

ONE

MISS FOSTER!" MR. SWEENEY'S nasal voice cut through Sophie's blaring music as he yanked her earbuds out by the cords. "Have you decided that you're too smart to pay attention to this information?"

Sophie forced her eyes open. She tried not to wince as the bright fluorescents reflected off the vivid blue walls of the museum, amplifying the throbbing headache she was hiding.

"No, Mr. Sweeney," she mumbled, shrinking under the glares of her now staring classmates.

She pulled her shoulder-length blond hair around her face, wishing she could hide behind it. This was exactly the kind

of attention she went out of her way to avoid. Why she wore dull colors and lurked in the back, blocked by the other kids who were at least a foot taller than her. It was the only way to survive as a twelve-year-old high school senior.

“Then perhaps you can explain why you were listening to your iPod instead of following along?” Mr. Sweeney held up her earbuds like they were evidence in a crime. Though to him, they probably were. He’d dragged Sophie’s class to the Natural History Museum in Balboa Park, assuming his students would be excited about the all-day field trip. He didn’t seem to realize that unless the giant dinosaur replicas came to life and started eating people, no one cared.

Sophie tugged out a loose eyelash—a nervous habit—and stared at her feet. There was no way to make Mr. Sweeney understand why she needed the music to cancel the noise. He couldn’t even *hear* the noise.

Chatter from dozens of tourists echoed off the fossil-lined walls and splashed around the cavernous room. But their mental voices were the real problem.

Scattered, disconnected pieces of thoughts broadcast straight into Sophie’s brain—like being in a room with hundreds of TVs blaring different shows at the same time. They sliced into her consciousness, leaving sharp pains in their wake.

She was a freak.

It’d been her secret—her burden—since she fell and hit her head when she was five years old. She’d tried blocking the

noise. Tried ignoring it. Nothing helped. And she could never tell anyone. They wouldn't understand.

“Since you've decided you're above this lecture, why don't you give it?” Mr. Sweeney asked. He pointed to the enormous orange dinosaur with a duckbill in the center of the room. “Explain to the class how the Lambeosaurus differs from the other dinosaurs we've studied.”

Sophie repressed a sigh as her mind flashed to an image of the information card in front of the display. She'd glanced at it when they entered the museum, and her photographic memory recorded every detail. As she recited the facts, Mr. Sweeney's face twisted into a scowl, and she could hear her classmates' thoughts grow increasingly sour. They weren't exactly fans of their resident child prodigy. They called her Curvebuster.

She finished her answer, and Mr. Sweeney grumbled something that sounded like “know-it-all” as he stalked off to the exhibit in the next room over. Sophie didn't follow. The thin walls separating the two rooms didn't block the noise, but they muffled it. She grabbed what little relief she could.

“Nice job, superfreak,” Garwin Chang—a boy wearing a T-shirt that said **BACK OFF! I'M GONNA FART**—sneered as he shoved past her to join their classmates. “Maybe they'll write another article about you. ‘Child Prodigy Teaches Class About the Lame-o-saurus.’”

Garwin was still bitter Yale had offered her a full scholarship. His rejection letter had arrived a few weeks before.

Not that Sophie was allowed to go.

Her parents said it was too much attention, too much pressure, and she was too young. End of discussion.

So she'd be attending the much closer, much smaller San Diego City College next year—a fact some annoying reporter found newsworthy enough to post in the local paper the day before—CHILD PRODIGY CHOOSES CITY COLLEGE OVER IVY LEAGUE—complete with her senior photo. Her parents freaked when they found it. “Freaked” wasn't even a strong enough word. More than half their rules were to help Sophie “avoid unnecessary attention.” Front-page articles were pretty much their worst nightmare. They'd even called the newspaper to complain.

The editor seemed as unhappy as they were. The story was run in place of an article on the arsonist terrorizing the city—and they were still trying to figure out how the mistake had happened. Bizarre fires with white-hot flames and smoke that smelled like burnt sugar took priority over everything. Especially a story about an unimportant little girl most people went out of their way to ignore.