

Chapter 1

A Gang Apart

Somerton was poor, but it was also scored, and had been for twenty-one years. It was a trial town, having signed on when Score Corp was still beta testing the software and offering its services for free—including the smart-cams, or “eyeballs,” as the kids called them. Shiny black spheres two inches in diameter, they dangled like Christmas ornaments from streetlights and tree branches. They weren’t hidden; that wasn’t the idea. You were supposed to know they were there, and behave accordingly.

Now the eyeballs watched Imani LeMonde as she walked home from school. It was unseasonably cold for May. The stream of traffic on the Causeway spit icy water at her ankles. Despite the chill, Imani paused for a moment to gaze at her family’s marina behind Farnham’s Clam Shack. It was the off-season, so only the working boats were moored there—a handful of lobster boats and worn-out tugs clinging to a living in the depleted waters of the North Shore.

Imani’s own secondhand whaler was hidden behind Bill Reynolds’s tug. A dozen other boats perched on blocks in the lot for her father to tune up in time for opening day. They belonged to the “recreational” boaters—rich guys from other towns who clogged up the river with their sleek, pointless speedboats, and sandbarred with laughable predictability. Imani would have liked to take some pleasure in the dwindling numbers of these yahoos mooring at her marina every season, but with the clam beds in decline and

the lobsters growing scarce, those yahoos were the LeMondes' bread and butter.

As Imani walked down the Causeway beneath the dangling eyeballs, she couldn't be sure the software wouldn't discern such uncharitable thoughts. It was unfathomably smart. The eyeballs were not equipped with audio, but the software could read lips, analyze facial expressions, and identify a person based on gait. Just by walking down the Causeway and thinking anything at all, Imani was feeding it all the data it required to produce her score. But Imani also wore the cuff, which measured her pulse rate and pinged her location to the software every second of every day, in case she wandered out of the eyeballs' range. The cuff was a gift from Score Corp—her reward for scoring above 80. It was made of a dull black metal that snapped around her wrist and protruded slightly from her sleeve. It had lightning-fast connectivity and free unlimited data. Imani used it in place of a cell. It was one of the things that visibly differentiated the high scorers from the low. Its shiny tap screen was layered with fingerprints, and Imani had a nervous habit of wiping it clean on her pants leg, which she did now, realizing only after the fact that the software would know exactly what to make of the gesture—even if she did not.

When Imani reached the hard-packed sand of Marina Road, the traffic noise of the Causeway gave way to the quiet rustling of marsh reeds. Imani stopped for a moment to savor the sound. There were no eyeballs here. Marina Road was private, owned by her family for four generations.

Imani knew the score existed to help people like her, that without it her prospects would be dim indeed. Jobs were scarce around Somerton, and her family's marina could barely keep them afloat. The score was "the great equalizer," and Imani knew that as a "highbie" she was poised to benefit at the highest level. But she always breathed easier

when she arrived at those marsh reeds. They marked the boundary of a separate place, an unwatched territory.

While she gazed upward at the swooping arcs of some seagulls squawking over a disputed find, a mechanical growl intruded on the natural soundscape. Low, insistent, and louder than necessary, it was easily distinguished from the factory-installed hum of other vehicles. This growl was a custom job. Imani stepped back out onto the Causeway and spotted the growl's source rounding the bend by the 7-Eleven.

Frankenscooter.

The thing was a wreck, a death machine, a mutant scooter pieced together from the salvaged parts of broken Hondas—matte black in places, dented chrome in others, all of the welding announcing itself like proud scars. Its motor—also pieced together from scavenged parts—was too powerful for its cobbled-together frame. But the thing could *move*, which was exactly how Imani's best friend, Cady Fazio, liked it.

Cady and Imani should not have been friends. Imani's score was 92. Cady's was 71, and dropping. That put them in different score gangs. But they'd made a pact back in middle school, when they were both 90s, that, no matter what their scores, they'd always stick together. Even though this was a major peer group violation, they'd stuck to it. They practiced all the rituals of avoidance while at school, but privately, they were a gang apart.

Cady neither slowed down nor signaled for the turn onto Marina Road, an infraction caught by the eyeball above the stone elephant at Abruzzi Antiques. Imani could almost picture it shooting the evidence back to Score Corp for a quick lowering of Cady's score.

And, by association, of Imani's.

Cady angled Frankenscooter toward her favorite spot, then sped up and lurched over

the hard shoulder of Marina Road, catching air for a moment before fishtailing around Imani in a sandy blur of secondhand leather and beat-up metal.

“I’ve got the goods,” Cady said. “Get on.”

Imani obeyed, and Cady drove down the long sandy strip of Marina Road, the growl of the motor growing more ferocious as they gained speed.

It was only on the back of Frankenscooter or at the helm of her boat that Imani felt truly free. With the wind slapping her face, she reveled in the thrill of motion. That her cuff was pinging the speed infraction to the software, which was shaving off fractions of points, was something she could worry about later.

At Imani’s slip, they had her boat’s motor tilted out of the water so that Cady could examine its innards.

“Please don’t break her,” Imani said.

Cady laughed, then pushed her stick-straight, wheat-colored hair out of her eyes. Cady was always messing with her hair, tucking it behind her ears or pulling it into a messy ponytail.

In the hair lottery, Imani had wound up with her father’s loose Afro, which she kept pulled back in a long braid to avoid fussing. Her fourteen-year-old brother, Isiah, had gotten their mother’s auburn waves, which he buzzed to a quarter of an inch, and Imani had inherited her mother’s freckles—just a sprinkling over the bridge of her nose.

“There is so much wrong with this motor,” Cady said. “No offense to your dad.”

Imani’s father had built her boat, a salvage job like Cady’s scooter. For that reason, they called her Frankenwhaler.

Cady pulled a circuit board out and replaced it with a slightly larger one. Imani knew little about motors. Her father was the mechanic in the family. Cady had learned most of what she knew by tagging alongside him while he worked, handing him tools and running errands until she'd become something like an unpaid helper. When Cady's interest had turned to scooters, she'd moved on to Gray's Auto, assisting the mechanics there in exchange for free parts. Bartering of that sort was common in Somerton. Spare cash was less so.

"You doing the traps today?" Cady asked.

"If you ever manage to put my motor back together."

Mr. LeMonde's pickup truck pulled into the lot.

"You should begin thinking of ways to thank me for this," Cady said with a cocky smile.

Imani had already been thinking of it. She was going to give Cady the catch of the day if the new motor worked out.

Imani's father got out of the truck and waved to her and Cady, then, unable to resist another mechanic's work, came over to inspect. "You are aware there's a speed limit," he said. "Right, Miss Fazio?"

Cady kept her nose in the motor. "Not on open water, there isn't."

Joining them on the dock, Mr. LeMonde crouched down for a closer look, his dark brown hands so spotted with oil they looked like camouflage. Imani's father and Cady spoke a private language of circuit boards and electronics, of timers and transmissions, all of which were well outside of Imani's core strengths. According to the testing done by Score Corp when she was eight years old, Imani was not mechanically inclined. Her

strengths were elsewhere: in the humanities and pure science. Imani had no doubt that the software was smarter than her, but she had no intention of pursuing the humanities. She got enough of that particular species in school. She preferred fish and crustaceans and had long ago decided on a career in marine biology.

When Cady finished her tinkering, Imani dropped the motor back in the water, waited for Cady to take her place at the bow, then shoved off. Imani could feel the difference in the motor immediately. It was livelier and even sounded different—like a gasoline motor from old movies.

“Don’t go crazy out there,” her father called as they reversed out of the slip. “Mind the shallows.”

“I know the shallows,” Imani called back.

She took it nice and slow out of the marina and into the mouth of the Somerton River. When they passed Farnham’s Clam Shack, an elderly couple sharing a clam plate waved from behind the seagull-stained window. The girls waved back. Once they were clear of the couple, and seeing no other boats, Imani put the motor to the test. In no time at all, it shot straight up to forty miles per hour, which had been the absolute limit before. Imani pushed it further, and before long, they were doing forty-seven, then forty-eight, which, in the confines of the river, with the tide going out and the mud banks looming on either side, felt like sixty.

Cady sat at the bow with the wind in her face, and when she turned to look at Imani for confirmation of her talent, her hair wrapped around her like a squid’s tentacles. She always forgot to bring a hair band, and Imani always kept an extra one in her coat pocket, which she handed to Cady now.

“The lobsters are yours!” Imani shouted over the motor.

Cady smiled with the confidence she wore so well. “It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Imani LeMonde!”

“Back at you!”

They entered the narrows around the back of Goodwell’s Fish House, and Imani slowed but continued to go faster than usual. The motor seemed happiest at forty-five—and what a noise! Ancient and analog, it sounded mechanical rather than electronic. Imani loved it!

They emerged from the narrows, and Imani opened the motor up again. There was a little bit of chop to the water, and every time they caught air, Cady squealed with delight. Imani banked and turned, threw the boat in reverse, and did a couple of doughnuts—just to give the new motor a workout before starting in on the traps.

Imani’s father kept the lobster commissioner’s boat in top shape year-round, and as payment the LeMondes got to keep three traps in the river, free of charge. Checking them was Imani’s responsibility. She’d been doing it since she was eleven. If things had ever gotten truly dire at the marina—which was always a threat—she felt certain she could feed her family on what she trapped, caught, and dug up. With most of the commercial enterprises gone, there was little competition for what was left.

The first two traps were empty, so Imani steered Frankenwhaler to Corona Point, a rocky cliff face battered by the turbulent waters of the channel. Imani kept the trap just outside the mouth, where it was safe from the rookie boaters who always underestimated the power of those currents. Rounding the trap, she put the boat in reverse and pulled up right alongside it. Cady reached over and hauled the trap up out of the water two-handed,

just like Imani had taught her.

Imani always let Cady handle the lobsters because Cady was so proud of the way she'd overcome her fear of them. There was a time when Cady hyperventilated just watching Imani handle the lobsters. To Imani, this was proof that you could override even the most primal of instincts if you tried hard enough.

Cady banded the lobsters expertly, stowed them in the cooler, then lay back and spread her arms along the edge of the boat. "I feel like we should be drinking a beer," she said. "Isn't that what lobstermen do?"

"Yup. Drink beer, swear, and complain about their wives. Want to anchor and float for a while?"

Cady squinted into the steel-blue water glimmering in the afternoon sun. "You know me," she said. "I never want to go home. My parents are in permanent bitch mode."

Imani dropped the anchor, then stretched out across from Cady. "It's getting worse, huh?"

Cady shrugged, her eyes tracing the progress of a sailboat in the distance.

As sophomores, Imani and Cady had mapped out their futures together. They were still both 90s then, which meant Score Corp would cover tuition at any Massachusetts state school. Cady was going to study engineering while Imani pursued marine biology. Imani's goal was to work for the Fish and Wildlife Department, restoring the local fisheries and clam beds. In her most unencumbered dreams, she envisioned running a fleet of boats with Cady as her engineer in chief (with the caveat that Cady could design state-of-the-art scooters on the side, of course).

"My mom's obsessed with college," Cady said. "But she didn't go, so what's the big

deal if I don't?"

Imani knew that Cady's mother, who sold handmade clay pots at craft fairs, would have sold a lung to go to art school. But in those days, after the Second Depression wiped out so many universities, higher education became the province of the rich, as it had been originally. It was Score Corp that had reopened those doors for people like Cady and Imani.

"Yeah, but the thing is," Imani said, "it's hard to even get a decent job without a good score. I heard the police force just upped their minimum to eighty-five."

"Like I'd want to be a cop?"

"I'm just saying."

"I'll go work for your dad," Cady said. "He'd hire me, right?"

"Yeah. Because business is really booming at LeMonde Marina. So much so, in fact, that Dad was just talking about opening a side business in scooter repair and modification."

"Perfect," Cady said without a hitch. "Then I'm all set." She watched the sailboat making its slow progress near the horizon.

Imani couldn't tell if Cady's blasé attitude toward the future was genuine or defensive. With jobs scarce and the score growing more ubiquitous all the time, businesses could be choosy. Why hire a 71 like Cady when you could hold out for an 89—a bona fide highbie just one life-altering point below the scholarship line.

"You should at least take a break from Gray's Auto," Imani said. "You've been spending a lot of time there, and their kids are unscored. Doesn't one of them actually work there?"

Cady nodded and turned her gaze to the channel, whose southern shore frothed against the algae-stained rocks of Corona Point.

“Parker Gray, right?” Imani pushed. “I think he was in my gym class last year. Blond hair? Crooked teeth?”

“His teeth are fine.”

“That’s not the point. By working there, you’re associating with him. Maybe that’s why your score keeps dropping.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Pretend he doesn’t exist? Pretend he’s invisible?”

“Yes,” Imani said. “They *are* invisible. That’s what being unscored means. Can’t you barter for parts at some other auto shop?”

A look of apprehension flickered across Cady’s face, which she attempted to hide by squinting into the sun. “Maybe,” she said, her tone dropping, a signal that they should change the subject.

Imani could have pushed, but they had agreed long ago to banish score talk from the river, a ban they usually obeyed. Score talk had a tendency to creep in, especially now, with only a few months left of senior year and their final scores looming.

Imani took a deep breath of salty air and made a determined effort to realign her thoughts. There at the mouth of the channel, beneath the towering cliff face of Corona Point, the world was putting on a brilliant show. Seagulls were diving and the salt air was sticking to her skin. There was not an eyeball in sight, and though her cuff was constantly pinging her location to Score Corp, it was neither score negative nor score positive to be where she was. On the high plateau of Corona Point, the stone facade of one of the mansions was just visible between two pine trees.

There were around twenty mansions on Corona Point. The whole area was private and gated. None of the kids went to Somerton High, and none of the parents kept their boats at LeMonde Marina. They kept them in Waverly, so that they wouldn't have to rub elbows with the few remaining clammers and lobstermen in the area.

Cady followed Imani's gaze up the cliff face to the plateau. "None of them are scored," she said.

"They don't have to be," Imani said. "They can buy admission to any college in the world."

"What a racket."

"You sound like my dad," Imani said. She knew such inequities existed, but she also knew that before long the score would be universal. That was what everyone was saying. When that happened, if that happened, it wouldn't matter how rich you were. If you didn't have a score, you wouldn't get anywhere in life. You'd be just as doomed as the other unscored, like Parker Gray and his ilk.

For a long while, Imani and Cady faced west, where the distant mound of Hogg Island swallowed the sun in a long slow gulp.

"Man, will you look at that sky?" Cady said. "Will you just look at that shit?"

There *was* something magical about it. How the electric blue deepened and turned steely. Eventually, it would redden in a final burst of color before the darkness swallowed it all.

"Hey, Imani?"

"What?"

"I'd understand completely if you wanted to dump me."

“Shut up.”

“No, I’m serious. You know you have to consider it. Before it’s too late.”

“No score talk on the river,” Imani said.

“We were *twelve* when we made that pact,” Cady reminded her.

Their separate place, their unwatched territory had been breached, as all things inevitably were, by the score.

It would be dark soon, but that hardly mattered. There were still three hours until low tide, and as long as there was water in the river, Imani could get them home. She could do it blind if she had to.

“Cady,” she said after a long pause, “there are two things in this world I will never give up. Not for my score or for anything else.”

“*Two* things?”

“Yes.”

Cady paused for a moment to think about it, then said, “Oh, right.”

That was the hallmark of true friendship: the things you didn’t have to say. None of Imani’s fellow 90s would know what she was talking about, because they didn’t understand her the way Cady did.

The two things Imani would never give up were Cady and the river.

Chapter 2

First Tuesday

Somerton High was a squat one-story off of the Causeway, studded with clumsy additions in mismatched brick. It had begun life as a clam-processing plant, and when it was low tide in the nearby salt marshes, you could smell that past.

Cady dropped Imani off at the front entrance, a metal double door with three concrete steps leading up to it, then drove around to the back to park her scooter. They wouldn't speak or acknowledge each other for the rest of the day.

Everything inside Somerton High was gray—the lockers, the walls, the floors, even the air. Everything, that is, except for the eyeballs, which dangled at ten-foot intervals from the ceiling. It was a dreary place in the best of circumstances, but on the first Tuesday of each month, when new scores were posted, dreary became ominous.

There were 763 kids at Somerton High, and most of them were scared. Beneath the gaze of the eyeballs, they sized each other up, wondering if they were safe in their gangs, if they dared hope for ascension, or if they were about to be demoted. Whatever their behavior had been for the previous four weeks, the monthly reckoning was at hand.

So as to avoid inadvertent contamination, Imani's gang, the senior 90s, had decided not to acknowledge each other on first Tuesday until the new scores were posted. It had been Anil's idea, but they'd all agreed that it was mature and showed a serious commitment to self-improvement.

Imani passed Anil every morning on the way to her locker. On most days, he'd smile

as warmly as he was capable of smiling and offer a few polite words of greeting. But on first Tuesdays, he didn't give her so much as a glance. Anil Hanesh was going places. At 96, he was one point away from ascension to that most exalted gang of all—the high 90s. There were only two high 90s at Somerton High: Chiara Hislop (98) and Alejandro Vidal (97). Anil wanted to be their lunch mate so badly it had come to define him. The last thing he needed was a 92 with an “unfortunate friend” jeopardizing his chances.

Imani constantly told herself not to take such things personally—either on her own behalf or on Cady's. It was nothing but the execution of an agreement she'd gone along with. It was sober, clear-eyed fitness at its best.

The first two classes were write-offs for most students. It was nearly impossible to concentrate on your teacher when the real grade was floating through the ether, shaped like either a bullet or a kiss. Most teachers knew this and didn't bother introducing anything important until after the scores were posted, which was sometime between nine and eleven.

Imani spent first-period Spanish staring emptily at Mr. Malta's smartboard, with its scroll of verbs in their neatly ordered conjugations. She was not paying attention, which was in violation of the fourth element of fitness, diligence, as well as the second element, impulse control. What she should have been doing was role modeling Chiara Hislop, who sat two desks over.

Chiara was undistracted as she watched the smartboard, her face a picture of serenity. She wore the gold-rimmed data specs given by Score Corp to those who scored 97 or above. The specs provided optical Web access and allowed Score Corp to spy even more

intimately on its highest scorers. Imani still had her specs from that one glorious month in eighth grade when she'd crept up to 97. When she'd dropped back to 96 four weeks later, Score Corp had deactivated them. They sat in her sock drawer at home.

Chiara was going to Harvard in the fall, on a full scholarship, provided she maintained her high score. Score Corp would have paid for her to attend any state school in Massachusetts, but Harvard had a special fund for high 90s. Chiara was a true scored success story, having risen from a low of 40 to 98 in four years. Her parents, long ago laid off by the last remaining fish-packing plant in Somerton, had sold her story to a writer in New York. As long as she didn't screw up between now and June, Chiara Hislop, the pride of Somerton, would become a role model for thousands, perhaps millions.

Above Mr. Malta's head, the clock inched forward as the class grew restless. Imani was not the only one committing impulse control and diligence violations. Waves of anxious distraction—the *snick* of tapping feet, the fabric scrape of fidgets—crept from the back of the room. When the bell finally rang, the class leapt, almost as one, for the door. Only Chiara remained calm, gathering her books before walking with extreme composure to the hallway. Imani tried to mimic Chiara's demeanor and pace but soon found her feet rushing forward in the swiftly moving current of Somerton High's lesser students.

To combat cheating and distraction, all mobile hookups—cuffs, specs, cells, tablets, smart scrolls, gloves, etc.—were automatically deactivated on school property by sensors located throughout. The only way to learn your new score was to go online at one of the library tablets or check outside the principal's office, where Mrs. Bronson, the school secretary, taped an alphabetized list up to the glass. A desperate crowd bulged at each location, but

to no avail. The scores weren't posted yet. Mrs. Bronson shooed everyone away but wouldn't say when the scores would be up because she didn't know—something she had to remind them every single month.

Imani's next class was twenty-first-century American history. The teacher, Mr. Carol, was frequently annoying and painfully unfunny, but it was still the most interesting of her classes and, therefore, the *least* conducive to impulse control and diligence violations. In Imani's opinion, however, it should have been renamed Mr. Carol Lectures Everybody about How Dumb They Are for Not Realizing How Dumb Things Have Gotten in This Dumb Country.

Mr. Carol was a "creeper," someone who worried about the "creep" of surveillance and scoring into all areas of society. Like all creepers, he was fond of the phrase "slippery slope," which, regardless of its grim intent, had always sounded nursery-rhyme-ish to Imani. Mr. Carol had tenure, so he couldn't be fired for his beliefs, but rumor had it that the principal, Miss Wheeler, was dying for him to hug a student or download porn to his Smart Board so that she could oust him. Once, Mr. Carol had obstructed the eyeball in his classroom by draping a miniature American flag over its lens. When Miss Wheeler found out, he had to take it down, then apologize to his students for keeping them out of coverage. It was embarrassing for everyone.

Under normal circumstances, only unscored students, of whom there were thirty-six at Somerton High, were assigned to Mr. Carol's classes. But that year a round of layoffs had left the school one history teacher short, so Imani and two other scored kids had been assigned to Mr. Carol's class.

Imani pitied the unscored. Though some of them attempted to dignify their status

with caustic politics, Imani was convinced that was purely defensive. Most of them, she assumed, were the victims of bad parenting. In some cases, their parents had been too lazy, too drunk, or too absent to sign the consent forms. In the absence of a score, the software assumed the worst, which made association with the unscored the severest peer group violation of all.

It was a small class. By senior year, most of the unscored had dropped out of school. Mr. Carol kept the desks in a circle to “encourage free-spirited debate,” but this merely resulted in the three scored in the class—Clarissa Taylor (74), Logan Weisgarten (93), and Imani—sitting on one side, while the four unscored sat on the other. Every day, the halves of the circle inched farther apart until Mr. Carol noticed and pushed them back together, reminding his students that classroom interaction was “score neutral.” He always used finger quotes when he said it.

Imani took her usual seat between Clarissa and her fellow 90 Logan, being careful to obey Anil Hanesh’s first-Tuesday rule. Logan ignored her expertly.

Mr. Carol arrived late and, as he did on most mornings, said, “Good evening.” No one had ever laughed at this joke, but that didn’t stop him. Mr. Carol carried a banged-up secondhand smart scroll plastered with political stickers, along with a sloppy stack of handouts he’d printed from “the great hive mind of the Web”—another of his un-laughed-at jokes.

“The curriculum Nazis tell me I have to give you guys more tests, so . . .” He glanced around the classroom. “Diego, think of five questions to ask your fellow students about the Second Depression.”

Diego Landis, one of the unscored, nodded, then started scribbling in his notebook.

Even for an unscored, Diego was strange. He had arrived at Somerton High late in his junior year. Imani didn't know where he'd come from. He had straight black hair, which always obstructed half his face, leaving only one of his blue eyes visible.

Mr. Carol sat on the desk that divided the circle. "Okay, who here knows about the Otis Institute?"

No one did.

"Right," he said. "So Sigmund Otis was this eccentric educator who founded a think tank to—"

"Mr. Carol?" Clarissa raised her hand as she spoke. They were allowed to interrupt, because Mr. Carol believed in treating students as equals. "Should we be taking notes, or is this another one of your . . . you know . . ."

"One of my tangents?" he said. "No. The Otis Institute has this brand-new scholarship. It's for public school seniors only, and they're judging it based on an essay. It's for forty thousand dollars."

"Forty *thousand* dollars?" Clarissa exclaimed. At 74, she was well below Score Corp's scholarship line.

"I know," Mr. Carol said. "And it's renewable every year as long as you maintain, I think it's a B average."

From the way Clarissa's shoulders straightened, it was clear that Mr. Carol's words had opened a window of hope. Clarissa was a good student but had not managed to budge above 74 all year. It was one of the mysterious quirks of the score that dropping was easy but rising was hard.

"So here's what I'm thinking," Mr. Carol continued. "Final paper, I want you all to

write an essay for the Otis Scholarship. Two birds. One stone. What do you think?" Mr. Carol didn't merely assign homework. He proposed it.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Rachel Sloane asked. She was unscored, with spiky orange hair and a fondness for snarky comments.

"Of course not," Mr. Carol said.

"So they'll actually give the scholarship to an *unscored*?"

"Only if you write the best essay," he replied.

Rachel folded her arms across her chest. "I don't buy it."

"Look," Mr. Carol said. "Believe me, I know how scarce scholarships are these days, but this one's legit. And the best thing is, it's brand-new. Hardly anyone knows about it yet. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if one of you won it." Mr. Carol could not prevent his eyes from flicking to Diego Landis.

"Mr. Carol," Logan said. "Do you really think it's fair to hand out a scholarship to someone just for writing one good essay? Some of us have been working hard all of our lives to get over Score Corp's scholarship line."

"You want a medal for being a score whore?" Rachel asked. She managed to shoehorn that phrase into most class discussions.

Next to her, Diego, who'd been writing out test questions for the rest of the class, raised a finger.

"Yes, Diego," Mr. Carol said.

Diego took his time finishing what he was writing, then looked up through his hair. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he said, "but wouldn't it brilliantly upend everyone's stereotype of the unscored as stupid, shiftless deviants if one of us won?" He cast a sly

smile at Rachel, who saw his point and took a moment to relish the possibility. "And as to your comment, Logan," Diego continued, "if you think fairness has anything to do with the fact that *you're* getting a full boat to college, then you are seriously deluded."

Logan gazed out the window. "Sour grapes, if you ask me."

"I don't recall anyone asking you," Diego responded.

"Mr. Carol." It fell to Imani to interrupt the debate. Diego would decimate Logan. He always did. And she was in no mood for another display of his showy intellect. Besides, if Logan wasn't careful, his antagonism of the unscored would hurt his score, and by association, hers. "Does this mean you're assuming the unscored have a better shot at winning the scholarship?" she asked.

"Of course not, Imani."

"So it's not rigged?" she asked. "It's not a creeper organization or anything?"

Mr. Carol shook his head vigorously. "The Otis Institute's sole mission is to provide educational opportunities for kids 'overlooked' by the current system." He used finger quotes again.

"Because it would be incredibly unfair," Imani said, "and probably career-damaging for you to mislead us on such a thing." Imani was thinking of Clarissa.

"Imani LeMonde, you are full of suspicion and mistrust," Mr. Carol said. "I like it. Keep it up. Okay, so here's what I'm thinking: five thousand words, and—"

"Five *thousand* words?" Clarissa echoed.

"Yes," Mr. Carol said. "Five thousand whole words. Plus footnotes. I'm teaching this as a college-level class, in case you hadn't noticed. And in college you don't take multiple-choice tests. They're the height of stupidity, actually. Diego, how are you coming with

those questions?"

"I have three," he said. "I need two more."

"Good. Don't go easy on them either. Where was I?"

"The height of stupidity," Logan said in a wounded monotone.

"Right," Mr. Carol said. "Exactly. So, guys, this is your chance to take everything you've learned in class and own it." He squeezed his right hand into a fist. "It's your chance to shine. Okay? So think big. I want to see this thing sourced to within an inch of its life. I want breadth *and* depth. And I want counterarguments too. Don't make it easy on yourself. Engage the opposite point of view. Oh, and feel free to collaborate with your classmates. You guys could learn a lot from each other."

Imani could feel a collective squirm rise up from the seven students.

"Can we write about anything we want?" Clarissa asked. "Like the Second Depression or . . ."

"No, no." He shook his head. "Any American high school student can write about the Second Depression. I want to do something that will really stand out. I've given this a lot of thought and . . ." He smiled deviously. "I know it's a little out there, but . . ."

Imani sensed the arrival of another reckless idea, another career-threatening attempt to "subvert the dominant paradigm."

"What I want," he said, "is for the scored to write essays in *opposition* to the score."

"What?" Logan said. "You can't make us do that."

"Yes, I can."

"Mr. Carol," Clarissa said, "I think I have to be excused from this paper on the grounds that it could totally hurt my score."

"No, it couldn't," Mr. Carol said.

"Yes, it could," Clarissa insisted. "Because actually? There was a girl in my health class who asked to be excused from the reproductive system, because impulse control was a fitness challenge for her."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"And Mr. Concini couldn't count that section in her grade."

"Mr. Carol," Imani said. "I have to agree with Clarissa. Asking us to disparage the score would be endangering us and also—"

"Not true," Diego interrupted.

"Excuse me," Imani said. She looked directly at him, which she usually avoided. "I was speaking."

Diego stared back with his blue eye, unintimidated.

Regaining her composure, Imani turned away and faced Mr. Carol. "Anyway, it could also get you in trouble. You know like when you did that thing with the flag and the eyeball?"

"Why, thank you, Imani," Mr. Carol said. "I do appreciate your concern. But you're off the mark here." He wagged his finger at her. "And something tells me you know that. Score Corp does not punish academic inquiry. It's"—out came the finger quotes—"score-pos."

"Exactly," Diego said.

"What would you know?" Logan asked without looking at him.

"More than you," Diego said. "Most of the scored are completely ignorant about their own system."

"You're ignorant," Logan tossed back.

"Well argued," Diego replied.

"All right, all right," Mr. Carol said. "Look, people, I can't force you to write about any particular topic for the Otis Scholarship. If you want to write about the Second Depression or the Federalist Papers or any other run-of-the-mill topic, go for it. But for this class, the final paper will be what I say it is. I have tenure, so I can do that sort of thing. And incidentally, I happen to know a few people on the board at Otis, and I happen to know that they are very, shall we say, *open* to nontraditional essays. Let's just leave it at that, okay?"

"Are you saying you have inside information?" Imani asked.

"Only what I've just told you. And no, I'm not on the board, so don't get all conspiracy theory on me or anything. Now, while the scored are writing in opposition to the score, I want the unscored to take up its defense. Its rigorous defense."

"Oh, you've *got* to be kidding," Rachel said.

Diego laughed quietly. "That's brilliant."

Rachel turned on him, eyes flashing. "Are you insane?" she said. "How are we supposed to *defend* the score? It's blatantly discriminatory."

"Well," Mr. Carol said, "that's a great argument for one of your scored classmates to use. Your job, however, is to argue the other side."

"There is no other side," she said.

"There's always another side," Diego said.

"Thank you," Mr. Carol said. "I'm glad someone appreciates my vision. How are you coming with those questions?"

Diego ripped a page from his notebook and handed it to him.

Mr. Carol read it while nodding approvingly. “Interesting,” he said. “Very interesting.”

Diego sat back and glanced smugly around the room. Only one of his eyes was visible through his hair, and Imani wouldn't look at him directly, but she could have sworn he was seeking her out.

The scores were posted after American history, and the fallout was immediate. Thessaly Morris was crying into her locker, having obviously fallen sharply from the 90s. She was a junior, though, so there was still time to work her way back up. A couple of freshman boys high-fived each other, having ascended in tandem.

Imani walked past both the library and the principal's office, but the crowds there were so thick and the anxiety so pungent that she kept walking. She dreaded that first moment of discovery, when she found her name on the list and saw the two digits right next to it. Even imagining it sent her stomach into free fall. She preferred waiting for her gang to tell her at lunch. At least that way she wasn't alone with the news.

She was one of the last stragglers into the lunchroom, and instead of going directly to her table of senior 90s, she hung back and watched her fellow students reconfigure themselves. There were no outbursts, no tearful good-byes. By the end of the year, even the freshmen knew the drill. You went where the score sheet told you to go. You introduced yourself to your new gang, and you sat down. Whatever pain you felt about leaving your former gang behind, you buried it. Whatever jealousy you felt toward the ones ascending, you buried that too. The only tables that never changed were the unscored

tables all the way in the back by the teachers' lounge. Sometimes Imani envied them.

She noticed right away that Anil Hanesh was missing from her gang's table.

Scanning the lunchroom, she spotted him sitting with Chiara Hislop and Alejandro Vidal. His hard work had paid off. In a few days, he'd receive his specs from Score Corp and a handful of letters from Ivy League schools, welcoming him, at their expense, to the ranks of the superelite, pending the maintenance of his high score.

Imani knew she would never speak to him again. *Good-bye, Anil*, she thought. *It was nice never knowing you.* Imani didn't see Cady anywhere, but Cady often spent lunch period alone in the courtyard rather than with her gang. She felt no bond with the 70s, and they were happy to ignore her, assuming, perhaps, that she'd continue to drop.

As Imani walked to the table of senior 90s where she'd eaten lunch for the past year, Annabelle Kropski's mouth dropped open. Jason Friberg and Itziar Gomez started whispering to each other, and Logan stared at her in surprise before recovering and looking away.

"What?" Imani said. "What happened?"

Annabelle got up and left. The others stayed but refused to face her. Imani found herself staring at the back of Logan's head.

There was only one explanation for their behavior.

"Don't make a scene," Logan whispered, without moving. "Do the right thing, Imani."

It took what seemed like an hour but could only have been seconds to realize what had happened. By then, as if directed by an outside force, Imani was running from the lunchroom.

The hallways were empty except for a few teachers heading belatedly to the lounge. When Imani arrived at the glassed-in reception area of the principal's office, two underclassmen girls were celebrating their good fortune, unable to pull their eyes from the brand-new digits that represented hope and bright prospects. Imani sidled up to the glass and ran her eyes down the list, a gasp escaping when she found her name.

LeMonde, Imani: 64

"Sixty-four!" she cried.

The two girls backed away, leaving Imani to stare at her name and those two unfathomable numbers. What had she done? What had she *not* done? To fall so far so fast, surely she had to have done *something*. She pressed her face close to the glass and traced the invisible line from her name to her score. There was no mistaking it. She was a 64.

Below the scholarship line. *Far* below.

"I thought if I didn't tell you, it wouldn't hurt your score."

In her shock, Imani didn't recognize the voice. But when she turned she saw Cady standing there, eyes red, one hand kneading the other. Imani scrolled down the alphabetical list for "Fazio, Cady." Next to her name was the number 27.

"Oh my God," Imani said.

"I'm so sorry."

"What did you *do*?"

From behind the fake wood countertop of the reception area, Mrs. Bronson spotted them, wasting no time in coming out to order them either to class or to lunch, as this was not "social hour."

"I'm so sorry," Cady said. "I'm so, so sorry."

An eyeball above the door captured them loitering. Fractions of points were being shaved off their scores. Imani motioned for Cady to follow her back to the lunchroom.

“Just so you know,” Cady said, “I love him.”

Imani stopped walking. “What? Who?”

They were at the lunchroom’s double doors, and the entire student body seemed to be aware of their presence.

“I thought I could protect you,” Cady said, “If I didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what, Cady?”

Cady’s lip began to quiver. “I love him,” she said. “I can’t help it. I just—” She turned and ran down the hallway, each eyeball capturing her flight.