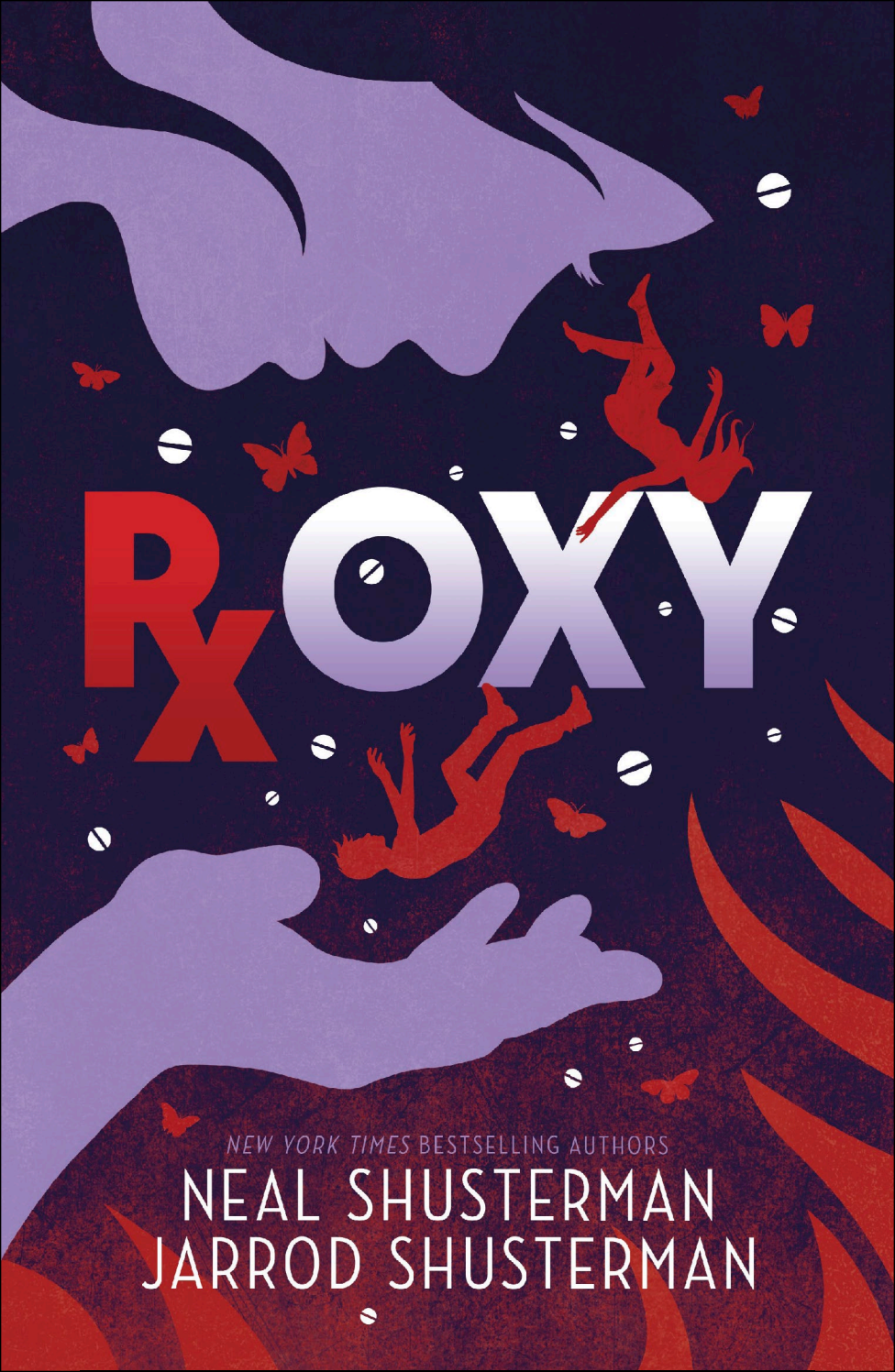

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
NEAL SHUSTERMAN
JARROD SHUSTERMAN



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NEAL SHUSTERMAN
and
JARROD SHUSTERMAN

WALKER
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Dedications TK

1

Nalox**one**

I am no superhero. But I can save you from the one who claims to be.

I am no wizard. But I cast a spell that can bring back the dead.

Almost.

And never often enough.

I am, if nothing else, your final defense—your last hope when hope itself has spiraled into that singularity that crushes not just you, but everyone around you.

And so here we are, you and I. The scene is set. Never identical, yet always the same:

Today it's a room in a house on a street that was born when dreams were milky-white appliances and cars were like landlocked ships, too proud to ever be slung with seat belts.

This was once suburbia, but it was long ago consumed by a gelatinous urban tsunami. The neighborhood struggles and sometimes even thrives. But this street? This street is dead. It has been sacrificed for the greater good.

The trees on either side have already been taken down, their trunks turned into firewood, their limbs fed into a chipper. Most doors and windows have been stripped and salvaged, leaving the homes with the deadest of eyes and gaping, silent

mouths. Nearly a mile of this. And just beyond are bulldozers and rubble, and beyond that, towering concrete pillars reach skyward like the columns of an ancient temple.

Because a freeway is coming. A six-lane corridor that will cleave the neighborhood in half, right along this very street, in a brutal rite of passage called eminent domain.

When night falls, the doomed street is engulfed more completely than anywhere else in the city.

And there you are. In the fifth house on the left.

You're not from this part of town, but somehow you found this place, drawn by darkness so dense you can wrap it around yourself like a blanket.

Now flashlights illuminate a familiar tableau. One officer, two paramedics. And me.

A medic leans over you—presses a finger to your neck.

"Hard to find a pulse," she says. "If it's there, it's weak."

This room was once a bedroom. But there's no bed, no dresser. All that remains is a warped desk and a broken chair that no one deemed worth saving. You lie on carpet mottled with mold that has left it looking like a wall-to-wall bruise. It is the very epicenter of abandoned hope.

"I can't detect any breathing. Beginning CPR."

Rats would complete the scene, but vector control has already been here with some of my more vicious cousins to kill the vermin. But they can't get rid of the roaches no matter how hard they try. They are the victors of this world, the roaches. Truly undefeatable.

You, on the other hand, are defeated. How defeated is yet to be seen.

Thirty chest compressions, two rescue breaths. Repeat.

The other medic prepares me for what I've come to do, while the officer gives a description of you on his radio. They don't know who you are. I don't know who you are either—but soon you and I will be close. I will be inside you. A kind of intimacy neither of us wants but both of us need. It is, after all, my purpose. And you? You have no choice.

"Administering the naloxone."

"Make sure you get the muscle."

"I never miss."

The needle plunges deep in your left thigh—and I surge forth into muscle tissue, searching for capillaries that will carry me to larger and larger vessels. And yes—you're still alive! I do hear your heartbeat! Slow, faint, but there!

I ride the long sluggish wave of your beat into the chambers of your heart, and out again, up and up toward your brain. Only there can I save you. I will rip you free of the hold they have over you.

They.

The *others*. Who care for you only as long as they have you locked in their embrace, as if you are nothing more than a child's tattered toy. They do not know love—only possession. They promise you deliverance and reward you . . . with this:

Thirty compressions, two breaths. And me.

It is you, and those like you, who gave them power, and continue to give them power day after day. Because who but you can generate current enough to feed the bright flashing lights of their eternal Party? How could you not see that the others—my brutal cousins—are the cancer at the core of

seduction? The void at the heart of your craving? They see themselves as gods, but in the end they are just like me. Nothing but chemicals. In complex combinations, perhaps, but still no more than tinctures, distillations, and petty pharma. Chemicals designed by nature, or by man, to tweak *your* chemicals.

If they live, it is only because you gave them life. As well as the license to end yours. And if they act in roles beyond their purpose, it is only because you placed them upon the stage to perform.

Thus the stage has been set. The audience cool and dispassionate—waiting to be entertained but too jaded to believe it ever will be.

But we must try, must we not?

And so here, between the chest compressions and the life-saving breaths, I will do my part, struggling to wrest your fate back from the capricious "gods."

I am no superhero. I am no wizard. But I can save you. Although half of the time I don't. Too often I am too late. Victory and tragedy will forever fight for purchase on this stage.

And today the dimming footlights find tragedy.

Your heart begins to fibrillate. Then it seizes like a furious fist . . . and then releases. The wave is gone. I can't do my work if I can't get to your brain. Still, the medics keep working CPR, but it will not change the fact that you have surrendered your life in the bruised room of the rotting house, on the street that will soon be gone.

They tag your toe with the last name on your ID, and your first initial:

Ramey, I.

Then they wheel you out, and I have little left to do but settle in your veins—one more chemical to parse in the autopsy.

And I curse the others.

My soulless clan who brought you to the Party, then left you in this desolate place, where even those who tried to save you are too world-weary to shed a single tear.

If I had a voice, I swear to you I would tell your story. At least enough of it so that I might know who you are.

2

Isaac, Ivy, and **the** In**finite** Loser

TWO MONTHS EARLIER . . .

Ivy's got to be here somewhere, thinks Isaac Ramey as he pushes through the door of the cesspool looking for his sister. *No doubt about it; this is Ivy's kind of party.* The house reeks of puke, hormones, and beer, making Isaac wince as he wades through the living room. He's ankle-deep in deadbeats, burnouts, and druggies—all of whom are far too wasted to realize that freak-dancing to techno looks like faking a seizure to someone who's close to sober. Or worse, actually *having* a seizure while interpretive dancing—which would be a really sad way to die, because the audience would just slow clap while you writhe yourself into oblivion.

Isaac needs to stay on track. He searches through the muck and mire. A girl with a half-shaved head. A guy who clearly pissed himself. A seedy dude too old for this party, talking to a girl who's too young for it. Nothing Isaac didn't expect. And if this night is like any other Friday night, he'll find Ivy here. Ivy is a year older than Isaac, but more often than not, Isaac feels like her older brother.

It's not that he doesn't like parties. He's a junior, so he's been to plenty in his time, where things were going on that

his parents wouldn't want to know about. . . . But he doesn't go to *these* kinds of parties—his sister's kinds of parties. Where seedy things don't happen in back rooms but are in your face—the dismal and the desperate shoving their brains into a hydraulic press just to make themselves forget how finite they are.

He goes out to the backyard. It's overgrown and features an amoeba-shaped pool not large enough to do anything but float, or secretly urinate. Which might be why the water is clouded and green like a study in bioterrorism.

It isn't long before Isaac spots his sister—her Slurpee-blue hair is a dead giveaway. Ivy's by the pool with Craig, her infinite-loser boyfriend, who lives here. He's their parents' perfect nightmare: ratlike fingernails, competing tattoos, and a man-bun protruding from his head like a tumor.

"Ivy," Isaac calls out as he gets close. He has to call her name three times to get her attention. She takes a moment to hide her surprise at seeing him.

"Mom and Dad know you snuck out, and they're on the warpath."

"So they sent *you*?"

"They have no clue where you are, or even that I went out looking for you."

Ivy turns and is already marching away—her classic response to anything she doesn't like. Especially when she's been drinking. Isaac follows, grabbing her arm before she stumbles into an overgrown bush.

"If they get wind of this party and find you here like this, it'll be bad. You'll thank me tomorrow."

Suddenly Craig discovers enough brain cells to notice Isaac's presence.

"Hey, is this guy bothering you?" he asks Ivy.

"Shut up, Craig. He's my brother. You met, like, six times." Ivy turns back to Isaac. "I'm not some basket case; I don't need you to save me. So, go home and study, or whatever it is you do on Friday nights."

"Yeah," seconds Craig. "You heard her. She wants to party with me."

That's when Isaac sees the drug bag that Craig holds, dangling like a little scrotum full of god-knows-what. Just the sight of it ignites something primal within Isaac, taking over his body and making him swat the bag out of Craig's hand, sending it flying into the pool.

"Oops, my bad," Isaac says. He's not the kind of guy who looks for a fight, but some are worth starting.

"What the hell . . ." Craig's shock turns to fury, and he pounces on Isaac. They begin to grapple, and it quickly grows into a full-fledged fight. A zombie horde of the stoned gather to gawk, making it the center of the party's limited attention.

Isaac, who's stronger, lands some blows, but Craig grabs a Solo cup of something 180 proof and hurls it in Isaac's eyes. Craig has a distinct advantage in that dirty moves are his superpower.

And now Craig is punching Isaac over and over again as Isaac fights the burn in his eyes. Hammerfists over his head, body shots. Whatever Craig can do to inflict damage before Isaac recovers his eyesight. Ivy tries to break it up, but Craig won't have it.

Finally Isaac regains enough of his bearings to deliver a shot to Craig's nose that may just break it, but before Craig's pain kicks in, he shoves Isaac with all his might, sending him flying to the ground.

In an instant Ivy is at Isaac's side, helping him stand. She looks up to Craig, who now rotates through every profanity he knows as he cradles his gushing nose.

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Ivy yells at Craig.

"He started it!" Craig yells back

But Ivy's not having it. "Just get the hell away from us!"

Craig turns his back far too easily, making it clear how little he actually cares. "Fine. Whatever. You and your family are psycho anyway." Then he goes over to the pool and stands there gazing into the murky water, mourning the loss of his little plastic scrotum.

It isn't until Isaac's adrenaline fades that he realizes his ankle is hurting. No—it doesn't just hurt; it throbs. More than just a run-of-the-mill ankle twist, this is a bone-deep ache. He can already sense that it isn't going away anytime soon. When his sister sees him limping and grimacing, she helps him through the side yard, and together they make their way to the street.

As they get to Isaac's old silver Sebring by the curb, Isaac leans against it, exhaling, realizing he'd been holding his breath most of the way. Then, as he opens the car door, he puts too much weight on his injured ankle and nearly goes down. His vision darkens from the pain, then clears again—but the pain only subsides the slightest bit. That's when he realizes that the simple task of getting home is no longer so simple.

"I can't drive home with my ankle like this. . . ."

"Uh—that's why you have two feet."

Isaac considers it, but shakes his head. "I drive right-footed. I don't even know if I can use my left."

"Fine. I'll drive." She puts out her hands for the keys, but Isaac knows better than to let her have them.

"No. You're drunk. Or worse."

She glares at him. "Not worse."

"No? Looked like it was about to get that way."

"Don't you dare lecture me!"

Isaac backs off. He knows that was out of line. "I'll get an Uber," he says. "I can pick up my car tomorrow."

The app says their ride is three minutes away, which, as always, means ten. They watch people come and go from the house. Neighbors peer angrily out of windows. One comes to his porch and begins yelling at Isaac and Ivy, as if waiting by the curb makes them the official ambassadors of the party.

"If this doesn't stop, I'm calling the police!"

"Be my guest, moron," says Ivy, and Isaac raps her to shut her up. Their Uber can't get here fast enough.

Finally, it arrives, and they slip in the back, Isaac putting too much weight on his foot again and grunting from the pain.

"You didn't save me, you know," Ivy tells him as they head off. "I would have left on my own. Eventually."

Isaac nods, choosing to believe her but wishing it came without effort.

Now they sit there in awkward silence, their dynamic going back to normal.

Ivy smirks. "The look on Craig's face when you tossed his stash was classic. Like you took a dump in his Froot Loops."

Isaac, even through the pain, can't help but smile, too. Ivy leans over, rests her head on Isaac's shoulder, and closes her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says. And he can tell she means it. Although neither of them is sure what it is she's sorry for.

Ivy truly believes she would have left on her own. Even though she's never left a party before they released the proverbial hounds and threw everyone out. Believing something that you know is not true is *Ivy's* superpower.

When they arrive home, she decides to walk in the door ahead of Isaac. She turns on the light, fully expecting to find their parents waiting for them in the dark. That's how things work in this house. It's a three-stage progression. Stage one: her parents explode after realizing she snuck out the window. Stage two: they blame each other's parenting fails for seven to twelve minutes. Stage three: an hour of solitary brooding, where her father will retreat to his computer, while her mom invents household tasks that don't actually exist, like alphabetizing kitchen spices or pairing other people's socks. Stage five: at least one of them will sit in the living room in the dark, monitoring every sound from outside and each passing headlight until Ivy comes home.

Since Isaac got her fairly early, it hasn't reached the darkened room stage yet. Instead, her father steps out from the kitchen. He's already built up plenty of potential energy, and the look in his eyes tells Ivy it's about to go kinetic.

"Good evening, *Father*," Ivy says, trying to sound ironic and light, but instead it comes off as snarky. Well, the sooner she gets him yelling, the sooner this can be over.

Her mother comes out from the bathroom. Ah—so it's an ambush. The only family member missing is Grandma, who's been living with them for the past year. She's wise enough not to embroil herself in the drama.

"Care to explain yourself?" Ivy's mother asks her, but looks to Isaac instead. He's an easier read than she is.

Ivy prepares to respond, but before she has the chance, Isaac blurts out, "I was on my way back from Shelby's and figured I'd grab Ivy from the movies."

It's not an unbelievable lie. That is, if Ivy weren't wobbling, still majorly buzzed. She wonders if they saw the Uber drop them off. Oh, the rabbit hole of explanations ahead.

Isaac tries to hide his limp as he crosses the room, but almost trips. Their father is there to support him. "You okay?"

"I . . . twisted my ankle at practice this afternoon. It's nothing." But if there's anything that Ivy has learned, it's that parents always know when you're lying. Even if you're just lying to yourself.

And so to prove his ankle is a non-issue, Isaac walks on it again, and he almost goes down. Ivy silently wonders if her boyfriend's redeeming parts come anywhere close to outweighing his unredeeming ones.

"That looks pretty bad . . . ," their father says.

"I'm fine, Dad," Isaac says with just enough exasperation. "I'll go ice it, okay?"

Then their mother zeroes in on Isaac's forehead. "Is that blood?"

And although part of Ivy is glad that the interrogation has been turned entirely to Isaac, it also pisses her off that her

brother's boo-boos have completely blasted Ivy out of her parents' minds.

"I went to a party," Ivy says without flinching. "Isaac came to bring me home. He's like that because he beat up Craig."

If she was going to tell the truth, she might as well make Isaac look good in the process and give their father the satisfaction of knowing that Craig not only got beaten up but by his son, no less.

And now the negative attention has turned back to Ivy. Their mother starts haranguing Ivy about broken promises and patterns of bad behavior until she exhausts herself and shakes her head woefully. It's the expression Ivy hates the most. That *you-disappointed-us-again-and-guess-what? We're-not-even-surprised* look.

"Ivy, I honestly don't know what we're going to do with you," she says.

"Why do you have to do anything? Why can't you just, for once, leave me alone?"

But they can't. She knows they can't. This is, after all, their job.

Then her father drops the boom. "We're making an appointment for you to see Dr. Torres."

"No!" says Ivy. "I am not a child—I will not go to a kiddie shrink!" Ivy would much rather choose her own humiliation than swallow theirs. Dr. Torres has a mural with Winnie-the-Pooh in a pharmacist's robe.

"Well, you're going to see someone. All this self-medicating isn't doing you any favors."

Self-medicating. Ivy wonders when drinking with your

friends became clinical. Ivy hates the idea of having to go see some sweater-vested pencil-neck "professional" with a cheaply framed diploma. But what if it's the only way to avoid harder action? She knows a kid who knows a kid who got dragged out of their home in the middle of the night and taken to one of those forced labor camps for unruly teens. Would her parents do something like that to her? At this point in her life, she has no idea.

Isaac has slipped away from the scene. She hears him in the kitchen getting ice, but their fridge has a sadistic ice dispenser that hurls ice everywhere but where you want it to go. She finds Isaac kneeling in pain, trying to pick ice up off the floor. She helps him gather the remaining cubes and put them into a Ziploc.

"Shoulda used crushed," she said. "Or a bag of frozen peas."

"Crushed would be a bigger mess, and peas would be a waste of food—and you know how Mom is about wasted anything lately."

"Yeah," says Ivy. "Especially wasted me."

She hopes it might bring a smile from Isaac, but it doesn't. Maybe he's just in too much pain. "They'll get over it by morning," he says. "They just needed to vent."

Maybe so. But Ivy's not sure she'll be over it. And that doesn't just mean the hangover.

3

R**oxy C**an't C**ontain** Herself

I am so hot right now. And everyone knows it. It's like I own the world. It has no choice but to yield to my gravity.

As I step into the Party, all heads turn, or want to turn, and are fighting the urge. The music hits me first. Loud and rude. It's not just in your face, but in your blood. The lights flash to hypnotize, and the beat takes over your own, replacing it, forcing you to move to it. We are the pacemakers, and right now I'm the one who sets the rhythm. There's no better time to be me.

Al greets me at the door, a glass of champagne in each hand. He's always been the designated greeter, and never misses an arrival. Al's older than the rest of us, been around longer, but he carries his age well.

"My, my, Roxy, you are looking fine tonight!"

"Are you suggesting that I didn't last night?"

He chuckles. "My dear, you get more irresistible every day."

Al slurs his words. It's almost like an accent, the way he's perfected that slur. Consonants and vowels spill over one another. Words in a waterfall. He holds out a champagne flute to me, and I take it. It's how we shake hands here.

"But where's your plus-one?" Al asks, looking behind me.

"I'm on my own tonight, Al."

"On your own?" he repeats, as if it were a phrase in some other language. "That's unfortunate—what will I do with this second glass of champagne?"

I grin. "I'm sure you'll put it to good use."

"Indeed, indeed." Then he leans closer, whispering, "Maybe you could steal a plus-one." He looks over at a gaggle of revelers, singling out Addison. He's dressed in conspicuous style, like he belongs to a yacht club that his father owns. All prestige and privilege. But we all know it's overcompensation for being forever on the periphery. *In* the Party, but not *of* the Party.

"Addi's rather full of himself tonight," Al says. "He's held on to his date longer than usual—you should steal her before someone else does."

"You're always making trouble, Al."

He raises an eyebrow. "I do love a little drama."

Addison is at the bar, intently focused on a young woman, who, in turn, is caught in his hypnotic gaze. He's selling her on how he'll make her life so much better. All the things he can help her accomplish, blah, blah, blah. Even now, he's still going on about his keen ability to focus the distracted. There are moments I admire him for his singularity of purpose. Other times I pity him, because he will never be great like the rest of us. Like me.

Addison and I came up together. Different family lines, but similar circumstances. Born to help others rather than help ourselves. The problem with Addison is that he never outgrew that stifling idealism. I suppose because most of his work is with kids and adolescents, he still holds on to the youthful naïveté of the task he was created for. True, I still do my job

when necessary—dulling angry nerve endings on a strictly clinical basis—but it's such a minor facet of what I've become. They label me a killer of pain, but that doesn't come close to defining me. I've found far more entertaining and empowering uses for my skills.

Al, reading my faint grin, says, "Oh, how I love to watch you calculate, Roxy."

I give him a wink and head off toward Addison. I won't steal the girl from him—I'm fine being solo tonight. After all, we do have to clear our palate once in a while.

Nonetheless, Addison's so much fun to tease.

I make my way to the bar, pushing past the sloe-eyed barflies. Al has long since replaced their empty beer bottles with crystalline glasses filled with more elegant, liver-challenging liquids. Martinis heavy on the gin. Aged scotch. Name your poison, and Al will provide it.

I come up in Addison's blind spot, upstaging him. "Hi, I'm Roxy," I say to the girl, pulling eye contact. She's intense and twitchy. Like she's in the process of being electrocuted but just doesn't know it yet. Too much of Addison can do that to anyone.

"Hi! I love your dress!" she says. "What color is that?"

"What color do you want it to be?"

Addison turns to me, bristling. "Isn't there somewhere else you'd rather be, Roxy? Someone else you'd rather grace with your presence?" He looks around. "How about Molly? She looks like she could use a friend right now."

Molly does look pretty miserable. Dripping wet and crestfallen. "He was in my hands," I can hear Molly complaining. "I

had him—and then some idiot threw me into the pool!"

"Not what I'd call a state of ecstasy," I quip. Then I smile at the girl Addison has been trying to charm. "Molly's a whiner—I'm much happier to hang with you two."

I'm enjoying Addison's irritation—and for a moment, I do toy with the idea of claiming her as mine . . . but it wouldn't be worth the trouble. Addison's positively obsessed with one-upmanship. If I lure her away, he'll never rest until he thinks he's bested me. Poor Addison. He tries to be like me, but he's still too deeply mired in the mundane to ever be a player.

And as if to prove it, the crowd parts, and I see a commanding presence coming toward us through the breach. It's the head of Addison's family. The undisputed godfather of his line. I take a small step back, knowing this doesn't concern me.

"Crys . . . is everything to your liking?" says Addison as he sees his boss. I can see Addison deflate, but he does his best to keep up the facade.

From a distance, Crys is small and unassuming, but up close he's larger than life. Then he becomes intimidating far too quickly. It can be disconcerting for the uninitiated.

"And what do we have here?" Crys says, zeroing in on the girl. He smiles darkly, a sparkling quality about him. Or maybe it's just the glitter on his fingernails. "Addison, aren't you going to introduce us?"

Addison leaks a quiet sigh. "Crys, this is . . . This is . . ."

"Catelyn," the girl reminds him.

"Right. Catelyn." Addison will forget her name as soon as she's out of sight. So will I. A benefit of living in the moment.

"Charmed," Crys says. Then he takes the girl's slender

hand, his fingers closing around hers like a flytrap on a mosquito. "Dance," Crys says, and pulls her out onto the floor. She doesn't resist—but even if she did, it wouldn't matter. Crys always gets his way.

Addison watches them go, pursing his lips, stifling all he wished he could say to his superior. "He could have given me a little more time with her."

"It's not his way," I remind him.

Beneath the flashing lights, Crys and the girl begin their dance. It will not end well for her. Because before the night ends, Crys will pull her into the VIP lounge. Intimate. Deadly. The one place where she'll get everything she's ever asked for and a whole lot she didn't. The VIP lounge is the place where the real business of the Party is done. The girl should consider herself lucky, for Crys is the shining jewel of his line. You can't trade up any higher than that.

Addison shakes his head. "I really don't like Crys's style. I wish I had *your* boss."

"No you don't."

"Are you kidding me? Hiro never leaves the back office. He lets you bring your plus-ones to him when you're good and ready."

I don't argue with him. No one can know what it's like to be on someone else's chain.

"Are you going back out to find someone fresh?" I ask him.

"Why? Just to have them stolen again?"

"Maybe the Party just isn't for you, Addison." And although I mean it as a sincere suggestion from a friend, he takes it as a jab.

"Things are always changing, Roxy. Crys won't always be the head of my line. There's room for someone smart to move up the ladder."

I could almost laugh, but I spare him my derision. He gets enough of that from his upline. "You mean someone smart like you?"

"It's possible."

"But you've never even brought someone to the VIP lounge. You've never been with them to the end. That's not who you are."

He glowers at me. "Just because I haven't doesn't mean that I won't," he says, and strides off, indignant.

After he's gone, I step out onto the deck for some air. The club is high above everything, giving it a spectacular view of the world below—all those city lights. Any city—*every* city—and here, those lights are always twinkling, because it's always night. The date might change, but the scene is the same. The bar never closes. The DJ never stops spinning one song into another. This place exists at that golden moment when the bass drops.

I join Al, who's taking a moment too, standing at the railing, looking down on all there is. The turmoil and excitement. The winds that both lift and shred.

"So many parties down there," I say.

"There's only one Party," Al points out. "The rest are but a faint reflection of this one. People can feel it, reach for it, but can't find it. Not without an invitation."

And then I hear a voice to my left. "Do you ever wish we could do better?"

I turn to see a slight figure wearing a tie-dye dress and a vague expression. Around her neck hangs a heavy diamond necklace completely out of sync with her style. If you can even call it style.

"Do better?" says Al, amused by the thought. "How so, Lucy?"

"You know," Lucy says, as if it's obvious. "Find what we were *meant* to be. Transcend all of this."

"Right," says Al, still smirking. "Good luck with that."

"We are what we are, Lucy," I say, shutting her down. "That won't change, so you might as well embrace it."

"Well," she says, "It's nice to dream." Then she goes back inside, spreading her arms wide and careening side to side, like she suddenly decided she was an airplane.

"I never liked her," Al says. "There's something terribly off-putting about her eyes." Then he goes back in as well to greet newcomers and freshen everyone's drink.

I linger, looking out over the endless array of lights.

Do you ever wish we could do better?

The question rankles me. I *am* better. At the peak of my game. Loved by those who matter and hated by those who don't, because they wish they were me.

Addison might be bitter, but not me. It's time for me to get back out there and bag a new one. I'm ready for my next plus-one.

4

The Curvature of the Earth

ISAAC

"MIT, Stanford, Princeton, or Caltech," Isaac tells his academic adviser. "Those schools have the best aerospace engineering programs in the country."

Mr. Demko screws his lips into a wry and somewhat superior smile. "So you want to be an astronaut."

"No," Isaac says, trying to be a little less condescending than Demko, who has made the same wrong assumption everyone makes. "I want to design the ships that take astronauts out there. I'm going to be a propulsion engineer."

"Oh, I see." Demko immediately begins tapping on his computer, obviously trying to give himself a crash course on propulsion-engineering programs. Isaac doesn't dislike Mr. Demko, but it bothers Isaac that he's a part of his own counselor's learning curve.

"So . . . you want to eventually work for NASA?"

"Jet Propulsion Laboratories," Isaac tells him. "It's a part of NASA. They do all the heavy lifting, you know? Before the *actual* heavy lifting."

Isaac's friend Chet has an uncle who used to work for JPL, so he has at least one potential contact. Isaac has a little fantasy

that he'd put in his time as a low-level engineer at JPL, and then he'd be headhunted by SpaceX or whatever other cutting-edge aerospace companies have exploded onto the scene by that time. He knows that looking beyond the horizon is the first step to getting there. You don't have to be an astronaut to see the curvature of the earth.

"There are plenty of schools with excellent propulsion-engineering programs," Mr. Demko says. Then, as he scans the list of schools he's pulled up, he grins. "MIT, Stanford, Princeton, and Caltech—just like you said. . . . But you may want to widen your field. I'm not saying you won't get in, but look at MIT's average admission GPA—it's 4.18."

"I know—and I only have a 3.77—but I can bring it as high as 3.93 by the time I have to apply—and I know for a fact that MIT accepted some freshmen into their engineering program last year with GPAs under 4.0."

Mr. Demko takes a moment to check his chart again. "Says here you play club soccer?"

"Yes . . ."

"Are you any good?"

Isaac shrugs, knowing where Demko is going with this. "Well, I'm team captain . . . but everyone thinks they're going to get a soccer scholarship, and nobody does."

That makes Demko actually snort. "You're realistic. That puts you at an advantage over most students I see." Then he leans closer. "Here's the thing, though; a simple nod from a recruiter could be the thing that puts you over the top. Even without a scholarship, that nod could make a 3.77 worth a 4.0. . . ."

And although Isaac had considered that himself, having his counselor say it makes it feel all the more legit. Scholarships are pie in the sky . . . but nods? Those happen all the time.

Demko concludes the appointment by giving Isaac some info on financial aid and student loans, which Isaac will definitely need, considering his parents' perpetual financial woes.

When Isaac leaves, he tries not to grimace despite the pain in his ankle. He's made an oath to himself that he will not let this bring him down. He'll do whatever is necessary to keep his injury from affecting him. And now, more than ever, he can't let it impact him on the field.

He knows what to do about it—he had gone through the familiar drill last night. Three ibuprofen—which was one over the recommended dosage but less than full prescription strength. Then twenty minutes of ice as cold as he could stand it, followed by heat, followed by more ice, for three cycles. Then in the morning he got up early to do it again. Yet even with all that, he was still tender and limping, so swollen that he had to leave his shoe untied all day.

"When I was your age, that was a thing," his father had told him. "No one tied their laces."

His soccer team has practice tonight from seven to nine. If he misses it, he won't play this weekend. That's not going to fly. So all day long, whenever he could, he'd been taking off his shoe and massaging his foot, finding just the spot to press where it hurt the most, then massaged that spot anyway, getting the blood flowing through it. Blood flow equals healing.

"Maybe you should kinda sorta . . . I don't know . . . see a doctor or something?" his kinda sorta girlfriend Shelby

suggests. Shelby is big on hedging. When she speaks, she never really commits to anything she says. It's one of many endearing things about her, and will probably make her a good politician someday, which is something she wants to be. Although she hates the word "politician." She prefers "public servant."

The problem with doctors, though, is they have a one-size-fits-all mentality when it comes to athletes. Regardless of how he got the injury, he'd get slapped with one of those Darth Vader boots for two months, and there goes his position on the team, along with any hopes of being noticed by a scout. That hurts more than his throbbing ankle.

"How'd it happen?" Shelby asks.

"My sister's boyfriend," Isaac tells her. "It's okay—I gave as good as I got." Except that Craig isn't currently limping around his biohazard home. Isaac can imagine him, his nose already healing, as he gets high and plays video games on his waterbed. Ivy's always complaining about his douchey waterbed. It bothers Isaac that Ivy might have spent time in it.

"People are saying that Ivy might possibly get sent to the alternative school, maybe," Shelby says.

Isaac thinks of his sister, and for a moment his ankle seems to hurt even more. He knows it's just in his head. One kind of pain begets another. He wishes there were something he could do for her, but Ivy just resents him when he gets between her and her shitty decisions. Not that every decision Isaac makes is stellar—but he does tend to learn from them. Unfortunately, Isaac suspects that his sister only knows how to learn things the hard way.

IVY

Ivy spends lunch hour with her friends. Though she can hardly call them "friends." All they ever do is talk about themselves. Or what party they're throwing. Or who did a keg stand and then passed out, and how all these things manifested on social media.

"You'll never believe who liked my post," TJ says, showing the pic with his teeth photoshopped refrigerator-white.

"Rembrandt?" Ivy says deadpan.

"Is that an influencer?" Tess asks.

"No, it's toothpaste," Ivy responds with scorching sarcasm.

No one laughs, but that leads Tess to open the widely controversial debate on whether swallowing toothpaste leads to brain damage. Tess and TJ are a couple. They are clearly soul mates.

It's hard to have true friends when no one gets your humor. So Ivy returns to the lunch she brought from home because school food sucks ever since a state mandate removed all flavor to make it less unhealthy. Not healthy, just less unhealthy. But Ivy doesn't complain, because cafeteria food is the ultimate in low-hanging fruit as far as complaints go. As a senior, she can always go off campus for lunch, but really, it's not worth the effort.

She glances around at the various groups—which, unlike TV high schools, are less about cliques than they are about lifeboats. Those who can't find one don't necessarily get picked on, but they are more likely to die of neglect in frigid water.

The defining factors are never as simple and clear cut as

"popular kids" or "bandos" or "honors geeks"—because the musical screeches of the band kids have given way to observable talent, and popularity starts to bloom for the honors kids as it dawns on everyone else that smart is good and the future actually exists.

Isaac sits with his own group across the cafeteria. They are from all walks of life, with nothing definable holding them together, and yet they are fast friends. Isaac says something. The others laugh. It's the way friends should be.

Meanwhile, Ivy's friends are playing an uninspired *Would You Rather* game.

"Straight or curly fries?"

"Beer or vodka?"

"Ketchup or ranch?"

Ignore. Ignore. Ignore. Insipid conversation is the bane of Ivy's existence. Well, that, and Shelby Morris—Isaac's stuck-up girlfriend. She lives in her own cloud of moral superiority, and Ivy's unsure how the people around her don't choke on it. Anyone who takes a luxury family vacation to Africa, snaps a staged photo with a malnourished elephant, and makes that their profile pic for two years can't be trusted. Ivy isn't sure what Isaac sees in her. Just one of many things they don't see eye to eye on. Even though there's a lot of sibling love between them, Isaac and Ivy don't connect on many levels. Ivy connects more with people like Craig. Happy, carefree losers. She wonders if that makes her a loser too.

Meanwhile, her friends drone on with their comparisons. . . .

"Filter or no filter?"

"Dogs or cats?"

"Biggie or Tupac?"

That's when Ivy stands, finally having had enough.

"Where are you going?" Tess asks.

"Mars, or the moon," Ivy responds, grabbing her lunch. As far as her friends are concerned, where she's actually going might as well be off-planet. It's certainly not a part of their universe.

Ivy's head has been full of a thousand things lately. She promised her parents she'd get *help*. Every time she goes through this, it's the same story, since Ivy was a child—first it was play therapy, then talk therapy, then behavior modification therapy, and of course medication, which she was never consistent with.

ADHD. That's her affliction—without the H part, but ADD is so last century. Ivy scoffs at the idea of her having a deficit of attention; she focuses just fine on her own when she wants to. Her grades are low because she chooses not to focus. Or at least she tells herself that.

Ivy steps on a public bus. "Does this go downtown?" she asks.

"Unless you plan to hijack it," the bus driver responds jovially.

"No such plans." Ivy flashes her bus pass. "But the day is still young."

On school-cutting excursions, Ivy will usually borrow Isaac's car, but this time it just felt wrong asking him for his wheels after what happened the other night. She shouldn't always be putting him in that position.

Ivy sits, her earbuds blasting her favorite band, Wutever Werx—the perfect soundtrack for bailing from school. Finally, the bus reaches the second to last stop. Her favorite place in the world.

The City Art Museum.

Art was always Ivy's *thing*. It's something that comforts her. The one thing she's actually good at. She used to be in art classes when high school started, but admittance to higher-level classes was limited to those who sucked up to the art teachers. Teachers don't really like Ivy. She knows it's not personal, although sometimes it feels like it is. She is a *type* to them. The type that makes their lives difficult in a stunning variety of ways. It's okay. Ivy doesn't care for them, either. Maybe she'd like her teachers if she went to a different school. An art school or something. But who does she think she's kidding? Her parents would never pay for that. The chance of a return on their investment is simply too low.

The fact is, she's close to flunking out of her senior year. It would mean repeating this semester in the fall, or just accepting the fact that she's not going to finish high school. She already knows that if she has to repeat in the fall, it won't be here. The district will send her to the alternative school.

"There's no shame in it," Mr. Demko had told her. "You just need a different kind of educational experience." Such bullshit.

The bus arrives at the museum. There's a traveling van Gogh exhibition this month. He's one of her favorites. The troubles he had seemed insurmountable, and yet he succeeded not because of them but in spite of them. All his great work

was done when he was well, not when he was in the depths of madness. And often utilizing rich shades of blue. It was why Ivy started dying her hair "VooDoo Blue." Most people think she did it in an act of teenage rebellion, but it was the opposite. It was a way for her to connect with something she cared about. It brought her closer to the person she really was.

Ivy grips a brown-bag lunch and sits on a bench in a gallery of works so vivid, she can almost feel the wild brushstrokes in her brain. Chaos guided into form and structure. But her favorite is one that almost disappears beneath the vibrant assault of the others. *Vase with Carnations.* Famous for being *un*famous. Ivy knows all about it, because from the moment she heard about it, it fascinated her. The painting was from what you might call van Gogh's "meh" period. Just a pedestrian study of light and color. It was hidden in storage for decades, after a Jewish family sold it to escape Nazi Germany. Then, years later, it resurfaced in Hollywood, sitting behind a movie screen in a film mogul's living room before disappearing into museum storage for years. Unloved. Disregarded. That is until someone somewhere decided those carnations deserved some light. Ivy can relate.

She takes a deep breath and lets van Gogh's inspiration—as well as those moments where he lacked inspiration—calm her troubled thoughts. If this is what it takes to wrangle her brain, then Ivy will have to make do. But at some point she'll have to start painting the broad strokes of her own life.

There are only three choices: alternative school, drop out, or kick her ass into gear and make a big change. And if she doesn't choose option three now, only the first two will remain.

But Ivy knows, as much as she hates to admit it, that she can't make that change without a little help.

I'll go see Torres and get the right meds, she tells herself as she bites into her sandwich, staring across at flowers that suffered indignation but never wilted. *Ritalin, Adderall, whatever he prescribes. I'll take it, I'll be consistent, and I'll make my life work.*

Ivy finishes her lunch like this, alone—no noise, no distractions—just her and van Gogh. It reminds her of simpler times, when she was a little girl on a field trip and brown-bag lunches always tasted a little better.

5

The Prince of Attention

ADDISON

I sit in the back row of a piano recital with my older sister, Rita. She feverishly knits a scarf that already wraps twice around the world.

Onstage, a fifteen-year-old boy plays Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto #3—a piece that stymies the most accomplished pianists. I want to appreciate the music, but I can't. How ironic that the so-called prince of attention can't focus.

"You think too much, Addison," Rita tells me in that judgmental way she has. "Stop thinking and just *do*." Even though no one can hear us, Rita whispers, because it is, after all, a recital.

Well, she can spend her life knitting row after row and organizing closets to her heart's content. That's not who I want to be. "I'm tired of doing for others," I tell her. "Our upline does whatever they want, and they get away with it. I'm tired of playing by the rules . . . of being ordinary."

I think about Crys, who can have whoever he wants, whenever he wants—or even worse, the twins, Dusty and Charlie, in their white silk suits and flashy jewelry, lounging in a private booth like spoiled princes, making the party come to

them. But most of all I think about Roxy—who's thinks she's so much better than me now. That never stops chafing.

"Hedonism is not to be envied," Rita says in her most holier-than-thou voice. "Crys, the Coke brothers, and all our other wayward cousins rot everything they touch, leaving behind a trail of misery—"

"That they never see," I point out, "because they're happy to never look back."

"But we're better than that. We have the power to change worlds; all they have is the power to destroy them. We are the gardeners, Addison."

"Yes, but they gorge themselves on what we grow."

Rita just shrugs. "What they do is not our problem." Then she adds yet another row to her scarf, which stays a constant pale yellow, never once having turned green with envy.

Onstage, the boy plays flawlessly. Most don't realize what a feat this is, but I do. Years ago, the boy's parents would have scoffed at the idea of him being onstage at all. But I came quietly into his life and calmed him. Centered him. Helped him feel at peace within his own skin. And then he discovered the piano.

"You're looking at it all wrong, Addi," Rita says. "Look what you've done here. There's much to be proud of."

"The applause will be for him, not me."

Rita turns to me, scowling. How I hate her scowl. "You've become quite the bitter pill, haven't you. Too vain for your own good. I think you've been spending too much time with Roxy—she's a bad influence on you."

That makes me laugh. "You're just jealous because I have

friends in high places." Then I add, intentionally blithe, "I even go up to the Party sometimes."

I thought she might react to that, but Rita is neither scandalized nor impressed. "I've been," she says. "It's not my cup of tea. . . . Is it really yours, Addison?" she asks. "Do you enjoy it, or do you just pretend to?"

The question burns me more than it should. Because part of me knows the answer to that question.

"Why are you even here?" I put to her. "The boy onstage is *my* ward, not yours."

Rita puts down her knitting. "You see the little girl right in front of us? She has trouble sitting still. I was recently brought on to help."

How typical to throw Rita at such a minor concern. "Just because she can't sit still doesn't mean she needs *you*."

Rita sighs. "It's not our job to make that decision, merely to provide service for our ward once the decision is made."

"Our *wards*," I scoff. "Even our lingo betrays our banality."

"Not banality, but responsibility," Rita says. "It reminds us that we are here to provide service and care. Those others at the Party? They see people as targets to acquire and dominate. Their so-called marks." Then she gestures to the stage. "Is that what you want for this young man you've taken such great pains to help?"

"Of course not," I tell her. But I also know that there are others who are older—more streetwise and jaded—who know full well the difference between use and abuse. I would have no problem seeing them as marks and targeting them with the full force of my laser-like focus.

The girl in front of us—Rita's ward—begins to squirm in her seat, and Rita reaches out, draping part of her scarf over the girl's shoulders.

"That's enough," Rita says, both gentle and firm. The girl stiffens. Then relaxes, and Rita returns to her knitting, satisfied. "You see? All better now."

I could go on, but why bother? Talking to Rita is like talking to an assembly line robot. She does only one thing, but she does it very well.

So is that all I am too? Just another tool above a conveyor belt, stamping out identical human molds?

Onstage, the piece concludes, and the boy with whom I worked so hard to reach this moment stands to take his bow amid thundering applause. And although I truly do want to beam with pride, I choose to deny my own nature. Today I refuse to feel anything but slighted.

6

Exactly How to **Fix** It

ISAAC

Isaac chooses to live in defiance of his sprained ankle rather than let it derail his life. He's taught himself how to drive left-footed, and when it's time for practice that night, he slaps on a neoprene brace that's easily hidden beneath his socks, gears up for soccer, and heads for the field.

But tonight he's running even slower than the backup squad. Truth is, the ankle brace doesn't help at all, and it isn't long before the coach takes note and sidelines him. In fact, he tells Isaac to sit out a few days so he can recover, and when Isaac protests, the coach says he'll let him play in the game if he's "up to snuff," whatever that means.

And so, as much as he doesn't want to, Isaac stops by the neighborhood walk-in clinic on the way home. He doesn't tell his parents—they won't know until they get the report from the insurance, and by then it will be a moot point.

He arrives just before closing, and even with only one patient ahead of him, the wait feels like it takes forever. When he's taken back, he can tell that both the nurse who checks his vitals and the doctor who examines him have already mentally checked out for the day. The doc asks the standard questions,

then takes a look at Isaac's ankle. Isaac tries not to grimace as he presses the sore spots.

"It's gone a bit yellow," the doctor notes. "You've had this for a while?"

"Just a few days," Isaac tells him.

"We should get you x-rayed, but our tech is gone for the day. Come back tomorrow and we'll let you skip the line."

"Is that it?" Isaac asks. "Come back tomorrow?"

The doctor offers Isaac his best professional shrug. "No magic wands here, I'm afraid. We'll see you tomorrow for that X-ray."

If there's an upside to being benched from practice, it's that he can spend a little more time with his friends.

After school the next day, and into the evening, they all hang out in his friend Ricky's garage, which has been converted into a "fun room." One of the few places that actually deserves the title. There's a pool table, a soda fountain, and even a couple of old-school pinball machines. Ricky's uncle owns a junkyard, so every month or so there's a new eccentric addition, making the garage the ultimate balm for boredom. This month's installment is a hundred-pound big screen from the turn of the century and a game console that needs a special adapter because the connections it uses no longer exist.

"That old Nintendo is more valuable now than when it was made," Ricky tells them. "And the games are worth even more than the machines."

Chet, Shelby, Rachel, and Ricky sit on the couch and clack away on the controllers playing Super Smash Bros. with

the intensity of neurosurgeons. But Isaac has been tasked with removing malware from Chet's computer, since he's the closest thing to a computer guy they have.

"Isaac, aren't you going to play?" Ricky asks.

"I will as soon as Chet stops crashing his computer with porn."

Rachel guffaws and kicks Chet in the head—in the game. Chet, in turn, playfully punches Isaac's arm—in real life.

"Isaac isn't playing because he's too afraid of losing to me," Shelby taunts from a beanbag. Which isn't entirely untrue—Shelby's always been the goddess of games—though Isaac has already accepted that he'll never beat her unless she lets him. Which she would never do.

"You're an inspiration for the rest of womankind," Rachel lauds her. "And a total pain in the ass. Now die!" She mashes buttons hard enough to break the cheap plastic controller.

Isaac takes a moment to watch his friends. A teacher once told them they looked like the cover of a health textbook. Different ethnic backgrounds, different interests, different everything shoved together in a single dubious tableau. But the group did have one thing in common. Isaac. Each one of them had entered his life at a different stage. He knew Shelby from elementary school, Ricky from soccer, Chet from camp, and Rachel from Sunday school. They stuck together, Isaac being the bonding glue—and when their middle schools all fed into the same high school, they were set from day one. A health textbook case of an organic friendship.

Chet's laptop runs out of power, and Isaac sighs. "Where's your charger?"

Chet spares a quick point between the mashing of buttons.

Isaac stands from the couch to retrieve it, momentarily forgetting about his ankle. The pain makes him flinch, he overcorrects, and he wipes out across the coffee table—an embarrassing fail that knocks over some drinks and sends a metal bowl of popcorn clanging to the ground. "Oww! Damn it!"

The spilling drinks and flying popcorn make the whole thing look much worse than it is—especially when Isaac can't get up right away, because it would mean putting his full weight on that ankle. Chet helps him back onto the couch, while Rachel triages the mess. "Did you resprain it?" Chet asks. "Let me see."

"Stop. I'm fine."

"I got you, bro." Then he forcefully elevates Isaac's leg onto the coffee table, which just makes it hurt even more. Chet works weekends as a pool monitor, though he tells everyone he's a lifeguard, and has been known to forcibly administer first aid. "Why isn't this wrapped? Don't you have an ACE bandage?"

"It's been in a brace all day—I've been letting it breathe."

"You've sprained it again. Look at how swollen it is."

This is infuriating. "It was like that before."

"Ginger and turmeric naturally relieve inflammation," Rachel points out.

Ricky opens a cupboard and tosses Chet a first aid kit, knowing he'll ask for one. "Keep still!" Chet orders.

"No, he should move it around to get blood flowing," Rachel says, then heads into the house to search for a natural cure.

Meanwhile, Shelby takes advantage of the opportunity to kill everyone else's characters. Finally, at the "game over" screen, Shelby looks in Isaac's direction. "Just put ice on it," she says.

"Way ahead of you," Chet responds, giving her a thumbs-up, as if her two cents adds up to something bankable.

"Guys, I know what I'm supposed to do for this," Isaac protests. "I've been doing it for days."

"Just shut up and let a professional handle this." Chet activates a chemical ice pack and thrusts it against Isaac's foot, but it must be too old, because it stays room temperature. Then Rachel returns, announcing that there will be neither tea nor a poultice, because there's absolutely nothing natural in Ricky's house. With this whole humanitarian mission going south, Ricky offers Isaac an escape. "So before they amputate your foot, you want me to take a look at that car of yours?"

Isaac welcomes the chance to get out. So while Shelby sets up the next game and Chet and Rachel try to untangle their controllers, Ricky helps Isaac up from the couch, and they head outside, leaving the others to their Falcon Punches and Thunder Attacks.

Isaac's convertible is in decent shape for a twelve-year-old car. Its roof has duct-tape patches, and, like Isaac's grandmother, often needs help getting up or down, but the car runs. That's thanks to Ricky, who helped him turn it from scrap metal to freeway safe. While Isaac excels in the theoretical, Ricky excels in physical application, so their skill sets always meshed, making them a deadly duo. Ever since they were kids, the two of them have been taking things apart and putting them back together

again—mainly at the expense of Ricky's mom. It's true her hair dryer may blow circuit breakers, but at least it's souped-up to the point of maximum efficiency. And although her coffee maker spontaneously combusted one morning, it did make the world's strongest drip coffee before its blaze of glory. It was always Ricky's thing to make the best of the worst—and that's exactly what he did for Isaac when he rolled up in his hunk of junk earlier this year.

"Old Chryslers actually have Mercedes engines, because they used to be owned by the same company." It was the line Ricky used to convince him to buy the thing in the first place. Now, with Ricky's help, Isaac's car has the low-profile tires of a Porsche and the exhaust of a Mustang. And as much crap as they talk about the car, Isaac and Ricky have actually come to love the thing. It's their final project together before their lives part ways.

Ricky slaps the hood of the car like it's an old friend. "What's wrong this time?"

"Clunky acceleration. Sometimes it struggles to start."

He pops the hood, roves around inside, and does a quick diagnosis. "Just as I thought—spark plugs are shot."

Ricky pulls out a toolbox from his Jeep and gets to work, grabbing the right tools without even looking in the box as he does it.

"How do you make that look so easy?" Isaac asks.

"Bro, you're the one who reverse-engineered that lawn mower, remember? And figured out how to make it fly."

"Yeah, but you're the one who put the thing together."

Their flying lawn mower had become not just a neigh-

borhood story, but an internet meme. It was mere luck that it didn't kill someone when it came down.

They both grin over the memory; then Ricky returns his attention to the car. "It might look complicated, but if you know how it all works, you know exactly how to fix it."

It's a statement so simple, yet at the same time profound, and it sticks with Isaac. "You know, you could be an engineer if you set your mind to it."

That makes Ricky chuckle. "Yeah, well, setting my mind to school has never been my strong suit. But tell you what—when all your crazy-ass designs break down, I'll be around to fix them."

Ricky finally finishes up, slams the hood, and smiles proudly. "See, it's like your foot; all it needs is a little TLC."

But Isaac doubts there's a tool Ricky can blindly reach for that will tune up his ankle.

Isaac's already a light sleeper, but now every time he shifts under the covers, the pain wakes him up. In the morning he ups his ibuprofen from three to four.

It's all he can do to keep his eyes open in class that day, and he heads straight home when school is over. The bathroom mirror reveals bags under his eyes. He decides it must just be his imagination, or the bathroom light, but then his grandmother ambles past with her cane, takes a good look at him, and unleashes a drive-by truth bomb.

"If you're wondering how you look, the answer is *terrible*," she says. Grandma comes from a generation where life was too short for sensitivity. At the end of the day, everyone always

appreciates Grandma's honesty. She cares enough to give you the truth, even if it's straight up with a twist.

She smiles warmly, which tempers her words, then points to her cheek, demanding a kiss, to which Isaac obliges. "I only say that because I know how handsome you are."

"I've been having trouble sleeping," he tells her.

"Don't I know it! It's like a bed of nails when you're in pain." She glances down at his foot. A bit of bruising is visible above his ankle socks.

"I'll get you set up with my orthopedic guy. He's the best. Fix that ankle right up."

"It's okay, really," Isaac says.

Grandma's eyes wrinkle, and she chuckles. "Your grandfather, your father, and now you. All the men in this family hate doctors."Then she reaches into the bathroom medicine cabinet and fishes around, eventually producing an orange prescription pill container. "The doctor gave me these when I busted my hip. Heavy-duty." She places a pill in Isaac's palm. "You could do without the bed of nails for one night." Her eyes twinkle the way grandmas' eyes sometimes do. "What is it they say? No pain, no gain? That's horse shit. Pain is overrated."

Isaac laughs, and Grandma heads down the hall toward her room. Once she's gone, Isaac looks down at the stubby oblong pill; it's smooth and ivory white. Almost weightless in his palm. He pops it in his mouth, then turns on the bathroom faucet, leans over the sink, and scoops some water to his mouth to chase the pill down. He feels it for a moment in his esophagus before it silently slides to his stomach and begins to dissolve.

ROXY

I know the moment it happens—the sensation is instantaneous. Subtle at first, but building. It's an overwhelming feeling of belonging—a connection to something greater than myself. It's what I live for. It's why I exist.

That's what Hiro tells me.

"You're here to envelop them, Roxy. To quell them. And then to bring them to me."

I'm at the Party—in the Jacuzzi. It's an infinity tub that feels so vast, it seems to drop off not just the horizon, but the edge of the entire universe. I've been chatting with Mary Jane, who sits nearby, not daring to ruin her business suit by actually getting in the water. I swear, Mary Jane's gotten so boring since she's gone legit.

Molly's in the tub, wet again, but this time by choice. She holds her plus-one—a handsome frat boy—completely under her spell, drowning in ecstasy. Their bodies seem to melt together. I can't hear her whispers, but I know what she's telling him.

You always were, and forever will be, the only one for me.

But it isn't true. It never is.

The irresistible pull of a new mark summons me out of the hot tub, and everyone watches me as I get out—the way water droplets form on my perfect contours. Their envy is a compliment so rich and aromatic, I can wear it like a fine perfume.

I grab a towel and stand at the edge of our domain, gazing across the sparkling city below and wondering who I will be brought to this time.

"You look like you're fishing," says Addison, coming up behind me. As always, his hair is perfect, and his complexion is radiant. We all exist at our physical peaks. But he also looks like he's trying too hard.

"Are you spying on me?" I tease.

"I'm just a skilled multitasker."

Back in the Jacuzzi, Molly gently cajoles the frat boy. "I know a better spa," she tells him, this time in a stage whisper we can all hear. "The water's so much hotter." Then she leads him out, and he follows her like a woozy puppy across the deck and through the red leather doors of the VIP lounge. The final destination for all our honored guests.

"Molly was fast tonight," I note, impressed.

"Everyone knows she doesn't work alone," Addison replies, but it's just sour grapes. "I can do what she does. I could do what all of you do."

Here we go again. Addison blustering. All talk with no real action. "Then do it!" I tell him. "See someone all the way through to the end. Be their one and only."

Addison shifts uncomfortably. "You don't think I can?" he asks.

But we both know the answer to that question. Addison and I might have come up together, but we're made of different stuff. Different ingredients entirely. He might have been a golden child when we were younger—a fix-all that was supposed to change the world—but times have changed. Everything's faster, more cutthroat. It's a world I'm perfectly suited for—but the more famous I grow, the more Addison covets all of the oxygen in the room. Oxygen he'll never be able to ignite.

So, do I think he has what it takes to see someone through to the bitter end? You tell me.

"Addison, don't ask questions you don't want the answer to," I say. Then I saunter off, pulled by the call of my next mark. Let Addison chew on that for a while. With any luck, he'll finally admit to himself that, no matter how well he's dressed, he just doesn't have what it takes to bring someone to the VIP lounge. Maybe then he'll be content with his place in the world.

I slide through all the excess until I reach the gilded elevator. It's Gothic by nature—elegant and eternal with friezes that depict our ancestors. We venerate them even though they're just less-refined versions of ourselves.

The elevator doors open, and I step inside. There are only two buttons. One to go up to the Party and one to go down. No emergency button. No help or rescue.

I don't need to press a button for the elevator to take me to where I need to go. The buttons are for the mortals below. They are the ones subject to their own decisions. Their own activations.

The doors close, and the elevator descends with building velocity until I'm in free fall.