

Cassie Mckinney has always believed in the Hive.

Social media used to be out of control. People were torn apart by trolls and doxxers. Even hackers — like Cassie’s dad — were powerless against it.

But then came the Hive. A better way to sanction people for what they do online. Cause trouble, get too many “condemns,” and a crowd can come after you to teach you a lesson in real life. It’s safer, fairer and perfectly legal.

Entering her senior year of high school filled with grief over an unexpected loss, Cassie is primed to lash out. Egged on by new friends, she makes an edgy joke online. Cassie doubts anyone will notice.

But the Hive notices everything. And as her viral comment whips the entire country into a frenzy, the Hive demands retribution.

One moment Cassie is anonymous; the next, she’s infamous. And running for her life.

With nowhere to turn, she must learn to rely on herself — and a group of Hive outcasts who may not be reliable — as she slowly uncovers the truth about the machine behind the Hive.

The Hive is a breathless race through the day after tomorrow, where online and real life are blurred beyond recognition, and social media casts ever-darker shadows.

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Today, the promise of the internet is finally fulfilled in America. It's going to be big. And beautiful. And I think people are really gonna like it, and I think it's going to be very good for the United States of America.

— the President of the United States,
announcing the Heuristic Internet Vetting Engine

Welcome to

BLiNQ

Trend  Positive!

Hello, **CassieMcK39!**

So far today you have:

 4

 1

 0

Any mobs today? I have the day off and I'm bored!

#SaveMeFromMyself

Nice day for some Hive Justice! Look at that sunshine!

Who's heading to **#MonsterNotAMan**?

#BLINQReaderPoll3995: Is **#MichaelJones** a monster or a man?

Vote: bl.inq/poll3995

HIVE ALERT: **#MonsterNotAMan** rally happening now in Rasche Field.

I just voted MONSTER in **#BLINQReaderPoll3995**, join me:

#MonsterNotAMan Vote: bl.inq/poll3995

ENTERTAINMENT NEWS ALERT: Rumor has it **#MichaelJones's** wife will be appearing at today's rally. What will she be wearing?

Streaming now at enewsalert.hive.gov/3995. **#MonsterNotAMan**

What kind of man does this to his wife and children? An animal, that's who. **#MeetMeAtRascheField #MonsterNotAMan**

I just voted MONSTER in **#BLINQReaderPoll3995**, join me:

#MonsterNotAMan Vote: bl.inq/poll3995

How much must it suck to be related to **#MichaelJones** right now? Poor kids. **#MonsterNotAMan**

HIVE ALERT: **#MichaelJones** has arrived. Hive Justice set to begin momentarily. **#RascheField #MonsterNotAMan**

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Somewhere nearby, shit was going down, and Cassie had to be a part of it.

She followed the crowd down a block lined with shady trees and around a corner that she remembered well. They were heading to the baseball field in her old neighborhood, the one where Cassie had swung and missed more times than she could count. The one where Cassie's dad, Harlon McKinney, had hugged her after a skinned knee, after a tough loss, after a mean joke from the pitcher. Now, with every step she took, her blood ran hotter, her breath pulsed quicker in her lungs.

She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the blinding sun, which had just peeked out over the trees like it knew the crowd needed its own audience.

As she approached the field, the charge in the air became palpable. These people, despite their varied ages, races and backgrounds, had a shared mission, and Cassie felt their energy in her body. Her fingers twitched, her stomach knotted. *Let's do this,*

she thought. And then, smaller: *Please let me feel something new. Anything.*

Her mother had disabled Hive Alerts on her phone, but there was nothing her mother could do to her phone that Cassie couldn't undo. Rachel was a classics professor, not a coder. Cassie's phone wasn't even running the software it had come with — it ran a custom variant she and her dad had cobbled together.

Now its sudden burst of pings made her jump. This was it. All around her, people were receiving the same notification she had just heard through her earbud: he was here.

The crowd roared, so Cassie did, too, the sound surprising her as it reached up her throat, around her teeth. It felt unexpectedly good to yell. Because all the others around her were stomping their feet and shaking their fists, she did as well, and that also felt good, kind of. It was real, and it wasn't pain, so that counted for something.

Cassie tried not to think about it too deeply, but for months she hadn't been able to shake the feeling that she was viewing the world from a distance, like she was occupying a different physical plane from everyone around her. Here, in this moment, Cassie thought — maybe — she could see things normally again. She could *feel* things normally again. She could belong.

And right now, she belonged *here*, at Rasche Field, with the others who'd also been drawn here by GPS and Wi-Fi and the unrelenting triangulation of cell towers.

“Do your justice,” the synthetic voice in her ear said, followed by the hashtag. Everyone else heard the same.

Cassie had always hated being tall, a trait she'd inherited from her dad, but today it felt like a sign. Her first Hive Mob and she

practically had a front-row seat. She saw the perpetrator immediately: a slight, sandy-haired man, his head down, climbing the bleachers, as he'd been instructed to do by the thousands who logged their votes locally. It took him forever to reach the top. When he finally did, Cassie took note of how his shoulders, which had been sagging, suddenly straightened; how his slight frame suddenly seemed to grow in size. This man was determined, Cassie realized.

Almost ... proud.

Well, he wouldn't be proud for long. He'd humiliated his family in public by writing an anonymous blog in which he'd detailed his ambivalence about his relationships with his wife and his children. Honesty on social media was admirable, but there were limits. After a particular post with the confession that his response to his wife's cancer diagnosis was to tell her he didn't love her anymore, his blog went viral, and the usual doxx gangs quickly uncovered his identity. His Dislikes and Condemns skyrocketed — even Cassie had shared the call to Condemn him, and she barely shared anything online these days.

Overnight, Hive Justice was declared, and #publicjunk was agreed to be an appropriate sentence. So justice would be served, right here, right now. As punishment for his indiscretion, he'd be forced to parade around town naked, with the words "World's Worst Husband and Father" written on his chest.

Someone started chanting — "Monster, not a man!" — and Cassie joined in, even though it was a dumb chant. But the chant wasn't the point of all this, was it? It was the togetherness, Cassie knew. The unity. That's what everyone said, anyway. She tried to say the words again, to be a part of it all, but the chant caught in

her throat. She coughed as she watched the man on the bleachers square his shoulders again, like he could form a barrier around himself before things got started. The sun shifted overhead, brightening the field even more, giving Cassie a clearer look at him. She blinked. There was something about his face ... for a second Cassie wondered if she knew him.

Still waiting on the top row of the bleachers, the man took off his glasses, folded them carefully and placed them in his left shirt pocket. Then he patted them. Twice.

Cassie's stomach heaved.

"Dad," she whispered.

Around her, the crowd quieted.

"Wait," Cassie said. No one heard her.

A woman with a bright scarf wrapped around her head, carrying a marker, climbed the bleachers. Noticing her, the man began unbuttoning his shirt. The sunlight gleamed off his sandy hair. Cassie struggled to catch her breath.

"Mark him!" someone behind Cassie yelled. Bursts of applause followed. The new chant thrummed — "Mark him! Mark him!" — on the bleachers, the perfect stage for the crowd in the field; the woman had approached the top, and the man had removed every item of clothing. He was completely naked, completely vulnerable. Cassie averted her eyes and tried to squelch the hot nausea climbing her throat.

She struggled to even her breathing. "It's not him," she whispered to herself. She knew that. He was white, for one thing. But still. He was *a* dad, someone's dad, and her own father, like this man, was always taking off his glasses and putting them in his pocket for safekeeping. Her limbs felt shaky and loose. What

happened to the energy, the charge she'd felt just moments ago? The camaraderie?

The woman held the marker up to the crowd. Cassie expected her to be giddy, to smile at least, but instead her face was expressionless. She appeared to hesitate, then leaned in and gave the man a quick peck on the cheek. He closed his eyes in response.

The crowd, though, savored this moment. They clapped harder while Cassie felt herself shrinking back into the shell she'd formed so many months ago.

"A-ni-mal!" a little girl next to her roared. Cassie stared at her, this tiny angelic-looking thing whose eyes were burning, whose teeth were practically bared. She looked like she couldn't hurt a fly but yearned to do damage.

Cassie blinked. She looked around at the others, each of them cheering at the scene unfolding before them. On the bleachers, the woman began writing on the man's chest. He stood naked and perfectly still. Cassie turned away.

"I have to get out of here," she wheezed, and started to push back the way she came. Bodies everywhere. Cassie struggled, dodging elbows and shoulders and fists, trying to breathe.

Finally, a break in the crowd. She hit the open field and broke into a run. The sun was hot now, pounding on the back of her neck, her knees. The noise of the Hive Mob behind her quieted enough for her to clear her mind, to think again. She slowed to a jog, then a trot, kicking up the light brown dirt under her feet. It floated around her, making it hard to see. Any moment of clarity Cassie had had, any seconds when she hadn't felt like she was separated from the rest of humanity, were gone. *Poof.*

Behind her, the man was getting ready to spend his day naked

in public, where the whole world could see his shame. He would be streamed live online, where people would comment and laugh and share. His wife would be even more humiliated. His kids, too. And Cassie had helped. Had cornered him at the field, left him nowhere to go.

That's what she'd wanted, right? To mete out the sort of immediate justice that the world demanded? To feel the righteous thrill of the mob at her back?

She was going to be sick. She ran through the neighborhood, through the shade of the trees she'd grown up under, across streets and around corners until she reached her house.

Wait. Her *old* house.

"Dammit!" Cassie yelled, fists clenched at her sides. She stood in the middle of her old street, in front of the house that had been sold to new owners just a few weeks before. She'd been so desperate to flee that she hadn't been thinking; she'd just relied on muscle memory. Her new apartment was in the city. She'd have to ride a bus to get there.

"Thanks, Mom," Cassie mumbled. Rachel always ruined everything.

Luckily, Cassie knew the bus stop was nearby. She hurried there and caught the next one just in time. On the bus, she ignored all the BLINQs coming in to her feed and tried to settle her stomach. If she didn't think about it, about #publicjunk and the man who didn't look like her dad but could have been him anyway, about the press of the crowd and the little girl's blazing eyes, she was fine.

The bus ride was quick enough. When she got off, the sun hid behind towers and the air felt thicker. Cassie hated the city,

but she had to admit it was at least useful: when you didn't feel like making eye contact, when you felt like you couldn't hold it together for another second, everyone left you alone.

"Cassie!" Rachel exclaimed when Cassie burst through the door to their cramped new apartment. She was sitting at the tiny kitchen table, laptop open, surrounded by books. "You OK?"

"Later, Mom," Cassie said. She went straight to her bedroom and slammed the door.

In her bedroom, Cassie dived onto her bed and fumbled at her phone's screen. Once the chat app opened, her breathing returned to normal. Everything was OK. She was safe.

Dad, she texted, today is horrible.

The response from her dad was instantaneous. **Hey there, kiddo. Any day you can walk away from is a good one, right?**

She groaned. Her dad's mordant sense of humor always had the ironic effect of making her feel better.

I miss you so much, Cassie wrote.

I miss you and I love you.

Cassie stared at her dad's words for a few minutes, letting them warm her the way they always did. There was an ache inside her without him around, like someone had torn a chunk of her body away and now she was expected to just live like that, without the very piece that made her a whole person. The only thing that filled that ache was anger. Some part of her knew that it wasn't healthy to walk around angry all the time, but it felt so much better than the pain.

She started to write back, needing to work out her thoughts about the day. He wouldn't have an answer for this one, would

he? **So, Dad, I joined my first Hive Mob today ... I was punishing a person whose name I can't even remember, if I ever knew it in the first place.**

Then her mom burst through her door.

"Mom!" Cassie said hotly. "Jesus! Knock first!"

Rachel grimaced. "You're right. I'm sorry. But we talked about you texting your dad —"

"Who says that's what I'm doing?"

Her mom crossed her arms over her chest, leaned against the door and stared. Cassie scowled at her with deep, abiding rage. There was plenty left over from her aborted attempt at Hive Justice. All that anger and froth had to go somewhere. Mom was as good a target as any.

Instead of fleeing or bursting into flame, her mother sighed and sat gingerly on the edge of Cassie's bed.

"Honey, we talked about this, right? About texting him?" Rachel tried to smooth a lock of Cassie's dark hair, which was pulled into a knot at the top of her head, but Cassie batted her hand away.

Inside, the jumble of emotions that had been competing for her attention all day kindled. Cassie knew that if her mom lit the match, things would explode.

She set her jaw — her defiance another trait inherited from her dad — and glared at Rachel. Her voice was cold. "You can't keep me from talking to him."

Rachel glared back at Cassie for a moment. "Actually, I can."

Rachel hated this part, the part where her daughter was finally feeling something, and she had to go and ruin it. As tears started to spill over Cassie's cheeks, Rachel steeled herself. Her only child was approaching meltdown, but she had to keep herself together for both of them. This was hard for her, too. Different, but just as maddening.

Rachel saw her husband in Cassie's big brown eyes, in her height, in the tiny dimple she had when she smiled. She never got to see that dimple these days. So what if Cassie needed to text her dad? Rachel felt herself caving, even though she knew it wasn't healthy. Even the therapist had said so.

Then again, Dr. Gillen was long gone, along with the extra funds to afford him. He wasn't there to see how Cassie changed when she talked to her dad, how she morphed back into the care-free, loving, spunky kid she deserved to be. Even if it was only for a few minutes.

"Please, Mom," Cassie whispered again. Outside, the city noises seemed to fall away, leaving a quiet, a peace Rachel hadn't heard in ... well, in six months.

"OK," Rachel relented. "For now."

Rachel wasn't even out the door before she heard the blips and pops of Cassie's keyboard. A car honked outside, and the subway vibrated under her feet, even up here on the tenth floor.

Ping. Whatever Cassie had texted, she'd gotten a response.

It was all Rachel could do not to grab the phone from her daughter's hands to see what Harlon had written. She gripped the doorknob, her knuckles white, and shut it behind her. In the dark hallway she closed her eyes and counted to ten.

Of course, she reminded herself, padding back into the

kitchen-slash-office-slash-dining room, it wasn't Harlon. Not really.

It couldn't be Harlon, because they'd buried him six months ago.

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Cassie made a face at herself in the bathroom mirror, still foggy from her shower. In the old days, she would do her hair, sweep on some mascara. But these were new days. She pulled her hair into another topknot and, doubling down, even decided to forgo her trademark berry-red lipstick. Who was she trying to impress anyway? The kids at her new school? Hard pass. They wouldn't give a damn about her, so why not return the favor?

The one thing she refused to compromise on, though, was her bracelet. She would wear it today as she wore it every day. It was a simple gold chain with ten colored stones on it. Not even real gems — just cheap knock-offs. But her dad had given it to her, so she adored it.

When she burst into the kitchen to grab breakfast, she stopped short at the look on Rachel's face. "What?" she snapped. Her hands flew to her lips, to her hair. Maybe she looked *really* bad, even for her.

Her mom's mouth had shrunk to a shriveled pucker, so tightly

was she pursing her lips. Cassie realized for the first time how tired her mom looked, how the lines around her eyes and mouth had deepened. She was even more pale than usual, her skin almost translucent. Rachel shook her head tersely, fatigue and anger radiating from her in nearly visible waves.

“What, Mom?” Annoyance was overtaken by a jolt of worry then; she had a sudden flashback to that unspeakable day six months ago. Was Rachel about to say something else that would make Cassie’s life explode into pieces again? She wouldn’t be able to take that.

It’s about your father. It’s about —

But there was nothing left to explode, Cassie reminded herself. Nothing left to be taken from her. Rachel could say anything, and no matter how bad it was, it wouldn’t make a difference. Things were already rock bottom for Cassie: Dad gone. Shitty new apartment. No doubt a shitty new school. No friends. And of course, nothing to wear, just to add insult to a festering pile of injuries.

When Rachel finally spoke, her voice was strained, like she was struggling to be heard through a wall. “What. Is. This.”

Rachel spun her tablet around on the table, showing a video to Cassie. It took Cassie a few confusing seconds to understand why Rachel was so pissed.

Someone had recorded the Hive Mob yesterday. And there, clear as the blue sky overhead, was Cassie. Her height and pitch-black hair drew the camera to her again and again as it panned over the crowd, shouts and chants drowning out whatever Rachel was saying now.

The sick feeling started to bubble in Cassie’s throat again, the same one that made her turn and run yesterday. Only this

time she held it down, forcing it back into the pit of darkness she carried around with her these days.

As she watched the video, which was trending online, she was captivated. Watching yourself on-screen when you don't know you're being filmed is a total trip — though of course, everyone was filmed everywhere these days. It was like she was watching a twin she didn't know she had. As the video played, Cassie could see it in her eyes: the weakness. The fear. If she had been stronger, she would have stayed. If the perpetrator hadn't reminded her of her dad, well ... the video wouldn't be showing her turning her back and running away. Like a child.

She wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Do you hear me, Cass?" Rachel flipped off the tablet. The juxtaposition of the screams of the video and the sudden silence of the kitchen made Cassie feel underwater, out of sorts. "What did we talk about? You are not to participate in this garbage!"

"Garbage?" Cassie shook her head. Only someone who hadn't felt the goose bumps on her arms from the energy of a Hive could call it garbage. And her mom, who barely knew how to operate her email, definitely didn't get it. "Mom, this is the way the world works. Don't you care about progress? About justice?"

"This isn't justice!" Rachel slammed her palm on the table so hard that her coffee cup jiggled and threatened to capsize. "Justice isn't hunting down some miserable guy who was venting about the hand life dealt him and —"

"This *is* justice now!" Cassie jabbed a pointed finger toward the window. "This is how we do things now!"

"Other countries don't do this," Rachel pleaded.

"That doesn't make it wrong," Cassie snapped.

“Or right!” Rachel shot back.

“Are we really going to have this fight again?” Cassie rolled her eyes. “Our greatest hits, right? Let me know if you forget your lines.”

As soon as Rachel’s skin bloomed into that particular shade of purple that it turned whenever she lost her temper with her only child, Cassie tuned her out. It was like someone muted the room; Rachel’s voice just became background noise, blending in to the traffic and sounds of people outside. They’d been having this particular argument forever, it seemed.

Cassie could barely remember what it was like before Hive Justice. Her dad used to tell her about the days when someone’s name trending on Twitter usually meant they had died or, best case, had dropped an unannounced album. But slowly, the online behaviors that were and were not acceptable began to change.

“People act mean when you give them the permission to,” Harlon used to say. Any slight that someone shared, perceived or genuine, became fodder for vicious threats, harassment, doxxing. Send a mean tweet to an ex? Your name, your address, even your grade point average were almost immediately uncovered and broadcast to the world, potentially turning hundreds of millions of users against you. And it was all fair game. Cassie remembered a neighbor close to their old house, a sweet old woman who liked to spend most of her time gardening. She’d been the first person Cassie had known to be virtually shunned after she posted a photograph making light of some bad landscaping she’d seen in the neighborhood. Her photo went viral, and soon the internet hated her. She was a bully, a bitch. Her sharp tongue was a “microaggression cannon,” a danger to society. Eventually, she’d

had to sell her house after groups of angry people kept showing up unannounced and pulling the flowers out of her garden, leaving a graveyard of colors on the street. Cassie didn't know where the woman lived now. But she was sure she didn't make fun of people anymore, wherever she was.

So that's what it was like in the beginning: slowly, people online became the judge and jury for all "uncivilized" online behaviors. This condemnatory mass of the social media majority became known as the Hive, responsible for identifying and punishing whatever actions were deemed socially unacceptable.

With frightening speed, the Hive became known for its outright vigilante violence. With the national social media engagement rate at nearly 99 percent, anyone who was believed to have done something wrong was hunted down by angry crowds that meted out "justice," as the internet deemed it.

At first, the Hive was considered the price you paid for living in a free and open society, the way so many people used to treat mass shootings.

Then came the riots. After a series of them in several cities, the government was forced to catch up and enact legislation to control them the best they could. But the Hive was decentralized. There were no leaders. There were no plans to disrupt. It just *was*.

"It was us," Harlon had said to Cassie. "We met the Hive and it was us." And then he'd laughed in that way that told her he'd just made a reference to something old, something she'd have to look up if she ever wanted to understand it.

It was too late to take away their power — the Hive was too big by then — but it could be directed. Channeled. With the help of all the big technology companies running the internet, the

government set up new algorithms to legislate the management of the Hive's justice system. A new, mandatory social media platform — BLINQ, available only to U.S. citizens — came into being, aggregating content from all the other platforms, making it easier to see a person's whole social profile in one place. You could still Like or Dislike a person's activity, just as before ... but now you could also Condemn. And once a user's Condemns hit a certain threshold, weighted by things like speed of virality and past social media content, they were officially sanctioned.

Which meant actual consequences.

In the analog world, where things were physical not digital, the courts still played their role. Crimes — robberies and embezzlements and assaults — were still all cops and lawyers and that antiquated crap. But everyone finally realized that the only way to police the internet was *with* and *through* the internet. For years, they'd tried applying the old analog tools to the digital frontier. It was a losing battle, as anyone who knew anything about the internet could have guessed. Now, people were fully accountable for their online behavior ... and faced real-world consequences.

And, as Cassie repeated to Rachel whenever she went on one of her anti-Hive crusades, things were better now. People were more careful online, more responsible. How could that be wrong, no matter how much her mother bitched about it?

"I'm late for school," Cassie said airily, right in the middle of her mother's diatribe. "One of us should probably care."

Rachel hated yelling. And she didn't yell, usually. But Cassie getting involved in Hive Justice ... well, that was guaranteed to nuke her self-control, not to mention trigger a migraine. Had Cassie been listening at all? It was hard to tell. Cassie had mastered her facial expressions in such a way that Rachel couldn't decipher her feelings. "Perfect Teenage Apathy Affect," Harlon had called it.

Harlon. Jesus, Harlon. The part of her that she still allowed to dream and fantasize believed that if he hadn't died, none of this would be happening.

Cassie was right about one thing.

Rachel's eyes fell on the clock on the stove. "Shi — crap!" She tried not to swear in front of Cassie; she had a beautifully naive theory that her daughter would start modeling her mother's behavior one of these days. "We're going to be late!"

"Yep," Cassie said mildly. So maybe she *was* listening? Rachel shook her head. It didn't matter. It was a big day for both of them: Cassie was starting her senior year at Westfield High School, and Rachel was starting her new professorship at Microsoft/Buzzfeed University. Maybe, she thought as she threw a granola bar and an apple into her briefcase, they should celebrate tonight. Maybe she'd order Thai. It was a splurge, but it was also Cassie's favorite.

Preparing for this new job had distracted Rachel from Harlon's death, and for that she was grateful. But she was also terrified, somewhere deep down inside of her, in a place she couldn't let Cassie — or anyone — see. As a part-time professor at the local community college in their old neighborhood, Rachel taught a few classics courses each semester, leaving plenty of time

to join the parent-teacher association at Cassie's school and to attend most of her soccer games and math meets. Not that Cassie particularly cared, Rachel remembered; no matter how many times she'd sat in the bleachers to cheer Cassie on, Cassie had been disappointed if Harlon wasn't there, too.

But Harlon had been a computer engineer at some of the biggest technology companies in the world and at some of the smallest but most influential; his frequent work travel had been a thorn in their marriage. After his death, she'd discovered that they were in fairly deep financial trouble in spite of his constant work, thanks to some bad investments and Harlon's expensive technology hobbies. He had done a fantastic job keeping it a secret from her. Sometimes, it made her weep with regret, quietly, when Cassie was asleep. Other times, usually in the harsh light of day, it made her want to throw things. Why hadn't Harlon prepared her? Why had he been so secretive for so long?

Rachel had had no choice but to sell their house, pay off their debts and find a smaller (OK, *significantly* smaller) place in the city, where she could find a better-paying job. Even she had been surprised when MS/BFU contacted her for an interview. The university was a tiny, private one that had a well-deserved reputation for having a student body that descended from the wealthiest of the wealthy. Its students' parents were founders and CEOs of luxury companies and technology firms, investment bankers and entrepreneurs, and oil and gas tycoons. While no student these days was clamoring for a classics education, their parents — the ones footing the bill — still thought it necessary. How she was supposed to reach kids like that, she had no idea.

Cassie stood at the front door, tapping her foot. She raised

her eyebrows in that bored, testing way when Rachel froze at the sight of her. Rachel couldn't help it. She was suddenly struck by how grown-up her daughter was, with her height and her attitude, with the way her eyes seemed to have millions of stories to tell. Grown-up, Rachel noticed, but also damaged.

*

Outside, two men — it was always two men — waiting in an unmarked black sedan sipped the remnants of their coffee, the loose grinds sticking to the white paper cups in polka-dot patterns that could've been read like tea leaves. They'd been parked long enough that the coffee was nearing just that temperature that made you grit your teeth while you choked it down, that made you question why anyone drank coffee at all.

They'd been there since the sun came up. It was the first day of school for both Rachel and Cassie McKinney, and they weren't yet sure what their weekday schedules would entail. The top brass had demanded they make an early go of it. So here they were, slumped in well-worn seats.

Finally, there was movement.

Man One tapped the shoe of Man Two, who had crossed his long legs so that they imposed on Man One's space. Both men sat up, but coolly, like they'd done this a million times before.

They had, of course.

"Targets spotted," Man One murmured into his headset. He awaited further instructions. They had only one car, and the big brass would need to direct them on which target to follow.

The directive, when it finally came a few seconds later, was

clear.

“Roger,” Man One said, nodding curtly. He waited until the targets had reached the end of the block, and then he started the car.

In the city’s morning bustle, no one noticed.

10010300101

Cassie stomped across the scuffed marble floors of Westfield High. Her mom had tried to join her for new student registration in the administration office, the thought of which was so mortifying that Cassie felt she might actually keel over and die. But she'd managed to divert Rachel's attention to her own first day, on her own need to get going. So now Cassie was alone. She preferred it that way.

"Excuse me," she said to the only person behind the large counter in the office.

A harried woman, juggling a phone on one ear and a tablet in one hand, held up her remaining hand. "Be right with you — take a seat!" she blurted.

Cassie sat in one of the folding chairs lining the wall and reluctantly grabbed her phone. All the avoiding she'd been doing this summer, including pushing away thoughts of starting a new school her senior year, was staring her in the face. Now that she was actually here, now that this was truly

happening, maybe it was time to see what Westfield High had in store for her.

She scrolled through BLINQ for any mentions of the school. It was all the usual stuff: kids talking about their teachers, about what they were going to wear, about who had broken into the school over the summer and was now expelled. There were a couple of pretty active hashtags, like #HowTheWestfield-WasWon (gossip about its athletes and the people hooking up with the athletes) and #EastOfWestfield (trash talk about the students at Westfield's rival high school, Huerta High). She had just started to unthread a complicated discussion between dozens of people about the school's dress code on #WhoWoreIt-Westfield when a BLINQ notification interrupted her, ping- ing in her ear.

Hive Alert! Her notification sounded. #DumpSkylar!

Cassie read through the hundreds of BLINQs linked to the Hive Alert. A funny little flutter had started in her stomach. She licked her dry lips and glanced up at the office administrator. Had she forgotten her? The multitasking woman who'd told her to wait was still at it, and was now frantically pounding at a laptop. For the first time Cassie noticed that she didn't have any earbuds in — weird, since most people wore them during their waking hours. Some people even slept in them.

Her own earbud pinged again. *Hive Alert! WHS Courtyard in five minutes.* #DumpSkylar!

“Hon!” The multitasker waved to Cassie. “Thanks for waiting. How can I help?”

“Hi,” Cassie said, pocketing her phone and approaching the desk. “I'm new. It's my first day, I mean.”

“It’s everyone’s first day, darlin’,” the woman said, tapping on her tablet. “Last name?”

“McKinney.”

“Let’s see ... OK, Cassie, welcome. Here comes your schedule, your locker information, a link to the map of the school —” She tapped a few more times and Cassie felt her phone vibrate with the information. “And — oh! Great. You’ve been assigned a buddy. She should be here any moment.”

“A buddy?” Cassie’s stomach kicked. A buddy was exactly what she didn’t need. “Is that really necessary?”

The woman paused and peered at Cassie. “Well, do *you* know where your homeroom is?”

“No, but I can check,” Cassie started to say.

The woman shook her head. “Every new student gets a buddy. Now have a fantastic day!” Somewhere in the back office a phone rang, and the woman bustled toward it.

Cassie slumped. Would anyone notice if she sneaked out without her buddy?

“Eff your buddy system,” Cassie said aloud as soon as she was safely down the hall. She ducked into a little nook with a water fountain to check out the #DumpSkylar feed for a few minutes before finding her homeroom. After all, no one would miss her.

It was a little unclear what Skylar had done, but Westfield kids were *intense* about Hive Justice if their BLINQs were any indication. It was refreshing, Cassie realized, to see that other kids were feeling the same drive to destroy, to tear things down and right the world’s wrongs, that she felt all the damn time. Maybe she’d find the courtyard, redeem herself from yesterday’s weak performance. Was that too much to ask?

“Cassie!” A wall of blond hair appeared, a hand jutting out from her midsection and grazing dangerously close to Cassie’s. At the threat of unexpected physical contact, Cassie took an automatic step back, hitting her hip on the corner of a drinking fountain. She gasped as the blond creature in front of her came into focus.

The girl chuckled and dropped her hand. “Not a handshaker, eh? No prob. I’m Sarah Stieglitz, your buddy.”

Cassie stared. This was her buddy? Oh, come *on*. How had she found her? That flicker of anger flared up again. She didn’t want to be rude — oh, wait. Actually, she didn’t care much about being rude.

Whoever assigned buddies had made a poor match. Sarah was her polar opposite: short where Cassie was long, blond where Cassie was black, white where Cassie was brown, smiling where Cassie was ... well, not. Definitely, absolutely *not*.

Sarah was talking, but Cassie wasn’t listening and cut her off midsentence. “Thanks, but I don’t really need a buddy — which is why I left without you,” she added pointedly.

She tried to scoot around Sarah, already tapping on her phone to pull up the map of the school.

“Cassie! Wait! I can help you!”

Cassie groaned and looked up at the ceiling. Her eyes landed on the blinking green light of the Zi Technologies IndoorWatch Camera mounted there, and she had a dawning realization that she’d been a fool to think she could escape from her buddy. Or anyone, for that matter. It was easy to forget there were cameras everywhere, recording all the time, hidden in plain sight. Even in schools.

Seizing the opportunity Cassie's pause had given her, Sarah dashed over. "Listen, I get that it probably sucks to transfer schools as a senior. I would hate it myself. But I've been assigned to escort you — it's this thing we do in student council — so can you at least let me show you around a bit? This way I don't get called out for letting the new kid get lost or something."

Cassie exhaled a groan. "I really don't need —"

"Well, obviously you don't. But here we are."

Cassie shifted her hips, eyeing the long corridor ahead of her. She had no idea where it led. The map posted on the school's website was for crap.

"I promise I'm normal," Sarah added. "I'm not going to murder you or anything."

Cassie held up her hand. "Fine. I give."

A small grin slowly took over Sarah's face. "Oh, good," she said lightly. "Surrender. Just like a good little victim."

Cassie snorted. This girl was weird. Had Cassie actually been in the market for friends, she'd possibly put Sarah on the list.

Friends, no. A quick guide? Well, OK.

Westfield seemed like every other high school. With a pang she quickly brushed away, Cassie thought about her old school, her old friends. Six months ago, after what happened to her dad, Cassie had buried her grief and had an epiphany: friendships, or relationships of any kind, weren't worth the hassle. Those old friends had reached out — some of them every day for weeks and weeks — but Cassie eventually blocked all their numbers, even those of her two best friends, Adena and Max. It wasn't until now, with Sarah giving her the lay of the land at Westfield and chatting away as though they were going to be great friends,

that Cassie began to wonder if she'd underestimated how hard it would be to go through senior year without them. Or with anyone.

One year, she told herself as Sarah diverted them from what looked like the gym doors and made a sharp left down a long hallway. All she had to do was survive one year at WHS. No sense trying to put down any roots when she was going to be transplanted in ten months.

"The labs are this way, and over there is the theater. What do you do, Cassie?"

"What do I do?"

"Art? Acting? Tennis? Code? What's your thing?"

"Oh." In her old school ... *before* ... that had been easy to answer. She was Harlon McKinney's daughter, so she hacked. But now? "Nothing, really."

"Well, there's so much to do here, if you're into that. Here's the library, and there's the auditorium," Sarah said, pointing. "And there's the media center over there, right past the courtyard."

The courtyard. Where dozens and dozens of kids were gathered, some of them shouting and cheering. The Hive Mob. It was time to #DumpSkylar.

"Cassie?" Sarah finally noticed that she'd stopped, whirled around and trotted back. "Come on, we — oh."

"There's a Hive Mob," Cassie said. She was staring at the crowd. The sound of it, a steady thrum of voices and feet stomping, filled the hallway. Flashes of the previous day's Hive Mob danced in her memory, leaving her unsteady and a little unsure about whether what was happening in front of her was real or just a flashback.

“Yep. But the bell’s gonna ring soon, so we should go.”

Cassie nodded toward the crowd, which had filled the courtyard, an open-air space with a few trees, a smattering of grass and some benches.

“What about them? They’ll all be late, right?”

Sarah shrugged. “Basically, any student can be excused at any time to go participate in any Hive Mob that involves a Westfield student. So even if it’s during exams” — Sarah made a face — “we’re free to go.”

Cassie raised her eyebrows. Impressive. Her old school had pretty strict anti-Hive rules. The thought of being able to join one no matter when or where it was happening ... and her mom wouldn’t even know ...

“But it’s a joke,” Sarah added. “Only the popular people ever trend positive. Each week, a certain crowd decides who will be the targets, and everyone just follows along. It’s not even real justice. It’s just —”

The bell rang.

“Cassie,” Sarah warned. But Cassie’s mind was already set.

“See ya, buddy,” she said, and rushed toward the courtyard, her skin feeling like fire.

*

The courtyard teemed with everyone at Westfield, it appeared, except for Skylar himself. (Well, and Sarah.) They were chattering, checking their phones, the sound of BLINQs forming a symphony Cassie found herself craving. The atmosphere was almost festive.

If Cassie knew anything about high school, it was this: it's a battleground. She could see immediately which groups were in charge. The beautiful people, as they'd been called at her old school, were the most obvious to spot: the sunlight bounced off their shiny hair, their contoured faces. Then there were the techies, the sect Cassie most closely fit in with at her old school, who tended to congregate on the edges. They had a confidence that rivaled the beautiful people's, but they seemed more approachable. Cassie knew from experience, though, that if you did approach the techies, it had best be with something smart to say.

There were the badasses and the middlemen and the artists and the athletes, though as the world had grown more digital many of those groups had been diluted, weakened over time. Not many people cared these days if you could throw a touchdown pass or paint a picture, unless you also knew how to translate your winning moments into viral gifs. The more important question was, could you kick off a trending topic? Did you have the skills to doxx?

What you looked like mattered — it had always mattered and always would matter. What you could *do* mattered only a little less, and had changed dramatically, even in Cassie's lifetime.

Cassie moved around the perimeter of the courtyard and looked up toward the second floor of the school. Even the hallways were full, serving as an overflow space for the Hive Mob. This was gonna be good. She felt that charge again, the same one from yesterday, like her fingertips were buzzing. The heavy rage inside her rose up, as eager to be expended as Cassie was to be rid of it.

Cassie nudged a girl with sleek black hair and retro cat's eye glasses who didn't look exactly friendly but at least not hostile. "So what did Skylar do?"

Glasses Girl looked her up and down. Finding Cassie's black jeans and rumpled denim shirt acceptable, she broke into a grin and revealed the whole story.

With every word, Cassie felt herself start to deflate.

It turned out that Skylar, a junior, had been dumped by his girlfriend of four years, Izzy. As payback, Skylar had tried to start a vicious campaign to turn people against Izzy by sharing "secrets" about her — things she'd said to Skylar about her friends and family, about school, about him. Tried, but failed. People quickly caught on to what Skylar was doing and turned the tables on him, calling him a misogynist, an abuser. The backlash was brutal. #DumpSkylar was trending locally within hours of his failed attempt.

It couldn't be the whole story, Cassie knew. Because if #DumpSkylar was just about a heartbroken guy sharing low-level secrets from his ex-girlfriend ... well, Cassie would need to find something to kick. Hard.

She kept her voice steady. "So what's the Hive verdict? Level 1? Level 2?" She could check her phone or tap her earbud for the answer, but Glasses Girl looked like she wanted to share.

There were five Levels of Hive Justice, each one denoting the severity of the crime and the spectrum of possible punishments. Most offenses trended locally only and were Level 1. Within each Level was a Range, which determined how long the Hive had to enact its justice. At Range 1, you only had a day, so you'd better act fast. The Ranges grew exponentially, and by the time you got

to Range 5, the Hive had an entire year to get to you. Such a time span was theoretically possible for any Level, but in practice the algorithm that determined such things rarely punished a meager Level 1 crime with anything greater than Range 2. At higher Levels, your chance of higher Ranges increased, as did the severity options for punishments the Hive could vote on.

Glasses Girl actually squealed. “Level 1! Range 1, so we gotta do it today. We get to dump garbage all over him!”

Cassie closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Sure enough, her earbud pinged and told her *It’s #garbagedump time!* There had to be more. “And then what?”

When she opened her eyes again, Glasses Girl was narrowing hers. “What do you mean? *That’s* his punishment. It’s been voted on. It’s a good punishment because he tried to dump garbage about Izzy. Get it?”

Sensing the rise in tension, a few girls quickly appeared behind Glasses Girl, fixing Cassie with blank stares, the kind she’d perfected herself the day she turned thirteen.

“Everyone’s out here waiting to throw garbage on someone who got dumped and acted out?” Cassie shook her head, exasperated. There was real shit happening in the world, and Westfield High wanted to waste time on stuff that didn’t matter?

Maybe if she knew Skylar and Izzy, it would have mattered, but Cassie found the cold satisfaction of Hive Justice boiling into hot anger again. This was useless to her. It was kid stuff.

“This is what the Hive agreed to.” Glasses Girl crossed her arms across her chest defensively, as though Cassie had insulted her mother.

“This is ridiculous,” Cassie fumed. “Are you really wasting

your time with this crap? Are you kidding me?” Something from a conversation with her dad bubbled up in her memory just then: *Punch up, Cass. Never down.* “I’m not gonna spend my time on some douche who’s sad his girlfriend broke up with him.”

Glasses Girl gasped. One of the other girls — tall, with red hair — cocked her head, suddenly showing interest. “New girl, am I right?”

Cassie shrugged. She’d already said more than she should have.

“Too good to join a Hive Mob?” the redhead taunted lightly.

“A shitty one like this? I’m just saying, I like to spend my time on stuff that changes things. I was in a mob yesterday for a guy who ruined his family’s lives. That one mattered. My dad always said, ‘Punch up, not down.’”

The redhead laughed. “Who the hell is your father and why should I care?”

Cassie felt her cheeks burn. She was the daughter of a tech god, but she’d never in her life traded on Harlon’s name or history. She wasn’t about to start now.

“Never mind. I’m just saying — the whole point of the Hive is justice. Justice is for big things, not a lovers’ quarrel.”

“General consensus is that all Hive Justice is important,” the redhead said coolly. She pushed some of the other girls aside and joined Glasses Girl in front of Cassie. From the way the other girls let her, Cassie could tell she was one of the beautiful people. “Because, of course, by definition it’s the will of the people. It’s an elitist stance to say that any one crime is more or less important than any other. That’s for the Hive to decide, not the individual.”

“Exactly, Rowan,” Glasses Girl said, and the remaining girls nodded, crossing their arms.

“Sometimes people are wrong,” Cassie countered. She could hear Harlon in her ear, everything he’d said over the years about Hive Justice. How it started out as a way to save the internet, and with it, the world. How it was a valid path people could use to take power back from the government, from the tech companies. How it had disrupted the world’s long-held views of justice. Her dad, she remembered, a little smile appearing on her lips, was all about disrupting. She gestured around at the crowd. “If you Hive Mob over petty crap like this, you’re making a joke out of the whole thing.”

The redhead, Rowan, raised her eyebrows. “What an ... interesting perspective.”

“What’s your name?” Glasses Girl asked.

“Why, so you can start a social campaign against me for thinking this particular mob is amateur hour?” Cassie snapped.

Rowan smirked. “Just more petty crap, right?”

Before Cassie could respond, Rowan and her friends began to filter away, joining the crowd.

Cassie was glad to see them go. She sought out empty space to find a path out of the courtyard and back to the hallway. She’d long since lost interest in this excuse for a Hive Mob. She’d have to find a release for her fury elsewhere.

As she edged in between the spaces, finally reaching a part of the hallway that wasn’t packed, she heard a roar go up behind her. Skylar had arrived. For a moment, she considered staying.

But then, a flicker. Up ahead, on top of a row of lockers, something was perched. Moving. Cassie caught it out of the corner of

her eye, the kind of movement that could be nothing, or could be everything.

She took a step forward, debating. She wasn't sure which way to go to get to her class (where was her "buddy" when she really needed her?), but the long stretch in front of her felt like the obvious direction. So she continued on, approaching the flicker, which had stilled.

And then a boy landed, hard, on the floor in front of Cassie.

His sneakers made a startling squeak. His black jacket puffed up behind him like a balloon before perfectly settling down. Under it he wore a black T-shirt that said CODE IS POETRY in white monospaced letters. Cassie's fists curled in again; it was fight or flight time, and her body had already decided to stay and fight.

"Sorry," the boy said, straightening, settling his long limbs. "I didn't see you there."

Right. Someone hadn't seen all five feet ten inches of her walking alone in an empty hallway.

"Yes, I'm often told I'm invisible," she said.

He fixed his gaze on Cassie. His eyes were green, serious. "I don't think that's true."

He looked at her for so long that she went still. Something about his eyes, his leather jacket, the whole damn thing made her anger cool. An ice cube melting into hot soup.

And then he smiled. Cassie doubted he'd even admit that, since it was just the tiniest curling up of the lip. But she saw it. And it made her flush. Her mouth went dry. She regretted not putting on lipstick.

But most importantly, she realized this was the longest

eye contact she'd had in months. No one looked at each other anymore like that; most of their interactions were digital.

"Watch where you're going next time," she snapped, stepping around him. She strode down the hall, her boots echoing.

*

Eventually, she found her first-period class. And her second, third and fourth, a forgettable mix of annoying teachers and ringing bells and gossip about Skylar, who was apparently walking around Westfield with food scraps and rusted cans and empty bottles dangling from his neck. Finally, lunch came.

As Cassie shoved her textbook into her backpack, Sarah, who was in the same fourth-period advanced calculus class, approached her.

"Whoa!" She threw her hands up in mock surrender. "Quadratic polynomials really piss you off!"

"It's not that," Cassie fumed. "It's that I've already taken advanced calc. But it's the highest math class here, so my mom's making me retake it so I don't" — she made air quotes — "lose my skills."

"Nightmare!" Sarah said. "What does your dad say about it?"

Cassie concentrated on hoisting her already-too-heavy bag onto her shoulders. It was the perfect way to avoid meeting Sarah's eyes and thereby avoid the question, though she was sure a spark of anger flickered visibly across her face. If Cassie *had* been on her way to being friends with Sarah, that comment alone would have made her reconsider.

As it stood, weeks ago she'd decided — almost subconsciously, deep inside the bones that still ached at the memory of her old

life — that relationships, even the special ones, weren't really worth it in the end. People weren't worth what it cost to lose them.

“Where's the caf?” Cassie changed the subject, leading the way into a crowded corridor. Sarah pointed in the opposite direction from where Cassie was headed.

“Over here, Magellan. By the way, I told my friends to save an extra seat for you, if you're up for eating with us?”

Cassie shrugged; it's not like she had anyone else to sit with. She and Sarah cruised past the senior wing and the library, through furtive hookups and selfie poses and locker slams. In the caf — big and crowded and smelling of day-old sandwiches, even though that should've been impossible — Sarah showed Cassie the lunch options and stuck close by as Cassie grabbed an apple and a bag of pretzels.

“I thought we were eating with your friends?” Cassie wondered as Sarah led her to an empty table.

“Hmmm,” Sarah said, rearranging the lettuce and pickle on her sandwich. “Maybe they got stuck in line. Doesn't matter.”

Cassie frowned and sucked on a pretzel. For the next few minutes, Sarah asked her a steady stream of questions that Cassie deflected. No one needed to know the reason they'd moved here, Cassie decided, and Sarah was approaching dangerous territory, the kind of stuff only friends would ask. Cassie's gratitude for her “buddy” was wearing off. And there hadn't been much of it to begin with.

It disappeared entirely at Sarah's next line of questions.

“What's your family like?” she asked between bites. Cassie's fingers curled up, her hands becoming fists.

“Nothing special,” Cassie said coldly, her limbs tightening.

“Oh, come on,” Sarah continued, chuckling. “Brothers, sisters?”

Cassie glared. Sarah met her eyes, her expression earnest.

“This is a weird conversation.” Cassie dropped her empty pretzel bag and glugged half her water. “Hey, what happened to your friends?”

Sarah shrugged. “It’s not weird to talk about families. It’s, like, the most important thing to talk about, actually. Don’t you think?”

Cassie didn’t answer. She couldn’t — her tongue had suddenly grown too thick for her mouth. The back of her neck grew damp. She picked up her apple, her hands looking for something to do that didn’t involve hitting the person across the table.

“I think someone’s family reveals a lot about them ... like me, for instance.” Sarah leaned forward, her sandwich forgotten, and trained her eyes on Cassie. “I lost my mom when I was a sophomore. It really changed me.”

Cassie froze, her apple midair. Sarah reached out and patted Cassie’s arm.

“There’s this amazing club here at Westfield. Well, not even a club. Just a group. It’s a bunch of us who’ve experienced trauma in some way. I think we could really help you, Cassie.”

There was a piece of apple lodged in Cassie’s throat, blocking her airway. Her heartbeat throbbed in her ears. “Wh-what did you just fucking say?”

“No, it’s OK, I swear!” Sarah straightened up. “The support group is literally life changing. And it’s all confidential — what happens in group, stays in group. So you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I d-don’t have to worry ...” Cassie stuttered, willing the stuck bit of apple to move out of the way or else be burned in the line of fire that was threatening to explode from her lungs. “What exactly do you think you know about me?”

“Cassie,” Sarah said softly. Her eyes darted around, checking to see if Cassie’s heat had been picked up by anyone around them. “Listen, I get it. I was angry for a long time. I was just like you.”

Cassie threw her apple onto Sarah’s tray. It landed hard, shooting up crumbs of the chips she’d left behind. Sarah leaped back, looking shocked.

“Who. Fucking. Told. You,” Cassie spat, her voice barely contained.

Sarah’s eyes widened, but then she took a deep breath, nodded once and visibly relaxed. “Westfield’s registration form asks if the incoming student has any extenuating circumstances the school should know about. Your mom said you’re grieving the sudden loss of your dad. And since I’m in the trauma group, and I lost my mom, I was assigned to be your buddy. I’m here to help.”

Cassie felt like someone had sliced open her skin and poured in a scalding liquid. Her mother’s name was a curse. Once again, Rachel had to go and fuck up her life. She couldn’t even let Cassie have a fresh start.

Sarah, oblivious, continued. “There’s no one else in group who’s lost a parent ... someone lost a sister to suicide, and then a bunch of people have family members who are alive but are facing addiction problems, and then of course there’s a couple of kids dealing with their own PTSD. But until now, I was the only one who lost a parent.” She gave Cassie a sad smile. “I’ve been waiting for someone like you for years.”

For years? Cassie couldn't see anything around her — not the caf, not the shining sky outside, not even her own hands in front of her. “What you just said is supremely insane.”

Sarah cocked her head and nodded thoughtfully. “This rage you're experiencing? It's totally normal. It's what you're *supposed* to feel.”

Cassie knew from Dr. Gillen that anger was one of the stages of grief. She didn't need Sarah — little white Sarah, blond and well-meaning but so completely out of her depth — to explain it to her. Cassie felt the heat, the anger, rise from her limbs.

Sarah continued. “I told my friends to give us some space today, for a few minutes at least, so I could talk to you privately about group. But if you don't want to talk about it right now, we can do it later. I'll text them now, tell them we're ready for them.”

Cassie stood up. Anger existed for a reason, she realized: it felt *good*. It was better than sadness, smarter than denial.

“I'm sorry you lost your mom.” Cassie's voice, low and thick, somehow managed to attract the attention of the people sitting around them, who were watching, waiting, phones out. Ready to BLINQ or hashtag whatever happened next. “But if you think I'm interested in bonding over a dead parent, you can fuck right off.”

Sarah blinked. She opened her mouth but Cassie didn't stay to hear the words that came out of it next.

She bolted.

As she tried to storm through the caf, she couldn't go very fast or very far. Tables and chairs and people blocked her at every turn. Her breathing was heavy in her ears. She glanced at the clock on the wall. Lunch wasn't over for another fifteen minutes, and no one was allowed to leave the caf.

Which was just as well, she thought, dropping into the first empty seat she could find, as far from Sarah as possible. Without her buddy, she had no clue how to get to any other place in the building.

Cassie fumbled for her phone, desperate to distract herself from her anger. It wasn't until she heard someone clear their throat that she realized the table wasn't empty. She looked up.

There was Rowan, her eyes fixed on Cassie, wearing an incredulous expression. With her were a clutch of girls Cassie recognized from the mob, which included Glasses Girl.

Cassie looked up at the ceiling. "Fuuuuuuuuck," she whispered. Just what she needed — a verbal assault from the cool crowd.

But instead, Rowan chuckled. "Tell me about it."

"Don't worry, I'm leaving," Cassie started to say, but Rowan held up a hand.

"Why? Stay. Curse some more. We're bored."

Cassie eyed each girl, sussing them out. She suddenly felt incredibly exposed, and a hot, fast pang made her wonder what she was even doing here.

"Cassie," Rowan purred, and Cassie knew there were a hundred ways she could have learned her name. She was curious which one Rowan had used but didn't let it show. "Cassie McKinney. I'd actually been hoping you'd join us. Are you as badass as your father?"

For God's sake. Had Westfield texted every student about her dad? Were there banners hanging in the hallways? "You don't know anything about my father," she said, her voice low and tense.

"I know enough," Rowan said. "Enough to be curious about his daughter."

“What do you want?” Cassie spat.

“Sweetheart ...” Rowan reached across the table and patted Cassie’s hand. “This is your chance to make some friends. Some important friends. Maybe crack a smile?”

Cassie glanced around. She wasn’t imagining it ... everyone in the lunchroom was watching. Watching her. The new girl, who’d plopped herself down at the popular table without an invitation.

She took a breath. Lunch was over in ten minutes. She couldn’t change tables *again*. She’d never live it down. And she was running out of tables.

She studied Rowan again. Everyone posed in high school — even Cassie — but Rowan and her friends had taken it to a new level. Every move they made, every shift in posture, every tap on their tablets suggested they belonged on a highly produced reality show: glossy, confident, BLINQ-ready. And the other kids at Westfield were tuned in. Watching. Waiting to be entertained. Or maybe just taking notes on how to be.

Cassie was pretty well known at her old school; that was what happened when Harlon McKinney was your father, and when you’d managed to hack your way around the school’s security and grading systems a few times. But no one had looked at her the way Westfield’s students were looking at Rowan and her friends. And she’d never preened the way they did. Were these her only options here? To watch or be watched?

“What am I, your new charity case?” she asked, keeping her head down. “Adopt the new girl, build her up, then tear her down for your own amusement?”

Rowan chuckled, followed by the others. “Wow, are you a

pessimist or what? I'm making an effort here. Oh, and this is Madison, Indira and Livvy." Each girl waved, and Indira — the girl with the glasses from the courtyard — offered her plate of fries, as though food could convince Cassie of their harmlessness.

After a thought of the sad apple she'd eaten, she grabbed a handful of them.

"I know what you're thinking," Rowan said brightly. "You're thinking, 'Oh, these are the hot, popular girls and they look down on everyone else and spend their days perfecting the highest form of bitchcraft.'"

Despite herself, Cassie chuckled.

Rowan grinned appreciatively at the reaction. "I won't lie to you. There's a little bit of that. But look — we're just trying to get through all this crap like everyone else. It's high school, not the real world, and there's safety in numbers."

Cassie skipped her eyes around the table. It was a collection of gorgeous specimens, and then there she was — hair in a topknot, nonexistent makeup ...

"I'm sure I'll fit right in," she deadpanned.

Rowan giggled. "Hey, look, if you don't want to be ready for your social media moment, then that's your funeral. But ..." She pointed at each girl in turn, ending with herself. "Math. Science. History. English. We're missing tech."

"It's tough to Homework Coven the comp sci final when there isn't a tech-head in the group," Madison offered.

Underneath her hot anger, still boiling because of Sarah and Rachel, an understanding began to brew. Cassie put the pieces together. Homework Coven. Rowan's crew was gorgeous and popular, yeah, but that wasn't their goal. The four of them were

cruising through high school by lending each other a hand, missing only one subject area.

The one subject Cassie could cover for them.

“It’s your call,” Rowan said with a shrug. “You can muddle through on your own and actually do all the work —”

“Or you can hang out with us and breeze through,” Indira finished.

“We’re hot *and* smart,” Livvy said with absolutely no trace of ego. Just plain facts. “Deadly combination, right?”

With a snort, Cassie shook her head. She didn’t want to admit how tempting the idea was. To coast through this last, miserable year at this miserable new place ...

“What’s the catch?” she asked.

The four girls all exchanged a look and, of course, deferred to Rowan.

“You’re part of the group. You don’t embarrass the group. We do everything we can to Trend Positive, so you do, too, if you’re with us.” Rowan hesitated for a moment. “You don’t have to glam it up, but if you don’t, you probably won’t get onto our social and ride the trend with us.”

Cassie didn’t give a damn about trending positive or going viral. She just wanted to be left alone. Still ... If she had even just the illusion of a posse, that would keep most other people away, right? And while she was an excellent student, she could think of better things to do with her time than, well, *all* of her schoolwork.

“One last thing,” Rowan was saying. “We have a pact. If one of us Likes or Dislikes or Condemns something, we *all* do.”

Cassie suppressed a bark of laughter. A total of five votes

in any one scenario hardly made a difference, she figured, and Rowan's earnestness was hilarious.

It was like Rowan could read her mind. "When we speak as a group, we have more power than you'd think," she said. "It's about consistency. We get people who want to curry favor with us to vote the same. And when the numbers are all pretty small to begin with ..." She shrugged to communicate the idea of a *fait accompli*. "Last year, we got three football players kicked off the team for making lewd comments at the cheerleaders."

Cassie shrugged right back. "OK, but ... why put so much effort into something that doesn't matter? You think hashtagging a kid in biology for looking up your skirt really changes anything? Try punching *up*. Maybe go after administrators or the school board or —"

"Disruption," Rowan said, using air quotes.

"Exactly," Cassie said. "If you spend so much time haggling with people on your own level, you never get a chance to get at the people *really* in charge."

"Oh, honey," Rowan said. "That's where you're wrong. Because we're the ones in charge."

"No," Cassie said emphatically. "The system is just set up to make you think that."

"You're taking this all a little too seriously," Indira said.

"It's just high school," Madison added.

"That's my whole point," Cassie said. "It's just high school." She thought of the previous day, of the unhappy husband, and her temper flared again. That guy had humiliated his wife and children. That actually *mattered*, not like these squawking high school spats. "This is a microcosm of society. The way we

operate Hive Justice now is how we'll handle it out in the real world, too."

"I promise you, Cassie," Rowan said, again patting Cassie's hand and again making her feel like screaming. "It's just something to pass the time. And the high you get from trending positive? Well ... it's worth it. I mean, I see your point. It makes sense. But this is the way the system is set up, and there's no reason not to take advantage of it. As long as you're careful enough — smart enough, especially — to not give an opening to let people do it back to you."

Cassie shook her head so hard that a curl of hair fell out of her topknot. "You're taking this thing that's supposed to be affirmative and empowering and you're just ... It's like you're just using it to get out of class. The internet lives forever. Big stuff, sure, go for it. But you're convicting people for stupid things, and it will be with them forever."

Rowan burst out laughing. "Girl, you're so wrong. The internet gets erased every damn night."

One by one, each of Rowan's friends nodded in agreement. Cassie's throat felt swollen, like it couldn't get any words out. Luckily, she didn't have any.

"No one remembers anything from last week, let alone last year," Rowan assured her. "You think Skylar will, what? Be denied a job because of this? Get rejected from colleges?"

Indira snorted, while Livvy threw her head back, her beautiful curls dangling halfway down her back, and yelled, "Imagine a world where that would happen!"

The idea was seductive and easy. And she knew that it was true, to a degree. Her dad had once called the internet "a perpetual

motion machine that runs on outrage.” Some new offense would captivate Westfield tomorrow — or even by the end of the day — and no one would remember #DumpSkylar.

Well ... except for Skylar.

And except for the BLINQs and posts and pics and gifs, all of them tucked neatly away into searchable databases ...

Rowan smirked at Cassie, and Cassie tried to read deeply into her eyes to see if Rowan really believed what she was claiming. It was hard to tell, though. Rowan’s eyes were bright and shining and brimming with a certainty Cassie herself had never possessed.

“We all get a do-over,” Rowan said, and Cassie felt herself nodding, even if she still wasn’t sure she believed her. “Every day is a new life for each of us.”

“As long as you’re not galactically stupid,” Madison added, and Rowan nodded.

“Right.” She popped a cherry tomato in her mouth and grinned. “And *that’s* the beauty of the Hive.”

*

After lunch, Cassie peeled off from Rowan’s group and headed to the girls’ bathroom. It was empty, and she slammed the door a little harder than necessary when she stepped into a stall.

The echoing clang and the vibration of the metal around her felt good. She slammed it again, then again, then again. Over and over. The bathroom tiles resounded with the clamor of metal on metal, feeding her anger and her ire, jacking them up higher and higher.

She didn’t know who she was angry at. Or why. Was it Rowan

and the others, because they were just barely deep enough that she couldn't dismiss them? Was it herself, for contemplating going along with it and joining their stupid little clique? Was it her mom, for moving her here, for excising her from where she'd been known and comfortable?

Or was it her dad? Because everything eventually came back to him. Because he went away, goddammit.

Cassie rubbed her eyes. Harlon used to tell her to be herself, to *know* herself. He — and, to a degree, Rachel — tried to explain how just being born biracial would sometimes mean that people would disregard the rest of her. That sometimes people wouldn't be able to see beyond the color and into the individual. She had a tall order: she would have to know her history, those who came before, but she would also need to remain steadfast in who she was and what she believed. And she thought she had.

So why did she suddenly feel like a fraud?

She kicked open the door to the stall and stalked out to the sinks. The girl in the mirror stared at her with a rage that was frightening and glorious.

*

Sarah caught up to Cassie at the end of the next period. Apparently being told to fuck off just didn't take. That was OK — Cassie felt the tiniest bit of guilt at blowing up like that.

"Look at you," Sarah said, her voice a mixture of awe and caution. "Day one and you've already managed lunch with Rowan."

"Girl," Cassie hissed, "lay off." It was nicer than fuck off but still got the point across.

“That group isn’t going to do you any favors,” Sarah warned.

A wave of anger crested inside Cassie, an unconscious backlash to the sympathy, the pity, that was blooming in her stomach at the sight of Sarah. Little, loud Sarah. At first she’d seemed so empathetic, but now Cassie saw the truth — she was just needy, thirsting for acceptance with a mania that bordered on tragic.

Cassie had needed someone, once. *Look at what it did to you. You got greedy in your need for connection, for love. And then you were screwed when that person was gone.*

Not her. Not anymore.

“You need to be around peers,” Sarah was saying. “And I mean people who *get* you, who get what you’re going through. My group —”

“I don’t know, Sarah,” Cassie snapped. And then she forced herself to take a deep breath. “I don’t know, Sarah,” she said again, this time in a calmer tone.

It’s not her fault that she’s desperate, Cassie reminded herself. Neither of us asked for this today.

The old Cassie would have been on Sarah’s side, without a doubt. Always protect the underdog. Always use the Harlon McKinney uppercut.

But Rowan, Indira, Madison and Livvy had been right about one thing: this wasn’t the real world. This was just high school. More to the point, it was her last year in a place where she owed no one anything at all.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she lied to Sarah, and as soon as Sarah made her way down the hall, Cassie tapped her earbud. “Text Rowan: I’m in.”

10010400101

How many times, Rachel mused, had she considered quitting today?

She slammed her water bottle down on the table at the front of the empty lecture hall. She counted back: at least six distinct times, and she still had one more class to go before her day was done. “Ha!” She barked a laugh out loud. “Six times!”

Soon, the room wouldn’t be empty, though it wouldn’t be full, either. It would likely never be full again. She had never wavered in her commitment to teaching classics, even when it had fallen out of favor as a course of study. But sometime in the past ten years, college administrations, wooed by fancy funders from the technology space, had begun to question the use of teaching the literature and languages and philosophies of ancient cultures; the students didn’t want it, and they were telling their parents, who footed the bills. So far, most of the parents disagreed, and fortunately Latin had seen something of a resurgence, thanks to Lorem, a popular technology that used the supposedly “dead”

language to leverage a truly byzantine encryption scheme that was beyond her capacity to understand.

She began every 101 class with the same statement: “History isn’t dead! It’s very much alive ... and it is watching you. Leering at you. Every second, every minute of the day!” While the lecture room awaited its guests — about forty kids, as it turned out MS/BFU was one of the few remaining institutions that made classics mandatory for all students — she rehearsed it again, this time with feeling.

Five minutes later, it looked like all forty students had arrived, and Rachel was waging an invisible war against the hornet’s nest that had landed in her stomach. Impulsively, she tossed aside the attendance list and the syllabus. They could wait.

“I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking history is more or less bunk, in the words of Henry Ford, that pioneer of American innovation and disruption. But Ford actually meant that history was bunk *to him*. That he personally had little use for it. And I should also point out that Ford was tremendously undereducated, despite his successes.

“History isn’t bunk. History is what we are doomed to repeat if we forget it, to paraphrase Santayana, and we do repeat it. Over and over. History is happening all around you, right now. Anytime someone is lambasted in the press without a trial, there are the Romans, feeding victims to the lions for sport. For fun. To remind everyone how strong they need to be under Caesar. There are enemies at the gates, and all members of society must come watch the games to become knowledgeable in the ways of war.” Rachel paused, taking a breath, and smiled wearily. “And there’s the rub. We like to look back smugly and think how foolish

they were, killing each other for sport, but it wasn't merely sport. It was education. Are they the barbarians or are *we*, who kill each other daily in the media and online, with no lesson taken away for all that violence?"

Rachel shook her head in annoyance and continued her speech on autopilot as she thought about the circularity of it all. If only she could really teach the classics the way they deserved to be taught ... maybe then her students would get it, and things in the world would go back to some semblance of normal. But it was too late, she feared. Academics and technology had fused together in ways no one had predicted.

Except Harlon. "I applaud your commitment to the classics, hon," he used to say. "But you're writing yourself a death sentence." How ironic, in retrospect.

An unmistakable *ding*. Rachel paused in her speech again, adrenaline making her chest heave. Her mouth was dry. How long had she been talking? She blinked, squinted. With the way the lecture hall was set up, she couldn't make out any faces in the crowd — it was too dark, and the light circling around her was too bright.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

Rachel stifled a groan. She could hear people shifting in their seats — how long had she been yapping away? she wondered — as they checked their devices. Even the ones who appeared to be sitting still were no doubt getting feeds through their earbuds. That many notifications at once meant something big was happening, and Rachel knew kids this age were practically powerless to refrain from reading them. She'd seen the behavior up close with Cassie. The Hive was an actual, physical addiction.

She waited a full minute for things to settle down. “Is everyone done now? Let’s continue discussing the way —”

A hand shot into the air, and a voice rang out before Rachel could call on the questioner. “But isn’t there historical evidence that many in ancient Roman times objected to the lack of concrete law at the time? And from that, can’t we deduce that there’s always been an undercurrent of rejection from a segment of the population, even if it wasn’t codified into law until millennia later?”

Rachel cleared her throat. “You’re conflating the notion of *jus non scriptum* — unwritten law, common law — with the lack of codification. At the time —”

“Should we really judge them by *their* standards and not ours?” he interrupted.

Rachel tried to even her breathing. She grabbed the remote control from the desk and pushed a few buttons. The lights changed; suddenly, she could see her students.

For a moment, she wished she couldn’t.

“Well,” she began, eyes flicking over the crowd to determine the source. He was easy to find — he sat alone, surrounded by empty chairs, in the front row. And he was a total prep, Rachel noticed, wondering if they still called them preps these days. Or was there a new word for that, like there was for almost everything else? He had porcelain-white skin and piercing blue eyes and an eighties-movie-villain cable-knit sweater tied around his shoulders. Rachel knew exactly the kind of student he was: rich, for starters. Entitled. Probably too smart for his own good.

But then he shifted forward in his seat, and the dim lights showed Rachel something that gave her pause: deep red hair,

knotted into dreadlocks, tied back in a ponytail that hung past his shoulders.

OK, she thought. *Maybe not a prep.*

The sudden light seemed to hit Pause on their back-and-forth. She decided to forge ahead, pretending he wasn't there. "As I was going to say, there are distinct parallels between the ancient Greeks and our current society. Take the law, for example. In Athens, justice was collectively enforced by society at large. There were no lawyers, no judges in the courts, to which any male citizen could bring a complaint. There were only speeches, and whoever told the most compelling story often won the case."

"Right," the student said almost affably, Rachel realized, which made her more annoyed than it should have. "And as a result, the wealthy found themselves in near-constant danger. The more elite the offender, the more pleasure the courts got in rendering their punishment."

Rachel's jaw dropped. She quickly closed it, covering her surprise with a cough. "That's right. I was just getting to that, Mr. ..."

She picked up the attendance sheet, trying to pretend her fingers weren't shaking. She'd never had a student try to take over her lecture like this. "What's your name, please?"

"Red Dread!" Someone guffawed from the side of the room. A few stray hoots followed.

The interrupter shot an unhappy glance to the person who'd yelled "Red Dread," then seemed to remember where he was and turned back to Rachel. "Muller. I'm Bryce Muller."

Rachel stiffened. "Well, Bryce, I'm glad to see you so informed. But perhaps you can allow me to —"

“I just wanted to make sure everyone here gets all the nuances.”

“Hashtag mansplaining!” someone shouted from the back row. A wave of laughter rippled down the tiers of seats.

Rachel swallowed a chortle. Who did this guy think he was? “I appreciate your enthusiasm, Mr. Muller. But I promise I’ll get to all the necessary nuances in due time ...” Her voice trailed off as a series of collective dings made everyone’s eyes, which had been on her, drop to their devices immediately.

For the first time in her life, she was grateful for the culture of distraction.

Whatever was BLINQing at everyone gave Rachel just enough time to reset herself. She got through the rest of class without incident, though also without much eye contact. Even Red Dread remained docile.

“We’ll continue this next time,” Rachel announced when her watch told her that class was over. The sounds of her students packing up their things and leaving was the most noise they’d made since they arrived. Rachel, packing up her own things, felt a ribbon of nausea ride up her throat. Maybe she wasn’t as exciting and as smart a professor as she’d always thought, if students like Bryce thought they needed to deliver her lecture for her. This whole day was a disaster. Her whole *life* was, in fact.

She was well on her way to a pity party when she gave one last look at the empty classroom to make sure the lights were all off.

“Oh!” She jumped, her heart racing. A man — surely not a student, in a sleek black suit and with a graying hairline — was sitting in the back row, tucked into a darkened corner. He nodded at her.

“Who are you?” she demanded. The man unfolded himself

from the seat and stood up, moving like someone who knows his mere presence could intimidate the skin off a snake. A chill ran down Rachel's back. *No. Not this again.*

"I'm just auditing your class, Dr. McKinney." His voice was honey smooth and just as sweet.

"Professor," she corrected, forgetting to wince at the slight. She was ABD — All But Dissertation. It was half written on a hard drive somewhere and she figured eventually she'd get back to it. "And no one told me there would be an auditor." She'd had people auditing her classes all the time — other professors, administration members, special visitors. But standard protocol was to clear it with the professor first.

He waved his hand around, taking a few steps down to the front of the room. The closer he got, the more Rachel felt a balloon of panic, of fear, inside her chest. He was physically far enough away that she was trying not to worry, but the energy in the room had shifted, and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

"I don't believe you," she said firmly, almost in wonderment at how deeply she felt that truth. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

He paused a few feet in front of her. Rachel gripped the remote control on the desk in her right hand. It wasn't much, but if she needed to, she could hurl it at him. Inside her sensible shoes, she wiggled her toes, bracing her body to flee.

"Rachel," he said. His eyes drifted toward her hand, the one with the remote control. *Shit.* He was on to her.

"Who. Are. You." The words were fire on her breath.

He looked at her for what felt like a long time, his gray eyes

small and focused and unreadable. The room was so quiet that Rachel could hear the old-fashioned clock on the wall as it ticked away the seconds.

“Just tell me,” she whispered, her words tightly coiled.

A pause, and then a curt nod. “I’m Agent Hernandez with the NSA.”

“The NSA?” Recognition dawned on Rachel. Fury, hot and sudden, pounded through her veins. “Again?”

“Yes, I know my office has previously been in contact with you.” He nodded again and then settled himself into the closest seat.

“Oh, is that what your records say?” Rachel, seething, clicked her tongue. “That the NSA has ‘previously been in contact’ with me?” She tried to remember the last visit she’d had from an NSA agent. There had been so many, in such a condensed time frame right after Harlon’s death, that now they all bled together — just flashes of men in suits, like in a movie, descending on their house time and again, ransacking Harlon’s office, their den, even their bedroom. Even Cassie’s bedroom!

“I’m sure those aren’t pleasant memories, but I’d appreciate your continued cooperation,” Agent Hernandez said. He wasn’t, Rachel noticed, asking. He was demanding. “We’re looking for some more information about your late husband’s activities, and if we could —”

“Look,” Rachel interrupted, heat rising in a scarlet flush along her neck, up past her ears. “You vultures came and took everything. Whatever you didn’t outright steal, you copied. I *still* don’t have the hard drive backup of pictures from my daughter’s birth. What possible use could the U.S. government have for those

memories? Does someone at the NSA get his rocks off on my breastfeeding photos?”

Rachel realized she'd probably gone too far, but she was trembling. Furious. And terrified, and outraged, and a million other things. “I'm a widow. You bastards keep poking around, sniffing around Harlon's survivors like cadaver dogs with a scent. I'm going to say it one more time.”

Rachel leaned forward, still gripping the remote control, close enough to Agent Hernandez now that he could feel her breath escaping in little pants. “Leave. Us. The. Hell. Alone.”

It was a reaction full of the grief and fear and hatred and exhaustion she'd been facing for months. It came from deep inside her.

Something went soft in his eyes.

“Professor McKinney, I'm very, very sorry for your loss, and I'm ... Well, I was going to tell you that I'm just doing my job, but that's not much of a comfort for you, is it?” He shifted his weight. “Look, your husband's work was important. And I'm not supposed to tell you this, but you deserve to know why we keep checking on you. Between us, we think there's a chance that he left some uncommitted code on a personal device. Maybe we're wrong. We're just being thorough.” He sighed and shrugged and handed her a card.

“Let me guess,” Rachel said sarcastically. “If I think of anything, I should call you?”

“No, ma'am. That's my personal number. I'll be back in the office on Friday. Give me a call then, and I'll see if we can expedite the return of that hard drive.” He paused. “I have kids, too.”

Rachel froze, only her eyes moving as Agent Hernandez nodded at her and left.

It was only once he was gone that she allowed herself to breathe. The wave of relief that rolled over her nearly made her collapse, and she doubled over, gulping air, wondering how on earth she'd managed to cope with another harrowing visit from the government entity that was intent on taking down her husband, his legacy and, she feared, his entire family.

When her lungs and heart and brain and every other organ that Agent Hernandez had affected finally relaxed, Rachel straightened and rearranged her things. She put back the remote control, smoothed her hair out of habit and then flicked off the lights. She stepped out of the room and into the blissfully empty hallway. Empty, that is, except for Bryce Muller. Red Dread. She froze. He was standing just next to the door, close enough, Rachel knew, to have heard and seen everything. He stared at her, a stunned expression on his face. For a long moment, Rachel stared back.

Eventually, Bryce's face settled into something new, and it looked like he wanted to speak. But Rachel held up her hand. She had heard enough from men today. From everyone, in fact. And he was her student. Whatever he'd just heard, whatever he thought he'd just seen, he'd need to forget it. Immediately.

"My office hours are listed in the syllabus," Rachel said tersely. As she elbowed her way around him, she added, "Don't loiter outside my classroom again, Mr. Muller."

Does Rowan Buckland make all of her friends color coordinate?
They're all wearing shades of purple today.

#WhoWoreItWestfield

Omg, are Skylar and Izzy back together? **#WhatsUpWestfield**

Speaking of Rowan, who IS the new girl in her group? She stomps around looking like she wants to murder someone. She's bringing Rowan down, if you ask me. **#WhatsUpWestfield**

No one asked you, Marcy. — RB **#RowanSpeaks**

It's Mary. And sorry, Rowan, that was rude of me.

#RowanSpeaksToMe

Whatever, Marcy. — RB **#RowanSpeaks**

Huerta is going DOWN this weekend! Let's go Westfield!
FOOTBALLLLLLLLLLL! **#HowTheWestfieldWasWon**

If Izzy's back with Skylar she deserves everything she gets.

#WhatsUpWestfield

Is it winter break yet? **#WhatsUpWestfield**

10010500101

Cassie ate lunch with Rowan and her friends again the next day. And the day after that, and the day after that. She was, inexplicably, a new member of Rowan's girl gang.

Her anger didn't go away, but she found it had abated somewhat. It wasn't that she enjoyed her new "friends," but they did provide a convenient distraction. When Rowan and Indira spent fifteen minutes taking forty selfies to figure out the perfect one to post, Cassie found herself caught up just enough that she didn't think about her dad or her life.

The crazy thing was, it was almost fun. For someone who preferred to keep a small group of select friends, Cassie found that being a part of Rowan's crowd was a new experience. Moving through her days, she developed a sense of something that was almost like power. People left her alone once they figured out who she was friends with, and this new status offered her the protection, the invisibility, she'd been craving. Her anger still flared and flashed of its own volition, but she had her girls to

help her direct it. She'd always hated the kind of girl who spent time cutting down others, but she had to admit that it served a purpose: it felt damn good. Pointing out someone else's flaws and shortcomings helped to masquerade her own.

Better yet, the girls' whole Homework Coven notion was genius. Her homework time was cut down considerably, as the five of them ganged up on each class assignment, letting each girl's expertise lead the way. Why kill yourself on that English essay when Rowan could set it all up for you and show you what quotations to use? Why stress over physics when Indira could walk you through the equations in half the time? Cassie figured that she earned her part, given that she got all of them A's on the first quiz in Westfield's mandatory coding class.

Dad, I'm sort of cheating at school, but not really, she texted one night.

Sounds more like you're hacking life, came the reply.

After that, she didn't worry about it anymore.

Her newfound guiltless existence, though, didn't cover everything. A voice gnawed at the back of her mind, whispering that she should be nicer to Sarah. And she tried — she really did. Sarah so badly wanted someone to bond with. She wanted someone whose grief — newer, more raw — could overshadow her own. But she had nothing else to bring to the table. Other than losing parents, she and Cassie had precisely nothing in common, whereas with the Homework Coven ...

With the Coven, there was snark. And flash. And style. Nothing more than skin-deep. Nothing real. That's what mattered, for this year in particular.

Still, out of sheer guilt, Cassie spent time with Sarah between

classes and occasionally in homeroom, then usually managed to bounce a few texts back and forth. Eventually, Sarah stopped pushing her trauma group and seemed OK just being friends.

Meanwhile, Cassie found that pretending to be friends with Rowan, Indira, Madison and Livvy was getting easier and easier. Sometimes she didn't even have to pretend. Bonus: it was definitely keeping her mom off her back and her rage quiet.

Of course, then Rachel had to ruin it.

*

“We have to talk about college,” Rachel said to Cassie one night during dinner — cheap spaghetti, watery marinara — and Cassie groaned. The only person she hadn't reached some kind of understanding with appeared to be her mom. Their relationship was as strained as ever. Rachel had been snapping at Cassie more and more, especially about how much time Cassie was spending with her new friends after school. Cassie figured she must be stressed from her new job. It was better for everyone involved if they just left each other alone as much as possible, Cassie had decided.

“Oh, I'm going,” Cassie assured her, poking around at the lukewarm noodles. “Fast as I can get out of here, I'm going.” She pretended not to see Rachel's face cloud over.

“Of course you're going,” Rachel said quietly. “But you'll be applying soon, and I'm a little worried about your transcripts.”

“I'm an A student,” Cassie argued. Why was her mom always discounting her? She was never good enough for Rachel. She remembered bringing home a B minus on an impossibly difficult statistics final sophomore year. She'd been so proud of that

grade. But when Rachel saw it, she'd tsk'd and asked Cassie what had happened. Her dad, meanwhile, had as opposite a reaction as one could: he'd taken her out for ice cream.

"I'm not talking about your grades, which are very strong." Rachel paused to shake some cheese, probably the kind filled with sawdust, onto her pasta. "I'm worried about your lack of extracurriculars. I don't want schools to look at your record and wonder why you dropped everything, even all your computer stuff, when you switched schools."

"I will happily tell them why I dropped everything," Cassie snapped. "I'm sure there's some kind of 'dead dad' credit they'll give me, if you're so worried about it."

Not for the first time, Cassie wondered if she'd gone too far. Rachel turned pale, her fork frozen in midair. She sighed. "Sorry."

"No, don't be sorry," Rachel said, her voice low. She still wouldn't meet Cassie's eyes. "Maybe you're right. Maybe there is a dead-parent box you can tick off on your applications. Maybe there's a mom-who's-tried-everything-to-get-through-to-her-daughter-and-is-out-of-ideas box, too."

Abruptly, Rachel stood up, cleared her dishes and disappeared into her bedroom, the hollow door making a small *thwack* as it closed. Cassie rolled her eyes, ignoring her regret. It was just like her mom to leave *her* to clean up the kitchen. And why did she have to bring up the fact that she hadn't touched a keyboard in months? As though it had been an easy decision for her, something she'd done on a whim. *You have to have a reason to code*, Harlon used to tell her. *Your reason can be lofty or silly, grand or stupid, but it needs to exist*. Well, without him, she didn't have a reason. Even though she dreamed in code, she couldn't play

around with it anymore. It felt like ... Cassie hesitated, trying to place the emotion. Betrayal was the closest word she could come up with. Playing with code after her father died kind of felt like she was betraying the deepest, truest part of their relationship, their bond.

Hey, Dad, she texted as soon as she got to her bedroom. Rachel hadn't come out of hers all night. **Why is mom so mean?**

Hey there, kiddo, Harlon wrote back. **Your mom loves you. So do I.**

She has a funny way of showing it. Cassie's thumbs were faster than her brain. She shouldn't have written that. She suspected Rachel occasionally checked in on Cassie's texting with Harlon, even though it was the most private thing Cassie had ever done and would ever do.

I'm sorry you had a bad day, Harlon wrote. **But remember ...**

Cassie said it out loud before the phone could send the full message: "Any day you can walk away from is a good day."

She stared at the screen awhile longer, wondering what her dad would really say if he were here. Would he be proud of Cassie? Their apartment was so quiet that she could hear the television noises from old Hattie Morris's next door. She wanted to scream, to break the silence with her internal thunder, to wake her mom from whatever cage she'd constructed around herself, from whatever it was that was keeping them from hearing each other.

Cassie's thumbs moved over the keys without her even realizing what she was asking. **Dad, why is this all so hard?**

She stayed up for hours, her eyes scratchy, her long limbs heavy. But Harlon never wrote back.

*

Sometimes he didn't write back. That was part of the randomization strategy.

It wasn't her father. Not really. Cassie knew that even though she let herself *think* it was her dad on the other end of the chat. Her father, though, was actually buried some ten miles from the new apartment, in a cemetery behind an old run-down church, the same church where baby Harlon had been baptized.

The Harlon at the other end of the chat logs was a bot. A very special one.

She and her dad had built it together. Some dads and daughters built homemade musical instruments or birdhouses. Harlon McKinney and his daughter hacked together an incredibly sophisticated bot designed to test Alan Turing's theories.

Turing had claimed that the true test of artificial intelligence was whether you could put the machine behind a curtain and have it converse with a human being on the other side. If the person on the other side couldn't tell that he or she was speaking to a machine, not a person, then congratulations — you've got bona fide artificial intelligence.

Their attempt at a Turing AI had been modeled on Harlon himself. There was a lifetime's worth of Harlon's blogs, posts, tweets and more all over the internet, to say nothing of thousands of hours of lecture videos and home movies. A hell of a lot of information on one man, capturing vocabulary, mannerisms, verbal tics and so on. Together, they'd built a neural net designed to suck all of that in, along with Harlon's entire text-message history.

They'd finished it about eight months before he died and had spent every free moment training it. It lived somewhere on the net on a secret server farm Harlon shared with some other mysterious hacker types, and only Cassie had the IP addresses that allowed her to "speak" to it.

It was like talking to her dad.

Almost.

The bot responded to her using Harlon's words and Harlon's written voice, based on what she said and how she said it. But there was a randomization factor built in. Sometimes it didn't respond because ... Well, sometimes people just flaked and didn't get back to you. It was more realistic that way, though frustrating.

And she'd begun to notice that some repeats were cropping up. Depending on what she said to the bot, there was a range of responses. At first those responses had seemed infinite, but the bot was starting to tread old ground a bit. This was probably her fault; she had been — subconsciously, perhaps — sending it a lot of the same input lately. **Mom sucks. I hate my life. I miss you.** Over and over. The bot wasn't learning anything new.

She sighed and tried to figure out something new and interesting to send it but couldn't come up with anything that would throw it for a loop.

Mom said something smart today.

Ugh. No. Never.

Cassie would never admit this, but her mom was occasionally right about things.

It was *infuriating*.

Still, Cassie considered what Rachel had said about extra-curriculars. She'd worked hard all throughout school, and it

seemed pretty dumb to throw it away now, when she was so close to the finish line. She'd had her eye on Stanford since Harlon had taken her on a tour of it in middle school, when he'd been a visiting lecturer, and her application was already saved on her laptop, just waiting to be finalized. So the next day, while she was waiting in the lunch line to purchase her sad little banana and yogurt cup — Rachel hadn't allotted her much in the way of a lunch budget — she checked the Westfield High app to see what clubs were meeting that day. Maybe she'd surprise everyone and join one.

She had English right before lunch, with Sarah, so she let Sarah escort her to the cafeteria each day. By unspoken agreement, Sarah peeled off before they actually walked into the room.

At her lunch table, Rowan and Indira were shrieking and laughing at something on their phones. "What's up?" Cassie asked, setting down her tray.

"Oh, we're just making fun of the president's daughter. She had the baby!" Indira said gleefully.

Cassie shrugged. "Mazel, I guess." The president had a bunch of kids, but Cassie couldn't be bothered to pay much attention to any of the first family. She did, though, remember her dad ranting about how the president was scum, especially for the way he talked about women, including his own wife and daughters. "If you ever hear me talk about Cassie like that," he seethed to Rachel once, "please shoot me in the head. Twice, to be sure."

And, yeah, the first daughter had all the traits of a hottie, along with a social media following most people would kill for.

And her dad seemed like a total creeper, but Cassie just couldn't convince herself to care. Most old guys seemed like total creepers, after all.

"Cassie," Rowan said in that tone of voice that made Cassie guess her reaction to the news had been less than ideal. "Don't say you haven't seen the photos?"

"I haven't been on BLINQ since second period," Cassie protested. She and Rowan had somehow fallen into this pattern, this routine, where Cassie scoffed at the amount of time and energy Rowan spent on social media, while Rowan pretended Cassie didn't know anything about anyone as a result.

"Girl. These will *make* your life." Indira flashed Cassie her phone. Cassie grabbed it and began scrolling. It took a minute for her to digest what she was seeing. Then, her expression unreadable, Cassie handed it back.

Rowan and Indira waited eagerly, their faces bright as they scrutinized Cassie. Livvy and Madison slid onto the bench next to them and Indira nudged them, updating them in a whisper while they all waited for Cassie's reaction.

"Well?!" Indira squealed. "I can't take it anymore! What do you think?"

"I mean, I know nothing about babies ..." Cassie began. She chewed her lip and tried not to laugh. "But ..."

"But ..." Rowan prompted.

"But ..." Cassie met four pairs of glistening eyes. "That is one unfortunate-looking child."

"Ba-ha-ha!" Indira guffawed while Livvy and Madison burst out laughing. Rowan was prettily chuckling into her hand. Eventually, the table's laughter was loud and raucous enough that

the others began to look at them, even more than they normally did. Cassie basked in it, surprised at how good it felt to hear real laughter. It had been a while.

“I mean,” Cassie added, eager to continue making them laugh, to continue the cafeteria’s collective admiration, “the poor thing is going to hate its mother for being so pretty!”

“It looks like her dad,” Indira said. “Like a teeny, tiny, baby version of the president.”

“With better hair,” Livvy deadpanned.

Cassie had to admit it was true. Poor baby.

“My mom is gorgeous and I don’t *hate* her,” Rowan said. She cocked her head in thought. “But still, I get what you’re saying.”

“You guys, we should try to get #UnfortunateBaby trending,” Livvy declared.

“Or what about #UglyMothersAreTheBestMothers?” Madison offered.

“That’s so mean,” Cassie said with a chuckle.

“OK, this is my mission now. Let’s see what’s trending already.” Rowan tapped a few times and then cleared her throat. “Here’s our competition: #RoyalBaby.”

“But they’re not royalty!” Livvy said.

“They sure act like it,” Cassie grumbled. An unexpected silence fell across the table and Cassie, surprised, tried to clarify. “What? My dad said the president thinks he’s a king.”

“My family supports the president,” Rowan said, her voice stiff and prim.

“It was just a joke.” Cassie shrugged.

Rowan fixed her gaze on Cassie for another uncomfortable moment before clearing her throat again and looking back at her

phone. “Check out the other trends, everyone. Let’s reconvene after school to try and get something trending ourselves. We don’t have much time if we want to get in on this one!”

“Speaking of after school ...” Cassie let her voice trail off and hated herself for it. She straightened her spine, set her jaw. So what if they laughed at her? “I’m thinking of joining a club. What do you guys all do?”

Indira snorted. Madison looked confused. Livvy and Rowan exchanged glances before Rowan broke into a dazzling smile. Indira snapped a quick photo of her — “This light is really beautiful, Roe, I’ll post this ay-sap” — and Cassie braced herself. She’d misstepped somehow, again.

“Clubs aren’t really our thing,” Rowan said. She shrugged daintily. “You know our thoughts: This is all so temporary. Burn bright and brief and leave some energy for the real world.”

“I get that.” Cassie nodded, biting into her banana. “I guess I’m just worried about my college applications. I don’t want them to look too sparse.”

“Mmmm,” Rowan said noncommittally. “My daddy told me I don’t need to worry about college applications.”

“Me neither!” Madison’s eyes lit up. She liked it anytime she and Rowan had something in common.

If Harlon were alive, would Cassie need to worry about college? As she slurped the rest of her yogurt she tried to picture, not for the first time, how her life might be different had Harlon lived. They hadn’t been private-jet rich, or even first-class-to-Europe-every-summer rich the way Rowan and her friends seemed to be. But Cassie had never wondered if her parents would turn down her requests for the latest technologies, or the

best sneakers, or that weekend away at Max's beach house. She'd always gotten what she wanted in addition to what she needed. Now, she realized ruefully, her college search had been narrowed down to its high scholarship potential. She would probably end up at MS/BFU. With her mom. Ugh.

Cassie surveyed the rest of the cafeteria to get ideas. Her eyes landed on a tableful of techies, silently munching at their sandwiches while also tapping at tablets. She lingered long enough for the other girls to notice.

"Oh-em-gee, is our tech-head hearing the mating call of the teen cybergeek?" Rowan teased.

Cassie ducked her head, grateful she hadn't made the time to tie her hair up that morning so it could fall over her face and hide her grimace. With Harlon McKinney for a father, being a tech-head had pretty much been her birthright.

But that was over now.

"Nah," she muttered when she knew her face had reverted to its neutral expression.

"Well, let's think about what you're good at, and go from there," Livvy suggested.

"Talking shit?" Rowan joked. Cassie chuckled while the rest of the girls laughed heartily.

"No, but Rowan's right," Madison said.

"Obviously," Rowan said with a smirk.

"I'm serious. You do always have a smart comeback, and you're a fast talker." Madison counted out on her fingers. "What about debating?"

"We do have a good debate team," Indira said.

"Debate team." Cassie nodded. The two words felt right in her

mouth. But more importantly, they would get her mom to ease up a bit. Hopefully.

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