



MY REALITY APP

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CHAPTER II: DO I WANT A NORMAL LIFE



****Chapter 11: Do I want a normal life?****

Sofia was still trembling when she stepped into her apartment, the familiar space offering little comfort. She leaned against the door, her chest rising and falling with deep, uneven breaths. The terror she had felt in the park lingered, raw and consuming, refusing to dissipate.

She moved to the kitchen on autopilot, her hands fumbling as she prepared a cup of hot tea. The routine was meant to soothe her, the warm liquid calming the trembling in her body. But as she sat at the small table, cradling the mug in her hands, her thoughts raced.

"My usual routine..." she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. Would she ever be able to go back to it?

For years, Sofia had crafted a life of quiet contentment. She taught a subject she loved, reveling in the opportunity to share her passion with eager students. Her apartment, modest but comfortable, was one of the few places she could see as it truly was—a rare privilege in a society built on augmented illusions.

She didn't have many friends, and no one particularly close, but she was fine with that. She valued her solitude, her walks in the park, her books. In those quiet moments, she believed she had found what she was looking for: peace.



And yet, there was a part of her existence that never quite settled into that idyllic reality. A shadow lingered in the corners of her soul, restless and unyielding. It whispered to her, reminding her of truths she tried to bury. The hunger to escape the system, to fight it, had never fully disappeared.

No matter how hard she tried to suppress it, it remained—a flickering ember refusing to be extinguished.

Sofia's childhood had been anything but peaceful. It was marked by tragedy, fear, and the kind of scars that never truly fade.

She was seven years old when she witnessed the execution of her parents. The memory was etched into her mind in horrifying clarity: their lifeless bodies crumpling to the ground, the cold eyes of the officers who had carried out the act.

Her parents had been professors at the very college where she now worked. They were passionate, principled people who believed in a better future—a future free from the suffocating grip of the system. But their defiance came at a cost.

In secret, her parents had organized meetings among a small group of trusted colleagues, all equally disillusioned with the corporate regime. They had developed a clever system to communicate their dissent. Sofia's mother, a psychologist, and her father, a linguist, had devised an intricate code using visual cues that only made sense within the context of the college.



To any outsider reviewing the surveillance footage from their contact lenses, the meetings seemed innocuous—discussions about improving college facilities or enhancing academic programs. But to the initiated, the words carried hidden meanings, a quiet rebellion woven into their conversations.

Her parents were careful, almost obsessively so. Only those who had worked at the college for years, who had demonstrated genuine empathy and altruism, were invited to join. Sofia's mother had even created a covert psychological test to vet potential members—a subtle assessment designed to weed out infiltrators and detect false kindness.

The system worked well, uncovering those who feigned trustworthiness. But no test was infallible.

One day, the fire they had been playing with consumed them. Someone they trusted—someone they had welcomed into their circle—had betrayed them. The authorities descended on them with swift, merciless efficiency.

Sofia had been hiding in a storage closet when it happened, peeking through a sliver in the door as her parents were dragged into the courtyard. She had clamped her hands over her mouth to stifle her cries, but the image of her parents' execution burned into her memory. Their fight for a better future ended in blood and silence, leaving Sofia alone in a world that punished those who dared to dream.



The betrayal came from someone they trusted—Gianna Davis. A third-year psychology student at the time, Gianna had seemed like the perfect addition to their clandestine meetings. She had a sterling reputation, built on years of volunteering in social programs and aiding those in need.

Gianna had passed the psychological test with flying colors, her responses reflecting an impeccable understanding of empathy and compassion. But Gianna's brilliance masked a terrifying truth: she was a fully functional psychopath. Her extraordinary intelligence had allowed her to mimic empathy with such precision that no one suspected a thing. She was incapable of genuine human connection, but she knew exactly how to fake it.

The betrayal came swiftly and without warning. Sofia's parents had invited her to her first meeting, a quiet gathering where ideas were exchanged under the veil of coded language. But that had been enough for Gianna to report them to the authorities.

That night, as Sofia lay in bed, the world she knew was torn apart.

The police breached their home with ruthless efficiency. Officers stormed the house, their faces cold and impassive as they read out the charges. The sentence, they declared, had already been handed down. There would be no trial, no chance for defense.



Sofia's parents didn't resist; they simply stood tall, holding each other's hands as they were led into the living room. The officers showed no hesitation. Raising their semi-automatic weapons, they unleashed a hail of bullets, executing Sofia's parents in front of her.

Sofia's screams echoed through the house, her small body trembling as she cowered in the corner. But her horror was magnified by the officers' twisted smiles. They were enjoying it—the act of ending two lives in cold blood.

Something inside Sofia shattered that night. A part of her that had once been whole—innocent—was irreparably broken.

For two years, Sofia didn't utter a single word.

The media painted her parents as dangerous radicals, enemies of the state who sought to destroy the fabric of their "perfect" society. Sofia, now an orphan, became a cautionary tale, a living symbol of what awaited the children of dissenters.

She was sent to one of the city's harshest orphanages, a place where cruelty was policy. The food was barely edible, the rooms cold and unwelcoming, and the strict religious staff saw punishment as a form of salvation. The orphanage used Sofia as an example, a constant reminder of the dangers of deviating from the system's approved message.



But none of this compared to the torment in Sofia's own mind.

For two years, she was trapped in a relentless loop of horror and hate. Every night, she relived the execution, the sight of her parents' lifeless bodies, the smug satisfaction on the officers' faces. The loop consumed her, feeding her anger, her grief, and her despair.

She hated everything.

She hated her parents for their defiance, for risking everything for their ideals. She hated them for leaving her alone, for dooming her to the orphanage. She hated herself for surviving. But above all, she hated the police—the monsters who had taken her parents from her with such callous joy.

It took years for her to claw her way out of the mental prison she had built. No one came to save her; no hand reached out to pull her from the darkness. She realized, painfully and slowly, that if she wanted to survive, she would have to save herself.

Sofia emerged from her silence with a new resolve. She would not follow in her parents' footsteps. She would not fight the system, would not sacrifice herself for ideals that couldn't protect her.



She decided to adapt, to blend in, to embrace the system as much as she needed to in order to live a quiet, simple life. She buried her anger, her hatred, and her pain, locking them away in the darkest corners of her mind.

Sofia threw herself into her studies with single-minded determination. The orphanage offered few opportunities, but she seized every one with an intensity that set her apart from her peers. While the other children accepted their bleak reality, Sofia focused on building a future, using knowledge as her shield and weapon.

Her relentless effort paid off. By the time she graduated, she had earned the highest history scores in the country, a distinction that opened a door to a prestigious scholarship. When the opportunity came, she didn't hesitate. She walked through that door with resolve, determined never to look back.

At university, Sofia found her calling in a niche but growing field: the history of technological evolution. It was an area few had ventured into, making it a perfect avenue for someone like Sofia—ambitious, intelligent, and wary of drawing too much attention. Specializing in this field allowed her to delve deeply into the system's inner workings under the guise of historical research.



Her interest wasn't purely academic. Every paper, every study, every archived document brought her closer to understanding the system that had taken everything from her. She didn't seek revenge; she sought survival. If she understood the system better than anyone, she could avoid her parents' fate.

Her dedication didn't go unnoticed. Sofia excelled so thoroughly in her work that she gained access to the most sensitive documents related to technological history. To her astonishment, it seemed that someone high up in the corporate hierarchy had taken an interest in preserving the narrative of technological progress.

They wanted history to remember the system's advancements as noble and necessary. And Sofia delivered exactly what they wanted.

She became a master at weaving the corporate-approved story into her research, presenting the evolution of technology as an unequivocal good. Her work was flawless, so perfectly aligned with the system's messaging that those in power grew to trust her implicitly. So much so that they overlooked the extraordinary gift they had given her.

Sofia was granted a privilege few human beings ever received: the ability to completely disconnect from the system by turning off her contact lenses. It was an oversight, a remnant of her high-level access, but she had learned early on not to draw attention to it.



She used the gift sparingly and with great caution. Only when she was utterly alone—inside her apartment or walking in the park—did she dare to disconnect.

Without the system's filters, the world took on a raw, unfiltered beauty. The synthetic, hyper-saturated colors of augmented reality gave way to the muted, authentic tones of the real world. She loved the quiet imperfection of nature as it truly was: the rough bark of trees, the uneven patches of grass, the dimming sky as dusk fell.

But Sofia knew this privilege was precarious. One wrong move could bring it all crashing down. She guarded it jealously, hiding it even from herself sometimes, as though acknowledging it too often might make it disappear.

By all appearances, Sofia had achieved the life she had long desired. She had a fulfilling career, a quiet home, and moments of stolen peace in the real world. She had adapted to the system, played her part perfectly, and built a life far removed from the chaos of her childhood.

Yet, deep within her soul, the embers of her hatred for the system still smoldered. She had buried them, convinced herself they no longer burned.



But now, for the first time in twenty years, that hatred surged to the forefront.

Luca's words, his audacity, had cracked something open inside her. The world she had carefully constructed suddenly felt fragile, and the raw truth she had suppressed for decades pressed against the walls of her mind.

The system hadn't changed. It was still the same machine that had devoured her parents. The same machine she had spent her life learning to outmaneuver.

And for the first time, Sofia felt the pull of something she thought she had left behind: the urge to fight back.

Sofia stood up from the couch, the cup of tea warm in her hands, and walked to the window. Her mind churned with Luca's words, his revelation about the police surveillance that shadowed her every move. The thought of being a target sickened her, a bitter wave of nausea rolling through her. She had worked so hard—so carefully—to avoid this exact fate.

She stared out at the quiet street below, her reflection faintly visible in the glass. The police officer could be anywhere, blending into the shadows or feigning casual disinterest in the crowd. The system was always watching. Always ready to chew up anyone, good or bad.



Sofia understood this harsh truth all too well. The same meticulous path she had walked to become the perfect citizen, to blend into the system, had also painted a target on her back. There was no escaping it. The system would always be there, omnipresent and hungry, devouring anyone who strayed too far from its script.

Her fingers tightened around the cup, but she didn't close the curtains. A simple act of caution like that could trigger unwanted suspicion. She knew better. She had to keep playing her role—the part of the compliant, upstanding citizen who had nothing to hide.

But as she stood there, staring into the dimly lit street, she felt something stirring inside her. Something unfamiliar, yet achingly powerful. Was it... hope?

Luca's words had awakened more than just her simmering hatred for the system. They had sparked the faintest glimmer of possibility.

Sofia had always known about the people living outside the system. In those terrible days after her parents' execution, she had imagined joining them, leaving everything behind. Rumors about the underground had reached her ears, whispers of communities untouched by the surgical implants, where people lived free from the system's oppressive gaze.



Those born into the underground were spared the contact lens procedure, their freedom protected from birth. But there were also those who had once been part of the system—people who had chosen to remove their lenses.

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. Removing the implants often came at a steep price: blindness, irreversible damage, even death. Yet some had survived, their sight intact, emerging as true rebels in a world of submission.

Sofia had never had the courage to take that step, even in her darkest moments. She couldn't bear the risk, the pain, the unknown. But that didn't stop the pang of envy she felt for those who had. They didn't have to act, didn't have to perform for a society that demanded perfection while delivering none of it.

That night, sleep evaded her. She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, her thoughts a relentless tide pulling her in different directions.

The internal struggle she had buried for years refused to stay hidden. It had stepped forward, louder and more urgent than ever. But now, it wasn't just anger and grief that filled her. There were new elements in the mix—new factors she couldn't ignore.



She wasn't alone anymore. Luca's presence, his words, had shifted something fundamental in her understanding of the world. And he had spoken of payback.

The idea took root, unbidden but powerful. For years, she had fought to keep her hatred contained, to smother the fire before it consumed her. But now, that fire burned brighter than ever.

What if she could fight back? What if she could wipe away the smug smiles of the officers who had killed her parents? What if she could stop others from enduring the same pain, the same loss?

Her heart pounded as the thoughts grew louder, more insistent. The system had taken everything from her. It was time to take something back.

That night, Sofia didn't sleep. But for the first time in years, she began to dream.

Sofia arrived at the meeting point, her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and determination. She had followed Luca's instructions to the letter, ensuring no one could track her movements. As she stepped into the shadowed alleyway, she paused, scanning her surroundings. Satisfied that no eyes were on her, she took a deep breath and disconnected her contact lenses. The world shifted immediately, the vibrant overlays and synthetic colors vanishing to reveal the raw, unfiltered reality beneath.



The faint stench of the sewer hit her as she descended, but she pressed on. This was her choice, and there was no turning back.

Luca was waiting for her near the maintenance door, his figure barely illuminated by a flickering overhead light. He nodded silently as she approached, then gestured for her to follow him.

Still wordless, he led her into the maintenance room. Once inside, he removed a panel in the wall, revealing a narrow passage. He gestured for her to crawl through, and she hesitated only briefly before following.

When they emerged on the other side, Luca finally spoke, his tone soft but sincere.

"I really want to thank you for giving us this chance," he said, extending a hand to help her up.

Sofia accepted the gesture but remained silent, her body tense, her mind wary.

They walked in silence through a dimly lit corridor, the sound of their footsteps echoing faintly against the damp walls. Sofia's unease grew with every step, but she kept moving forward, drawn by a mix of curiosity and the desire to see what lay beyond.



When they finally reached the underground village, Sofia stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening at the sight before her.

At the entrance stood a man with a warm, weathered face. His demeanor was calm, his presence grounding. He greeted her with a gentle smile, clearly trying to put her at ease.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sofia," he said, his voice kind and measured. "You don't know how much it means to us that you've come here."

Sofia acknowledged his welcome with a small nod, her shyness still evident.

The man—Henry, she guessed—seemed to sense her apprehension. He added quickly, "Please, don't be afraid. I know what they say about us. We aren't monsters. We just want to live in peace... well, except for what this terrible genius boy here has inspired us to do," he said, chuckling softly as he gestured to Luca.

Luca blushed, looking down in embarrassment, but didn't protest.

Henry extended his arm toward the village. "Allow me to introduce our community."



Under Henry and Luca's guidance, Sofia began to explore the underground society.

For the first time in her life, she saw people living without the shadow of the system looming over them. The narrow streets were lined with simple huts constructed from salvaged wood and metal, their modesty a stark contrast to the opulence of the world above. Children played freely, their laughter echoing in the cavernous space. Adults moved with purpose, but without the tension that came from constant surveillance.

Sofia's eyes lingered on the families, the pure, unfiltered love between parents and their children. It struck her how different this was from the hollow, staged interactions she had seen through the augmented reality filters above. Here, happiness wasn't projected or fabricated; it was real.

Little by little, Sofia began to relax. The tension in her shoulders eased, and she even allowed a shy smile to break through when a child approached her, wrapping her in a warm, sincere hug.

Seeing Sofia's growing comfort, Henry and Luca exchanged a glance and led her to a modest hut near the village's center. Inside, the room was cozy, lit by the soft glow of a handmade lantern. Henry gestured for her to sit, offering her a cup of herbal tea.



"It's time we talked," Henry began, his tone shifting slightly, becoming more serious. "We want to know what drove you to take this step. And we want to talk about what comes next."

Sofia hesitated, her fingers curling around the warm cup, its heat anchoring her. She took a deep breath, knowing this conversation would change everything. For the first time in her life, she could freely explain her internal struggle. Her world was about to move forward, away from the pain and into the unknown.

Luca had laid out every detail, explaining the critical importance of accessing the documentation on the microchip. Without it, there was no path forward—no way to break through the system's highest levels of security. As he finished, Sofia sat quietly, her mind processing the enormity of what he was asking.

She understood the stakes all too well. Her work as a tech historian had given her a unique insight into the microchip's sophisticated authentication system. She knew its protection level was unmatched, designed to be impenetrable.

After a few moments of heavy silence, she finally spoke.



"If I'm going to help you..." Sofia began, her voice trembling slightly. She paused, feeling the weight of Henry and Luca's eyes on her. "I need a favor from you."

Henry straightened in his chair, while Luca leaned forward, sensing the gravity in her tone.

"I want to know the identities of the police officers who killed my parents," she said, her voice steadying as the words left her lips.

The room grew tense, the air thick with unspoken emotion.

Henry was the first to break the silence, his voice soft but firm. "Sofia, overexposing ourselves with hackings could compromise the whole operation. You know that as well as I do." He hesitated, his expression pained. "I understand your grief. Believe me, I do. But embracing that pain... it takes you to dark places. Places you don't want to be."

Sofia exhaled slowly, steadying herself before replying. "I know those dark places, Henry. I've been there before. I've lived with them for years." Her hands gripped the edge of the table. "But this isn't about revenge. I need to know who they are—real people, not the monsters I've built in my mind. I need to close that wound. I can't keep living with it open."



Her voice wavered, but the conviction behind her words was undeniable.

This time, it was Luca who spoke, his tone cautious but supportive. "Henry, I can do this without drawing too much attention. It's old data, buried deep in the archives. No one's checking it. I can get the profiles tied to that crime without compromising the operation."

Henry's brow furrowed deeply, his thoughts visible on his face. He wanted to deny the request, to steer Sofia away from the path he himself had walked. He knew too well the corrosive power of hatred, the way it could consume even the strongest resolve. But he also saw the determination in her eyes, the unshakable need for closure.

After a long pause, he sighed heavily. "Alright," he said at last, his voice tinged with reluctance. "Luca will get you the information. But there's one condition."

Sofia tilted her head slightly, waiting.

"Luca will be there with you when he hacks into the system," Henry continued. "This isn't something you'll face alone. And it's not something we'll allow to jeopardize everything we've built."



Sofia nodded solemnly, the tension in her body easing slightly. "I agree."

The agreement was sealed.

They were going to help each other. For Sofia, it was a step toward a long-awaited reckoning with her past. For Luca and Henry, it was the foundation of a fragile but vital partnership. The stakes were higher than ever, but for the first time, they faced them together.

The cyber-café was quiet, its labyrinth of private cabinets dimly lit. Sofia entered cautiously, her contact lenses disconnected as instructed. She made her way through the maze, her heart heavy with apprehension but steady with determination.

Inside the cabinet, Luca was already seated, his camouflage loop active, ensuring they were invisible to any surveillance the system might have in place. He glanced up as she entered, acknowledging her with a brief nod.

They exchanged no words—only a simple, inconspicuous "Hi." Neither dared risk saying anything aloud that could be recorded or traced.



Sofia sat in the chair Luca had prepared for her and gave him a silent nod, signaling him to proceed.

Luca worked quickly, his fingers gliding over the keyboard with practiced precision. It didn't take long for him to access the records of the crime. There was plenty of information, more than either of them expected. Mass media coverage of the incident had been extensive, a carefully curated narrative designed to vilify Sofia's parents.

He filtered through the sensationalized reports, digging deeper until he reached the police files. There, hidden beneath layers of bureaucracy and propaganda, was the truth.

The first revelation struck Sofia like a blow. Gianna Davis—the young woman her parents had trusted—had been a collaborator from the beginning.

Reality Labs had a recruitment program to infiltrate collaborators into every layer of society. Gianna was one of their younger operatives, recruited because of her psychopathy and her ability to fake emotions flawlessly.

Sofia's hands tightened in her lap as she read the cold, clinical report Gianna had written about her parents. Every word dripped with calculated detachment, reducing her parents to mere "subjects"—obstacles to be eliminated.



The final recommendation in Gianna's report was brutal and unflinching: "Extermination of the subjects is advised."

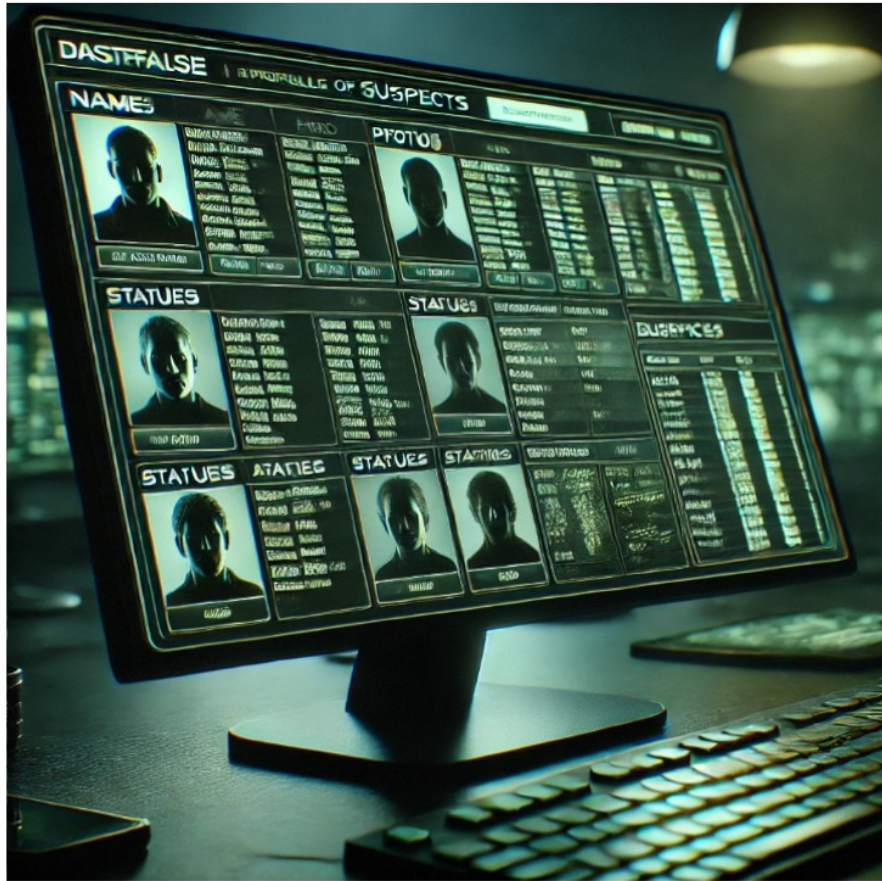
The file was marked with a green authorization stamp from a judge. Luca highlighted the judge's profile for Sofia to see—a mother of three at the time, now a grandmother, respected and celebrated in society. Sofia's parents' fates had been sealed in seconds, their "trial" nothing more than a cursory acknowledgment of Gianna's recommendation.

Sofia's vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes. Luca noticed her pain and placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

She looked at him, her expression a mix of gratitude and raw determination. "Keep going," her eyes seemed to say. She wanted all of it—no matter how much it hurt.

Luca continued, pulling up the records of the police squad dispatched to execute her parents. The squad had consisted of four officers—three men and one woman. Two had since retired, living comfortably in affluent neighborhoods, while the other two remained active, enjoying promotions and privileges far above what most officers could expect.

Further digging uncovered something darker: all four officers had been implicated in a drug money laundering operation years ago. The charges had been dropped, swept under the rug by someone high in the police hierarchy.



Sofia read the details in silence, her tears flowing freely now. She cried quietly, her body shaking as she tried to contain the storm inside her. For those responsible, the murder of her parents had been nothing more than a routine task. A day's work. A job they had relished.

Luca paused, then typed a message on the screen for Sofia to read:

"I can make the records public anonymously. The mass media will eat this up. They'll destroy them."

Sofia's gaze lingered on the words, her heart aching with the weight of the choice before her. Luca's offer was tempting. He could expose them, ruin their lives, and give her the vengeance she had craved for so long.

But then, she thought of the bigger picture. She thought of the system—the machine that had orchestrated all of this, that continued to grind countless lives into dust. Destroying four corrupt officers wouldn't change the world. It wouldn't stop another child from enduring what she had endured.

She met Luca's eyes, her expression resolute.

"No," she said softly. Her voice was steady now, the trembling gone.



Luca blinked in surprise but didn't argue. He could see it in her face—something had shifted.

"I'm going to help you," Sofia said, her voice firm. "We're going to destroy this rotten system."

The mission had become hers.