

OUR  
SHOUTS  
ECHO

JADE ADIA

**HYPERION**

Los Angeles New York

Also by Jade Adia  
*There Goes the Neighborhood*

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*For anyone who's ever been through it*



This is a book about being alive. The love and hilarity and mystery of it all.

That said, this story also contains candid discussions about mental health. If you'd like a full list of content warnings, you can find one on my website, [www.JadeAdia.com](http://www.JadeAdia.com).

But here's my promise to you, reader: This is a book about being alive. The good and the difficult but always, and most importantly, the good.



# YEAH, NO THANKS

YEAH, NO THANKS  
YEAH, NO THANKS

**IN MY CLASSROOM, THERE IS A POSTER THAT** epitomizes everything that I hate. A triumphant-looking girl wearing a white bandanna crosses her arms. She nods at me with a vibrant, can-do-attitude grin. Beneath her dopey smile, shiny silver text declares: *You are the future!*

Pathetic.

I don't know if you've noticed, but the world these days is a bit—how you say—shitty.

I like Earth and all. I'm a huge fan of her work. A timeless gem, she is. But these days? Yikes. Ol' girl is tired. I know it, you know it, she knows it. And us people farting around on her surface, dissociating from reality and pretending that we're not hurling toward a giant ocean of flaming garbage? We are merely the overgrown hairs on her freckled chin, waiting any day now to be plucked or lasered away for good.

So, when mass-printed motivational propaganda posters tell

## OUR SHOUTS ECHO

me that I'm the future, or when overeager parents tell me that their generation is counting on mine, I offer up the same response that I give to the cashier at Taco Bell when he hands me a Dorito Crunchwrap without enough cheese: "Send it back."

Y'all can keep your damn future to yourselves.



# WELL PREPARED

## WELL PREPARED

### WELL PREPARED

“EARTH TO NIARAH,” MY TEACHER MX.

Ferrante repeats, arms crossed as their Dr. Marten loafers tap the linoleum floor. The worst thing about Mx. Ferrante is that they’re actually cool, which makes it hard when I consistently mess up every assignment they give me. Today—the last day of sophomore year—is no exception.

“Wh-what was that?” I clear my throat. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve had the raspy voice of a weary jazz singer smoking their last dying cigarette.

“Time for your final presentation.” A menacing *dun-dun-dunnnnn* echoes in the shallow cavity of my brain where my mental preparedness for this situation should be.

“Actually, I already presented,” I reply confidently. Naturally, this is a lie. It is a stupid lie because everyone was here, so they know that I’m lying, but it is also *so* blatantly stupid of a lie that it casts just enough doubt to make Mx. Ferrante double-check their notes. They glare back at me, as if to ask if I really thought that

dumb trick would work. I shrug, resisting the urge to point out that it almost did.

The front of my notebook is covered in my own half-assed attempt at graffiti and bleak song lyrics. I avoid Mx. Ferrante's eyes, adding another doodle that perfectly captures the essence of my spirit as of late, as well as my general philosophy on love, life, society, and philosophy.



“Nice try,” Mx. Ferrante says. “Front of the classroom, please.”

I feel the beady eyes of my over-caffeinated and under-stimulated classmates fall on me. I shrink into my hoodie. Most people hated virtual school during the height of the pandemic, but I loved it. No human interaction required. I was merely one blurry square in a grid of dozens of blurry squares, free from the oppressive burden of being perceived.

“Can I get something from my locker first?” I plead, grabbing a strand of curls and placing it over my upper lip like a mustache. My hair is out in a full mane, Simba-style. A few months ago, I got a new haircut: curly bangs. Cute in theory, until I realized how much maintenance they require. Now my hair is in a constant state of chaos. The only benefit is that the frizzy curls hide my eyes.

“The last time that I let you go to your locker during class, you were found passed out on the lawn after attempting to give blood without parental permission.”

The girl seated in front of me turns around, her meticulously waxed eyebrows blending with the swirled baby hair frozen in gel at the summit of her forehead. “You tried to *give blood* to avoid class?”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” I say. Plus, in

my defense, I didn't plan on passing out. I didn't know that I was afraid of needles until then. "I was *allegedly* found passed out." Innocent until proven guilty.

Mx. Ferrante just looks at me and sighs.

I did not prepare for today's presentation. It is becoming clear to me that it is also becoming clear to Mx. Ferrante that I did not prepare for today's presentation. We've spent the entire semester working on the sophomore capstone project: big scrapbook-like things full of essays, art projects, and photographs that are supposed to represent our "vision for the future." For the record, I'm using *we* loosely here. *My classmates* have been working on their capstone projects. I, on the other hand, have been working on establishing myself as a force to be reckoned with in the newest battle royale video game. I'd rather take the bad grade than go through the motions of such a tedious assignment. Take, for example, the topic for today's torture:

*Please bring an object that symbolizes where  
you see yourself in ten years.*

*Along with the object, prepare a one-page letter, titled  
"Dear Future Self," to share with the class.*

There has been a wide range of presentations. Stacey, the class gunner, showed off a stethoscope because she wants to be a doctor. Nobody had the heart to break it to her that in ten years, when we're twenty-six, even if she goes straight through from high school to college to medical school, she'll probably still be sleep deprived and saddled with hundreds of thousands of dollars of student loan debt, anxiously awaiting the opportunity to work horrible hours as an intern at some hospital that will exploit her labor, still years away from becoming a bona fide doctor. Corey,

the class idiot, brought in a music video that he made, which was essentially just three minutes of him and his friends jumping into a pool in slow motion while sinister EDM beats pounded in the background. Xander, the class sex symbol, brought in a pair of tiny baby Nikes because he “wants to be a father.” Everyone oohed and awwed, but I know that he only did this as a stunt to boost his potential to sleep with anyone he wants this summer. Hence, my point: This assignment is a joke.

“This is a requirement to pass this course,” Mx. Ferrante reminds me in a voice with a surprising level of softness. They like me, for whatever reason. I sense that they were possibly a fellow Weird Kid back in the day, but still. Being liked apparently isn’t enough to let me skate by.

I groan in defeat. If teachers are so worried about students failing, then they shouldn’t give us grades at all. I unzip my backpack and search for something, anything, to makeshift a presentation on the fly. The main compartment holds a jumble of unread books, a bag of snacks, fast-food receipts, two broken pencils, and a hamburger eraser. The front pocket carries my phone, Metro card, and earphones. Not a lot of potential material. Unless . . .

I plunge my hand deeper into the pit of my backpack, feeling around until my fingertips graze the edge of a Ziploc bag. My saving grace.

*Here goes nothing.*

The loose nail in the bottom of my desk scrapes the floor as I drag myself up from my seat to the front of the room, special object in hand. Mx. Ferrante gives me one of those now-was-that-so-hard? smiles. I grimace back at them.

The blank stares of my classmates make my skin crawl. I’ve always hated one-on-one eye contact, let alone twenty-on-one. I open my notebook to a blank page and start bullshitting.

Dear Future Self,

By now, you are twenty-six years old. Congrats on surviving this long. Sixteen-year-old you from the past would like to gift you a necessary item that will encourage your ongoing success. I anticipate that this will be hard to find in your time, so yeah. You're welcome.

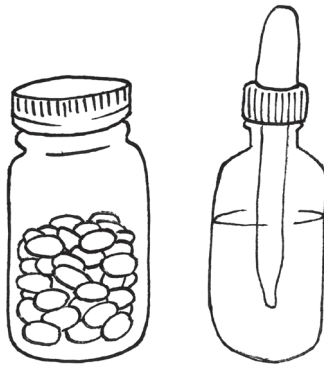
Sincerely,  
Niarah Simone Holloway

**EDC**

EDC

EDC

**I HOLD UP MY OBJECT. “TA-DAH.”**



The room is silent as a sensory-deprivation tank. From their desk chair, Mx. Ferrante squints to get a better look. “Niarah, can you please explain what’s in your hand?”

I give the plastic bag a little shake. “It’s a dual pack of iodine. The dark glass thingy with the eyedropper is liquid iodine, which

can be used for purifying water or as a topical disinfectant for injuries. The pills are potassium iodine, which is an FDA-approved nuclear radiation blocking agent.”

Corey scratches his head. “Nuclear radiation . . .”

“Yeah. The pills work by saturating the thyroid with stable iodine so it will block the thyroid’s absorption of cancer-causing iodine released from a nuclear reactor or nuclear bomb. You know, for when the nukes hit? *Kaboom!*” With my hands, I mime a dramatic explosion. The kids in the front row flinch. “Together, these two forms of iodine will help Future Me survive in the inevitable doomsday scenario when the state fails and there’s no clean water and the air’s poison and it’s every person for themselves.”

I keep an iodine kit on me at all times. Disaster can strike at any moment, and after months of research, I’ve concluded that iodine is necessary to keep on hand in my Every Day Carry (EDC) kit. (Well, that and a knife, too, but I can’t bring that to school. I’m not tryna get my Black ass expelled for being “armed” on campus.) In a pinch, I can find food and shelter, but if shit hits the fan and the world crumbles while I’m away from my actual emergency kit at home, I’ll be thankful to at least have the tools to purify water and prevent nuclear cancer. Doomsday Survival 101, baby.

Mx. Ferrante removes their glasses. “In ten years . . . you see yourself . . . navigating an apocalypse, fighting to survive?”

I pick my nails. “Correct.”

“Not law school. Not traveling. Not making friends. Just taking iodine pills?”

I pause. “Well, if the apocalypse doesn’t actually involve nuclear threats, then I guess I’d probably sell the pills on the black market.”

Mx. Ferrante’s mouth falls open, but before they can speak—

“Holy shit, she’s actually serious,” Corey interjects. Laughter erupts throughout the room. I glance up from my notebook to find Corey’s phone out, camera aimed right at me. He’s the type of leech who believes that having a minor following online gives him the right to film anyone at any moment. A true visionary, he never misses an opportunity to turn someone else’s embarrassment into manufactured social media attention for himself.

I try to laugh along with the class, play this off as a joke, but it’s too late. Fingers point. More phones record. Cackles. Whispers. Stares. Time to salvage the situation. “With the pandemic, the increase of severe natural disasters due to climate change, and general unrest throughout America and the world, it’s not a bad idea to be prepared for a variety of emergencies.”

But there’s no use explaining. Corey bolts from his seat, lunging forward to snatch the iodine bag from my hand. I pounce back but miss as he jukes me out. He beams, zooming his camera in on the iodine. “Y’all see this?”

Mx. Ferrante tries to get control of the situation but only makes things worse. The room courses with that feral, last-day-of-school energy when consequences for rowdiness feel impossible. An entire school year of flying under the radar as the Semi-Invisible New Kid, gone in an instant.

“Let me see,” Xander yells, arms outstretched to receive the iodine-turned-hot-potato from Corey. But, like the second-string wannabe quarterback that he is, Xander flounders. The shrill wail of the school bell rips through the classroom, startling him. I hiss as my iodine slips from his fingers and shatters on the floor. A mess of sickly orange liquid pools inside the crinkled bag.

Everyone rushes out of the classroom, the moment of my humiliation passing as quickly as it started. Mx. Ferrante begins



to say something, but I don't want their pity. My nose crinkles as the harsh metallic scent of the spilled solution seeps into the air. I leave the mess on the floor and make my escape. The last thing I hear before I put on my headphones is the echo of a classmate's voice, dripping with sadistic glee: "Enjoy your summer, Doomsday Girl."

# DEFINITION

DEFINITION  
DEFINITION

**prep·per** *noun* \ 'pre-pər \

*plural* **prep·pers**

: a person preparing for the end of the world as we know it

*example* : me

# THREE TYPES OF PREPPERS

## THREE TYPES OF PREPPERS

### THREE TYPES OF PREPPERS

#### PREPPERS FALL INTO THREE LEVELS.

##### Level One: Light Preppers

The people who know that we live in a dangerous world but don't have the time or money to invest in big preps, so they just do what they can.

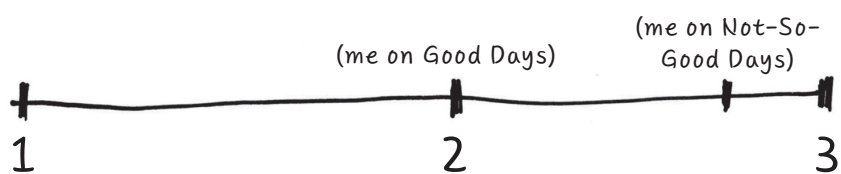
##### Level Two: Diligent Preppers

The ones who believe there is a nonzero chance of something happening that could set society back a hundred years or more, so they invest in prepping but still continue to live their lives, hoping for the best.

##### Level Three: Online Forum Gurus

The hyperfocused, intense people who believe in government mind control, live off the grid, and are practically praying for the end of the world.

OUR SHOUTS ECHO



# PLEASE REPORT TO THE GUIDANCE COUNSELOR'S OFFICE

PLEASE REPORT  
TO THE GUIDANCE  
COUNSELOR'S OFFICE

PLEASE REPORT  
TO THE GUIDANCE  
COUNSELOR'S OFFICE

## THE INSIDE OF MR. GUTIERREZ'S OFFICE LOOKS

like an episode of *Hoarders: School Administrator Edition*. Folders upon folders stack and slouch on every visible surface. It smells like printer ink and stale air. The walls are packed tight with framed photographs from school events and his many awards for Teacher of the Year. I notice a new one with this year's date on it.

"Congrats on another win. I'm sure the other teachers are so proud."

Mr. G laughs. "I'm Public Enemy Number One. The math department is plotting a coup to change the rules so that only 'real teachers' are eligible for awards, not us lowly guidance counselors."

If it wasn't for the salt-and-pepper coloring of his beard, the man would look no more than twenty years old. His age—or lack thereof—is one of the many urban myths of this school. On one hand, the sheer number of knickknacks on his desk leads me to

believe that he's been here forever, but on the other hand, he's also a sneakerhead with a consistently up-to-date knowledge of rapper internet beef. He could be anywhere from twenty-four to forty-seven years old. There's probably some spooky antiaging magic afoot, so I mind my business. I don't mess with the dark arts.

Mr. G picks up the landline in his office and calls the front desk. "In ten minutes, can you send Mr. Torres in, please?"

I pocket a piece of White Rabbit candy from the bowl by the door. "Who is Mr. Torres, and why is he joining us?"

"Take a seat, Niarah."

"Way to avoid my question."

Mr. Gutierrez flashes me a grin, amused but warning me to watch it. I pick up the chair opposite his desk and adjust the angle so that I can see the door. I don't like having my back facing exits.

"So," Mr. G begins, "Mx. Ferrante tells me that for your Dear Future Self presentation in class this morning, you brought . . ." He checks his notes, his rushed handwriting nearly illegible even to himself. "Iodine to protect yourself from the side effects of nuclear war."

"And to treat water," I add.

"And to treat water," he confirms. "Then, last week, you ditched class to . . ." He checks his notes again. "Donate blood."

"Correct."

Silence passes between us.

I stare at Mr. G. "I'm sorry, was there, like, a question in that?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out one of his signature Mr. G I'm-a-nice-guy-trying-my-best-to-reach-these-kids sighs. "What are your goals for this summer?"

Ah, the dreaded "goals" question. Teachers love this one.

Fortunately, this is actually a question that I can answer. This summer, I'm going to live out every young girl's fantasy and build the emergency fallout shelter of my dreams.

I shall name it Camp Doom.

To be clear, Camp Doom is not actually a camp. There will be no dorms, no counselors, no activities. It's not a camp like that, more so a station. I'd call it a fort, but that feels either too militant or too whimsical depending on how you say it.

I haven't started building it yet, but in my mind, I imagine Camp Doom clearly: fortified exterior, one wall covered with a pantry full of enough food to last a year, the others boasting a selection of self-defense and survival tools. In an ideal world, I'd build a bunker that could withstand anything. An intense structure, preferably underground. Unfortunately, I don't have the time, money, or skills to execute something like that. I'm not crazy enough to think that I can build a shelter that can protect against a mega-disaster like an asteroid impact. If shit hits the fan that hard, we're all screwed. But I think that I can build something capable of withstanding less-extreme events—the big earthquake, civil unrest, a pandemic-induced zombie apocalypse, maybe—I don't know. So, after weeks of research, I've decided on a more feasible model: the aboveground bunker. Or, in my case, the reinforced, dilapidated wooden detached garage in the backyard. The plan is to begin construction this afternoon.

I tell Mr. G this—not about Camp Doom specifically, obviously—but that I'm working on a Very Important DIY project.

He doesn't seem convinced. I don't blame him.

“Niarah, I want to ask you a serious question.” He laces his fingers together like a judge on a daytime television set and leans forward. “Are you depressed?”

I shrug. “Just the normal, age-appropriate amount.”

It’s hard to know how others feel, but I’m certainly walking around life with a full plate of anxiety plus a side of depression and a scoop of OCD for dessert. And then there are the reoccurring nightmares. I don’t know if “normal” sixteen-year-olds still have nightmares. But then again, I don’t think that anyone is truly “normal.” The concept of “normal” is a tool to either dilute people into complacency or alienate others. If life is a cup of black coffee, “normal” is milk; the more the concept is forced onto you, the weaker you get.

“I know that moving across the country to Los Angeles part-way through high school must’ve been tough—”

“No way. Transferring was actually fine.” I may not have any friends here at my new school, but it’s better than where I was before. Back in Syracuse, everyone knew my family. Us Holloways were hot gossip. Every day, I’d hear the whispers, clock the nervous stares. Back there, everyone heard about what went wrong in my house. Here in LA, at least, nobody knows me at all. Anonymity is a sweet relief. Or at least it was, until this morning’s presentation.

“Was middle school any better?” Mr. G asks.

It takes Herculean strength not to laugh in his face. Being a middle school girl is *terrifying*. One day, you blink and notice that everyone around you is looking at your body and your friends’ bodies and you want them to stop. But then you start looking right back. You notice the boys in your class sound different. At a sleepover, you catch a whiff of your classmate’s hair and it smells like a cinnamon candle. You’re envious, but you also want to stay close enough to smell it all night for some reason that you don’t have the words for. You look at your parents and realize that they



don't love each other. You learn things in school that outrage you yet you have no power to change, and you start to sweat. A lot. Your mom can't get the funk out of your favorite shirt in the wash. Things start looking up when you discover some depressing music that makes you feel seen until, one night at 2 a.m., you pull off your covers, look down, and find that you're covered in blood. You wobble to the bathroom, toss your underwear in the trash bin, then, in a dark tiled room, slouched against the terry-cloth robe that you've had since third grade, you poke a tampon into the wrong hole. If that isn't the most confusing shit in the world, I don't know what is.

"No, Mr. Gutierrez, I did not enjoy middle school, either."

"Look, I'm only trying to understand what's going on with you. You're a smart kid. Don't you want to go to college? You have so much potential."

*Potential.* How I hate the word. Potential for what? I'm a person, not a fixer-upper. I don't even know if I can handle more education beyond high school.

Mr. G plops his elbows on his desk and massages his temples. The door opens abruptly and a pair of familiar Dr. Martens stride in.

"Mx. Ferrante?" I ask.

I get the feeling that Mx. Ferrante is avoiding my eyes as they fidget with their messenger bag, staring straight at Mr. G. "Have you told her yet?"

My eyebrows shoot up. "Told me what?"

Mr. G starts to look clammy. "We understand that this year has been difficult for you, but there are consequences to ditching class and not completing mandatory assignments, and none of us want you to repeat sophomore year. . . ."

Hold on.

Nobody mentioned anything about repeating a year. My words fall out in a stutter. “I—I don’t understand.”

Mx. Ferrante takes a deep breath, then gives it to me straight. “Here’s the reality, Niarah: As of now, you’ve failed sophomore year.”

Wait, wait, wait.

I failed sophomore year? Who fails *sophomore* year?

“But I didn’t fail your class!” I point to Mx. Ferrante, but they look away.

That’s when it hits me: Why they’re here. In this office. With us. Right now.

I’m screwed.

# CONSEQUENCES

## CONSEQUENCES

### CONSEQUENCES

#### **“YOU’RE DOING THIS TO TORTURE ME.”**

“I told you *several times* that you needed to complete your capstone to pass the class,” Mx. Ferrante argues.

“I did the final presentation at least.” That must count for something.

“No, you didn’t. You stood up in front of the class and talked about the end of the world.”

“But everything I said was true. That *is* what I see for the future.” I don’t see myself in the future at all, but when I do, it’s in a crumbling world.

“If that’s how you feel, fine. But you’re going to have to prove it to me. Finish your capstone project this summer. All of it. If your vision for the future is the apocalypse, then back it up. Write something that convinces me that doomsday prepping is a worthwhile activity. Show me why this matters to you so much. Turn in something substantial to prove your point by the last week of summer, then I’ll give you the passing grade that you need.”

I pull my hood on and yank the drawstrings until the fabric swallows my face. This sucks. Sure, I'm already prepping my shelter this summer, but having to supplement the experience with schoolwork wasn't what I had in mind.

I glare at Mx. Ferrante through my cotton cocoon. "Why couldn't you let me slide?"

Mx. Ferrante smiles like some self-proclaimed hero. "Because I care too much."

I audibly gag. Mr. G claps his hands. "Glad that's settled. Unfortunately, the makeup capstone project alone is not enough."

I groan. "What else could you people want from me?"

"I already spoke to the rest of your academic teachers and convinced them to pass you. You'll receive Cs and Ds, but at least you can go on. From what I've heard, you understand the material when asked, you just refuse to turn in any work. However, that still leaves the matter of PE. . . ."

"Physical education is a scam." First off, the school campus is big as hell, so I already walk enough from class to class. Second, there is no "learning" happening in PE. All we do is participate in forced group activities or mindlessly sulk around the track. I technically show up to PE, but I never stay, except when it's raining and the sports teams are using the gym, so we watch an ancient '90s movie in an empty classroom instead.

"Do you know how many times you've missed PE this semester?"

"No."

"Forty-four."

Nice.

"Do you know the total number of PE classes per semester?" he asks.

I stare at the ceiling. "I'm going to guess at least forty-four."

“Forty-six.” He pulls out one of those TI-89 calculators that our teachers insisted we purchase even though we have phones and thus will literally never use a physical calculator in our lives. “You’ve managed to miss 95.65217391 percent of your physical education.”

“Cool. Do I get a plaque like you now?”

Mr. Gutierrez bites back a chuckle, but the expression is fleeting. “You have to make up those lost PE hours. There’s no other way around it.”

“How?”

There’s a knock at the door.

“Come in!” Mr. Gutierrez chimes.

Great. More guests to pile onto my punishment. The heavy wooden door creaks as it slides open on ancient hinges.

“Mr. G, I’m sorry I slacked off this semester, but, like, the world is literally on fire, so I don’t see the point in coming to school every day and—”

*Whoa.*

The rest of my sentence vanishes.

A boy with wavy brown hair tucked beneath a faded Dodgers cap hovers by the door, a neon-pink Post-it note stuck to his forehead.

His eyes scan the scene, taking in Mx. Ferrante’s crossed arms, Mr. G’s worried grimace, then my face, a heart-shaped canvas of brown skin, partially hidden behind my worn-out sweatshirt. Recognition spreads across his face as he finds my eyes. He lets out a soft chuckle.

Coming from anyone else, his next words would’ve hurt, but his tone is gentle. The boy tosses me a small, amused smile. “Hey, Domsday Girl.”

# LITERAL COERCION

LITERAL COERCION

LITERAL COERCION

“COME IN, COME IN, MR. TORRES,” MR. Gutierrez says.

The boy shuffles into the room, his eyes bouncing between me and the teachers until he settles on leaning awkwardly against the wall. He’s wearing a dark blue flannel shirt that looks pulled straight from a thrift store. On a mannequin, those shirts tend to look dorky, but on him . . . Well, he wears it differently.

“I saw the video of your project this morning,” the boy explains.

I say nothing.

“Your classmates suck,” he continues. “I thought that you were interesting.”

*Interesting.* He could’ve said that he thought that *my presentation* was interesting. Instead, he said that *I* was interesting. I must’ve heard him wrong. I must be misinterpreting. But then he seals his comment with another soft smile. I flinch.

“Meet Marco: student leader of the Color Outside group,” Mr. G announces.

Marco gives me a small, almost-imperceptible nod.

I steal more glances at the intruder. Frizzy waves, brown skin, a mellow smirk, faded Old Skool Skate Vans, a little green Earth patch sewn over a tear in his jeans . . .

“Anddddd this is for you, Niarah.” I hadn’t realized that neither of us has said anything until Mr. G pulls a flyer out from underneath a stack of manila envelopes. He places the paper in front of me and gives it two quick taps with his finger. “Marco volunteers with a group dedicated to helping people of color access outdoor activities. Hiking, rock climbing, and whatnot. Real nice mission. Other kids from school do it, too.”

I am what you call an Indoor Kid. The wonders of my natural habitat include MMRPGs, conspiracy theory videos, and copious amounts of doom scrolling. Normal, reasonable-person activities. Not trees.

I slide the flyer toward Mr. G. “I don’t hike.”

“Well, this summer, you do.” Mr. G pushes the flyer right back. “The first Color Outside meetup of the summer is Tuesday morning. If you attend the activities, I’ll have Marco sign off on your hours. Then I can convince the school to give you the necessary course credit.”

I give the boy another quick look. “Did they force you into this group as well?”

He bobs his weight from his heels to toes. “At first.”

I raise an eyebrow. “A fellow delinquent?”

“Former delinquent,” he corrects with a smirk.

That’s interesting—that he had once been in trouble, too. We make eye contact again, briefly, before his eyes flit away, head

turning straight up toward the ceiling. His movements are a little erratic, a little shy.

“Umm.” I strain to keep my thoughts on track. I cross my arms and face Mr. G. “Isn’t it messed up that another student is surveilling me? Isn’t that, like, a conflict of interest?”

“Surveilling is for narcs. Do I look like a narc?” Marco holds his arms up and examines his outfit theatrically. I ignore him and turn back to Mr. G.

“There’s got to be another way. Please.”

“It’s either Color Outside or summer school,” Mr. G repeats.

The thought of being stuck here in this prison over the summer without air-conditioning when it’s all hot and sticky makes me gag. The only teachers here during break are the exhausted ones who want to take time off but can’t afford it because they’re so underpaid. Or, even worse, the temps who only teach during the summer, so they’re way too eager to “change our lives” or whatever. It’s really bleak, if you think about it.

Marco tries to hand Mr. Gutierrez the Post-it note that he carried into the office, but Mr. G points at me instead. “That’s for the newest member of your group here.”

“I have not agreed to anything yet,” I remind Mr. G.

“*Yet*,” Marco repeats with emphasis.

The boy is decidedly hard to read. Sometimes shy, sometimes confident.

When he steps closer, I catch a better glimpse of his eyes, a shade of brown so deep that it almost blends with his pupils. His eyes have a way of crinkling at the corners, exuding the aura of someone perpetually on the brink of cracking an inside joke with you. Except inside jokes are for friends, and we are strangers. I shrink away. Still, I detect a hint of hope in his glance as he hands me the Post-it. I peel it from his fingers, careful not to touch him.



8 a.m., Elysian Park,  
southeast entrance.

Bring water, walking shoes,  
and a growth mindset



*Growth mindset?*

“Jesus Christ,” I mumble.

I stick the Post-it onto the flyer and shake it in Mr. G’s face. “To be clear: This is literally coercion.”

“It quite literally is not.” Mr. G waves me off, returning his focus to his planner. And suddenly, the whole meeting is over.

Mx. Ferrante tries to shake my hand on my way out, but I brush past them, past Marco, out of the office.

“Have a good summer, Niarah.” Mx. Ferrante’s voice fades down the hallway. “And try to engage with the world.”

Sure. Will do. Can’t wait. Thank you so much.