

Kinetics

MultiMind



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Content Warning:

- Theme of Abuse (Grooming)
- Severe Blood/Violence
- Reference to Sexual Violence



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Prologue

The school bell chimed as Latin class started. It was the middle of the day and Ava already wanted to go home. She loathed school, every minute of it. Third class of the day and one more to go. Ava slumped at her second row desk by the stained dry erase board as the remaining students wandered in.

Ava didn't want to check her phone. Nasty messages were already springing up in her notifications by lunch. All created by Roma, all passed around by everyone else. It didn't matter whether or not Ava had classes with Roma or even crossed paths with her that day, Roma always had something awful to say. It has been like this for years, stretching back into middle school. Roma just loved to mess with her for fun – well, Roma liked picking on

anyone she could get away with but Ava was a special target for some odd reason. Ava used to wonder why but her curiosity died out long ago. She just wanted to survive the day.

“Everyone, in your seats!” commanded Ms. Dorrell as she leaned back against the front of her wooden desk. She had a shrimp’s demeanor: pale pinkish-brown with beady eyes, tall but a bit bent, scuttled a bit as she walked – unless there was a student to harangue. Her hair was short, brown and bobbed, her voice was bored and loud. The chalkboard behind her was filled with streaks from countless washings with dirty water and faint skitters from previous lessons.

The students continued to mill about and chatter until Ms. Dorrell stomped, “Now!”

Everyone sat and remained quiet.

“Thank you,” the teacher said with strained politeness. She continued in a regular tone, “This is not Freshman year, everyone! You have more to worry about than what is going on in your lives. SATs, ACTs, colleges, the lot. You have to think about your future lives. And there’s not a single, decent college that will take a cut-up just because they think they have to. Oh, no. They’ll pass you over quick. So please, try to pay attention and let’s begin. Starting with the homework from last night, please pass it forward and turn it into the tray.”

Ava’s body prickled. She didn’t get a chance to do it the night before. She was too busy fighting with her mother, Yvonne, over the dishes. Yvonne had found a few dishes

sitting in the drying rack that still bore flecks of dried food. When she woke Ava up from napping on the couch, that's when the turmoil began. Yvonne made her do the soiled plates again but Ava's twin brother, Tyrone, pitched in. He dried the dishes and handled the more stubborn stains. This caused more uproar. All the while, their father, Jermaine, reclined in his favorite chair, watching the evening news in his usual sleepy stupor. He never cared to get involved unless forced to.

"Ms. Tanis?" Ms. Dorrell chimed from her desk.

Ava straightened up, alert and afraid.

"Where is your packet? You had all week to finish," the teacher dryly inquired. Students began to giggle but a look from Ms. Dorrell silenced them.

Ava shifted in her seat, her eyes drifted downward.
"Um ..., I—"

"Are you answering to the desk or are you answering to me?" Ms. Dorrell snapped.

Jabbed with humiliation, Ava looked up and replied, "I didn't get a chance to finish it—"

"Ms. Tanis, *when* did I give out the assignment?"

Meek as a mouse, Ava replied, "Monday."

"When?" The Latin teacher lifted her sharp chin and gave a disdainful stare down her flat nose.

Louder, Ava repeated, "Mond—"

"Monday'. Exactly. And what is today?"

"Wednesday." Heat flourished in her chest as her mouth grew dry. All eyes were on her, they pierced like needles.

Ms. Dorrell's voice crawled with bemused surprise, "So that means you had time to work on this. Isn't that right?"

Ava shrugged and sunk her head. The previous night flashed across her mind. Anger bubbled underneath her shame. She wished her mother left her alone; the fighting swallowed up the night. And the night before last was filled with homework from other classes – which she had hardly finished because there was too much of it.

Ms. Dorrell tilted her head as she narrowed her eyes. Her hard-permed bob moved little towards gravity. "Are you telling me you don't know?"

Ava lifted her head and replied, "I had a lot of hom—" "What college do you plan to go to?"

"I ... I haven't decided ye—"

"*Not decided?*?" Ms. Dorrell sliced in. "Ms. Tanis, before you know it, it will be Junior year. And then Senior. Besides that, do you think college will have less work or more work?"

Ava mumbled, "More wo—"

"I can't hear you," Ms. Dorrell jabbed.

"More work!" Ava answered. Her blood grew chill with seething. She wanted to bark back at the teacher but it would just cost her more chiding and a quick one-way trip to the administrative office. That's how it always was in that class for others, and she imagined no different for herself.

"Exactly." Ms. Dorrell walked to the window as she rubbed her arms. Her heels clicked behind her words,

“You will not get an easy pass in life, none of you. I didn’t tower on the work, I gave a simple packet that should have only taken two nights to do.” She hefted open a tall window. A soft, humid summer breeze wafted in. “One night, if you were paying close attention in this class.” The teacher sat on the emerald painted sill of the window, “When I give you work to do and set a deadline, I expect that work to be *done* by the deadline. None of this is impossible. Just do the work. Ms. Tanis, you have until tomorrow morning to turn in your packet or your grade on it will drop a whole letter. This means if I don’t see that packet in my mailbox by lunch, it will be a B if it was supposed to be an A. If you decide to take more time on it and spend an extra day, it will drop to a C. Spend another day on it and it will be a D – at which point, you might as well not even turn it in. Do I make myself clear?” Ms. Dorrell rubbed her hands. She had a chill that simply wouldn’t go away, goosebumps collected on her arms and legs.

“Yes, Ms. Dorrell.” Ava replied. She hoped that would be the end.

“Good. You’re not going to start this year on the wrong foot.” Lifting up from the sill, Ms. Dorrell said, “Now, let’s start the class ... is anyone else cold? I guess they turned up the AC too much today. Either way, pull out your books and turn to our last section. We were on section thirteen, page forty-six. Section thirteen, page forty-six.”

The rest of the class was fairly normal but Ava kept quiet and small. Every time she wanted to check her

phone, she would stop herself mid-grab. Did she really have to see all those terrible messages and tweets just to check the time? Ava's Twip account was the worst of them all. Every new notification was an insult or jeer. She found it pointless to even try visiting the app or use it. Ava used to be invited to so many TwipGroup chatrooms, she had to turn off the invitation feature. Every chat was the same: she would be invited again and again, and if she accepted, the chat would just be full of abuse towards her. If she didn't, the invitations would just continue. Endlessly. If she blocked one person, another would invite her.

But she looked at her phone anyway. She had to – there was a text from her mother layered atop the Twip notifications. Ava looked for Ms. Dorrell. She was in the back of the classroom helping a struggling student by lambasting their intelligence. Ava nestled her phone in her lap, tapped the text message notification and opened her phone.

Mom: Dn't fgt to do ALL chores

Mom: Ty cn't help

Mom: No napping

This incensed Ava. Before she could reply, another tweet rolled in. It was a meme of her eating in the school cafeteria with a horse's head instead. As with most of the terrible tweets, it came from an anonymous account. Ava used to show them to the teachers and administrators but their half-hearted attempts to find the culprits dissuaded her from even trying any further. She could tell it was

Roma's work because the memes would gravitate around whatever she had said to Ava personally. But every time an administrator or teacher would ask Roma if she made those tweets or said those terrible things, Roma would play innocent and say it wasn't her. "They certainly aren't from my account," was her alibi. "I don't know why Ava blames me so much. She's so obsessed with me."

The torment tapered off just before the summer started after her brother intervened. To this day, Ava didn't know what he did but whatever it was, it made Roma and her associates keep their distance. Or at least, keep the harassment online. There were still whispers around the school but at least most of them ceased when Ava was around. She still wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing – but at least things were quiet offline.

Ms. Dorrell's heels clicked their way towards the front. Ava rushed into her phone settings to turn off all her notifications and thrust the phone under her leg. Hearing how close the clicks were, Ava was sure Ms. Dorrell had seen her. Anxiety flared within her chest – Ms. Dorrell loved to take away phones and turn them over to administrators. Several students had already learned this first hand and the year had just begun. But Ms. Dorrell breezed past as if Ava wasn't there. Not even a dismissive glance. She even grew an extra scuttle in her step.

The class bell rang and Ava gathered up her things. Nestling in the last book, she zipped up her mesh aqua backpack and shuffled out the room. Ava passed a small cluster of students.

One snickered, “There goes horse—”

“Shut uuuuup!” another hissed. “Her brother is *super* crazy.”

Ava walked away faster; she didn’t want to hear any more. Tyrone never told her what he did to Roma or if he ever suffered being picked on but from the glimmer of comments, she was certain he was. It didn’t help that she knew he loved all things esoteric and occult. If it was unusual, he gravitated towards it. And he didn’t do much to hide it. That certainly had to earn him some ridicule.

Ava kept her head down as she stormed to the next class, Biology. Another class whose homework she hadn’t completed. She weaved through the other students in the crowded hall, both hands clutched on the single strap draped over her shoulder. This was her everyday: stay small as possible, become as little of a target as possible. Her phone sat quiet in her pocket but she knew it was filling up with new obscenities. The torrents were always the worst between classes.

She pattered down the school stairwell and walked into class. Biology was a bit more relaxed than Latin but not by much. Mr. Farrowat was a stocky man with a bushy mustache who graduated university with honors but somehow decided to become a high school biology teacher. “I want to give back,” he would express at the start of every year. No one could believe him.

“In your seats, everyone!” He called out as he readied his school-marked laptop on his desk in front of the

whiteboard. “C’mon, class is going to start as soon as the bell rings so get ready!”

Some students obeyed and slid into their seats, others stayed where they were. Ava sat at a lonely side table close to the door, head down. *Someone’s gonna take a picture of this*, fledted across her mind but she lost the will to care. Everything she did garnered ridicule.

Few students sat with her. The seats and red lacquered tables were assigned but Ava’s table became a bit scarce after a shouting match she had with another student. They kept mocking her voice and ribbed for others to join in. The growing crowd kept asking her questions about horses and the validity of Roma’s statement that Ava was dating her twin brother. To simmer the heat, Mr. Farrowat re-did the seating chart and only placed the quiet and studious at her table. He felt proud, she felt singled out.

Ava rummaged through her backpack to collect her books. A light chill brimmed inside her mesh bookbag. She ignored it, it was just something that happened every once in a while. She picked out her cherry-covered binder and waited for the class to start with her head slumped on her arms.

One person zipped in right before the bell chime, and Ava was glad to see her. Her best friend, Lexi. Dolled up as always, almost late as always. They exchanged quick hellos as Lexi hurried to her seat at the back of the room. Harsh scrapes of chairs against the wax floor filled the room as Mr. Farrowat closed his laptop.

“First things first!” The teacher announced. “Send in

your homework! Send your homework in! Homework for the questions in chapter three, section two in your book.” A student halfway in the back raised his eager hand. “Yes, Darnell?”

“This was too hard!” The pin-thin boy lamented. “I hardly understood anything! Can you go easy since it’s the start of the school year? Y’know, ‘learnin’ curve’ an’ all?”

The rest of the class agreed as they pooled their scribbled pages of notebook paper at the center of their table. The three other students at Ava’s table had their pile ready as soon as Mr. Farrowat spoke.

The biology teacher rolled his grey eyes and sighed, “Darnell, we went over this in *class*. If you were paying attention – if any of you were paying attention – then this assignment wouldn’t be so hard.” He began to walk about to each table to collect the stacks as he continued, “This isn’t the Honors track, everyone! You all have little to complain about, I made sure that the questions were easy. Even a half-asleep kid could have googled this and passed. Maybe if you spent less time on Twip – this includes *you* Marcus, put the phone away or I will take it – or at least more *constructive* time on TwipSearch, this wouldn’t seem so hard. I didn’t have these things when I was your age. All we had were encyclopedias and sometimes they were outdated. Twip, Google, whatever, it’s all at your fingertips now.”

When Mr. Farrowat came to collect the pile of homework at Ava’s table, he noticed it was one short. “Ava,” he said quietly, “where is your homework? This is

the third time already, you're not getting off to a good start."

A mischievous student overheard and commented, "Her brother—"

"Dorian, one more word and it's the Administrator's office for you," Mr. Farrowat threatened. He turned on a heel to the joking boy and reminded, "I'm still astonished that you're still here, given your behavior as a freshman. Does your *father* need to come up here or your *mother*? They seemed to be incredibly *eager* in your improvement. Your father was like the Flash the last time and your mother doesn't work that far away."

Dorian quieted as classmates snickered. "I'll – I'll shut up," he mumbled to himself and looked away.

Mr. Farrowat turned back to Ava, "Get this in *tomorrow*. All of it. I don't care what you have to do, just do it, okay? You're a smart girl, I want you to show that off."

Ava sank in her seat, "Okay." A small surge of irritation erupted within her again. She had no idea how she was going to finish tonight's assignments and the back-pile. She sulked in her seat.

The biology teacher sauntered off to collect more papers. The other students looked away before Ava could meet their eyes. She was certain they were judging her.

Class was long and tedious, seconds dragged like hours. Angered by her circumstances, Ava wanted to be left alone. She wanted to snap at anyone, everyone. The fact that Mr. Farrowat kept calling on her so many times didn't help. She wanted to bark at him to stop.

At one point during class, a girl with blue box braids and glossy cherry lips huddled herself next to Ava's chair as Mr. Farrowat marked evolution theories on the whiteboard. Her sudden arrival startled Ava on the inside but she dared not show it. The girl had a Cheshire smile as she whispered eagerly, "Ey, Marris a been sayin' things about you. Your brother gonna take care of her, too?"

The table behind Ava broke into a fit of light laughter. Ava's stomach sank from the attention.

"I don't care, okay? Go away, Penelope," Ava brushed off. She tried to return her attention to the whiteboard but Penelope kept talking.

"You don't care?" she tittered. Penelope threw a hand over her mouth as she checked back at the chuckling table. "You know Roma and Marissa *always* be talkin' 'bout you, right? What? Alexandria taught you some kung fu moves from her dad? Or is your brother gonna do somet--"

"Penelope!" Mr. Farrowat clapped. The student was caught off-guard by the sudden baritone of his voice. "What are you *doing*?"

Her smile unmoved, Penelope stood up and answered, "I was just askin' Ava for somethin'. Like, a pad or tampon or whatever."

The class erupted with a mixture of disgust and laughter. Ava closed her eyes and felt tears begin to sear, she felt so humiliated and dragged along. She didn't want to be caught misty-eyed. The last Ava wanted was the class to think she was crying.

Mr. Farrowat wasn't impressed. "Penelope, if you need

those things, wouldn't you think the *nurse* would be a better choice rather than bother your own classmates? Go to the nurse."

Penelope shook her head, "Nah, I think I'm good--"

"Go to the nurse or get written up," Mr. Farrowat demanded.

Penelope was taken aback, "Get written up for what? I wasn't doin' anything!"

"For disrupting class--"

"I wasn't disruptin' nothin'! I was quiet!" she defied. "You ain't hear me--"

"Nurse or administrator's office. Your choice, not mine," Mr. Farrowat stated. The class was silent.

Penelope stood there for a moment, baffled. Then she sucked her teeth and stormed out of the classroom.

Mr. Farrowat took a deep breath to steady himself. He spoke to the rest of the class, "Like I said before all this commotion, there are various biomes that affect evolution...."

Ava sank her head down onto her arms. She kept her eyes low, she could feel tears gathering and wanted no one to see. This was her every day. Her every single day.

Chapter 1

The sun basked down as Ava sat on the bus bench. She avoided the broken slats and tried to not mind the wobbly cement base. She messed with the notification settings on her phone. She wanted digital solace but she still wanted updates from XinBō.

The app opened up when she okayed the new settings. It was a wave of sea colors that opened to where she left off, her journal. She typed a new entry:

Sept 23, 2015

Mood: Exhausted

My brother always loved me and I'm grateful for it.

Another awful day. Everyone is on my *case*!
Forget my homework for a couple classes and
everybody goes crazy! No slack, no nothin!
They all get on my nerves!

Ma then trippin over the fact I ain't clean the
dishes right because I rushed thru em. Dad's
just sayin nothin like always do. Like he not
even there!

Ty's the *only* one lookin out for me. The
only one. I don't know if it's twin-connection
or something but he always is there for me.
Never got on my case unless it's serious,
actually *tries* to help me out. He don't dog me
for stupid reasons or *nothin*. I wish it was only
us sometimes.

Ava Tanis posted the update as “Private”. An animated gray eye blinked on her screen in confirmation. She wanted to check her other notifications but she already had a good idea what was there. Ava checked the time and looked up at the schedule posted on the bus stop. The bus was late *again*. Late and probably *very* crowded with rowdy students. *Prolly be faster if I just walked*, Ava thought as she leaned over to check the street. No bus in sight. She sat back, blowing out a derisive breath, and decided to give the bus a bit more time. Ava didn't feel like standing on a crowded bus but she didn't feel like walking the half hour it would take on foot, either.

She slipped her phone into her back pocket as she fumed about her day. Ava couldn't wait for the day to be over. The school year had only just started and already teachers were giving her grief. Every other elder in her life was the same: Telling her what she *should* do, what she *shouldn't* do, what job she *should* get, what job she *shouldn't* get, what college she *should* go to, what college she *shouldn't* go to, who she *should* be, who she *shouldn't* be. The same nag, the same rag.

Over the hill far away, the 23 bus sat at a red light. Through the dark tinted windows, Ava saw there weren't many people. It must have been a lagging bus. No matter, a lagging bus with plenty of seats was much better than a crowded bus or no bus at all. *The only good thing to happen to me today*, Ava mused as she gathered her things.

As the red and yellow bus headed down the hill, Ava fished out her monthly student pass from the messy front pocket of her backpack. She had the same card since she started Melissa Elliot High School, the plastic neon yellow card was bent and faded. Then the bus arrived. Its gears whined to a stop and the doors hissed open as it idled with the rumble of a neglected diesel truck engine. The cool, stale air greeted Ava as she stepped aboard and swiped her card. There were plenty of seats to choose from, as the bus was near vacant and had more adults than students. She plunked down in a seat behind the driver. The driver grunted the next stop and shut the door. He was a portly, languished man just as intent on going home as she was.

Bookbag on her lap, Ava pulled back out her phone

and unlocked it. She learned about XinBō from Lexi a couple years ago and had been using it ever since. The fact it was only popular on the other side of the planet was her favorite feature. Her own little special corner of the internet. Away from the bullies, away from the drama and nonsense. On XinBō, Ava could be herself. The people were different. The topics were different. Everything was different. More vibrant.

She would post updates about her life, play time-killers, dress up her avatar, Wix23, or mind the small house it lived in. Her avatar was a stubby, bubble-faced, cherry-lipped glam girl with deep brown skin and silver bobbed hair. Whenever Ava was bored, she would send her avatar into the diamond portal outside its house to visit chatrooms. Like now.

Tapping the glowing wormhole diamond, Wix23 walked to her doorstep on her tiny, heeled feet. The bus rumbled past an empty stop. The screen turned silver as it loaded possible chatrooms. A single, small diamond appeared and spun fast or slow as new worlds loaded. Deals and tips on how to navigate the chatrooms and games popped up underneath the rotating diamond.

Moments later, a miniature city appeared on the screen. Each location designated a different chatroom. There was a party house, decked out in fall colors to mark the passing of the seasons; a beach with rippling waves and small fishermen posed on a dock; a park that featured turning leaves; and a city center that mimicked a jumble between Hollywood and Times Square. A golden statue

billboard covered in blinking lights spelled out “XinBō Centre”.

Given that the digital city loaded in a couple minutes, Ava guessed there weren't a lot of people on. *Most of the users are probably sleep right now*, she figured as the bus idled at another stop light. A passenger chimed the yellow tape along the walls for the next stop, it rang with a metallic ding. Three more stops to go for Ava and they were going along quicker than expected.

Before Ava could pick any of the chatrooms, a bar notification appeared and a doorbell popped up on her app's screen. Both read: Ra1nwater is visiting! Go now?

Ava tapped the doorbell with her thumb. The diamond loading screen popped back up. She looked up and saw her stop approaching, she readied her bag as the bus churned its way down Sandoval Ave. The bus stop was empty and decrepit, the bench was in crumbles and splinters, dandelions sprouted everywhere. The flowers were dotted along the vacant lot behind the stop.

Checking her phone, Ava dinged for her stop. The avatar was home again, bobbling and teetering about. The home had a summer flare. Ocean sand slushed in a corner around a shell-shaped hot tub, fishing nets graced the mint stripe walls with scattered pearls. The lamp hanging over the door was a beach ball. Under it stood an avatar wearing a pastel shark kigurumi on a golden welcome rug.

The bus squealed to a stop in front of the shattered bench, and Ava slumped her bag onto her shoulder and gripped the rail to stand. She could feel the rumble

through the silver railing and her feet. Ava's phone chirped as she trotted down the triplet of stairs. The bus driver grunted out the next station and pulled the double doors shut. The bus drove off with a belch of black smoke. Ava checked her phone, but the afternoon sun behind her made it hard to see. After she fumbled with the brightness on her dark screen, Ava saw a tiny speech bubble float above Ra1nwater's head: Hi!

In the chat box on the lower half of the screen, an amber speech bubble pointing left appeared: Ra1nwater shared a greeting!

Ava started walking past the stop to cross the wide, abandoned parking lot. Echoes of a small convenience store remained, broken off walls of brick and busted windows covered in errant sprawls of dandelions and blossoms. The markings for the parking lot were still untouched, blow flowers swayed in the cracks as Ava stepped past in her dingy white sneakers.

She selected a wave greeting from the selection scrolled under the text box. Ava didn't want to be too distracted while crossing this lot; she had heard stories of jumpings on the less-than-aware and she didn't want to be preyed on by surprise. She kept her head up and alert as she made her way along. Her home sat on the other side, a red rowhouse with a few sunflowers sprouting in front of the raised stone porch.

Almost at the other end of the lot, Ava heard another chirp. She checked her phone.

Ra1nwater: How ya doin?

Ra1nwater: You looked pissed in bio

Ava looked about and then tapped out a quick response:

Wix23: So much bull today. All of it

Ava stepped onto the cracked, jaunted sidewalk and crossed the pockmarked street to the cement stairs that led to the cherrywood door of 12 Docker Ave. The black mailbox by the door hung open, Ava tapped it closed. As she fished for her keys, she read the response she just received.

Ra1nwater: What happened?

Ra1nwater: School just started

Ra1nwater: Is Roma messing with you

Ra1nwater: *you?

The front door swung open with quick creaks. It was her twin brother, Tyrone, in a blue polo and denim pants. Like Ava, he had a medium build and lanky stature. It always baffled her how the both of them were let out at the same time but he always made it home before her.

“You’re just getting home now?” Ty joked. He stepped through the threshold in his grey socks to slip Ava’s bookbag off her shoulder with care and invite her in warmly. Ava padded through with a shy smile. Though she

appreciated her doting brother, sometimes he doted too much. But she would remind herself: enjoy it now, he won't always be there to shoulder her burdens. College was only two years away.

"Ty," Ava smiled, "I had it, y'know." Her phone chirped.

Tyrone closed the door as he eyed his sister with a cocked eyebrow and a defiant smirk.

"What? I can't help out my baby sister?" He hefted Ava's bookbag onto his shoulder and followed her around the round pillar that separated the doorway and the living room to the chocolate couch. The living room was spacious and simple, with tan carpet stairs in front of the door and an entertainment center nestled against the wall between the kitchen and dining room. Warm and homely.

Ava chuckled, "We were born at the same time!" Standing in the living room, illuminated by the open windows and thick curtains pulled tightly aside, Ava checked her phone and typed a quick reply:

Wix23: Not her. Other stuff. Home w Ty.
brb

"Who you talkin' to?" Tyrone inquired as he sat Ava's bookbag beside the aged microfiber couch. Some of the pillows were mismatched from couches past. Tyrone's black tablet was nestled between a peach polka dotted pillow and a smooth brown one. The television played in silence, a home shopping channel.

Ava pocketed her phone, “Lexi. She saw I was irritated today and wanted to check up on me.”

The phone chirped again.

Tyrone held out his arms as he made his way to his sister, scoffing, “Whatever. Lay it on me, your big brother.”

He wrapped his arms around her and slid his hands down her arms to guide her to the couch. Ava chuckled again and tried to correct him but it fell on deaf ears. She snuggled up beside him. Tyrone laid his head atop hers, his cheek shifting a long braid or two around her crown. He smelled of spice while she smelled of cherries. They suited each other well.

“Baby sis,” Tyrone reminded gently, “I was born two hours before you. That makes you my baby sis. Now, what happened?” He laced a hand over her tilted hip.

Ava sighed and shifted her head better on Tyrone’s shoulder. She cushioned her cheek against his muscle, what little of it he had. She always felt safe and protected like this, deep in her brother’s arms, hearing his deepening voice, hearing his pulse. Nothing could touch her, nothing could harm her. She needed his comfort, she knew that.

“Everything.”

“‘Everything?’” her brother echoed. “Like what? That Roma girl buggin’ you again?” Ava could feel Tyrone’s shoulder tense.

“Nah, nah. It’s Ms. Dorrell. She got on my case about forgetting my homework in front of the class. Mr. Farrowat in Bio got upset too but didn’t go into a whole lecture about it like Ms. Dorrell did. And not in front of

the whole class, neither!”

Tyrone eased some. “Oh, ok. I was about to say, ‘I thought I handled that.’ Thought she was getting out of pocket again. Sounds like I’mma have to handle *this* problem a little later. Haven’t you had Ms. Dorrell before or was that somebody different?”

“Somebody different,” Ava confirmed. Almost every teacher Ava had was tough on her. The school figured it was the best way to prepare their students for the “real world”.

“Ok. The school year just started, though,” Tyrone commiserated. “Why she buggin’ out ‘bout it now?”

Ava sighed angrily. “She wanted to go on and on about how I’m starting the year on the wrong foot and how it’s gonna affect my life and career and how I need to start thinking about how colleges will see me and stuff.”

Tyrone sucked his teeth. “Not even five full weeks into school and she’s already tryna act like you’re about to flunk out!”

“I know, right?” Ava vented, bolting upright. Tyrone lulled her back to his shoulder and petted her head, smoothing her edges.

“She needs to stay in her lane,” Tyrone seethed. The air grew a little thick.

Ava ears perked. He was falling into a mood again, she could tell. She tried to soothe him, “But it’s not that big of a deal, though!” Ava didn’t want her brother to fix her dilemmas, he was the ... heavy-handed type, out of passion. He never struck her or anyone she saw but she always felt

something happens when Tyrone gets involved.

Once, there was a boy in her neighborhood that would catcall her at every chance and opportunity. Tyrone caught wind of it and the boy wound up in the hospital. The boy said Tyrone did it but Tyrone said when he went over to talk to the boy, he found the child bashing his own head in on the jagged stone wall outside his house. No outside force, no nothing, all doctor reviews pointed to self-inflicted wounds. But Ava felt something was amiss.

Then there was Roma. Once Tyrone promised he would step in, that's when the "crazy brother" rumors started. To this day, he never told her what he did. Tyrone only assured her that Roma would keep her distance.

As Ava continued to try to simmer her brother's temper, her phone vibrated and sung out a crescendo of chirping birds. Tyrone looked down at his sister as she pulled out her phone and saw "Lexi" beaming.

Ava tried to get up, "Gotta take this."

Tyrone clutched her hips and brought her back beside him, "Why can't you take it here?"

Ava glanced at her brother with masked unease and took the call.

"Hey, Lexi," Ava greeted with a false calm.

"Hey!" A charismatic voice greeted back. "Still with Ty or can we talk?"

Tyrone interjected, overhearing the call, "Y'all can still talk around me." Ava cringed, Tyrone slipped a hand over her waist.

A couple beats of silence and Lexi continued, unsure,

“Oh – okay. Uh, Ava ... what’s up? I ain’t hear much from you. You ok?”

Ava replied, “Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Just Ms. Dorrell got on me today.” She looked up at her brother, who lightly thumbed her waist and draped an arm around her shoulders. He met her gray eyes and tapped his forehead to hers lovingly. Ava smiled at her brother, “Ty helped me through it.”

Lexi knew of Tyrone’s ways, but she tried to push past it, “Well, if you’re doin’ oka–”

“She’s just fine, Lexi,” Tyrone affirmed flatly. Ava knew he wasn’t irritated ... but he was getting there.

Tyrone nuzzled Ava’s ear. She thought he was dotting over her but he whispered, “Will she be talking like this forever?”

Ava tensed up, her voice quickened, “Uh, Lexi ... since that’s over, anything else you wanna talk about?”

Lexi caught on. “Nah, not really. I just wanted to see how you were doing but if you’re doing okay, I’ll see you online later.”

Ava nodded, “Hm, okay! I’ll catch up with you later! Bye, Lex–”

“Byeeeeeee, *Lexi*,” Tyrone feigned sweetly.

Lexi hung up and Ava’s phone turned dark. Ava laid her phone down in her lap and gazed up at her brother.

With a heavy sigh, Tyrone reached over to the glass top coffee table in front of them and grabbed the TV remote. His resting hand traced across Ava’s shoulders and down her bare arm as he reached and traced its way back up to

its resting place as he sat back. The air in the room leavened some.

“Let’s watch some TV, okay?” Tyrone suggested.

Ava nodded and laid her head back on his shoulder as Tyrone turned up the TV and sorted through the channels. Tyrone snickered to himself, flipping along, “I can’t believe I picked up the remote to do this. I should be able to turn the TV on by myself by now.”

“Hm?” Ava looked up at her twin. His angular jaw still bore no scruff or whiskers. His hair was thick and braided into swirls, a feat carried out by a visiting aunt a couple weeks ago. Otherwise, his hair would be out and wild. The aunt was so deeply frustrated by Tyrone’s silence and one-word answers to every question she asked. By the time the aunt left, she chalked it up to being a teenage boy and dropped the issue.

“I’m still learning,” Tyrone continued. “Don’t want to blow up anything unless I absolutely have to.” He snickered to himself at the thought. He settled on a different home-shopping channel, where a hyper announcer sold floral dish sets. He laid down the remote and picked up Ava’s hand. He rubbed her fingertips with his thumb and examined them.

“Have you been doing anything?” Tyrone asked. The television volume lowered by itself.

Ava watched him rub her fingertips like a coin. She shook her head. “Nah, I haven’t. Not really.”

Tyrone sighed again, exasperated. He pulled her hand to his heart, still rubbing her fingertips. He chided to her

with a tired face, “You gotta *practice*, baby sis. How can we get strong together if you don’t practice?”

Ava tried to humor him, “I ... uh ... I’m not as good at it as you.” A shy smile curled upon her face.

Tyrone was unmoved.

“Ava,” his voice was stern and dry, “whatever shall I do with you, baby sister?” He drew her fingertips to his face and gave them a soft kiss. Ava felt a small spark. “Please don’t let your big brother down. I love you too much for that.” He looked her in the eyes, “Promise?”

Ava was held by his stare. “I promise.”

“Good,” Tyrone sat back, satisfied. He saw the time on the shopping ticker at the bottom of the TV: 4:56 PM.

He patted Ava on the shoulder, “You need to do your homework before Ma and Dad come home. Go do that. I’ll be wherever you need me.”

Ava slipped her hand away to pick up her phone and got up. She hooked her bookbag and slumped it over her shoulder on her way to the stairs. Tyrone watched her diligently as he leaned over to grab his tablet and wake it up.

Seeing the upstairs light turn on and the last of her shadow leave, Tyrone returned his focus to the television. The hyper presenter was selling blankets now. Annoyed and bored, Tyrone rolled his eyes and blinked them. The channel changed to a random action movie more than halfway over. He propped up a leg on the coffee table and started scrolling through his tablet.



Upstairs, Ava sat on her bed with her lavender door closed and her unopened bookbag slumped against her legs. Her room was small, just like Tyrone's, which was further down the hall on the other side. Unlike Tyrone's, her room was decorated with whimsy and color. She had a giant ice cream cone lamp on her purple dresser, a recent birthday gift from Lexi. Loose jewelry scattered about the base of the lamp, some pieces she hadn't worn for years. More forgotten pieces of jewelry collected in the join between the dresser and the floor. Her walls were robin egg blue, complete with the speckles. She still remembered how her father and brother spent all weekend on those speckles, mostly arguing over every placement. That was three years ago, and she still loved them. A squat, sparse-filled bookcase sat next to her dresser filled with piles of comic books and random figurines. Beside her bookcase was her closed closet, small and packed tight across from her bed. Her bed had a brilliant firework-covered summer comforter and lined sparrows on her sheets. Ava got comfortable on her bed and opened her phone to XinBō.

Win23 was alone in the house, striking various poses or looking around. Dusk began to fall outside the avatar's windows. Ava tapped the golden telephone in the corner of the room and her friend's list popped up. The list was short, mainly people Ava had a couple good conversations with, but never heard from again after accepting their

friend request. However, they had interesting feeds so Ava kept them anyways.

It was a short scroll to Ra1nwater's name, Ava tapped the house icon beside it. There was a green dot hanging in the corner of the house, she was available. The diamond loading screen appeared and a moment later, Wix23 was in a cluttered house filled with knick knacks from rare gachas and contests, two baths, a large heart shaped canopy bed, and a crystal purple birdcage rocking next to her golden telephone.

Ava typed:

Wix23: You there? I'm by myself now

It took a couple minutes but Ra1nwater appeared in her shark kigurumi. Jumping excitedly, Ra1nwater said:

Ra1nwater: Yay! Yu haz freedumz!

Ava rolled her eyes with a smirk and replied:

Wix23: You know how big brothers are

Wix23: *how brothers are

Ra1nwater gave a concerned reaction.

Ra1nwater: Dat bugs me a lil

Ra1nwater: He's your *twin* brother

Ra1nwater: I know he was born first
but he's still your *twin*
And he needs to let you do
things on your own

Ra1nwater: You ain't six

Wix23: I know, I know

Wix23: He just wanna keep me safe

Ra1nwater switched from a shark kigu to a punk school girl outfit with a silver-white beehive hairdo. It complimented her brown skin and glossy peach lips. She then facepalmed.

Ra1nwater: He wanna keep you to
himself

Ra1nwater: He know y'all not datin,
right?

Ra1nwater threw her head back in a belly laugh. Wix23 shot a look of irritation.

Wix23: That's not funny

Wix23: You're an only child, you don't
get it

Ra1nwater: Do you *seriously* think
all siblings r lik this?

Ra1nwater: srsly?

Ava sighed out loud.

Wix23: You don't get it!

Ra1nwater: He's gonna kill your first
boyfriend

Ra1nwater: You know that right?

Wix23: Stop messing about, Lexi

Ra1nwater folded her arms and gave out an animated huff.

Ra1nwater: Fiiiiiiiiiiiiine. I just don't like
him not letting you be in-
pendent

Ra1nwater: *Letting

Ra1nwater: *Independent.

Ra1nwater: All my English is *gone* to-
day

Wix23: He's just a bit over protective.

Wix23: Can we talk about something
else?

A few moments passed. Both avatars started striking random poses and looking about.

Ra1nwater: Are you *sure* you don't want to talk
about Ms. Dorrell?

Wix23 shook her head no.

Wix23: Can we talk about *anything* else?

Wix23: Liiiike, how was *your* day?

There was another pause. Ava was about to type something but Ra1nwater replied.

Ra1nwater: Nothing new. Dad making adobo tonite

Ra1nwater: Adobo and greens for dindin

Ra1nwater: #BlasianLiving

Wix23 smiled and laughed.

Wix23: Don't he like nvr make that unless somethin special happens?

Ra1nwater: Or ma bug him just because

Ra1nwater: Either Imma get surprised with something or hes just being watever

Two quick double knocks rapped against Ava's door, it was Tyrone.

Wix23: BRB

Ava placed her phone on silent and darkened it before she wedged it under her lap. Tyrone peered in and noticed the unopened backpack and the corner of her phone poking out. “You haven’t started yet?” he asked.

Ava immediately zipped open her bookbag and pulled out all the contents all over her bed. “I wanted to relax a bit and catch up on what I missed on the internet today,” she hurried out as she flapped open her binder. “I’m gettin’ on it now, bro.”

Chapter 2

Dinner at the Tanis residence was uneventful that night. Though there was a large and luxurious wood dining table, the family rarely ate there. That's where all the bills lived. Instead, everyone ate in the living room around the television. An old technicolor Western played on the dingy flatscreen TV, picked by Jermaine. He sat on the couch next to his wife, the both of them balancing a glass plate of steamed tilapia and vegetables on their laps.

Jermaine was round and worn from the years spent in warehouses and manufacturing. He rose from item packer to a department manager in twenty years. Yvonne used to be slimmer in her younger years but pregnancy and working as a loan officer at the local bank added to her figure. Both Jermaine and Yvonne used to be athletic and

active together, it was how they met, but time has calmed them into the comfortable rut they were grounded in. Away from them, Tyrone sat on the floor in front of the coffee table, his orange plate beside him. His picked apart slab of fish grew cold, his tablet nestled in his lap with a dim glow.

Away in her room, Ava worked slavishly through the back-pile. Yvonne had brought her plate up earlier, the red platter sat atop her closed math textbook, empty. Wanting a break, Ava set aside her Bio homework and got up to stretch and change into her bed clothes. She slipped on a faded red, oversized shirt and drew up her braids into a messy, loose top bun. Ava plopped herself back down on the bed and fished out her phone. She reasoned to herself that she already completed Math II and Art History so she should be allowed a short break.

Ava visited her social feeds to clear the number bubble resting at the corner of each app. She knew she wouldn't find anything substantial, she just wanted to clear the numbers. Ava then opened XinBō to catch up on her webcomics, scroll through the fashion snaps and skim her feed. Ava couldn't read most of the captions but she always told herself she'd one day pick up Mandarin. Despite the language barrier, the pictures she saw were stunning, a viewport into a better, prettier world. When it came to her webcomics, she followed translation accounts for fan scans. Ava had Lexi to thank for that. Lexi herself could barely piece together the Chinese, Tagalog was her better second tongue.

Updated and satisfied, Ava went to her avatar's house and tapped on her daily diamond claim, displayed by a glowing diamond rotating in the bottom corner of her screen. She already had three hundred and twenty-eight in two days because she rarely spent them on in-app apparel and games. Lexi, on the other hand, always spent her diamonds on anything that remotely caught her fancy – which was nearly *everything*.

Wix23 tried to visit Ra1nwater's house but an away message popped up:

Ra1nwater isn't home right now!
Leave a message?

Ava figured it was probably the universe telling her to finish her homework. She pulled back open her Bio work and started on the next problem.



The clock turned and turned but still Ava wasn't done. It was almost half past midnight and everyone else had already gone to bed. Only Tyrone stopped in an hour ago to kiss her goodnight on her forehead, just like every night. Even when Ava spent the night away from home, Tyrone send a text that just had a kiss and a black girl emoji. She had finished Bio but was only a third through her Latin homework packet. Ava yawned wide. Her bundled braids lolled in the general direction of her every head tilt.

She didn't want to fall asleep but she kept drifting, slipping off. Her head kept nodding and, once, she could have sworn the pen she dropped slid back into her hand by itself. Completely defeated, Ava shoved away her schoolwork and laid out on the bed. The overhead light went off and her covers drew over her.