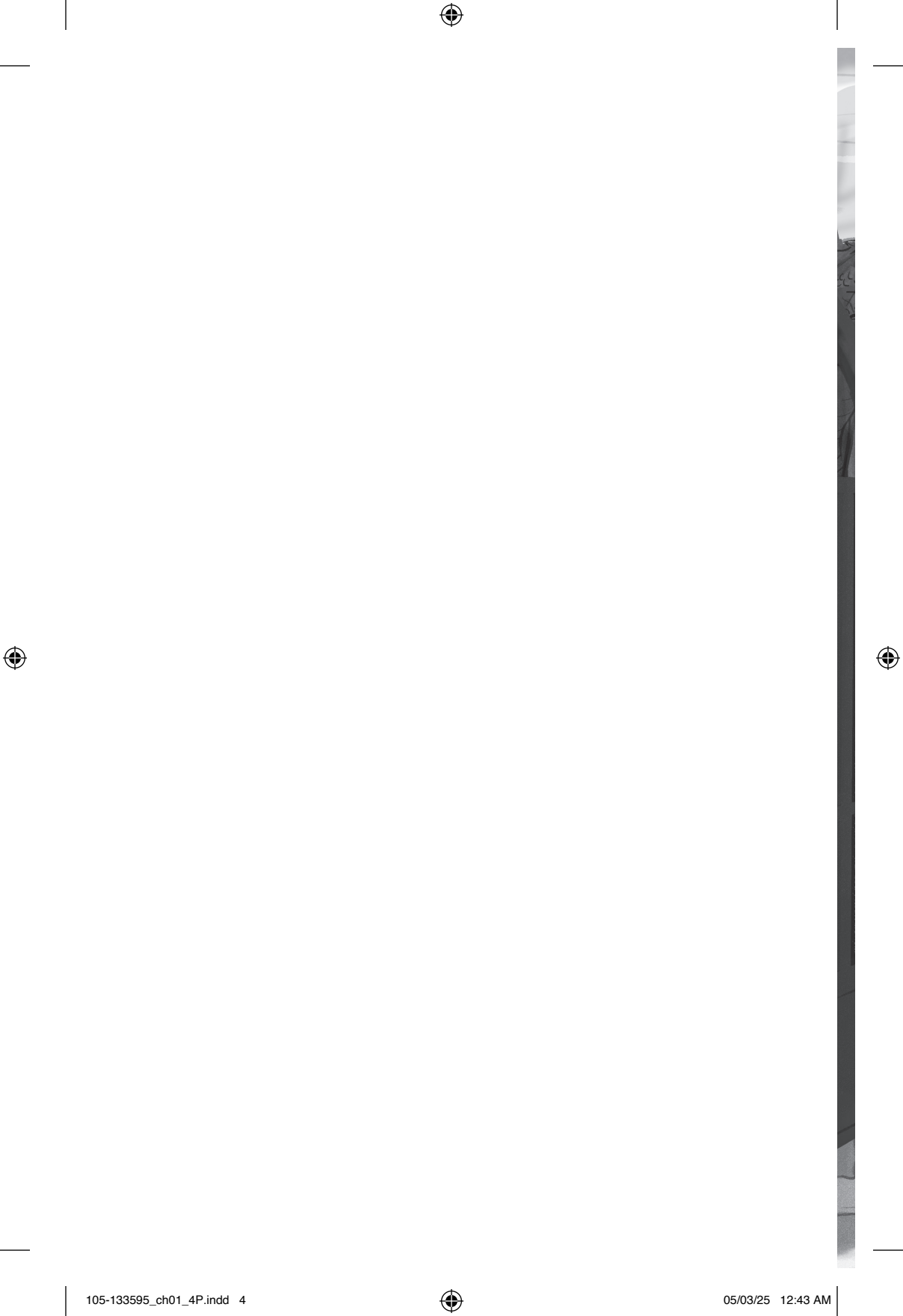




COFFEESHOP IN AN ALTERNATE UNIVERSE



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HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in the UK in 2025 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
5th Floor, HYLO, 105 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LZ

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1937-9

Also available as an ebook

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Designed by Aurora Parlagreco & Meg Sayre
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



The authorised representative in the EEA is
Bonnier Books UK (Ireland) Limited.
Registered office address: Floor 3, Block 3,
Miesian Plaza, Dublin 2, D02 Y754, Ireland
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bonnierbooks.co.uk/HotKeyBooks

***In loving memory of
my grandfather, Mike Lee,
who taught me to savor
every joy in this lifetime,
and
for my daughter Nova,
to experience the full breadth
of everything this universe
(and any other)
has to offer.***



1 ♥ BRENDA

Apparently the big secret to life is that the universe hears everything you want: everything you put into it, all your hopes and dreams, every energy into every thought. So the more positively you think—the more energy you put into believing that your dreams are possible, the more motivation you have to go after them—the more the universe will respond in kind and make you more in tune to see those opportunities.

That's why I came up with the Plan.

I think about it constantly, training my unconscious to put this energy out that I, Brenda Nguyễn, high school senior in a small no-name suburb, am going to save the world.

I *know* that I singlehandedly can't stop an asteroid from hitting the earth, or save a school bus headed for a train, or whatever comes to mind when you think "save the world." I know I don't have superpowers or anything ridiculous like that. But there *are* supervillains out there—corrupt people and corporations destroying our planet, reducing the quality of life of people all over the world. And I know I can fight them, through science and collaboration with public policy and inspiring change at all levels.

But, of course, all plans have their snags.

The internet is out.

"Má, I need your car!" I say, trying not to panic as I dash to the front door.

Of all the days for the Wi-Fi to kick the bucket, of course it's when my scholarship is due. This wouldn't have been a problem, since I wrote my essay last week, but my last recommendation letter didn't come in until today. Mr. Mendoza, my AP Bio teacher, mixed up the date of the deadline.

This past week was a hectic scramble—not that my life usually isn't or that I can't handle it. I can handle complicated; I have to if I want to



become the next Shannon Mayfield, incredible scientist and green entrepreneur. Her clean energy breakthrough created the world's first industrial factory with zero carbon footprint to make everyday household things.

I don't particularly have a passion for sustainable soap, but Fields Forward offers a full scholarship to any four-year university for students studying environmental science *and* it includes a fellowship where you get academic credit to do research in their cutting-edge labs.

I need this scholarship. It ties in perfectly with the Plan:

BRENDA NGUYỄN'S ULTIMATE PLAN TO SAVING THE WORLD

13. ~~Take all the AP science classes and PASS THEM~~
14. ~~Write a killer personal statement~~
15. ~~Apply for all the best colleges, including UCLA (the dream school!!!!)~~
16. Apply for all available scholarships, including FIELDS FORWARD!!!
17. Use scholarships to pay for said dream school
18. Go to UCLA and do the ultimate research project at Fields Forward Industries
19. Invent something awesome and SAVE THE WORLD

Under Step 16 I have a sub-list for every scholarship; all of those are complete except one. But when I reminded Mr. Mendoza on Monday, he said, "Oh, of course, Brenda, I'll get that to you by the deadline. Friday, right?"

"Wednesday at 6:00 P.M.," I said, my relief at finishing the essay flying out the window.

"I promise, I'll get it in. Can you email me the info again?"

Every problem is just another challenge, I reminded myself.

The week didn't get better from there.

Everyone in concert band was freaking out about the upcoming competition, and I spent all of after-school practice helping the freshmen prepare. More Key Club volunteers signed up than expected for our next service trip, and I need to figure out options with the limited transportation. Three dif-

ferent vendors bailed for prom, and if I have to sit through another student council meeting squabbling over the musical tastes of the last DJs in Los Angeles in our budget I'm going to scream. This late in the game, we can't afford to be picky. Yesterday I finally got everyone to agree on a DJ, and a florist signed the contract, so prom is back to smooth sailing.

And then regionals last night was almost canceled because of that 4.2 earthquake out in Inglewood early that morning. We had some shaking in second period, and Ms. Forsyth's globe fell over, but nothing major at all happened, just the usual scientists freaking out and other scientists calming everyone down. Apparently the uptick in these moderate quakes this year are a good sign, according to the latest report out in Caltech. That the pressure in the San Andreas Fault is being released slowly, instead of all at once, which means the Big One may not come at all.

Anyway, we're Angelenos and used to moving on with our lives despite earthquakes. And regionals went spectacularly; we *won* and Ms. Collette, our band director, was ecstatic. San Pablo High has never even qualified for the statewide music festival before, so everyone is excited.

But regionals were in downtown LA, so by the time I got home, I just passed right out. I'd brought my laptop to school to submit my essay first thing only to realize there was no letter.

"Right after school, I promise," he said when I nudged him about it in class today.

I left band practice early after giving the freshmen some practice exercises and caught the first bus home. But no letter yet. I watched the site like a hawk while polishing my essay. There was a new article in *Forbes* featuring Fields Forward so I took the opportunity to reference it. Maybe Shannon herself would be reading the final essays.

At 5:27 p.m., I refreshed one more time and finally, finally, there are *three* recommendation letter icons instead of the two that have been plaguing me all week. Right under the wire. *Thank you, Mr. Mendoza!* I tried submitting the application, only to find the blank horror of zero bars of connectivity on my laptop display.

I wish I had a Wi-Fi hotspot on my phone or something, but the last time I asked Má, she said it wasn't worth the extra expense if I didn't need it all the time. But you can't really predict when you would ever need something like this until it happens.

"Má! I'm taking the car to the library!" I shove my feet into my tennis shoes without undoing the laces, keys in my hand, backpack swinging from my shoulder; I'm all ready to go.

"Aiyah—slow down, you're gonna trip or something!" Má calls from the kitchen. "Auntie Vân is going that way. Take your cousins, too; they've got nothing to do!"

"Má, nè!" I complain, stopping on the patio. "I don't have time. I need to submit my scholarship before six!"

Auntie Vân hustles Jimmy and Stacey toward me. "The library is ten minutes away. And it's across the street from the 99 Ranch. I can do the grocery shopping while you take the kids to the library," she says.

No, no, no.

5:28. I don't have time to argue.

"Fine, come on," I mutter, jerking my head toward the car.

"Brenda's driving? All right!" Five-year-old Jimmy's face breaks into a wide grin.

My other cousin, Stacey, is twelve and is already too cool for everything. She rolls her eyes at me, tapping away at her phone, probably complaining to her friends how she has to hang out with her nerdy cousins.

By 5:32 we are all miraculously in the car.

"I think I'll make bánh xèo this weekend. Do we still have basil at home?"

"Uh, I dunno." I'm trying to concentrate, but my arms are shaking as I drive as fast as I can under the speed limit, and I can't muddle through my toddler comprehension of my own language to parse through Auntie's too-quick Vietnamese to mentally compare the herbs she's asking about with what we have at home.

5:37. The light is still red. Great. My fingers tighten on the steering wheel. The back of my shirt sticks to the car seat.

“Slow down!” Auntie Vân says, scowling as I veer right and take a short-cut across a gas station lot. “What are you doing? So dangerous!”

“Oooh,” Stacey says, and I can see her smirking in the back seat, the traitor.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter sheepishly, trying to concentrate as I pull into the parking lot. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

Auntie Vân huffs, patting my shoulder. I tap my fingers impatiently on the steering wheel as Auntie Vân seems to take *forever* getting out of the car, idling to tell Jimmy and Stacey to pick up some Vietnamese newspapers.

“Come on,” I mutter under my breath. I grip my lucky TARDIS key chain, fiddling with the familiar shape of the telephone booth.

“And Wilshire is backed up all the way to Sepulveda from downtown, looks like a loose pack of wyverns, if you’re heading westbound, stock up on extra fireproofing spells—”

What? I turn the volume up, frowning. A pack of . . . what? The radio crackles with static for a second.

“—a three-car pileup at Wilshire and Figueroa—”

I shake my head; I must have imagined it. Probably the stress. Better find a place to upload this essay and fast.

Finally Auntie Vân is out and waddling toward the 99 Ranch supermarket. I zip across the street and park at the library.

“I’ll meet you in the kids section in one hour!” I say, giving Stacey and Jimmy an admonishing look.

Stacey gives me a *whatever* face, but she takes Jimmy’s hand dutifully anyway, and they head toward the colorful children’s area of the library.

A bead of sweat drips down my brow as I look for an open place to turn in my essay—desk, couch, whatever—I’m not picky at this point. But there’s nothing. Every seat in the library is taken: kids chatting with their parents, people studying avidly with thick textbooks, seniors leisurely reading newspapers, each computer station occupied.

Fine. I can submit this essay *standing*.

I open my laptop, precariously balancing it on my other hand—

What in the—

The Wi-Fi symbol is *grayed out*.

I snap my laptop closed, taking in the 5:41 on the big wall clock. My eyes flit about the room, past the crowded computer stations, looking for an answer—

We are experiencing technical difficulties with our wireless connectivity server. If you would like to connect to the internet, please use one of the library computers. :)

The happy face at the end of the sign is mocking me. No. I have to get this essay submitted. Without scholarships, I won't have a chance at affording tuition even if I get in. Another pang of anxiety streaks through me—I haven't heard back from UCLA yet, and it's driving me wild. I can't—I can't *stay* here in this cramped house with my mom and all my aunties and cousins. I've got big dreams and I'm getting out of here. I'm going to save the world. This is the next step of the Plan and I need to do it.

I bite my lip, thinking quickly as I power walk out of the library, my heart pounding rapidly against my rib cage. I have to find another option, and fast.

"It's okay, there's still time," I mutter. I repeat it again until I've convinced myself. *Do you hear me, universe? There's still time. Please. I just need somewhere to connect, somewhere to sit—*

I look down the street; should I go back to the car and try to drive somewhere? No, I don't have enough *time* . . . My brain swirls with panic, and I can feel my nerves starting to fray with every thought, my heart racing and the worry and doubt starting to seep in. I can feel the thoughts starting to get away from me already; if I don't turn in the scholarship and I don't get any of the others I applied to, I'll be stuck with no prospects of how I'm going to pay for college and the Plan is going to fall apart . . .

Focus. I need focus. And coffee.

Wait. This is Main Street—there's a bunch of shops and diners and an indie coffeeshop or something like—yes! There. I see it: a sign shaped like a coffee cup, just down the street.

I run, my backpack bouncing against my back as I narrowly avoid pedestrians and an angry bicyclist who shouldn't be riding on the sidewalk anyway.

Main Street is wider here; this is the old part of town. Oak trees that have seen better days line the pavement, and a big divider with dried, brown grass lies in the center of the street. BROWN IS THE NEW GREEN, the sign declares. Drought as usual.

The coffee cup sign stands out against the fading, long-out-of-business storefronts. There's a shimmer of air pulsing around the sign, or maybe just the shop itself. Wow, it really is that hot. There's no name on the sign; it must be new. Then again, I can't remember the last time I was this far down Main Street. I exhale a sigh of relief at the hand-lettered OPEN sign at the front of the shop and push my way in.

The door jingles merrily as I enter; low jazz music plays softly, a light piano accompanying a wistful saxophone. There's a polished grandfather clock standing proudly in the corner, whose hands tell me I still have at least ten minutes. I can feel my panic start to subside. As my eyes adjust to the soft, warm light of the coffeeshop, I notice immediately that it's empty. A small place, with a couple of booths along one wall, a few round tables, and some squashy armchairs in the corner. Perfect.

I set down all my things and head to the counter, blinking at the chalkboard menu. It looks incredibly complicated. Apparently people must customize their drinks all the time. The shop's flavors are cute, themed around moods or something, like "Slow Me Down" or "Rewind" or "Wake Me Up."

"Espresso, espresso, espresso . . .," I mutter to myself, but I can't find it anywhere on the menu.

"Be right there with you," says a voice underneath the counter. I can only see a blue baseball cap as its owner's head digs for something. "You know what you want?"

I don't have time to decipher this menu or to chitchat about this coffeeshop's hipster specials. My heart is skyrocketing with panic, and

words start tumbling out of me. "Sorry, I've never been here before, but can I just do an iced coffee with two shots of espresso . . ."

"You want a Pick-Me-Up? House special."

"Sure, I just need to get this done . . . I've got a scholarship deadline in the next ten minutes so I gotta . . ."

The voice is amused. "No worries. I'll bring it to you."

I set a twenty on the counter before darting back to my table. "Thank you so much! Keep the change!"

There's an unsecured network called Mr. Freezy's, which I don't think twice about connecting to. I exhale with relief when I see the connection symbol light up. I roll my shoulders back, load up the Fields Forward website, and log in. I can do this.

I set my TARDIS on the table for luck. I fly through the digital application, doing a quick review of my short answers and making sure all the files are uploaded correctly.

A silvery mug is set down next to me. I take a generous sip. It's some heavenly concoction of espresso and iced coffee. There's a hint of vanilla and cinnamon, and something else, a bright flavor that makes me perk up right away. No wonder it's the house special; it's amazing.

A calming peace settles over me. The music is a soft, constant murmur, quick and encouraging, and with every sip of my coffee, I have new determination to finish.

5:56.

I give the whole application one more once-over and then press SUBMIT. The website reloads, and I get a cute thumbs-up image and a canned confirmation message. I slump back in my chair. Done.

I close my eyes, watching a swirl of colors dance behind my eyelids, counting slowly. I can relax for a little; only a minute, and then I'll get out my to-do list and evaluate what else needs to get done tonight.

Thank you, universe.

There's a laugh, bright and tinkling. "Wow, when you said you really needed to get it done, you meant it. You finish?"

I throw my arms into the air and whoop victoriously.

There's a chuckle. "Congrats."

I open my eyes and look up right into a pair of bright brown eyes, warm with amusement. Wow, really, *thank* you, universe. The girl is incredibly cute, with a heart-shaped face and a smile that seems perpetually sunny. Wisps of black hair escape from her baseball cap, framing her face with soft tendrils. "I've never seen you here before. You go to Devonsford?"

"San Pablo."

"Mm-hmm," the girl says, drawing out the sound thoughtfully. "I'm Kat."

"Brenda," I say, suddenly nervous.

Kat grabs the chair next to me and spins it around. She's wearing a white crop top and baggy vintage denim overalls, revealing an expanse of golden-tan skin at her side as she sits astride the chair backward and regards me with a grin.

I can't think of anything else to say, even though I know I'm known for rambling and usually saying too much. I rack my brain for something, anything to say, something cool, but the only thought running through my head is *cute girl cute girl cute girl*, and I keep getting distracted by the slope of her bare shoulders, the easy warmth of her smile.

Kat glances at my empty cup and smiles. "You like the Pick-Me-Up?"

"Yeah, definitely, thank you." I give her a sheepish smile in return. "What's in that, by the way? It's really good. I feel like it was exactly what I needed." I'm not lying. It was like magic—the calmness and focus that settled over me as soon as I took a sip.

Kat grins. "It's my specialty. Technically the shop specialty, but I find that Pick-Me-Ups aren't always effective if you add sugar, so I used vanilla instead, and I added a shot of Willpower, too. Looks like you needed it."

She slides my money back to me across the table. I glance at the slightly crumpled green bill sitting on a paper menu I hadn't noticed earlier. *Sammy's Coffee and Pick-Me-Ups* it reads across the top.

"No, seriously, keep it and the change," I insist. "You literally just saved me right now."

One of Kat's overall straps slips off her shoulder, dangling as she shrugs. "Don't worry about it; it's on the house. Plus, you finished your scholarship, and it's your first time here."

I can feel blood rush to my face as I try not to stare at the high, rounded curve of her biceps, and I glance back at my laptop quickly, trying to resist the urge to clap my hands to my face to hide. I always turn bright red when I'm embarrassed—or interested in someone. I hope I'm not too obvious.

Kat doesn't seem to notice, just gestures at my keyboard, lifting an eyebrow. "This is cool. Where'd you get it?"

"Huh?" I glance at my keyboard cover. It's a bit dirty, but the bright neon green is still visible and looks absurdly bright in the soft warm colors of the coffeeshop. "Oh, that was a present from my friend Erica. She knows I'm a klutz and was like 'this way you can be cute and in the event you spill something, you won't totally ruin your life.'"

I pick at the cover, lifting the corner a little to show it's removable. "So, ah, you go to Devonsford?" The high school across town is one of San Pablo's bitter rivals; even though we're both public schools, Devonsford is in a much nicer area of town.

"Yeah," Kat says. "It's not bad. I used to go to San Pablo, but I transferred a couple months ago to Devonsford." She shrugs. "My dad's happy; they've got the best advanced spelling program in the city."

I nod. I knew competitive spelling bees were a thing, but I didn't know you could take a class in it. But I definitely know all too well about trying to get into all the advanced classes, even though my mom says she'll always support whatever I want to do, I still feel that pressure. To make her proud. To show that her sacrifices were worth it. "Are you first or second gen? My grandparents came over in the '80s when my mom was a kid, so technically I think that makes me second gen since I was born here."

Kat chuckles. "I always get first and second confused. Like, are you first gen if you're born here or when you settle?"

I nod. "One of my cousins just took an Asian Am class in college and there's even a 1.5 gen—that would be my mom."

“The Woos have been here since the first Chinese immigrants came over to work on the railroad,” Kat says with a shrug. “Dreams of the Gold Mountain and all that.”

“Oh wow. That must be so cool, to be connected to all of that history and hear all the stories!” My own family history feels so abrupt, like we were lifted up by a storm and had to start anew. My grandparents hardly ever talk about the war, and I can barely hold a conversation with them in Vietnamese. It must be nice to be able to connect with family members who have had more generations here.

Kat blinks and looks away quickly. “Oh, I only know a little of that. I don’t really have a lot of family left on my mom’s side.” She taps my laptop, quirking her eyebrows at me. “So what was your scholarship thing about?”

“Oh, just, like, what I plan to do in college and why they should select me specifically for this scholarship.”

“And what do you want to do?”

“Save the world, basically.” I laugh a little, trying to play it off as a joke, but really, that’s what I want to do. I don’t think I’ve ever said that out loud before.

Kat doesn’t laugh or give me any sort of patronizing *that’s nice* expression. She tilts her head, regarding me. “Okay. How are you gonna do that?” The question seems exactly what it is: honest curiosity.

I plunge forward, emboldened by her gaze, and begin talking animatedly about the Plan. I’m already on Step 7 and how I realized in AP Chem that through science I could make a difference when I realize Kat is actually paying attention. Most people’s eyes gloss over if I get this far in the spiel, but she’s leaning forward, listening with interest. There’s a little furrow in Kat’s forehead as she knits her eyebrows together, and a hint of a smile on her lips.

This . . . is new.

I feel flushed with the attention and lose my train of thought, fumbling through the rest of the Plan. How do I explain Step 11 again? She is so cute, those eyelashes, damn.

She's staring at me. I stopped talking. Right.

"Yeah, so, I just want to make a difference," I mumble awkwardly.

Kat shakes her head. "When do you sleep?"

"I sleep," I insist. At least five hours. Okay, maybe more like four.

"You just told me you're part of marching band and the school paper and the president of like three different clubs—"

"Only one—I'm the *vice* president of the honor society—"

Kat snorts. "Yes, college is all well and good, but you've got to be in one piece when you get there, you know? It's cool, though, you want to be a . . . scientist?" She scrunches up her face, like she's still processing everything. "Not many people can pull that off, and you've got a twelve-step program and everything."

"Nineteen."

I like her laugh, how she throws her head back and her whole body shakes with mirth.

"Sounds like a helluva plan," Kat says. "Just make sure you make time to have some fun in there." The corner of her mouth quirks up, like she's holding back a smile just for herself and she knows all the secrets in the world.

She leans in closer, and I take a slight breath, hoping to be unnoticeable. She smells like freshly ground vanilla beans.

"Okay," I say, swallowing back the urge to giggle nervously. The only thing I can think about is how cool she is, how she didn't laugh at the Plan, how I could never in a hundred years pull off how casually confident she is.

I fiddle with my hair self-consciously. "So, um. Fun. What do you—do you like to do?" Way to go, Brenda. You've definitely impressed her now, what with your endless rambling about the Plan and your dorky goals.

Kat grins at me, tipping the chair forward and leaning back and forth casually. She shrugs. "Lots of things. Walk around the pier, people watch. Mess around with runes and come up with my own spells."

"Cool, like Dungeons & Dragons stuff?" I can't help grinning excitedly at her. I *love* Dungeons & Dragons; I even have my character sheet and

notebook in my messenger bag right now—you never know when you might have inspiration or when your friends want to do a one-shot.

Kat lifts her eyebrows at me in surprise. “You think it’s cool?”

“Well, yeah,” I say, giving her a small smile. Of course, I’d never admitted this to someone I just met. There are certain expectations at school on what’s cool and what isn’t. But I bet if anyone met Kat and her effortless confidence they’d think *Dungeons & Dragons* was cool, too.

Kat leans closer, her eyes sparking with interest as she listens.

I can’t help but giggle, a thrum of nerves rushing through me. “My friends and I play every week. We get into so much trouble, but it’s fun! One time our party came up against a red dragon and I nearly died like three times, but—”

Kat’s eyes widen. “You got away? Dragons are so—”

I nod, thrilled. I haven’t gotten to geek out like this in forever. “Yeah, I know, right? Luckily I had some great spells handy, and I made one that Erica actually approved of and I had just leveled up, so.” I blush, but that had been a really difficult campaign, and I’m proud of how it came out.

“Whoa,” Kat breathes. “That’s amazing. I’ve never met anyone who’s encountered a dragon before, let alone anyone else my age who writes their own original spells. I’d love to hear more—”

The bell over the door chimes again, and a few people walk in, laughing and talking with one another. They look like they’re coming from dress rehearsal but for three different plays. Maybe there’s a convention in town I didn’t know about. I can’t place what characters they’re supposed to be or even what time period the clothes are: One woman looks like she’s wearing some sort of steampunk-inspired tweed business look with snappy suspenders, and another is in a corset and flowing skirt.

Kat waves at them and glances back at me with a sigh. She stands up, pushing the chair back into the table. “I gotta go take this,” she says, jerking her head at the customers. “You gonna be here awhile?”

"I have to go pick up my aunt and my cousins," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "But I could come back Saturday? Do you want to hang out then?"

Kat's eyes sparkle. "I'm off Saturday. I can meet you here if you want to have coffee?"

"So, it's a date?" The last word comes out as a high-pitched squeak, and I clap my hands to my mouth in embarrassment. "I mean, if you want it to be . . . ?"

"Oh!" Kat says, looking nervous for the first time. She looks down at her feet, and then back at me. "Yes, I'd love that."

"That sounds great," I say.

A slow, pleased smile blooms across her face, and I know there's a goofy grin on my face as well. Excitement courses through me; I know I've got work to do, lists to write and rewrite and check off, but a few hours with Kat seems like the best thing in the world right now.

We stare at each other for a few seconds, and then the moment is broken when one of the customers coughs.

"I have to go, but I'll see you Saturday," Kat says. "Is four okay?" She takes a napkin off the table, scribbles hastily on it, and hands it to me. "I might have to pick up a shift in the afternoon, but I'll definitely be done by four."

I nod, tucking the napkin into my pocket for safekeeping, the reality of a date still kicking in. I accidentally knock over the chair as I stand up and apologize, trying to pick it up.

Kat laughs, helping me tuck the chair back in and our hands meet in a brush of warmth.

"Saturday," she says.

"Saturday." It's a promise, the hope of something new and exciting in my usual routine. I can't wait.

I gather up my things in a daze. I pause at the door and catch her eye as she waves at me. I wave back with a giggle, then turn to face the window with a smile before I make a fool of myself. Outside, I can see wind rus-

ting through the green grass by the street, and everything is beautiful and peaceful—

Wait.

Green grass?

I stare; the sidewalks are lined with overgrown, tall grass. Looking down Main Street, the whole road is lined with lush oaks rustling with thick, waxy green leaves, willows swaying in the wind, tall leafy plants I can't name, all of it bursting with life on the narrow meridian in the middle of the street.

I open the door and step out just as a dry, hot wind rushes by, whipping my hair into my face. I cough and splutter and when I look up, all I can see is the same old dry and dusty meridian, parched earth and long-dead weeds.

Huh. It's so hot I must be seeing things.

My phone beeps with several texts. I must be late.

I race toward the library, making it to the end of the block in record time.

A storefront window reflects a hot blast of sunlight into my face. I squint and turn back toward the row of faded shops where Sammy's Coffee and Pick-Me-Ups was. The giant coffee cup sign is faded and hanging at a strange angle—huh, that's weird. It looked brand new to me earlier, but I was so stressed and distracted, I probably missed it.

Stacey stands up from the library front steps. "Where have you been? Mom's been texting me nonstop for the last few minutes," Stacey says.

"I said an hour," I say, scowling.

"Yeah, well Mom said whenever *she* was done shopping, so—"

I look down at Jimmy, who's holding a tote bag full of books and beaming. "What'd you get?"

"This one is about a dog who goes to space and this one is about a cheese monster and—"

We get in the car, and I tune out Stacey's negativity and listen to Jimmy's excitement about his new books as we drive across the street. Pulling up to the grocery store, I spot Auntie Vân in a comfortable squat, looming

protectively over all her grocery bags at her feet like a mother hen. She waves me over and *tsks* at me for being late as I hop out to help her load the bags.

“Did you finish your work?”

“Yes, thank you,” I say, stashing the last bag securely in the trunk.

“Good, good.” Auntie Vân wipes away sweat from her brow. “You took so long I got worried! Good thing I found this shade.”

The flimsy tree barely casts a shadow; it’s mostly dry branches, withering in the drought like everything else.

I think about that moment at the coffeeshop, seeing all that greenery exploding out of the ground, like the plants had so much water and nutrients they didn’t know what to do except grow.

It’s a ridiculous concept. We’ve been in a drought since before I was born. The city hasn’t watered those meridians in years.

I must have imagined it.