

CAM BAITY & BENNY ZELKOWICZ

THE FIRST BOOK OF

FOUR

THE FOUNDRY'S EDGE

Disney · HYPERION BOOKS
New York

To my D. G. Jeanette, who followed the kite

—CB

For Tali, forever my Papagena, who never doubted me

—BZ

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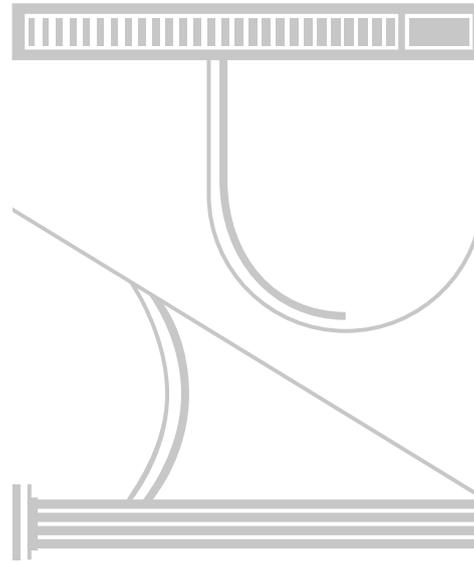
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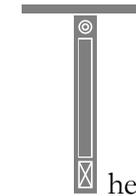
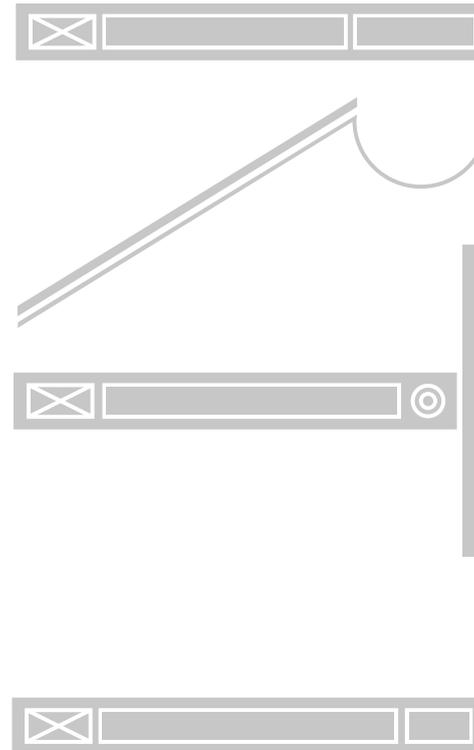
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GOTCHA



The man in the fog was watching her. He was across the street, just outside a pool of street light, standing as still as the ghostly birch trees that surrounded him. At first Phoebe dismissed it as an odd combination of shadows, perhaps created by rays of porch light streaming through the bronze gates of Plumm Estate. But the

longer she stared, the more the stranger seemed to peel out of the gloom.

Phoebe parted the shimmering drapes and pressed her nose against the window to get a better look. From her third-story bedroom, she could just barely make him out: a sharp black suit and bowler hat, a pale face with a thick curving mustache, and round black spectacles like two holes punched in his face.

What could he be doing at his hour? Bird-watching? Stargazing? Maybe he was planning a heist. If so, he wouldn't get past the top-of-the-line security system her father had installed. It would certainly be a hoot to watch him get caught and see all the servants running around in a frenzy.

Still, the stranger was unsettling. Who wears dark glasses at night anyway?

Nobody, Phoebe Plumm realized with a sigh. There was no intruder. No stranger down there at all, just her imagination swirling in the mist. The most exciting thing she usually saw on her nightly watches was a tomcat scuffle or a sudden whirlwind of leaves, so she was left to invent things huddling in the dark for her own entertainment.

Phoebe didn't sleep well anymore, so she often gazed down from her twelve-foot-high picture window in the murky hours before morning. She watched with the hollow hope that a flare of headlights might sweep up the hammered-steel driveway. The last time her father had returned from one of his business trips, he arrived at four in the morning, and Phoebe was

downstairs and in his arms before he could get his bags out of the trunk.

This was his longest trip yet—three months, nearly four. So Phoebe maintained her vigil, waiting every night for him to return.

She rubbed her bleary eyes and glanced out the window again. Just as she expected, the stranger was nowhere to be seen. He'd probably never been there at all.

Phoebe ran a finger across the greasy smear her nose had left on the window, just the sort of thing that got Mrs. Tanner's apron in a bunch. She placed a dozen handprints on the glass for good measure. *Hopefully the old cow will take her frustrations out on Micah*, she thought.

She yanked the silver curtains closed and padded across her enormous bedroom. Platinum sconces crafted to look like palm fronds glowed with a cozy light, illuminating Phoebe passed. As she approached a shiny door, she heard the pleasant hum-click of precision machinery, and the shutters automatically withdrew like graceful fingers to reveal her Carousel.

It was a cavernous chrome closet with concentric, mechanized rings that bore hundreds of outfits. Phoebe tapped an oval pedal neatly inlaid into the floor, and the Carousel began to rotate in a swooshing parade, showcasing each garment beneath a soft spotlight. Phoebe watched vaguely as her clothes whizzed past, metal filigreed fabrics sparkling like fireworks. It took five whole minutes to cycle through them all. Finally Phoebe made up her mind, released her foot from the

pedal, and the Carousel eased to a stop. A slender hydraulic arm unfolded and presented the chosen outfit to Phoebe—a cream-colored silk shirt decorated in darts of copper mesh.

Selecting a skirt was easier, since she wore the same one pretty much every day. The gray diamond-patterned fabric was fraying at the hem, and it was so big on her she had to cinch it in place with a belt of interlocking metal triangles. Phoebe knew the girls at the Academy whispered about her ratty old garment, but she couldn't care less.

Within its pleats, Phoebe had sewn secret compartments that contained her arsenal: a little coil of wire, a tube of Speed-E-Tak cement, a needle and thread, a small vial of machine oil, a bent nail, and a handful of other odds and ends. This was her sniping skirt.

It felt like home, a relic from so many of her memories, worn so often that it was velvety soft to the touch. Phoebe's cheek had caressed this skirt a thousand times when she was a kid. It had belonged to her mom, whose familiar scent used to linger in the fibers. But that was long gone.

She slipped into her clothes and took a look at herself in the full-length, oval mirror. Phoebe had inherited her father's long, almond-shaped face as well as his lanky build. Her wispy limbs and slender hands were okay, but she loathed her big awkward feet more than anything. And she was too tall for a twelve-year-old, teetering over most of her classmates, so she always slouched a bit to compensate.

Phoebe slapped some pink into her pale cheeks. Though her pinched mouth and needle-straight eyebrows made her

look stern, her eyes were a luminous honey brown that exuded tenderness, a weakness she hid behind choppy dark bangs.

Her haircut was pretty much a disaster, with the left side trimmed in a clean line that grazed her shoulder, and the right side bobbed short and jagged. Mrs. Tanner had insisted on styling it the other day, and Phoebe had hated the result. So she had taken a pair of scissors to it herself, roughed one of the sides, and removed all the drab symmetry. It didn't look good, exactly, but at least now it was *her* haircut.

Phoebe swept her ragged locks behind her ears and pushed the button on her octagonal jewelry box, which bloomed open like a mechanical rose. Inside, a dozen different Trinkas dangled from hooks, each sparkling with tinted precious metals and lacey ornamental carvings. Ever since the Foundry had introduced these little mechanical pets, Trinkas were fashion necessities. Phoebe chose a plump one covered in soft gold bristles with a big happy mouth, emerald eyes, and bouncy appendages. When she held the Trinkka at her throat and turned the key, the device extended two of its limbs and gathered them loosely around her neck. Giggling adorably, the Trinkka swung back and forth like a necklace with a mind of its own.

Phoebe wrinkled her nose. She had worn this model for the last few days, delighting in its joyful swings, but today she found it dull. She rifled through the top drawer of her dresser, already crammed with unopened gadgets and gizmos, and stuffed the fuzzy Trinkka among them. Its muffled giggles faded as the mechanism wound down.

She selected another Trinka from her jewelry box and ripped off the tag. This one reminded Phoebe of a tiny octopus. It had teddy bear eyes and four paddle-shaped tentacles beneath a bulbous silver head. When she pushed a hidden button, ruby light glowed from within the Trinka, making the paper-thin metal shell appear translucent. The light exposed infinitesimal clockwork innards, pumping and tittering, pulsing like a heartbeat.

The Trinka sprang into the air, somersaulted in place using its spinning tentacles to stay aloft, and then landed in Phoebe's hand with a soft chime of bells. It clung to her wrist like a bracelet as its light faded, leaving the surface opaque and reflective again. Phoebe approved.

She grabbed a strawberry-flavored Honeygum for later and slipped it into her skirt pocket. The sparkly beehive container was small and easy to hide, and she liked the challenge of pouring the syrup into her mouth without getting caught by her teachers. Better yet, chewing the candy goo once it thickened helped pass the time during the dull day.

Phoebe put on a pair of low-heeled black shoes with silver straps and snatched her gray, bell-shaped hat. She unlocked the embossed platinum doors and slipped into the dark corridor. A distant clatter of activity rang down the hallway, the sound dampened by the brocaded carpet.

She gazed up at the triangular skylights set into the vaulted copper ceiling. Even though dawn was barely starting to blush the sky, the servants were already bustling about downstairs. The smell of fresh muffins filled her nostrils as she descended

a marble and gold staircase, each step carved to look like a feather, and entered the lavish dining room.

As always, Phoebe's breakfast was waiting on the bur-nished brass table that was as long as a shipping freighter. Today's selection included mini Parmesan quiches, blackberry pancakes, pork hash, and cinnamon toast. Mrs. Tanner always griped that Phoebe was malnourished, but really she was just never hungry. And she hated sitting at the monstrous table all alone, staring at the repeating patterns of shells and parallel lines in the metallic wallpaper until her eyes crossed.

Phoebe filled a cup with black coffee, popped a piece of cinnamon toast on a saucer, and headed for the veranda. Today was sure to be a scorcher, and she wanted to breathe some fresh air before it got unbearable outside. She slunk past the open door of the kitchen, which rang with clanging pots and pans, the hiss of an automatic Dish Wand, and the chatter of a Televiewer.

A shriek of laughter made Phoebe flinch. The cackle belonged to the chef, Mr. Macaroy, and she peeked in to see the commotion. Mrs. Tanner was scolding a maid, who had evidently done something that tickled the fancy of the hyena-like chef. Mrs. Tanner's sausagey arms were jiggling with every gesture, but Phoebe couldn't hear her sputtering because the Televiewer in the corner was playing the news at full blast.

“. . . and the nation of Trelaine, prominent member of the growing so-called Quorum, has made its threats very clear. In his recent address to the Council of Nations, Premier Lavaraud said his patience was at an end. 'Should Meridian continue to

hinder trade and withhold critical exports, she will find herself looking down the barrel of a gun.’”

The tall nickel-framed screen showed a severe man with a slick helmet of hair and a long scowling face. It cut to footage of some recent protest overseas, uniformed soldiers on horseback confronting angry citizens. Trelaine’s capital city was in the background, a clot of hulking buildings beneath a miserable sooty sky.

Ignoring the dull drone of the news, Phoebe made for the filigreed door that led outside. She braced herself for a snap of cold morning air but was met instead by tepid mush. The city was in the grips of a heat wave, and summer was creeping up. Phoebe loathed the heat, but she would endure the perpetual sun of the Azsuri Crescent if it meant a few months of freedom from the Academy.

Birds sang cheerfully as she sat at a silver table draped with a silk tablecloth and laid her breakfast down. Phoebe sipped coffee and nibbled at her toast, gazing out upon the vast courtyard of herringbone-patterned hedges and titanium fountains.

Plumm Estate sat atop a huge terraced hill, situated perfectly to take in the wonder of Albright City, capital of all Meridian. It signaled to Phoebe like a grand beacon, a horseshoe of gleaming skyscrapers that wrapped around the semicircular bay. A suspension bridge extended from the center of the horseshoe to a solitary island teeming with high-tech smokestacks, warehouses, gargantuan factories, offices, and shipping docks. They were so densely packed that from afar it looked like the circuit board of an enormous Computator.

This was the Foundry—the apex of technology, the epicenter of innovation.

And soaring above the bridge, brighter than everything else, was the Crest of Dawn. It stole Phoebe’s breath every time she saw it. The Foundry’s magnificent logo was the pinnacle of this famous skyline, towering higher than the tallest building in Albright City and marking the only entrance to the island. Held aloft by two titanic columns on either side of the bridge, the Crest of Dawn was a sculpted sunburst thousands of feet high, an explosion of glittering beams erupting in glorious metal fire.

Phoebe had visited her father’s office at Foundry Central lots of times, and driving on the bridge beneath the Crest was always a thrill. No matter what time of day it was or where you were in the city, it was always the most brilliant point on the horizon. It was said that the sunburst could be seen from twelve hundred miles away, causing many to wonder what kind of metal it could possibly be made from.

The Crest of Dawn was perfection.

Phoebe didn’t register the icy jet of water until it smacked her face. It blasted the cup from her hands, dousing her with hot coffee. She staggered back and looked down, mouth agape. Her burning eyes scanned the courtyard for her assailant.

There he was, in the mud beside the irrigation pipes, wheezing for breath. The filthy little twerp tossed aside the tools he had used to crank up the water pressure and clutched his belly in hysterics while the garden hose thrashed like a gutted snake. He was laughing so hard that his stupid, freckled

face turned a grotesque, blotchy shade of purple. He pointed one muddy finger at Phoebe before collapsing backward in a snorting spasm of laughter.

“Gotcha!” he managed to squeak between choking guffaws.

It was Micah, Mrs. Tanner’s ten-year-old son and the grease monkey of Plumm Estate. Phoebe wanted to scream curses in his ear until he was deaf, then strangle him with that stupid hose.

Mr. Kashiri, the Plumms’ doughy gardener, ran up and grabbed Micah by the collar to reprimand him, but the lunatic hose sprayed him as well, which sent Micah flailing into another fit of giggles. At last, Mr. Kashiri snatched Micah and dragged him away through the hedges.

Phoebe knew what would come next, because it had happened too many times to count. Whenever Micah antagonized Phoebe, he had to answer to his mother, who used a heavy hand in her discipline. The next time Phoebe saw him, he’d have a fresh bruise or some awful new chore. Normally, she felt a twinge of guilt when Mrs. Tanner punished Micah.

Not this time, she thought as she looked at the coffee stain on her shirt. *This time he’s gone too far.*

Now, any dimwit could play a joke, as Micah had proven time and time again. But Phoebe didn’t do *jokes*. Her attention to detail elevated her above the average prankster, which was why she referred to her careful art as “sniping.” She always made her attacks appear accidental, like a dose of rotten luck. For example, she might separate the supports in a recliner so

the person sitting in it would slip between the cushions, or maybe she would file notches in the keys on someone’s key ring to render them useless.

But Phoebe was righteous with her snipes, using them only on people who truly deserved it—like Micah. He was obnoxious and clumsy, and he had absolutely no respect for anyone. She had hated the little jerk ever since his first day on the job, when she had caught him trying to pop birds around the feeder with his slingshot. He was the ideal target.

At first, Micah had thought the snipes were his older brother Randall’s doing, but eventually he caught on to Phoebe. He tried to expose her as the culprit behind things like the hot pepper in Tennyson’s cereal and the earwigs in Mr. Macaroy’s pillow. When that didn’t work, he resorted to pestering her any chance he got. Unfortunately for him, it won him a whopping every time.

As she used the tablecloth to wipe herself off, her mind raced through all sorts of vengeful scenarios, and the minute Micah’s laughter faded, she leaped into action. Phoebe rushed off the veranda, leaving the mess behind for the staff to sort out, and flew down the steps to the manicured courtyard. She glanced around to make sure no one was watching, and then marched through the silver arbor that led to the lane of servants’ quarters.

Phoebe’s golden brown eyes sparkled as she headed for Micah’s work shed.

Gotcha, she thought.



THE STRANGER

The scents of rich, oily brass polish and old smoke from the fireplace put Phoebe at ease the instant she entered her father's study. Dr. Plumm was not an orderly man, and the floor of his office was piled with stacks of books and ledgers that seemed to defy gravity. The dark iron shelves were precariously overloaded, and the narrow Computator tower on his desk sat atop a nest of scattered papers and files. Blue shards of light streamed through stained glass windows and raked across the bronze wall panels, illuminating drifting motes of ash and dust.

This was Phoebe's favorite place in the whole house. It felt

like her father was lingering just out of sight, hard at work on some inscrutable project. She settled into his pillowed reading chair upholstered in luxurious Durall, a premium material made from velvety-soft metal fibers. Phoebe tousled her hair, which was still damp, and pushed a button on the armrest to start the chair's rocking function.

Her eyes drifted across the walls crowded with certificates, commendations, awards, and accolades for the great Dr. Jules Plumm. She could never remember exactly what her father did for the Foundry, but it was something really important, she knew that much. Not just anyone could get their photograph taken with the president. Phoebe studied the picture, though she knew every nuance of it by heart. Her father was in the middle, a lean rake of a man with a wry grin, the sunlight glinting off one of the lenses of his glasses. He was shaking the hand of President Saltern, who was on the right, boasting that winning smile of his. But her father wasn't looking at the president—instead, he was gazing to the left. To Phoebe's mom.

She wore a sleeveless, ankle-length dress made of overlapping silver rectangles that looked like shimmering scales, and there was a splash of lemonade-colored diamonds in her black bobbed hair. Her eyelashes, thick with mascara, were pinched tight in laughter, and her head was slung back with her mouth wide. She was clutching her husband's arm with both hands. It looked like they were sharing an inside joke at the expense of the most powerful man in the world.

Out of the corner of her eye, Phoebe saw the dimpled copper door of the study swing open. It was Micah, wearing



heavy-duty cleaning gloves and muttering to himself. He dragged a sloshing bucket with one hand and clutched a filthy toothbrush in the other, not noticing Phoebe as he trudged toward the private lavatory in the corner.

“Get out of here,” Phoebe said coldly.

Micah startled and almost toppled his bucket, but he quickly regained his composure. He chuckled and took a few moseying steps toward her. The splatter of freckles on the twerp’s round face stretched in a snide, lopsided grin that made her skin crawl.

“Costume change, eh, Plumm? What happened to your other shirt there?”

“Some stupid little garden gnome thought he was cute. He was wrong.”

“Ha-ha! Testy, testy. Did I spoil your *pwetty widdle* outfit?”

“Don’t you have a toilet to scrub or something?”

Micah glanced down at his toothbrush and bucket and shrugged with feigned indifference. “It was worth it. Anything’s worth it to see Freaky scream,” he said, doing his ugliest impression of Phoebe’s reaction to the hose.

She rose to her full height and leered down at him. Not only was Phoebe two years older than Micah, but she was also a glorious six inches taller. “Enjoy it while it lasts,” she muttered ominously.

“What’s ’at supposed to mean?”

“I guess I’d have to explain it to an inbred hick like you, wouldn’t I?” She stepped close enough to make Micah uncomfortable, but he didn’t back down. He brushed his rusty blond

hair away with a stubby hand and wrinkled his pug nose.

“You’re a stuck-up snobby kook, you know that?”

“Better than a crap farmer like you. Is that why you love scrubbing the pot so much?”

“You think you’re *so* smart,” he said, starting to go red.

“Ooh! I have a new name for you. Toiletboy. Has a nice ring to it.”

Micah scrambled for the words. “Shut up! You’re a . . .”

She raised her eyebrows, waiting for a brilliant comeback.

“. . . a stupid freakin’ idiot!” Micah finished lamely.

“Wow,” chuckled Phoebe sarcastically. “Such wit.”

“FREAKY!” Micah shouted, his fat mouth bent into an angry scrawl.

A horn blared outside.

“Gotta go, Toiletboy,” Phoebe said, casually breezing past him. She clicked the yellow brooch on the band of her hat, and a spray of fine golden tendrils swished out like a metal ostrich feather. “Oh, and if I were you, which I’m glad I’m not, I’d watch my back . . . and front, come to think of it.”

“Bring it on. I ain’t scared of your stupid tricks!”

She flashed him a smile and left the study.

Phoebe skipped across the foyer, feeling a surge of elation. She so wished she could be around to see Micah stumble upon her snipe. As she approached the copper-plated front doors, she checked the time on the grandfather clock, a family heirloom shaped like an ornately filigreed skyscraper. Seven thirteen a.m. She was late for school and couldn’t care less.

The horn bleated again, and she rolled her eyes.

She hefted open the great front doors and hurried down the wide slab steps. On the hammered-steel driveway below, Tennyson the chauffeur was finishing up a quick polish of the long, smoke-gray Baronet with his chamois.

The Plumms had seven Auto-mobiles in all. Phoebe's favorite was the classic, electric-blue Flashback her dad had named Shameless. Tennyson, however, preferred the Baronet, which was the largest and most impressive of the collection. It was a silver arrow of aerodynamic design, with sweeping fenders whose curves reminded Phoebe of brushstrokes. Parallel grooves ran along the body, giving the impression that the Auto-mobile was speeding, even when it was at rest. The Baronet was quite a sight, but it was no match for Shameless.

Tennyson ignored Phoebe and headed for the driver's seat without opening the door for her—their relationship no longer included even that basic formality. She stretched out across the oiled black and silver leather, her foot knocking up against the book bag she had left under the seat.

The Baronet hushed quietly out of the driveway and onto Shimmering Crest, which made a steep series of zigzagging switchbacks all the way down the hill. Tennyson whistled as he drove, clinking his wedding ring on the aluminum steering wheel. Phoebe assumed he was doing that to annoy her.

Two can play at that game, she thought. So Phoebe activated the Trinkta strapped to her wrist and let the toy's spinning tentacles clatter across the ceiling. She did it again and again and looked in the rearview mirror to see if she was getting a rise

out of Tennyson, but the chauffeur just whistled and clicked his ring that much louder.

Phoebe lolled her head to the side and gazed out the window as they whizzed from the hills and approached downtown. They plunged in and out of long shadows thrown by the forest of skyscrapers, making it seem like someone was flicking the world's light switch off and on. Phoebe craned her neck to try and see the tops of the buildings they passed.

There was the bronze Lion's Mane Hotel, whose sharp spires seemed to jab at the sky like the prongs of a trident. Then there was the Uniton Tower, home to Phoebe's favorite Televiewer network, which boasted gold windows that slanted in overlapping ribs, reminding Phoebe of a titanic stalk of wheat. Then the Opal District, a plaza of art galleries made of copper covered in a lush green patina. And the Central Library, which resembled the prow of one of the Foundry's impressive ocean liners. And the five silver pillars of the National Museum.

Phoebe rolled down her window to absorb the commotion of morning—the symphony of horns, the clamor of traffic, and the bustle of sharply dressed pedestrians, some walking dogs that were just as elegantly attired. These steely streets were the veins of the city, flowing with thousands of polished Auto-mobiles and pulsing with hordes of hurried people. The Link-Way hubs were packed, as riders hooked their Cable Bikes on to the lines and zipped across the intricate web of aerial wires. Phoebe counted three new building projects, with Over-cranes and Earthshakers hoisting beams into position.

She imagined what wonders these new structures would add to the world-famous skyline. Every year the capital grew more and more magnificent.

“Keep it closed,” grumbled Tennyson as he rolled up her window from his control panel. “Got the air on.”

Phoebe glared at the back of Tennyson’s square head and then mashed her button to lower the window again. She slung her arms out of the Auto to prevent the chauffeur from rolling it back up.

As they drove through Paragon Park, Phoebe admired the chrome statue of Creighton Albright at its heart. The legendary inventor of the modern age was holding the globe aloft and gazing upon it with fierce pride. Every Dudscrub and Microcounter, every Auto-mobile and Megatanker, from the tiniest pin to the mightiest skyscraper, every glorious new advancement served as testament to his genius.

She wondered if Albright could have imagined the impact he’d have on the future. That four centuries later, his greatest invention of all, the Foundry, would remain the unrivaled source of progress and innovation.

“Hey!” Phoebe yelped as the window started to close on her. She yanked her arms back into the Auto and pulled the golden tendrils of her hat inside as the glass was sealed tight. She kicked the back of Tennyson’s seat.

“I said, keep it closed,” the chauffeur grumbled. “And no kicking.”

Phoebe pressed the button repeatedly, but he had locked her window.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Phoebe huffed.

“That’s not what your father said. He told you to be a good little girl and obey me, remember? Upsetting the driver is a hazard.”

Phoebe kicked Tennyson’s seat harder.

They emerged from the shelter of the park, and Tennyson turned onto the road that hugged the coastline. As she did every morning at this spot, Phoebe slid to the opposite side of the Auto and stared at her feet. The Baronet was blasted with an intense light, a reflection from the Crest of Dawn, which towered over the island of Foundry Central.

Phoebe squeezed her eyes shut, but not because of the glare.

They were driving on a high bluff above the dark churning bay. Though the Baronet was soundproof, Phoebe could feel the crash of the waves, malevolent and hungry. She trusted that the guardrails would prevent the Baronet from going over the edge, but she could not bear the sight of the water below. Her heart pounded, and she tasted bile at the back of her tongue. She closed her eyes and counted backward from ten, knowing that when she reached zero, the ocean would no longer be yawning, waiting right below her.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

She thought of her father. How when she was little, she couldn’t wait to see what gift he had brought her when he returned from his business trips. Nowadays, she just wanted him. She pictured his open arms.

Seven. Six. Five.

She imagined Micah’s stupid face turning bright red as he

discovered the snipe she had set up that morning. That made her smile.

Four. Three.

They were definitely past the worst part of it by now, but Phoebe didn't like to take any chances. She searched for other glimmers of happiness.

Two.

All at once, the strangest sensation overcame her. It was a prickling chill at the back of her neck that had nothing to do with the dreaded bay below. Phoebe had a powerful urge to look, but she resisted it.

Just one more second to go.

One.

She opened her eyes. Foundry Bay was gone from view as the busy street angled around a bend. But the weird feeling was still there. Phoebe looked out the back window.

Behind the Baronet was an unfamiliar model of Automobile. It was jet-black with a dark bronze stripe down the middle. A row of oval headlights wrapped around the front of the Auto below a narrow, tinted windshield. For an instant, she glimpsed a face behind the smoked glass.

Curving mustache. Bowler hat. Round black spectacles.

Phoebe gasped. With reflections dancing across the dark windshield, she couldn't be sure. Was she imagining things?

No. It was the stranger she had seen from her bedroom window.

Her mind scrambled for an explanation. Was it merely someone who looked like him? It was a fairly typical fashion,

plain black suit with a white shirt and gloves. Maybe he was a new neighbor who coincidentally shared her commute.

That's when it hit her. This man had been sent by her father, hired to watch over her like a bodyguard. That's why he had been surveying the house that morning and why he was following her now. Did that mean she was in danger? Her father was a big deal at the Foundry, after all. Maybe this was a precaution, what with all the anti-Meridian stuff going on.

Surely that was it.

Phoebe gave the stranger a little wave to let him know she understood. On cue, the black Auto drifted back and disappeared into the sea of traffic. Not exactly the reaction she was expecting, but it was no matter. She was relieved to know that her father was watching over her from afar.

Still, why didn't he just tell her? Her father could have sent word from wherever he was. It would certainly scare her a lot less if she knew this stranger was a bodyguard and not some creepy stalker.

She pondered this until they arrived at Beatrice Albright Academy for Girls. The campus was a vast grassy commons enclosed by a row of stately elms, and the front of the school faced the distant bay, whose waters glittered through the leaves. Her instructors always boasted about the inspiring historical significance of their school. But to Phoebe, it looked like some sort of burned-out fortress, with a clunky iron block design corroded by centuries of ocean air.

Lately, the Academy had been undergoing renovations, and while half of the sprawling campus was caged in by

scaffolding, the other half had received a shiny new veneer that gleamed with fiery reflections from the Crest of Dawn.

Tennyson parked the Baronet. Phoebe slouched so that no one could see her, and he didn't say a word, knowing her routine. Every day, she watched as the other girls milled about, playing with their Spinner Purses and ridiculous hair mobiles until they all finally bobbed indoors. Only then would she slink inside.

The chauffeur resumed his obnoxious whistling and tapping. He glanced at her in the rearview mirror and gave her a smug grin. She had considered letting him off the hook for his previous slight, but this sealed the deal.

Phoebe searched one of the secret pockets in her skirt.

At last the bell rang. She grabbed her bag and shuffled out of the Auto, immediately feeling weighed down by schoolwork and the salty humidity of the bay.

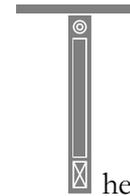
Phoebe paused for a second, pretending to adjust her shoe as she pulled the bent nail from her pocket and wedged it beneath the Baronet's back tire. She slammed the door, and as Tennyson sped away, she thrilled to the pop and hiss of the punctured wheel. Hopefully, he would be stuck in traffic by the time he realized he had a flat. That was sure to stop his stupid whistling.

"Gotcha," Phoebe said.

As she trudged up the steps, Phoebe scanned the driveway and parking lot, looking for the stranger's black and bronze Auto. It was nowhere to be seen. She took a last deep breath of the free world, sour and salty though it was, and forced it out, resigned to another day's hard labor at Fort Beatrice.



HEAT RISING



he day was worse than Phoebe had anticipated. Normally, she could endure Miss Castella's annoying enthusiasm for punctuation, she could even stomach Mr. Pomeroy's wretched frog-puke breath. But not today. Every class was like being trapped in a sauna. The renovations on the building were causing the air-cooling units to fail, which meant long stretches of sweltering muck interspersed with rare bursts of heavenly breeze.

They wheeled a bunch of brand new Flurrys into every classroom, but even the Foundry's top-of-the-line fans, chrome

devices built to resemble spinning snowflakes, did little more than stir the air like a hot, boring soup.

As the end of the day oozed closer, Phoebe shuffled down one of the gleaming remodeled hallways toward Mrs. Vondell's dreaded history class. She saw a boisterous group of girls and locked her eyes on the ground. Two or more geese were called a gaggle, she knew, but what was the term for two or more shallow, stuck-up, catty know-it-alls? A squall? A shriek?

Yeah, that sounded about right.

She wove through the crowd and snuck past the shriek of snots, hoping to go unnoticed. No such luck.

“Seriously, that can't be for real.”

“I would just shave my head if I were her.”

“Was it cut by a drunk?”

“More like a blind man.”

This last dig came from Candice, and it stung the worst.

Back when they were kids, Phoebe and Candice had been inseparable. But when Phoebe needed her best friend most of all, Candice had abandoned her as if she thought tragedy was contagious or something.

Phoebe's breath felt fiery in her nostrils, and her face tingled with humiliation and outrage. She raked a hand through her butchered hair and fussed with its ragged, uneven edge.

She strode into Mrs. Vondell's classroom and flopped into her chair by the window, more irritated than ever that she had to sit directly behind Candice. As the waddling hippo that was Mrs. Vondell began her history lesson, Phoebe envisioned all the terrible accidents that might befall her ex-best friend.

Perhaps the workers would hit a weak spot in the roof, and the ceiling would collapse on her. Or maybe Candice's necklace would get caught in the blades of a Flurry. But between the sweaty classroom and Mrs. Vondell's monotonous voice dripping in her ear like a drug, Phoebe's mind drifted.

“That's correct. By 1646, the Alloy War had been going for sixteen years, claiming over thirty million lives,” Mrs. Vondell droned, her multiple chins wagging to and fro. “And on October twelfth of that year, Meridian brought about a cease-fire by introducing . . . the what?”

Nobody raised a hand, but Mrs. Vondell carried on as if she hadn't noticed the class's profound disinterest. She turned back to the enameled metal whiteboard, angling her ample rump to the class, and wrote the answer.

“The Ferro-nomic Treaty, which finally permitted international trade of Foundry goods. A free market emerged for the other nations of the world, who lacked our spirit of innovation.”

Phoebe's eyelids were heavy. She knew Mrs. Vondell expected her students to regurgitate all this stuff word for word on the test, but the day was nearly at an end.

Candice's muffled snort of laughter snapped Phoebe awake. She stared at the nauseating waves of perfect blond hair that cascaded down Candice's back. The girl tittered at some private joke and flung her locks with a showy toss of her head. A handful of her curls spilled across the frame of the open window.

And an immensely satisfying snipe sprang to her mind.

“The global distribution of Albright’s countless advancements in technology, manufacturing, and transportation resulted in major cultural and economic shifts. Greinadoren, Moalao, and the other primitive nations saw substantial improvements to their quality of life. But most importantly, Meridian became the most powerful country in the world. Now, can anyone tell me . . .”

There were only a few minutes left until the bell would free her from Vondell torture. She had to act fast.

Soft as a whisper, Phoebe eased the window sash closed on Candice’s golden hair. She withdrew a paper clip from one of her skirt pockets, wedged it in the window mechanism, and twisted the wire around the knob to jam it. Candice was too engrossed in gossip to notice.

Phoebe wouldn’t be the only one with an uneven haircut.

Satisfied, she prepared to bolt at the sound of the bell and glanced out the window to see if Tennyson had arrived.

Her breath lodged in her throat.

Beyond the workers’ scaffolding and construction tarps wafting in the sea breeze, she saw the stranger in the bowler hat. His tailored black suit hugged his broad barrel chest, and he wore crisp white gloves on large hands. Gleaming steel trim lined his lapels and the soles of his shoes. He stood eerily still, the waxy tint of his skin making him look like a statue that might melt in the sun. His stout, gently curled mustache looked like a joyless smile, which made his appearance all the more disturbing.

Even through his impenetrable black spectacles, she could feel his stare.

The sudden clang of the school bell propelled Phoebe from her seat. She snatched her book bag and was halfway down the hall before she heard Candice squawk behind her. Phoebe imagined Mrs. Vondell being forced to cut the girl loose with a pair of dull scissors.

Gotcha.

She slowed as a swarm of students poured out of classrooms and toward the front doors. Normally, she would have escaped Fort Beatrice at full speed to avoid the mob, but seeing the stranger out front made her hesitate. That morning, she had felt certain that he was a bodyguard hired to protect her. Now she was not so sure.

If he was an ally, why did his glare feel so invasive, like he was impaling her with a mere look?

Phoebe flattened up against the lockers to avoid students storming past and considered another route out of the building. She slipped down a stuffy side hall that was shrouded in drop cloths and loud with the screech of power tools. A custodian shuffled out of a classroom hauling a heavy trash bag to the incinerator. The moment his back was to her, she dashed through the door he had left open.

A humid breeze drifted in from an open window that overlooked the athletic fields behind the Academy—away from the waiting stranger. She heard the shouts of kids playing outside and scanned the grounds to make sure no one was

watching. Content that the coast was clear, she hopped up on the windowsill, swung her legs over, and dropped into the bushes below.

It was farther than Phoebe anticipated, but the hedge cushioned her fall. The mellow hush of ocean breeze tempered the brutal heat of the afternoon. It was such a relief to escape that stuffy old building.

From the bushes, Phoebe watched her classmates frolic, their lively Trinkas dancing in a colorful stir. Boys from the nearby prep school had gathered as well, pretending to ignore the girls but showing off nonetheless. Six of them were playing a frantic game of Springchuck, bouncing the coconut-sized copper gyroscope. You were supposed to catch the thing, perform some feat of agility, and then hurl it back into the circle of players. The gadget shot out at random, so it was impossible to predict where it would go, which was supposed to be half of the fun.

The older boys raced their Cable Bikes across the lawn toward a nearby hub. At the umbrella-shaped brass booth, they latched their Bikes on to the ascension line and zipped off overhead. The boys chased each other along the criss-crossed Link-Way high above, doing dangerous stunts as they switched their Bikes from wire to wire, to the giggling delight of the girls below.

Phoebe crept through the shrubs and made her way around the side of Fort Beatrice. A long line of Auto-mobiles parked in the driveway came into view, and she could make out Tennyson leaning against the Baronet, his arms folded disapprovingly.

And there was the stranger.

He had positioned himself between the chauffeur and the front doors of the Academy, as dark and unmoving as an ink-blot. She considered trying to signal to Tennyson, but it was no use. He would not understand the need for discretion, and there was no way to get his attention without the stranger seeing as well.

The chauffeur mopped his brow and scowled at his watch. She knew exactly what he was thinking. Phoebe had a habit of ditching her driver in order to take the Zip Trolley home. How long would Tennyson wait before giving up on her?

She couldn't stick around to find out.

Phoebe broke into a jog and cut across the athletic fields. The wind brushed against her damp skin as she ran, waking her body after the long, dreary day. She made her way to the edge of the grounds and passed under the row of elms that bordered the Academy.

Sweet freedom!

She found herself on a residential street lined by brand new tin-plated townhouses with tall trapezoid windows. The symmetrical buildings were so alike that Phoebe wondered how the residents ever managed to find their way home. She crossed an intersection and headed up a street bustling with fashionable pedestrians. Phoebe dug into her book bag, withdrew her hat, and popped it on, activating its metal feather ornament with a flagrant swish. She was headed to the Zip Trolley stop on Illacci Hill, one of the classier shopping districts in Albright City, so she had to look the part.

The afternoon sun lit up the glass storefronts like a kaleidoscope. The bluster of Auto traffic filled the air, and the glittering gold sidewalks looked like fashion runways. Waves of city folk towered over Phoebe and broke around her like the tide, their shopping bags sizzling with brand-new purchases.

She didn't like crowds but found it easy to get lost in the shuffle. No one even noticed the scrawny twelve-year-old girl in the ratty skirt.

The window displays drew her eye. A glamorous hat store showed a lively beach scene populated by bronze mannequins in the latest summer fashions. There were sweeping striated sun hats that could retract to the size of a pillbox and adorable silver bathing caps with goggles that popped out when they got wet. At another store, she admired a pair of Scopers, sandals with heels that could extend to make you look taller. Not that Phoebe needed any help in that department.

She wove between the throngs of refined pedestrians and made her way to the gadgetariums farther up the hill. One novelty shop advertised the FroYoYo, a peach-colored yo-yo made of tin that (for some reason unclear to Phoebe) doubled as a frozen yogurt dispenser. The next store sold household luxury items, including Sleeksweeps and the Kinetik Komforts series, scalp and body massagers that resembled gyrating chrome spiders.

A Foundry truck with tank treads covering its back wheels was parked in the street. The cargo bed was segmented with overlapping steel plates, and its gate was open like an invitation.

She approached, dying to know what was inside. Probably the premiere of a brand new product, something unbelievable that would be—

She froze.

Phoebe couldn't believe her eyes. She stared at the reflection in the truck's polished chrome bumper.

The stranger was behind her.

He was running at top speed, his long strides unwavering as if climbing the hill required no more effort than breathing. There was no longer any question. He was after her.

A shock of adrenaline rippled through her limbs. She ran with no destination, past pedestrians and across streets, heedless of the honking Auto-mobiles. She wanted to look back but didn't dare.

Halfway up the block she skidded right, and then dashed into the alley between a department store and a hotel. Her footfalls echoed and multiplied in the narrow passage.

Click-clack-click-clack.

Or were those *his* steps pounding closer and closer?

The skyscrapers rose around her like the bars of a silver cage. She burst onto Fourth Street in the center of the Financial District. The shadows were growing long and the buildings shone with the fierce amber glow of sunset. The sidewalks were even more crowded here, and she weaved between the masses, hoping they would conceal her.

The city had lost its comforting hum. Now everything was amplified and aggressive—horns shrieked, jackhammers

roared. Phoebe thought she heard her name murmured in snatches of passing conversations, and her heartbeat thundered in her throat.

She shot down an alley and slammed against a wall to catch her breath, her lungs wheezing and straining for air. Her eyes couldn't focus, she was dripping with sweat, and her legs burned. Feeling light-headed, she peeled off her hat, savoring the chill that swept over her drenched hair.

Phoebe was not at all accustomed to this kind of exertion. Walking was okay—she loved to explore the city. But running? Long ago, she had talked her father into getting a doctor's note to permanently excuse her from gym, some fabrication about weak knees or something. Ever since then, she had avoided anything that might cause her to break a sweat.

What was she supposed to do now?

The chirp of the Zip Trolley sang out. It was like the call of a long-lost friend. This was her chance. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize where she was in relation to it.

Click-clack-click-clack-click-clack.

The sound of metal-soled shoes.

Click-clack-click-clack.

Phoebe peeked around the corner.

He was coming.

Her hat slipped from her fingers.

The sunset careening off the Crest of Dawn nearly blinded her when she spilled out of the alley. Disoriented, rushing down a street she didn't recognize, all she could do was chase the sound of the trolley whistle. She crashed into a vendor

selling limeade Fizzies as she bolted onto a narrow walkway between towering black buildings.

Phoebe burst out onto Illacci Hill again, and there it was. The sight of the Zip Trolley with its bulbous facade and round, sparkling windows filled her with elation. It was just starting to roll away. She pumped her legs like a locomotive to catch up. Her heart felt like it was going to explode.

She reached out and snatched the back railing, feeling the deep vibration of the electric engine through her palm. Phoebe hauled herself aboard just in time to see the stranger rushing at her from the *opposite* side of the street.

Impossible. He had been behind her only moments ago. How could he have gotten over to the other side? It was as if he were everywhere at once.

The stranger jogged for a bit before giving up the chase, his eyes never leaving her. She heaved a rattling sigh of relief as the Zip Trolley whizzed away, her body trembling from exhaustion. No matter how fast he was, there was no way he would be able to catch up on foot.

Yet as the trolley sped over the hill and his black-hole stare vanished from sight, she had a feeling the stranger would not give up so easily.