

The Night Before

No one would understand if they knew.

Noah Seforé pushed both hands against his bedroom door until it clicked into place. He turned the lock and paused to listen. The car with his aunt, uncle, and nonna sped down the street. The 3-D vidwall in the den blared, almost masking the sound of clinking dishes in the kitchen. For once, the smallness of the house felt like a gift. Neither parent would head Noah's way without him hearing.

He took two strides across the room and reached between the mattress and box springs. His fingers caught on the rough cardboard edges of the notebook, and he dug it out.

No one understood that he didn't want to be a liquidator. Not that he'd told anyone. His friends acted no better than his parents. Their smirks had followed him around all day, reminding him without a word that they assumed a life of fast cars and tons of money headed his way. Sitting down at his desk, Noah opened the tattered notebook. It had been hard to find. No one used paper anymore, not when they could write or draw on the countless screens in their possession.

But he couldn't risk his plans being monitored. The random data tap on his v-compad six months ago had confirmed his paranoia. He dragged a hand through his hair and allowed his

shoulders to drop for the first time today. The tightness in his chest didn't recede.

No one could ever know he planned to throw his Gifting and Aptitude Placement.

He skimmed the first page, notes on how to perform below par on the physical exam tomorrow. It hadn't been hard to come up with these. He just flipped the recommendations Coach gave him before each wrestling meet. Push his muscles in weight lifting the day before the test? Check. Light to no dinner? Check. Limit fluid intake for the next 24 hours? Check. Allow only four hours of sleep? Check. His body would take care of the rest.

He flipped several pages and found his notes on the academic portion. While searching through the media archives, he'd come across information on the standardized tests used before Marcioni and the Elite came to power. He could only hope the SAT and ACT served as building blocks for the GAP.

He couldn't fail this portion—it would be too obvious—but he'd worked the percentages. He needed to score an eighty-five to disqualify himself from Class One. A score in the eighties might still be high enough to get him into Class Three, but his main objective remained avoiding the Academy. Ending up in education as a teacher would be icing on the cake.

He studied the ratio of correct to incorrect answers again and flipped to the final section. Psychological Examination. He pushed back from the desk and resisted the urge to stand and pace. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror by his closet made him freeze. The wild look in his eyes would catch any psychologist's attention. Maybe that should be the idea. Any individual who couldn't handle the tension of an eight-hour placement exam would be deemed unsuitable for the Academy. That kind of person would lose his mind when forced to mete out justice with his bare hands.

Noah wouldn't even have to pretend. The tension of planning in secret had birthed

paranoia, migraines, and insomnia. The psychologist wouldn't be able to discern the cause of Noah's anxiety. He would never suspect that Noah plotted an act of treason.

A hand banged on the door. "Hey, Seforé, time for your birthday run."

Noah's heart ran its own race. He flipped the notebook closed and forced a couple of deep breaths. It was only Ryan. He cleared his throat. "Give me a sec." Maybe Ryan wouldn't notice his agitation.

"I don't have all day, kid." Ryan's tone held the usual mixture of condescension and affection Noah had come to expect from his brother's best friend. Noah would forever be the tag-along in Ryan Lutz's eyes.

Noah stuffed the notebook back into its hiding place, his plans to destroy it tonight going up in smoke. He'd have to get rid of it tomorrow. Every day he held onto the plans proved more dangerous. He gave the room one last glance before opening the door.

Ryan leaned against the doorjamb. His dimpled grin promised trouble.

"Do I want to know what a birthday run is?" Noah retied the laces of his sneakers with precision, assessing the secondary school senior grinning at him.

"Well, you're not sixteen until tomorrow, so I'm going to go easy on you tonight. As of tomorrow, you'll be a man, and all bets are off." Ryan rubbed his hands together and bounced back and forth on his feet.

His glee made Noah's gut tighten, but Noah relaxed his face and set his mouth in a line. "Bring it, old man."

Ryan barked out a laugh and slapped Noah across the back. "That's the spirit."

Ryan chattered as they left the house and began their normal five-mile route. Mostly teasing Noah, but that was fine. With Daniel gone, they both needed a good running partner.

“You’re quiet tonight.” Ryan cocked his head. His eyes narrowed but didn’t lose their twinkle. “What gives, kid?”

Revise that. Noah needed a silent running partner. “It’s been a long day.”

“Your dad giving you a hard time?”

Noah’s head swiveled to his right, where Ryan ran. As their next-door neighbor, Ryan knew more about the dynamics of the Seforé household than anyone. “No, he’s been all right.”

“So, if it’s not your pop, what’s up?”

Noah didn’t take the bait. A minute passed. Two.

“Are you worried about tomorrow?” Noah stumbled over his feet, and Ryan nodded. “Definitely about tomorrow then.”

Noah’s insides solidified. He wracked his brain for a topic to distract the all-state wrestling champion.

Ryan bumped Noah’s shoulder with one of his own. “Don’t sweat it. You’re going to be fine. I know I’m not a classification official yet, but I know you. You’ll knock the ball out of the park.”

How to respond? “It’s ... a lot of pressure is all.”

“Sure, I get that, but your GAP scores will be great. You’ll ace the academic and physical portions. The only thing left is the psych exam, and if your brother can pass it with flying colors, you don’t need to worry.” Ryan’s grin took over most of his face. “He’s way more messed up than you are.”

Yeah, exactly. Noah sucked in a deep breath and let it out in spurts. His plan would work. It had to. If he told himself that enough, he might believe it. He schooled his face into a neutral expression. “Guess we’ll see in a couple weeks, huh?”

“I’m telling you, in two years, the three of us are going to be running this country.” Ryan winked and sped up the hill, leaving Noah in his wake.

Ryan’s confidence blasted a hole through Noah’s gut. The plan had to work. If it failed ... well, it wouldn’t. He couldn’t let himself consider the other option. He didn’t need to. The plan would work.