

Author's Sensitivity Note

The fictional New Thought Centers draw on historical and contemporary systems of institutional control, particularly those associated with disability, autonomy, and government power. The practices portrayed include forced compliance, deprivation, and punishment rebranded as rehabilitation. These elements draw from documented historical sources, including asylums, forced labor, confinement of disabled people, and modern policies that tie human worth to productivity.

The protagonist, Maya, is autistic and experiences sensory sensitivities and anxiety. Her neurodivergence shapes how she perceives and survives these systems and is represented with care and attention to authenticity. Like many people subjected to institutional power, she learns to adapt while resisting quietly.

This novel explores survival under a system that defines human value narrowly and enforces obedience through fear and control. It asks a central question: Who decides what makes a life valuable, and what happens to those who do not fit that definition?

January, Six Months Before Graduation

Chapter 1

Am I the Carrie at My School?

The relentless public service announcements still played in my head as I stepped off the bus: “All citizens are reminded to report disruptive behavior immediately.” *Nothing says “safe learning environment” like snitching on your classmates.*

I shoved through the crowded hallway, backpack clutched to my chest, picking my way like a soldier crossing a minefield. Lockers slammed with sharp cracks that ricocheted in my ears, but if I timed it just right, I could slip through unscathed. I had trained myself to endure the sound, just as I had learned to ignore their insults.

In kindergarten, when the classroom exploded with noise, my hands snapped to my ears, or I dove under a desk. The boys sneered, “What’s wrong with you?” The girls stared as if I were breaking a rule.

By middle school, the teasing had turned sharper and more deliberate. Someone swapped my chair for one with a missing leg. I toppled sideways, barely catching myself before crashing to the floor. *Harmless fun, right?* I laughed it off like a good sport but inside the embarrassment stung.

When I reached high school, their taunting ramped up even more. If I ever said something not meant to be funny, they whispered behind my back, loud enough for me to hear,

of course. I just wanted to fit in, but I must have been absent the day they handed out the secret rule book.

When I brought up my favorite subject, I must have sounded like a broken record, always steering the conversation to equine colic or some other malady. *“Stay on topic, Maya,” they snapped.* While the girls talked about boys and sleepovers, I steered the conversation to tendon injuries. They rolled their eyes, trading looks. I dreamed of becoming a famous equine veterinarian, Maya Morales, the horse whisperer. Eventually, I shut up about horses. No point handing them another reason to mock me.

Every week I met with Ms. Fox, my communications coach, in a tiny room that smelled of stale coffee. She played videos of facial expressions I was supposed to identify and practice in front of a mirror.

“Eyes on me, Maya,” she said when I broke eye contact.

“It’s uncomfortable,” I mumbled, my fingers clenched to keep from tapping.

Her lips formed a smile. “Practice will help. That’s how you connect.”

I nodded, thinking the videos hadn’t helped me yet. I recognized happiness as a smile with crinkled eyes and anger as narrow eyes with scrunched eyebrows. It was easy in a video but impossible in real life, like watching a foreign film without subtitles.

I still hadn’t cracked the secret code. How did the girls flip from being best friends to enemies overnight? When I gathered my courage to join them in the cafeteria, their chairs

screeched across the floor as one by one they left, mumbling lame excuses. I forced a wave goodbye, but the feeling of humiliation stayed with me.

Kylie was the hardest to understand. She laughed at my jokes, borrowed my notes, and admired the sketches of my favorite quadrupeds. *That meant friendship, right? Apparently not.* The one time I waved to her across the cafeteria, she abruptly turned around, as if I didn't exist. My hand froze in midair as the heat rose to my cheeks. In class, she was the friendly Kylie, but everywhere else she was the not-so-friendly Kylie.

As I replayed those memories, the bell jolted me back to the present. Its sharp clang lingered in my ears as I packed my things, already bracing for the usual jostling at the bus stop. 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. Looking down, I spotted a shoe sliding into place. Was someone trying to trip me?

Rachel had a sixth sense for finding my weak spot. She never missed a chance to humiliate me. *Not today!*

I paused, then stepped back, pretending to lose my balance. I stomped down hard.

A sharp yelp followed. Rachel's eyes widened in shock.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. "Oh, so sorry, Rachel," I said, feigning innocence. With my heart pounding, I darted to the bus, keeping my eyes to the ground. For once, I didn't fall for her antics. My pride swelled after my tiny victory.

The ride home gave me a moment to calm down, to let the adrenaline settle. I stepped through the front door to find Mom in the kitchen. Usually, I had the place to myself, but today she sat at the counter, sifting through stacks of papers. *Why was she home so early?*

Her auburn hair, the same shade as mine, fell in loose waves. She always looked well put together, even in jeans and a faded sweatshirt. Her hazel eyes stayed glued to the paperwork spread across the counter while one hand gripped a pencil, scribbling notes in the margins. She sighed softly, not noticing I had come in.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, dropping my backpack with a thud.

She jumped and muted the TV, cutting off a financial news segment mid-sentence. “You startled me,” she said, holding her hand to her heart.

“Sorry,” I mouthed, my eyes scanning the papers scattered across the island. “What’s that?”

“Bills,” she said. Her gaze returned to the paperwork.

“Are you making dinner?” I asked, kicking off my shoes. My heartbeat hadn’t settled from the bus stop confrontation. My hands fiddled with a stray pencil on the counter, waiting for an answer.

“Dad’s working late. I’ll toss salads later. You can have the leftover chicken and rice from last night.”

“Okay,” I said, moving to the fridge. My fingers grabbed the cool metal handle before reaching for the leftovers inside.

“Did you turn in your English paper?” Mom asked without looking up.

I froze. “Oh, shit! I forgot!” My hand shot to my mouth. “Ms. Ellsworth said she’d remind me.”

“I reminded you before school,” Mom snapped, twirling her pencil. “Didn’t you write it down?”

“I hate that binder. It makes me stand out. People already call me names.” *The word retard came to mind.*

Her tone softened. “Everyone forgets things,” she said, “but you need to manage your deadlines.”

“I am trying!” I said, sharper than intended. *Keep it together, I told myself.*

“You’re a senior, Maya,” she sighed. “Ms. Ellsworth can’t be your personal assistant forever.”

“Whatever.” I crossed my arms and turned away.

“Hand it in tomorrow. Maybe you won’t lose too many points.”

“I can’t wait to graduate,” I said, raising my hand like a traffic cop to cut her off.

She glared at me. “And what happens after that, Maya? College? Job?”

“I’ll figure something out.” I shrugged, grabbed the leftovers, and headed to the microwave.

She bent over the papers again, her voice fading. “That girl,” she muttered, shaking her head. “When is she going to be responsible for herself?”

“I’m right here! I can hear you!” I snapped.

I slammed the leftovers into the microwave and set the timer. When it dinged, my hands flew to cover my ears a second too late. The sound always caught me off guard, even when I knew it was coming.

“What about becoming a vet?” she asked. “Or a vet tech?”

“Honestly, I dreamed of that when I was a kid. Now, I just don’t know.”

Later, as I rinsed my plate, she asked, “Did you have enough to eat? I can make you a salad.”

“No, thanks.” I opened my backpack, removed the binder, and made a note to turn in my English paper first thing in the morning.

She tossed her pencil to the side. Leaning over the counter, she drew a sharp breath as she unfolded the newspaper.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” I stepped closer, looking over her shoulder. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

“It’s on the front page.” She pointed. “Sentient Technologies Sharpens the Axe in Anticipation of... Layoffs.”

I cut her off. “That’s Dad’s company.” I took a step back, then another, distancing myself from the headline.

Staring at the newspaper, she said, “I’ve been looking over our bills.”

I gripped the edge of the counter. “For what?” I asked, already dreading the answer.

“Our spending,” she said. Her voice strained as she opened the fridge and reached for the salad ingredients. “We’ll need to cut back.”

A warning bell rang in my head. “What about Peaches?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Her shoulders stiffened. She glanced at the kitchen clock. “I want to talk to your dad first,” she said, her lips pressed into a thin line.

I shook my head and retreated to the family room, turning on the TV. She joined me on the couch later, flipping through a magazine. When she leaned back into the cushions and closed her eyes, I slipped into the kitchen, finding the bill for my riding lessons on the counter.

Her voice startled me. “Your dad’s company might go under if the economy doesn’t turn around.”

Sitting on a counter stool, I pictured his office building sinking underground. “What does that mean?”

“It means the company will close and everyone will lose their jobs.”

“What happens to us?” I demanded, tapping my foot nervously.

She forced a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Tell me!” I slammed my palms on the counter, glaring at her.

“After I talk to your father.”

“You never tell me anything!” I bolted upstairs, stomping hard enough to rattle the walls.

In my room, I collapsed onto my bed. I had wanted to tell her about Rachel, about how I finally stood up for myself. I wanted to share my moment of triumph.

I grabbed my battered copy of *Carrie* by Stephen King and traced my finger over the cover before flipping through the worn pages. The entire school taunted Carrie White, the awkward, lonely outsider, until she exploded and fought back.

In my freshman year, the principal made us read *Carrie* to promote empathy, kindness, and inclusion. Teachers framed it as a lesson about the consequences of exclusion, the weight of peer pressure, and the courage it takes to stand up for oneself. I related all too well. But teaching the ideas didn’t stop the eye rolls when I raised my hand too often.

I stared at the ceiling and wondered: Am I the Carrie at my school?

Reaching for my sketchbook, I drew the bus stop scene with Rachel’s shocked face in focus, the rest fading into a blur. I didn’t want revenge. I wanted acceptance. My sketches told the truth. My art was my voice. Maybe one day, someone would listen.