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## Turning Tide

Chatters echoing through the air, the narrow corridor crowds up like a busy street market in the morning. One conversation shifts into another as I plunge past the sea of green, blue, and black backpacks. As my sneakers brush against the shiny tile, a shoulder hurls into my side. Staggering sideways, my hands reach out, but my fingers grip nothing but cool air. My chest collides with a pink backpack in front of me before colliding onto the rough tile. I crack my eyes open to a flurry of giggles. I notice a girl laying on the ground in front of me, her back twisted towards the ceiling like a doll. She lifts her head, neck, shoulders, arms as if coming back to life, her eyes meeting mine.

“Sorry.” I mutter, offering her a hand.

“Don’t worry about it, you’re not hurt, are you? I’m Abby, by the way.” She smiles at me as she floats back up, her hair cascading down into perfect curls. Before I can answer, the sound of the bell flows across the hallway. A metal door swings open as my teacher motions for us to come inside, and we trickle into the classroom one by one, everyone taking their seats.

“Good morning, take out a pencil please.” Mrs. Davis’s voice booms. The tumultuous buzz of opening zippers flows through my ears. My own hands dive through the jumble of ripped folders, filled notebooks, and empty chip bags in my backpack. I glance at kids bent over their bags: some have frantic eyes glossing over their notes for the last time, some slump on the desks struggling to stay awake, and others text their friends on their phones, fingers tapping and swiping under the tables as their eyes monitor the teacher’s location. I grasp my lucky turquoise pencil at the corner of my bag as the teacher walks over; I watch as Abby hides her neon pink phone inside her hoodie pocket, twirling her long blond hair in her fingers. She smiles at me again.

A bright white test packet plops in front of me. Eyes glazing over the black Times New Roman font, my pencil glides across the paper, flooding the white space with numbers and letters. A sudden poking at my shoulder jolts my head up. I whirl to my left, my eyes sinking into two blue pools that stare back at me. Abby points at my test paper, then herself.

“*Pst*, what did you get for number 1 and 2?” she whispers.

I shake my head and keep reading the next question, ignoring her silent pleas as I turn away. The scratching of pencils writing around me shifts my mind back to the test; fingers gripping my turquoise pencil again, I bubble in two more answers, watching the dark graphite spill into the small ovals.

*Thud.* A neon pink phone slaps the hard tile. My fingers freeze up as if they clutched the cold floor again. I hear the sound of Abby’s body slamming against the ceramic tile.

*“Are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?” I blink up at her cerulean eyes, her blond curls dancing around her shoulders as she stretches her hand towards me.*

*“Maia.”*

*“Maia.”*

“Please,” she mutters, her fingers now clawing at her smooth blond hair. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a golden strand fall onto her black hoodie, glinting under the white lights.

“Fine,” I mouth, rotating my paper a little.

“Make sure our eyes are on our own paper,” Mrs. Davis says. I look up. Her brown eyes tie mine into an intense staring contest, but I lose. Yanking my test back, I read the next question, but I still feel her eyes fixed on me. I twist my pencil between my fingers, the sweat in my palms slipping them around.

*Tap tap.* I glance to my left. Abby holds up a number four sign with her fingers. I tilt my paper towards her again.

*“Maia, please see me after class.”*

A wave of silence washes over me. Pencils stop squeaking, papers stop flipping, and bodies grow still, as if everyone in the room felt her words. I glance up at Mrs. Davis, but instead of staring at me, her eyes are fixated on

her emails. Pink detention slips and “F” written in red burn through my mind; my fingers rake through my hair as I slide my test paper back towards me, her words ringing in my ears on repeat as I finish the last few questions. “Turn in your tests to me as you leave,” Mrs. Davis calls, still not looking away from her screen. Pencils bounce onto the desks. Chairs creak as students stand up to form a line, words gushing out of their mouths like a tsunami of thoughts. I drift to the back of the classroom, waiting for everyone to leave, and I notice Abby standing a few people in front of me. After she hands in her test, she mouths ‘sorry’ before slipping out the door; this time, not smiling. I turn away from her.

“You wanted to speak to me, Mrs. Davis?” I ask, walking up to her desk after everyone left.

“Yes, I just wanted to congratulate you on winning your math competition!” Looking up from the computer, her eyes folded up with deep crevices as I stared into her brown pupils once again.