

July 2026

ONE

Grace pulled her plastic junior e-card from the front pocket of her metallic silver shorts and handed it to Eric, who was working behind the desk at the rock climbing center. She had been in love with him from afar for years, and now she was up close. Very close.

“In two days I won’t have to carry that card anymore,” she told him, trying to keep her tone casual. “I turn seventeen on Sunday.”

“Happy Birthday,” he said, his dark eyes flashing merrily.

This was more than she’d ever gotten from him at school. It was a huge school — a factory for making students, really — and they didn’t have any of the same classes or friends. She noticed him in the halls, though. She always noticed him in the halls. Even as she felt herself blending into the crowd.

Eric never blended in. Everyone knew him. He was quite literally a rock star — a rock-climbing star, that was. Olympic team bound. Not like her at all.

Although maybe he *had* noticed her. Because when she’d come here to the indoor rock wall climbing center for the first time, he’d said, “I know you.” And each time after that, she’d wanted him to know more.

“Where are you getting your tattoo done?” he asked.

“Since I have a summer job as a receptionist at GlobalHelix, I can get it done on my lunch break,” she told him. “But I have to wait until Monday.”

She’d never mentioned her job to him before; in the weeks they’d been flirting (well, she at least had been flirting — his intentions were unclear), it hadn’t come up. Now, when she mentioned GlobalHelix, the genetics division of the multinational corporation Global-1, his smile flickered for a second. “After everything that’s happened, how is that company still operating?” he wondered out loud. It wasn’t antagonistic — he wasn’t attacking *her*. But clearly he wasn’t a Global-1 fan.

Grace shrugged. “Global-1 has divisions all over the world and one group went rogue with its own agenda. That division has been shut down.”

Eric shook his head. “I can’t believe they got away with saying that. They had to have known what was going on. Isn’t working there kind of banged out? The building is even evil-looking, like it’s some kind of a fortress.”

An uneasiness filled Grace. Global-1 had always been good to her family and, she honestly believed, good to the world. It took a hit with the bar code scandal, yes . . . but blaming the whole company for that was kind of like blaming a country for what one outlaw town did.

An image of the company’s huge, impersonal lobby, with its five-story glass-and-steel ceiling, flashed into Grace’s mind. She could see how it would seem like a fortress to an outsider. But she’d been going there her whole life.

“It’s only a summer job,” Grace explained, instinctively knowing she wasn’t going to convince Eric of what the company

was about. It didn't seem worth arguing over, not right now. "My dad works in maintenance there. He got the spot for me. A job is a job. You know how impossible they are to get."

"Tell me about it," Eric agreed with a sigh. "I was lucky to get this one."

Grace laughed. "It helps that you're a pre-Olympic rock climber," she pointed out. Everyone at school knew about that. They gathered at the indoor wall in the gym just to see him free climb with amazing speed and agility. "They're lucky to have you working here."

Eric Chaca could have easily acted like a Jock God, but instead he transformed into Mr. Bashful. "Yeah, whatever," he said, not meeting Grace's eyes.

It made her like him even more.

He changed the subject. "So are you up for the tattoo or is it banging you out?" he asked.

Grace wasn't really sure how to answer that. It's not like there was a choice involved. You turned seventeen and got the bar code tattoo. Period.

"It makes life so much easier," she said. Immediately, she saw the questions in his eyes. "I know what you're going to say — but, look, they're okay to get now, right? This second generation of bar codes is just what we thought they were at first: They contain basic info like address, driver's license, bank account, and so forth. No genetic information. No nanobots. That's what they say at Global-1."

Eric sighed. "I wouldn't trust them."

Grace glanced at the tattoo he wore. "I guess you must believe them because you have a 'too.'"