of moving her laptop, she tugged on one of Deja's knitting needles and broke its cord.

"They were old," Deja assured her. "Were probably gonna break soon anyways."

"Still, I want to take responsibility for it," Tóbi said.

She reached into her yellow Birkin Bag and extracted a hundred dollar bill, then offered it to Deja.

Deja stared. "These are really cheap needles," she said.

"Yes," Tóbi said, "so this should cover it, right?"

Deja considered explaining what "cheap" meant to normal people, but she decided it was a lost cause.

"Seriously, don't worry about it," she said, waving away the cash. "I have another pair."

"I found it," Eden said.

Deja gathered her broken needles and stuffed them into her knapsack. By the time she moved behind Eden's chair, next to Tóbi, Eden had already opened the file. Time seemed to freeze, a collective breath being held among the three of them as Eden scrolled through Dawn's record, slow enough for them to read it.

According to the record, Dawn enrolled at Tanglewood in 1997, making her Class of 2003. The record also showed that, true to her diaries, Dawn was a top student; she had received an A in every class she ever took at Tanglewood and was a member of a handful of clubs.

"She's still enrolled," Eden said.

Deja searched the record to find that Eden was right. Bizarrely enough, Dawn's enrollment period was displayed as *09/01/1997 – ongoing*.

Eden placed her finger on the laptop's screen, at another section of the record. A chill went down Deja's spine as she read what was written there.

Status: Inactive (not attending since 10/20/2002)

After a long stretch of silence, Tóbi asked shakily, "What does that mean?"

"I think we know what it means," Deja said, her voice surprisingly calm, a sharp contrast to the uneasiness creeping over her. "But just to make sure, Eden, pull up another student's record—any random record. Then pull up my mom."

Keeping Dawn's page on screen, Eden opened a new window and clicked on the archive of last year's graduating class, then clicked on a guy's photo. The status displayed on his record read, *Graduated*.

Next, Eden searched up *Renée Freeman*. The photo that popped up was one that Cybele had shared with Deja before, a yearbook picture of her mom. Deja was irritated to see that her mom truly had been a good student, her record displaying she passed her classes with mostly A's and only a few B's.

But Deja forced herself to focus on what she was looking for in the record, until she found it: *Status: Withdrawn*.

Deja slammed her hand on the back of Eden's chair, startling both Eden and Tóbi.

Deja was too angry to care. "If Dawn dropped out or graduated, it would have shown on her record," she said. "Tanglewood knew she was an orphan with nowhere to go. But she's been missing since 2002, and they just wrote it off on her record and moved on. Dawn

was probably killed by her bullies, and Tanglewood never even cared enough to look into it. Damn it!"

Her frustration reached a boiling point, and she kicked an empty chair. It wobbled, but it did not fall. Deja took aim again, but a hand grasped her arm. She looked to see Eden, who now stood beside her.

"Tanglewood may not have cared 'bout Dawn, but we do," Eden reminded her. "Even if no one else at this school cares 'bout Black girls, we care 'bout each other. And that's why we'll just keep trying even harder to find out what happened to her, right?"

In the firelight, Eden's large brown eyes were a warm orange that soothed Deja, like a salve to her anger. Not completely, but enough that the frustration knotted in Deja's chest loosened.

"Right," Deja said grudgingly. Then, more confidently, "Right. We'll find out what happened to Dawn. For Dawn."

The few girls who were still in the common room at this time were casting judgmental glares at Deja. She did not care, but she was prepared for Tóbi to reprimand her for it.

However, when Deja turned back to the table, she saw that Tóbi had not moved, her attention still on the laptop. She stood so still, it was like she was stuck.

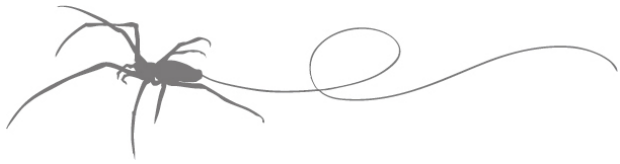
"Tinker Bell?" Deja asked uncertainly.

When Tóbi looked up from the laptop, Deja was startled to see that her dark eyes were filled with tears.

"Her bullies hung a noose on her door," she whispered. "They told her she was dirt, and they threatened to kill her. We thought she lived over a century ago, way before Civil Rights, so I thought her harassment was just a result of the times."

Tóbi feebly gestured to the laptop, at Dawn's still-open student record.

"But this was the twenty-first century. A Black girl was probably killed, just for being Black, and no one cared. And it happened just one generation ago."



Deja had not wanted to return to her dorm, and she was not the only one.

Both Eden and Tóbi had accompanied her when she decided to meet Fabien at Clarke-Reynolds Hall, where he preferred to practice now that its auditorium was nearly complete. Tóbi had not even said anything about breaking curfew.

Since discovering the actual years Dawn had attended Tanglewood, a line from the diaries had surfaced in Deja's mind, something about her bullies wearing "ugly-ass" uniforms. When she thought about it, she realized there had been a couple instances where Dawn used modern language like that. The truth had been right in front of them, but none of them had been able to fully process it. Even now, it was still difficult to accept that such severe harassment still existed, that it was not just history.

Clarke-Reynolds Hall's new auditorium was an oval-shaped room filled by arced rows of velvet seats. Its granite walls were dotted with stained-glass windows that spanned from the sloped mahogany floor to an overhead balcony that curved around the room's perimeter. From the vaulted ceiling hung countless tiny, vertical tube lights that illuminated a grand wooden stage.

The auditorium was magnificent, but Fabien was not appreciating his hall's beauty. He sat on a stool onstage, his long legs extended before him. He was hunched over, his curly hair cascading around his face, and his eyes were closed as he played his trumpet.

The slow, improvised jazz reverberated off acoustic panels so that the entire auditorium seemed to shudder with sorrow. With the amount of emotion Fabien projected through his trumpet, he was not just playing; he was feeling.

Eden and Tóbi sat in the audience, a few rows behind the orchestra pit. Deja sat directly behind them, resting her arms and

chin on the back of Eden's seat. With Clarke-Reynolds Hall still under construction, they did not need to worry about running into campus safety, since no officers were assigned to this area of campus yet. Although, even if they were to get caught, Deja doubted she and her friends would care. They were too numb to do anything other than listen to Fabien's music.

This was how Monte found them when he arrived at the auditorium around midnight. "I turned my phone off to study and only just saw the group chat's messages," he said apologetically as he took the seat next to Deja. When no one acknowledged his arrival, Monte asked in a quieter voice, "We're sure that Dawn was a student in the early 2000s?"

"Yes," said Eden.

"My parents are older than Dawn," Tóbi commented absently.

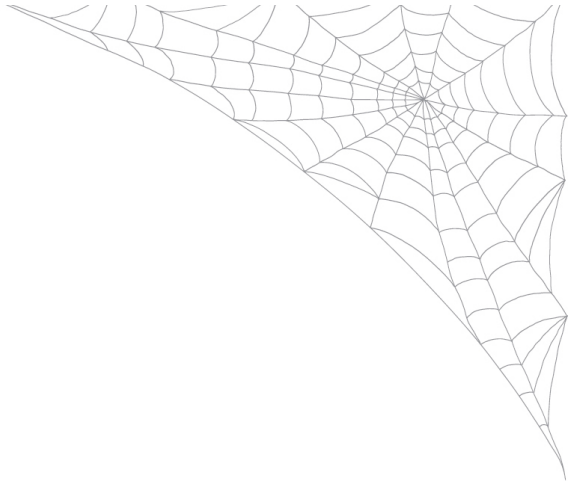
"They're older than her bullies too," Deja said hoarsely. "Those jerks are still alive, and knowing Tanglewood's alums, they're probably somewhere high-up."

"Damn," Monte said. Then, again, "Damn."

"It's so …" Deja began, but she let her sentence drop off.

No one tried to pick up the conversation again, for in that moment, Fabien began a new, sad melody that said what they were all feeling much better than any of them ever could.

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CHAPTER 19

WINTER BREAK

The third week in December saw the start of mid-year exams. No classes were held; students took one exam a day, then used the rest of the day to study for their next exams.

The gray, frostbitten campus resembled a funeral. Students held vigil in the library, which stayed open all night in observance of exams. They mourned their grades and resembled zombies as they emerged from their studies only to eat, otherwise entombed in notes and textbooks.

In the future, when she looked back at this week, Tóbi knew she would not remember how she had survived all her exams, essays, and extracurriculars. She would have thought she blacked out if not for her sleep deprivation, which disproved the notion she had gotten any rest. But Tóbi's consciousness found its way back to her on Friday as she took her last exam, which was for AP Calculus.

Upon completing the exam, Tóbi intentionally rustled her belongings loudly as she packed them up and stood from her seat. Students were not required to wear uniforms during exam week, and in their fatigue, most wore sweats. Tóbi, on the other hand, had forced herself to wear a light blue knitted dress and thigh-high boots. She was especially glad she had done so now, because as she walked to the front of the lecture hall, her boots echoed through the silent room, rightly alerting her peers that she was turning in her test first.

But she nearly stumbled when she glimpsed Eden sitting at a desk with her packet closed and her attention on the nearest window. Tóbi frowned; how long had Eden been done?

As Tóbi handed her test to her math teacher at the front of the room, the woman smiled. “First one finished? I’m not at all surprised.”

Tóbi bit her lip, glancing at Eden. It was harder to enjoy praise when it was not deserved.

“Actually,” Tóbi said loudly, “Eden finished before I did.”

Several students glanced up from their tests, looking around in confusion. Most people skipped over Eden; it was clear they did not know who to look for. Eden was staring at Tóbi with wide eyes.

“Oh,” their math teacher said. “If that’s the case, come turn in your test, Eden.”

Eden did not move at first, as though staying still would render her invisible. But once their teacher beckoned to her, she stiffly made her way to them.

The teacher accepted Eden’s test and flipped through it, frowning slightly. “Interesting—you really are done. I guess my colleagues who speak highly of your academic work have reason to, don’t they?”

Tóbi’s eyes narrowed; perhaps their teacher had meant it as a compliment, but her inquiry sounded less rhetorical and more like she was truly questioning Eden’s abilities.

“I’m sure you’ll find that out for yourself once you grade her test,” Tóbi said. Then, realizing her sharpness might have been rude, she added, “But have a nice winter break.”

Eden looked like she wanted to run away. Tóbi looped her arm through Eden’s, keeping her at a steady pace as they exited the room. But as soon as they stepped out into the entrance hall, Eden untangled herself from Tóbi.

“Please don’t do that next time,” she said.

“I won’t,” Tóbi replied. “Because next time, you’re going to do it yourself.”

“No, I won’t.”

Tóbi propped her hands on her hips. “Didn’t you see how passive-aggressive that teacher was being? Why would you let someone treat you—?”

“I,” Eden interrupted, “don’t *let* folks treat me like that. They just do. It’s different for you, Tóbi—everyone at this school loves you, because you’re part of everything, and you talk to everyone. But I don’t, and apparently that’s a problem.”

Eden spoke as softly as ever, but there was a kind of steel in her voice Tóbi had never heard before. It reeled Tóbi back, making her realize Eden was not as unaware of others’ assumptions about her as Tóbi had implied.

“But have you ever tried joining a club?” Tóbi asked, choosing a more careful approach this time. “You’re clever, and you’re kind, but how’s everyone going to know that if you don’t tell them?”

“I’ve tried some clubs, but in the end, I’m most comfortable by myself. And that’s okay, because you still seem to get me. And Deja does, and so do Monte and Fabien. I don’t think it matters if not everyone knows what to think of me, ‘cause at least the folks I care ‘bout know me. So, if I want to take my time turning in my test, I will. ‘Cause I don’t see any point in trying to impress people who decided they don’t like me without even knowing me.”

Tóbi struggled to wrap her mind around Eden’s words. Tóbi did not just like being liked—to some degree, she needed it. To know that Eden did not let others’ expectations pressure her was unimaginable … and oddly admirable.

“I don’t know if you remember,” Tóbi said, “but last year, I invited you to have lunch with me. You never responded.”

“I remember, and I still feel bad ‘bout that,” Eden said, much to Tóbi’s surprise. “But I didn’t know you back then, and I get enough anxiety from speaking to people I know—it’s even worse with strangers. I panicked ‘bout what to do for a while, then it felt too late to respond, so I just never did. I know I could’ve handled that better.”

“I could have too,” Tóbi admitted. “I took your anxiety personally for no reason. I apologize for misjudging you, Eden, and for calling you a stuck-up prima donna.”

Eden frowned. “You never called me that.”

“Oh.” After a moment, Tóbi shrugged and said, “Well, I apologize for thinking it.”

“I—actually, y’know what? Fine, I’ll take it,” Eden said. She gave Tóbi a small smile, the warmth of which felt like the sun rising on the horizon, marking a new dawn.

The lecture hall door opened, and Monte stepped out of it. He quickly spotted them, and as he approached, his gaze lingered on Tóbi. She forced herself to ignore the flutter in her stomach, an odd feeling that seeing Monte gave her ever since he had comforted her last week. It was possible she was getting sick.

“Deja and Fabien said they’ll be waiting in Crowle Hall after their Pre-Calculus exam,” Monte said.

Eden and Tóbi nodded, and the three of them headed outside. Snow drifted down from the sky, but luckily, the walk to Crowle Hall was brief.

When they entered the foyer, Deja sat on the bottom step, and Fabien stood leaning on the wall next to her, wearing his silver headphones. When they noticed the others’ arrival, they stood, and the five of them began heading to the dining hall; lunch would be starting soon.

No one spoke, partly because of their exhaustion from exams, but mostly because there was simply no need to speak. At this point, they had all shared so much time—investigating Dawn or laughing over meals or even just studying silently but together—that greeting each other was as redundant as greeting oneself.

As they passed Bartleby, Deja broke the silence. “Y’all go on ‘head and save me a seat at lunch,” she said, heading to Bartleby’s entrance.

“I’ll join you after I sign up to stay on campus.”

“Lame, you’re staying on campus during winter break?” Fabien asked as he and the others came to a stop with Deja.

“It ain’t like I want to. Louisiana is being hit with snow right now, believe it or not. It’s not as bad as the snowstorms up here, but in the South even just a little snow shuts everything down. My flight

got canceled, and it don't look like things will clear up in time to be home for Christmas."

"Yeah, there's snow all over New Orleans," Eden chimed. "I'm flying to my family in Atlanta 'cause of it. But I don't know if it's good for you to be on campus alone right now, Deja. It might be a little … depressing."

Eden's words hung heavy in the air. She did not say it, but it was clear to all of them that she referred to Dawn.

Since discovering that the harassment Dawn faced had occurred not even thirty years ago, they had all taken a step back from the investigation. Finals had forced them to do so anyway, studying consuming all their time. But now that finals were over, it would be all too easy to dwell on what they knew of Dawn's story thus far. Tóbi agreed with Eden; Deja should not be dwelling on that alone.

"We could get you a hotel," Tóbi suggested.

Deja glared at her. She had already climbed one of the steps leading up to Bartleby, and with her standing on a step and Tóbi standing on the ground, they were now eye-level.

"I don't need y'all's charity," she said.

"Then come spend Christmas at Montalvo Manor," Monte said. "I think we all need a break from this school right now, but trust me, I'm not inviting you out of charity. I have three younger brothers. You'd be the one helping me, because I need someone to keep me sane."

"Three? Damn." Deja thought it over for a moment, then shrugged. "Alright. But if the rest of them are anything like Ace, I'm spending the entire break holed up in the guest room."

"Let me come too, old man," Fabien begged, pressing his palms together. "Don't make me spend Christmas with my stepdad Stan—all he talks about is bugs."

"Sure. And I guess I might as well invite everyone," Monte said, glancing at Eden and Tóbi.

Eden shook her head. "I already missed Thanksgiving, I can't miss Christmas too. My parents are waiting for me in Atlanta. We're doing our huge annual Christmas service from the Salt & Light campus there this year."

“Oh, yeah, I always watch that on TV,” Deja said. She paused, then added, “I guess I’ll be looking for you when I watch it this year.”

Eden turned away, pulling on a curl. “Cool.”

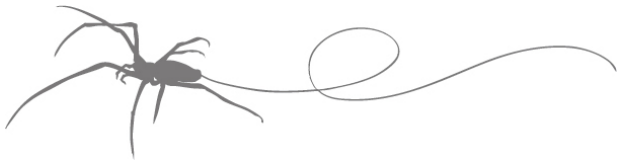
Tóbi raised a brow, looking between Eden and Deja. *Interesting.*

“I understand,” Monte said. “I can at least drive you to the airport, though.”

He looked at Tóbi and cleared his throat. Scratching the back of his neck, he asked her, “Would you like to stay at my house? For Christmas.”

Tóbi’s beautiful contemporary mansion in San Francisco was filled with photos of her older brother and his accolades, things her parents had never taken down after his death. Tóbi’s own photos and awards were all either crammed into her bedroom or here in her dorm. Needless to say, Tóbi did not like going home.

It was this that Tóbi focused on—rather than how Monte’s gaze made her feel oddly warm despite the snow—as she smiled and said, “I would love to spend Christmas with you all.”



Monte lived in Greenwich, Connecticut. It was less than a two-hour drive from Tanglewood, a journey made all the more convenient by the fact that Monte was one of the few Wildfire students permitted to keep a car on campus. Because the five of them had not left Tanglewood until after sunset, it was nearly midnight by the time Monte’s black Jaguar pulled up to an enormous, snow-covered estate.

The property was enclosed by a tall wrought iron fence, which boasted a gilded *M* that parted down the middle when Monte used a remote to open the gate. They drove down a long driveway lit by dozens of ground lights and that eventually curved into a roundabout with a frosted fountain in its center.

Behind the fountain was Montalvo Manor: a massive French Normandy-styled structure made of granite. It shone in the night, illuminated by golden lights.

Eden's flight was not until morning, so she had come with them. She had stuck her head out the window for most of the drive despite the cold, but as they pulled into one of the manor's six garages, Tóbi glanced over her shoulder to the back seat and said, "Eden, roll up the window. And wake up the other two."

With some grumbling, they extracted their luggage from the Jaguar—but only what they needed for tonight. Monte assured them his household staff could get the rest in the morning.

Motion-sensored lights clicked on as soon as they stepped inside the manor's two-story foyer. Its walls were lined by a curved double staircase that met below a chandelier hanging from the high ceiling.

"Well damn …" Deja said, her fatigue apparently fading as she walked to the adjacent room.

The others followed her through multiple living rooms. Each space was decorated for the holidays, with garlands hanging alongside intricately framed paintings, and fir trees of varying sizes glowing warmly atop opulent rugs and beside grand leather couches.

"Not bad," Fabien said.

"Not bad?" Deja repeated, incredulous. "I'm pretty sure everyone in Sweetwater can fit into this place."

"I was referring to the Steinway," Fabien said, gesturing to a grand piano positioned next to a window wall. "But yeah, I guess the house is cool too."

Deja's disbelief only grew when she saw the others regarded Monte's house in the same casual manner as Fabien.

"Right," she said. "I forgot the rest of y'all have houses just like this—"

"Boo!"

Deja screamed as a little boy jumped out from behind a couch. He had long, light brown hair and wore frog pajamas. Giggling madly, he ran to Monte, who embraced him.

“Oh my god, I almost kicked it,” Deja said, her hand pressed to her heart.

“Ciao, come stai?” Monte greeted the boy, kissing the top of his head. To the others, he said, “This is my youngest brother, Archer. He likes sneaking up on people. You’ll get used to it.”

Archer looked at them with wide blue eyes. His gaze settled on Tóbi, and he smiled. He said something in Italian, and Monte nodded in agreement, responding in Italian as well.

Tóbi spoke four different languages: English, Yorùbá, Spanish, and Arabic. She planned to eventually master all six of the UN’s official languages to aid her political career. Italian was not one of them, so she’d never taken any interest in it—unlike the Montalvos, who ensured every family member learned Italian, a tradition that spanned generations, ever since they first immigrated from Italy.

“What did he say?” Tóbi asked, curious.

“He said it’s past his bedtime,” Monte said. “Which is very true, but I promised not to tell on him as long as he goes to bed right now.”

Monte gently pushed Archer, who huffed but obliged, running to a staircase and climbing it four-legged. Tóbi eyed Monte skeptically, but he was careful not to meet her gaze.

“We should probably do the same,” he said. “I can show you all to the guest rooms.”

Fabien asked, “Can we eat first? I forgot to visit the dining hall before we left Tanglewood.”

Monte checked his watch. “I’d offer you food, but our chef would’ve left a few hours ago.”

“Can’t we make something ourselves?” Deja asked.

“Oh,” Monte said. “Yes, I suppose that’s an option. The kitchen’s this way.”

He led them to a dining room that had a long, handsome table surrounded by twelve chairs. At the back of the room, Monte slid open large mahogany doors to reveal a chef’s kitchen that boasted stainless steel appliances.

“What do you got in here?” Deja asked.

Monte gazed around his kitchen with interest. “I’m not sure. I think this is the longest I’ve been in here.”

Deja rolled her eyes and rummaged through the pantry before pulling out a small packet. “Instant noodles,” she said, amused. “And here I would’ve thought y’all were too rich to eat this stuff. Start boiling the water, and I’ll see if I can find more.”

They sifted through cabinets until, finally, Fabien located a pot. He filled it up with water and placed it on the stove, then stood back with the others to watch it.

“I got five packs—what are y’all doing?” Deja asked as she joined them.

“You told us to boil the water,” Fabien said.

Deja glanced at the still pot of water. “But you didn’t turn on the stove.”

“Oh, those have power buttons?” Monte asked, fascinated.

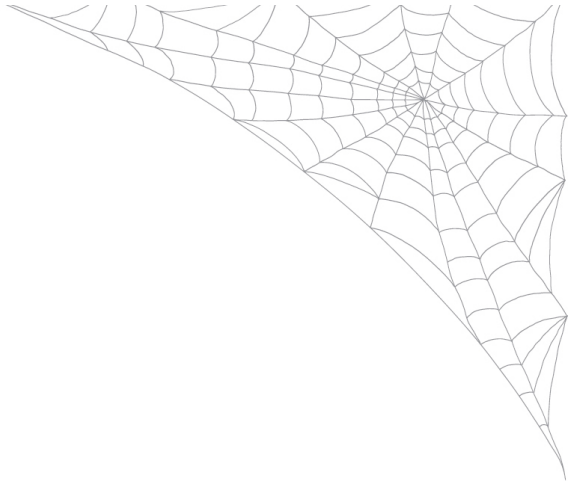
“You’re kidding.” Deja’s disbelief grew when she saw that none of them were indeed kidding. “Tinker Bell, don’t you come from a family of cooks?”

“A family of cooks that now has its own cooks,” Tóbi clarified.

Deja stared at them, her expression so blank that Tóbi could not tell what she was thinking. After a moment, Deja said in an incredibly soft voice, “Why don’t y’all wait in the dining room? I’ll just make the noodles for us.”

As they left the kitchen, Tóbi was pretty sure that she heard Deja mutter, “I hate rich people.”

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CHAPTER 20

GIFT GIVING

Deja woke before her alarm went off.

The sun was still climbing over the horizon, half of the sky dark from where it had not yet reached. Deja and her friends had not gone to bed until well into the night, so for a moment, she was confused why she had woken so early.

Then she turned over and saw the twin bed next to hers was made. Tóbi stood beside it, wearing athletic clothing.

"Sorry, I was trying not to wake you," Tóbi said, tying her afro hair into a high puff. "Monte mentioned there's a gym in the basement. I'm going to get a quick workout in."

With that, she left. Deja closed her eyes, trying to return to the dream she had been having. It was quickly fading from her memory, but in it, she was pretty sure she had been watching a meteor shower.

Her alarm clock went off.

Deja groaned. It was the first day of winter break, and she could not even sleep in. Then again, she had chosen to do this.

She dragged herself out of the dangerously comfortable bed. She pulled on her favorite outfit—baggy jeans and a large tee over a hoodie—before grabbing her knitting project and heading downstairs. Monte and Eden were just leaving the dining room as Deja walked in.

“Good, you ain’t left for the airport yet,” Deja said. She took Eden’s suitcase away from her and held it out to Monte, telling him, “Put this in your car. Eden will catch up.”

Monte cocked his head to one side, his eyebrow raised.

Deja sighed. “Please?” she added.

“I was actually looking for a ‘good morning,’ but that works too,” Monte said, accepting the suitcase.

As he walked away, Deja shoved her knitting project into Eden’s hands. “Here.”

Seeing it jumbled, Deja wished she had thought to wrap it like a proper gift. Anxiety bubbled in her stomach as she watched Eden untangle two fingerless gloves.

Deja cleared her throat. “You told me regular gloves get in your way while you’re coding or whatever,” she said. The night they broke into Hamilton, seeing Eden struggle with cold weather had bothered Deja so much that she had been working on these gloves ever since, using what little free time finals season had allowed her.

“So you made these for me?” Eden asked, shocked.

Suddenly shy, Deja ducked her gaze, unable to meet Eden’s large brown eyes. “Shut up, I didn’t do it for you,” she mumbled. “My grandma taught me how to knit as a way to calm myself down. Finals were stressful, so I was mostly helping myself. Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

Eden pulled Deja into a cinnamon-scented embrace. “Thank you.”

She pulled away as quickly as she had gone in to hug Deja, leaving the manor before Deja could react. Shocked but pleased, Deja made to go back upstairs—only to notice Ace watching from near the front door. Deja suppressed a groan; Monte had mentioned Ace would get a different ride home from campus because he had a party to attend, and Deja had hoped that meant she would not be seeing him so soon.

He must have only just come home; he wore a rumpled dress shirt and slacks, and he smelled as though he had been out all night. When Deja met Ace’s gaze, he smiled.

“I never had a chance with you, did I?” he asked.

Deja frowned at the unexpected question. “What gave you the hint? The third time I wouldn’t give you my number, or the fourth?”

Ace shrugged. “Don’t worry, I get it now. Still sad to have lost you, though.”

“Toni Morrison once wrote, *You can’t own a human being. You can’t lose what you don’t own.*”

Ace chuckled. “Right.” He stooped to pick up his duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Well, for what it’s worth, you two look good together.”

As he walked around her, Deja felt herself un-tense. Maybe now he would let his crush on her go—

Wait. Who looked good together? What did he mean by that?

Deja turned to ask him for clarification, but he was already climbing the stairs. “Nino? Nino!” Ace called. When that failed to get a response, he yelled, “Antonio Montalvo, I know you hear me! Swear to God, if you’ve moved into my room while I was at school, you’re dead.”

Deja watched him leave with a mixture of irritation and confusion. However, her attention was soon pulled to a skittish jazz melody bouncing around nearby.

Curious, she followed it to find Fabien sitting at a grand piano. It was clear that he was inventing the melody as he played from how he physically moved with it, tapping his foot in time with the music and bobbing his head. It was like the tune had possessed him.

Deja sat on the armrest of a high-backed sofa, listening in wonder. She had not known he played anything other than the trumpet, but she supposed it made sense for a musical prodigy to be familiar with multiple instruments. After a few minutes, Fabien wrapped up the piece with a teetering, high-note melody that, like a cat, ended up landing spectacularly on its feet.

Deja clapped. Fabien looked at her in shock, just now noticing her. “Hope I didn’t wake you,” he said. “I know it’s early, but I got bored of sleeping.”

“Is everything always boring to you?” Deja asked, rolling her eyes with a smile.

Fabien shrugged. “It wasn’t always. I think I just realized in the past few years that nothing’s that interesting.”

Deja’s amusement faded. It was just a few years ago that Fabien’s father passed; she wondered if that was related to his boredom.

“Living here must seem dull compared to the life you had with your dad in London, huh?” she asked.

Fabien’s smile was small and sad; nothing like his usual arrogant grin. “You have no idea. My dad was this incredible, larger-than-life guy. There wasn’t a single person he couldn’t charm—and that’s when he wasn’t performing. So when he hit the stage?” Fabien chuckled, shaking his head. “The way he played that trumpet could turn a funeral into a party. And I got to witness it almost every night.”

He dropped his gaze, absently playing scales on the piano. “I thought he was the coolest thing in the world,” Fabien said softly. “And now that he’s gone, I don’t think there’ll ever be anything as interesting as him.”

Deja knew Fabien had trouble committing to things. He flitted from girl to girl; he rarely attended his classes. But she had always chalked it up to a lack of maturity. Only now did she realize that it was deeper than that. She supposed that if she had lost her one hero and inspiration, she’d feel aimless too.

As though Fabien could sense Deja’s thoughts, he looked up from the piano with a grin. “That was heavier than I thought it’d be. Sorry, that was kinda lame of me.”

“It’s not lame,” Deja said. “Emotions are never lame.”

Fabien’s forced grin softened into one more genuine. However, all he said was, “Jeez, we get it. You’re a poet.”

“Damn right.” Deja settled back into the chair. “Play that song again.”

“The one I just improvised?” Fabien asked, perking up. “You liked it?”

Deja gave him a small smile. “It was alright.”

“I am really talented, aren’t I? You’re lucky you get to see such genius up close.”

Deja's smile dropped; the only downside of cheering up Fabien was the return of his ego. "No one said all that," she said.

Fabien laughed, though his laughter faded as his gaze caught on the living room's entrance. Deja looked to see a blonde woman dressed in silk pajamas and a pearl necklace entering. Tóbi followed close behind her.

"Look who I ran into as I was leaving the gym," Tóbi announced. "This is Mrs. Montalvo."

"Please, call me Alison," the woman said. "It makes me feel younger."

Alison walked to a nearby bar cart. As she began pouring herself a glass of red wine, she said, "Monte hates guests—he never has anyone over. It's quite a surprise to find you all here."

"He didn't tell you we were coming?" Tóbi asked, scandalized. "I apologize, I didn't mean to intrude."

Alison waved her free hand dismissively. The rock-sized diamond on her ring finger was almost blinding.

"Nonsense!" she said. "It's a pleasure to have you. I'm happy to see Monte has made friends, especially with such impressive people. Tóbi, Tanglewood's board is constantly gushing over everything you do at that school."

Tóbi beamed. "Really? Thank you, Mrs.—Alison."

"And you," Alison said to Fabien, "you're Lady Madeline Reynolds's son, aren't you?"

"And Wildcat's son, yeah," Fabien said.

"Of course, of course," Alison said. She was still pouring the wine. "I attended a concert of his once. Amazing musician. I was sad when he passed."

Alison looked at Deja and frowned. Or, at least, she tried to, but her Botox would not allow her to do so completely.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize you," she said to Deja.

"I'm Deja Freeman. I just transferred to …" Deja began, but she trailed off, looking at Alison's wineglass. It was getting dangerously full. "Uh, are you gonna …?"

But before Deja could finish the thought, Alison stopped pouring, just in time to prevent the glass from overflowing.

Confusion passed over Alison's large blue eyes. "Am I going to what, dear?" she asked.

"Never mind," Deja said, somewhat dazed; Alison had not even glanced at the glass to know when to stop. "I was just saying I'm new to Tanglewood this year."

"How exciting! You'll love your time there. Every Montalvo has gone or will go to Tanglewood, so I can personally attest that it's a fantastic school."

Alison picked up her glass. Although it was filled to the brim, she did not spill a single drop. "And I hope you all enjoy your winter break," she continued. "Angel—Monte's father—is out of town on business, so we're not having one of our famous Montalvo Christmas parties this year. But I trust Monte will be a gracious host."

Alison flashed them all a dazzling smile and left, her mink house slippers brushing softly against the floor.

When she had gone, Fabien remarked, "Christ, it's not even five o'clock in London yet."

Tóbi looked at the bar cart in concern. "At least she's nice," she said. "Before she married Angel Montalvo Sr., she was a really successful businesswoman, so I was expecting her to have a little more bite."

"I mean, if I were stuck in a gilded cage, I'd probably mellow out too," Fabien said. "Monte's dad is so busy, you guys think he even remembers he has a wife and kids at home?"

He grinned, clearly joking, but Tóbi and Deja did not share his amusement.

"You're hardly one to talk about forgetting relationships," Tóbi said.

"Have you checked on your latest girlfriend yet?" Deja added.

"Crap, I knew I was forgetting something," Fabien muttered, jumping up from the piano. He fished his phone out of his pocket and left the room, dialing on his phone.

Tóbi sighed. "I'm going back to our room to get ready for the day. Coming?"

"I'm already dressed," Deja said.

Tóbi glanced at Deja's outfit. "Oh." She glanced over her once more. "Well, if you're sure …"

Deja rolled her eyes as Tóbi walked away—but she was glad for the moment of privacy. Returning to the sofa she had been sitting on, she pulled out her phone and called Cybele.

Her aunt picked up on the first ring. "Hey, you at your friend's house now?" she asked.

"Yeah," Deja said, smiling; it was funny hearing the grand Montalvo Manor be referred to as merely her "friend's house."

"How're things in Sweetwater? Weather channels are making it sound like y'all are buried in snow."

"Southerners are just dramatic when it comes to winter. The worst part of it all is the ice closing roads. But me and Marie are excited for our very first white Christmas."

Marie was Cybele's best friend. Deja was relieved her aunt would not be alone during Christmas, especially now that her grandma was gone. But still, Deja wished she could have gone home.

"I would've loved to spend Christmas with y'all," Deja said.

"We've spent Christmas together your whole life. Missing one don't hurt nothing. I'm really glad you get to spend winter break with your new friends—well, I'm just glad that you *have* new friends. They're good people?"

"Yeah, they are," Deja said softly. "They've helped me out a lot while I've been at Tanglewood."

Deja chewed on her lip. In her calls with her aunt over the past few months, Deja had avoided talking about her and her friends' investigation for fear of how her aunt might react. But with how serious Dawn's story was getting, it did not feel right hiding it any longer.

"And actually, back in September when we saw The Web, we started having these weird dreams," Deja confessed. "They led us to looking into a past student named Dawn Novak. Her time at Tanglewood was awful, Cybele, she—"

"No," Cybele interrupted.

Deja frowned. "No?"

“Deja Renée, I don’t want you looking any further into this Dawn Novak person.”

“What, why?” Deja demanded. “The Web itself led me to her! It wants me to help her.”

“Renée also thought that having a connection to The Web made her a hero. It went to her head, made her act like it was up to her to save people. She didn’t realize the person that most needed saving was herself until it was too late.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll end up like her,” Deja snapped. “I’m not naïve like she was.”

“Don’t talk ‘bout her like that, like you’re above her,” Cybele said sharply.

“Well I sure as hell ain’t below her!” In her anger, Deja rose to her feet, her voice rising too. “She dropped out of high school and got with a *drug dealer*, Cybele! She was addicted to mentiscape! You want me to look up to her so badly, but why the hell would I? She’s a failure.”

As soon as the words left Deja’s mouth, she knew she had gone too far. Several long, painstaking moments of silence passed.

Finally, Cybele said, “That’s a horrible thing to say about your mom.”

Deja’s anger drained out of her, leaving behind a hollow void of guilt. Cybele had only said Deja’s words were horrible, but Deja could not help but feel that by extension, her aunt was also calling her a horrible person.

“I’m sorry, Cybele. I didn’t mean it,” Deja said. Except she was not sorry, and she absolutely had meant it—and that made her feel worse.

“I know you didn’t,” Cybele said. “I think we’re both just upset. Let’s cool off, and I’ll call you later, alright? I love you. Have a merry Christmas.”

“You too.”

There was a moment of silence before Deja realized that Cybele was not going to hang up. She was waiting for Deja to do it, like she always did. Even after all the hurtful things Deja had just said, Cybele was kinder than Deja knew how to be.

Deja ended the call. Suddenly feeling claustrophobic, she left the living room. She found a set of French double doors and slid them open, stepping outside onto a stone patio that marked the beginning of the Montalvos' expansive backyard. There were outdoor chairs frosted in white, and Deja brushed the snow off one to sit.

Clutching her arms for warmth, Deja looked up. The sky was an endless sheet of white. There was going to be a full moon tonight; Deja wondered if the sky would clear enough for it to break through. Thinking about the moon made her think about her aunt, and a fresh wave of guilt washed over Deja. At the end of their call, Cybele's tone had been carefully calm. Deja knew her well enough to know when she was concealing the fact that her feelings were hurt—and that was Deja's fault.

A blanket fell atop Deja's shoulders. She looked up and was surprised to see Ace next to her.

"Saw you from my room," he explained, pointing to one of the windows on the manor's upper floor. "You looked frozen."

"I just got out here," Deja said. "Did you run through the house or something?"

Ace shrugged. "I know I've promised to stop chasing after you, but every once in a while, I still might jog a little."

He dragged a chair next to her, and Deja's gratitude shriveled into irritation. As he shook snow off the seat, she said, "Just 'cause you brought me a blanket don't mean you can sit next to me."

"Maybe. But I'm Ace Montalvo, so this is my home, which sure as hell means I can sit where I want in it."

He dropped onto the chair, leaning back as he regarded Deja.

His blue eyes were especially stark in winter, two splashes of color in a grayscale world.

"So," he said, "that phone conversation you just had."

Deja cringed, realizing how loud she must have been. "You heard me?"

"I was too far away to hear what you said, exactly, but you sounded upset." He cocked his head to one side. "Want to talk about it?"

"No."

Ace fished his diamond chain out from under his leather jacket and placed it in his mouth, chewing on it. As the silence between them stretched on, Deja found herself un-tensing somewhat. The phone call embarrassed her; her anger had pushed her to say some really bad things. But Ace was not exactly the most upstanding person himself. If there was anyone she could talk to without judgment, it would be him.

"But," she said after a moment, "I do got a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Well, I noticed you can get angry pretty easily. How do you stop yourself from doing that?"

"What do you mean?" Ace asked, confused. "If something bothers me, then it bothers me. I can't just stop the feeling."

"But don't you think you should try?" Deja pressed. "What if it drives away the people you care about?"

Ace thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, I hope that wouldn't happen. The people who matter the most to me are my brothers, and I know I annoy them sometimes. But I also know that when I get angry, they trust there's a valid reason for it. I like defending myself—and I like defending them too. They understand that.

"By the way," he added, "if you're talking about Monte and the rest of them, I wouldn't worry about driving them away. They know what you're like, and they still choose to be your friends, don't they? They must think of you as more than just your anger."

Deja had actually been talking about her aunt, not her friends. However, the reminder she had other people in her life who also cared about her was a much-needed comfort. Deja could be brash with her friends, but unlike her aunt, Deja supposed her friends had never made her feel guilty about her temper.

"Yeah," Deja said softly. "I guess that's true. Thanks."

"Sure, anything for a friend." Ace paused, then added, "We could hug it out, if you want."

"Hell will freeze over before I give you a hug."

"That's perfect—I heard Tanglewood is getting hit by a blizzard later this week, so I'll check in with you then."

Deja strained to keep her face blank. Undeterred, Ace stood with a grin.

"I'll see you around, alright? Enjoy your Christmas here."

With that, he went back inside. Only once the door closed behind him did Deja allow herself to chuckle. She had found Ace's joke funny, but he did not need to know that.

Deja looked up at the sky, feeling surprisingly lighter than before.

She continued searching for the moon, and before long, she heard her friends' voices drift out from the manor.

"Yeah, I completely forgot she invited me to go skiing with her family," Fabien was saying. "But no biggie, right? It's just the Alps—not like I haven't been there already. Except she got peeved I didn't remember her lame trip, and she dumped me."

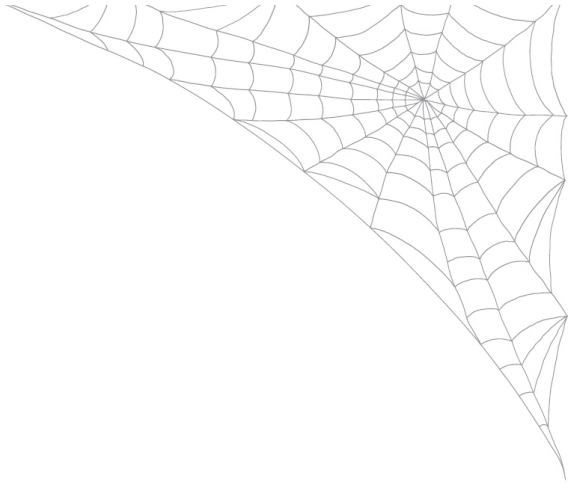
"Really? I can't believe it," Tóbi said in such a monotone that it was clear she absolutely could believe it.

"It's whatever. She was a bit taller than me anyways, which honestly kind of freaked me out. Speaking of height—or rather, lack thereof—where's Deja?"

They began calling her name. Ace had been right; her friends knew what she was like, and they still wanted her around. Spending Christmas away from Sweetwater for the first time was daunting, but at least Deja could still feel at home with her friends.

"Shut up, I'm right here," Deja called, standing from her seat and reentering the house to join Tóbi and Fabien.

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CHAPTER 21

FROGS AND SNAKES

Tóbi was finishing up her makeup when someone knocked furiously on her and Deja's guest room door.

Tóbi opened it to reveal Ace and Fabien, both still wearing their pajamas and holding a large sack between them. They looked confused to see Tóbi wearing an emerald sweater dress instead of being in a similarly disheveled state.

Ace asked, "How are you already dressed at six in the morning?"

"Michelle Obama wakes up at four thirty in the morning. Therefore, so do I," Tóbi said.

It was then that she got a better look at the sack they both carried, and she realized it wasn't a sack at all; it was Monte. He was slumped over, one arm draped over Fabien's shoulder and the other over Ace's.

"Um, is Monte"—Tóbi almost said *alive*, but she caught herself —"awake?"

Fabien waved his free hand dismissively. "He's just not a morning person. But it doesn't matter—it's Christmas! There are presents downstairs, c'mon!"

He and Ace whooped, and as they turned and made their way down the hall, they practically dragged Monte alongside them. Tóbi glanced at a lump under one of the bed's covers.

"Are you awake?" Tóbi asked.

In response, Deja groaned. She dragged herself out of the bed and wrapped her blanket around her shoulders, then followed Tóbi to catch up with the others. They all walked through the manor's long hallways until they reached a living room. Tóbi had assumed that "presents" entailed a dozen or so gifts sitting under a normal Christmas tree. She had forgotten this was Montalvo Manor; when they entered the main living room, they were greeted by a towering tree that was at least twelve feet tall. It sported so many ornaments and lights that it illuminated the room completely on its own.

Beneath and around the tree were countless red and green gift boxes, ranging from as tall as Tóbi to as small as her hand. It would take hours to get through all of them—luckily, Archer and a skinny blond boy who must have been Nino, the third-oldest Montalvo brother, had already gotten a head start. They tore through their presents, creating a pile of trash that staff were cleaning up almost as quickly as it was being produced.

Alison hovered agitatedly at the edge of the room, sipping red wine. As soon as she spotted Tóbi and the others, she made a beeline for them.

"Oh good, you're here, Monte," Alison said. "I need to start getting ready for the Christmas parties we're attending later. Watch your brothers, and make sure they put on their tuxes when it's time."

Monte, who was now slumped in an armchair, had barely nodded before Alison cheerfully told the rest of them, "Merry Christmas!" and swept out of the room.

"Hey, moron," Ace said, walking up to Nino and snatching a present out of his hand. "Are you illiterate? My name is written on this one."

"I just wanted to see what you got," Nino mumbled.

Ace grabbed his brother's head. "Here, let me help you look closer," he said, and he shoved Nino's face into the present.

As Nino yelled in protest, Monte sighed. "Ace," he called, "leave him alone."

He removed his glasses from the breast pocket of his pajamas, and as he put them on, he said to Deja, Fabien, and Tóbi, "There are

presents for you guys as well. I picked some stuff up on the way back from the airport."

"If I'd known we were doing presents, I would've gotten everyone something too," Tóbi said. Her parents' teachings about the importance of manners and reciprocation were so deeply ingrained in Tóbi that not being able to return Monte's polite gesture now made her feel icky, as though she had touched something gross and was unable to wash it off.

The other two did not seem to share the sentiment; Deja was already searching around the tree. After a moment, she retrieved a gift bag that bore her name. From it, she pulled out an embossed leather journal.

"I like this," Deja said in surprise, as though she had not expected to.

It was still too early for Monte to smile, but Tóbi could tell he was pleased. "I thought you might," he said. "It looked suitable for poetry."

"Or for a spellbook," Fabien said.

He ducked in time to dodge the gift bag that Deja hurled at him. "Oh, hey," Fabien said, picking up a present that he had dropped next to. "This one's mine."

He unwrapped a wide, flat present that turned out to be a Louis Armstrong vinyl record. "This is signed," Fabien said in amazement.

"Yes—" Monte began.

But a yell cut him off. Ace was now on the floor, cursing loudly in Italian as he tried to shake off Archer, whose teeth were sunk into his shin. Nino jumped at the opportunity to kick Ace while he was down.

"Archer," Monte called.

Archer dislodged himself from Ace and ran up to Monte, who pulled Archer onto his lap.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to bite people?" Monte asked his youngest brother. "Even if those people are Ace. Use your words, not your teeth."

Turning back to Fabien, Monte continued, "Louis Armstrong once performed at some Montalvo's party and gave them that as a

gift. It's been in our family for a while, just sitting on a shelf, so I thought you'd appreciate it more."

Part of Tóbi still felt like she was being rude for not having any presents to give, but after seeing Deja's and Fabien's easy acceptance of their gifts and how Monte expected nothing in return, she relaxed. It was not like the stifling Christmases in her own home, where the gifts she received were always proportional to what she had accomplished or which of her family members she had helped that year. No one here seemed to expect her to prove she deserved a gift.

Newly curious, Tóbi circumvented Ace and Nino's scuffle to scan the presents remaining under the tree, but she did not find anything for her. Frowning, she turned to Monte, only to see him holding up a small velvet pouch.

"This one's yours," he said, answering Tóbi's unspoken question.

Fabien grinned. "Were planning to give it to her yourself, huh, old man?"

Monte gave him a look that Tóbi did not quite understand but made Fabien laugh. "Yes," Monte responded, "because it's small, and I didn't want it to get lost. But now's as good a time as any."

"Of course you give me the smallest present," Tóbi said, slightly offended, but she walked over to take the pouch anyway.

Her irritation dissolved as she removed an American flag pin from the pouch. It was made up of small red, white, and blue diamonds that glittered in the light.

"POTUS always wears a flag pin on their lapel," Monte said. "So, you can practice by putting this on your Tanglewood blazer. That is, if you can find space among all your club pins."

Tóbi had received presents much more expensive than this—yet she was unsure if any had been worth nearly as much. The path to her future was one she had only ever walked alone. But in this small, shiny pin, Tóbi saw the possibility that she now had support in the form of her friends—Monte included.

Before Tóbi could figure out how to thank him, a frog plushie was shoved into her hands. Tóbi looked up to see Archer holding the toy up to her.

“My present’s better,” he declared.

In her shock, Tóbi laughed. At last, a small smile broke through Monte’s fatigue. Tóbi could not help but notice how the golden Christmas lights snagged on some layers in his brown eyes but not on others, adding dimensions to his gaze and making it sculptural.

“Be careful with that frog,” Monte said to Archer. “You might *rip it.*”

Whatever brief spell Monte’s brown eyes had put Tóbi under instantly broke. She stopped laughing in case Monte’s lukewarm joke got mistaken for the cause of it. Everyone stared at him blankly, including Ace and Nino, who had reached a lull in their wrestling.

Monte looked around the quieted room and said, “Frogs go *ribbit.*”

“I wish you would *shut it,*” Ace said.

With Ace distracted, Nino managed to wriggle out of Ace’s grasp. He ran away, screaming yet smiling, and Ace laughed as he chased after his younger brother.

“It was a nice try,” Fabien said, patting Monte on the shoulder.

“You got a record player I can pop Louis into?”

“There’s one in the den, the next room over,” Monte said, leaning on the armrest and placing his chin on his hand. His grumpiness seemed to have returned.

As Fabien left to play the vinyl record, Tóbi cleared her throat.

“Thank you, Monte,” she said. “Your gifts are very thoughtful, and I’m sure the others agree when I say that we’re all very touched.”

Monte nodded in acknowledgement, but he did not smile again. Tóbi found herself wishing that he would, just so she could see it one more time.

Brushing off the strange feeling, she took a seat in an armchair. Archer slid off Monte’s lap, gathered as many of his frog-themed presents as he could, then presented them to Tóbi, who found herself smiling as she listened to him talk about his love of frogs.

Jazz music floated over from the den, muffled through the wall. It was accented by fire crackling in a hearth. Tóbi curled up in the

chair with Archer as Ace and Nino fought nearby and Monte half-heartedly tried to stop them. Deja had borrowed one of Monte's Montblanc pens and sat in a corner of the room, writing in her new journal.

The Montalvos' chef arrived around noon and conjured up a brunch of cinnamon crepes topped with fresh fruit, along with butterscotch sticky buns and crispy slices of bacon. Afterwards, Monte made his brothers get dressed for the parties they would be attending.

At Monte's request, before the chef returned home to spend Christmas with his family, he left supplies for Deja, Fabien, and Tóbi to make a gingerbread house. Even though he also left written directions, it fell on Deja to give Tóbi and Fabien instructions for each instruction, like how to crack an egg.

Come evening, all the gingerbread pieces were successfully baked, not even as deformed as Deja had complained they would be. Proud, Tóbi wanted to record them constructing the house for her social media, but to her surprise, she realized she had left her phone in her room this morning. She did not think she had ever gone so long without checking her notifications.

The last time she had spoken with her parents was when she had gotten their permission to spend winter break at a friend's house. Tóbi would have liked to believe she would return to her phone to see a heartfelt message wishing her a merry Christmas, but she knew that more likely than not, they had just sent her the same basic Christmas e-card they sent every year, even when she was there in person for them to give her an actual card.

Tóbi left Deja and Fabien to their bickering—caused by Fabien secretly making miniature cookie versions of them to live in the house, resulting in there not being enough gingerbread for a door—and went upstairs. As she reached the second floor landing, she heard muffled yells coming from a nearby room.

Tóbi followed the voices. As she got closer, she realized they were Ace and Monte. Having spent most of the day in the kitchen, she had not noticed when the brothers had returned from their parties.

“At this point, your head is so far up your ass that all you can spew is shit,” Ace was shouting. “You are the oldest Montalvo. Just because you don’t care about this family doesn’t mean other people won’t look at you and see a reflection of Father and Grandfather and everything they’ve built.”

“You mean everything they’ve inherited,” Monte corrected. He spoke quieter than Ace, but his anger was just as potent. “Grandfather would not be on the Supreme Court if he was not descended from T.W. Montalvo, and I know you’re not stupid enough to think Father could’ve become CEO of a hotel chain on his own. Hell, his uncle handed it to him on a silver platter, and already he’s on track to run it into the ground in the next decade.”

“If that’s how you feel, then you should be working harder to take over the company so you can run it however the hell you think it needs to be run. Instead, you’re choosing to abandon ship at the first sign of high waters, like the traitor to this family that you are.”

“For the last time, Ace, I don’t aspire to be an architect just to spite our family. You are so dependent on being a Montalvo that you can’t fathom me not needing our legacy to boost me through life. If you’re okay with living like that, then fine, but don’t be upset that I’m the only one in this family who can make a name for himself, by himself.”

Ace laughed, although he did not sound amused. “The name you’ve made for yourself, *Monte,* is just a diluted version of your real name. No matter how much you try to hide it, you will always be Angel Montalvo Jr. Don’t you know how many people wish they could say the same?”

Monte did not respond. Tóbi moved closer to the door, careful not to make the wooden floorboards creak. She had always known that Monte and Ace had a tense relationship, but until now, she had never realized why.

“And I’m one of those people,” Ace said after a moment. “Because if I weren’t Ace Montalvo, Father wouldn’t overlook me as his successor. If I were the oldest, Father would see that I’m just as smart as you are, and more importantly, that I actually care about this family.”

Again, Monte did not respond, and there was a pause. Then, there came a crash so big that Tóbi jumped. It was followed by footsteps, and Tóbi moved away from the door just as it swung open to reveal Ace.

His expression was murderous, but when he saw Tóbi standing in the hallway, he reined in his temper with obvious effort.

"Have a good night, Tóbi," he mumbled, and she gave him a brief smile as he kissed her cheek before walking away, presumably leaving for his next Christmas party.

Tóbi peered inside the room he had left. It was filled with old-school arcade machines and game tables. Monte stood at one machine, wearing the same black suit as Ace, though his jacket was draped over a chair and his dress shirt was rolled to his elbows. A stray blond lock had escaped from his slicked-back hairstyle, hanging over his face, but he was too focused on a game to fix it.

Tóbi considered leaving before Monte realized she was here. But then Monte remarked, "I would think eavesdropping is too impolite for you."

So he had already noticed her. With a sigh, Tóbi stepped inside, and as she closed the door behind her, she said, "It's not eavesdropping if Ace is yelling so loudly I could hear him through the door."

As she walked to Monte, she noticed that a ping-pong table was overturned. That must have been the source of the crash earlier.

"Oh, that," Monte said, following her gaze to the flipped table. "Yes, that's what usually happens when Ace and I speak. It's probably why we don't speak. You know we've said more to each other today than in the past few months combined?"

He spoke nonchalantly, but Tóbi had spent all morning with him as he watched his brothers open their presents. She had seen the small smile he wore when he thought no one was looking. Tóbi knew that Monte cared for his brothers, and Ace suggesting otherwise must have hurt.

Tóbi hesitated, then asked, "Are you okay?"

Monte did not respond, his focus on the arcade machine before him. Tóbi moved next to him, and she saw that Monte was playing a

game that consisted of a line moving around the screen.

"This is basically the only game in our arcade that I play," Monte explained, sensing Tóbi's curiosity. "It's called Snake. That line is the snake, and you move it around the screen so it can eat those dots. You lose if you bump into yourself, but the catch is, the more you eat, the bigger you get, the greater the chance of running into yourself.

"I don't find it fun," Monte continued. "It's quite stressful, actually, watching the snake have less and less space to move around. I don't know why I keep playing it. Maybe I just want to see how big I can get before I finally run into myself."

Tóbi watched the snake navigate the small space it was allotted. Monte was right; the game felt claustrophobic. It was a feeling Tóbi understood well; she had spent a lifetime trying to fit into what little space in her parents' hearts was not already occupied by her older brother. Tóbi never would have expected the eldest Montalvo to relate to feeling as though there was no room for oneself in their own life.

"Monte," Tóbi said softly. "You didn't leave those Christmas parties to play a video game."

He sighed. "No, I didn't. Some construction tycoon was telling me a story of him and my father, when I suddenly realized I did not care, and I walked out of the party. Right in the middle of the conversation. It was quite rude, so I see why Ace is upset. But I simply no longer wished to be surrounded by people who will only ever know me as 'Junior.'"

Tóbi recalled what Ace had said about Monte's name. If not for Tóbi's habit of investigating her competition, she never would have known Monte's full name. Every single mark he had left on Tanglewood—from awards to class rosters—had simply been under the name *Monte*. No doubt his privileges as a Montalvo allowed him to control how he presented himself, but Tóbi had never thought much about why he made the effort in the first place.

Despite Ace's disgust with Monte's decision, Tóbi found it admirable. It was important to Monte to have his own name, and he was willing to do whatever it took to ensure that.

Tóbi placed her hand atop his. He looked at her in surprise, and the snake on the screen bumped into itself, ending the game. Monte did not notice.

"We're making a gingerbread house downstairs," Tóbi said. "If you're not going out again, you should come join us."

Monte did not respond, but his brown eyes softened. And when Tóbi left the arcade, he followed.

They got to the kitchen just in time to prevent Deja from throwing a bowl of icing at Fabien. After wrangling it from her, Monte delegated tasks to each of them, and the construction of the house went smoother than anything else they had done all day.

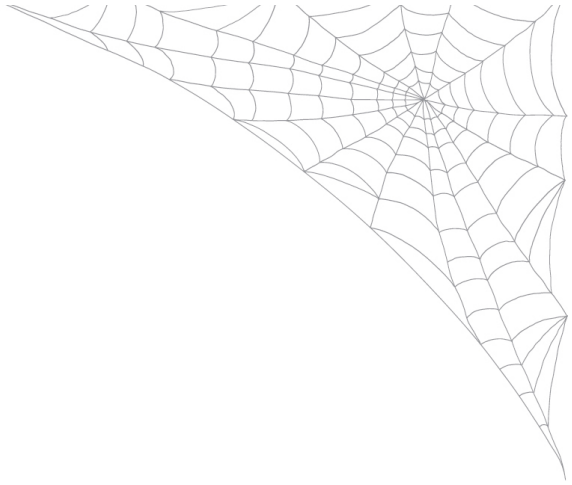
At one point, Deja video-called Eden to wish her a merry Christmas. Eden introduced them to her mom, a pretty Black woman with a sweet Southern accent and a sweeter personality. She was chatty in every way that Eden was quiet, and somehow, she talked the four of them into promising to visit New Orleans in the new year.

Tóbi's Christmases had always been stressful. Each year, her parents hosted a large holiday party, and though Tóbi's many aunts, uncles, and cousins were all invited, the event had none of the warmth typically found at a family gathering. Her parents' party was a performance, everyone displaying how great their lives were, each person more determined to put on a perfect show than the last.

But tonight, Tóbi's smiles came naturally. Tonight, she did not need to worry herself to death ensuring a party went off without a hitch, nor did she feel any pressure to impress any of the people around her.

Tonight, for the first time in her life, Tóbi enjoyed Christmas. Her friends made it easy.

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CHAPTER 22

COINCIDENCES

Winter break passed in a haze of laughter and hot chocolate, and much too soon, it was late January—time to return to Tanglewood for the start of the spring semester.

Most of Deja's classes were year-long, but a few had ended last semester. One such class was her biology class, which this semester had been switched out for chemistry. It was located in Tanglewood's science center.

CONWELL SCIENCE CENTER

The gift of

Joshua Kingsley Conwell

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The large, three-story building had state-of-the-art research equipment, an observatory on the top floor, and skeletons of exotic animals on display in its atrium. Over the past few months, whenever Deja had visited the futuristic space, all she could think of were the antiquated halls that held Tanglewood's arts and

humanities departments; clearly, the school's billion-dollar endowment was much more dedicated to the sciences than other disciplines.

While Deja's biology class had been held in one of the science center's classrooms, her chemistry class was in a laboratory. Rectangular black-top tables that seated two people were lined in two columns, facing the black board at the front of the room. Immediately upon entering, Deja headed to the very back of the room. She excelled in literature, but science was her worst subject; she felt most comfortable in the back, where her confusion was less likely to be noticed.

There was already a girl sitting at the farthest table back. No sooner had Deja taken the seat next to her than Ace entered the laboratory.

Like Deja, Ace also seemed most at ease in the back of the room, because that was where his gaze immediately went, searching for a table. When he saw Deja, his eyes widened, and he set off toward her. He walked quickly, his head down as though he did not want to be seen.

When he reached Deja's table, he said to the girl sitting next to her, "Get up."

Immediately, she stood and found another seat. Amused, Deja watched as he took the girl's place, sitting low in the seat.

"Ain't this a junior-level chemistry course?" Deja asked. "What're you doing here?"

Ace glanced around then said in a low voice, "Science is my best subject. I did so well last semester that my teacher asked Tanglewood to bump me up to a junior class this semester."

"Aw, you never told me you were a science geek," Deja said, ruffling his hair.

Ace shoved her hand away. "Cut it out." He pulled his phone out and used the screen as a mirror to fix his hair. "I'm not a geek, I'm Ace Montalvo. It's not my fault chemistry is kind of cool. I mean, everything you can think of has chemicals. The whole world is made of small puzzle pieces that chemistry lets you break down and put together in all different ways. That's wild, isn't it?"

He glanced at Deja, and when he saw her smirk, his expression soured. “Shut up,” he mumbled, sinking lower in his seat.

“I ain’t even say nothing,” Deja said, but for his sake, she did not tease him further as their teacher entered the room to begin the lesson.

Aside from chemistry, the rest of Deja’s schedule was the same—and so was her workload. It was only the first day back from winter break, but already Deja was getting hit with essays and projects.

Deja’s spirits, dampened by the number of assignments she received, gradually lifted as the school day came to an end. She was excited to reunite with Eden, a feeling that fortified her for what Deja and her friends had all agreed to do after school today: resume their investigation of Dawn Novak.

Cybele might not have wanted Deja to continue looking into Dawn, but Deja was a thousand miles away from Sweetwater; her aunt could not stop her. Although Deja did not enjoy lying to her aunt, this was more important than Cybele’s unfounded worries about Deja getting involved with The Web. Whatever had happened to Dawn was huge; Deja could feel it.

Thanks to winter break, Deja and her friends had gotten the space they needed from Dawn’s story to recover from the heaviness of it. Now that they were back at school with clearer heads and stronger resolves, they had decided to proceed by combing through Dawn’s student record for any clues about what became of her.

Tóbi and Monte had some extracurriculars right after school, and Fabien needed to rehearse, so it was left to Deja and Eden to start the review of Dawn’s record. But first, they needed to wait out seventh period.

Seventh period had become Deja’s favorite time of day. Ever since she found out Eden was in her gym class, the two of them had shirked gym activities together, hiding under the bleachers. Eventually, toward the end of last semester, they had started skipping gym altogether; the class was large and hectic enough that attendance was neglected, and both Deja and Eden were unpopular enough for their classmates to never notice their absence.

Once the bell marking the end of sixth period rang, Deja headed straight to the Promise Garden. It was where she and Eden normally went when they skipped. Not only was it rarely visited by campus safety patrols, but ever since Deja's first day at Tanglewood, she considered it the most peaceful spot on school grounds.

Time stood still here. Winter had frozen the garden's small pond, and bare tree branches were frosted by sheets of snow. The air was so frigid that not even sound could pass through; in the silence, Deja could hear her heartbeat.

Eden was already here, bundled in a blue winter coat and sitting on an icy bench. She played a handheld game console, and Deja was delighted to see that Eden wore the fingerless gloves Deja had knit for her.

She walked through the garden, stepping in previously-made footsteps to avoid the deepest parts of the snowfall, until she reached Eden. With her full attention on her game, Eden did not notice Deja—that was, not until Deja picked up some snow, molded it into a ball, then threw it at Eden's arm.

Eden merely glanced up and said, "Oh, hey," before looking back at her game.

The smile that had appeared on Deja's face when she first saw Eden now faded; something was wrong.

Sitting on the bench, Deja asked, "What's up with you?"

"It's not a big deal."

Deja tensed, instantly protective. "*What's* not a big deal?"

Eden did not respond immediately. She continued playing her game, but it seemed she could no longer suppress what she had been trying to avoid, because after a moment, she lowered the console.

"We got a group project in computer science class today," Eden began. "We're s'posed to build a website. I got assigned partners, and we decided to split up the tasks. I just wanted to focus on my part, but my partners kept asking me weird stuff, like if I agreed this was a waste of time, or what I thought 'bout our teacher. They were smiling while they asked me, and thinking back on it, maybe they were expecting me to make a joke or something. But I just replied

honestly that I liked the project, and that I didn't have a strong opinion 'bout our teacher.

"After a while, one of my partners asked why I was being so rude and not talking," Eden continued. "I didn't understand, 'cause I did talk to them, whenever it was 'bout the project. Maybe I missed something 'bout the conversation, like I always do. I don't know. It feels like I never know." With a sigh, Eden dropped her gaze. Absently tugging on one of her curls, she continued in a quieter voice, "I wish I could just do the project by myself. Computer science is my favorite subject 'cause there's only one right answer. You found the solution, or you didn't. Technology is straightforward —unlike people. I'm tired of never understanding what I'm doing wrong."

What Eden did not say was even louder than what she did: If she was tired of not understanding, then she must have been just as tired of not being understood.

Anger burned within Deja. It sounded like Eden's partners had taken one look at her and expected her to be loud and entertaining. And when she had not lived up to their presumptions, they took it personally. The world could be so inhospitable for quiet Black girls.

"What're your partners' names?" Deja asked.

Immediately catching on, Eden shook her head. "You don't need to know that."

"C'mon, Eden, I'm not gonna do nothing. I just wanna know."

"Seriously, Deja, no. I still have to work with 'em, which'll be hard enough without you picking a fight." As an afterthought, Eden added, "Also, don't forget you're five feet tall."

"I'm five-one," Deja snapped.

When Eden only looked at her, Deja huffed. "Fine, I'll drop it," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

After a moment of listening to the quiet sound effects coming from Eden's video game, a thought occurred to Deja. "Well," she said, "my favorite subject is literature, I think for the same reason you probably hate it: There's no one right answer. I remember the first time I had to write poetry for a class, back in elementary school. It felt magical to me, but other kids in my class didn't like it

‘cause they said they didn’t know how to do it. That annoyed me. The way I see it, there’s no *way* to do it—it’s just something you do. People might have different approaches, but different doesn’t have to mean wrong.

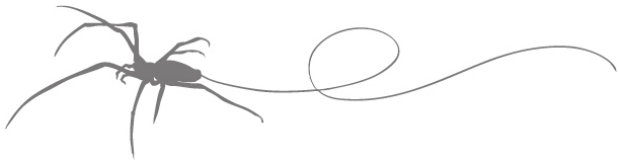
“It’s like with you and your partners,” Deja continued. “Just ‘cause you’re different from them doesn’t mean you’re doing anything wrong. And I hope you know that even if some people don’t make an effort to figure out who you are, others will—like me. I like trying to understand you.” Deja shrugged and added, “In a way, I guess you’re my poetry, Eden.”

Deja had always found peace in working through the complexities of poetry. Similarly, with Deja’s increasingly tense relationship with her aunt, Deja was grateful that Eden provided at least one area of calm in her life.

Eden’s large brown eyes were warm even in the cold afternoon. Deja only realized how close their faces were when she noticed bits of snow caught in Eden’s long eyelashes. When Eden blinked, the snow-flakes drifted onto her cheek, and instinctively, Deja brushed them away. Eden looked surprised, but she did not back away from Deja’s cold touch.

After a few heartbeats, Deja realized that her hand was still on Eden’s face. She pulled away, clearing her throat.

“It’s colder than Jack Frost’s ass crack out here,” Deja said, standing. “Let’s walk around the garden to warm up.”



Once seventh period ended, and Deja and Eden could walk around campus freely, they went to Eden’s dorm. Having visited Eden’s room before, Deja was not surprised to find blackout curtains completely blocking out the day’s light.

Since Eden found the overhead light too bright and overstimulating, her room was instead lit by LED string lights that

doused the space with a soft indigo glow. Figurines—mostly *Charmborne* related—sat atop her bookshelf and wardrobe.

Eden allowed Deja to sit in the light blue gaming chair at her desk, taking the basic wooden chair that had come with her dorm for herself. But instead of a video game, pulled up on one of Eden's two computer monitors was a coding screen. Deja watched as Eden typed away until eventually, the coding screen gave way to Tanglewood's school management system. The violet landing page was clearly built to only be accessed by administrators, displaying things like attendance information and courses that were still in planning.

Eden clicked on the student record page, where yearly archive links appeared. As she typed Dawn's name in the search bar at the top of the page, various students with the same first name popped up, their yearbook photos set as the thumbnail cover for their files. Once *Dawn Novak* had been typed in full, there was only one search suggestion left. Deja's heart stalled as she looked at the photo that had appeared with it.

Deja must not have seen it the first time they accessed Dawn's student record because Eden had already opened the file. But now, Deja saw that the thumbnail for Dawn's record was a photo of a Black girl with short, crimped hair and narrow glasses—the same girl that Deja had seen in three visions since September.

"Wait," Deja said quickly, before Eden could open the file. She pointed to the thumbnail. "*That's* Dawn?"

She realized her recurring visions had started around the same time she and her friends began looking into Dawn's story. Deja probably would have connected the two occurrences sooner had they not believed Dawn had lived over a century ago for most of their investigation; Dawn's appearance was very clearly marked by the fashion of the early 2000s in her visions.

"I've had a few visions of her throughout the school year, always the same moment," Deja said. Then she frowned. "But those visions took place during the meteor shower that happened only a few months ago. Dawn went missing years ago, and she would be older now."

On her second monitor, Eden opened a new window. In a search engine, she typed, *Tanglewood meteor shower.*

A dozen articles appeared about the meteor shower from September. Eden clicked on the first one and scrolled through it. Equal parts curious and confused, Deja could only watch as Eden scanned the article with a quiet efficiency.

Midway through the article, Eden paused. She highlighted a phrase that must have been what she was looking for: *The Spira Constellation.* According to the article, it was the constellation from which the meteor shower had originated. Eden copied and pasted the term into a new search.

Just as Deja was about to ask what Eden was doing, Eden clicked on a page about the Spira meteor shower and read aloud, "*The Spiraids are one of the brighter meteor showers Earth has the pleasure of witnessing. For the past few centuries, it has occurred about every twenty-five years.*" Eden turned to Deja. "It says the last meteor shower happened September 20, 2002."

"Exactly one month before Dawn's enrollment status was marked as 'Inactive' in her student record," Deja said. She thought back to the visions she had received of Dawn. "If it takes a certain amount of absences for a student to be deemed inactive, maybe something happened around the time of the meteor shower that led Dawn to stop showing up for her classes. She did look scared in my visions sometimes. And she was running—I think she was running *away* from something. Maybe …"

"Maybe the night you kept seeing is the night she was killed," Eden finished, because Deja did not have it in her to say it.

"That is, if she was killed," Deja said, but it was hard to sound hopeful.

"I wonder—Dawn's story never made any headlines, but maybe something 'bout the night of that last meteor shower did," Eden said.

In another new search, Eden typed, *Tanglewood meteor shower 2002.* A handful of news articles popped up about the topic. An anxious silence fell over both Eden and Deja as they clicked on each article one by one. The articles detailed information about the

meteor shower that occurred during Dawn's time as a student and the constellation from which it came, showing old photos of Tanglewood students gathered to witness the celestial event. Nothing out of the ordinary.

When they had gone through all the articles on the first page, they clicked onward to the second.

"Look," Deja said quickly, pointing to an article from a local news outlet that had appeared. It read *Tanglewood Prep Student Wins Town Writing Contest.*

Eden opened the article and read its tagline aloud, "*We are pleased to announce the winner of the eleventh annual Tanglewood Short Fiction Contest, hosted by the Tanglewood Public Library: 'Honeydrops' by D. Novak*."

"Dawn was a writer," Deja said, feeling a newfound affinity for Dawn.

"Makes sense," Eden said. "She did keep all those journals."

"What are 'Honeydrops,' though, and why did she name a story that?" Deja murmured.

She took the computer mouse and scrolled down. There was an image of a default avatar icon, under which a caption read, *Winner has chosen not to share a photo or a biography.*

Dawn had been bullied enough for her academic achievements; it made sense to Deja that Dawn probably did not like drawing attention to herself. It would also explain why she had provided only a shortened version of her name.

The article contained a brief description of Dawn's winning short story. This time, it was Deja who read aloud, "'When a scientist encounters a golden substance on a fallen meteorite, she uses it to make a groundbreaking medical cure.'"

Deja looked at Eden, who appeared as unnerved as Deja felt.

"The meteorite," Deja said, even though she did not need to; she knew they were both thinking it. "A gold mist came out of it that night."

"That's a mighty big coincidence," Eden said.

Deja shook her head. "No such thing as a coincidence. 'Specially if it was The Web that led us to all this."

“Then maybe there’s some truth to this Honeydrops story. I will say, there was something strange ‘bout that mist, and not just because it made the meteorite glow.” Eden dropped her gaze, tugging on one of her curls. “This is gonna sound crazy, but when that mist hit me, it smelled like my mom’s perfume. It felt like home.”

“It’s not crazy,” Deja said. “I should’ve been concerned, but instead I found it comforting. For me, it smelled like—well, it smelled like my grandma’s sweet potato pie.”

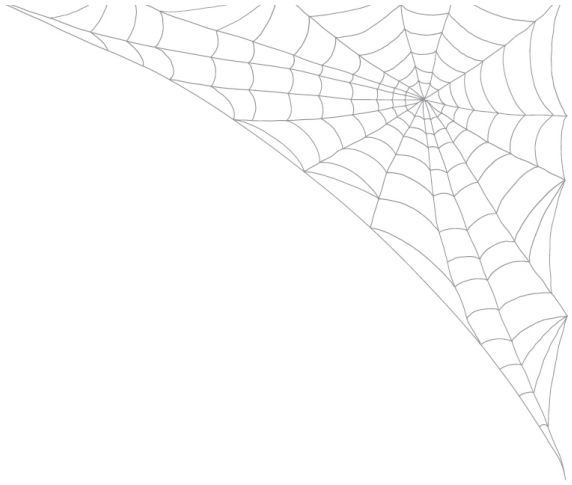
Silence settled between them. If Eden was quiet for the same reason Deja was, it was because they were both thinking about that feeling, as though holding on to the memory could bring them that comfort again.

Finally, Eden said, “It looked like that yellow stuff was originally liquid, then when you touched the rock, it vaporized. I wish we thought to catch some of it or something. Maybe Dawn’s short story is right about it being something important—maybe it has something to do with why she disappeared.”

“Actually,” Deja said, perking up, “I kept a piece of the meteorite. That yellow stuff is dried, but it’s still there.”

She thought back to her science class with Ace earlier that day. “And lucky for us,” Deja continued, “I know just the person who can help us identify what kind of chemical it is.”

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CHAPTER 23

ON THE EDGE

Deja woke abruptly.

With a groan, she sat up. A piece of paper was stuck to the side of her face. She removed it and stared at it for several moments until she was conscious enough to recognize her homework.

She realized she was sitting at her desk, her textbooks and notes open around her laptop. She must have fallen asleep last night while working on an essay for her philosophy class. Luckily, it was Saturday, which meant the only consequence of sleeping in was a crick in her neck from spending the night at her desk.

She picked up her phone to check the time and saw she had missed a call from Cybele—their daily check-in. Deja debated whether to return the call. It would only be stunted and awkward, like all their calls had been since Christmas, as Deja tried to avoid revealing that she had continued looking into Dawn even after Cybele explicitly told her not to. Deja would have loved to hear her aunt's voice, but her ability to confide in Cybele was frustratingly limited right now.

Stalling the decision on whether to call her aunt back, Deja scrolled to her next notification, which was a missed call from Tóbi.

Several more missed call notifications followed, at least one from each of her friends, and there were dozens of new messages in the *Dawn Novak Diaries* group chat.

Deja swore. It had been over one week since she and Eden informed the others about Dawn's eerie short story, which had led to them asking Ace to analyze Deja's meteorite sample. It had taken some persuading; he had been reluctant to do it because he did not want to take the risk of being seen being good at chemistry. But eventually, he had agreed, and yesterday, he told Deja and her friends that the results of his analysis would be ready today. As it was nearly noon, Ace must have already been at the lab, along with the others.

Without opening the messages on her phone, Deja grabbed her student ID and rushed out of her dorm. She jogged through campus, only slowing once she reached the science center.

Because she did not know which lab Ace and her friends were in, Deja peeked into all the labs on the first floor. Some were occupied by students doing homework, but most were empty, with most people spending their weekend elsewhere. Deja climbed to the second floor, ready to search every lab here too. But when she saw two campus safety officers, she paused.

They had spotted Deja, and the interest they took in her instantly made her feel uneasy. She wanted to turn around and leave, but a certain dread pushed her to look inside the lab that the officers stood outside of.

Sure enough, within the room, Ace and her friends sat at a table.

Ace looked furious; Tóbi looked scared; Eden looked confused; Monte looked artificially indifferent; Fabien looked genuinely indifferent. However, when they saw Deja, all their expressions shifted to varying degrees of horror.

Standing in front of them were three more campus safety officers and, to Deja's surprise, Ophelia. The latter must have sensed the shift in her friends' moods, because she glanced behind her. When she saw Deja, a triumphant smile spread across her face.

"Of course you're part of this," Ophelia said. "Come in and take a seat."

An officer closed the door behind Deja, telling her that she did not have a choice in the matter. Stiffly, Deja took a seat next to Tóbi, who immediately leaned into her.

“We told you not to come,” Tóbi hissed. “Didn’t you get our texts?”

Deja thought of the messages she had not opened. Before she could explain that she had come straight here, Ophelia asked, “What are we discussing, ladies?”

“Nothing,” Tóbi mumbled, quickly dropping her gaze to her lap. Deja doubted she had ever gotten in trouble before.

Seeing Ophelia intimidate Tóbi made Deja annoyed. “What’s the problem?” she asked.

Ophelia raised a brow at Deja’s tone, but one of the campus safety officers stepped forward. “There’s been a safety concern flagged in the school’s system. We’ve received a report that some students have attempted to make an illegal substance here on campus,” he said.

“That’s crazy,” Deja said dully. “What’s that gotta do with us, though?”

“They’re accusing us of that,” Ace said angrily. “I took a sample of a yellow substance on a rock and ran it through one of the science center’s infrared spectrometers. The results came back reading mensluciferen, and since those results were automatically uploaded to my account on the school’s cloud, the faculty saw it too.”

Only about half of the words Ace had said got through to Deja. It must have shown, because Fabien glanced at her then said to Ace, “Go ‘head and translate the nerd into English for us, mate.”

“Alright, let me put it this way: My rock was coated in mentiscape.”

Deja’s heart dropped to her feet. “Mentiscape?” she repeated incredulously.

“Well, it’s not mentiscape exactly,” Ace said. “Mensluciferin is the main chemical in mentiscape. Mentiscape is taken like eye drops, and mensluciferin penetrates the eye’s layers until it reaches the optic nerve, where it changes the images that get sent to the brain. That’s what makes people have trips.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff,” an officer remarked.

“That’s what happens when you’re one of Tanglewood’s best science students,” Monte interjected. “But you have no right to use my brother’s intelligence against him—especially not when we’re discussing mentiscape, a drug so common that, really, it’s concerning that security personnel like you know less about it than a high schooler.”

Ace’s scowl lessened as he glanced at Monte, as though he was grateful that his older brother had come to his defense. If Monte noticed, he did not acknowledge it; he stared down the officer, who grew visibly uncomfortable under his gaze.

Ophelia cleared her throat. “No one wants to jump to conclusions, Monte, but you must understand that if we had not contained this so quickly, word of a situation like this reaching the public could have caused Tanglewood a lot of trouble. This is a very serious matter. I mean—Ace, you say you found the substance on a rock, but where did you find this rock in the first place?”

Anxiety twisted Deja’s stomach, and she looked at Ace, perhaps a little too quickly. But Ace did not so much as blink in her direction; without missing a beat, he responded, “I found it on the ground while I was walking back to my dorm. The yellow stuff coating it looked weird, so I brought it here to figure out what it was.”

“And the rock was so fascinating that five other students came to see its test results?”

“We didn’t come for that, we had already planned to have a study session here together,” Monte said.

“Yeah, I was just going to finish up my experiment then join them,” Ace said. “If I wanted to make drugs, you really think I’d use school equipment? I’m Ace Montalvo. I’m not an idiot.”

Despite how smoothly the Montalvo brothers improvised a story, Ophelia and the campus safety officers still appeared skeptical. Deja was as frustrated as she was grateful for the lie; Ace was probably trying to help her by omitting the fact that she had given him the rock.

But it had been Deja’s idea to test the meteorite fragment, and she would not allow her friends to take the fall for her.

Deja stood. “Ace didn’t randomly find that rock on the ground,” she said.

“Yes, I did,” Ace said slowly, a clear warning in his voice.

“Deja,” Eden said softly, “I think he remembers his own story best. Just let him tell it.”

Deja kept her attention on Ophelia. She was the reason why The Web had even appeared in the first place and led them to Dawn Novak. She appreciated her friends trying to protect her, but mentiscape was a big deal. She could not just sit back and let them take the fall when all of this was only happening because of her.

So, Deja said, “I found the rock, and I asked Ace to look at it for me. He was only helping me out. The only person who’s to blame for using school equipment for a mentiscape-related chemical is me.”

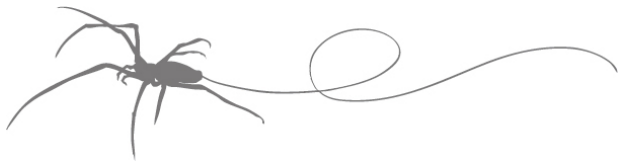
Immediately, Deja’s friends broke out in a chorus of protests.

“That’s not true, all of us wanted to do this—”

“She didn’t even bring the rock on campus, it fell during the meteor shower—”

But their objections fell on deaf ears. The moment they had met, Ophelia had decided she did not like Deja; and now, her aversion was justified. A smile spread slowly across her face, an expression that made Deja feel as though she were a mouse in the presence of a cat.

“I knew it was a mistake to let someone like you into Tanglewood,” Ophelia said. “Now, the headmaster will finally see that.”



As it was the weekend, Headmaster Egleston had to be called into his office. The commute was short; he was one of the many faculty members who lived on campus—in his case, in a large house on the border of the woods surrounding campus.

As she had waited for him to arrive, Deja's phone buzzed so much that she was forced to turn it off. Her friends clearly wanted to join her in Egleston's office, but they had been made to stay behind to be questioned by campus safety. It was no matter; Deja could handle this. She was being accused of something she did not do. So, upon Egleston's arrival, Deja decided it was in her favor to simply tell him the truth.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly," Headmaster Egleston said once Deja finished explaining. "You mean to tell me that the mentiscape-related substance you were caught analyzing came from the meteorite that crashed onto campus in the fall?"

Egleston sat in a great leather chair behind his desk. His grave expression was made all the more severe by the stony light of a storm brewing outside.

Deja sat in a wooden chair in front of his desk. Although her heart hammered in her chest, she forced herself to meet Egleston's gaze with a calm, almost bored, expression as she affirmed, "Yup."

"And that's the story you're sticking with?"

Irritation pierced through Deja's anxiety. "That's the only story there is. I was just curious 'bout a rock. That's a crime now?"

Egleston looked at her for a long moment. Part of Deja acknowledged that she could have more tact, but she did not see why that should matter. What was most important was that she was innocent.

"I see," he said eventually. "Well, as you seem to have no remorse for your actions, you leave me with little choice. I am calling for your removal from Tanglewood Preparatory School. Effective immediately."

It took a moment for his words to set in.

"Wait," she said. "I'm being expelled?"

"You should consider yourself lucky that you are not being arrested instead. I do not think you comprehend the gravity of this situation, Miss Freeman. You were found making a highly illegal substance. Given the circumstances, this is a very moderate punishment."

Deja had been prepared to take the fall for her friends, but she had not expected that to result in expulsion. Dread slowly seeped into her. Just a few months ago, she had not even wanted to come to Tanglewood. Now, the thought of leaving devastated her. She liked her classes; she wanted to see Dawn Novak's investigation through. Most of all, she did not want to be separated from her friends.

"Your teachers have told me about your behavior issues," Egleston continued. "I noticed these issues myself during our first meeting. However, your academic performance outweighed your rudeness, so I overlooked it. Now, though, I see that was my mistake. Like mother, like daughter, I suppose."

At this, Deja snapped out of her shock. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, Renée could not resist the temptation of drugs, and it ruined her life. I am sure you got your academic talent from your mother, but I strongly advise that you not strive to be completely like her. I hope your removal from Tanglewood will help you consider how you can learn from your mother's mistakes."

Like mother, like daughter. It was the worst insult anyone could have given Deja. Her cold fear melted away as the heat of her anger grew, engulfing every part of her mind. Before she could think better of it, she was on her feet.

"You don't know a damn thing 'bout me," Deja snapped. "And we both know you definitely don't care. Take your fake concern and shove it up your ass. I don't need it, just like I never needed Tanglewood to have a future—one that will have *nothing* to do with drugs. So go 'head, kick me out. I'll be just fine."

Egleston smiled smugly, as though her outburst proved some kind of point. "Great, it seems we're on the same page, then," he said. "Get your affairs in order, Miss Freeman. An administrator will be in touch with you shortly to provide information about your removal process."

As the headmaster stood and walked across the room, panic flared within Deja. Once again, she had gotten carried away in her anger. He had clearly been goading her, but that did not matter. By

now, Deja should have known she was never allowed to show her anger, not even when she was angry.

Deja turned to him. “Wait—”

She broke off when the headmaster opened the door to reveal Tóbi standing outside.

“Hello, Headmaster Egleston,” she greeted. “How are you doing? I hope your weekend is going well?”

“Miss Ẹkúndayọ,” Headmaster Egleston said, shocked. “Now is really not a good time to chat.”

“Yes, I’m rather busy myself. So, I’ll make this quick. I am sure Ophelia conveniently neglected to let you know that Deja is not alone in this incident. It involved five other students, myself included. It was an innocent experiment gone wrong, but from what I caught of your conversation, you don’t seem to understand that. So let me make one thing very clear: If you expel Deja Freeman, I will call my parents’ friends in the FDA and insist that Tanglewood’s dining hall is in desperate need of a health inspection. Of course, they’ll likely find that the kitchens are up to standard, but such an investigation would be sure to put Tanglewood’s excellent reputation into question, don’t you think?”

Deja stared in shock. Tóbi, the girl who would never so much as kill a fly for fear of how it would be used against her in future political campaigns, was now threatening the headmaster of Tanglewood Prep. What in the world had gotten into her?

Headmaster Egleston looked equally as flabbergasted. “This is quite out of character for you, Miss Ẹkúndayọ, and it is a very serious thing that you are proposing—”

“Oh, good, you lot are still here,” Fabien said as he entered the office.

It must have begun to rain, because Fabien’s hair was wet. As he began tying it up, he continued, “I thought I’d be late—those annoying campus safety officers asked us so many questions about our science experiment. It almost felt like they were questioning my commitment to Tanglewood, as though my family isn’t generously building Clarke-Reynolds Hall—speaking of which, have you seen it lately, Egleston? It’s brilliant, the construction is almost complete.

Almost. Wouldn't it be a shame if its funding got pulled? Think of all the music, drama, and dance businesses that have already agreed to sponsor equipment for the brand-new spaces. I reckon they'd all be livid if their project got snubbed. They'd never want anything to do with Tanglewood again!"

Eden entered the office. She walked past a very stunned Headmaster Egleston to sit in the chair next to Deja. "Hi y'all," she said softly. "I just got off the phone with my mom. She said that Salt & Light Baptist Church wouldn't be happy if one of our scholarship recipients got expelled. We only started the scholarship so more Southern kids had a chance to come to Tanglewood, but if Tanglewood doesn't appreciate our support anymore, we'd be glad to end the program. I guess Tanglewood can find another way to reach Southern or multicultural communities."

Deja looked around in amazement. She had insisted that she be the only one to meet with the headmaster, and in this moment, she was incredibly glad her friends had not listened to her. She had been trying to protect them, and in her impulsiveness, she had forgotten they would be just as determined to protect her.

Headmaster Egleston's mouth worked indignantly, but it took a moment for actual words to come out. "This is extremely inappropriate," he said at last. "I understand you all are upset about Miss Freeman's removal, but this is no way to express your disapproval. You cannot talk me into reversing my decision."

"More of an action man, huh?" Fabien asked. "No problem—I'll phone my mum right now, get things in motion."

Tóbi sighed, pulling her phone out of her yellow purse. "Calling the FDA was not on my schedule, but I suppose it'll only take a moment."

"Wait," Headmaster Egleston said quickly. "This is all very sudden. How about this—I'll allow Miss Freeman to undergo a disciplinary hearing, which offers her a chance to be forgiven."

"We don't want a chance," Tóbi said. "We want a guarantee that she can stay at Tanglewood."

"I'm afraid that's out of my control. Because drugs are concerned, I had to report this incident to the school board, and—"

“What was that about the school board?”

Everyone turned to see Monte enter the office. There was a coldness to him that seemed to leach the warmth from the room.

He placed a hand on Deja’s shoulder. “I should be preparing for dinner with my father tonight, but after my friend was brought to your office, I wanted to check if everything was okay.”

If possible, Headmaster Egleston’s face became even paler. “Angel Montalvo Sr. is in town?”

“Yes, he just flew into Connecticut this morning. These days, the hotel keeps him very busy, but he’s still committed to his duties as the chairman of Tanglewood’s school board, and he would certainly want to know if there was an issue. So, Headmaster Egleston, is there an issue here?”

Deja looked at Monte in surprise. She knew the Montalvos held many notable positions, but she had not been aware that chairman of Tanglewood’s board was one of them.

All her friends watched Egleston, patiently waiting with their phones at the ready, like weapons for Deja’s defense. Gratitude flooded Deja, forcing her to blink several times in order to prevent it from pouring out of her.

Headmaster Egleston’s gaze lingered on Monte’s hand resting on Deja’s shoulder. “No,” he finally said. “There’s no issue at all. Nothing that Angel Montalvo Sr. needs to be made aware of. I’ll follow up with the school board, say we found the whole thing was just a prank. They probably won’t do anything more than require a mandatory counseling session for Miss Freeman.”

“Sure, that works for us,” Monte said, suddenly pleasant. “Well, we apologize for intruding on your weekend, but hopefully you can enjoy the rest of it.”

Monte helped Deja stand, and with his arm around her shoulders, he guided her out of the room. The other three followed behind them. In the lobby outside, Ophelia sat at her desk. She had probably been eagerly waiting to witness Deja’s expulsion, but now she watched the five of them leave with a stunned expression. Deja was too shocked herself to gloat.

Deja walked through Hamilton Hall with her friends as though caught in a haze, still in disbelief of how quickly her friends had been able to turn her luck. “You idiots realize that if that had backfired, you would’ve gotten expelled with me?” she asked. In her disorientation, her concern about them risking their own spots at Tanglewood came out harsher than intended. “And you,” she added, turning to Monte, “you played the dad card. You hate playing the dad card.”

“I know—I wish Ace had come with us so he could play it for me, but he had to go to rowing practice,” Monte said. “But ultimately, I’d play my entire hand if it meant keeping you safe, Deja.”

Deja looked around to see her friends all nodding in agreement. If her heart swelled any larger, her gratitude might kill her.

“It was really dumb of you to try and handle it yourself, y’know,” Eden said. “You know who our families are. If anyone should’ve taken the fall, it should’ve been one of us. We have a lot more wiggle room in this kinda stuff than you do.”

“Yeah, you really didn’t think that one through, mate,” Fabien said. “Aren’t you into philosophy? Whatever happened to *I think therefore I am*?”

“I’m more of an *I feel, therefore I can be free* philosopher,” Deja said sheepishly. “I just didn’t wanna drag y’all into my mess.”

“*Our* mess, Deja,” Tóbi said, exasperated. “How many times do we have to tell you that?”

Honestly, they could have told her a hundred more times, and Deja probably still would not have believed them. She had always had difficulty trusting people. However, her friends had not just told her she could trust them today; they had showed her. And actions were a thousand times louder than words.

“You’re right—we’re in this together,” Deja said. “I get that now, I swear.”

She spoke to all her friends, but she looked only at Eden, whom she could tell was most disgruntled about her near expulsion. It was the best of an apology she could offer, and to her relief, Eden nodded reluctantly.

“And now that the storm has passed, if we could please address what Ace’s analysis revealed,” Monte said with an urgency that indicated he had been wanting to talk about it ever since it happened. “While Dawn was a student, she wrote a story called ‘Honeydrops.’ As far as we know, this story is about a scientist using a golden liquid gotten from a meteorite to create cutting-edge medicine. Fast forward years later, the meteorite that crashed in September was coated in a substance that is a key ingredient in mentiscape. What are the odds?”

“Well, there was a meteor shower that occurred during Dawn’s Tanglewood years,” Tóbi pointed out. “I’m sure there was the same amount of excitement leading up to that shower as there was for the one back in September. It wouldn’t be far-fetched to say she drew inspiration from that.”

“Also, I looked up mensluciferin, the chemical that Ace mentioned,” Eden said. She pulled up an information page on her phone, and as she passed it around, she said, “It’s a light compound —a rare one, since unlike other light compounds, it can be found in non-living things too. And it has been found on meteorites before. Dawn must have known that fact when she wrote her story.”

When the phone came around to Monte, he frowned. “Okay, you two are making some logical points,” he admitted after a moment. “Still, I can’t help but feel like there’s something we’re missing here. Her story—it was about creating medicine from the meteorite substance. Maybe if we look more into what exactly mensluciferin —”

“Absolutely not,” Deja snapped. The headmaster’s cruel suggestion that she was bound to the same fate that befell her mom still stung, and she continued, perhaps a little too forcefully, “If there was anything healing ‘bout that compound, mentiscape would have a medical use. But it’s a vicious street drug, through and through. We don’t need to get involved in any of that mess —’specially not over a piece of fiction.”

“Sorry, old man, but I have to agree,” Fabien said. “Just look at today, what happened when we tried to take even a step down that

route. If we get in trouble over this kind of stuff again, I don't think threatening Egleston will work a second time."

Eden and Tóbi voiced their assent. Monte looked around at his friends. Finally, he nodded curtly, handing Eden back her phone.

"You guys are right," Monte said. "I don't want to put any of us at risk. Besides, I suppose we should focus on things that are more directly related to Dawn's disappearance."

"That still means the meteor shower from years ago, at the very least," Deja said. "From my visions, I'm pretty sure something big happened to Dawn that night."

"We can keep searching for notable headlines about that night," Monte said. "And it's probably worth returning to Dawn's student record too—maybe one of her classes or extracurriculars will help us figure out where to next look for traces of her."

"Sounds good," Tóbi said. She checked her smartwatch. "If that's all, I should go. I have a meeting to prepare for."

"I need to go too," Monte said. "Unfortunately, I was telling the truth about having dinner with my father tonight. If he thinks I'm avoiding him, he'll schedule some *father-son bonding time* again."

"Right, then. I'm off to find a free practice room in Rhoden," Fabien said.

He slung his arms around Tóbi's and Monte's shoulders as the three of them made their way out of Hamilton. Deja watched them leave. She knew she took things too far sometimes; she could not help it. But she felt lucky that she had found friends whom she could always trust to pull her back from the edge.

After the others had gone, Deja turned to Eden, who was frowning. Deja reached out and slid her thumb over the space between Eden's brows, trying to smooth out her expression.

"Fix your face," Deja said. "I'm fine. Nothing happened."

"You almost got expelled," Eden said. "You could've gotten kicked out of Tanglewood. Then I never would've seen you again."

Deja softened, realizing just how much she had worried Eden. "You really think that? Eden, not even getting expelled would keep me away from you. You can't get rid of me that easily." When Eden still did not look convinced, Deja, wanting to cheer her up, added,

“Let’s do something. You wanna play your dumb video game? You can even teach me how to play—I’ll listen this time.”

Eden stared at Deja for a moment more, then she sighed. “Y’know, Deja, you can be pretty tiring sometimes.”

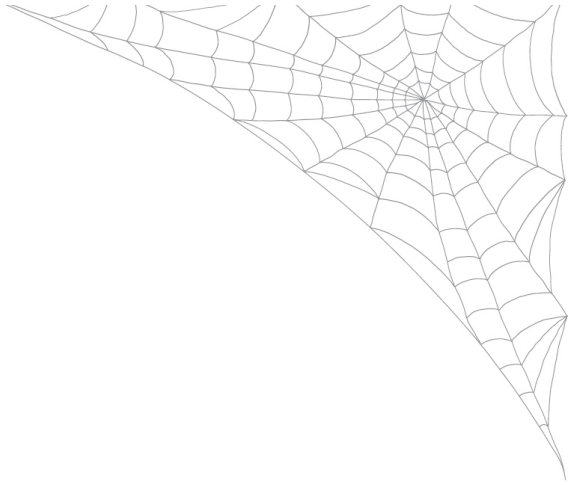
Deja blinked, nonplussed. “Damn. Alright.”

“But still,” Eden continued, “for some reason, I don’t think I could ever get tired of you.”

Her large brown eyes were warm in the hallway’s yellow light, and her gaze felt like the sun against Deja’s skin.

Eden turned, not waiting for Deja to respond before walking away, nor checking to see if Deja was behind her. Deja was glad for it, because if Eden had looked at her, she would have seen how Deja could suddenly not stop smiling.

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CHAPTER 24

BREATHE

The spring semester always seemed to move at a faster pace than fall. This year, to make up for losing class president, Tóbi had taken on more commitments than ever before. Her workload was like the fabled hydra; for every one task she completed, three more seemed to pop up in its place.

It grew difficult to keep track of the days. Instead, Tóbi measured time by deadlines and meetings. She only knew March was approaching because of the growing excitement for Wildfire prom—which, as the chair of the prom committee, put pressure on her to ensure it was perfect.

After ballet rehearsal ended one evening, Tóbi hurried to Bartleby. She arrived at her prom committee meeting just in time to hear a guy say, “How are we supposed to throw a red carpet-themed prom without a red carpet?”

“What happened to our red carpet?” Tóbi demanded.

He glanced at the others, clearly fearful of answering Tóbi himself. So, Lynn Q. stepped up.

“We didn’t order it on time,” she said. “And now red carpets are out of stock.”

“But there are other colors available?” Tóbi asked.

“Um …?”

“Get the supplier on the phone and find out what colors they do have.”

“Sure thing,” Lynn Q. replied, but Tóbi was already out the door.

She hurried upstairs to another room, where a Mind & Body meeting was occurring. As she walked to the head of the table, Lucille placed a tablet into her hands.

“We finished making the mood tracker,” Lucille said. “How many copies do you want us to print?”

As Tóbi scanned the sheet, checking for errors, she responded, “Since we’re handing them out at the visiting psychologist’s talk, it depends on how many people sign up for the event.”

“So how many people are signed up?”

“I’ll have to check with the wellness committee. They’re the ones organizing the talk.”

“You’re the chair of the wellness committee,” Lucille reminded her.

“Oh.” Tóbi shook her head a little, trying to clear it. “Right.”

“Tóbi, are you okay?” Lucille asked.

Tóbi forced a smile. “Of course, Little Me.” She returned the tablet to Lucille. “There are typos in columns three and eleven. While you guys correct those, I’ll check the number of attendees for you.”

Tóbi left the room and hurried to another down the hall. Although the walk was short, she felt winded when she stepped inside. But she barely had time to catch her breath before Lynn P. came up to her.

“These are the people who have agreed to let us interview them,” Lynn P. said, handing Tóbi a paper with a list of names.

Tóbi scanned the list and frowned. “These are all students. Where are the faculty and staff?”

Lynn P. glanced at the other members of the social committee, but they looked just as lost.

Tóbi sighed. “As the social committee, we highlight the *entire* Tanglewood Prep community. Give me the names of your favorite teachers, administrators—even the sweet lunch lady who smiled at you the other day. Anyone who we can interview.”

She pushed the list into the hands of the nearest person and left the room, going back down the stairwell to return to the prom

committee meeting.

“What colors are available?” Tóbi asked them.

Lynn Q. lowered her phone from her ear, putting a hand over the microphone to tell Tóbi, “They have orange. That’s pretty close to red, right?”

“Not close enough,” Tóbi said.

“Well, the other colors remaining are green, white, purple—”

“Purple’s perfect,” Tóbi said. “That’s our new prom theme—Tanglewood meets Hollywood on the violet walk of fame.”

To the rest of the prom committee, she said, “Budget people, work out how many purple velvet ropes we can afford to line the carpet. For what we can’t buy, we’ll just dye the ropes we already have.”

They had barely nodded before Tóbi spun around and left the room. Slightly dizzy, she made her way back to the social committee meeting, where everyone was gathered around the list of potential interviewees.

“These are the new names we could come up with,” Lynn P. said as Tóbi joined them.

They showed the list to her, but Tóbi could not make out any of the names. She blinked, shook her head, and looked closer. The names swirled together, blurring in her vision.

“Tóbi?” Lynn P. asked.

“Looks good,” Tóbi lied. Her lack of sleep must have been catching up with her; she’d check the list again later.

“Draft the interview questions, then you’re all free to go. Thank you for your help,” Tóbi said, leaving the room.

As she made her way down the hallway, Tóbi’s surroundings seemed to spin. She felt vaguely surprised that she was still able to walk. How could she be falling with both feet on the ground?

She managed to make it back to the Mind & Body meeting, and when she walked in, everyone turned to look at her. For a moment, Tóbi feared that she looked as off-kilter as she felt.

But then Lucille prompted, “So, how many people are attending the talk?”

Right—she was supposed to check the number of attendees. She could do that right now, send a quick text to the wellness committee group chat. But her purse was suddenly too heavy on her shoulder, and she could not fathom lifting it to dig out her ever-buzzing phone.

"Tóbi?" Lucille asked, taking Tóbi's hand. When had she walked up to her? Tóbi had not noticed. "Are you alright? Do you want me to check for you?"

Tóbi shook her head. "No, I got it. It's my responsibility—"

Her lungs constricted painfully, and suddenly, she did not have enough air to continue speaking. Her breaths came quick and short, but the more that she tried to take in air, the less that she seemed to have.

"Breathe, Tóbi," said a Mind & Body member who had come up to her. "That's what we advise, remember? Deep breaths."

The other Mind & Body members gathered around Tóbi, repeating the same instructions. On some level, Tóbi knew they meant well, but they were too close, and the room was too small, and they just kept repeating the same thing: Breathe.

If she had not been hyperventilating, Tóbi would have laughed. Breathe? *Breathe*? Her head was underwater, and they wanted her to breathe?

"Please, stop—*stop,*" Tóbi gasped. "I need air. I just need some air."

She pulled away from the helping hands and hurried out of the room. She barely kept her balance; the hallways seemed to teeter precariously, and the floor seemed to shake beneath her.

At last, she stumbled out of Bartleby, inhaling chilled night air that expanded her lungs. With it being late February, most of the ground was still covered by snow. But that did not stop Tóbi from walking to the center of a lawn and lying down.

She did not know why she did it, but she knew it had been the right choice as she felt the world gradually slow to a halt. The moisture from the ground seeped into her clothes. Distant conversations floated on the evening breeze as she stared up at the sky, allowing its stars to swallow her.

Tóbi did not know how much time had passed before footsteps approached her. She felt them first, slight vibrations beneath her, before she registered the crunching of snow. Tóbi vaguely acknowledged how odd it would seem for someone to find her here, but right now, she did not have the energy to pretend she was doing okay.

Eventually, Deja's face appeared above her own. "I swung by one of your fifty 'leven club meetings in Bartleby looking for you, but they said you left," Deja said. "Figured you couldn't have gotten far, though, 'cause it's not like you ever take a break."

"Your nose stud looks like one of those stars," Tóbi said faintly.

"Thanks."

To Tóbi's surprise, Deja lay on her back next to her. It was quiet enough that Tóbi could hear the soothing rhythm of Deja's slow and steady breathing. Tóbi closed her eyes, syncing her breath with Deja's.

Two more pairs of footsteps arrived, accompanied by Fabien's voice. Although Tóbi did not look, she knew that the second person was Eden, somehow recognizing her by her silence.

Fabien quieted as he and Eden reached the spot where Deja and Tóbi lay. After a moment, there was the sound of rustling as they too lay down, Fabien next to Deja and Eden next to Tóbi.

Clusters of voices came and went as people walked paths around them. Tóbi was unsure whether anyone could see them lying there in the dark, but if they did, no one called out to her. It was peaceful staying still as the world continued around her, and she found herself grateful that her friends seemed to have agreed to take a breath with her.

Tóbi heard a group of guys pass by. She did not think anything of them until she heard Monte's voice say, "I'll catch up later."

Footsteps approached them, accompanied by rustling that indicated Monte was carrying something. His lacrosse gear, probably, given that the season had started this semester.

"I thought that was you all, but I wasn't sure," Monte said as he reached them, clearly perplexed. "Isn't the ground cold?"

"Join us and find out," Fabien said.

“I’m sure there’s more logical ways to find out. But, well. Sure, I guess.”

Fabien and Deja shifted to make room for Monte as he lay between them. For a moment, all five of them stared up at the twinkling stars that were almost blindingly bright in Tanglewood’s isolated campus, where there were no city lights to compete with them.

The sight reminded Tóbi of the floating galaxy they had seen in September—The Web. Deja had once said The Web was based on intentionality, a system defined by fate. Tóbi had found the concept a little hard to understand. But now, Tóbi realized she did not need to understand it; she felt it. Lying here, gazing at the night sky alongside her friends, felt perfect, as though it was something that was always meant to happen.

After a long moment, Monte finally asked, “What are we doing?”

“Deja?” Fabien prompted.

“Hell if I know,” Deja said. “Ask Tinker Bell. She’s the one who decided to stargaze in the snow.”

They grew quiet, plainly waiting for Tóbi’s answer. She shrugged feebly, even though she knew that they couldn’t see it.

“It all just got a bit much,” Tóbi explained the best that she could.

To her relief, her best seemed enough for her friends. “Well, while we’re here, look at that,” Monte said. He pointed to the sky, tracing a few stars. “The Big Dipper. And over there”—he pointed to another area of the sky—“Perseus.”

Eden traced out her own shape in the sky. “And Mufasa.”

For the first time all day, Tóbi smiled. Her anxiety had faded, her head becoming clear enough to remember to ask, “By the way, you said you were looking for me, Deja? Did something catch your attention about Dawn’s extracurriculars?”

“Nah, not yet. I just wanted to show you this.”

She pulled a folded sheet of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Tóbi, who unfolded it. The light of the stars just barely allowed her to see that it was her favorite photo of herself, the one that had been anonymously taken of her during her freshman year recital. It

had been edited so that fairy wings bloomed from behind her white dress.

"I printed it out 'cause I think you should hang it somewhere," Deja said. "Eden and I got bored in seventh period and made it."

Fabien reached to take the photo from Tóbi so he and Monte could see it. "Come off it," Fabien said. "Eden most definitely did all the work."

"Shut up. Giving her Tinker Bell's wings was my idea, at least."

Tóbi laughed. Admittedly, Deja's nickname for her had grown on her, especially now that she saw this. "How'd you know about my ballerina picture?" Tóbi asked.

"I just searched your name, and it was the first picture that came up," Deja said, sounding pleased that she had been able to do that much. "Well, the first one of you, because surprisingly, some guy popped up first. Who would've thought anyone shared a name like yours?"

"Oh, that's probably my brother," Tóbi said before she could think better of it. The admission was followed by instant regret.

"I didn't know you had a brother," Monte said, and Tóbi could hear the frown in his voice.

"But it had your name under his photo," Eden said.

Tóbi's smile faded. She did not talk about her brother, something that being so comfortable around her friends seemed to have caused her to forget. Normally, she would have been too afraid of how people would perceive her if they knew the truth. But right now, it was just Tóbi, her friends, and the stars—two audiences she knew would not judge her.

So, Tóbi admitted, "That's his name as well. We share a name."

"You're both named Olúwatóbi?" Fabien asked. "Doesn't that get confusing?"

"Not really," Tóbi said. "Because he's dead."

There was a shocked pause. Then, Eden said, "I'm sorry."

Tóbi shrugged. "It doesn't affect me much. He's been dead for nineteen years now."

"And you're seventeen," Deja said slowly, processing the information. Then it clicked, and she said in disbelief, "Nah, that's

messed up. You're a replacement baby?"

In the corner of her eye, Tóbi saw Fabien hit Deja's arm. At the same time, Monte said warningly, "Deja."

"What? We were all thinking it," Deja grumbled, rubbing her arm.

"It's alright," Tóbi said truthfully; somehow, it was refreshing that Deja was blunt as ever about a topic that so many others normally shied away from.

"My brother died young, and my parents weren't ready to let go of having a child," Tóbi continued. "I don't mind. My brother was amazing. I'm glad to have him as an example."

Throughout her life, she had repeated the phrase so many times that she could no longer tell if it was genuine. She knew she did not dislike her brother; she had never even met him. And yet him being a constant presence in her life, despite the fact they had never met, was also the reason why she was not sure if she liked him either.

"I think you're more of an example than he is," Eden said, surprising Tóbi. "The photo I found was attached to an article 'bout him receiving Tanglewood's Citizenship Award. Don't you already have two of those?"

"Three," Monte corrected. "I know because you have one more than I do."

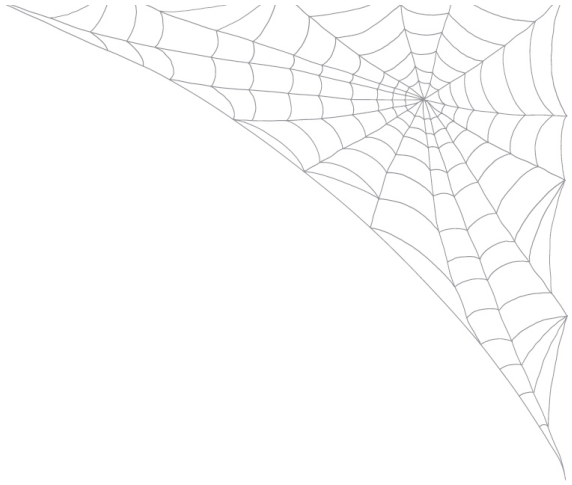
"Oh, yeah, I remember when that announcement came on in class because it woke me up from my nap," Fabien said. "Good on you. Looks like you're leaving Tóbi 2.0 in the dust."

"It's not a competition," Tóbi said, somewhat amused, but mostly amazed.

Tóbi constantly felt as though she was falling behind, so much so that trying to catch up all at once was what had caused her panic attack. And honestly, if her friends had not come along, Tóbi would have simply taken a breath in the snow then gone back inside, whether she had been ready to or not. Pushing on had always felt like the only way to impress her parents, who never failed to remind her of all the ways she fell short of her brother. *She* was supposed to be Tóbi 2.0—but to her friends, she was not just a copy. She was the original.

“But,” Tóbi added after a moment, smiling slightly, “I guess that is kind of true, isn’t it?”

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CHAPTER 25

THE TRUTH

“So we meet again, Miss Ẹkúndayọ.”

Tóbi paused in the speech she was giving to a tour group. She looked to see Monte approaching her, leading a tour of his own. Spring was when Tanglewood received the most tourists, who were usually prospective students and their families, or else curious travelers exploring the best sites in New England. As a student ambassador, Tóbi was tasked with leading campus tours after her classes.

“Monte,” Tóbi greeted. “This is the third time we’ve run into each other today. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that you were following me.”

Monte was also a student ambassador, and for most of Tóbi’s Tanglewood career, the inevitable intersections of their extracurriculars had annoyed Tóbi. But lately, she felt oddly light whenever chance had her working alongside Monte, as though she could float.

Her heart certainly seemed on the precipice of fluttering away as Monte said, “At this point, it would be most logical for us to combine our tour groups.”

“There’s no rule against it, so I guess it’s alright,” Tóbi said, forcing herself to seem nonchalant even though she felt anything but.

Perhaps it was a trick of the rare sunlight that graced Tanglewood's grounds today, but Tóbi thought she saw a hint of a smile on Monte's face.

As they walked to the next building, Tóbi said, "This is Bartleby Student Center, the epicenter of social life at Tanglewood. It's named after Reverend Grant Bartleby, who built a school here in 1734 that would evolve into Tanglewood Preparatory School."

Nodding, Monte continued, "The Bartleby Student Center aims to foster community within Tanglewood—"

He stopped speaking abruptly, his attention pulled across the lawn. Tóbi followed his gaze to see Ace storming through campus, trailed by his two lackeys.

Tóbi quickly picked up where Monte left off. "And as a gathering place for the entire campus," she said, "Bartleby hosts most of our school's programs, services, and different extracurriculars—oh look!"

She faked a gasp and gestured to a nearby tree, redirecting the tourists' attention to two jet-black squirrels sitting in its branches. "Did you know," she said, "according to campus lore, these squirrels are the product of an inhumane and unnatural experiment conducted in the science center several years ago? Whether that's true or not, I can't say … I just know that I've never seen this type of squirrel anywhere other than here on campus."

The tourists voiced their amazement as they gathered around the tree to take pictures of the squirrels, which were so used to being a tour attraction that they hardly reacted. With their groups momentarily distracted, Tóbi moved next to Monte.

"Everything alright?" she asked softly.

He shook his head a little as if to clear it. "Yes, sorry. I just saw Ace, and he didn't look like he was up to anything good. But I know there's no point in trying to stop him—he would just ignore me."

Tóbi still remembered the brothers' fight from Christmas Day. It was clear Monte was protective of his younger brother, but because he did not like upsetting Ace, he would never intrude unless he was specifically asked.

“I can check on Ace,” Tóbi said. “Will you be able to finish the tour without me?”

A nagging part of Tóbi acknowledged that even if Monte finished the tour for her group, she was still the guide assigned to it, and if any visitors had complaints, those would be attributed to her. In the past, she would have never trusted someone to contribute to her workload, sure that the only way to ensure perfection was to do everything herself.

However, that lingering fear faded as Monte gave her a small, grateful smile. “I can handle it. Thanks.”

Tóbi nodded and hurried to catch up with Ace, who was already turning onto another path. The warm weather had drawn students outside, and study groups were scattered across lawns and sitting at outdoor tables. Many called out to Tóbi in greeting, slowing her down as she indulged in brief chats out of politeness.

By the time she caught sight of Ace again, she was alarmed to see that he had stopped in the shadow of a building. Each of his buddies held the arm of a boy, whom Ace was beating up.

Ace landed another punch, and the guy doubled over with a groan. As he straightened back up, he glared at Ace. “You think you’re so tough,” he spat. “But you’re just a spoiled rich boy.”

Ace stepped back, looking affronted. He pulled a fifty-dollar bill out of his blazer and used it to dab his face as though it were a tissue. “Is that really what you think of me?” he sniffed. “And here I thought we were coming to an understanding. But if you still don’t get it, I can make myself clearer …”

Ace noticed Tóbi, and he paused. “Tóbi?”

He crumpled the money and tossed it over his shoulder. As he walked up to meet Tóbi, he said, “You’ve caught me at a bad time.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Tóbi said incredulously. She glanced at Ace’s victim and noticed freckles on his swollen face, which struck a chord of recognition within her. “Wait, is that …?”

Ace tried to block her path, but she nudged him out of the way. “That’s the guy Monte fought in September,” Tóbi realized aloud.

She glanced at Ace, who had suddenly become very interested in examining his bruised knuckles. His silence was all the confirmation

she needed.

“Ace, seriously?” Tóbi asked. “The poor guy already had his jaw broken. He probably only just returned from the hospital.”

A menacing look passed over Ace’s face. “He would have ended up in a much worse condition if I’d been there when he tried to embarrass a Montalvo.”

Despite the situation, Tóbi almost laughed. The Montalvo brothers would never directly admit they cared for each other, yet it seemed they still found their own ways to show it.

“You know I can’t let you continue with this,” she said.

“Come on, Tóbi. It wasn’t just Monte he disrespected—it was you too.”

As crude of a testament as it was to their friendship, Tóbi felt touched. “I appreciate the thought,” she said sincerely. “But I don’t want this. So, if you’re really doing this for me, you’ll let him go.”

He glared at her. Unwittingly, Tóbi noted that even though Ace’s eyes glowed blue with anger, they seemed much less vibrant than Monte’s brown eyes.

After a moment, Ace rolled his eyes. He nodded curtly at his lackeys, and they released Freckles, who staggered forward as he regained his balance.

“Thank you so much, Tóbi,” he gasped.

Tóbi merely smiled. It was true that he had almost embarrassed her last semester by threatening to spread the news about her break-in to Monte’s dorm, and Tóbi was not a particularly strong advocate for forgiveness. However, she was thinking long-term. Shortly after that incident, Tóbi had learned Freckles was the son of a famous actor. She was sure her parents would appreciate a celebrity endorsement for Zebra Rush, something she could probably now arrange through him.

Sure enough, Freckles continued, “I owe you one, Tóbi, really. And I’m sorry about September. I was just being stupid—I swear it had nothing to do with the decision the school board almost made this year. My parents weren’t even one of the ones who complained. I would’ve been happy to have you as president for all six years—I think you would’ve been great.”

Tóbi's false smile morphed into genuine confusion. "What?"

His eyes widened, and he looked nervously between her and Ace. "Oh, you didn't know—?"

"Five," Ace interrupted. "Four. Three …"

Freckles got the hint; before Ace finished counting down, he ran away.

Tóbi stared at his retreating back. Had he just mentioned her broken class president streak? How was that relevant? And which of the school board's decisions had he been referring to?

She was usually one of the first to know about any new school policies—but only those that were finalized. To hear about policies that had never left the planning phase, she would have needed a connection to someone on the board—like Monte and Ace had through their father.

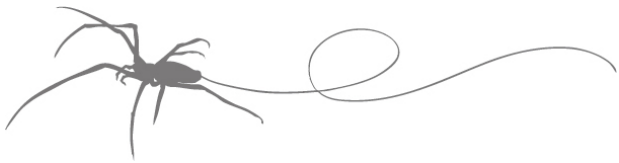
Her heart beat rapidly. She thought about how random it had been for Monte to run for class president this year, almost as if he had known something she did not.

Tóbi rounded on Ace. "What was he talking about?" she demanded.

She wanted Ace to scoff and say the guy was crazy, that he had no idea what he was talking about.

Instead, Tóbi's stomach sank as Ace looked at her mournfully. "You should really talk to Monte about that," he said.

Before Tóbi could say anything more, he gestured to his lackeys and led them away, leaving Tóbi standing alone in a puddle of dread.



By the time Tóbi found Monte, he had finished the tour and joined Fabien in a room in Bartleby. They sat on a sofa, laughing at something on Fabien's phone, but as Tóbi entered, they both looked up.

“You lied to me,” Tóbi said to Monte.

Monte’s small smile faded. “Can you give us the room?” he asked Fabien.

“No need,” Tóbi said. “This will be very quick.”

Fabien stood from the sofa. “No, no, it’s cool. I needed to go charge my phone anyway. It’s on”—he glanced at his phone—”99 percent. So …”

He trailed off. Then, he shrugged and left.

As Tóbi walked up to Monte, she said, “Jack Richards. Thomas Hernandez. William Green. Even Hana Park and my own brother.” She stopped just short of Monte, who had stood to hold Tóbi’s gaze. “There are more, but those are the students I can think of off the top of my head who held class president for all six years while at Tanglewood. It’s a streak I’ve always wanted, and you know it.”

Monte said nothing. His expression was tentatively neutral, as though he needed more information before he could decide how to react.

The non-reaction angered Tóbi more than any words could, but she kept her voice calm as she continued, “Back in September, you told me you ran for class president for fun. But I’m going to ask you again, and this time I want the truth: Monte, why did you run for class president this year?”

Monte opened his mouth, a quick response ready. But he paused, perhaps realizing that whatever lie he was about to say would not work on Tóbi this time.

After a moment, he sighed. “Last school year,” he said, “after you were elected class president, some parents complained. They said it wasn’t fair that you’ve been elected four times in a row, and that other people in our class deserve a chance to be president. So, there was a policy proposed to the school board: Each student would be allowed to hold the presidency for only four consecutive years, and after that they were not allowed to run anymore.

“My dad told me about it while the board was still deliberating,” Monte continued. “That’s when I made a deal with him: He would make sure the policy was rejected, and in return, I would make sure to win class president this year. That way, parents would stop

complaining, and you could still run for president senior year. I just thought losing class president would be more tolerable if it was due to another student rather than a systemic barrier."

Tóbi's anger flickered out, leaving cold shock. When Freckles mentioned the school board's involvement in her campaign, her first instinct had been to believe that Monte tried using his ties as the chairman's son to sabotage her. She had not been prepared to hear that he had been on her side this entire time.

"But—those students I just mentioned," Tóbi said, desperately grasping for a foothold of reason even though it felt like she was already falling. "No one had a problem when they were class president for all six years. In fact, they were celebrated for it."

"I know. But this time was different because—well, I can't be too sure because it was never said explicitly. But, well, if you look at the previous students who had the streak …"

Monte trailed off, plainly unsure how to continue. However, Tóbi heard what he was trying to say anyways, the truth hitting her so hard that he might as well have yelled it.

"None of those other students were Black girls," Tóbi finished, the realization creeping over her like ice.

"No. And it does seem like once one finally had a chance at accomplishing the streak, people became uncomfortable with the concept."

To some extent, Tóbi heard him, but she was unable to metabolize the information. His words merely passed through her as a numbness gradually encased her.

"Tóbi," Monte said, and she realized she had been staring blankly into space for the past few minutes. "I'm sorry."

Tóbi did not know if he was apologizing for the school's discrimination or for his attempt to make it better, but it did not matter.

"Don't be," she said. "There's nothing either of us can do about it. Especially not right now—right now, I have a meeting to attend."

"Is there anything I can—?" Monte began.

But Tóbi was already leaving the room. As she made her way through Bartleby, she felt no tears. As unexpected as the news of the

nearly-implemented policy was, she could not be completely surprised. Tóbi had never once failed to reach her goals, no matter how ambitious—yet every time she arrived at one, it felt like the goalposts were moved even further. She constantly pushed herself to be the best, and she beat herself up if she fell short. Now she wondered why she was so hard on herself when there were plenty of systems in place to do that for her.

The meeting that Tóbi headed to was for student council, which meant that as class president, Monte would lead the meeting—something Tóbi had forgotten until Monte entered the room just a few moments after she did.

As Monte made his way to the head of the table, Tóbi felt his eyes sear into her. She carefully avoided his gaze as she sat at the far end of the table and pulled out her laptop, preparing to take minutes. Gradually, the other class officers filed into the room. The junior class treasurer sat next to Tóbi and began talking to her animatedly. Tóbi did not hear a word he said, yet she still managed to smile and nod in all the right places. She had always been good at that.

Once the last person walked in, Monte cleared his throat. “It’s great seeing everyone again,” he greeted, and Tóbi noted how easily he could turn on his professionalism as well. “As we all know, Wildfire prom is coming up, so this meeting is dedicated to finalizing plans. First, however, let’s hear about the fantastic work the prom committee has done in creating this year’s event. Tóbi, if you would.”

Right—as head of the prom committee, Tóbi was supposed to present this year’s prom details to the rest of the student council. She had completely forgotten about that.

Yet as she switched from the meeting minutes on her laptop to one of her many file folders, she found presentation notes. All written-up and ready for her to follow, almost as if someone else had done it for her.

Sometimes, Tóbi felt as though her past and present selves were two different people. And even with all the work thrown at her, never once had her past self failed her.

Tóbi began speaking, and the words came calmly and confidently even in her detachment. She hardly looked at her notes, and when the others asked questions, her answers were prompt and comprehensive. At the end, she received a round of applause, because of course she did; she had always been good at organization and public speaking.

"Thank you, Tóbi," Monte said. "Moving onto how we can create some more excitement about prom in these final days leading up to it, I think one initiative can be …"

The meeting continued for a half-hour more before Monte finally announced, "The Wildfire prom looks like it's in great shape. For questions specifically about prom, please see Tóbi, and for follow-up questions about today's meeting, you can reach out to me. Thank you all for your time, and have a great rest of your day.

"Tóbi," Monte added above the rustle and chatter of people gathering their belongings, "please stay for a moment. There are a few things I'd like to clarify."

She knew he did not actually have anything to clarify, because her presentation had been perfectly clear. She was good at presenting—she was good at just about everything she did. Why did she always wait for others to acknowledge that when she already knew it was true regardless?

As the room emptied, Tóbi stayed seated, staring out the large window opposite from her. She kept her gaze on a leaf fluttering outside even as she heard the door close behind the last person and Monte walk toward her, his footsteps echoing in the sudden quiet.

He pulled out the chair next to hers and sat on it sideways so that he faced her. "Are you mad at me?" he asked.

Tóbi thought for a moment. It was wrong of Monte to not tell her the truth about why he ran for president, especially after they had become friends. But ultimately, he had been right; it was much better to try and fail than to be prevented from trying altogether. As botched as Monte's consolation attempt was, on some level, she appreciated it.

"No," Tóbi said finally. "I'm not mad at you."

Monte sighed in relief. It was small; she only noticed it because she sat so close to him.

"As for those parents who complained," Monte said, "you shouldn't dwell too much on their opinions. You've never been *their* class president—they had no right to comment on your abilities."

In response, all Tóbi could manage was a loud groan. She dropped her head onto the table, her face buried in her arms, not caring if she smeared makeup onto her blazer.

Monte rubbed small circles into her back. The gentle motion somewhat relaxed the knot of frustration within her.

"It's okay if you want to cry," he said.

"I'm not trying to not cry," Tóbi said, her voice muffled. "I'm trying not to scream."

Silence followed her words, occasionally punctuated by birds chirping near the window. Monte continued rubbing her back.

Eventually, he asked, "Do you want my advice?"

Tóbi turned to Monte. He had propped his other arm on the table, and as he looked at her, a stray blond lock fell into his face.

"Honestly?" Tóbi asked.

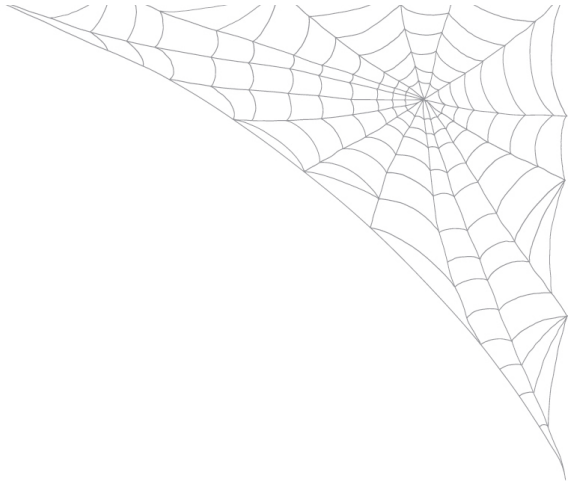
He nodded. Tóbi let out a long sigh.

Then, she responded, "No."

They stared at each other. Tóbi was the first to smile. Slowly, Monte followed suit. The next thing she knew, they were both laughing. She could not pin down what exactly was funny, but the more she tried, the more she laughed. And the more she laughed, the more Monte did too.

Monte pulled her into him, his arm around her shoulder, and she hugged him in turn. It was far from a perfect solution, but as she felt rare laughter rumbling in his chest, she found that she felt at least a little better.

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CHAPTER 26

BELOVED

Although Deja needed to finish reading her novel before classes began, she was having trouble getting through it; it was difficult to concentrate when there was better entertainment happening right next to her.

"How about him?" Lynn P. asked, plucking one of many photos off a table and showing it to Tóbi. "He's first chair in Tanglewood's orchestra *and* in the state youth orchestra."

In the photo, a guy wearing a tuxedo held a cello on a stage, presumably playing at a recital. Deja thought he was decent looking, but Tóbi cringed.

"No thank you," she said. "He looks like my cousin."

"Okay, then the president of Zoology Club," Lucille said, pointing to a photo of a guy with a yellow python draped over his shoulders. "He's a senior, and he's been nationally recognized for his conservation efforts."

Tóbi pondered for a moment, then she shook her head. "He has braces."

Lynn Q. looked up from the photos she had been sifting through, offended. "*I* have braces," she said, pointing to the hot pink brackets on her teeth.

"And you wear them beautifully," Tóbi responded without missing a beat. "I'm just concerned about camera flashes getting caught in his teeth. Remember, Wildfire prom is way more

important for seniors than juniors. I'm only going this year because the student council needs to be seen there, so I just need a photogenic prom date."

Lucille and the Lynns exchanged looks of exasperation, and Deja laughed. She was not sure how she had ended up spending her morning here, but she found herself enjoying the show.

"Jeez, Tinker Bell," Deja said, "you're so picky."

"I am not." Tóbi sniffed. "My tastes are simple: I am easily satisfied with the best."

"What's wrong with the guy you went with last year?" Lynn Q. asked, pointing to a photo on the table.

"I just want something new," Tóbi said airily.

"Well, you have plenty of new choices," Lucille said. "At least fifty guys have applied to be your date this year. Maybe we could streamline this process more if you already had an ideal date in mind. You really can't think of one guy in this entire school who you'd like to go to prom with?"

Deja looked expectantly at Tóbi, who merely shrugged noncommittally. Deja rolled her eyes; she could think of one person with whom Tóbi would probably have been happy going to prom, but if Tóbi was not going to admit it, Deja would not bring it up.

Tóbi sighed. "Little Me, can you read all the names again? Maybe there's someone I overlooked."

Lucille turned to her laptop, a spreadsheet reflected in her cat-eye glasses. As she began going down the list, Deja returned her attention to her book, shaking her head but smiling.

She had barely read one page, however, when the room quieted. Deja looked up to see that it was not just Lucille who had stopped speaking—most of the lounge had paused their conversations.

At first, Deja was confused. Then, she heard it: a song. It seemed to slowly fill up Bartleby, and as it poured into every corner of the building, Deja recognized it as "La Vie en Rose" being played on trumpet.

Deja had only heard one rendition played so masterfully. She made eye contact with Tóbi, who seemed to be coming to the same conclusion. In unison, they said incredulously, "Fabien?"

They rose from their seats as the music grew louder. Sure enough, Fabien entered the lounge a moment later, a crowd following behind him. Deja was surprised to see him here; he usually spent his free time practicing at Rhoden Performing Arts Center or Clarke-Reynolds Hall. Plus, he was not a fan of social gatherings—not unless he was at the center of one, apparently. Like the natural performer he was, he stepped onto a table and immediately made it his stage, looking completely at ease as he played. His music seemed to transfer that ease to those around him, and the people around him swayed to the song.

A group of guys wearing violet jerseys entered the lounge. Deja did not know what to make of their outfits until she heard someone ask, “What’s the lacrosse team doing here? Aren’t they excused from classes today for their away game?”

Understanding dawned on Deja. It seemed to dawn on Lucille and the Lynns at the same time, because they all stepped away from Tóbi, allowing her to be the center of attention as the lacrosse players approached her. Deja scanned the crowd and spotted Ace and Eden watching, the latter of whom waved to her.

As Deja went to join them, she asked, “Y’all knew ‘bout this?”

Eden shook her head. “Just found out like ten minutes ago.”

“Well, I knew,” Ace said. “I’m Ace Montalvo—I know everything that goes on in this school.” He glanced at Deja. “Glad to see you weren’t expelled for that mentiscape stuff, by the way. Hope you won’t do something that stupid again.”

“You’re the last person who gets to lecture me ‘bout doing stupid stuff,” Deja snapped.

When Ace only smiled at her scowl, she rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the center of the room. She watched as the lacrosse players formed a single-file line in front of Tóbi, the crowd parting for them. Everyone gazed excitedly at Tóbi, who in turn looked utterly confused.

Each lacrosse player held a red rose. One by one, they moved forward to hand her their roses before stepping out of her way, large grins on their faces.

Tóbi collected the roses in wonder until she held a proper bouquet. With the surreality of the moment, and Fabien's romantic playing, it was like watching her stand in a dream.

At last, the final guy stepped aside to reveal Monte. Unlike the rest of his team who were clothed in their jerseys, Monte wore a button-down shirt over slacks. In his hand, he held a white rose.

It was only because Deja knew him so well that she could see the nervous cracks in his calm mask. But when he spoke, it was with a steady voice.

"Tóbi Ẹkúndayọ," he said, offering Tóbi the rose. "Will you go to prom with me?"

Girls gasped; guys whooped their approval. Many people filmed the scene with their phones, but for once, Tóbi did not look around to see who was watching.

Her wide eyes were trained solely on Monte, and in her shock, her free hand covered her mouth. There was a breathless pause. Then, finally, Tóbi nodded.

Cheers erupted, so loud that they dwarfed Fabien's song. But it did not matter; he stopped playing to cheer for the beloved couple along with everyone else. Deja was pretty sure she had never seen Monte smile so widely.

"He looks like a lovesick idiot," Ace said. But when Deja glanced at Ace, she saw that he wore a proud grin as he recorded the scene on his phone.

Deja returned her attention to her friends' promposal—but suddenly, all she saw before her were clusters of shadowed trees.

Dawn ran through the woods that bordered Tanglewood's campus, nearly tripping over the stones and tree roots that the night concealed. She paused to lean against a tree trunk, hunching over to catch her breath. But she quickly straightened at the sound of rustling. A boy stepped out from behind a nearby tree. He wore a Tanglewood uniform and held a single rose in front of him as he approached Dawn.

"Headed to the boathouse?" he asked.

Continued applause pulled Deja back to the present. With everyone's attention still on Monte and Tóbi at the center of the room, it was only Eden who noticed something strange with Deja.

“Another vision?” she asked Deja.

Deja nodded. “A vision about Dawn.”

Ever since learning that the girl featured in her recurring visions was Dawn, Deja had tried to summon another vision multiple times. But she had never had control of her visions, and this one was no exception. Today was the first time Deja had seen Dawn in her visions since December, and as always, she had returned to the same moment, but slightly more detailed this time.

“Dawn was running through the woods the night of the meteor shower when a guy met up with her,” Deja said. “They seemed to know each other, but I can’t tell who he was beyond that.”

She would have assumed he was one of Dawn’s bullies. And yet —he had been holding a rose, and he had smiled when he saw Dawn. It was a surprising contrast to the previous visions, which felt more urgent, and about escape. It was difficult to understand this vision’s tone because Deja’s point of view had been from behind Dawn, preventing her from seeing Dawn’s face and her reaction to the boy.

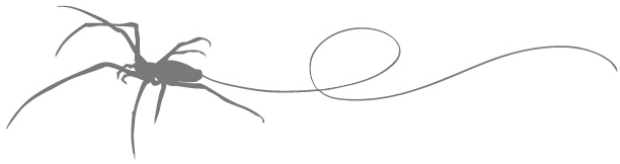
Nonetheless, there was one part of the vision that had been clear. “He suggested the boathouse was where Dawn was headed,” Deja said. “If that’s true, that might’ve been the last place she was on campus before she disappeared.”

“That would make sense,” Eden said suddenly. “At one point in her diaries, she mentioned most of her bullies were rowers, remember?

Deja realized Eden was right. “If we could look around the boathouse, maybe we’ll find something that’ll give us a clue ‘bout Dawn.”

“Rowers are real protective of their boathouse. How are we gonna get inside …?” Eden asked, but she trailed off, a thought seemingly occurring to her.

The same thought occurred to Deja, and as one, they looked at Ace, who in turn watched them in confusion. When Deja and Eden turned back to each other, they shared a smile.



The moment seventh period ended, Deja and Eden headed to Tanglewood's boathouse.

"Rowing practice doesn't start 'til later, and Ace told me he convinced his team to stay away for the next hour," Deja explained as they walked. "That's how long we have to scan the boathouse."

"I'm still surprised Ace let us into the boathouse so easily," Eden remarked. "Didn't he have a thing for you?"

There was an uncharacteristic edge in her soft voice that caught Deja by surprise. "I guess he used to, yeah." After a pause, Deja added, "But it doesn't matter, 'cause I was never interested."

Deja did not know why she felt compelled to add the last part, but when Eden nodded, she was more relieved than she would have expected.

Tanglewood's boathouse was a two-story wooden building positioned on a riverbed in the southeast corner of campus. Monte, Fabien, and Tóbi were already standing on the lawn outside, waiting for them. Having just returned from his away game, Monte still wore his violet jersey.

Monte must have caught up with the group chat after his game, because as Deja and Eden joined them, he said, "We don't have much time, so the goal here is to film every single corner of the boathouse. Remember, go slowly, and shoot everything you can find —old rosters, photos, even equipment brands. That way, when we analyze the footage later, we have a chance of spotting anything that might lead to information about Dawn's bullies. I'll cover the upstairs of the boathouse. Tóbi and Fabien, you guys take the downstairs. Deja and Eden, you can take the garage."

They all nodded before splitting up. As Deja and Eden made their way down the hill to the riverbed, it began to drizzle. Droplets fell onto the river, stirring the water so that it resembled a slithering snake. Deja and Eden walked on the dock alongside it, wooden

planks creaking beneath them, until they reached the boathouse's lowest level, which held the garage. To Deja's relief, the entrance to the garage was unlocked, just as Ace had promised.

Inside, the garage doors were open, the river extending into the boathouse via two large bays. Gray light and the patter of rain filled the garage. Atop the wall opposite from the entrance, a large plaque read:

THE HAROLD A. TURNER BOATHOUSE

In Honor of Captain

Harold A. Turner '51

And the Undefeated Team of 1950

Along one wall were large display cases. Eden moved to video the gleaming trophies and medals within them, while Deja pulled out her phone to capture the framed photographs hanging on another wall. Each photo showed a crew team consisting of a dozen boys wearing violet spandex shorts and tank tops that displayed a large *T*. The pictures gradually progressed from black-and-white to sepia to digital shots.

Each had a year engraved into the bottom of the frame. When Deja reached the photos corresponding to the years Dawn was at Tanglewood, she slowed. As she scanned the wall with her phone, she also inspected the faces in photos, trying to see if she could recognize any as the boy who met Dawn in her vision. When none immediately stuck out to her, she stepped forward to take a closer look—

Dawn hunched over as she carefully replaced a wooden floorboard in the boathouse's garage. A round of laughter sounded from somewhere outside, freezing Dawn in place. She cast a fevered glance toward the boathouse's door, waiting. When it became clear the boys outside had not yet reached the garage, Dawn returned her attention to the wooden

plank, moving much quicker now as she straightened it, then stood. She struggled to push a trophy case atop it, to what appeared to be the case's original spot. When she finished, she sprinted to the door. With one last glance at the trophy case, Dawn ran out of the garage.

Deja came back to her present reality just in time to catch her phone, which had slipped out of her slackened grip. That was the first vision she'd had of Dawn that did not involve Dawn running through the school's woods. It looked as though Dawn had been in the middle of hiding something—and if she had hidden it well enough, it might still be there.

Deja whirled around, searching the garage's trophy cases. They all looked the same, but the one Dawn moved had been directly under the boathouse's plaque, and there was only one case still there.

Deja rushed to the case, telling Eden, "Help me move this."

Eden gave her a confused look, but she did not question Deja as she took one end of the display case while Deja took the other. Together, they managed to pull the case forward. With just enough space for Deja to fit behind the case, she walked along the wall, closely inspecting the floor with her phone's flashlight. The next plank she stepped onto lifted the moment she put her weight on it, and she paused.

Eden must have caught onto Deja's train of thought, because she asked, "You think there's something under there related to Dawn?"

"I know there was—I just had a vision of Dawn hiding something here. The question is if it's still here."

Deja squatted next to the loose plank, and she lifted it away. Beneath it, wedged between two steel beams that supported the boathouse, was a metal box.

"Look," Deja said breathlessly.

Eden hurried to her side. They shared a look of anticipation before Deja reached down and pried the box out of from between the beams.

It was small and rusted, and upon a closer look, Deja saw that it was an old pencil case. Although it was ice-cold and smelled as

rotten as the lake, it was not heavy; no water seemed to have infiltrated it.

Before Deja could figure out what to make of it, her phone rang. She pulled it out of her blazer pocket to see a call from Fabien.

"What's taking you two so long?" Fabien asked once Deja picked up. "The rowers could be back any minute. Me and the others are already waiting outside."

Looking at the small metal box, Deja said, "We found something y'all might want to see."

"Really? Alright—we're on our way."

"Hurry up."

"Okay. Bye, then. Love you."

"Bye, Fabien."

"Say it back."

Deja hung up. "The others are coming," she told Eden.

Eden nodded. Before long, the garage door swung open, and in walked Monte, Fabien, and Tóbi.

"Is that what you found?" Monte asked as he and the others joined Deja and Eden, the five of them forming a circle around the box that Deja held.

"What's inside?" Fabien asked.

"Dunno," Deja said. "We haven't opened it yet."

"You're sure this has something to do with Dawn?" Tóbi asked.

"Pretty sure. I had a vision of her hiding something here. I didn't see what exactly it was, but I think this is it."

"It has to be," Eden said. She pointed to the side of the metal box, where Deja only now noticed tiny initials engraved into the metal: *DN*.

Deja swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. This was it—this could finally tell them what had happened to Dawn. If she truly was killed, this box could serve as evidence of that. Suddenly, Deja found herself unsure if she could handle the truth.

But then she looked around at her friends. In their expressions, she saw the same anxiety she felt, but also a determination that grew as the five of them glanced around at one another. They had started this investigation together. No matter how scary the

conclusion of Dawn's story proved to be, no matter how sad, they at least had each other to get through it.

Willing her hands to not shake, Deja held the box out, an open invitation. Monte was the one to accept. Deja grasped the box firmly as he popped its lid off with only some difficulty. Immediately, they all leaned forward.

Inside, there were folded yellow papers. Monte lifted one, carefully, for time had turned them thin and fragile. He unfolded it and scanned it with a small frown.

"It's a letter," he said. He adjusted his glasses, then read:

> Beloved Dawn,
>
> I think of you often, and I want you to know. Tanglewood has never been your favorite place, but I promise that very soon, I'll take you away from here forever. Just like we've both dreamt of.
>
> I stopped by your room earlier, but you were absent, so I am leaving this here. I trust that you will receive it, because no matter where you are, I will always find my way back to you.
>
> TG

Silence settled over them as they processed the words.

After a moment, Deja asked incredulously, "It's a *love* letter?"

Tóbi took a handful of papers from the box and shuffled through them. "They all are," she murmured.

Handing the box to Fabien, Deja took a few papers to inspect them herself. Tóbi was right—each of the letters began with *My Darling Dawn. Beautiful Dawn. Sweet Dawn. Dearest Dawn.*

"Given this box's location, TG was likely one of Tanglewood's rowers," Monte said. "A few of these letters confirm that at the very least, TG was a Tanglewood student. And almost all of them are about TG and Dawn running away together … so it seems that's what they ended up doing."

Fabien laughed with relief. "So they didn't kill Dawn after all," he said. "She lived! And she was in love!"

His joy washed over all of them. Monte wore a rare smile as Fabien slung his arm around Monte's shoulders, still laughing. Tóbi's eyes glistened, though she quickly retrieved tissues from her purse to blot her tears before they fell.

Deja felt so weak with relief, she could have collapsed. She settled for leaning against Eden, who wrapped an arm around her waist, leaning on her in return. "That's what my vision earlier was," Deja said to no one in particular. "That guy who met her in the woods during the meteor shower must have been TG. This whole time, Dawn wasn't running away from anything—she was running *to* something. To him. They must have planned to secretly meet in the woods before running away from Tanglewood together."

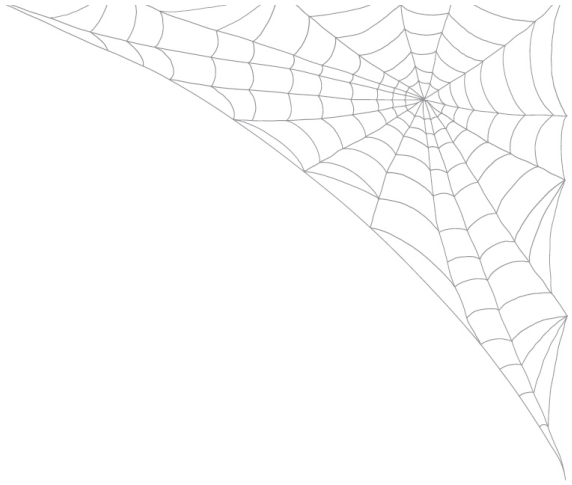
"And maybe Dawn's main bullies were rowers 'cause they didn't like her being involved with their teammate," Eden suggested.

"That would make sense," Monte said. "Rowers might be the most exclusive group on campus. They wouldn't take kindly to someone with Dawn's background."

"Well, in the end, TG chose his girl over them!" Fabien said. "Should we try to find out more about this TG bloke?"

"I don't think that's necessary," Tóbi said softly. She looked out through the open garage, into the rain. "Dawn's diaries showed how lonely and scary her first few years at Tanglewood were. But she found someone who loved her, and they escaped. I'm sure wherever they are, their life is much calmer. Let's just let them be happy in peace."

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CHAPTER 27

EASY

Following the discovery of Dawn's love letters, Tóbi and her friends made their way to the dining hall. Tóbi did not talk much during dinner; she did not feel the need to. All school year, Dawn's story had bothered her like an itch, only worsening with each new horrific detail she and her friends uncovered. But the surprisingly soft ending to Dawn's story was like a balm, a sense of relief Tóbi had not felt in a long time.

The others seemed to feel the same way; a content silence enveloped their table while they ate. Tanglewood was not an easy school to attend, from its extreme rigor to the administration that plainly cared about some types of students more than others. But at least when Tóbi and her friends were together, they created their own safe bubble to exist in, within an otherwise hostile environment.

After dinner, Monte and Tóbi tried to go on a walk. However, the drizzle from earlier quickly evolved into a full-out thunderstorm, pushing them to take shelter in Bartleby, but not before their clothes were soaked.

Monte left to search Bartleby for something to warm them up, while Tóbi found an empty room. By the time she had lit its gas fireplace, Monte rejoined her, holding two paper cups of hot tea.

"Thank you," Tóbi said as he handed her one.

She sat on a table in front of the crackling fire and took a sip of tea, grateful as its warmth combatted the chill of her damp clothes. Monte leaned on the table next to her. Tóbi watched him try to dry his glasses with his wet jersey for a moment before she extended her hand to him. “Here, let me.”

Monte handed them to her. As Tóbi used the hem of her skirt to wipe his glasses, she was hyperaware of his gaze. When she returned his glasses to him, their hands brushed in the exchange. For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then, Tóbi pulled away. Monte cleared his throat.

“Thank you,” he said, re-donning his glasses.

“Of course.” Tóbi turned back to the fireplace, well aware that the heat on her face had nothing to do with the fire.

After a moment, Monte said, “You know, when it came to Dawn, I had prepared myself for the worst. I never imagined such a positive outcome.”

“Me either,” Tóbi said. She smiled faintly. “I’m glad we were wrong.”

“Earlier, you mentioned Dawn and TG are probably living a more peaceful life now. Do you think they’re still together?”

Tóbi shrugged. “Who knows. Either way, I’m sure Dawn’s happier away from Tanglewood, considering all that she went through here.” She dropped her gaze to her cup of tea, absently running a finger along the rim of her cup. “Honestly, I admire her for finally leaving. She was such an accomplished student, yet everyone made her feel like she wasn’t doing enough. Eventually, she just decided she wasn’t going to kill herself for this school—or worse, let this school kill her. When she left Tanglewood, she probably went somewhere she was actually appreciated.”

Tóbi thought of the decision the school board had almost made against her, how readily they had been willing to betray her despite all that she had given to Tanglewood. “And I think it’s time I learn to protect myself too. I’ve been thinking, I’m going to drop all my extracurriculars that aren’t ballet or legal-related.”

Monte gave her a small smile. “I think that’ll be good for you.”

Tóbi returned his smile. She had not needed his approval, of course, but she respected his opinion enough that it was nice to have it.

"That way," Monte went on, "you can focus only on the things that really interest you. Like prom, for example."

Tóbi's smile faded. "Oh," she said. "Right. Prom."

"I assume you have your dress already. So, what color tie am I wearing?"

It was true that Tóbi had gotten a dress custom made weeks in advance, but there was something more pressing on her mind. And now that the Dawn Novak case was resolved, she could no longer ignore the question that had been bugging her all day.

"Monte," she said, turning to him, "why did you ask me to prom?"

"Because I want to go with you."

"As friends?"

"No. This is a date. I like you, Tóbi."

Tóbi's eyes narrowed. He spoke so … frankly. As though it could really be that straightforward.

After a moment, Tóbi dropped her gaze to her lap. "I know I said yes earlier, but on second thought, maybe it would be better if we didn't go together," she said.

Monte did not seem surprised, as though he had expected Tóbi to react like this. "Tóbi," he said, "I'm not a spontaneous person. I need facts and figures before I can make even the smallest decision. That's the only way I was able to find the courage to ask you out, because all the evidence indicated that it would be a success."

"Evidence …?"

"That you liked me back. Of course, it is possible that my personal bias clouded my judgment. Is that the case here? Was I wrong?"

"No," Tóbi said, and it surprised her how readily the admission came. She had not even admitted it to herself. "No, you weren't wrong."

"Then why not go to prom with me?" Monte asked. "Do you not want to?"

“I do, but …”

Tóbi trailed off, unable to pinpoint the right words. Like a neglected ball of thread, they were jumbled together, and over time, the longer she had made herself ignore them, the worse the knot had become. Now, untangling them seemed impossible and tiring.

With a sigh, Tóbi set her cup of tea down and stood from the table. Monte did the same.

“But what?” he prompted.

It was as though he tugged on the knot within her, and Tóbi panicked at the prospect of being pulled apart. She tried to step around him, but he did not let her.

“Monte,” she said warningly.

“Tóbi,” he said, parroting her exasperation so well that under different circumstances, she might have smiled. “I just want to understand.”

Tóbi pinched the bridge of her nose, as though that could hold her together. But she could still feel Monte’s insistence tugging at her more, and more, and more—

“Okay,” Monte said after a moment. “I don’t mean to push you. So, if it’s really that hard for you to imagine us being together, then —”

“It’s easy!”

The words burst from Tóbi with so much force that Monte stepped back in surprise. They shocked Tóbi as well, but an end had come loose within her, and now that the unwinding had begun, she could not stop it.

She said, “Every relationship in my life has always taken so much effort. Forming and controlling alliances, trying to impress my parents. But with you—with the others too, but especially with you —life just feels so … easy.”

Tóbi wrapped her arms around herself, lowering her gaze. “Too easy,” she continued in a quieter voice. “It feels like I didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

The words had been wound so tightly that upon releasing them, Tóbi felt looser. She was relieved—yet she was also uncomfortable. It was slightly unnerving how similar relaxing felt to falling apart.

“Tóbi,” Monte said softly. “Your experiences don’t need to be hard to be valid. Just because you didn’t struggle to get what you wanted doesn’t mean you’re any less deserving of it.”

Tóbi’s shoulders dropped—the last of her tension leaving her. Her eyes burned, and she quickly looked away.

“Yeah, sure,” she said with a weak chuckle in an attempt to sound casual. “You just said that so that I’ll kiss you.”

“No, I really do mean it.” Monte paused. “Although, if what you’re saying is that you want to kiss me, I can confirm that would be very simple.”

He spoke calmly, though his gaze was anything but. The crackling of the fire faded, dwarfed by the sound of Tóbi’s beating heart.

She walked to Monte and placed a hand on his cheek. The blank mask that he typically wore was rapidly crumbling, as though he was becoming undone by her just as she was by him.

Tóbi looked up at him, and in turn, he leaned down. He closed his eyes as their faces came close enough that she could feel his breath. Then—

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tóbi whispered, and she spun around.

But she had barely taken one step when Monte pulled her back to him. Laughing, she stumbled into his arms, and before she could tease him again or even find her balance, he kissed her.

As Tóbi wrapped her arms around Monte, a lightness overtook her, so sudden that it was dizzying. But she was no longer worried about floating away or falling apart. Not when she had him holding on to her.



“Maybe we should have waited until morning,” Tóbi said.

Monte reminded her, “You were the one who insisted on seeing if I had an acceptable suit for prom.”

That was true; Tóbi normally liked to approve her dates' outfits. However, when Tóbi had insisted on doing so tonight, she seemed to have forgotten that visiting hours were over. Monte, being Monte, had successfully convinced The Log Cabin's faculty supervisor to let Tóbi visit his dorm for five minutes, so long as they kept the door open. But even though Tóbi had permission to be here, that did not stop her from receiving curious glances from the guys she and Monte passed as they walked through the wooden halls.

As though he sensed Tóbi's discomfort about the attention they attracted, Monte slipped his hand into hers and squeezed. The small gesture seemed to transfer some of his calmness to her, and she felt her pulse settle. It did not matter what others thought of her and Monte together; he made her happy, and for once, she was putting her feelings over others' opinions.

"Hey," Monte said, "at least this time you're being invited into my room rather than breaking into it."

Tóbi groaned. "Will you *please* forget about that?"

Tóbi did not miss the smile that flickered over Monte's face. Once they reached his dorm, Monte propped the door open. When he turned on the lights, Tóbi's vision was flooded by the colorful paintings, sketches, and photographs plastered over the walls.

As Monte walked to his wardrobe, he peeled off his wet lacrosse jersey, leaving the black hoodie he had been wearing beneath it. A thought occurred to Tóbi.

"By the way," she said, "how did your game today go?"

"We lost, so we're not going to nationals this year. But it's alright. This season has taught me what I'm going to do better to win next season."

If Tóbi had lost, she would have been miserable. But Monte spoke about his loss analytically, as though mistakes were merely learning opportunities. That was something Tóbi admired about Monte—with him, there was always a next time. Perfection might have been preferred, but that did not mean that failure was fatal.

Monte began rummaging through his wardrobe to find a suit, and Tóbi, smiling slightly, leaned against the wall to watch him.

Too late, she remembered how full the walls were; behind her, papers fell to the ground, and she felt a picture frame come loose.

"Oh!" Tóbi turned to see that she had dislodged a framed sketch of a vase of flowers. "Sorry about that."

To Tóbi's surprise, Monte rushed to her side. "Don't worry, I'll fix it later," he said quickly.

"It's a small thing, I can just quickly …" Tóbi began as she repositioned the frame, but she trailed off as a large sheet of paper slipped out from behind it.

It landed on the floor in a heap, but Tóbi could make out parts of a drawing. What she could see looked strangely familiar, and she picked the sheet up.

Beside her, Monte had gone oddly still. The only sound was the rustle of paper as Tóbi unfolded it to reveal a drawing of Tóbi at her freshman year ballet recital.

After a moment of stunned silence, Tóbi managed to say, "You drew me."

Monte adjusted his glasses. "It's from two years ago. Around the same time that I took the photo. I just wanted to capture the moment in two different mediums."

"The photo?" Tóbi looked at Monte in amazement. "You mean *you* took the photo that this drawing is based on?"

"I—yes." He cleared his throat. "Yes, that was me."

Tóbi stared at him, utterly nonplussed. She had never put much thought into who had photographed her at her freshman year recital, but if she had, Monte would have been her very last guess.

She recalled Ace's tip in September, when he had convinced her to break into Monte's dorm. So *this* was the drawing he had hoped she would find. He must have known how Monte felt about her; no wonder Ace had always been so brotherly toward Tóbi despite terrorizing just about everyone else.

"I always thought you hated me," Tóbi said faintly.

"Well, no," Monte said. "That rivalry has been one-sided on your part. For two years. It's fine."

"One-sided? You're the one who always joins the clubs I'm in, and volunteers for all the same projects I do, and …" Tóbi broke off

because suddenly, she realized that those were not the actions of someone who hated her.

"Oh, okay, I see it now," she admitted. "But thank you for the photo, Monte. I've always loved it."

Monte's nervousness was replaced by a glow that lit up his brown eyes. "Really?"

"Really. It's one of my favorite photos of myself."

Tóbi turned back to the drawn version of herself, considering it. "I like the sketch too," she decided after a moment. "It's beautiful, though it's different. You definitely drew me a lot more graceful than I am in the photo."

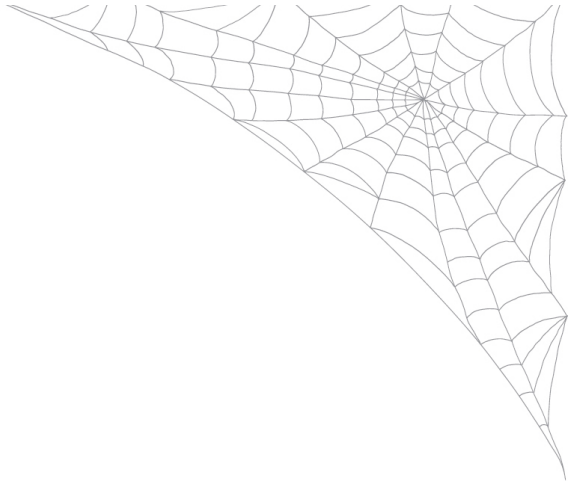
Monte shrugged. "I just drew you how I see you."

Tóbi looked at him in wonder, but he did not notice; he was walking back to his wardrobe. After a moment more of rummaging through it, he took out a black suit and tie.

"It seems this is the only suit I brought with me to Tanglewood," Monte said, showing it to Tóbi. "I'm sure it's much too plain to pair with your dress. I could check if anywhere in town has something better, though there might not be enough time to get it tailored. I also have different suits at home—I could get permission to leave campus and drive home to retrieve one. Accounting for traffic, the round-trip would take around four hours. I have a lot on my plate this weekend, but maybe if I leave early enough—"

"Monte." Tóbi pulled the breaks on his wandering train of thought. She could not help but smile as she assured him, "This is perfect. Thank you."

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CHAPTER 28

DESTINY

Deja kicked a rock, sending it flying. With a *clang,* it struck the Promise Garden's fountain, right on its inscription.

TANGLEWOOD PREPARATORY SCHOOL

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THE QUINCY FAMILY FOUNDATION

for its financial support of this fountain

January 30, 2000

Once it stopped raining, Deja had broken away from her friends, taking some time to think. Her joy about the loving conclusion to Dawn's story was beginning to wear off, leaving her with only one thought: Deja and her friends' investigation into Dawn Novak had officially ended—and The Web was nowhere in sight.

Deja had been sure there was a reason why The Web appeared to her back in September. Maybe, she had thought, she was finally being given a chance to become a full-fledged weaver. She had wanted to believe she had been specially chosen by The Web to investigate Dawn Novak, to help her somehow—a self-important

assumption not unlike the attitude Renée had had toward being a weaver.

Deja scowled. She wanted to speak to her aunt about this, but her Christmas phone call with Cybele still lingered shamefully in Deja's mind. She did not want to admit that Cybele had been right about Deja thinking her encounter with The Web was more significant than it ended up being. Deja especially did not want to risk losing her temper with her aunt again. She wished she did not get angry so easily; she wished she knew how to get rid of her feelings of resentment.

For the time being, at least she could channel some frustration into random stones. She found a particularly jagged one and aimed another kick at it. It flew through the air and hit—

"Ow."

Deja jumped at the voice; last she had checked, she was alone. She peered into the night and was alarmed when the moonlight illuminated a person sitting among soaked flowers, clutching her leg.

"Eden," Deja breathed, rushing to her side.

Deja knelt next to Eden, the damp soil caving beneath her. As she inspected Eden's leg, she said, "Damn it. Are you bleeding? Can you stand?"

"Don't worry, it just caught me off guard," Eden said. "I feel fine."

Deja felt the opposite. No matter how hard she tried, it seemed as though her ill temper always ended up hurting the people she cared about most.

"What are you even doing here?" Deja snapped.

"Looking for you. When you didn't come back in time for curfew, I figured you might be here."

Deja's scowl lessened. Not only had Eden noticed Deja was not at The Palace, but she had also risked sneaking out to find her. Sometimes, Deja did not know what she had done to deserve a friend like her.

Deja flopped onto the ground, sitting next to Eden. As she drew her legs into her, she said, "I didn't mean to be short with you."

“I know.” Eden reached out to a nearby flower and ran her hand over its blue petals. “Is something upsetting you? After what we found out ‘bout Dawn today, I thought you’d be happy.”

“Of course I’m happy for Dawn. After everything Tanglewood put her through, I’m glad she got a happily ever after. I guess a part of me just thought that after all this, I could somehow have a real connection to The Web. But now, I’m starting to think I never will.”

Deja rested her chin on her knees. “Every generation in my family has had weavers, for as far back as we can remember,” she continued. “It’s just not fair that I’ll be the one to break that cycle—not even because of anything I did, but because of my mom. And I know, I can’t blame Renée for getting killed. But that doesn’t help me let go of my anger toward her—except I really need to. It feels like it’s just getting heavier, and I’ll have to hold onto it forever, even as it starts to crush me.”

The confession left Deja’s throat feeling raw. Eden wrapped her arm around Deja, who turned her head so that Eden would not see her cry.

“Hey,” Eden said. “I’m adopted.”

So great was Deja’s surprise that she momentarily forgot to hide her tears. Facing Eden, Deja asked, “What the hell?”

“Yeah,” Eden said, apparently mistaking Deja’s bewilderment at the sudden topic change for curiosity. “Fifteen years ago, while my parents were on a mission trip in Barbados, they visited an orphanage. My orphanage. I was only a few weeks old. Apparently, my biological parents abandoned me. I don’t mind, because the parents I have now are the best I could ask for.

“They’ve never treated me like I was anything less than their daughter. But everyone else, especially people in the church, treated me like I was another one of the Lovejoys’ good deeds. They always reminded me how lucky I was to have been saved and how grateful I should be and all that stuff.”

Throughout the school year, Deja had witnessed how much Eden loved to talk to her parents. They were so close, Deja never would have guessed Eden was adopted. She doubted Eden told many

people, and she listened with rapt attention, touched that Eden was confiding in her.

"It kinda made me feel like I shouldn't step into a room without first thanking someone for allowing me to take up space," Eden continued. "Then a few years back, Salt & Light held another mission trip to Barbados. It was near where I'd been born, so I signed up to go out of curiosity.

"I got there and … it was just a regular town. Kinda small, sure, and not the richest. But people were happy. And I realized, if my parents had never adopted me, I would've been just fine. There wasn't anything to 'save' me from. I became angry—angry at everyone who had made me feel small for no reason, and angry at my parents. They never made me feel bad, but they were the cause of it, so I think I was angriest at them."

"And now?" Deja asked.

"And now I'm still angry," Eden said.

Deja looked at her in shock. Eden explained, "It's really unfair, how many years I've lost to making myself as small as possible, all 'cause of other people. So, I can't really tell you how to get rid of that anger, 'cause I don't know either. But I do know that it doesn't have to be the only thing you have. As angry as I am at my parents, I love them a lot more. So maybe it's not 'bout getting rid of that bad feeling. Maybe it's just 'bout making sure you got good feelings that are bigger."

One thing Deja knew was that her frustration toward Cybele would likely never eclipse the love Deja had for her. And she guessed that did help.

But, Deja realized, her aunt was not the only person in her life that she had love for. After all, it was Eden who was giving her advice. It was Eden who had trekked through campus past curfew just to make sure Deja was okay. She had shown up for Deja, just as she had been doing all school year, alongside Monte, Tóbi, and Fabien. And whenever Deja was with them, she did not necessarily stop being angry about her life's circumstances, but her friends made her realize there was more to focus on in her life than just her anger.

Perhaps The Web had set Deja on Dawn Novak's trail for a reason after all. Not for Dawn's sake, but for Deja's. It was what had guided her to the people who had become her closest friends. Just as Dawn had been able to know love after all she went through at Tanglewood, even if Deja never became a weaver, she had found a different kind of community.

Finally, Deja said, "You're right. Y'know, I only came to Tanglewood 'cause I felt forced to follow in my mom's footsteps. But this is the one way my mom's actions determined my destiny that I'm grateful for. Because if I hadn't come to Tanglewood, I wouldn't have met you. You've become my best friend, Eden." Deja sighed, resting her head on Eden's shoulder. "Sometimes," she continued quietly, "it feels like you're the only thing keeping me sane."

Sitting so close to her, Deja could hear Eden's heartbeat. Her pulse seemed slightly quickened, but Deja still found the rhythm soothing, if only because it came from Eden.

After a moment, Eden put her hand under Deja's chin and lifted her face. Deja looked up at Eden in confusion. But before she could say anything, Eden kissed her.

The cold melted away as warmth spread through Deja, as though a cinnamon-scented candle had been lit within her. The kiss was so pleasant that it took a second for Deja to remember to pull away, and when she did, she was surprised by how hard it was to do so.

"What—?" Deja began, but stopped because she did not even know what to ask.

Eden rose to her feet. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I'll go."

"Wait, Eden," Deja said, scrambling to her feet as well. She took Eden's wrist, preventing her from leaving. "You don't have to go, I just …"

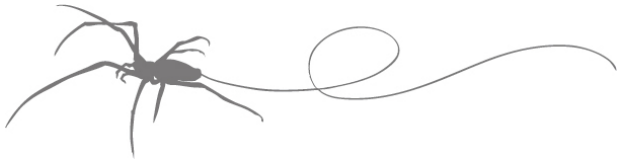
Deja trailed off, at a loss for words. Eden finished for her, "You don't feel the same way."

"No—wait," Deja found herself saying for a second time. The command was less directed toward Eden and more toward Deja's own emotions, which were rushing at her too quickly for her to

process. “Maybe. I don’t know. I’ve just never thought about it before.”

“Meanwhile, I’ve been thinking about it since the day I met you.” Eden gave her a sad smile. “I get it, though. I’m not upset. You’ve become my best friend too, and I don’t want to mess that up. Let’s just forget this ever happened, alright?”

For once, Deja’s mouth had no quick response to supply. Her mind racing with fragments of thoughts she did not know how to put together, she could only watch in stunned silence as Eden stepped around Deja and hurried out of the garden, vanishing into the night.



The next morning, Deja had the counseling session that had been mandated for her after getting in trouble for the mentiscape-coated meteorite fragment.

Tanglewood had only required her to attend one session. If she enjoyed today, she could elect to continue counseling, a service that would be covered by the school. Although it was much less severe a disciplinary action than expulsion, part of Deja was irritated that she had to go at all. She already knew she had anger she needed to get rid of; she did not need a shrink to tell her that.

But another part of Deja was glad for an excuse to get away from campus. Since last night, she had replayed her kiss with Eden in her mind hundreds of times. The more she thought of it, the more she felt excitement—and fear. Deja vividly remembered the visible hurt she had caused Eden. She felt she had messed everything up. She was realizing she very well could feel the same way about Eden, but she did not know how to show those feelings. Until she figured it out, she did not want to risk saying the wrong thing, hurting Eden even further. Deja wanted to do this right; she just needed time.

For at least today, until her counseling session was over, Deja decided to push thoughts of Eden to the back of her mind. Because Tanglewood assigned her to an off-campus provider, Monte had offered to drive her into town. His black Jaguar wound through long, narrow roads that cut through the woods surrounding the school's campus until eventually, they emerged into town.

Deja had heard that residents of Tanglewood often referred to Tanglewood Prep as the "purple bubble," and now she understood why. Despite living here for about half a year now, this was her first time making the trip from campus into town. She gazed outside the car's window with interest. They drove by farmers markets, colorful storefronts lined with flower boxes, and boutique cafés with vintage signs. Deja felt like she had been transported to the setting of a storybook.

They came to a stop at a red Victorian-style building, tall and narrow with bay windows and a steep, gabled roof. As Deja stepped out of the car, Monte told her, "Just call me when you're done. I'll be at a store nearby, buying some supplies for Art Club."

Deja thanked him then jogged up a short flight of stairs to the building's entrance. Despite the building's historic outer appearance, Deja found a modern waiting room on the other side of the arched wooden door.

The only person present was a heavy-set Black woman at a receptionist desk. She took one glance at Deja's school uniform and asked, "Deja Freeman?" When Deja nodded, she smiled. "Everything's all set up for you. Just make your way up to the fourth floor."

The receptionist neglected to tell Deja that the building had no elevator. By the time she climbed all four flights of stairs, she was drenched in sweat. To make matters worse, the top floor was an attic with only one tiny window and a lack of air conditioning, making the air stifling.

If the woman waiting for Deja was affected by the heat at all, it did not show. Her navy pantsuit was pristine, without any hint of sweat stains. She had a small afro that was highlighted with gray, though her brown skin was smooth.

As Deja arrived, the woman smiled widely. “Hello, little sister.”

It was a strange way for a counselor to greet a patient, but maybe this was one of those holistic types of approaches to therapy. *One hour,* Deja reminded herself. She only needed to get through one hour of this.

“I’m Deja,” she said, more as a rejection of the woman’s odd address than a greeting.

“I know, and I am very excited to talk with you—but maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s start over. Hi, my name is Lorelei. I’m a licensed mental health counselor who has been practicing in the Tanglewood community for nearly forty years now, and I often work with students from Tanglewood Prep too. Please, step into my office. Take a seat.”

The woman stepped aside, and Deja saw that “office” was too conventional of a word for the space. Mismatched cabins and a sink made up a miniature kitchen in one corner. Colorful plants were scattered throughout the room alongside dozens of book stacks, some of which were on the floor and some on stools of varying heights. There was no desk, but there were plenty of chairs, everything from basic wooden chairs to the stereotypical lounge couch Deja had seen in therapists’ offices in movies.

Deja chose a high-backed sofa chair. As she sat, Lorelei said, “I’ll make us some tea.”

Deja removed her Tanglewood blazer, hanging it over the back of her chair. The white button-up shirt she wore beneath clung to her skin uncomfortably. She was about to tell Lorelei that tea was the last thing she needed in this oven-like office, but Deja paused when she turned to her.

Lorelei had already began preparing the tea, though there was no kettle or stove in sight. As Deja watched, she placed tea leaves in a mug and filled it up at the office’s sink. Then, grasping the sides of the mug with both hands, Lorelei stared intensely at it. After a few moments, it began to steam.

Deja’s eyes widened. “You’re a weaver.”

Since weaving could only alter people, Lorelei must have made her hands hot enough to heat the tea. Sure enough, when Lorelei

carefully handed the mug to Deja, it was scalding, as though the water had been boiled.

Lorelei beamed as she dragged an oversized beanbag chair over and sat opposite of Deja. “My sisters and I head the chapter located in this part of Connecticut. You met one of them downstairs—my receptionist. We try to look out for weavers who attend Tanglewood Prep. We’ve been wanting to meet you ever since we learned you entered that school, but that’s been made complicated because you’ve been on campus.”

Deja frowned. “Why don’t y’all like going on campus?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s not really up to us,” Lorelei said vaguely. “Otherwise, of course we would have come to see you. It’s been a while since a weaver attended Tanglewood Prep.”

A thought occurred to Deja. “Was my mom the last weaver who attended Tanglewood?” she asked.

Lorelei nodded excitedly. If she had been a counselor for as long as she said, she must have been advanced in age. However, her cheeriness made her seem far younger.

“My sisters and I were very fond of Renée,” Lorelei said. “She was a very bright young girl.”

Deja rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I’ve heard.”

Lorelei cocked her head to one side. “I am sensing some complicated feelings toward your mother. How is speaking about her making you feel?”

The shift from a great-aunt-like figure to a mental health professional was sudden, and Deja held up her free hand to block the question as though it had been thrown at her. “We don’t need to do all that,” she said. “I don’t actually need counseling, I’m just here ‘cause it’s school-mandated. I already know what I gotta work on. But now that I know you’re a weaver, I’d much rather talk ‘bout that.”

“Sure, we can discuss that too. But first, just to clarify, what is it that you know you need to work on?”

Deja huffed; she was getting impatient to move on. “I get angry easily. And I already know it’s not good, you don’t gotta tell me.”

“Why isn’t it good?”

“Well ‘cause … ‘cause it’s anger,” Deja said. She did not know what was more annoying—that the question seemed obvious, or that, despite that, Deja was having trouble answering it. “It makes you mean, a bad person. It gets people’s feelings hurt.”

Lorelei nodded slowly, a thoughtful expression on her face. “So, Deja, I’ve been told you’re quite the bookworm. I brushed up on some of my favorite books to prepare for this session, to see if anything might be applicable, and you’re making me think of something.”

She reached behind her, to a few books stacked on a low plastic stool, and she plucked *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison from the stack. Deja was grudgingly impressed by the selection.

Lorelei opened the book to one of the several pages that were tabbed and read, “*Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging.*” She closed the book. “In this moment, Pecola—the main character—got angry. Did that make her a bad person?”

Deja hesitated, then said, “No.”

“No,” Lorelei agreed. “In fact, it seems like it made her a better person. At least, a better person to herself. For a moment, anger made her feel like she took back some of the power that was taken from her.

“The thing about anger,” Lorelei continued, “is that it’s intrinsic. It’s an emotion that, like all emotions, exists to help us survive. Sure, an extreme amount of anger can be destructive. But it sounds like you criticize yourself for experiencing any anger at all, denying a very natural part of yourself.”

Deja wiped sweat from her forehead. If possible, it felt even more suffocating in here.

“I got a question,” she said.

She faltered. But Lorelei nodded encouragingly, her dark eyes kind.

Deja found the courage to continue, “If you knew my mom, you must know what happened to her.”

“Yes, I heard about her murder. It was a very sad day for all of us Connecticut weavers who had been watching her grow up at Tanglewood.”

“And see, I know that it’s sad, but I still can’t help it—I hate Renée. I hate her for making bad choices, and I hate her for getting killed. So, tell me—do I still have a right to be angry if it’s my own dead mom I’m angry at?”

Confessing her deepest, darkest secret to someone who knew Renée felt like a crime. Deja’s heart raced. She took a sip of her tea. It was still blistering hot, scalding her tongue and causing fresh beads of sweat to spring onto her forehead. But Deja could not bring herself to look Lorelei in the eye, for fear of the judgment she might see there.

“Of course you do,” Lorelei said.

Surprised, Deja raised her head. Lorelei met her gaze steadily.

“I know anger is often perceived as negative, but frankly, I don’t always agree with that,” Lorelei said. “Our anger tells us we were wronged somehow. Anger is justice, the part of us that knows we deserved better. When it comes to your mother, Renée was a victim, yes—but so were you. You had to grow up without your birth mother, and you are allowed to acknowledge the unfairness of that. Ignoring this very human reaction—or worse, guilting yourself over it—might only be making things harder. If you want to get to the other side of anger, you’re going to have to let yourself go through it first.”

Whenever Deja felt anger, she tried to hide it or suppress it before it hurt someone, as it always seemed to inevitably do. The concept of just letting herself feel it when it came sounded terrifying—and liberating.

“And of course,” Lorelei continued, “that’s what I’m here for. Not to tell you to get rid of your anger, but to help you figure out how to coexist with it. I’d like to work with you on this, Deja, if you’ll let me.” She paused, then added, “And did Tanglewood tell you these sessions are free? They would be the ones paying me, so you wouldn’t need to worry about any of that.”

“Yeah, they told me,” Deja said.

She had never been interested in therapy, but speaking with Lorelei felt surprisingly freeing. Deja had been able to talk openly with Lorelei in a way she never could with her aunt. Maybe it would be nice to have an adult in her life she could truly confide in without having to temper her emotions. Plus, as Lorelei had reminded her, this was free—she had nothing to lose.

"Alright, fine," Deja said finally. "I'll take a stab at the whole therapy thing."

Lorelei clapped her hands together happily. "Exciting! And it's so nice to be in contact with a young weaver again." She reached behind her to a different stool, and this time she retrieved a tablet and a stylus. "Now, there are some logistics to take care of. Like you said, the school mandated this session. I do need to know a little bit more about why that is."

"Administration thought I was trying to make mentiscape, which ain't true. There was a meteor crash on campus back in September, and I kept a piece from the meteorite. It had some gold liquid on it, and when me and my friends scientifically analyzed it, the liquid turned out to be a main ingredient in mentiscape."

Deja could hear how bizarre the story sounded. However, Lorelei seemed to take it in stride, nodding and scribbling notes on her tablet as Deja spoke—the benefit of having a weaver for a therapist, Deja supposed.

"I'm curious," Lorelei said, "what made you want to find out what that liquid is?"

"We thought it might have some kind of healing properties. Got the idea from a short story we found written by Dawn—Dawn Novak, that is. She's a former Tanglewood student we've been learning about all school year."

Lorelei went rigid, her stylus freezing mid-writing. The sudden tension in her did not go unnoticed by Deja. She realized that with Lorelei having served Tanglewood as a counselor for so long, she would have been living here back when Dawn was a student at Tanglewood Prep.

"Did you know Dawn?" Deja asked.

Hesitantly, Lorelei set her stylus down on her tablet and looked up at Deja. “Yes, I knew her while she attended Tanglewood, up until she left. She once asked me to weave her into The Web.”

“Dawn was a *weaver*?”

Deja’s head whirled. She recalled the dream The Web had given her, of her mom obsessing over Dawn Novak. She thought The Web had just used the image of her mom to provoke Deja into action. But now she realized that if Dawn was somehow connected to The Web, it was possible Renée knew about her too.

She suddenly remembered the very first vision she’d had of Dawn, when it had appeared as though Dawn looked directly at her. It had seemed impossible, but when it came to The Web, the limits of what was possible expanded. If Dawn had become a weaver, could she have somehow given Deja her recurring visions, and maybe even the dreams that had led Deja and her friends to Dawn in the first place? Was it possible their entire investigation had somehow been Dawn’s will?

“Well, she never quite got to become a weaver,” Lorelei said, immediately disproving Deja’s theory, though the thought still lingered. “When she first started at Tanglewood, she got bullied pretty badly. I had her as a patient, and I witnessed the bullying get worse and worse. Finally, I couldn’t just watch any longer. I revealed that I was a weaver. My sisters and I wanted to help her, so we made her a protection charm.”

“The love letters—they were the charm,” Deja realized out loud.

Weavers used charms to amplify their intentions. Charms could be made out of anything, but the more meaningful, the better. They worked best when they were hidden out of sight—like Deja’s grandma’s earrings, which she wore even now on a chain under her shirt.

Lorelei nodded. “When Dawn got older, she found herself a boyfriend—I don’t remember his name. But he used to write her love notes. We used those as the protection charm, because there’s no stronger tool for weaving than love. The charm protected Dawn for a while, and it helped when she had a boy to look out for her.

But charms don't last forever, and Dawn wanted her own protection. She wanted to be a weaver herself."

"But that's not possible, is it?" Deja asked. "Weavers can only be woven into The Web by their female relatives, and Dawn was an orphan."

Lorelei stood, and as she walked to the attic's kitchen, she replied, "That's the easiest, safest way. But there is a way to bring new bloodlines into The Web."

Lorelei opened a cabinet. The inside of it looked like a small version of Deja's home in Sweetwater, stocked full with jars containing various herbs and plants. Lorelei took a small glass vial out of the cabinet and held it up to Deja. It contained a golden liquid so thick that it clung to the sides of the vial.

"Mentiscape?" Deja asked, flinching back in horror.

"Not quite. It's not the venom polluting today's streets. It's a non-addictive, weaker version that was once very common among weavers. It's pure spiralmint oil, but weavers call it 'honeydrops.'"

Deja had heard that term before. "That was the name of Dawn's short story."

"I'm not surprised she would write about it. The more she wanted to join The Web, the more interested she became in learning about it. One thing she learned is that honeydrops have several uses, one of them being to facilitate bringing girls and women unrelated to current weavers into The Web. She constantly begged my sisters and I to help her become a weaver, and eventually, we did try. But the ceremony is a complicated one. When it came to Dawn, it was not successful."

"At least she didn't need The Web in the end, right?" Deja asked. "She made it out of Tanglewood with her own abilities."

Lorelei appeared deep in thought as she stared at the vial, tilting it one way then the other, watching the golden liquid slowly crawl along the inside of it. "Yes. You could say she did."

Deja eyed the vial as well, her fear quickly replaced by fascination. Her heart skipped a beat as she asked, "If that stuff can bring even outsiders into The Web, could you use it to bring me into The Web?"

Deja's words seemed to pull Lorelei out of whatever rumination she had fallen into. She looked from the vial toward Deja, frowning for the first time since Deja met her. "I recall Renée having an older sister, and her being very close with her mom. Neither of them have woven you into The Web?"

"They didn't want to," Deja said.

It was Renée herself who told them not to weave Deja into The Web before she died, but Deja left that part out. She did not want to risk Lorelei deciding to respect her mom's unfair wishes in the same way her aunt and grandma had been set on doing.

Lorelei looked at Deja for a long moment, and Deja wondered if the counselor could tell she was not sharing the whole truth. She tried not to look nervous, though that was difficult as beads of sweat rolled down her face in the room's stuffiness.

Finally, she said, "Well, it was not my sisters and I who tried to bring Dawn into The Web. We do not have that power. The only woman who can weave entirely new bloodlines into The Web is Lady Spider."

"Who?" Deja asked.

Lorelei appeared shocked. "Has Renée's family never shared anything about The Web with you?"

Deja shrugged uncomfortably. Deja knew only what she had learned growing up while seeing women around her weave to assist their everyday lives. No one had ever taught Deja about The Web directly; Cybele and Deja's grandma had made sure of that.

"Forgive me if it's not my place to say this, but that's just not right," Lorelei said. "You're a daughter of The Web. You deserve to know the traditions from which you come."

Her gaze turned somber, her dark eyes taking on an intense gleam. In a quieter voice, she said, "There is still not a day that goes by when I don't ask myself if there was more I could have done for Renée. But now, to have crossed paths with her daughter … it feels like destiny. I'm glad we're working together. I hope to be able to offer you guidance in more ways than one."

The youthfulness Lorelei had displayed earlier was gone.

Suddenly, she looked every bit her age, with all the many memories and hardships that came with it. Deja knew then she was looking at a weaver more knowledgeable about The Web than any weaver back in Sweetwater—and more importantly, Lorelei was a weaver actually willing to teach Deja. She understood the unfairness of Deja having been left out of The Web; finally, Deja had found a weaver willing to be on her side.

Deja straightened in her seat. “I would like that,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to be connected to The Web.”

Lorelei held Deja’s gaze for a moment, her eyes searching. Then, she smiled.

“Great!” She placed the honeydrops vial back in her cabinet and returned to her beanbag. Sitting on the edge of it, she leaned into Deja, her playfulness returned. “We’ll figure out where to go from here, but first, to answer your earlier question—The Web began centuries ago, started by one woman. To this day, she sits at the center of The Web, overseeing every single thread of energy that weavers use. That’s Lady Spider.” Lorelei’s smile widened. “And if you want, I can help you find her.”

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