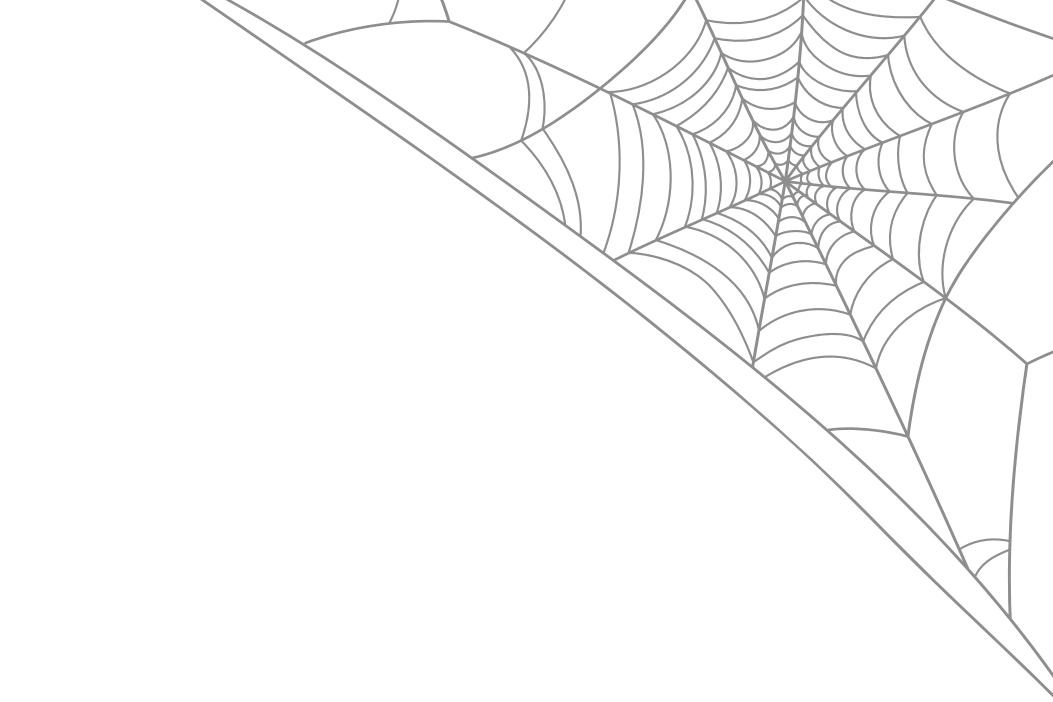
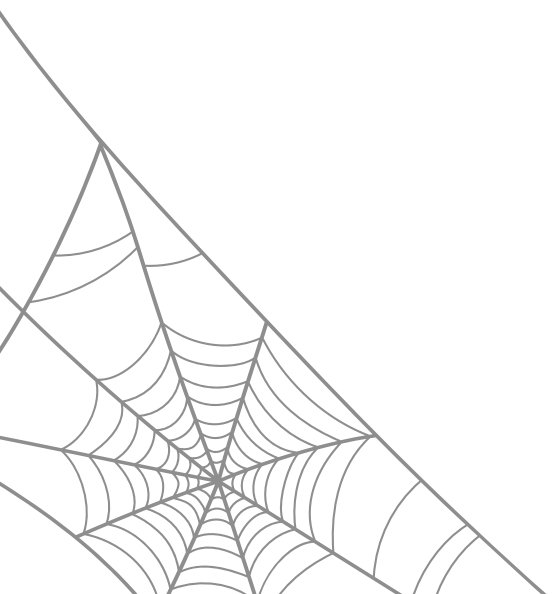


DREAMWEAVING



A Rock the Boat Book

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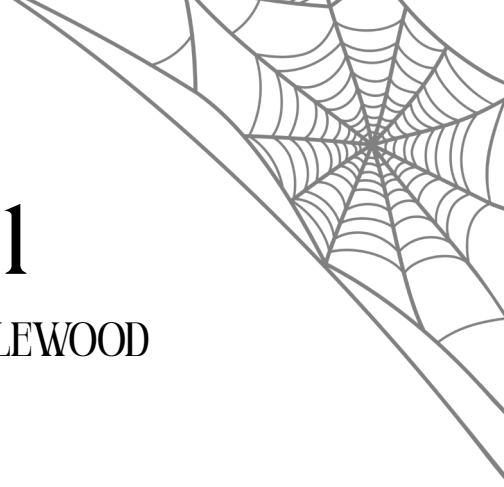
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DREAMWEAVING

O.O. SANGOYOMI





CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO TANGLEWOOD

Deja was a strong advocate of eating the rich, but she had to admit: they had some cool aesthetics.

This time of year, the campus of Tanglewood Preparatory School was a rippling sea of red, orange, and yellow leaves. Stone buildings with moss-stained walls were topped by tall spires, the tips of which were lost amidst a low-hanging fog. In the distance loomed vaporous mountains, like a trembling shore. Clouds swallowed the autumn sun, enveloping the afternoon in a chilly gray.

"So, this is New England?" Deja asked. She turned away from the window. "It's mad depressing up here."

Across the small room, an elderly woman sat at a desk. With her graying pixie cut and dark pantsuit, it looked as though she had absorbed the dreary weather. Her attitude must have been affected too; she glared at Deja.

Unfazed, Deja dropped onto an overstuffed couch and propped her feet onto an ornate coffee table. Her brown sneakers—which had definitely not been brown when she got them—showered dirt onto the polished surface. The gray woman made a small, indignant

squeak that Deja ignored.

She subtly placed a hand below her collarbone. Aunt Cybele was scared of planes, and anyway she was too busy with her salon, so she had been unable to drop Deja off at Tanglewood. But through the mystical ways of their family, Deja's aunt had found other ways to make sure she was not alone. And as Deja felt the necklace hidden beneath her shirt, she felt reassured; the small charm was a reminder that her family's support was with her everywhere she went.

Deja extracted her phone from her pocket, and her gratitude turned into irritation. The cracked screen showed that it was now ten minutes past the time she was supposed to meet with Headmaster Egleston. As the headmaster of the best secondary school in America, Egleston was a highly educated man. He had an M.Ed., a PhD, and probably other parts of the alphabet too. But as educated as he was, apparently, he had never learned punctuality.

Deja leaned onto the armrest, straining to hear what was happening on the other side of a nearby wooden door.

"This is your fourth year at Tanglewood," said the muffled voice of a man who must have been Headmaster Egleston. "Even though you skipped a grade, you've had plenty of time to adjust. Yet from your record, I see you haven't joined any extracurriculars. Tell me, is it ego or disinterest that keeps you from participating in school organizations?"

The person to whom Egleston spoke was too quiet for Deja to hear.

After a moment, Egleston sighed. "Although strongly encouraged,

extracurriculars are not required. If you wish to continue making excuses for your antisocial behavior, there is little I can do. I just hope you know that being a bright student does not justify narcissism."

A moment later, the door swung open, and out walked a girl. Like the other students Deja had glimpsed earlier, the girl wore a black, violet-trimmed blazer over a white-collared shirt, a violet tie, and a black pleated skirt. Deja thought the girl was pretty, with her short afro hair and skin the same color as brown sugar. Her most striking feature was her large brown eyes, which quickly found Deja.

"You're new," she said to Deja.

Deja was surprised to hear the girl had a New Orleans accent; she had not expected to meet anyone from her home state, Louisiana, all the way up here in Connecticut.

But it was clear the girl was a different type of Southerner. Her accent was round and regal, much like a southern belle. Deja, on the other hand, had the type of country accent that, well, made elderly secretaries turn their noses up at her.

"And you're a narcissist," Deja replied, using what she had heard the headmaster say against the girl.

Too late, Deja remembered she had promised her aunt that she would at least try to make friends at her new school. *You always jump at the slightest spark to set yourself on fire*, Aunt Cybele once told her. *It ain't cute. You burn everyone around you.*

But in this moment, Deja did not care. She was annoyed about her delayed appointment with the headmaster, and the girl was the

easiest person to blame for that.

She expected the girl to huff and storm away. That was what most people did after speaking to Deja. But the girl merely shrugged at her rudeness. "Not really," she said. She looked Deja over. "I like your shirt."

Deja glanced down at her oversized tee, which displayed a large picture of Malcolm X. "I bet you do," she said.

She watched closely, gauging for some sort of reaction. The girl's expression remained neutral. Contemplative.

"Hm," was all she said, then she walked away.

Deja did not know what was most irritating about the girl: that she had held up Deja's appointment with the headmaster, or that she had been admirably calm in the face of Deja's goading.

As she moved around Deja to the office door, Deja turned in place to watch her leave. She only realized she was doing this when the girl paused at the door to give Deja a small smile. Shock jolted Deja, and she quickly looked away.

She pushed aside any lingering thoughts of the girl as a second person emerged from the adjacent room, this time an old, portly man. He was bald, but as though his hair had migrated south, his round face sported a salt and pepper goatee.

The gray woman said to him, "Your next appointment is here, Headmaster Egleston."

The man smiled at Deja. "Ah, yes, Miss Freeman. Come in, come in." To the woman, he said, "Thank you, Ophelia."

"Yeah, good girl, Ophelia," Deja said, following Headmaster Egleston into his office.

She smirked as the door closed behind her on a scowling Ophelia. At least she had gotten a rise out of *someone*.

Like the previous room, the headmaster's office was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Draped over the dark wood floor was a rug so shabby that it must have cost a fortune. Opposite the door, sandwiched in between two bookshelves, was a handsome mahogany desk with a large leather chair behind it.

"Miss Freeman," Headmaster Egleston said, "it is my absolute pleasure to finally be able to say, welcome to Tanglewood Preparatory School."

He offered her a pudgy hand. In her mind, she heard her aunt's voice nag her about manners, and Deja reluctantly shook his hand. Her palm tingled.

Warm sunlight filtered in through the headmaster's office. Egleston, much younger with tufts of brown hair atop his head, stood at the center of the office. He extended his hand to a pre-teen girl who looked just like Deja—her mom, at a younger age than Deja was now.

"Welcome to Tanglewood Preparatory School," the younger Egleston told Deja's mom. She grinned as she shook his hand.

With a gasp, Deja wrenched her hand away. No matter how many visions she received over the years, she still never knew when they would pop up or what they would show. An image of her mom was the last thing she would have wanted to see in this moment. The

sudden glimpse of the past caused resentment to surge within her.

The gray light of the present, cloudy day replaced the sunlight from her vision, and Egleston was once more an older, bald man, staring at Deja.

Suppressing her shock and anger, Deja walked away. The floorboards creaked as she stopped at the nearest shelf and ran a finger along the spine of a leather book. She was unsurprised to see a layer of dust now coating her skin. Tanglewood seemed like a school that cared about books more for decoration rather than function.

Visibly confused but recovering quickly, Egleston walked to his desk. "I apologize for the delay in your enrollment. There were difficulties transferring all your credits from your former high school. However, I am happy that you are finally here, even if it is two weeks into the term. You're coming from a public high school in Sweetwater, Louisiana, correct?"

"Yup."

Headmaster Egleston waited, probably expecting Deja to elaborate on her accomplishments at her old school, or how excited she was to transfer. But she was still thinking of the vision of her mom. Speaking with the headmaster all those years ago, she had looked happy to be here—which made Deja feel the opposite.

When he realized that was all she had to say, he cleared his throat. "Great. Naturally, then, I expect this will be a bit of an adjustment for you, given that Tanglewood is a boarding school for grades 7-12. We strive to make all our students feel welcome, so if you need help

finding your place here on campus, please, don't hesitate to reach out to me, your teachers, or any of the counselors at our wellness center."

As Egleston spoke, Deja had slowly made her way around the room, inspecting the books, plaques, and trophies clustered on the walls. Now, instead of responding, she paused at a plaque that caught her eye. Across the top, in bold letters, was *Outstanding Junior Award*. Below was a list of names, one for each school year. It ranged as far back as the early 1900s. She reached out and ran a hand over the award recipient from seventeen years ago.

"Right, then," Egleston said after another uncertain pause. "Well, as you know, Tanglewood Prep is known for our commitment to students' academic, creative, and all-around excellence. This is exemplified by our motto: *et nos in via lux*. It means—"

"'We light the way,'" Deja finished for him, still examining the plaque. The Latin phrase had persistently come up during her thorough research of this school.

"Precisely. The torch is our emblem because ever since 1734, Tanglewood alumni have lit the way for each generation. We have produced some of the finest leaders, artists, and thinkers that the world has ever seen. As such, we have quite the reputation to uphold, and we expect each of our students to meet our high standards. You are a fortunate young lady, indeed, that Salt & Light Baptist Church chose you as one of the five Southern students to receive their full scholarship. I am excited to see how you use this chance that you have been given."

At last, Deja tore her eyes away from the plaque. The headmaster was giving her the same look that she had received from the secretary outside, some of her teachers at her old school, and everyone else who thought that her box braids and country accent were a sign of low intelligence.

She smiled. "Did Salt & Light give me my 4.2 GPA too?" she asked.

Egleston looked flabbergasted. "Pardon?"

"Did they give me my perfect score when I took the ACT in seventh grade?" Deja pressed on. "Did they give me the awards I've won from poetry competitions, or my hundreds of hours of community service, which were personally recognized by the governor of Louisiana?"

Egleston extracted a violet handkerchief from the pocket of his suit and dabbed his brow. Deja stared at him coolly, savoring his discomfort. Then, she said, "I wasn't *given* anything. I earned my scholarship, and I earned my place here at this prehistoric school."

She turned back to the plaque, running her hand across the name again. "Just like my mom. *Renée Freeman*," she read, and her anger leapt like a flame within her. "You remember her, Headmaster?"

"Oh!" Egleston said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "Freeman—I didn't even realize you were related. Yes, of course I remember Renée. She was one of Tanglewood's best students. I was sad to see her go. Tell me, how is she these days?"

"She's dead."

Awkward silence dropped atop the room.

Maybe Deja was supposed to say that with more remorse, or sadness. But as her heart raced, each beat pumped only rage through her.

For Deja's entire life, she had been measured against a mom she never knew. She was only here, at Tanglewood, because she had been pushed to follow in Renée's footsteps. Deja's aunt and all their family friends in Louisiana tried to make her mom out to be a role model, but Deja found it hard to respect someone who had gotten herself killed, leaving her daughter behind.

When Deja realized her fists were clenched, she folded her arms over her chest, leaning against a bookshelf. For several moments, the only sound in the room was that of a grandfather clock. Each tick seemed to pound against the inside of Deja's head, making her head ache as she attempted to restrain her anger.

Finally, Egleston said, "I'm sorry to hear that. She had a brilliant mind."

"I've heard." When people told Deja about Renée, that was the most common thing they said about her. If only her mom had been smart enough to make better choices.

"Well," Egleston began, then stopped, unsure how to proceed. He dabbed his handkerchief at his temple again, looking far more tired than when Deja had first entered his office.

"Once you leave here, my assistant, Ophelia, will escort you to Bartleby Student Center," he said, apparently deciding on dismissal. "There, you will receive your student ID and your uniform. The uniform is paid for by the school, though you will need to buy your own

pair of dress shoes." He glanced with ill-concealed disapproval at her outfit. "Bartleby also has bins filled with donations made by students from past years, if needed.

"I know you only have two years at Tanglewood, Miss Freeman," Egleston continued, "but I hope you will still make your time here as fulfilling as possible."

"Oh, I plan to," Deja said, looking back at Renée's name engraved into the plaque.

My junior year will definitely be fulfilling, Deja promised silently, *because I won't make the same mistakes my mom did.*

CHAPTER 2

CLASS PRESIDENT

Tóbi always shot for the moon because if she missed, she knew she would land among the cold vacuum of space, forever adrift.

In other words, she had no choice but to win junior class president.

"The chorus page hasn't reposted your campaign flyer yet," Caitlyn 'Lynn' Patel announced.

She scrolled tirelessly on her phone, its bedazzled case catching the room's fluorescent lights. Lynn P. had always taken great care in accessorizing, from the silver jewelry shining against her brown skin, to the violet ribbon that tied up her long black hair.

"We can encourage them," Jacqueline 'Lynn' Quigley said, absently twirling a finger in her brunette bob. "You know my friend Stella?"

The name did not ring any bells for Tóbi; she only kept track of people worth knowing. Lynn Q., on the other hand, had friends in just about every social circle at Tanglewood. It was why Tóbi kept her around.

"What about Stella?" Tóbi prompted.

"She's choir leader this year. She's so sweet, she totally deserves

it! Anyways, there's a chorus rehearsal later, so we can stop by, check on Stella, talk about that time I took her shopping in New York. And then we'll remind her to support your campaign, because I'm sure she just forgot. She really is a sweetheart."

"And if she still needs an extra nudge," Lynn P. said, "we'll let her know how much we loved the performance she gave at her parents' anniversary party."

She showed them her phone. On it played a video of a girl—who Tóbi assumed was Stella—singing, though her mouth was pitifully out of time with the music.

"I wonder what the chorus would think of their leader lip-syncing," Lynn P. said.

"I'm sure she was just having trouble with her voice that day," Lynn Q. said. She sounded sympathetic, but she smirked, flashing hot-pink braces.

Tóbi did not ask how Lynn P. got the video; she never did. Lynn P.'s magic was knowing every unfortunate thing about others, and like all magic tricks, learning how it worked would only spoil the effect for everyone.

So, Tóbi nodded. "Pay Stella a visit."

"Once we have chorus's vote, we'll have all of the arts on our side," Lucille reported.

The screen of her tablet was reflected in her cat-eye glasses, replacing her gaze with charts detailing Tóbi's campaign efforts. As the daughter of a Nobel Prize-winning economist, Lucille always

organized the world into data and numbers.

Tóbi was surer with each passing day that she made the right choice in choosing Lucille as her protégée; the eighth-grade girl reminded Tóbi so much of her younger self. Intelligent, ambitious. Not quite as stylish, but that was alright; Tóbi would help her grow into that.

Lucille removed a stylus pen from her cornrowed bun, and as she scribbled on her tablet, she continued, "But our numbers are still down with the athletes."

Tóbi tensed. She knew that most athletes would be supporting *him*, since he was an athlete himself. But Tóbi refused to lose this election.

"You have friends on the softball team, don't you?" Tóbi asked Lynn Q. "Their practice is happening now. Can you run to the fields and chat some of them up?"

"On it."

Tóbi had not literally meant run, but Lynn Q. jogged out of the room anyways. Tóbi had always marveled at how much stamina Lynn Q. had—but then again, her parents did own America's largest fitness empire.

To Lynn P., Tóbi said, "I'll trust you to take care of chorus."

She nodded, and once the Lynns had left, Tóbi told Lucille, "As for you and I, Little Me, it's time to make the rounds."

Lucille beamed, tucking her tablet into her Dior tote. She followed Tóbi out of the room, through Bartleby Student Center. As they

emerged into the foyer of Bartleby, they were cocooned by chatter.

With classes over for the day, Bartleby brimmed with students socializing. Bordering the room, along poster-splayed walls, were tables where clubs promoted themselves. There was everything from hip-hop dance companies advertising their fall shows, to Culinary Club selling baked goods in a fundraiser.

"Miss Ẹkúndayọ̀!"

At the sound of her last name, Tóbi looked over her shoulder to see the headmaster's assistant, Ophelia. She was followed by a very short, deep-toned Black girl with very long box braids. Tóbi was appalled by the girl's poor fashion taste, which included a silver nose stud and a bandana tied over her head. Worst of all was the girl's worn T-shirt, which was so baggy that it dangled off her tiny frame.

"I'm happy that we ran into you," Ophelia said to Tóbi. "I'm having trouble recalling where Tanglewood's donation bins are."

"In the basement, next to the newsroom," Tóbi responded. As the chair of the service committee, Tóbi had organized multiple school-wide clothing drives. "What do you need them for?"

"For Tanglewood's newest student," Ophelia said, gesturing to the girl. "This is Deja Freeman. She just transferred into the junior class."

"That's perfect." Tóbi snapped her fingers over her shoulder, and Lucille handed Deja a campaign flyer. "Hi, my name's Tóbi, and you've come right on time to vote for me for junior class president."

The flyer displayed her full name—Olúwatóbi Ẹkúndayọ̀—along

with a photo that had been taken during her freshman year ballet recital.

The photo captured Tóbi mid-performance, her limbs glowing black against her crisp white dress and her afro puff perfectly perched atop her head. She had never learned who took the photo; the photographer had submitted it to her ballet company anonymously. But despite the photo's mysterious origins, it was her favorite picture of herself.

Deja looked far less impressed as she glanced over it. "You expect me to participate in a process mimicking a system that cages and fetters the folks it's s'posed to serve?" Deja asked in a thick country accent. "That suppresses individualism and molds creativity into uniform, capitalistic devices?"

Whatever the hell that means, was what Tóbi felt like saying. Instead, she smiled. "Voting begins Wednesday."

"Viva la revolución."

Deja crumpled up the flyer and dropped it onto the ground—earning an indignant gasp from Lucille—before walking away. Ophelia gave Tóbi an apologetic look before hurrying after Deja.

Lucille remarked, "What a bitch."

"Language," Tóbi scolded. She agreed, but she couldn't have her protégée speak like that. Her parents had always emphasized that even if others could get away with such language, it was less tolerated from people who looked like Tóbi—another thing that Tóbi apparently needed to teach her protégée.

Tóbi made a mental note to refine Lucille's etiquette later. For now, they needed to focus on winning Tóbi more voters.

Their first stop was an Environmental Club meeting on Bartleby's second floor. The president, who was mid-speech upon Tóbi and Lucille's arrival, did not look pleased at the interruption. However, he and the rest of the club grew more welcoming with each contribution Tóbi made to the conversation.

"And not only does fracking pollute the air and oceans, but it's also way more expensive than wind and solar power," Tóbi found herself saying. She wasn't sure how she had gotten to this point, but she was nevertheless invigorated by the sound of her own voice. "It's not eco-friendly, and it's not cheap. So, no matter which way you look at it, it's completely unreasonable."

Tóbi made a subtle gesture behind her back. Lucille jumped up immediately.

"Tóbi, I just remembered we're going to be late for—"

"Oh, you're right!" Tóbi said, standing. "Sorry, guys, I need to run. But I'm excited to continue this conversation on a larger scale once I'm junior class president."

They pulled the same act with Astrology Club: "Leadership just comes so naturally to me, you know? I'm sure it's because I'm a triple Virgo."

And with Robotics Club: "Computers are the future. Coding has become a basic life skill, and as junior class president, I will renovate the robotics workshop so that everyone has a chance to learn

programming."

And with Anime Club: "My student council would only show subbed films at study breaks. Everyone knows the sub is always better than the dub!"

And on it went, Lucille and Tóbi hopping from room to room, worming their way into each club meeting. They stayed just long enough for Tóbi to use her surface-level knowledge of each topic to leave a good impression.

Sure, not everyone would vote for her; *he* was probably working just as hard to win supporters. But all the same, when Lucille left to attend her Mathletes practice two hours later, Tóbi was feeling better about her chances.

Outside the windows, the feeble gray light clinging to the sky gradually slipped into dusk. Tóbi felt her energy similarly trickling away, but she forced herself to smile at the people who offered greetings as they passed her. Fortunately, with it being dinner time, most students had migrated from Bartleby to the dining hall.

Tóbi would eat later; her fatigue, previously suppressed, was beginning to weigh on her. After long days of being around people, she often needed a moment alone to feel better. It was why Lucille and the Lynns were the only people she kept around her. Friends were contacts to be managed, and those three drained her enough. The thought of overseeing even more friendships sounded exhausting.

She made her way to a nearby lounge and paused when a bulletin board caught her eye. The last time she had seen the board, her

campaign flyer had been the largest thing pinned to it. Now, however, there was a new campaign flyer, one so large that it partially covered Tóbi's—and it belonged to her opponent.

It was a portrait of *him*, taken in front of the scenic woods that bordered Tanglewood's campus. He was illuminated by sunlight, making his golden hair glow and his brown eyes shine behind his circular wire glasses. Across it, printed in bold letters, were the words that had haunted Tóbi since the school year had begun: *Vote for Monte*.

Tóbi ripped the campaign flyer off the bulletin board.

Behind her, an amused voice said, "Resorting to sabotage, are we?"

Tóbi turned to see Ace Montalvo approaching her. As always, he radiated entitlement, from the swagger of his broad shoulders—as though they were used to shoving people out of his way—to his unkempt uniform, with his dress shirt untucked and his tie missing, making visible a diamond chain around his neck.

"Ugh," Tóbi said. "Don't you have someone's lunch money to be stealing?"

Ace grinned, his blue eyes glowing. He held up a few dollars in a bruised hand. "Way ahead of you."

Tóbi rolled her eyes. When T.W. Montalvo immigrated from Italy to America in the late nineteenth century, he had become one of America's greatest magnates, alongside Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and Carnegie. To this day, his descendants were some of the wealthiest people in the world. Montalvos were philanthropists and actors,

governors and fashion designers. Ace's father was the CEO of a hotel chain, and his grandfather was an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court.

Ace did not need to steal lunch money. He only did it because he could.

"I don't think there's ever been so much doubt about who'll become president for your class," Ace remarked, tucking his plundered money in his blazer's front pocket. "You've always won student council elections by a landslide."

Tóbi's frustration escaped her as an impatient huff. "That was before your older brother decided to run against me. I don't get it—Monte has never cared about student council before."

"You worried you'll lose?"

Panic flared within Tóbi. "I'm ranked number one in the junior class," she said quickly, much like a knight throwing up a shield. "I'm the chair of several committees, and the president of several more clubs."

Ace easily pierced Tóbi's weak defense. "And not only is Monte ranked number two in your class, but he's also vice president to a few clubs that you're president of. He's just as good of a class president candidate as you are."

Tóbi hated to admit it, but Ace had a point. It was something she had already thought of herself, the reality hovering over her like a dark cloud. Monte was just as popular as she was. It did not help that this year he was the captain of the lacrosse team, the first junior to

ever hold that title in Tanglewood's history.

Tóbi looked down at the poster in her hand, at Monte's smiling face, and resentment rose within her. "Why in the world," she asked, ripping up the poster, "would anyone choose silver when they could have gold?"

"Hey, I'm on your side," Ace said. "And if you want, I can help you win this election."

Tóbi looked up from her mutilation of Monte's poster in shock, which quickly morphed into distrust. "You only help me when you want something," she said. "So, what is it this time?"

"I'm Ace Montalvo. I'm just being the nice guy that I always am."

At Tóbi's clear skepticism, Ace said, "Okay, fine. Truth is, I've secured sophomore class president now that all my opponents have dropped out of the race because of . . . a change of heart . . . .Which means, for once in my life, I have a chance at accomplishing something that my brother hasn't: student council. You're not the only one trying to get out from under the golden boy's shadow."

Despite herself, Tóbi softened toward Ace. As dodgy as he could be, there was one thing Tóbi and him shared in common: they both were trying to prove themselves against their older brothers.

Tóbi's brother had been at the top of his class at Tanglewood, was a member of just about every club the school offered, and had graduated as valedictorian. Above all, his most impressive feat was being elected class president every single year of his Tanglewood career. In the eyes of Tóbi's parents, no one could measure up to her brother—a

belief that Tóbi had spent her entire life trying to disprove. And if she lost her own class presidential streak this year, her efforts would suffer a major setback.

Finally, Tóbi said, "Fine. What did you have in mind?"

Ace's grin widened. "As you know, my brother is quite the artist," he said. "He uses art as a visual diary. There's one particular piece in his dorm that might give you some answers about why he's suddenly so interested in student council."

"What's the art about?" Tóbi prompted. "An embarrassing moment? A murder confession?"

"Trust me, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. But you will definitely know it when you see it."

"You're being irritatingly ominous."

Ace glanced at his Rolex. "Listen, Tóbi, you know I love you, but I need to get dinner before the dining hall closes, and I won't make this offer twice. Just tell me, are you in or not? How badly do you want to be class president?"

She did not want it—she needed it. Sneaking into Monte's room meant breaking school rules, but for once, getting in trouble did not feel like the end of the world—not when the real end of her world would be never earning the same pride her parents had for her brother.

"Alright," Tóbi said at last. "I'll do it. I'm in."