

**ACCESS
UNIVERSE**

R. S. Hill

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For Zach and Alex

“I fear the day technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.”

— Albert Einstein

Access Universe

...Chapter 3

After pouting in bed for another hour, I grow some balls and decide to go back to campus and find Dr. Carrigg. All things considered, he's probably a little pissed that I ditched his class. Even though I'm just a teaching assistant, it's important that I be there. So I pull on some unflattering clothes and feel even fatter. When I'm finally ready to go, I recall that Dr. Carrigg has an Intro to Psychology class at one o'clock. If I hurry, I can catch him during his office hours and we can have a sit-down. One week isn't enough time. The good doctor should allow me a few extra days to accomplish what many never attempt. After all, this is my dream not his. I guess. Maybe, just maybe, if I have more time, I can turn the corner and find a way to finish the catalog, realize my dream, and gain access to the good life. Outside, it's gotten colder—around forty-five degrees. My bike is on the front porch, locked to the iron rocker. That loose board Kendra's Uncle Roy was supposed to fix squeals at me. I unlock my bike and hop on. I roll down the steps, balancing the Korean make perfectly, until I reach the sidewalk. I pedal hard toward the street, make a sharp left, slip between Kendra's Tercel and the neighbors' BMW, and hit the street standing. I glance over my shoulder at the Victorian Kendra's uncle is letting us use while he fixes it up. It's a beautiful house. The kind of place I'd like to live someday. Fat chance.

Cold, moist wind chills my face. The smell of burning wood is always strong in the neighborhood. I admire the restored homes as I leave them behind. Gaslight Clifton is loaded with antique charm. When Uncle Roy is finished restoring his house, he'll be able to sell it for tons of money, which is why, at the end of the year, we have to move out. When I hit Ludlow Avenue, I do not feel so depressed. I make a swerving left that feels more daring than it is. Soon, I'm cruising up the sidewalk, dipping in and out of pedestrian traffic, thinking maybe I'm not in such bad shape, when I realize I forgot my iPod. The most happening street near the university—much more fun than McMillan and safer than Short Vine—isn't very crowded. As I pass the Esquire Theater and head toward Grafton's, I get a craving for Cincinnati's famous ice cream. Thank God I'm going downhill.

Seconds later, I reach the four-way intersection at Ludlow and Jefferson. I make a hard right, cut across the street, and head south. Uphill. To my left and across Jefferson Avenue is Burnett Woods, one of the best city parks in a city loaded with awesome parks. I push myself hard up the big hill. It takes some time and effort, but I reach Martin Luther King Boulevard, cross it, and the road begins to flatten out. Suddenly, traffic is heavy. I see a few faces I recognize, but everyone else is a stranger. Raynard is a small private university that hosts only 4,800 students. Surrounded by six major hospitals and the University of Cincinnati, the area is a unique showcase for classic and cutting-edge architecture. I turn onto campus and head up the big hill toward the main gate where Zander Hall stands as it has for over one hundred years. Bikes aren't allowed on this particular sidewalk, but I'm cool with the security guys that are always smoking at around this time. I wave and smile, smile and

wave. They wave and smile back. As long as I don't act like I'm too good for them, they'd let me get away with murder.

Once behind Zander, I avoid the chapel and focus on Prentice Hall. I am tempted to drop into Travis's lab, hang out, and see if he has any samples of that weed I'm buying for Desmond. I resist because I have some serious explaining to do. When I find Dr. Carrigg alone in his office, paging through a psychology journal, I get nervous. Small talk usually works, but not today. The man just frowns and leaps into another responsibility lecture, followed by the ever-present declaration that only the strongest survive. He makes me feel like a slug. Why can't I just do my work? I have a ton of student loans to pay back and no job. I can't afford to fail.

"... with that said"—he adjusts his tone from pedantic to somewhere between Papa Bear and the voice of perpetual woe—"I must remind you, again, that there are prominent sponsors supporting the dream catalog you're supposed to have finished already..."

"I know but—"

"... and they've paid good money for the dream testimonies and the new software that will support their examination and eventually facilitate assisted global self-analysis via social media. You must finish videotaping, classifying and cataloging all the respondent dreams, and analyzing the data."

"I need more time."

"Silver, all you have to do is finish shooting ten more respondents. Then you classify and catalog. Quantify the data, run some basic statistics, analyze the results, and write an abstract. We've been through this before."

"Yes, sir. I-I've been slacking, sir."

"You're just not thinking about the future, dear."

"Sir?"

"After nearly every university in the country begins to use our catalog, it will serve as the most comprehensive, interactive dream reference library in the country. Do you know what that means?"

"I suppose."

"After the social media giants connect to it, the catalog will change society's perceptions of dreams and further define what they really are and how we can use them. Billions will have access to a collective dream database that will allow them to connect with others who have similar dream patterns. In the more distant future, dream analysis through a similar but more advanced system will accurately predict human actions and reactions, potentially predetermine the development of amoral or criminal personalities based on dream patterns, and spawn other more extraordinary applications."

"I just don't think that we live in a world where people want to manage their lives based on their dreams. And is it fair to lock someone up because they dream about rape or shooting their boyfriend in the head?"

"I don't mean it that way, Silver. Sometimes people don't know what they really need or want. Sometimes they have to be directed, controlled, or programmed, managed by an efficient system so to speak."

"Wow. That seems a little like Stalin to me, doctor. Not to mention, far-fetched."

"So was walking on the moon."

"You always say that."

"Silver, you'll be one of the most sought-after consultants in the dream marketing industry. Dream psychology may be pop psychology to some academics, but it is going to be big business regardless."

Now I'm really freaking out. So I surrender and admit, "I just don't know if I'm ready for all that. I mean, I want success. Don't get me wrong. I just don't know if I'm ready to pay the price that comes with it."

"Well, my dear, with the right connections, the future is in your hands. It's all about *access*, and I can give you that. You could be untouchable."

And while I liked the sound of "untouchable," I have to be realistic "Then why do I have so many doubts? Why do I feel like I am destined to fail?"

"Cold feet? This is a significant commitment, an investment in you."

"Sometimes I just want to go home."

"There's nothing there for you."

Wow. Reality does bite. "Maybe."

"You're so close." He chuckles like Santa Claus jonesing for gingerbread. "Don't give up now. You have the intelligence, the right qualifications. And the fact that you're a female minority on the cusp of breaching the glass ceiling doesn't hurt. So for right now, it's all about effort."

"Right! I'll get started right away."

"Remember your deadline."

"Yes, sir."

"I hate to teach this way, but you've already blown me off twice. If you miss this time, I'll have no choice but to pay an outside firm to finish the catalog. If you miss this deadline, I'm taking you off the project, which will create a funding problem for you. I've already discussed your situation with the department chair. The future is your hands."

Now I'm really stressed...