

The World Tilts

“Shayla?” Ms. Breaux called. “Are you listening?”

Shayla didn’t move. She sat at her desk, her head leaning on her hand, her thick dark hair haloing her head like one of the fluffy clouds outside the window. She was busy staring at the tall tree that stood in the corner of the schoolyard. It didn’t matter what subject Ms. Breaux was teaching—if Shayla didn’t have something to do with her hands, her mind drifted and her attention shifted to the window, where she would look at the tree’s branches and daydream.

Everybody circled around the tree at recess. For ninety dizzying minutes, kids of all shapes and sizes clustered around it, leaning on its smooth bark, playing tag around its broad trunk, and sitting on its huge knobby roots. But during the long, lonely hours while everyone was in class, Shayla was the tree’s only playmate.

On this morning, Shayla was imagining the tree's branches were sea creatures. The tiny bright green buds sprouting from the branches were the creature's scales and the tree trunk was a submarine diving down to the ocean floor.

Ms. Breaux called Shayla's name a third time, but she still didn't answer. A slap on her arm finally tore her away from her thoughts.

"Owww," she said, snapping her attention back to the classroom.

The room was completely quiet and Megan was smirking at her from the next seat over.

"Why'd you do that?" she whispered.

Megan didn't answer. Instead she tilted her head toward the front of the classroom. Ms. Breaux was looking at Shayla sharply and her classmates were staring at her silently like a bunch of wide-eyed frogs.

"Oh," Shayla said under her breath, suddenly realizing Ms. Breaux was waiting on an answer, but Shayla hadn't heard the question.

"She's asking about the book," Megan whispered.

Shayla sat up taller in her seat and looked at the colorful posters stuck to the walls as if they could magically reveal the answer to her. Just past Megan,

she could see Gemma hiding her mouth behind her hands, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Ummmm, welllllllll, I thinnnnnnnk,” Shayla said, slowly stretching every syllable and crossing her fingers under her desk for good luck. She was just about to launch into a rambling description of the chapter from last night’s homework when the principal rushed into the room and dumped an armful of orange papers on Ms. Breaux’s desk.

“One second, class,” Ms. Breaux said, and Shayla slumped against the back of her chair in relief.

“Your participation grade is going to be horrible,” Megan said as Ms. Breaux and the principal started whispering in the front of the room. She said the word *horrible* so hard Shayla felt like it had flown out of Megan’s mouth and smacked into her cheek at top speed.

“She’s never ready when Ms. B calls on her,” Gemma threw in.

“Nobody asked you,” Shayla snapped. She sank even deeper into her seat, wishing she could pull a tent over her desk. She peeked down at the sore spot on her arm where Megan had hit her. Her skin was stinging and it was slightly raised, but it was the same brown color as the rest of her skin. So different from

the bright red mark that would be left behind if she had smacked Megan back.

“We’re on chapter six,” a soft voice whispered from the seat behind her.

Shayla swiveled around and found herself face-to-face with Ai.

“What?” Shayla whispered back. She hadn’t even realized she was sitting there.

“I said we’re talking about chapter six,” Ai repeated. Then she flicked her finger up to point at Megan and Gemma. They were giggling together. “You think that’s how friends are supposed to treat you?” she asked. Shayla shrugged, but she couldn’t turn away. There was nothing mean in Ai’s voice. She just looked at Shayla with a bucketload of sadness in her eyes.

Shayla sat there, trapped between the glare of Ai’s honesty and the pull of Megan’s and Gemma’s friendship. Ai sighed into the emptiness of Shayla’s silence.

“She wants you to explain why the main character left home at the end of the chapter. You did read, didn’t you?”

The way Ai’s eyebrows drew together made Shayla think Ai’s question was about so much more than homework.

“I read, thanks,” Shayla said, suddenly finding her words. She knew her response was short and sharp, but she didn’t care. Why did Ai think she could decide who Shayla should be friends with?

She twisted back to the front of the classroom and straightened herself in her seat. She peeked over at Megan and Gemma. They were huddled together, talking and giggling as if Shayla wasn’t even there. This was how it had been all year. Shayla didn’t know how it had happened, but she was full of a fever that made her turn her back on Ai so she could hang out on the edge of Megan’s and Gemma’s friendship, trying to find a way in.

“Students,” Ms. Breaux said, clapping her hands to call everyone’s attention before Shayla could figure out what Megan and Gemma were talking about. Ms. Breaux held up the stack of papers the principal had brought in. From her seat, Shayla could see the words *School Closure* in big, bold letters across the top of the page. “As you know, we have been discussing how to continue safely teaching during this time. Some of your classmates are already learning from home and some of your parents are working from home. We have just received word that the governor has decided to close schools for the next two weeks.”

“What?” Megan said. She looked at Shayla then. They were briefly connected in shock. Shayla turned back and looked at Ai.

Everyone started talking at once.

Ms. Breaux clapped again. She put both her hands in the air and held them there until everyone in class fell silent.

“We will communicate with your parents,” she said softly and firmly. “We will send you assignments to complete at home.” She looked at the clock on the wall, then walked to the doorway of the classroom. “You are dismissed. Please stop at the desk and pick up one of the announcements. Put these sheets in your folders immediately—and give them to your parents as soon as you get home.”

Shayla stood up with the rest of the class, unfolding her long limbs from the small cramped chair.

“Megan,” she called out, but Megan had already slipped away, rushing toward the front of the classroom with her arm tightly linked with Gemma’s. Shayla darted out from behind her desk, but someone tugged her back. She turned to find Ai and Ben standing behind her.

“What?” Shayla asked, trying hard not to sound as grouchy as she felt. She felt like the tree in the yard,

towering over Ai and Ben. She shifted her weight on her hip, which made her tower over them just a tiny bit less.

It wasn't that she didn't like Ai and Ben—it just felt like she couldn't get away from them. They all lived in the same apartment building. They had spent their toddler years in their friend Liam's apartment so Liam's mom could watch them while their parents worked. They spent the first years of elementary school hanging in the park together. And now Ai and Ben were in her class at school. Shayla had had enough. She wanted to try to make her own friends—at least one friend that her father didn't make for her.

“We have to find Liam,” Ben said, irritated. He didn't like Shayla's new attitude.

“Why?” Shayla asked. She crossed her arms. It didn't matter what Ai and Ben thought. She had a right to be independent.

“How do you think he's taking this news?” Ai asked, circling her finger in the air.

Shayla's heart sank. She was instantly ashamed. She was so busy feeling trapped by Ai and Ben, she hadn't even thought about Liam. Change was not his friend. Once, when a substitute teacher showed up and announced he was replacing Liam's teacher for the

rest of the school year, he shut himself in the supply closet and refused to come out. While they raced to call his mother, he tugged at his hair so hard he yanked out a patch the size of a dime.

With a serious nod, Shayla turned on her heel and headed over to the hooks. Reaching over everyone else's heads, she tugged down Ai's and Ben's bags. The three of them shrugged on their jackets and wrestled their backpack straps onto their shoulders. Just like that, every thought that was cluttering Shayla's brain fell away. Shayla forgot about wishing for new friends and sped out of the classroom, focusing on doing everything she could to get to Liam's side.