

January, First Day after Winter Break

Chapter 1

New Thought

Eating my breakfast burrito in the family room, the TV volume suddenly spiked, catching my attention. The news anchor described the protests over food shortages as nonviolent. That's not what I'd seen. Hungry crowds crashed through barriers and ransacked the food warehouses that stored government-issued surplus cheese, the nondescript yellow stuff that melted without any heat. If they're lying about that, what else are they lying about? I reached for the remote and turned the TV off.

My charcoal pencil moved across the page, sketching the anchor's face. His eyes stared out at me from the page. I taped his mouth shut. Across the tape, I wrote one word. Truth. Then I scratched a line through it. I didn't draw what I saw anymore. I drew what I noticed, how I felt, and what didn't make sense. Closing my sketchbook, I stuffed it into my backpack and took my dishes to the kitchen.

"Morning, Maya," Dad said.

"Hey, good morning." I noticed he was wearing a suit and tie. He usually wore jeans to work.

He did a double take. "Is that a NASA logo?"

"Mr. Vance, my science teacher, gave them out to everyone who did the extra credit project. Cool, huh?" A white stick figure stood out against the backdrop of the universe, peering at the stars through a telescope. I Need My Space was printed underneath.

We both laughed as Mom walked in. "What's so funny?"

I pointed to my shirt. “I got this yesterday from my science teacher.”

“That’s so you,” she said. “Can you believe it? High school graduation is right around the corner. How does it feel?”

“It’s been a long time coming,” I said.

“I’ll need to order your announcements.”

“Can we talk about this later? Not sure who you’d send them to, anyway.” I grabbed my backpack. “See you later,” I said, heading to the door to catch the school bus.

As the bus steered through University Avenue, a boarded-up storefront caught my attention. The bookstore. First my favorite bakery, then my art supply store. Store awnings that once gave the street its character were beginning to fade and trash piled up in the corners

When we arrived on campus, the bus doors swung open. Students crowded the exit, spilling onto the sidewalk, their laughter and chatter filling the air. They clustered in groups or pairs, absorbed in their conversations. I adjusted the strap of my backpack and followed several steps behind. No one ever noticed me.

The relentless public service announcements still played in my head: “We remind all citizens to report disruptive behavior immediately.”

Nothing says safe learning environment like ratting on your classmates.

I slipped into the crowded hallway. Lockers slammed with sharp cracks that ricocheted in my ears. Holding my backpack to my chest, I made my way through like a soldier crossing a minefield. I’d learned when to move and when to wait to avoid collisions.

I saw patterns, but most people never noticed them.

Civic responsibility. Responsible citizens. The phrases appeared everywhere on posters and in public announcements. Even on buses. Follow the rules. Report anyone who didn't.

Was the constant repetition deliberate or a coincidence? How many times did we have to hear the same message before we all thought the same way?

At the end of the lunch break, the PA system crackled to life. "After fourth period, please report to the gym," Principal Anaya announced. "Vice President Boris will join us by video for an important message."

Chatter rippled through the classroom. *What does V.P. Boris want?*

When the bell rang at the end of fourth period, classroom doors flew open. Students poured into the hallways, jostling for space as they headed to the assembly. Their chatter and laughter bounced off the walls.

Crowds had their own patterns. Friends drifted together and saved seats for each other. The popular kids sat in the center. The ones who wanted to be seen sat in front. The others sat along the edges or in the back.

I waited for the crowd to settle down. By the time I reached the gym, almost every seat had been taken. I spotted Josie waving from the bleachers.

"Over here," she yelled, patting the seat next to her.

I waved back and crossed the gym, flinching when I sat down on the cold aluminum bleachers. "What's this about?"

"No idea," she said. "Some kind of pep talk"

"Can't wait!" I groaned.

Latecomers wandered in. Their footsteps shook and rattled the bleachers as they searched for a place to sit. The crowd grew impatient, packed together shoulder to shoulder.

I pressed my hands against my thighs to keep them from tapping and pushed my earbuds in, keeping the volume low.

Finally, the lights dimmed. The large screen flickered to life. The Vice President stood at the podium, holding onto a practiced smile. He greeted us with a booming voice that cut through the speakers. I wasn't the only one who jumped.

"Good morning, students," he began, his voice filling the gym. "Today, I want to talk to you about the future."

A few students clapped.

He smiled wider.

"We are entering a new era. A time of rebuilding. A time of unity. A time when every citizen has a role to play."

I turned up the volume, drowning him out. Even through the music, fragments of his speech broke through.

Unity. Another word that sounded harmless. I studied his face, catching the pauses before certain phrases. They weren't random. He paused, waited, then continued. He smiled when the crowd reacted. The slight movement of his eyes as he checked whether we were responding the way he expected.

I leaned back as his words blurred together. Patriotism, national pride. His voice had a rhythm, slow and deliberate. Then his tone changed. I pulled out one earbud.

". . . to build our Great New Society, we must transform the way we think."

Did I hear that right? Transform the way we think?

This wasn't the usual pep-rally speech. A cough echoed somewhere in the gym, then silence. No one moved, waiting for what came next.

“With New Thought, all citizens will align their thinking for one common purpose.”

He glanced at his notes before looking up with the same practiced smile.

Align their thinking. I stared at the screen, shifting my position on the metal bleachers.

What about those of us who rarely saw the world the same way others did?

“Together, we will create a prosperous nation where every person is productive and contributes to society.” At first, he sounded comforting. Then one word caught my attention.

Productive. What happened to the people who didn’t meet the standard?

Around me, students leaned forward, nodding in rhythm. Their acceptance bothered me more than the speech itself.

The athletes and cheerleaders rose first. Others hesitated, glancing around before rising to their feet. Even the students who slouched in the back followed. Principal Anaya, stationed at the front of the gym, enthusiastically waved her hands for all of us to join in.

I waited long enough for those around me to notice. When I stood up, I didn’t know if I was joining them or simply trying not to draw attention to myself.

“With New Thought, you have a role in building our prosperity. Join us as Citizens of the Future,” Boris said, concluding his speech.

“New Thought shapes our future,” the dude behind me said. “Transform the way we think,” another repeated. Each repetition made the phrases sound less like promises and more like warnings.

As we streamed out of the gym, teachers handed out brightly colored *Citizens of the Future* flyers. I accepted one, crumpled it into a ball, and let it fall. I avoided the sign-up line and slipped out. I headed toward Ms. Fox’s office, grateful for the familiar routine.

She looked up as I entered. The smell of stale coffee hit me.

“How was the assembly?”

I dropped my backpack next to the chair. “Let’s just say I squirmed in my seat.”

“Why?”

“The words don’t match what I see,” I said. “My dad’s company may be in trouble. If everything’s getting better, why are more people losing their jobs? Why do the homeless camps keep growing?”

“Mmm.” She nodded slowly. “That’s a good observation.”

No teacher had ever called my observations good. They usually said, “You’re overthinking or worrying too much.”

She glanced at the clock. “Before we run out of time, did you practice?”

I looked away.

“Eyes on me, Maya,” she said.

I forced myself to look up. “It’s uncomfortable,” I mumbled, fingers clenched to keep them from tapping.

She pressed play. A video of a young woman smiling streamed across the screen, her expression effortless and natural. That was the problem. I could pause a video, but I couldn’t pause real life. Real life felt like watching a foreign film without subtitles.

Ms. Fox hit pause. “Now, your turn.”

I looked at myself in the mirror and pulled the two corners of my mouth upward. My eyes didn't crinkle. If I were sketching this, I'd draw the mouth, clean upward lines, then the eyes. I wouldn't know how to draw the part that made it real.

"Too stiff," Ms. Fox said.

Of course. I was assembling my smile piece by piece.

"Let the smile reach your eyes."

I tried again, forcing my mouth and my eyes upward. My reflection shifted. Almost right. But it wasn't me.

The bell rang. Its sharp clang lingered in my ears as I packed my things, already bracing for the usual jostling at the bus stop. On the way out, I passed a poster taped to the wall.

CITIZENS OF THE FUTURE A BETTER SOCIETY STARTS WITH YOU. I stopped for a second. A better society. A better citizen. Who decided what better meant?

Backpacks grazed my arms, laughter spiked, and shoes squeaked across the sidewalk. As I stood in line, I felt a slight pressure on my heel and spotted a shoe sliding into place behind my foot.

Rachel! She never missed a chance to embarrass me. But not today!

I stepped back, pretending to lose my balance. I stomped down hard. A sharp yelp followed. Rachel's eyes widened in shock when she realized too late her plan hadn't worked.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. "Oh, so sorry, Rachel," I said, feigning innocence. I darted to the bus, keeping my eyes on the ground. I hadn't stood up to Rachel. I'd outsmarted her. For once, I hadn't fallen for her prank. My tiny victory.

I slid into the seat beside Josie in the back. She caught my eye and held out her fist. I bumped it once before resting my backpack on my lap. I closed my eyes and relaxed on the ride home.