



BOOK 3: THE VAULT OF DREAMERS TRILOGY



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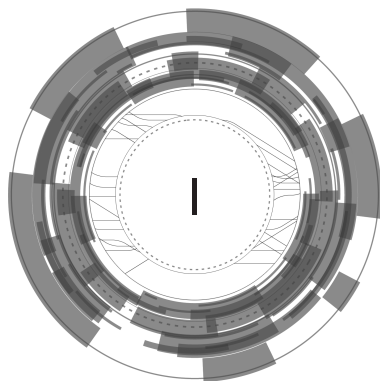
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*For my aunt,
Nancy J. Walsh*



THE BOXCARS OF HOME

APART FROM A LONE cicada's keening, the desert evening is quiet. I lean my shoulder against a boulder and aim my binoculars toward the boxcars, where the empty laundry line cuts through the heat of our backyard like a white slash. Rolling my focus knob, I shift my circle view up the back steps to the screen door and then to each window, one by one. Nothing moves. I watch until the colors go drab, until the stillness corrodes my hope.

No one's home. After all I've survived to come back, my family isn't here to greet me. I'd laugh if I didn't ache so much, and if I weren't sick with worry. Ma and Larry haven't answered the phone since I started trying to reach them yesterday, but they normally never leave Doli. They have no other place to go. Their absence makes no sense.

Training my binoculars on the desert surrounding the boxcars, I pick carefully over each clump of creosote to see if Berg has anyone staked out to watch my home and wait for me. From this side of the old train, out of sight of the tourists, nobody bothers with fresh paint, and each boxcar home has faded to a rusty brown that's barely distinguishable from the desert.

A neighbor steps out the back of her boxcar and descends to a row of chicken-wire crates that huddle in the shade of a stunted oak. First she pours a measure of feed pellets in the top, and then she takes a rabbit out by the ears. It kicks its legs, indignant, but she holds it to a stump and dispatches it quickly with an ax.

The thunk reaches me a moment after the flash of the blade.

If I were smart, I'd go to the McLellens' place at the far end of the train and ask what they know about my family, but I can't yet. Hope and fear keep me here, peering at my home, waiting in case someone comes. Dubbs should be back from school. Larry should be drinking a beer on the couch. Ma should be frying onions. Those windows should be open like mercy to let in the air.

As the shadows turn and grow longer, I get too anxious to wait anymore. I have to see what's left, even if my family's bodies are baking inside that shimmering box of heat, bloating into a feast for flies.

No, I tell myself. They're gone. They have to be gone, not dead. They can't be murdered.

But my fear is real. I know how sick Berg can be. I lower the binoculars so they hang from my neck, brace a hand on

the boulder, and rise. Hitching up my jeans and crouching low, I pick my way between brush and rock, until I cross the dusty slope of the valley. I duck under our laundry line and when I open the screen door, it gives a dry squeak. We never lock our back door, but since it sticks, I give it a kick at the bottom, and for the first time in half a year, I'm home.

“Ma?” I ask into the hot, hollow stillness.

Late sunlight sifts through the skylights, intensifying the gloom in the corners. I take a cautious breath and step inside. The stifling heat has the familiar, egg-sandwich smell of home. Dipping my head out of the strap, I lift off the weight of my binoculars and set them on the shelf. The ceiling is lower than I remember, the room more cramped. Books and dishes are left in a typical mess, but nothing looks ransacked. In the kitchen nook, a paperback props open the door of the fridge, a sign it's unplugged, and now I know: this was a planned departure. The nearest lamp is unplugged, too. I can picture how Larry examined the electric meter while Ma went around disconnecting everything—hot water heater, toaster, clock—so not even the smallest appliance could draw any current and cost them while they're gone.

But where to?

And when did they go? Sweating, I shove up the kitchen window for a cross breeze, and then I look around hopefully for a note. My gaze scans over my little sister's school photo and a box of ammo on the coffee table. The pencil bucket stands spiky on the desk. No note. I try to tell myself that they didn't expect me, which is not the same as being forgotten,

but still, it stings. As I trail my hand along the orange plaid couch, part of me clams over a lost pearl of grief. Where'd they go?

They wouldn't just leave for no reason. This is our home. They'd have to be driven or drawn away by something huge. Even then, they should have left me some message.

Despite my stepfather Larry's paranoia about surveillance in electronics, I'm sure my parents have a computer now. They've been coordinating the search for me and accepting donations online. Yet I can't find a computer or tablet anywhere. They could have taken it with them, but they haven't answered any emails lately, either. Things don't fit.

I try to think where my little sister, Dubbs, might have left me a message. Turning to the red curtain that gives some privacy to our bunk beds, I drag it aside along the wire, and I'm suddenly, keenly homesick, right here at home. Dust motes float in a beam of sunlight that lands on an upturned sandal. A gleam reflects off the little framed photo of my dad and me, him in his uniform and me in his hat, still on the wall where he hammered in the nail and hung it for me over a decade ago. My sister's bed, on top, is neatly made with her yellow patchwork quilt. Below, my red quilt has collected several drawings, a bird's nest, and a handmade, ceramic soap dish. I turn over the drawings, which have her name and age on the back, but no clues for me. Then I remember Dubbs's journal.

I drop to the floor, roll to my back, and push under my bed. Ignoring the dust bunnies, I inspect the pattern of metal wires for the little homemade booklet that she used to hide under the mattress. The booklet is gone, but in the same place, I find a

folded piece of paper. *Yes, I think.* I pull the paper between the wires and stand to hold it in the sunlight. It's a lined sheet of notebook paper with the ripped parts still fringing one side, and it feels faintly brittle, like it was wet once and then dried. It says

To Rosie. From Dubbs.

See you

I turn the note over, looking for more, but though the paper is large enough for more writing, those are the only words. Frustrated, I check under the bed again. That's all she left. Was she interrupted? That seems unlikely, considering she had time to fold up her message and hide it under the bed. Absently, I brush the dust from my hair and shirt.

The phone rings. I jump and bolt past the curtain to the living room. My gaze flies to the doors. The front one is still closed. The back one is still empty. When the phone rings again, I grab it to my ear.

"Hello?"

A faint click is the only reply.

"Hello? Who is this?" I ask.

I spin around the room, searching for a camera lens on the lamp or the wall or the skylight. One could be anywhere. I instinctively back into the kitchen, taking the phone cradle with me on its long cord, and I peek through the window toward the road out front.

Still no voice comes from the phone, though I hold it hard to my ear. It doesn't disconnect, either, so someone's listening.

A Jeep is newly parked beside the tamarack tree, its windows

rolled down, a gun rack clearly visible on the back window. A young man with a wispy mustache is smoking behind the wheel, and my lungs tighten with fear. Ian. My former captor from the Onar Clinic. He wasn't there when I entered the boxcar, but now he's watching it.

My heart thuds. "Is that you, Berg?" I ask into the phone.

The faint clicking comes again.

I slam the phone down in its cradle. Horror flashes along my skin. Out front, Ian opens his car door and flicks away his cigarette butt. He's lanky in a black tee shirt, gray pants, and army boots. Beneath his pale hair, his expression is unsmiling, but I can tell he's jazzed. He loves tracking me down.

Before he can get any closer, I move swiftly toward the back door. Quickly, quietly, I step out and shut it. I wince into the setting sun, and then I sprint around the ragged fences and rabbit coops and grills behind the boxcars, heading for the McLellens'. A surprised voice calls out to me, but I don't answer. A crashing noise makes me look back as I run. Ian vaults over a pile of cement pavers. He's coming fast and aiming a gun.

A popping shot fires out behind me, and a spat knocks a water jug spinning by my right ear. I dodge left and run even faster.

"Peggy!" I scream.

My heart's pounding and my lungs are bursting from fear. I'm running so fast that everything's a blur except when I leap over a shovel or launch off a garden post or flip a folding chair behind me. My ears are primed for another gunshot. My scalp anticipates pain. I don't dare to look back again.

I scream for Peggy again, and now the McLellens' boxcar

is in sight. It's ten yards ahead. Five. I'm almost there when I hear a much louder shot and jolt instinctively sideways before I realize the blast came from in front of me.

Peggy McLellen is standing on her back stoop, with her rifle raised. Her sundress rides up to show her sturdy knees and rugged boots.

"Get behind me," she says tersely.

I fly up the steps and stop in her shadow, panting. I look over her shoulder toward Ian, who has stopped back in the abutting yard. He hugs a bleeding hand to his chest, and his gun has fallen in the dirt.

"Explain yourself," Peggy says. "This next bullet's aimed somewhere more permanent."

"I've just come to collect Rosie," Ian says, panting. "I wasn't going to hurt her."

"She doesn't want to come," Peggy says. "That's what running away means."

"She doesn't know her own mind," Ian says. "She's sick in the head."

"I'm the sick one?" I say. "You're the one who works for Berg."

"Who sent you?" Peggy says.

"Her guardian, Sandy Berg," Ian says. "If you aid her, you're kidnapping, and that's a felony." He leans to reach toward his gun with his good hand.

"Leave it," Peggy says.

"I need my gun," Ian says.

"You need to get out of here or you'll get yourself mistaken for a gutless coyote and shot," Peggy says.

“It’s just tranquilizers,” Ian says. He lifts his voice. “I wasn’t going to hurt you, Rosie. You know you’re supposed to come.”

“Where’s Berg now?” I ask. The one good thing about him still being alive is that I can’t get prosecuted for killing him.

Ian tilts his head and gives his bangs a little flip. “At Forge, like normal,” he says. “But he’ll come now that I’ve got you. It won’t take him more than a few hours to get here. You can stay awake and talk with me in the motel ’til he arrives. Or sleep, if you’d rather. But it seems to me we’ve got things to discuss. You shouldn’t have ditched me back in Montana.”

“Where’s my family?” I ask him.

“Looks like they ran, like cowards,” Ian says.

Peggy takes another blasting shot toward Ian, who screams and ducks to the ground.

“Mind your manners,” Peggy warns him.

Ian swears in a squeaky voice. “You don’t have to shoot me! I haven’t done anything!”

Peggy frowns. “Your folks are looking for you,” she says to me, her voice low. “They got a tip. They left yesterday. Come on in and I’ll tell you about it.”

“What about him?” I ask.

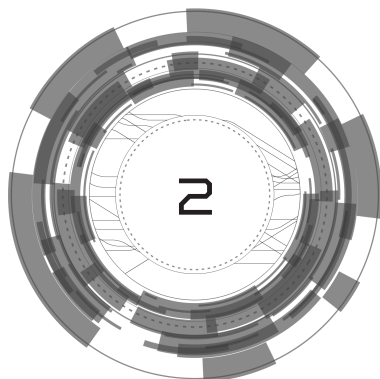
Ian is crouched way down, with his hands over his ears. The right one’s bloody. It also looks like he’s peed himself.

Peggy gestures with her gun. “Stand up, idiot. Quit your crying. I’ll only shoot you if you run.”

He stands slowly, keeping his hands high, and he looks taller and more awkward than ever. Peggy walks behind him, picks up his tranquilizer gun, gives it a quick inspection, and

tucks it in the belt of her dress. She gives him a nudge with the muzzle of her rifle.

“In you go,” she says to him. She nods back up at me. “Rosie, take the hash browns off the stove and see if you can’t find some duct tape.”



A GOOD DAUGHTER

I SHIFT THE HASH BROWNS off the hot burner and locate the duct tape like I'm told.

Peggy has me hold the rifle while she ties Ian's wrists behind him. When he resists, she clouts him on the head. "You watch it. I'm running out of patience," she says. She directs him into the closet off the living room and tells him to sit before she secures his ankles with more duct tape. She wraps a wad of medical gauze around his bleeding hand, gags him with an old scarf, and locks him in the closet.

I won't lie. I find this deeply satisfying. Ian kept me captive for months when I was helpless in a sleep shell, and I relish that he's the victim for a change. Once in a while, Ian kicks, and the muffled noise gives me another little thrill.

Peggy parks Ian's tranquilizer gun on the bookshelf next to her Bible. Without another word, she dishes up two heaping

plates of omelets and hash browns, and passes me the Tabasco. It's the best food I've ever had in my whole life. I have to moan with pleasure.

"Glad you like it. There's plenty more," Peggy says, smiling. "I cooked like everybody was home."

I glance around. The ceiling fan is on, silently alleviating the press of heat, and the windows are open. I can't hear any noise from upstairs.

"Where are Rusty and the kids?" I ask.

"Visiting Rusty's mother in Phoenix," she says. "No offense, but you look real bad. You could use another ten pounds, easy. Eat up," she says, and she empties the rest of both skilletts onto my plate.

The McLellens' boxcar has the same footprint as ours—a long, narrow rectangle—but it feels completely different because they jacked up the ceiling to fit in a loft and added a ton more windows. Money'll do that. I babysat and ran errands for the McLellens for half my life, so I know my way around. Their place is freshly painted and up-to-date, with a huge flat-screen TV and an open laptop on the kitchen counter. My gaze goes instinctively to the camera lenses, which are uncovered, and prickles rise on the back of my neck.

"Do you mind?" I ask. I step over to her laptop and close it. Then I take a dish towel and fold it over the top ridge of the TV to cover the lens there. I check the bookshelves, the lamps, and the corners where the paneling meets until I'm sure no other lenses are aimed at us.

Peggy, chewing thoughtfully, watches me and makes no comment. She's a tall, big-boned woman with short hair, dark

skin, and a penchant for wearing red. Her sleeveless dress today is no exception, and I can see the soft, swirly mark of an old scar on her upper arm.

I get back to my fork. “What do you know about my family?”

“You just missed them. They took off yesterday afternoon,” Peggy tells me. “They got a credible tip on your whereabouts. Someone had a photo of you sleeping, and your parents decided to go in person and check it out. They wouldn’t say where.”

“Sleeping how?”

“It was just your face on a pillow. In profile. Very little color, but some. It was pretty artsy, actually,” she says.

Inside, I go still. “It was just a picture? Not a video clip?”

“Just a picture. I take it you know the one I mean,” she says.

I do. It’s from a video taken when I was lying in bed with Linus. It sickens me to remember how we were spied upon. Was that really only a few nights ago? So much has happened since then. “How’d my parents get the picture?” I ask. “Who sent it?”

“I couldn’t say. Your ma showed me the picture, but otherwise, she was tight-lipped about the whole thing,” Peggy says. “She was trying to protect me, or so she said.”

As far as I know, the only person who could have sent that image is Berg, and if he’s luring my parents to him, they’re in real danger.

“Were they driving?” I ask.

“Yes. I sold them a car a while back,” she says. “They got a little money from people who donated to help search for you.

You wouldn't believe how stressed your parents have been. When that picture came yesterday, your ma was beside herself."

In a sick, painful way, I'm almost glad to hear she was upset. "Really?"

"Of course!" Peggy says. "And Larry, too. What's wrong with you?"

Guilt shuts me up. A good daughter's not supposed to have ugly feelings toward her parents, but I have layers of them. Resentment and anxiety are uppermost at the moment. It's so easy to blame Ma for letting Berg take control of me. She's responsible for bringing Larry into our lives, too, and what a prize he's been. The one thing I'm clear on is that I miss my sister, Dubbs, and I'd do anything to keep her safe.

"Once I find them, I've got to convince them to leave the country with me," I say. "We have to go somewhere else and start over with new identities. It's our only chance to have a normal life now. Berg'll never stop looking for me."

Peggy wipes her fingers daintily with a napkin. "If you ask me, that sounds like fear talking."

"It is," I say. "I'm not ashamed of it. Fear's healthy when you want to stay alive."

She looks doubtful. "I don't buy that. Rusty and I have been here, what, thirty years? Plenty of times I've been scared. Plenty of times we've had trouble at the business, but you don't let someone run you out of your home. Now, if you're tired of that boxcar and have better prospects, that I'd understand. But our kind, we don't run. I don't see Larry as the running type, nor your ma, either. And certainly not you."

I throw up my hand. “I’m not talking about local trouble. Berg has allies all over the world.”

“So?”

I can’t explain this to her. She isn’t going to get it.

“Don’t you make that disgruntled face at me, Rosie,” Peggy says, pointing her finger at me. “You just lay it out properly. Start back at the beginning. Don’t leave anything out. I saw you on that fancy show of yours. We all did. But I never understood why you got out of your bed and broke the rules. Did you *want* to get expelled?”

So I try. I tell her I wanted to expose what Berg was doing with the dreamers, but I got caught. Berg took me from the school and stuck me in a vault with more dreamers at the Onar Clinic in Colorado. For months, I was kept asleep there and mined for my dreams. Once I finally escaped, I made my way to Burnham in Atlanta, and then I went back to Forge, where I met up with Linus again.

I pause, remembering the morning in Linus’s bedroom when we were joined by Thea and Tom.

“Go on. I’m listening,” Peggy says.

I try to explain that this girl Thea has my mind in her body. Unsurprisingly, Peggy looks skeptical. I skip the part about nearly killing Berg in the dean’s tower, but when I get to how Berg kept Thea captive in the basement even though she was in labor with her baby, Peggy looks more thoughtful. Meanwhile, I go through my second helpings. Peggy opens a jar with a pop and pours me a sloppy serving of applesauce for dessert. The sweet, wet taste is heaven.

She leans back and fixes a bobby pin over her ear. “That is

some wild story,” she says at last. “If even half of what you say is true, Berg’s a psychopath. How can anyone be that evil?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “He doesn’t think he’s evil. He’s trying to save himself and his kids. He’s mining dreams for medical research.”

“How’s that now? He’s the dean of a boarding school,” Peggy says.

I nod toward her laptop. “Look up the Chimera Centre and Dr. Huma Fallon. Berg’s connected to that research. He sells dreams from Forge students and other dreamers to doctors who try to heal or rejuvenate brains, like for coma patients. That’s how Thea got my memories into her. Berg has a personal stake in it, too. He wants to find a cure for his Huntington’s disease before it gets worse, and he wants to be sure his kids don’t get it.” He also spoke about wanting to be immortal, but I spare Peggy that outlandish detail.

She leans back in her chair and crosses her arms. “Suppose what you say is true. I’m not saying I’m convinced, but just suppose. It still doesn’t explain why Berg is pursuing you, specifically,” she says. “What is it that makes you so special?”

“Not me. My dreams,” I say, and I rise to do the dishes. I squirt plenty of blue dish soap on a yellow scrub sponge. “Berg told me my dreams are unusually vivid and versatile, especially when I’m scared. He said he’s trying to figure out why. There’s a lot of money involved, I guess.” I nod toward the closet. “This is just the beginning. Berg’s never going to give up looking for me. He needs me too much.”

“I’d like to give him a piece of my mind,” Peggy says. “Not literally, of course.”

I laugh. "I don't suppose my parents took a phone with them."

"No. You know how Larry is about cell phones."

I do. My stepfather believes cell phones are a government scam so they can eavesdrop on us all. I don't agree with him, but I am convinced Berg has ways to tap into my calls, given half a chance. It's happened too many times before. I have a few recyclable phones that I consider safe, but I know the best way not to be traced is to never call anybody. I turn on the hot water to rinse a cup and set it on the rack.

"Speaking of phones, I had a call for you yesterday," Peggy says. "A young man named Linus Pitts left a message in case you contacted me."

Hearing his name aloud gives me a start. I turn from the sink. "What did he say?"

She reaches toward a yellow sticky note. "He was quite insistent that you call him. Fancy that. Handsome young man, if you ask me. I like his accent."

Peggy passes over the sticky note, and I take it with wet fingers. A small flutter attacks my lungs and won't stop. I told him I'd call him when I could, but what is there to say? It's painful to speculate that he has a camera in his eye, and that Berg has always been a silent spectator in our relationship. Berg may have even seen yesterday's kiss.

"I do believe that is a blush I see at last," Peggy says, her voice amused. "What did I tell you before? Smart boys like smart girls. It was only a matter of time."

"It's not that simple," I say. "I just realized yesterday that he must have a camera in his eye. He said he didn't know

about it, and I want to believe him, but it freaks me out.” I stare at the note, and now the blue ink is bleeding where it’s wet. “We’ve always, *always* had someone else with us, spying along with everything we’ve done.” I can’t explain how this makes me feel, like our relationship has been defiled.

“So talk to him about it,” Peggy says.

I shake my head. Linus is inextricably linked to Berg. Too many feelings to face. “I tried,” I say. “It’s no use. I just can’t right now.” I shove the sticky note in my back pocket.

“That’s too bad,” Peggy says. She folds her napkin. “Your sister Dubbs likes him.”

“What?”

“She near idolizes him, from what I can tell,” Peggy says. “She watches that show of yours more than what’s healthy. There’s some fan site that has all your old footage on it, and she watches your episodes with Linus over and over. Gorge on Forge. That’s what it is. A born romantic, that kid.”

“I guess,” I say. I let out the drain so the dishwater can gurgle down. “How am I supposed to find her and my parents?”

“Larry said they’d call me from a phone booth when they could to check in, in case I heard anything about you.” Peggy taps absently at her collarbone. “You could stay here with me. That’s probably the smartest move, at this point. When I tell them you’re here, they’ll come home and you’ll be reunited.”

“Ian’s in the closet,” I say, pointing out the obvious and all it implies. A tick of fear reminds me I shouldn’t linger. “He must have told Berg when I showed up. It isn’t safe for me here.”

“Your parents were working with a lawyer to try to stop Berg’s guardianship of you,” she says. “We could contact him.”

It's all I can do not to roll my eyes. "You don't get it. A lawyer can't keep me safe," I say. "This isn't a fight that will wait for the courts. Berg is utterly ruthless. He wants to mine my dreams, and nothing's going to stop him until he's dead or I'm dead. Even then, I wouldn't put it past him to keep mining me somehow. He's just like that."

"I see," she says slowly.

Her gaze shifts toward the afghan on the couch, so she's not looking at me directly anymore, and I'm instantly uneasy.

I've known Peggy McLellen for as long as I can remember, and I can read when she's figuring out how to say something I won't like. She's probably the closest thing I have to a second mother. Ma taught me my letters and how to read, but it's Peggy who took me to the library and braced her dark fingers on the paper form while I signed up for my first library card. More than once growing up, I wished Peggy and Rusty would adopt me, and not just because Peggy made better grilled cheese sandwiches. Effortlessly, casually, they made me feel safe and welcome, and I never want to lose that.

"There is one other possibility here," Peggy says. "Now don't get mad at me. We could try calling a doctor."

"For what?"

"You might need a little help," Peggy says. "There's no shame in it."

I look at her in disbelief. Even with Ian in the closet, she thinks I'm making up my problems. "You think I'm crazy."

Peggy opens both her hands like stranger things have happened. "I'm just saying. Your ma and I talked this over. A lot.

She has a mess of regrets about how she handled you when your dad left.”

I stare at her. “What’s Dad have to do with anything?”

“You don’t remember,” Peggy says in a tone somewhere between sorrow and resignation. Her eyes go serious. “You and your dad had a special connection. He was a dreamer, just like you. Big imagination. No goal was too far-fetched. And he loved this country. He believed in it. When he went MIA, you got real quiet. You barely talked. Your ma didn’t know what to do.”

“She never told me this,” I say.

“Why would she?” Peggy says. “She tried everything with you back then, but you were a mouse. You had this dreamy, faraway look. Rusty said you were downright spooky. When we asked you where you were, you said, ‘Talking to Dad.’”

A tingle lifts along my skin. “I don’t remember any of this,” I say.

“I don’t blame you,” she says. “Memory’s a strange thing. When we heard the news that your dad was presumed dead, your ma was afraid to tell you, but you heard about it somehow. You stopped eating for three days. You wouldn’t talk at all. Not for weeks.”

I keep waiting for a resonating prickle of recognition. I was four when my dad went missing and eight by the time he was presumed dead. That’s old enough for memories, but I don’t recall going silent or talking to him in my head. I just remember missing him.

“And you think that old stuff is connected to now?” I ask. “You think that excuses why she signed me over to Berg?”

“I’m just saying, she was afraid you’d need some help once you came home,” Peggy says. “It can’t hurt to talk to a doctor. She wishes she’d brought you to see somebody when you were little.”

Her wishes come too late.

“We can’t blame everything on the past. My mother is weak,” I say, coldly. I brace my hands on the edge of the metal sink and think of what she’s let Larry do to me over the years. “You know her. She’s always been weak.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit uncharitable?”

Stung, I frown at her. “Would you ever sign a contract to give up control of one of your kids?” I ask.

She bites her lip, and then shakes her head slightly. “No.”

“Because you’re a normal, decent mother,” I say. “Ma *wanted* to give me up. It wasn’t the money. It was *easier* for her that way.”

“Rosie, no. You’re not being fair,” Peggy says.

The ugly, old anger I feel toward Ma makes me twist the dishrag extra hard.

“I’ve always been too complicated for her,” I say. “She’s never understood me. She let Doli High put me on the pre-prison track! She married *Larry*, for heaven’s sake!”

“We all make mistakes,” Peggy says. “And Larry’s not all bad.”

I let out a pained laugh.

“Would you quit defending her?” I say, but it comes out as a squeak.

Peggy rises slowly from her chair and comes over to give me a hug. I stand stiffly in her arms, wishing this would all just

go away. I thought going to Forge was going to fix everything. Give me real skills and a place to belong, away from my family. Now I'm right back where I started, only my life's a thousand times worse.

"My parents were supposed to be home, waiting for me," I say, my voice tight.

"I know, baby," she says.

What am I doing wrong? How can I be so angry at my parents and miss them this much, too?

A banging noise from the closet makes me jump. Peggy loosens her arms.

"Keep it down in there!" I yell to Ian.

He shouts something back, muffled but angry.

Peggy releases me completely and turns toward the closet. "We're going to have to check on him. Tell me what you know about this boy."

I wipe my sleeve across my eyes and focus on the simpler, immediate problem of our hostage. Our disgusting hostage.

"His name's Ian. Ian John Cowles," I say. Of course I know his middle name. It's so annoying, what I had to listen to from him. "He's nineteen. He used to take care of dreamers like me at Onar. He liked to put makeup on the girls. He brought me little gifts, like lip balm and fresh mint leaves." He liked me helpless. A shiver of revulsion ripples through me. "He had a crush on me, and I tricked him into thinking I liked him back so he'd lighten up on my sleep meds. That's how I finally got away. He normally lives with his granny in Colorado. He likes to hunt, but he also rescues hurt animals when he finds them on the road. I thought he quit working for Berg, but obviously, he didn't."

“And you hate his guts,” Peggy says.

“Can you tell?” I say dryly. “Oh, and he had a cat named Peanut. She died. He still keeps her cage in his car.”

Peggy rubs her hands together. “Let’s see what Mr. Cowles has to say for himself.”

She steps over to the closet and opens the door.

Ian’s narrow features are normally pale, but now he’s red-faced and snotty. His teeth bite into the scarf gag, which has darkened with saliva. Still tied securely, he has shifted into an awkward sitting position among a jumble of hiking boots and a broom. His shirt is twisted, and with his wrists bound behind him, his skinny arms look unexpectedly strong. He flips his head, trying to get the sweaty, wispy blond hair out of his eyes. Angry, guttural noises explode around his gag.

“It won’t do you any good to yell,” I say. “No one can hear you. Okay?”

He says one more loud, indecipherable thing, and then goes quiet, looking at me through vicious eyes. He’s never looked more dangerous to me, and I think, *This is the true Ian. This is who he is underneath.*

“Myself, I’d give him more time to stew,” Peggy says.

He garbles into the gag again and looks furiously toward me. His demand is obvious.

“Hold still,” I say, and I lean in to get the scarf out of his mouth.

“Untie me,” he says, spitting. “This is ridiculous! I’m on your side.”

I wipe my fingers on my jeans. “What do you know about my family?”

“I told you. They’re gone. That’s all I know,” Ian says. “Berg sent me to get you, not them. Why don’t you call him if you want answers? Use my phone. Go on. It’s right in my pocket.”

I glance at Peggy, who shrugs. Then I reach into his pants pocket to find a phone and a small, clear box with a bunch of colored pills inside, red and yellow. I give it a shake, and Ian’s gaze glues to it.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Nothing. They’re for my heart. For when I’m stressed.”

I toss the box to Peggy and stand. “Do you realize what Berg wants to do to me?”

“It’s no secret,” Ian says. “He’s going to mine you again. He’s going to take out your worst dreams and leave the rest to help you heal, like before. You’re overdue. We need to get you back to treatment before you hurt yourself.”

He is so completely wrong that I’m actually impressed.

“Interesting,” Peggy says.

“Berg’s so-called treatment nearly killed me!” I say. “He ruined me!”

“You’re not ruined,” Ian says. “You’re overexcited. Unpredictable, maybe, but that’s not incurable. You just need the right care.” He tries unsuccessfully again to flip his sweaty hair off his forehead. “Untie me, Rosie. Let me help you.”

No possible way. “Why would you want to help me? Aren’t you mad that I ditched you?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“I was, at first. Any guy would be. I offered you everything,” he says. “But then I remembered how sick you are. I was worried for you.” He tilts his head to get a better look at me. “I’ve

only ever wanted what was best for you. You know that. I'm not giving up on us when you need me most."

Loathing renders me speechless.

Peggy clears her throat. "Touching devotion."

Ian's gaze never leaves my face. "I'm ready to forgive you, Rosie. You only have to ask."

"Here's what I have to ask," I say. "I want to know the scope of Berg's operation. A few days ago, I saw a picture of a vault of dreamers much bigger than the one at Onar. Is that the one in California that you once talked about? Where your dad works?"

He tries to sit up a little straighter, and the broom knocks out of the closet.

"It could be," he says cautiously. "The big vault's in Miehana."

"Are there other vaults in the U.S.?" I ask.

"I don't know. I haven't heard of any."

"Where is the one in Miehana, exactly?" I ask. "Do you have an address?"

He blinks at me, frowning. "No, he never told me."

"But you've talked to him," I insist. "You must have some idea where your dad is."

"We email," he says. "His phone doesn't work underground."

"Can you email him now?" Peggy asks.

"I will if you want. He doesn't always answer." He arches back and sniffs like he's had a sudden jolt of pain. "Call Berg. Just talk to him. If he knows where your parents are, he'll tell you."

Peggy shakes a couple of Ian's colored pills out onto her palm. "You're looking a little stressed. Want one of these?"

Ian looks from Peggy to me and back. "No. I'm fine."

"What are they? Roofies?" Peggy asks.

"No. Like I said, they're for my heart," he repeats.

"You're a total liar. Are they for me?" I ask. "Were you going to drop one in my drink?"

His cheeks turn a livid red. "No," he says. "They're just nothing!"

He can rot in the closet for all I care. I yank the broom out of the way and slam the door.

"Rosie! Don't do this!" he yells from inside the closet. "Call Berg! I didn't mean anything with the pills!"

I turn and chuck Ian's phone on the couch. I can't believe how pissed I am. Ian's a scuzzbag, but the real monster behind everything is Berg. If he has my family, I'll kill him. This time I really will.

A rattle of a drawer makes me turn. Peggy pulls out a magnifying glass and holds one of Ian's pills to the light, a red one. "Echo eight. I know a chemist who could take a look at these."

"Be my guest. Keep the whole box," I say.

She takes up a yellow pill next. "The idiot is rather compelling," she says.

"So you believe me now?" I ask.

She lowers the magnifying glass enough so that I can see her eyes over the lens.

"You're not safe here. That's clear. I suggest you call up one of your rich friends, Linus or whoever," she says. "Go hide

somewhere far from here, and once I hear from your ma and Larry, I'll send out a signal."

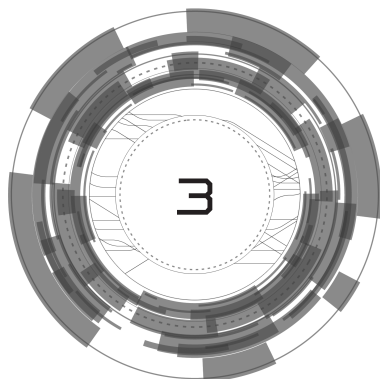
I can't just hide, though, not when my family is in danger. I run through my options. Calling Linus is out. I could reach Burnham if I could get on a computer, but he's all the way in Atlanta. Thea's the one I'd most like to connect with, but she just had a baby two nights ago. I'm not even sure where she is. The medic said she'd be okay, but what if she isn't? Supposing her parents have brought her back to Texas, I can't exactly show up there. Her parents are looking to buy more Sinclair 15, so going to their ranch would be like saying *here, mine me*.

A phone buzzes. Make that Ian's phone. It's on the couch, visibly vibrating, but the caller name is simply OTHER. I pick it up and swipe the answer button.

"Hello?" I say.

A click and a cool silence reach me before a voice comes on.

"I see Ian found you," Berg says.



A TRADE OF DREAMS

BERG'S VOICE SHOOTS through me like icy poison. I glance quickly at Peggy and then sink down on the couch, pressing the phone to my ear.

"What did you do to my family?" I ask.

"Nothing. They're perfectly fine. They're in Las Vegas."

"Vegas?" I say, surprised. "How do you know?"

"I had a tracking device put on their car," he says. "I was hoping they'd lead me to a certain elusive prodigy of mine, but I was wrong. Is Ian with you?"

I am not Berg's prodigy. "Yes."

"Put him on."

I glance toward the closed closet door. "Not possible," I say.

"Rethink possible," he says. "I need you to put him on, and I need you to stay put where you are. I can be at the McLellens'

in three hours. If you run, it will only be worse when I catch up with you.”

Fear ripples through me, and I cast my worried gaze toward Peggy. Berg knows exactly where I am. Peggy comes and sits next to me on the couch. She puts her arm around me, and I tilt the phone slightly so she can hear, too.

“You need to leave me alone,” I say to Berg. “I’d kill myself before I’d let you mine me again.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Not if I have your family. Wait there nicely now, Rosie,” he says. “It won’t be that bad. We’ll work out an exchange that’s fair to all of us, I promise.”

I let out a tight laugh. “Are you serious? You’ve ruined my life.”

“Actually, you made the choices that messed up our system at Forge,” he says. “Time and again you’ve thwarted me, but we have lives depending on your dreams now, Rosie. Countless lives, today and in the future. I’m not going to jeopardize other innocent people just because you’re being self-centered.”

I can’t believe the way he’s reframing everything.

“You stole my dreams,” I say. “Why don’t you admit you did it for yourself, for your Huntington’s disease? I know about you and your kids. Your daughter hates you, and I don’t blame her.”

He audibly sucks in a breath. I can imagine his ruddy face going bright with color.

“You’ve managed to surprise me, I must say,” he says. “Let me guess who you have spying on me. Linus? Has to be.” He hums a short note. “It hardly matters. I’ll grant your point. I am personally invested in finding a cure for my illness. But you

also must see that our research goes far beyond my own needs. If we can truly regrow brain tissue, we're at a turning point for all humankind, and you're pivotal to our progress."

"I don't care," I say. I shift the phone to my other hand and stand, turning away from Peggy to focus all my vehemence on Berg. "Just keep away from me and my family, or I swear, I'll turn this around and come after you myself. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

Berg makes a faint tapping noise on his end. "Why didn't you?" he asks.

I balk. In a flash, I'm back at the decision point, when I plunged the syringes into him and he watched me, glassy-eyed, while I tried to decide how much more of the sleep meds to give him. I hated him, but I couldn't kill him. It couldn't go over that line. He had a telltale bulge in the skin over his heart that matched mine.

"You had a port," I say.

"I see," he says. His voice grows slow and thoughtful. "We're more alike than you realize, Rosie. Both of us suffer. Both of us are dreamers. How would you like to know there's some of you in me already? If you killed me, you'd be killing a part of yourself."

This can't be true.

"A conscious part?" I ask, horrified. The phone feels suddenly heavy in my hand. It's excruciating to imagine part of me trying to exist in Berg. "Do you hear my voice in your mind?"

"No, but that would be a welcome side effect, I'm sure," he says. "Does Thea hear such a voice? It's a tantalizing prospect. Clearly, we have more studying to do."

“But I don’t want to be studied. Don’t you get it?” I say. “I don’t want anything to do with you, ever, period.”

“And yet I know where your family is, and you don’t,” he says.

I restrain an impulse to smash everything in reach. “Don’t you dare hurt them,” I say.

“Stay where you are. I’ll collect your family and bring them back to you. We can make a trade.”

I turn toward Peggy to see if she’s following this. Her eyes are wide with astonishment.

“You mean, trade my dreams for my family?” I say.

“Since you put it so crudely, yes,” Berg answers.

I can’t bear to listen any longer. I jab the red button on the phone to disconnect, and then I throw the phone back on the couch. I tighten my hands into fists and squeeze with all my might to stop from screaming.

“Heavens almighty. You weren’t kidding about him,” Peggy says.

“I have to go,” I say. Everything is suddenly very clear. I have to warn my family before Berg kidnaps them, but I’m also near panic because how can I possibly find them? He’s always one step ahead of me. I can’t stand it. “I don’t have a minute to spare.”

“I mean, really. The man’s a raving monster,” Peggy says.

“He says my family’s in Vegas.” I look at Peggy. “What are they doing there?”

“Take a deep breath,” Peggy says. “Let’s think this through.” She heads into the kitchen area, takes a couple grocery satchels from a hook, and starts loading one with bagels.

But I can't wait. I pat my pocket for my keys. I can't stop for anything.

"I have to leave now," I say. And then I have a terrible realization. "Oh, Peggy. I'm so sorry! He knows where I am. He'll come directly here, or he'll send somebody. You aren't safe!"

"Don't worry about me," Peggy says. "I can look after myself."

"But Rusty and the kids," I say.

She shakes her head. "Not a problem. I'll tell them to stay with his mother until we sort things out here." She nods her chin toward the pot bar in the next boxcar. "I've got three vets working next door. They're as good as an army. They'll handle anything Berg can throw at us, and they'll welcome the chance."

She's packing more food and gear into the satchels for me: cans of soup, dried fruit, water, a camp stove, matches.

"What about him?" I ask, pointing toward the closet. I feel a pinch of guilt. "He's been awfully quiet. What if he really has a heart condition?"

"I got him," she says. "Don't worry."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Shouldn't I at least look in on him?"

"I wouldn't if I were you," she says. She adds a box of Band-Aids to the bag. Then she sticks her hand in the cookie jar and pulls out a wad of twenties in a rubber band. She stuffs that in the bag, too. "Either he's okay or he isn't."

I step near and press my ear to the door. It's dead quiet in there. I set my hand on the doorknob, and then reconsider. She's right. I can imagine Ian in there, snot-faced and twisted. Either he'll bluster and complain, or he'll be silent and passed

out, or worse. It's bizarre to feel responsible for him after all he's done to me. I let go of the knob and back up.

Deliberately, I scoop up Ian's phone again. I check the settings to turn off the GPS, and then I power it down. If I could take out the battery, I would. I put it in my pocket.

Peggy passes me a set of keys.

"Take the Toyota," she says. "It has a lot of miles, but it will get you where you need to go. Just call me when you're somewhere safe," she says. "Hopefully I'll hear from your parents soon so I can warn them."

"But what if Berg taps your phone by then?" I ask. "It won't be safe for me to call you. It won't be safe for them, either."

She frowns a moment. Then she reaches on top of the fridge to where she keeps things she's confiscated from her kids when they misbehave. "Here. Take Freddy's tablet. I'll put a post on Facebook if I hear from your parents. We'll figure it out from there. Where's the charger?" She puts her son's tablet and a plug in the lighter bag, instantly giving me access to the world.

Her generosity floors me. "I don't know what to say. This is too much."

She waves off my thanks. "You might as well take some of these, too," she says, reaching for Ian's pills. "When I find out what they are, I'll let you know." She takes a few of the pills, puts the rest back in the box, and snaps the lid closed. Then she tucks the box into my bag.

I throw my arms around her in a hungry hug. She feels so solid, so real. I wish I didn't have to leave her. "I'm so sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to bring you so much trouble."

"It's nothing I can't handle. Who do you think I am?" She

smiles, letting me go. She plucks her red dress back in place. “Go on, now,” she says. “And drive carefully. When did you get your driver’s license, by the way?”

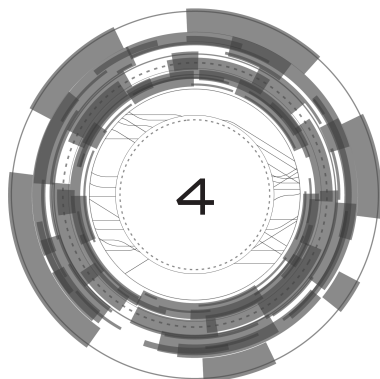
“I never did.”

Peggy lets out a booming laugh and shakes her head.

I pick up the heavy bags and clatter down her front steps to her old green Toyota. The night has come. I drive back in the desert hills and stop at my old car, the one Burnham lent me, long enough to grab my supplies. I still have two syringes of narcotics I took from Ian, all that’s left after I injected two into Berg. I have a bag of clothes, including a few new essentials I bought the night before, when I also picked up a sleeping bag. I have way too many phones: the crappy disposable one I used for a few calls with Linus and Burnham, Ian’s phone, and Berg’s phone, which has gone dead. I have no charger for it, either. I also have two more recyclable phones that Burnham gave me. What is that, five? I dump them all in my backpack. I’ve left my binoculars back at home, but there’s no getting them now. For a moment, I peer back toward the boxcars in mournful regret. This isn’t the way I expected things to go when I came home.

A minute later, I’m driving west, toward Las Vegas.

I make twenty miles before I realize I’m heading exactly where Berg wants me to go.



WAFFLES67

FOR A SECOND, I can feel Berg crowding in on my mind, playing me again. Then I step grimly on the accelerator and get back up to speed. I am not going to be paranoid. I'm five hours from Vegas. He doesn't know what car I'm in, and it would be nearly impossible for him to send someone to intercept me. Still, I have to be smart.

He definitely has the upper hand. All he has to do is send some lowlifes to pick up my family and stash them someplace. It infuriates me to think of Ma, Dubbs, and Larry in his control. Berg could drug them and mine them, just like he did me. Or he might keep them hostage until he can persuade me to do whatever he wants. My skin screams off my bones.

Think, Rosie. What's my next move?

A truck roars past on my left and sends a mini tornado around my car.

I wish my dad were with me. Hearing Peggy's perspective on him was unsettling. I should have taken the photo of me and him from the wall of my bedroom. Better yet, I should have taken the nail.

But I didn't, and my dad's dead. The truth is, I need help. It stings to admit it, but I do. I can't outwit Berg on my own. I have to run over my options again.

I have a distant cousin in Calgary. It's almost comical how unhelpful that is.

Linus.

Whenever I allow myself to think of him, even his name, an anxious, melty sensation curls in my gut. I can't call him, even though his number is in my back pocket. Berg would trace the call for sure.

Burnham.

I chew on the inside of my cheek and allow myself to fully consider my friend in Atlanta. The last time Burnham and I spoke, it was by phone, and I was in the dean's tower at Forge. Burnham's computer was getting fried by a virus from Berg's computer. That was Friday night, or technically early Saturday, and Burnham has probably replaced his computer by now, Sunday night. I can't imagine him existing long without one. He's far away in Atlanta, but he could help safely from a distance. On the downside, his parents own Fister Pharmaceuticals, the company that makes the sleep meds for Forge and half the country. He's loyal to his family and hypervigilant about anything that could tarnish the Fister reputation.

I squirm uncomfortably in my seat and adjust the vent to get a stream of air on my neck. Okay. So there's an added hitch

to me and Burnham that I haven't much wanted to admit to myself.

A week ago, that first night when I was visiting Burnham in Atlanta, I had a vicious nightmare and woke in a panic. Burnham got up to make me cocoa in his kitchen, and shirtless Burnham is quite the sight. The whole memory makes me uneasy, and not just because I feel guilty about hanging with Burnham while my relationship with Linus was murky. Now that I have a little space from the cocoa episode, I feel like Burnham shouldn't have kissed me. I know that I came to the kitchen dressed in, well, not much, and I didn't resist the kiss as it was happening. And yet, if Burnham was really as noble as I always thought he was, he should have known I was vulnerable.

I check my gas. I'm at half a tank. I put on my blinker to pass a slow car and then ease back into the right-hand lane.

The worst thing is, I apologized to Burnham the next day, like the whole thing was my fault, like something was wrong with me for not being into him more. I kept trying to be honest, but I didn't really owe him anything.

Then the other night, when Burnham and I discovered that clip of me in Linus's bed, Burnham was not pleased. I could tell. I wish none of this bothered me, but I feel this ick about Burnham and it isn't going away.

I turn my thoughts to my last real option: Thea. She changed me. I wanted to stay angry and not care for anybody ever again, but when she was suffering and having her baby in that dark, filthy tunnel, I wanted so badly to help her. I felt like I was seeing myself struggle in pain, and in the end, she broke

me open. She's me. That's why. She's truly me no matter how much we change. And if I can feel so fiercely protective of Thea, I must have the ability to care for other people, too.

Fine, I think, but this isn't helping me come up with a plan.

I'd love to talk to Thea and find out if she's all right, but I don't have a secure way to reach her. Anything I plan now needs to be kept from Berg if I'm going to have any chance of beating him, which brings me back to Burnham.

He set up a dark web Tor site so I could reach him securely if I needed to, and that's exactly the situation I'm in now. When I consider how devoted Burnham has always been to discovering what Berg's up to, it reassures me somewhat. Despite our turbid chemistry, I can count on Burnham. I'm probably making too big a deal out of the kiss, anyway. Could be he doesn't even remember it.

At the next chance of a turn, I ease off the main highway onto a narrow, unpaved road and head north. My headlights bounce over the gravel, and phantom bushes fly past my windows, but I hold the jittery wheel steady until I find a decent place to pull over. I turn off the ignition, and in the quiet, the gravel road gleams a ghostly, pale line through the dark desert brush.

I dig into a satchel for Freddy's tablet, doubtful I'll even get a connection here, but after a moment of a searching signal, I get a Google window.

Yes.

I check Facebook and look up Peggy's profile. Her latest post says, *The idiot is gone*. Nothing about my parents. It's disheartening, and I shiver, thinking of Ian on the loose again.

I pull up the Tor site Burnham created when I was with him in Atlanta and type in our passcode, *Waffles67*. A string of messages pops up, and I feel a jolt of surprise. They're from Burnham, and the first is time-stamped from last night.

From: BurnFist51

To: LKRose

Sent: Sat 3/26/67 8:59 PM

Subject: Hey

I'm finally back up. Berg's virus totally fried my computer. I had to buy a new one. Call me. 404-484-1223. The line's secure.

From: BurnFist51

To: LKRose

Sent: Sat 3/26/67 9:14 PM

Subject: FW: Hey

Are you there?

From: BurnFist51

To: LKRose

Sent: Sat 3/26/67 9:23 PM

Subject: FW: Hey

Reply if this reaches you.

From: BurnFist51

To: LKRose

Sent: Sat 3/26/67 9:32 PM

Subject: FW: Hey

I get it. You're not online yet. It'll prolly take you a while to get to a computer. I'm not going to panic. Call me as soon as you can. Waffles says hi.

From: BurnFist51

To: LKRose

Sent: Sun 3/27/67 6:06 AM

Subject: FW: Hey

I just saw Berg on the Forge Show like nothing's wrong. Where are you? Don't be dead. That would be uncool.

From: BurnFist51

To: LKRose

Sent: Sun 3/27/67 10:34 AM

Subject: FW: Hey

The now is miserable.

Burnham once professed that he didn't worry because it made the now miserable, but clearly I've pushed him over the edge. I scramble for one of my new, recyclable phones and pull off the wrapper. *Please have a signal*, I think. I punch in Burnham's number and listen to the rings. What time is it in Atlanta? Before I can calculate time zones, the connection comes on.

"Hello?" he asks.

I bolt up in my seat, smiling. "So you do worry after all."

"I'll be," he says in his Southern drawl. "You're not dead."

I shake my head, clutching the phone hard. Hearing his

voice twists me up because he sounds so close. A thrum of wind surrounds the car, and the desert outside my windows is impossibly vast and dark. “Nope,” I say.

“Don’t do that again,” he says. There’s a fumbling noise like he’s arranging something, maybe reaching for his glasses or shifting his brace. “Where are you?” he asks.

“About an hour west of Doli. I’m in my car, by the side of the road,” I say. I glance out the window. “In the desert.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re really okay? Berg didn’t hurt you at all? It sounded bad when I got cut off.”

“I’m okay,” I say. “I was able to jab a couple syringes into him and dose him with sleep meds. That was fun.” I explain how I escaped, and how my friend Thea had her baby down in the tunnel. “Berg kept her prisoner down there.”

“That guy is seriously twisted,” Burnham says. “But now, who’s Thea?”

I’m startled to realize I’ve never told him about her. I didn’t really know who she was myself when I visited him in Atlanta. It’s tempting now to tell him the whole story, but I have a sneaking suspicion he’ll want to tell his parents, which would not be good. Besides, I should check with Thea before I divulge what’s basically her health history. Come to think of it, I really should have checked with Thea before I told Peggy about her, too.

“Thea’s a friend of mine from way back,” I improvise. “We’re really close, actually, and she showed up at Linus’s house looking for me. She’s normally in Texas with her family,

and I really need to talk to her and find out how she is, but I don't have a safe way to call her. In fact, I haven't been in touch with anybody 'til now."

"No problem," he says. "I can send her a recyclable phone and give you the number. Do you still have one yourself?"

"I have one left," I say.

"Then what else? What else do you need?"

He is truly such a nice guy, and it feels so good to have his support.

"I have to find my parents and my sister," I say. "Berg said they're in Las Vegas, and he pretty much promised to kidnap them if I didn't let him mine me."

"You can't let him do that."

"I know, but I have no way to warn my parents," I say, frustrated. "They don't have a phone. I'm scared, Burnham. He could take them anywhere. Anywhere in the world, actually, even Iceland. The Chimera Centre's there."

"He can't take them personally, though," Burnham says. "He still has to show up regularly on *The Forge Show*. He could hire people to kidnap them, but I doubt he'd take them out of the country unless he had you, too." A tapping comes from his end. "This isn't good. I could get a PI, but that would take time. Do you have any other ideas? Why are your parents in Las Vegas?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "I'm not even sure Berg was telling the truth about them being there. My neighbor Peggy said my parents had a lead on where I might be and that's why they left. Vegas might have been their destination, or they could have been heading somewhere west of there and just stopped on the

way.” I frown out my window as a shimmer of dust passes through my headlights. “There’s supposed to be another vault of dreamers in Miehana, California. A big one. I can’t help thinking it’s important.”

“You mentioned that once before,” he says. “Miehana,” he adds slowly. “Isn’t that near the Olbaid Nuclear Power Plant? The one that blew up?”

The name tickles a memory of a story from science class. “Possibly,” I say. “Let me take a look.”

On Freddy’s tablet, I do a quick search for the Olbaid Nuclear Power Plant, which is right on the Pacific coast, about halfway between L.A. and San Francisco. It had a major meltdown in 2048, about twenty years back. The town of Miehana is thirty miles inland, just outside the Olbaid Exclusion Zone. Images of the OEZ show the rusty ruin of a roller coaster and decaying, overgrown summer cottages.

“You’re right,” I say, impressed.

“Okay,” he says. “We’ll see what we can find out about that vault in Miehana. And here’s another idea. I can search the Fister database to see if there are any significant sleep med orders in that part of California.”

“You think that vault of dreamers uses sleep meds?” I say. “The dreamers are already asleep.”

“They used sleep meds for you when you were at Onar, didn’t they?” Burnham says.

He’s right. They did. “But I was an exception,” I say. “Berg buys bodies from a pre-morgue. They’re legally dead. He’s just found a way to boot up their bodily functions. He can reignite their brain stems.”

“Who told you this?”

“Berg did,” I say, remembering Gracie, a little dreamer girl from the vault under Forge. “From what he said, the dreamers are sort of half back from the dead, just enough for their old dreams to stir. Berg uses their brains almost like potting soil. He could implant dreams from Forge students into them and they’d take root. That’s what he said, at least.”

“Holy crap,” Burnham says. “Why didn’t you ever tell me this?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t come up.”

“That is one creepy dude,” he says.

No kidding.

“Hold on. I’ve got another thing,” I say. I locate the pill box I took from Ian and fish out a few of the little pills. I turn on the overhead light so I can inspect a red one. “See if you can find out anything about a red pill marked ‘Echo eight,’ and a yellow one. I think this is a double theta marked on it.”

“Send me a picture.”

It takes me a couple seconds, but I do. “This phone camera’s not the best.”

“That’s okay. Where’d you get the pills?” Burnham says.

“I found them on a guy who works for Berg. Remember Ian? He came looking for me in Doli.”

Burnham wants to hear all about that, too, and I tell him how Peggy and I stuck Ian in the closet.

“You’re really not safe anywhere, are you?” Burnham says.

I focus out my window again. The place where I’ve pulled off is still dark and quiet. If I turn off my headlights, I’ll practically disappear, but I’m too anxious to stay here doing nothing.

I switch the phone to speaker and prop it on my knee. Then I start the car again and turn back toward the freeway.

“I’m going to keep driving toward Las Vegas,” I say. “I’m going to hope Peggy warns my parents about Berg in time and they start driving back toward me.”

“Sounds good,” Burnham says. “But maybe get some sleep in there.”

I laugh. Like I could sleep. “And you’ll do your research and send a phone to Thea,” I say.

“What’s her address?” Burnham asks.

“I don’t have it on me. You’ll have to look it up. Her name’s Althea Flores. She lives in Holdum, Texas, and her family owns a ranch. They’re super wealthy.” I realize he’ll learn a ton about her online, but that’s for another conversation. “How long will it take to get her a phone?”

“I can have it delivered first thing tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Burnham,” I say. “This is so nice of you. I mean it.”

“Don’t mention it,” he says. “I’m glad to be back doing something. I was worried about you.”

A louder shifting noise comes from his end. I think he’s about to say goodbye, but instead, he clears his throat.

“Listen. Do you have another minute?” he asks.

I’ve just reached the highway again and I turn on my blinker, which clicks in loud rhythm. I look to my left for on-coming headlights and wait while a pair of headlights gets bigger.

“Sure. I’m just driving,” I say.

After the car passes, I pull out onto the road and pick up speed.

“I was talking to my sister, Sammi, yesterday,” Burnham says. “I kind of told her about when you were staying with me here in Atlanta. That night. After you had your nightmare.”

I know exactly what he means. A cold furball lodges in my lungs. I can’t believe he told her about us.

“I remember,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant. “What about it?”

“Sammi says I owe you an apology,” Burnham says quietly. “She got me thinking I came on too, well, strong, and then I wasn’t exactly cool the next morning.”

I feel a snap of relief, like a cord breaking. I grip the steering wheel harder and aim straight ahead as an overpass whooshes above. “Wow,” I say.

“So she’s right?”

She’s brilliant is what she is.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I’m sorry, then. I really am,” he says. “The trouble is, I can never tell if the vibe between us is good or bad, or if I’m just imagining it, you know?”

I do know, unfortunately. It’s not like I have everything figured out. “Let’s just agree never to kiss each other again,” I say.

“Not ever?”

I throw up a hand. “Burnham!”

“I’m apologizing,” he says. “I’m trying to be straight-up honest with you.”

“And you’re making me really uncomfortable,” I say. “Just stop.”

“Okay. All right,” he says. And then, “Just tell me one thing. One last thing.”

“What?”

“That picture of you in Linus’s bed. Does that mean what I think it does?”

I frown at the road ahead and watch the white lines flicking by. I don’t owe Burnham an answer. I know that. I’m certainly not going to tell him that Linus and I didn’t have sex. But I have to say something.

“Linus doesn’t pressure me,” I say.

The car hums over the smooth road.

“Touché,” Burnham says softly.

I shake my head. He asked; he got his answer.

“If you don’t want to help me anymore, that’s fine,” I say.

“Wait a second,” he says. “I’m not helping you just because I like you. We’re a team, Rosie.”

“We are?”

“Berg messed up my life, and think of all those other students at Forge. We trusted that place, and he stole our dreams. I don’t mean mine, literally, but it’s effectively the same thing.”

A prickling of hope gathers in me. “You’re right,” I say. Burnham has always had an innate sense of justice. I knew that.

“We’re going to bring him down, Rosie. You can be sure of that.”

Wow, I think, and my hope is buoyed into something more certain. “Thanks,” I say.

“Of course,” he says. “Now, I’ve got stuff to do. Don’t drive too late. And be sure to eat something. Cheetos, at least.”

I smile. “All right,” I say. “Thanks again.”

He hangs up, and I'm left alone, still driving. It's funny. With all the dips and turns our friendship has gone through, I feel closer to him now than I did when I was standing in his kitchen. I wonder if he feels the same.

My smile fades. If only I knew where Linus was.