

ONE

Sasha Cross gave a furtive glance at the man standing outside the parking garage across the street as she bounded up the concrete steps that led to an entrance to the Brooklyn Dome. She didn't like the way he stared at her. A security guard blocked her path. "This is the wrong side. Go around," he said, pointing to the sign that read, Auction Entrance This Way.

The man across the street pulled out a drone from a backpack and placed it on the ground. Sasha didn't have much time. "Can't you just let me in here?"

"Even if I could, you'd never find your way." The guard paused. "Wait, aren't you . . . ?"

"Yes," she said hurriedly, "so if there is any way you could help me?"

"I'll radio to send someone over to pick you up."

Sasha glanced over at the man by the garage. "Never mind," she said, and walked in the opposite direction as the drone approached.

The guard yelled after her, "You don't want to go that way!"

She broke into a trot, hoping her twenty-two-year-old legs could navigate the foot traffic clogging the busy Brooklyn

thoroughfare better than the drone could manage the wires crisscrossing the street. A glance back confirmed her pursuer had halted the intrusive aircraft.

Smiling at her rare victory, she made a left-hand turn—smack into a throng of demonstrators massing to protest the Auction. Sasha froze. A man standing on the top of an SUV shouted into a bullhorn, warning the mob not to hurl objects at the police. Sasha looked back at her pursuer. Recovered, he elevated the drone to a higher altitude. She exhaled, put on sunglasses, and snaked through the gathering of mostly twentysomethings.

“Excuse me,” she said, gently pushing aside bodies. Sasha kept her head down as she pressed through the crowd. Her foot got tangled, and she stumbled into a heavysset woman wearing an army jacket and backpack.

The woman’s eyes went wide. “What are you doing here?”

“Sorry, just trying to pass through.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. “That’s Sasha Cross.”

Sasha intensified her efforts to extract herself. Thirty yards ahead she saw daylight. A man grabbed at her arm. “You don’t belong here,” he snarled as Sasha pulled away.

A woman intervened, “Let her go.” Twenty yards to daylight. A hand pulled at her sunglasses. Sasha stopped momentarily when they left her face, then pressed on. Ten yards.

Using the bullhorn, the organizer yelled, “We’ve got royalty among us!” The crowd responded with boos and hisses as Sasha’s stomach dropped. “Sasha, tell all the beautiful people waiting for you inside their day of reckoning is coming!”

A mix of anger, disdain, and empathy flashed on the faces of the mob. As she searched for an opening in the metal barricade, a voice called out, “Hey, Sasha!” She turned. *Thwack*. A freckled woman with a ponytail flung the contents of a strawberry smoothie into Sasha’s face, splattering her from the waist up.

Stunned, Sasha blinked her eyes, and felt a hand upon her. An officer pushed her through an opening. He escorted her toward the Brooklyn Dome's Flatbush Avenue entrance as photographers snapped pictures. Guards scanned her eyes then waved her through, and Sasha dashed inside to find a bathroom. She dropped her hands to the counter and held back tears. The speakers in the bathroom crackled, and a moderator called the event to order. Sasha wiped the strawberry highlights out of her hair and dabbed wet paper towels onto her tan cotton shirt. It removed the mess but left her with a wet stain across her chest.

She splashed water on her face, wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath. Sasha peeked her head out of the bathroom in search of the closest entrance to the stadium seats. Finding it, she made her way down the steps and gazed at the thousands of twenty-two-year-olds listening to a woman. Behind her, screens displayed the words *Auction Combine*.

Sasha's device beeped, signaling an incoming video call from her father. Those closest to her turned their heads at the noise, and the commotion caused the moderator to pause.

"Devices should be off," the moderator barked. Sasha fumbled to silence her device and slunk to the back row of chairs in search of an empty seat. She averted her eyes from the gawkers staring at her appearance, but turned when she heard her name. Jason Harris pointed to a chair next to him.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"Don't ask," she whispered.

The disruption over, the moderator continued. "You're here because your Auction will take place in November. You have a lot of work ahead. Over the next two days, you'll learn more about the Auction and how we'll help you succeed."

Fifteen thousand Auction candidates from all over the country sat on folding chairs on the same surface where the Virtual Reality Olympics took place just days ago. The scene

resembled a college graduation. Those seated were the cream of the crop—the nation’s top twenty-two-year-olds poised to become the most financially successful of their generation.

In the months to come, the Big 7 companies that dominated the economy would bid to gain the rights to these young stars. Sasha recognized a few of them. Billy Edwards had spent a brief time in her business class at Berkeley before dropping out to launch a start-up now worth \$5 billion. Loretta Sanchez, a world-renowned concert pianist, sat two rows away.

And then there was Jason.

He had been Sasha’s first boyfriend. It fizzled out, but was replaced by something sweeter: Jason became the brother she never had, and his house a hideout when the Cross family drama spun out of control. That was before the accident that killed his parents and shattered his leg. Jason left Los Angeles to live with his aunt Ayana in Philadelphia, and Sasha lost her refuge.

The moderator gazed at the candidates. “Many of you are comfortable in the spotlight. The rest better get used to it. You are about to be worth millions of dollars.”

Sasha was accustomed to attention, even though she did everything she could to avoid it. She presented herself blandly—plain clothes, limited makeup, nothing flashy—which was surprising given her background. The Cross family epitomized glamour and celebrity, even by Hollywood standards. Fame came with a price. Four years ago, TMZ had breathlessly covered her arrival at UC Berkeley, and a paparazzi photographer named Freddy Tangier made Sasha his pet project. When others grew bored with Sasha’s college life, Freddy remained, lurking everywhere, making a living on photos of Sasha.

“As a Series A, you’re special,” the moderator told them as she wrapped up the session. “Your college friends will probably be Series Bs. Those who work administrative jobs may be Series Cs. And if you have family or friends who are restaurant

workers, store clerks, or are in the military, they'll be Series Ds. The next six months will define the trajectory of your life. Use it well."

Soon after, the candidates filed out to the concourse. Turning to Sasha, Jason said, "I'd hug you, but not with that shirt. What gives?"

She glanced down at her still-damp clothes. "I ran into an admirer."

Jason opened his arms. "On second thought, you look like you need it."

Sasha slipped into his embrace. "Been a minute, Jay. What did the doctor say?"

"Not much. My leg's improved as much as it will. Ayana says hello."

Sasha brightened. "She's my hero. When are you coming to visit?"

"It's your turn," he replied. "I came for New Year's."

Sasha frowned. "There's more to do in San Francisco."

"Fine." He removed his jacket. "Wear this."

She slipped it on, and they walked down the corridor mobbed with Type A overachievers. Sasha squeezed his hand when they saw the sign pointing them to their required medical examinations and implantations. "The nightmare begins."

Twenty minutes later Sasha sat on an exam table as a nurse directed her to slip her left arm into a long metal sleeve. She shivered when the cold metal brushed her skin. The nurse fastened a clamp to tighten the sleeve, then sterilized her biceps with an alcohol swab.

"The doctor will be in soon."

Sasha eyed the plastic gun on the metal table. A sign on the door instructed patients to avoid strenuous physical activity for forty-eight hours after the implant. The doctor entered, did a double take when she realized it was Sasha, and got down to business.

“Hold still,” she ordered. The doctor inserted a tiny object into the canister and held the gun to Sasha’s biceps. Sasha flinched when the doctor pulled the trigger. A chip the size of a grain of rice was embedded in her biceps; it would enable the Big 7 companies to track her location. The doctor listened as a series of beeps confirmed the tracking device was operational. Series As were too valuable a commodity to be out of sight for a single moment.

After the nurse returned and stuck a needle in Sasha’s right arm for blood work—genetic testing to be catalogued and analyzed—he directed Sasha to a room down the corridor, where she underwent a full body scan to check for cancer and other diseases. From there, more blood work followed. It was the most thorough medical appointment she’d ever experienced; various parts of her body ached, and a slight headache developed behind her eyes.

Dazed and hungry, Sasha walked aimlessly down the hall until her device beeped with a message from Jason: *Taco bar at section 102*. She set out to find him, ignoring the stares that came with her family fame. Her mother, Lacy Cross, had been an Oscar-winning actress and America’s sweetheart. At the height of her career, Lacy was the most recognized woman in the world. Mother and daughter were inseparable, so it seemed fitting that seven-year-old Sasha play Lacy’s on-screen daughter in her biggest film, *The Road Home*.

They were the only mother-daughter duo to win Academy Awards in the same year. Sasha melted hearts when she sobbed over her mother’s lifeless body in the final scene. Audiences didn’t know the director had actually told Sasha her mother was dead. Her award-winning pain had been genuine.

As she grew into a carbon copy of her mother, the young star captivated America. She appeared on magazine covers and was a regular at trendy hot spots frequented by young

celebrities. But by the time she left high school, something had changed and Sasha sightings were few and far between.

Despite—or because of—her efforts to stay out of the spotlight, she remained a source of fascination. Her grandmother nicknamed her “Princess Di,” a reference Sasha had to look up to understand. When she made a rare public appearance for a Cross family event the summer after her high school graduation, the media paid as much attention to her as to her mother.

Her father pressed for Sasha to return to acting, but she’d insisted on attending Berkeley, just across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco. She hoped to be another face in the crowd there . . . but then Freddy Tangier appeared.

Life imitated art. In the middle of Sasha’s sophomore year, a maid discovered her mother’s lifeless body at the home of a well-known Hollywood agent. An autopsy confirmed Lacy died of a drug overdose. Television crews and paparazzi camped outside the Crosses’ Hollywood Hills estate to report on the star’s death and catch a glimpse of Sasha and her sister, Kelsie. Her classmates wondered if they would see her again. She returned the following fall but shut down questions about her family.

Now, with her Auction looming, she faced a return of the harsh spotlight she dreaded, and the reality of what was to come settled on her like a heavy blanket. Fellow candidates milled around, searching for tables. She discovered Jason sitting with an attractive, well-built man wearing a Michigan State sweatshirt.

“Thanks for saving me a seat,” Sasha snarked as she stared at the stranger.

The blond-haired man smiled. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Sasha frowned. She didn’t like being put on the spot. Then she saw it: around his eyes and the way he smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant discovery. “Avery?”

“It’s been a long time. Eighth grade.”

Sasha’s stomach seized as she was transported back to middle school. Eagerly waiting outside the school entrance for her celebrity crush to swing by to say hello. Unlike most thirteen-year-olds, she’d actually met her crush. Her father had introduced the YouTube singing sensation to her at a fundraiser.

Two days later, she had received a text from the fourteen-year-old object of her admiration. He wanted to see her again. Could they meet at her school? She waited, wearing her best dress and a bit too much makeup for the 3:00 p.m. date.

By 3:10, she was antsy. Ten minutes later, she repeatedly checked her device for a message. By 3:30, she couldn’t help it. She typed, *Where are you?*

Her device beeped immediately with the answer, *Behind you.*

She turned to find Avery and a dozen others laughing. At *her*. Another girl, a supposed friend who Sasha had warned against dating Avery, smirked and put her arm around him. Avery held his device, recording Sasha’s humiliation. Within days, the video had spread from her school to sites that mocked celebrities. Nearly a decade later, the video was still online.

A stinging sensation buzzed in Sasha’s throat at the memory. The shame. Not long after the incident Avery’s family relocated to Michigan, but he’d made his mark: From that point on, Sasha kept everyone at arm’s length. They’d never humiliate her again.

“Don’t you love this?” Avery interrupted her flashback. “The Combine is live on CNBC right now. I feel like a stud athlete about to be drafted.”

“I’m so sure CNBC is here for you,” Sasha responded.

Ignoring the insult, Avery focused his attention on Jason. “You must be a big deal to earn an Auction invite.”

Sasha blurted out hotly, “He’s a professional e-gamer.”

“What game?”

“Basketball. I play on a team based in Philly.”

Avery raised an eyebrow. "Guess the bum leg held you back from the real thing."

Jason placed his hand on Sasha's wrist. He knew her so well, he could sense she was about to jump out of her seat. "Car accident in high school messed me up. It's not all bad. The 76ers are talking to me about joining its NBA e-sports team."

Sasha's face was blank. "Where did you move to, Avery?"

"Outside Detroit. My mom and dad grew up there, so it was a homecoming. It took a long time to get used to the cold weather." He sighed. "I miss LA."

Good, Sasha thought. Avery's device beeped, signaling his next interview. As he stood, he offered, "Maybe the three of us can have dinner tonight."

"We'll get back to you on that," said Sasha.

Avery got the hint and departed without another word. They sat in silence until he was out of earshot and Sasha couldn't hold it in anymore. "What a dick."

Jason sipped his drink. "He's not the only one in New York this week."

"Who else?"

"Denton." He let the name linger. "He's here for a concert, wants to meet up."

"I haven't heard his name in a long time. Why is he in New York?"

"He's a ticket broker."

Sasha rolled her eyes. "Right. Not a drug dealer to concert organizers."

"I don't know."

"Be careful, Jason," said Sasha. "I never understood why you stay in touch with him."

"It's always complicated with Denton."

“And we’re live in five, four, three . . .”

The floor director completed a silent count as CNBC staffers hustled into place. Britney Reynolds adjusted her ear mic, cleared her throat, pressed her lips together.

At the right time, she burst into a smooth, distant smile.

“A big day for the markets as the Series A Combine gets underway in Brooklyn in what will be a hectic week,” Reynolds read from the prompter. “But first, proof the economy shows no sign of slowing down. The government today reported the lowest unemployment rate in half a century. More on that later.”

Reynolds pivoted back to the Auction, introducing an analyst named Andrew Barby. He’d been on her show many times before—and indeed, had grown too comfortable, if his hand on her knee at the previous night’s happy hour was any indication—and he beamed in the spotlight.

“Today’s the day the Big 7 take a first peek at the biggest prospects for the annual Auction. A lot of money is riding on it. What are the companies seeking to learn?” she asked.

Barby styled himself as an expert on the most valuable twenty-two-year-olds up for bid. With dyed jet-black hair that covered his head like a helmet, a bulging forehead, and a Kelly green Notre Dame tie, Barby looked like a cartoon character. He explained, “While all twenty-two-year-olds will go through the Auction in November, only the elite are here in Brooklyn. This week is about everything from medical exams to psychological tests to learning who burns to succeed.”

As Barby talked, the ticker at the bottom of the screen displayed the names of the top candidates. Reynolds interrupted with a nod. “For those viewers who might not know the basics, can you simplify what’s happening this week?”

“The Auction may seem complicated, but let’s not overthink it. Every twenty-two-year-old in the country goes through it. The companies bid on those they think will make

the most money in their careers. It's a merit-based system: if you have a bright future, you'll receive a high bid."

"How hard is it to be selected as a Series A?"

Barby took off his glasses for effect. "It's as rare as Charlie finding the golden ticket to get into Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. This year five million Americans will turn twenty-two years old, but only one in five hundred will be a Series A."

"And how do companies acquire their rights?"

"Companies place bids on candidates. If they win, they receive 25 percent of that person's income. For example, if Global Holdings bids for an entrepreneur and that person makes \$500 million over her lifetime, Global receives \$125 million of it."

Reynolds smiled without showing her teeth. "What do you say to critics who claim the Auction is stealing from these young people and handing their earnings over to their parents and the Big 7 corporations?"

If Barby was surprised, he didn't show it. Instead, he shook his head. "They're misinformed. The Big 7 help these kids build successful careers." He pointed toward the stadium floor. "The people down there are everyone's bets to join the ranks of CEOs, YouTubers, and inventors of the future. Because the Big 7 have a lot invested in them, they do everything they can to help them realize their dreams. It's a win-win."

"Andrew, what happens to those who aren't here today?" she asked, getting ready to wrap up the segment. Her brain was already jumping ahead to her next guest.

"Every twenty-two-year-old goes through the Auction," he answered. "But their value dictates what they become. Doctors, lawyers, and business executives pegged to make a lot of money will end up as Series Bs; most middle-class workers end up as Series Cs."

"And the rest?"

“The 1 million who aren’t selected become Series Ds. Most are low-wage workers. They are treated differently.”

CNBC cameras panned the demonstrators congregated outside the Brooklyn Dome. Reynolds let the footage tell its own story before she continued. “Speaking of Series Ds, it wouldn’t be an Auction without protesters.”

Barby jumped in. “There will always be the naysayers. But the Auction helps so many. Parents rely on money from the Auction to pay for their retirement, so this is an important obligation for their children.”

“Mmmm,” Reynolds said, pivoting. “One of those parents is our next guest . . .”

The camera zoomed in on a man sitting to Reynolds’s side. His tight smile hid the nerves that had overtaken his stomach a few minutes before air. His jitters were understandable: after twenty-two years of raising a child, he’d soon learn whether his hard work resulted in millions of dollars of retirement money. All parents were eager to find out what prices their children would fetch.



Global executives peered down from a luxury box, searching for clues about which of the candidates below would be the best bets. “There’s Sasha Cross,” an analyst said, pointing as the young woman returned from lunch.

“Talk about being born with a silver spoon in your mouth,” said another.

Clad in a no-nonsense plain black suit, Jessica Garulli stepped forward. Her heels echoed on the tile floor. “Say what you want, but there isn’t another here whose picture has been taken as many times or who has been on as many magazine covers as Sasha Cross. And yet she’s still a riddle to us.”

The analyst sneered. “She’s easy to figure out. An entitled princess who’s famous because she looks like her dead mother. Who cares?”

“It’s your job to care,” said Jessica, watching as Sasha ignored those who pulled out their devices to snap a photo or take a video as she glided through the crowd. The young celebrity lived behind a mask; it was Jessica’s job to pierce it and reveal the real Sasha.

As Global’s head of security, Jessica oversaw the collection of information on Series A candidates. If they had a weakness—a drug problem, family issues, or disease—she and her team had to find it. No matter what it took. Global installed video and listening devices in the lobbies, hallways, corridors, and hotel rooms Series A candidates stayed in during the Combine. Those surveillance cameras had already caught a twenty-two-year-old YouTuber from Omaha poking herself with a needle and a Harvard student planting cocaine in the suitcase of a supposed friend.

Jessica pulled up Sasha’s file. No arrests. High citizenship score. Business major. Graduating in May. Worked for a member of a California state commission investigating the Auction’s fairness. One of the Big 7 companies would bet big that whatever Sasha chose to do with her life, the company would make tens of millions of dollars. When you’re a Sasha Cross, you can do whatever you want. Jessica studied the young woman, arms crossed, brow furrowed.



A half hour later, Global wasn’t the only Big 7 company asking questions.

“Does suicide run in your family?” a Beech analyst grilled Sasha, barely looking up from her laptop.

She didn't answer. Throughout her ten-minute interview—though “Spanish Inquisition” was a more apt term for it—she could overhear the same conversation taking place in the cubicle next door. That meant whoever was in there had heard the interviewer ask if Sasha Cross planned on killing herself like her mother had.

“Does it?” the Beech analyst pressed. Of the Big 7 companies, only Global was bigger or more powerful.

Sasha leaned forward, eyes flashing. “No, does it in yours?”

The analyst paused, then moved on. “Tell me about this commission.”

Sasha exhaled. “My professor asked if I wanted a research position, so I took it.”

“And what have you learned?”

“That your job probably pays well.”

“Do you want my job?”

Sasha shrugged. “No. I have to look myself in the mirror every morning.”

“Then why not pursue a career in movies or television?”

“Are those my only choices?” Sasha's casual way of asking the rhetorical question hid her frustration. “Whore myself out to Hollywood or become a stooge for the Big 7?”

The analyst put down her clipboard and smiled smoothly. “Of course not. But I'm trying to understand you. You won an Academy Award. You have a famous name. Why not pursue an obvious path?”

“It's not my thing.” Sasha leaned back and crossed her arms.

“Then what is your thing?”

“Here's what I'd like my thing to be,” she snapped. “I'd like to stop being treated as a product, for the paparazzi to stop stalking me, for my friends to stop trying to profit off my fame. How's that for a start? Is that good enough for your notes?”

A hoot came from the booth next door. “You go, girl.”

“That answer won’t help you in the Auction,” the analyst replied, “but if you’re rich already, I guess it doesn’t matter. We’re done.”

Sasha left. She endured the same question at each meeting: Why don’t you go into the family business and reap the millions of dollars that await you? A handsome young Latino man nodded and greeted her by name, but she passed by without replying. Only later did she realize he was the pop singer who had played at her sister’s birthday party.

Her device distracted her. She had two messages. The first, from her father, Judah, read: *Play nice. It’s important.* The second, from Jason, asked where to meet for dinner.

She turned away when she noticed Avery sitting on a bench peering at his device. Outside, Jason’s oversized jacket protected her from the harsh wind that whipped across Flatbush Avenue. So much for springtime. Her mind wandered to the four days they spent together over New Year’s. She knew the death of Jason’s parents still haunted him. Gaming was his escape, and now it appeared it could be a career.

At least one of them had it figured out.

Flatbush Avenue hopped. The smells from Patsy’s Pizzeria made Sasha rethink their Thai dinner plans. For a moment she considered messaging her father for the address of the Brooklyn walk-up that had been her parents’ first home years ago, but thought better of it.

She passed a shabby two-story building that housed a public health care facility. The bottom rung of the Auction, Series Ds, weren’t provided private benefits. Instead, the government provided care and, based on the sign on the door, not often. It read, Open Monday and Wednesday, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.

As she approached Sixth Avenue, Sasha spotted Jason and Denton. At six feet two and 210 pounds, Denton might have played lacrosse at USC, but fate placed him in the back seat of

the car the night of the accident that killed Jason's parents. His injuries ended his sports career.

When she walked up to him, Denton bellowed, "The famous Sasha Cross."

Passersby turned their heads, and Sasha's stomach tightened. She relaxed when no one approached her. "Hey, Denton, heard you were in town."

He sized her up. "Looking good, girl. I saw a pic of you at the Staples Center last month. Whenever you need tickets, I'll be your hookup."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Sasha. She took Jason by the hand and led him away, but not before Denton yelled, "Get back to me, Jason."

They walked in silence before Sasha piped up, "What did he want?"

"He says he has a business proposition."

"Are you going to do it?"

Jason stared ahead. "I don't know."

"He's still dealing, isn't he?" she hissed. "I thought you were past that."

"No clue, Sasha, and I am. Give me space."

Sasha raised her hands in surrender. "I'm just worried about you. If you're gonna be like that, I'm picking dinner."

"I thought we decided on Thai?"

She grabbed his hand again and did a U-turn. "Ever hear of Patsy's Pizza?"

"Lead on. By the way, want to know who you're dating?"

"I'd love to."

Jason fished his device out of his pocket and showed Sasha a gossip site with a picture of the two of them arm in arm walking up the stadium stairs. "Me."

It was clear one of their fellow Series As snapped a photo and then sold it to the celebrity site. "Wouldn't that be nice," she said as she wrapped her arm around his.

“You know you were the first and last girl I ever kissed?”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah, your kissing skills are why I like boys.”

Sasha bundled his coat to protect against the wind. While she often messaged and video-chatted with Jason, she rarely spent actual time with him, and she enjoyed the feeling of holding him tight while they walked together. A vendor pushing a pretzel cart barreled toward them, jarring Sasha out of her thoughts. She moved to the side.

“Speaking of boys, any to talk about?”

He shrugged. “None worth mentioning. You?”

“You’d already know.”

“Or I’d read about it in *StAuctor*,” he laughed.

“Right. Hey, there’s a job for me. I could spy on people.”

“That photographer still harass you?” asked Jason as he opened the door to the pizzeria. A hostess picked up two menus and led them to a table. Sasha nodded and sat down.

“Freddy? He’s still around. Next to Brianna, he’s my most constant companion.”

“What losers we are. You’re desperate to be left alone. And I’m desperate for attention. If I can’t convince the e-76ers to take a chance on me, I’ve got nothing.”

Sasha held his hand. “That’s what’s so messed up. We’re twenty-two years old. Our whole lives are ahead of us. This should be an exciting time! Instead it’s the Life Olympics, and the outcome dictates our entire future. Then they wonder why so many of us have anxiety.”

A woman furtively approached the table. Sasha recognized the look on her face—desperate to impress. “Ms. Cross, I just wanted to say how much I admired your mother. Can I have an autograph?”

Sasha bit her lip and took the pen the woman held in her hand. After asking her name, Sasha scribbled a note and her

signature on a napkin. The woman smiled, then frowned after reading it and skulked back to her table.

Jason smirked as he read his menu. "What did you write?"

Sasha pulled a baseball cap out of her bag and tugged it over her head, shading her face. "I wrote, 'My mother taught me manners.'"

Jason shook his head. "That will sell for double on eBay."



Analysts rubbed their eyes and stared at monitors tracking Series A candidates. Their empty takeout containers littered the tables at the facility across the water in New Jersey. The silence broke when one of the roving supervisors was beckoned by an analyst.

"What's up?"

"You told me to track Sasha Cross," said the analyst, pointing to the blinking light on the screen.

"Anything to report?"

"Not about her, but her companion, Jason Harris. He had an interaction with a man named Denton Long. Facial recognition flagged him as a felon, and the system alerted me when he came in contact with Harris. Cross showed up minutes later, just as Long left."

"Have they entered Red Zones?" the supervisor asked, referring to parts of the city known for prostitution, gambling, and drug sales.

"No," the analyst reported. The chip implanted in the arm of Series As set off an alert if the candidates entered those danger areas. If so, an analyst filed a report. In cases of high-priority candidates, such as Sasha, the team dispatched an operative to investigate.

The supervisor stared at the screen. Sasha and Jason were inside Patsy's. "Send an alert about Denton Long."

Her supervisor departed; the analyst turned her attention to the screen. Dozens of others tracked priority Series A candidates. She pulled out a day-old egg-salad sandwich, a pickle, and a warm bottle of seltzer. It wasn't a coal-fired margherita pie, but it would have to do.