

THE SAME BUT NOW A SHADOW

The next morning, I dragged myself through the motions before work. I should never have gone out to dinner. Sleep remained elusive all night. Every time I drifted off, the FBA of my nightmares came in and brought me back to heart-pounding, hyperventilating alertness.

Outside of school, I lingered on the curb, digging my nails into my palms. A sharp blast of wintry air brushed across my bare cheeks. It was exactly what I needed. What I didn't need was a man, and now work would be awkward.

Why couldn't I love being alone?

Why not take on the world as a single woman?

Just the idea caused something ugly inside me to rise, my monster to uncoil. A core element of my innate being craved connection, and maybe some proof I wasn't fundamentally flawed.

The tall building that housed the learning community of the Dome loomed over me.

Squaring my shoulders, I drew in a breath, and the cold burned a path through me, in much the same way crystal webs climbed the windows of the school. Elaborate patterns crisscrossed the glass, climbing like mother nature's

fingerprints from each black pane into and across the neighboring gray cement. Now, she was an independent woman.

I smiled.

But it faded as soon as I spotted Cordell pass by the window. His brown, vacant eyes were twin nightmares. In the place where a vibrant, intelligent student once lived, now a stranger existed. Even from this distance, I could tell his movements were wrong for him. His shoulders drooped, and he shuffled instead of sauntering. He used to be such a macho, charismatic ball of energy.

Only two more years of required service for me—the cost of the government’s proffered, mandatory education. Thankfully, a smile wasn’t required, but how much longer could I stand the heartache? I didn’t feel like working today, but that didn’t matter. “All right, Shea, it’s time for us to get to work.”

Shea slipped into her usual prattle. “I’ve uploaded the lessons for today’s instructional program. All present students have checked in for today’s attendance. Jayden Meander will be absent. There will be an adjustment to the schedule.”

I tuned Shea out at the mention of Jayden, Felice’s brother.

He would miss the day’s lessons. It didn’t matter. The lessons were all outlined based on a government-mandated recipe for filling young citizens with the basic ingredients to their assigned future job’s requirements. Would he still have that future ahead of him?

I stepped under the beam of the school’s entryway scanner, and it read my implanted chip. The doors swung open. A warm blush of heat surrounded me as I entered the mouth of the building.

“There will be an assembly during the fifth hour,” Shea continued.

Being a teacher was mindless work. Follow the program like a robot and try not to die of boredom or get caught

attempting something new or outside the program. Why didn't they make a robot for the job?

A nudge of guilt bumped against my ribcage. If the Dome replaced me with a robot, I wouldn't have met my amazing students.

"Got it." The bustle and crush of a hallway full of kids almost pushed me back through the front doors.

Rockelle rounded the corner. Her flushed face held a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Morning, Ms. Knowles."

"Morning, Rockelle." I glanced at her hands shoved deep into her pockets. "Everything okay?"

"Just drama." Rockelle's flushed brown face told more of the story than those two words. Her tight black curls were wound into a severe bun, and it forced her eyebrows into a permanent state of surprise.

"Nothing too bad?" Rockelle was a good kid, one of my favorites. But I wasn't supposed to have favorites.

"No. It's okay." But just as the words escaped her lips, Julianna rounded the corner.

Usually, these best friends were my two best, hard-working, awe-inspiring, sweet-spirited students, but today, they weren't even making eye contact. It was a good thing I was there and not a robot. Stupid things, just like drones, only did what they were programmed to do. They couldn't comprehend context. But I could, and suddenly, it felt good to be the one to find Rockelle and Julianna in the hall.

"Ms. Knowles, is there anything I can help you with today?" Julianna kept her watery blue eyes hidden behind a frizzy fluff of vibrant red hair. Her face turned to the wall, away from Rockelle.

This was my best helper. Still, as she glanced at me, she quickly turned away again. What was up with these two? "I'm sure I can find something. Everything okay with you two?"

Jin rounded the corner, and now it was my turn to blush and refuse to make eye contact. We were a ripe red-as-tomato

trio. I turned for my classroom, and the girls fell in step, flanking me.

A tiny red eye followed us as we passed through the hall. I could almost feel the itchy spot where its vision bore into my back. In fact, the second I stepped out of its disparaging light, I could feel the gaze of a new camera taking its place. The FBA feed was always watching in the school. Everywhere. I scowled at the floor.

“Did you see Gracie?” Julianna’s bright blue eyes sparkled, all previous angst forgotten.

“No.” I sighed. Gracie returned yesterday after reconditioning. I hated what Julianna was likely about to say.

“She walked into the boy’s bathroom on her first day back from reconditioning. I think they gave her an extra dose of whatever they give people.”

“Don’t spread lies at school.” I didn’t put any power behind the correction, because the shadows always filled my head with a furious thought cloud full of curse words. My heart hurt.

“Jacob said all the boys walked out of there saying mean things to her. He was the only one that stayed behind to help her find the girl’s bathroom.”

“Jacob’s a good kid.” The dimmed lights illuminated as we entered my classroom, and the wall screen turned blue, warming up.

Shea’s voice filled the room. “Five minutes.”

I ran my eyes quickly over my classroom. The desks were in three perfect rows of five seats each. I hated one would be empty. The thought sat in fierce juxtaposition against the relaxing and grounding warmth of the room: the carefully painted taupe color used to help learners acquire maximum content through the use of a natural-colored environment. It was the same reason second-year teachers wore green. It made me want to change into something black or purple. Anything to show things weren’t all right.

But I didn’t have the courage it took to buck the Dome’s

attempt to keep us grounded in its health initiative through our environment.

I picked a piece of lint off my green blouse. “Girls, can you take these tablets and mark them for me? I didn’t have time last night.”

“Oh, I heard about Jayden Meander.” Julianna leaned in and whispered. “Were you there when it happened?”

Rockelle interrupted Julianna. “Are you okay, Ms. Knowles? You seem ... off today.”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Let’s get this work done and settle in for the day.” I couldn’t help but watch Gracie as she entered, her arms limp at her sides, her face expressionless, her eyes empty. “Julianna, please help Gracie find her seat.”

Gracie looked up at the sound of her name. Her typical smile and flushed cheeks were gone. Just as quickly as she looked up, her eyes returned to stare at the floor. It was as if recognizing the last vestige of self was too much strain. The sides of my stomach ached. Was Jin right? Should we uphold the law like this?

I shook my head. But what could I do? I was nobody with no family to call my own. I needed to do what was in my power to do. Right? I needed to protect my students while keeping my head down.

Rockelle had hardly said more than a few phrases since I found her in the hall. She was my biggest talker.

“Hey, Rockelle, come here for a minute.”

With wooden steps, she moved to my desk.

Even now, standing quietly before me, she didn’t say anything. “Hey, you know you can talk to me. You’d tell me if something was wrong. Right?”

“Ms. Knowles, you’re my favorite teacher.”

I smiled but urged her to continue by keeping quiet.

“Well, you at least get us.” Rockelle worried at her bun and pulled a strand of hair loose. It was pretty to see the curl framing her beautiful face. Why would her mother pull it

back so tightly? Those gorgeous black curls needed to be free.

“You’re a great kid, Rockelle.”

Rockelle frowned. “I’ll figure it out, but if I can’t, yeah, I’ll come talk to you.”

“Okay. Be sure you do that.”

She nodded and went back to her tablet.

The room filled with the rest of my students. Someone dropped their tablet, another kid sneezed. Several talked about the experience at Nat’s last night, while the rest stared at Gracie. Gracie stood by her desk, and a group of boys snickered and pointed.

“Boys, remember our acceptance law.” I loved the noise and the talking. It was like life began in the classroom. But I wished they’d all just stop talking about Gracie and Nat’s.

“Yes, miss.” They ducked their heads and moved to their desks and tablets.

I stood and began the day’s program. It was good to get into the swing of routine. It wasn’t a great job, but at least it was important and would be over soon. The hours unfolded, and the students and I were pros at managing the work, especially with Shea and the programmed tablets guiding us step by step.

Every time I tried to help Gracie, I thought of Jayden. Was he already reconditioned? Did the Meander family already stand trial?

The harder I tried to help Gracie accomplish the basic routines, the worse my stomach churned. Was this really the only way the government could protect us?

“No, no, Gracie, you need to hold the tablet with the screen up, facing you.”

I pushed a curl out of my face and turned to help another student. The work was important, but something dark was growing inside me, turning my thoughts, filling me until I was beyond irritable and frustrated.

“Miss Knowles, why did the government create the Acceptance Law?” Lyndon asked.

We’d been rereading the Declaration of Acceptance Articles. “I’d imagine, since they’re designed to keep us safe, someone or a group of persons hurt someone else.”

Tilting his chin, Lyndon thought for a second and then asked, “Why didn’t they record it for us to watch in the lesson program?”

“School used to go on for years and years. Students were bored with it, and parents preferred to eliminate so much learning and homework. I’m sure it’s recorded somewhere, but it’s not a part of the required program anymore. You might find them in the nonessential standards.” I smiled at him. It felt good to guide them, to see that *aba* moment that happened every once in a while, but Lyndon had a point. It was odd.

He scrunched up his face. “School for years and years? I’m glad they changed it.”

“Me too.” I nodded. I couldn’t imagine teaching for years and years.