January, First Day after Winter Break

Chapter 1

New Thought

I opened my sketchbook and picked up my charcoal pencil. The news anchor's face filled the whole screen. *Like, why did we have to see his pores and blackheads?* I sketched his eyes first, then his mouth, half open. A few strokes later, his dark eyes looked back at me from the page. I went to the garage, tore off a strip of masking tape, and pressed it across his mouth. Across the tape, I wrote one word: Truth. Then I crossed it out with a big X. I closed my sketchbook and stuffed it into my backpack.

The TV volume spiked. The news anchor called the food-shortage protests nonviolent. That's not what I'd seen. Hungry crowds crashed through barriers and ransacked the food warehouses storing government-issued surplus cheese, the nondescript yellow stuff that melted without heat. If they're lying about that, what else are they lying about?

After swallowing the last bite of my breakfast burrito, I turned off the TV and grabbed my plate to take it to the kitchen sink.

"Morning, Maya," Dad said, wearing a suit and tie.

"Hey, good morning," I said. "What's up with the suit and tie?

"Big meeting today. You know, dress to impress." He laughed, then did a double take. "Is that a NASA logo?"

"Mr. Vance, my science teacher, gave them to everyone who turned in 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. Last chance for extra credit.”

Mom squinted. “I need my space.” She laughed.

“June’s closer than you think,” Dad said.

“Right,” Mom said. “You need to order announcements.”

I zipped my backpack. “Can we talk about this later? Not sure who you’d send them to, anyway.”

“You keep saying later,” Mom said.

I slung the backpack over my shoulder. “See you later.”

As the bus steered down University Avenue, a crew of city workers boarded up the bookstore and nailed an out-of-business sign. First my favorite bakery, then my art supply store. Store awnings that once gave the street its character now flapped in the breeze, torn and faded. 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 grouped into pairs or clusters, absorbed in conversation. I adjusted my backpack strap and followed a few steps behind.

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 out 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, sensing when to move and when to wait to avoid collisions.

Most people never noticed how words became patterns. Civic responsibility. Responsible citizens. The phrases appeared everywhere, on posters, 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, the classroom doors flew open. Students poured into the hallways, jostling for space as they headed to the assembly. Their chatter and laughter ricocheted off the walls.

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

I let the crowd settle. Almost every seat was taken by the time I got to the gym. Josie waved from the bleachers.

"Over here," she yelled, patting the seat beside her.

I waved back and crossed the gym, flinching as I sat 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 rattled the bleachers as they looked for a place to sit. The crowd grew impatient, packed 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, wearing a practiced smile. He greeted us in 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 with 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 to drown him out. Even through the music, fragments of his speech broke through.

Unity. Another word that sounded harmless. He paused before certain phrases. They weren’t random. After pausing, he waited, then continued. He smiled when the crowd reacted. The slight movement of his eyes as he checked whether we were responding as he expected.

I leaned back as his words blurred together. Patriotism, national pride. His voice had a slow, deliberate rhythm. Then his tone shifted. 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 from somewhere in the gym, then silence. No one moved, waiting for what came next.

"With New Thought, all citizens will align their thinking toward a common purpose."

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

Align their thinking. I shifted uncomfortably on the metal bleachers. *What about those of us who rarely saw the world the way others did?*

"Together, we will create a prosperous nation where every person is productive and contributes to society." At first, he sounded reassuring. 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. *How are they buying this?*

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

When I finally stood, I didn't know whether 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 concluded, ending his speech.

"New Thought shapes our future," the dude behind me said. "Transform the way we think," another repeated.

As we streamed out of the gym, teachers handed out brightly colored *Citizens of the Future* flyers. I took one, crumpled it into a ball, and dropped it. I sidestepped the sign-up line and slipped out. The assembly had cut into my time with Ms. Fox. I hurried to her office.

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

"How was the assembly?"

I dropped my backpack beside the chair. "Let's just say I squirmed in my seat."

"Why?"

"The words don't match what I see," I said. "I don't see anything getting better."

"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, clenching my fingers 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 and study it, but I couldn't pause real life. Real life was like watching a foreign film without subtitles.

Ms. Fox hit pause. "Now, your turn."

I looked at myself in the mirror and pulled the corners of my mouth upward. My eyes didn't crinkle. If I were sketching this, I'd draw the mouth with 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 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 my way out, I passed a poster taped to the wall. CITIZENS OF THE FUTURE. A BETTER SOCIETY STARTS WITH YOU. I paused 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. While waiting in line, I felt pressure on my heel and 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 as she realized, too late, that her plan had failed.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. “Oh, so sorry, Rachel,” I said, feigning innocence. I darted to the bus, eyes on the ground.

I slid into the seat beside Josie in the back. She held out her fist. I bumped it once, then set my backpack on my lap before closing my eyes on the ride home.