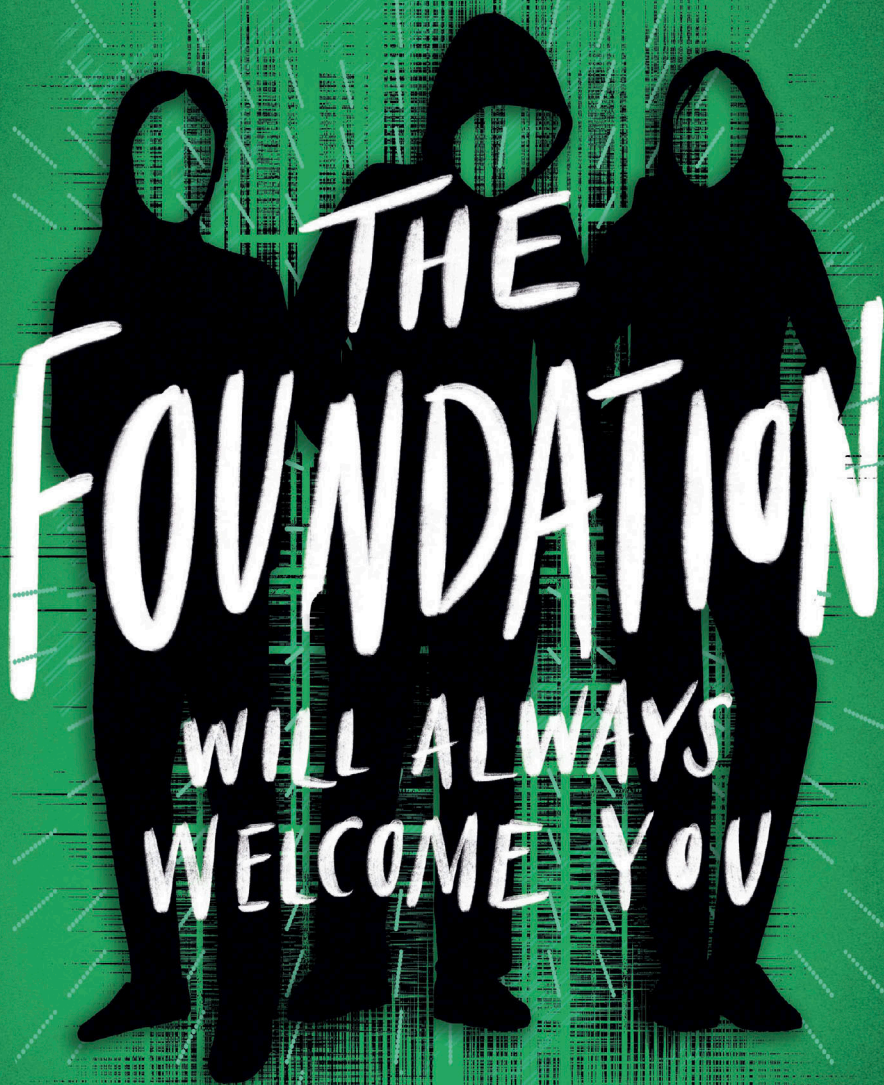


MELINDA SALISBURY



"A chilling vision of where tech might take us" KATHERINE WOODFINE

THE FOUNDATION

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THE FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 1

My mothers collected me from the police station. It was a bad sign that this was only the *second*-worst thing to have happened to me that day.

My mom took charge as soon as she arrived. She was a headteacher and used to dealing with unruly children. I just wasn't often one of them.

"Thank you, Officer," Mom said to the police officer who'd been waiting with me. "We're really sorry – Ivy isn't any trouble normally."

The police officer nodded and said, "She's very lucky, Mrs Finch. Today could have easily ended a different way."

Standing at my mom's side, my mum glared at me. "We'll be having a serious talk with our daughter, don't you worry," she said. "Nothing like this will ever happen again."

“We honestly thought Ivy knew better,” my mom added. “We’ve discussed internet safety with her.”

“Actually, I have something that could be helpful,” the officer said.

She handed a leaflet to my mom while she explained, “A local organisation called the Ash Tree Foundation is hosting a camp for young people who have internet-addiction problems.”

“I’m not addicted to the internet—” I began, but both of my mothers shot warning glances at me. I clamped my mouth shut, and the officer continued.

“As I’m sure you know, there has been a real increase in online crimes and incidents relating to AI lately,” the officer said. “The Ash Tree Foundation is trying to educate young people about the dangers of online interactions and help them form solid relationships in real life. Or *IRL*, as the kids say.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes so hard that I saw the back of my own skull.

When my eyeballs returned to their normal position, I saw both of my mothers and the police officer staring at me. My mom looked *furious*.

“That sounds like *exactly* what we need,” she said. Her tone of voice also said *wait until we get you home*. “And Ivy will definitely benefit from some real-life relationships, as she won’t be gaming online again for a very long time.”

“What?” I said. My mouth fell open. “That’s not fair!”

“We’ll discuss it at home,” my mum said as she ushered me towards the door. “Thank you, Officer, for your help. We’re all really grateful.”

“My pleasure, Mrs Finch,” the officer said, following us out. “Stay safe, Ivy. I mean it kindly when I say I hope I don’t see you again.”

We drove home in silence. The atmosphere in the car was heavy, like a storm cloud was hanging over us. It didn’t break until we were back at the house.

I headed for the stairs, trying to escape to my bedroom.

“Not so fast,” my mom said. “We need to talk, missy. This is serious.”

She held the living-room door open. I sighed, walking past her and taking a seat on the sofa. My parents sat in their usual chairs – Mom on the right; Mum on the left.

“Do you understand what could have happened to you today?” Mom began. “Do you realise how bad it might have been? How close you were to becoming a statistic? I thought we’d taught you better than to meet up with random people you’ve only spoken to online, especially men.”

“If I’d known he was twenty-two, I wouldn’t have gone,” I said. “He said he was fifteen, like me.”

“Ivy, you can’t just believe what people tell you on the internet,” Mum said.

“I didn’t *just believe him*,” I protested. “I looked him up. I checked out his socials.”

My mothers looked at each other, frowning.

“He was pretending, Ivy,” Mum said. “His profiles were faked.”

“We’re getting off the point.” Mom stood up and began to pace across the room. “Ivy, I don’t think you understand how serious this is. He’s a grown man. A twenty-two-year-old man knew

you were a fifteen-year-old girl and *still* wanted to meet up with you. If the staff in the pub hadn't called the police, who knows what might have happened."

"Nothing would have happened," I said. "I pretended I needed the loo so we had to go into the pub instead of getting in his car. *And* I told the staff that I was underage. *And* that he'd lied about how old he was and that I was uncomfortable."

I sat back, folding my arms.

"That was very responsible of her," my mum said, turning to Mom.

"Thank you," I replied.

They both glared at me again, and I mimed zipping my mouth shut.

"It would have been more responsible if you'd called us," my mom said. "And we're getting away from the real issue here, which is that you lied to us, Ivy. You told us you were going into town to use the library."

"I didn't want to tell you I was meeting someone because I knew you'd be like this," I replied. "And if I'd known the staff in the pub

were going to call the cops and not just kick him out, I wouldn't have told them either."

"Exactly," my mom said. "You don't understand the danger you were in."

"I do."

"No, you don't. Because if you did, you would have told us, or someone, that you were meeting a stranger. You would have let someone know where you were going to be. But you didn't. You lied about it."

"I'm sorry—"

"And that's why you're not allowed to play your games online any more," Mum continued. "You have to start living in the real world, Ivy. You can't keep escaping off to these fantasy lands. You need to engage with real people. You need to get a real life. You need friends."

Tears pricked my eyes and I blinked them away. "I have a life," I said. "I have friends."

"You have contacts on a screen," my mum said in a gentle voice. "They're not friends, Ivy."

"We're not saying you can't play at all," my mom added. "When you're ungrounded, you can

still play normal games – the ones we buy you. But we’re going to block the internet access for the console until you’re at least sixteen.”

My jaw dropped. I didn’t care about being grounded. It’s not like I went out anywhere anyway, as my parents had cruelly pointed out. But I *needed* to be able to get online when I was playing. At the very least, I needed internet access to download new patches and fixes for my games. I explained that to my mothers.

“We’ll do that for you,” my mum replied. “You can show us.”

“But what about my teams? Mom, I’m in teams with people – they rely on me. I can’t just disappear.”

“Yes, you can,” Mum said. “I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but everyone will survive. And you’re going to this Ash Tree Foundation thing. There will be lots of kids there like you. Ivy, I know you can’t see it right now, but you need this.”

I slumped back against the cushions. My life was over.