

THE RULE OF MIRRORS



ALSO BY CARAGH M. O'BRIEN

The Vault of Dreamers

The Birthmarked Trilogy

Birthmarked

Prized

Promised



BOOK 2: THE VAULT OF DREAMERS TRILOGY



ROARING BROOK PRESS
NEW YORK

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Published by Roaring Brook Press
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Partnership
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data tk

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First edition 2016
Book design by Elizabeth H. Clark
Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For my sister,
Alvina K. Hart*





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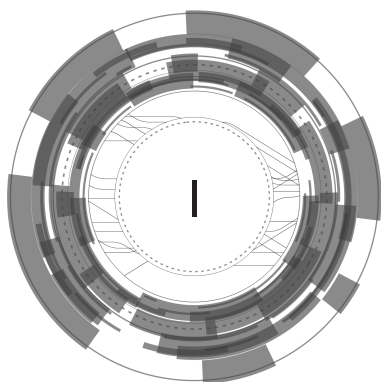
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THE RULE OF MIRRORS



Map TK

Map TK



— ROSIE —

THE VOICE THAT STAYED BEHIND

WHEN I FEEL SOFT, breathy pressure on my lips, I open my eyes and grab the guy's throat.

"Stop," I say. It's my first word out loud ever, and the power of it thrills me.

The guy jerks free from my grasp and rubs his throat. He's ugly and young. Mousy hair. Wispy, loathsome mustache. He's in scrubs, like he's a hospital attendant, but I'm not deceived. This is no hospital. It's a vault of dreamers.

"You can't be awake," he whispers. He looks rapidly over his shoulder and then back to me. "Whoever screwed up your meds, it wasn't me." He reaches for the drip that will infuse a new dose of narcotics into my veins.

"No, wait," I say. "Just wait, please. I need to talk to you."

“This is impossible,” he whispers furiously. “You must be talking in your sleep.”

“Do I look like I’m sleep talking?” I stretch my eyelids super wide and reach up for his face.

“Don’t do that,” he says, with hushed urgency, and he pushes my arm back to my side.

“I know you like me,” I say. “You were this close to kissing me.”

“No, I wasn’t!”

“No one else has to know,” I say. “Is your name Ian? Is that what I heard? Please, Ian. Please talk to me for a second. I’m so lonely.”

From my inert position in my sleep shell, lying on my back and dressed in a thin gown, I doubt I could look more helpless if I tried, but I put my every bit of pleading into my eyes, and before I can stop myself, real tears brim over. I hate appealing to him like this. I hate that my loneliness is so true.

He frowns above me, this ugly boy-man with droopy, soft lips. Big ears. Bulbous eyes. Soft everywhere. He might be man height, but I swear his voice never changed.

“Don’t cry,” he says. “I don’t believe this is happening.” He touches his sleeve to the corner of my eye, and then he smiles shyly. “All right. I’ll talk, but just for a second. I’m a big fan of yours.”

“Really?”

He nods. “I used to watch you on *The Forge Show*. I couldn’t believe my luck when you came here.”

“Where’s here?”

His brows lift in surprise. “This is the Onar Clinic, out of Denver. We do sleep therapy and research. You’re here to recover. Now hold still. This shouldn’t hurt. I just have to check your port.” He leans over the place in my chest where an IV goes into my skin and peels off some tape.

I try to make sense of this information.

The last thing I knew for certain was that Dean Berg had me trapped in the vault of dreamers under the Forge School. Linus was there, too, and a pang accompanies my memory of his limp body lying on the operating table. Dean Berg mined me that night, and the pain was excruciating.

Or wait. I recall a span of time after that, too. I was trapped in another vault, maybe this one. I glance up at the supply lines that run along the ceiling. Yes. I’m as certain as I can be that this is the same place. Ian was in that memory, too. I was here a couple of weeks or more, and I still had my other voice with me then. We tried to comfort each other. We tried for hope, but then—it comes to me fully now, the last thing I remember, when Dr. Ash was mining me. Us.

The gilded, honeyed lights surrounded our memory-dream of our sister Dubbs on the train tracks, ripping it away, mining it savagely out of us, and when my other voice couldn’t bear to lose our sister, she wrapped herself around Dubbs and held on so tightly that they both were torn away from me. A shattering of star bits swirled around me in the aftermath and broke the night into slivers of gold while I, in disbelief, in agony, screamed and tried to follow.

It was useless. The schism was complete, and my other

voice was gone. I was left behind in our body. Me. The other, lesser voice who spoke only in our head, never aloud. Until now.

Ian slides a new IV into my chest, and the prick hurts. “Sorry,” he mumbles. He peels off a new piece of tape to secure it.

This is what I’ve struggled to wake up to. This hideousness. I’ve come close to surfacing before, enough to be certain that Ian has lingered over me previously, but this is the first time I’ve actually broken through.

It’s so hard to know what’s real.

I always depended on my other voice for reason and logic. She made our decisions while I mocked and doubted, loitered and craved. Of course, I have my own quicksilver, instinctive way of drawing conclusions, and I fall back on that now. Keep him talking.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“What would you guess?” he says.

I have no idea. “Twenty-five?”

He laughs and then modestly adjusts my gown once more. “I’m nineteen,” he says. “Three years older than you.”

“Four years,” I say. “I’m fifteen.”

“No. You had your birthday in December. You’re sixteen now.”

Alarm slams me. “How long have I been here?” I ask.

“Let me think,” he says. “You came right before Halloween, I remember. It was wild. Four truckloads of dreamers showed up at the same time, and Berg told us we had to keep a special eye on you. I was like, that’s her, Rosie from *The Forge Show*.”

I was so psyched. I loved watching your blip rank go up. The show wasn't the same at all after you left."

"But how long ago did I come here?" I insist. "What's the date today?"

A mumbling of voices carries from the distance, and Ian looks over his shoulder until the noise passes. I can't see much from my angle, but from the way Ian keeps turning, I assume a doorway opens in the direction of my feet. He faces me again.

"Today's February eleventh," he says.

My mind balks. I've been here in this vault for more than three months! *Three months!* This is worse than a prison. It's stealing my life! I thrash my hand up in desperation.

"Please, Ian!" I say. "You have to help me. I can't stay here like this!"

"Careful." Ian catches my hand and holds it down.

"Are they mining me? Do *you* mine me?" I ask.

He smiles. "No. Not me."

"Dr. Ash, then? Does she mine me?"

"Look, it's all for your own good," he says. "You have to calm down. It's not right for your heart rate to go up like that. It'll change your metabolism and everything else." He reaches for the narcotics dial again.

"No, please!" I say. "I'm calm. See? I'm fine." I try to smile.

"I mean it," he says. "If you destabilize, they might decide to move you."

"To where?"

"The main research lab," he says. "To be honest, Onar is more of a sorting station than anything else. It's strange for a

dreamer to be here this long, but that's what Mr. Berg ordered for you. I think it has to do with confidentiality. He trusts us here."

"I don't want to go anywhere," I say, willing myself to be calm. I know, at some level, he's my only chance. He's the one who lingers over me. I must manipulate him right. "I want to stay here with you."

"You're lucky it wasn't one of the others who noticed you were awake," he says. "I really ought to report this. The doc will want to adjust your meds."

"Don't tell them," I say. "It wasn't luck. I waited to wake up just with you."

"Is that right?" he asks, looking pleased.

"I have an idea," I say. "Why don't you lighten up on my meds so you and I can talk sometimes? I'll keep it a secret if you will."

He rubs his nose and smiles again. "That's funny," he says. "You're asleep all the time. You have nobody to tell."

Duh. Exactly, I think. "I like to see you smile," I say.

He glances over his shoulder again and leans near so I can smell the potato chips on his breath. "I like your smile, too. This is the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me."

"Don't tell anybody," I say.

He whispers confidentially. "Okay."

"Can I ask you something? Do you have a girlfriend?"

Straightening again, he shakes his head, but a touch of color rises in his cheeks. "I never know how to talk to girls."

"You're talking to me," I say.

“I guess. This is different, though.”

“No, we are definitely having a conversation, and I am definitely a girl.”

He breaks into a quick, private smile and then frowns again. “I really need to put you back to sleep.”

“Will you do me a favor?” I ask.

He looks a bit wary. “What?”

“You smell like the outdoors,” I say. “Like the forest.” This is patently untrue. He reeks of tobacco. “Could you bring me something green to smell?”

“You want something alive, from outside?” He sounds surprised.

I nod. “It would mean so much to me.”

He is grotesque to me, this evil troll, but when he pauses to consider, his eyes take on a liquid, dreamy quality, and he looks younger. He pushes back his mousy hair and rubs behind one ear.

“It might help your dreams,” he says pensively.

“Is something wrong with my dreams?” I ask.

He hesitates, then shakes his head. “No. They’re fine.”

He’s lying, obviously. Panic tingles at my throat. Dean Berg hasn’t killed me in a brief, merciful way. He’s been mining me for over three months. He’s kept me wasting. Tethered. This is exactly the hell my other voice foresaw when she escaped.

“Ian, please. You have to help me! You can’t let them keep me here!”

He reaches for the dial on my IV again. “Don’t get excited,” he says. “It’s your job to sleep.”

“Just bring me something green,” I say. “That’s all I want. Promise me!”

He shakes his head. His lips go straight and firm.

I want to scream at him.

“When can we talk again?” I ask. “Ian?”

His eyes go sad. “That’s enough, now. Just close your eyes.”

I hate obeying him. He infuriates me. But I do what he says.

It’s an exquisite kind of horrible, lying there blind, hearing him breathing and knowing he’s turning the dial on my IV. We have a fragile new pact that’s built on us both knowing that I’m awake. He could do anything to me, and I’m helpless to stop him, but I have to hope he enjoys the power he has. The control. The mercy. I want him to sense how grateful I am for his decency and gentleness.

Not that he’s decent at all. He’s a pawn. A Berg tool.

The brown, warm heaviness seeps into my blood. I hold out as long as I can, resisting the meds with will power. If only I knew how to be smart like my other voice was.

Where are you? I call to her.

I listen to the hollow of my mind, waiting while the delicate emptiness plays in my ears, but only my own echo answers back, mocking me. She’s gone. I miss her. I hate her, too, and bleating for her won’t bring her back. A swirl of bitterness fills me. If she’s extinguished, it’s no less than she deserves for abandoning me.

I never asked to be in charge, but I’m all I have left now.

“I’m sorry,” Ian says softly. “That was a mistake, talking to you. I didn’t mean to get you upset.”

He smears a touch of gel on my eyelids. In a moment, he'll close the lid of my sleep shell and walk away. He'll never let me wake again.

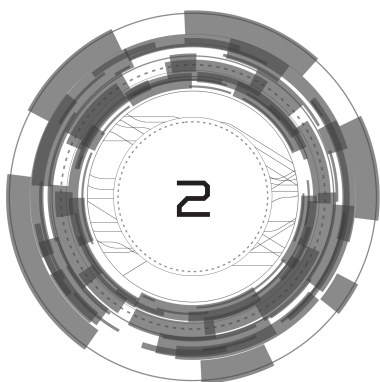
“Kiss me goodnight, Ian,” I whisper.

“What?” he asks.

It's my last trick to play, and I can't bear to say it again.

Gentle pressure lands not on my lips, but on my forehead—a kind kiss from a monster. It tears at me. I can't tell which of us has won this round, him or me.

Then my lungs fill with pure loneliness, and I'm back to the airless agony at the bottom of my pond.



— THEA —
THE VOICE THAT LEFT

MY BELLY DIPPED, returning to gravity. I could breathe again, too. The weighty fullness of my body swelled into being around me, and each warm, corporeal cell of flesh dazzled. My second breath brought the raspberry scent of roses, cloying and near.

An indifferent twilight lingered inside my eyelids. The strands of honeyed light that I last recalled spinning around my sister and me were gone, and so was the euphoria of release. My hands felt small and empty.

Are you there? I asked silently.

I lay waiting for the familiar shift of my inner voice to stir at the back of my mind, but my mental corners remained as clean and still as a swept pine floor. I felt odd. Not just awake,

but new. Inhaling deeply, I filled each tiny pocket of my lungs. My muscles came painfully alert, like they might respond if I tried to move, but I didn't dare to test them or open my eyes until I had my bearings. If I was still in the vault, someone could be watching.

Approaching wheels gathered volume until they squeaked to a stop.

"Good morning, Mr. Flores," a woman said. "Coffee?"

A man spoke up in a deep, weary voice, as American as a cowboy's. "Thanks. Black will do. What time is it?"

As liquid poured audibly into a cup, the aroma of fresh coffee cut through the redolence of the flowers, and the clues of normalcy thrilled me. Let this be real, I thought, and not some dream.

"Five eleven," she said. She had an unfamiliar accent and a lilting voice. "Looks like a beautiful day out there. How's your daughter? Any change?"

"Her heartbeat's up slightly," he said. "I don't know if that means anything."

Me. They had to mean me.

"There it goes again. See that jump?" he said.

"Right. This will be the day," she said. "I have a good feeling about it. You said black, right?"

"Yes, perfect. Thank you," he said.

The coffee lady wished him a good day, and the rolling noise receded into the distance. No way could I still be in a vault of dreamers. Whoever these people were, wherever I was, I must

have escaped, which set me teetering on the possibility of joy. For a last moment, I primed myself, readying for anything and guarding myself against disappointment.

Then I opened my eyes on a painfully bright world.

I blinked, squinting at a hospital room, and my gaze shot to the window. Just outside, a pine stood under heavy snow, bulging and clean against a fresh blue sky. Each minute, crystalline surface of the flakes glittered, and my heart ached at the pure beauty of it.

Beside the window, a man turned a paper cup idly in his hand and aimed his attention outward, toward the view. He was a regular, middle-aged guy, not some attendant in a lab coat. That alone was reassuring, but he also had a fit, big-boned frame, and rugged, dark-skinned features that appealed to me as unaffected and down home.

It hit me, with growing pleasure, that I had surfaced in a safe, normal place among everyday people instead of TV stars or the victims of a maniac. A black-and-silver rosary rested beside a vase of yellow roses. A TV was mounted near the ceiling, and a white board was covered with scribbles. I didn't see a single camera anywhere. My happiness soared.

The man turned to look my way, and when his eyes met mine, he lowered his cup to the window ledge so rapidly that a few drops spilled. He touched a hand to his heart. He shook his head, as if overcome, and then he seemed to both melt and levitate at the same time.

"Hello, *m'ija*," he said. "*¿De veras estás despierta?*"

I recognized Spanish, but I couldn't understand him.

He came over to set a kiss on my forehead, and then he beamed his warm eyes directly into mine. “Are you back with us again?”

Yes, I’m here, I thought, but trying to transmit the words to my lips brought only a thickness to my tongue. I felt my first flicker of fear.

“It’s all right,” he continued. He laughed and straightened and wiped at his eye. “I can hardly believe this. You’re actually awake, aren’t you?”

He went off in another stream of Spanish, but I hardly heard him.

I couldn’t speak. What else couldn’t I do? I moved my head slightly and twitched my fingertips, but I wasn’t getting any signals from my toes. When I tried to shift my legs, they were too heavy, as if instead of the sheet I could see, a lead apron pinned down my lower limbs.

I wasn’t going to panic yet.

“She moved her head, Madeline,” the man said, now speaking into a phone. “I swear. She’s looking at me right now, clear as can be. Get yourself down here.” He smiled at me, a stiff pinch of lips. “You’re hearing every word I say, aren’t you? Unbelievable.” He set down his phone and reached forward to lift my hand into his.

Except it wasn’t my hand. The hand at the end of my arm was all wrong: too knuckly and stubby. Too dark. *What on earth?* My heart pounded, and a simultaneous beep startled me from behind. *Wait!* I checked the other hand and it was wrong, too.

“Forgive me if we’ve done wrong,” the man added. “We’ve only wanted what’s best for you, and if this was a mistake coming here, I beg you to forgive us.”

Just explain what’s happened to me, I thought. *Cut the apologies and spell out the facts.* I needed my inner voice now. *Where are you?* I asked her insistently.

A nurse strode in, and I turned to her eagerly.

“Will you look who is awake? Welcome back!” she said. Her voice had a lilting, unfamiliar accent. “Are you not a sight. Tracking is dead on already, I see. Very nice. I’ll inform the doctor. You’re probably a little confused, are you not?”

What is this body? What am I doing here?

She smiled. “It’s perfectly natural. We will fill you in, I promise. For now, you just relax, okay? You’re doing very well. Beautifully, in fact.”

She flipped back her brown braid and reached for a computer screen at the side of my bed. Tapping followed. I tried to see her screen, but the angle was wrong. I tried to read her nametag, but it was written in some foreign script.

“Can she talk?” the man asked.

“Those eyes are certainly expressive,” she said. “We will have to see where her language is. The doctor will be able to tell you more, but her tracking is a very good sign. Does she seem to know you?”

“I couldn’t say. *Ha pasado mucho tiempo, mi niña. ¿Conoces a tu papito todavía?*”

I had no idea what he meant.

The nurse leaned near me. “Where is your father, *dúlla*? Can you look at your father?”

There was only one man in the room, and he wasn’t my father, but I felt his need pulling like a vortex. I flicked my gaze in his direction, and a dawn rose in his features.

“This is unbelievable. You have no idea,” he said, choking and then clearing his throat. “If you’d seen what they scraped up after her motorcycle accident, you’d have sworn this day would never come.”

“It’s no less than you deserve,” the nurse said kindly. “Careful, here.” She set a straw to my lips. “See if you can sip. Go on.”

I didn’t want to sip. I wanted answers. But I complied. It took concentrated effort to open my lips and set them tightly around the straw. When I sucked up my first taste of water, my eyes closed in pure pleasure. *More*, I thought.

“They are always thirsty,” the nurse said. “To be honest, your daughter was the worst case I have ever seen Dr. Fallon attempt. She won’t normally take on anyone who is so far gone.”

Fallon. I felt an instinctive spike of fear as I tried to place the name.

“My wife can be very persuasive,” the man said. “And my daughter’s a survivor.”

The nurse laughed. “Indeed she is.”

It hit me. Dr. Fallon had been Dean Berg’s contact in Iceland, the woman he had sent dream seeds to. My pulse jumped and

set off the beeper again. The nurse reached behind me to make the noise stop.

“Is her heart okay like that?” the man asked.

“She is a little agitated, understandably,” the nurse said. “We can give her something to keep her calm.”

I didn’t want anything to keep me calm. I needed to stay awake. With Dr. Fallon involved, whatever they’d done to me could only be bad. She could have hooked me into some sick experiment. This all seemed real, but it might still turn out to be some illusion. My parents weren’t here, either—another bad sign. I needed to get out of here and go home to Doli.

Quick footsteps approached, and then a small, angular woman stopped in the doorway. She clasped her hands together against her chest. Around her pale, strained face, a shock of short, silvery hair stuck out in all directions.

“Good Lord,” she whispered. “Diego, is it true?”

He rose out of his chair to a lanky height. “I tell you, Madeline, she’s following every word we say. She just had a sip of water from a straw, our very own girl.”

Madeline moved closer to me, slowly, disbelief visibly warring with her hope. “Hello, my little Althea,” she said. “I am so happy to see you. Praise God. I have lived for this day, honey. I have prayed for it, as the Lord is my witness.”

Althea.

Althea was not my name. The intensity of this woman rolled over me in a pounding wave of claim, but she was not my mother.

I’m Rosie, I thought. *I’m not your daughter.*

No matter how hard I tried to summon the words, I couldn't get them past my lips.

Madeline gave me a tender kiss on the cheek and set her hand on my belly. She smiled at me with brimming eyes. "Have they told you? You're baby's just fine," she said. "All this time you've been in a coma, your little baby has been growing along just perfectly inside you."

My ears stopped working. Her mouth kept going but my mind froze.

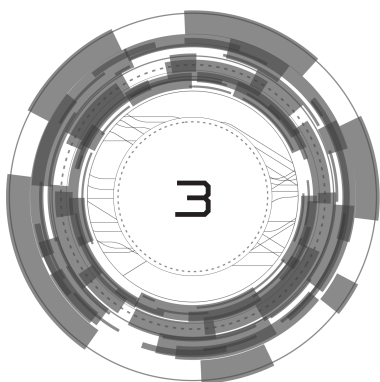
No.

No baby.

I could not be pregnant. I could not be in some other girl's body. This whole thing with the snow outside and the hospital and the strange hands attached to my arms had to be a nightmare. It had to be some new torture from Dean Berg, some dream seed or mining gone wrong.

Just then, my belly dipped again, only now I recognized that it wasn't just gravity pulling at me. I had a creature in there. Nudging. Horror should have woken me from a nightmare, but it didn't. It couldn't.

This was real. This body was real, and it was mine.



— THEA —
BLINK TWICE

WHERE ARE YOU? I screamed silently.

But still there was no answer. My inner voice had vanished, and I'd jumped into my new hell alone.

I flailed my hand against the bedrail, desperate to jolt awake or jar myself back to my old body, but the sharp pain did nothing except start the heart monitor beeping again.

"Althea, stop. You'll hurt yourself," Diego said.

I didn't care if I hurt myself. I had to get out and away from all of this. I struggled to move, but my scrawny arms had hardly any strength, and my body responded only by bumping awkwardly under my coverlet. Panic made me wild, and I reached frantically for the nurse. She caught me firmly.

"Calm down, now," she said. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions, but thrashing about will not help anybody."

You don't understand, I thought. These are not your normal questions. What happened to me? Where's my real body?

My tongue was as stupid as clay.

"Let me, Ida," said Madeline, and she slipped forward to take my hands. "You're all right, Althea. Look at me. You're going to be just fine. We're all here to help you."

I looked back and forth between Madeline and Diego, who clearly thought they were my parents. But they were not.

"Are you in pain anywhere? Does anything hurt? Your head? Your joints?" Madeline asked.

I paused to take stock. My belly was a compact knoll in the landscape of my bed, and that turning I'd felt seemed ready to happen again. I pulled free from Madeline and pressed my hands to my belly, astounded by the dense curve. My normal waist was utterly gone. I touched my face. To my fingertips, my cheeks and jaw felt too wide and boney. On my head, I found a fine softness that was nothing like my old thick waves of hair. I needed to see myself.

I looked Madeline straight in the eye and willed her to understand me. Then I patted my cheek deliberately and held my hand up before my face, mimicking that I was gazing into a mirror.

"She wants to see herself," Diego said. "Madeline, she's asking for a mirror." He laughed again in disbelief.

"One sec," Madeline said. She rustled through her purse, opened up a compact, and handed it to me.

The sight in the little circle was bizarre. My hazel eyes, curly dark hair, and gap-toothed mouth were all gone. Instead, a girl with wide-set, sunken, gray eyes gazed back at me. Her

tan-skinned cheeks were unnaturally wilted, and patches of acne marred her chin, nose, and forehead. Her lips were full, but dry and tender looking. When I turned my head slightly, I found a scar along her right temple that disappeared up into her hairline, and when I smoothed back my new soft hair, brown and silky limp, I saw the tip of her ear was missing, as if the road had taken a bite out of it. I touched it tenderly, hearing the faint tracing sound of my finger along the ridge. I peered at her eyes again, trying to see if any hint of Rosie would shine back out at me, but the mask was complete. My physical exterior was entirely new.

Whoa, I thought. It didn't seem possible, but somehow my consciousness had arrived in another girl's body. When I'd made my leap with my love for Dubbs, I'd never imagined that this could happen. I tilted the mirror slowly, trying different angles. I tugged at my skin, trying to absorb the truth. This sad-eyed, wasted girl in the mirror was me. I'd ended up in a Halloween mask I couldn't take off.

What had happened to my old body?

"Don't you worry," Madeline said gently. "You might not look like your regular lovely self at the moment, but we know she's in there. That's all that matters."

The irony was laughable. I didn't look anything like myself, but at least Althea didn't look like herself, either. I took a more critical look at Madeline, and the girl in the mirror, noting the resemblance of the wide-spaced eyes. Under the sickness, my new face had a mix of features from both parents, with my chin and darker coloring closer to Diego's. The way he spoke Spanish clicked. Althea had some Latina heritage, I thought.

“She seems so alert,” Diego said. “I can’t get over it. After all this time.”

“Remember the doctor who told us to unplug her?” Madeleine said.

“Which one?”

“That first one,” she said. “That genius back in Houston. I wish he could see this now. Have you called your father yet?”

“I will. He’ll be over the moon. The whole family will.”

A tap came at the door, and a woman in a white coat walked in. “I hear someone’s awake,” she said, smiling.

At the sight of her, a shock of jangled memories ignited in me like a whole grid of power surging on at once: overheard calls between this doctor and Dean Berg, nights of sneaking around the Forge School, and the vault of dreamers I’d uncovered deep under the school. I’d endured the torture of being mined when I was still impossibly awake.

Linus! Panic hit me again. They had taken Linus, too!

The alarm sounded behind me once more, and the nurse reached for it again. The beeping changed to a regular, soft blip noise that matched the tempo of my heartbeat.

“She has been very excited,” the nurse said, shifting to make room for the doctor.

“I’m not at all surprised. This is a big day,” Dr. Fallon said. “We can mark down February twenty-fifth as her second birthday. Hello, Althea. I’m Dr. Fallon, your surgeon. How are you feeling? A little confused, maybe. Any pain?”

Try anger.

They raised the head of my bed more. Dr. Fallon shone a

penlight to blind me in one of my eyes, and then the other. “Can you follow the tip of my finger?” She lifted a digit before my eyes and began to move it slowly left and right, up and down.

Try explaining how you stole months of my life and stuffed me in a different body.

I ignored her finger and studied her face instead, searching past the afterglow of the penlight for a hint of the monster inside her. Her pale skin, black hair, and red lipstick were as vivid as a model’s, and her eyes were frost blue. This was the doctor who had bought dream seeds from Dean Berg after he mined them from unwitting students at Forge. She’d collaborated with him. As far as I was concerned, she was as vile and evil as he was. My heart monitor audibly kicked into a faster rhythm.

The doctor lowered her finger. “Interesting,” she said.

“She was just looking at us and following our voices fine,” Diego said.

“I believe you,” the doctor said. She straightened, crossing her arms in her white coat. “She’s choosing not to cooperate with me.”

My heart monitor went silent an instant, betraying me, and then blipped onward.

“Althea?” Madeline said. She looked mortified. “What is this? We need you to do what the doctor tells you.”

The doctor smiled. “There’s no need to scold. It’s actually a very promising sign of autonomous intelligence.” She swiveled closer to me once more. “Let me introduce myself again. I’m Dr. Huma Fallon, and you’re staying with us here at the Chimera Centre just south of Reykjavik, Iceland. You had an accident six

months ago and fell into a coma. Your parents brought you here to me three weeks ago, and we were able to perform a surgery to help revive and restore your memories.” She reached to clasp my hand. “Can you squeeze my hand twice if you understand me?”

I glanced at Diego and Madeline, who both had their gazes locked on my hand. Behind them, the nurse was also watching gravely.

I squeezed twice.

Madeline let out a startled gasp.

The doctor patted my hand. “Perfect! Very good,” she said. “Over the next few weeks, you’re going to go through a series of changes. You’ll relearn to use your body and your voice. Most important, you’ll have to relearn to use your own mind.” She clicked her pen a couple of times. “There’s no other way to say this. You’ve suffered massive brain damage. Your memory is going to have gaps in it. You might not remember people you once knew and loved dearly. You might not even recognize yourself at times, and this, understandably, could be highly disorienting. But you’re in good hands here. You’ve come to the premier facility in the world for this kind of recovery, and we’ll do everything we can to see you through,” she said. “I promise.”

You are a scheming liar, I thought. How fast can I get out of here?

“Please squeeze twice if you understand,” Dr. Fallon said.

I did and then tugged free of her as quickly as I could.

Diego reached an arm around Madeline’s shoulder and gripped her tight. “How long will it be before we can take our girl home?” Diego asked, his voice rough.

“I’ll have a better idea of that after we run a few tests,” Dr. Fallon said. “We had one young man who was ready to go home in a month, almost fully recovered. Another one of our patients took six months to go home, and he’s still slowly improving there.”

“That’s not counting your patients who never revived,” Diego said.

“That’s right,” Dr. Fallon said. “Obviously, Althea doesn’t fall into that category.”

“Or the ones that relapsed,” Diego said.

“That’s always a possibility, as we’ve discussed,” Dr. Fallon said. “These next few days are especially critical. We’ll be watching her very, very carefully for the slightest regression.”

“I just can’t get over the way she’s watching us,” Madeline said. “It’s a miracle. Do you think she really understands us?”

“Blink twice, Althea,” Diego said.

The three of them turned to me again, like I was a puppy who would perform for a treat. *Fine. I’ll play. For now.* I blinked twice.

Madeline laughed, pressing her hands together before her mouth.

With an effort, I pointed to my water cup, and then I touched the fingertips of my two hands together, asking for more.

Madeline nodded. “What’s she doing?”

“It’s sign language. It means ‘more.’ She’s thirsty,” the doctor said. She passed Madeline my cup, and with trembling hands, Madeline held the straw to my lips again.

I sucked up the ice water and drank deeply, until the cool fluid slaked my thirst.

“But how did she know that ‘more’ signal?” Diego asked. “Did you seed that into her?”

“No. She must have known it before,” Dr. Fallon said. “Old things from deep in her memory can be coming back to her. Did you use sign language with her as a toddler?”

“No,” Madeline said, glancing at Diego. “We never did.”

“Maybe some caretaker did, or a friend,” Dr. Fallon said.

I knew all the sign language to “The More We Get Together.” Dubbs had taught me the song after she learned it in preschool, and we had practiced it for hours, singing it with shadow hands on the wall above her bunk.

I missed her, my smelly kid sister, and a twist of sorrow spun through me. I couldn’t help thinking that my love for Dubbs was what had landed me here, in this new body. The last thing I remembered from my old body was the time Dr. Ash was mining me. I’d had a memory of Dubbs on the train tracks near our home, with the flowers and the sunlight, and it had snared inextricably into a dream Dr. Ash was mining from me. I would never forget the swirling, euphoric release when I leapt free from my trapped body. I’d had to escape to survive.

My inner voice had been furious, though. She’d begged me not to go. She’d warned me. I had no idea now what had happened to the part of me that was left behind. Had she survived in my old body without me? Was my old body dead? I had to find out.

“Has ido de un misterio a otro, ¿no?” Diego said. *“Dime que mi pequeña todavía está ahí adentro.”*

I looked to Madeline, half expecting her to translate.

“She doesn’t understand me,” he said quietly. His eyes were dark with dismay. “She’s lost her Spanish.”

“Be grateful she’s alive, Diego,” Madeline said. “Look how alert she is.”

“Be honest with us, doc,” Diego said. “Althea was going places. She was ready to start college last fall. She had plans to be a psychiatrist. Is there any point dreaming that big anymore?”

“These are early days yet,” Dr. Fallon said. “I think your daughter will have options, but for now, you’ll have to be patient and see.”

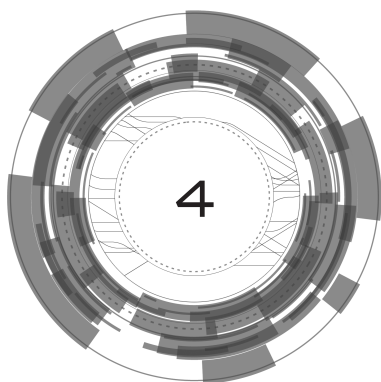
“I don’t want her to suffer anymore,” Madeline said. “That’s all I want.”

The doctor kindly put a hand on Madeline’s arm. “We’re doing all we can,” she said.

“Yes, I know,” Madeline said quickly. “And we’re beyond grateful. I mean, look at her. Look at my baby girl.”

They looked. I looked back, absorbing the weight of their hopes. I couldn’t help liking Althea’s parents, but I was destined to disappoint them when they realized who I wasn’t. I signaled “more” again, and Madeline helped hold my cup and straw. These people needed the girl they’d lost, not me.

Me. That was pathetic. I hardly knew who I was anymore. I wished I had a clue where my body was. My original self. I hoped, wherever she was, that she wasn’t still captive in Dean Berg’s vault.



— ROSIE —
THE SMELL OF GREEN

WHEN IAN APPROACHES my sleep shell, I'm ready for him.

Once, a couple years back, Dubbs put a coil of fresh flypaper inside our freezer to see if the temperature would affect its stickiness. When she hung the frozen helix from a lamp on the back stoop that night, flies and moths came to it by the dozens, sticking and struggling until their wings disintegrated, until Dubbs cried and I doused the writhing flypaper in a bucket of water.

Now I'm as cold as that flypaper. I lift my hand in a flimsy wave and compose my sweetest smile.

"You shouldn't do that," he says as he opens my lid. "What if it wasn't me?"

“It has to be you,” I say, and beam gratitude. “Nobody else lets me wake up.”

“If Dr. Ash figured out what I’m doing, she’d kill me,” Ian says.

Every now and then, Ian lightens up on my meds. When the narcotics wear off, I can come around, and usually he’s beside me already, waiting for me.

“So why do you, then?” I ask.

“You know why,” he says. He glances over his shoulder, and then back at me with a shy smile. “I’ve been thinking of you.”

He hovers awkwardly closer, and I close my eyes. His lips are light on my cheek, with a tickle of mustache, and I know he wants me to turn to him, but I just can’t. He’s too repulsive. I’m grossed out by the possibility he might actually press his lips to mine. So far, since he knows I’m conscious, he has refrained, but I don’t know how long that will last.

“I brought you something,” he says.

I open my eyes as he passes me a sprig of fresh mint.

“It’s from my grandmother’s greenhouse,” he says. “It’s fresh. You have to crush it a little. Hold on. I’d better do it for you or you’ll get it on your fingers.”

He pinches a few of the green leaves, and when I brush the soft foliage against my nose, a burst of ripe scent fills my nostrils.

“Wow,” I say, and inhale again. The tangy mint is the essence of green.

“Like it?” He drums his fingers on the side of my sleep shell and smiles.

“It’s amazing,” I say. This much is true. I lick a corner of one leaf.

“Don’t eat it. We can’t mess with your digestion. But go ahead and smell it again. Todd’s out on break, and Harvey called in sick. Or his kid’s sick, in any case.”

“So it’s just you today? You have a lot of responsibility.”

We should have more time to talk, I think. More time for me to work on him.

“It’s not that hard. We’re down to only seven dreamers right now,” he says. “We should get more next week, though.”

“Then it’ll be busy?”

He nods. “In a good way. Excuse me. I have to clean your port.” He undoes the shoulder snaps of my gown and folds it down carefully to reveal the port in my chest, inches above my left breast. It’s a lump under my skin, shaped like a mini donut and as big as a quarter. As we talk, he takes the old IV needle out of me and cleans the surrounding skin. “You know what I like most about this job?” he asks.

“What?”

“The dreams,” he says. “Seeing them. Dr. Ash lets me watch while she’s mining, and you wouldn’t believe the things you all come up with. Flying’s my favorite, but I like the twisted dreams, too, the ones that make no sense. You can never guess where they’ll go. Oh, and the flashing color ones, those are good, too,” he said. “You have very nice dreams,” he adds politely.

“Do I?”

“Yes. Very colorful and unpredictable. Even the awful ones are interesting.”

“What awful ones?”

He puts in a new IV. “You dream about the black guy who falls off the tower,” Ian says. “Sometimes he turns into your little sister. She falls backward and screams and then you, like, scramble.”

I fixate on a vivid image of little Dubbs with her arms out. She’s a silhouette against a blue sky, falling and pinwheeling with panic. Her fall stretches out and rips into me because I can’t save her, and then I slam down the door in my mind to block it out.

“I don’t want to talk about my sister,” I say.

“Sorry.”

Instead, I recall the real episode of falling off the observatory ladder, hitting into Burnham on my way down, and plummeting with him to the ground. There’s an awful crunch, a sound I don’t consciously remember hearing at the time, and then a suspended silence before a bird chirps in the distance.

“You’re making me remember things,” I say.

“Is that bad?”

“I don’t know.” It’s better than being asleep forever.

“That black guy wasn’t your boyfriend, was he?” Ian asks.

“No,” I say.

“Would you date someone black?”

“If I liked him,” I answer.

Ian sniffs and wipes at his nose. “You also dream about the other guy,” he says. “I forget his name. The kitchen guy. I never liked him.”

Linus lay unconscious on Berg’s operating table the last

time I saw him. Guilt taints my memory, as harsh as the lights on the stainless steel. Linus was there in the vault because of me, and if Berg hurt him, if he scraped through Linus's dreams, it's my fault.

"Maybe you miss him," Ian says. "I understand. That's okay."

I shake my head. I can't bear to think of Linus, either. "We broke up," I say.

Ian pats my shoulder. He sets aside the suction cleaner.

"You don't need to be sad," Ian says. "You have me, now."

"I know. I'm so glad," I say. I force myself to meet his gaze again. "You're so nice and understanding. How did I get so lucky?"

He blushes again, and hooks up my IV. "Dr. Ash says you're doing a little better. I was worried you were kind of getting mined out, you know? But I think maybe the stimulation has helped, don't you?"

"I'm sure it has," I say, and smell the mint again. What's *mined out* mean?

"I had one bad moment, though," he says. "I showed up in one of your dreams."

"You did? When?"

"The other day," he says. "I was worried Dr. Ash would guess what we're doing, but you dreamed that I was hunting in a forest with a gun. In camo and boots, with a pistol, which doesn't make much sense from a hunting perspective. How did you know I have a pistol?"

"I didn't," I say.

"I thought it was a close call, but it was also kind of cool,"

he says. "She didn't ask me anything about it, fortunately. I don't know what I would have said."

"When did she last mine me?" I ask.

Ian flips a tablet at the foot of my sleep shell. "Six days ago."

"I don't remember that," I say.

He smiles wisely, the way he does, with his lips stretched so a line of wet shows at the crease. "Of course not. You were asleep, silly. I for sure don't mess with your meds the day of a mining."

"When will she mine me again? Is that on that chart?"

Ian inspects the tablet again, squinting for a moment. "Tomorrow. I'll give you your full dose when we're done. Don't worry."

My pulse picks up. I have to focus on getting Ian to help me out of here.

"Ian, will you do something for me? Will you call my parents for me and tell them where I am?"

Ian adjusts a shoulder snap on my gown and tucks my blanket softly around my waist. The IV is ready for a final twist of the upper clamp. "They aren't in charge of you anymore," Ian says. "Berg is your guardian."

"But do they know where I am?" I ask.

"Not from me," he says lightly. "They're still offering huge rewards for you, you know. Every time they up the amount, I just have to show it to Dr. Ash, and she gives me a bonus worth twice that much. It's a good deal, to my way of thinking. It may not show, but I'm quite a wealthy guy."

Like a faltering stone, my heart slips off the edge of a cliff and plummets. I'll never get out of here. Ian will never help me escape.

"I want to go home," I say. It slips out before I can even think.

"You don't mean that," he says. "This is where you get the treatment you need. Remember? You're getting better."

"Am I?"

"Of course. You shouldn't worry. Look at your mint here," he says running a finger through the sprig. "It's just what you wanted."

"From your grandmother's greenhouse, you said."

Ian smiles. "Yes. Funny thing. She's always telling me to find a girlfriend, but she has no idea. I live with her and look out for her now that my dad's gone to California. He got me this job. Sometimes I wish I could bring you home for Sunday dinner, but of course, I can't."

"Would she like me?" I ask.

"Are you kidding? She'd love you," he says. "I've been watching old episodes of the Forge Show with her so she can see what you're like, but I never tell her you're here. It's an amazing secret. She thinks I'm just your fan."

I touch the mint lightly to my lips, and his gaze drops to the gesture. A slow blush comes up his cheeks, and his eyes grow warm again.

"You're so sweet," he says. "Sweet as honey."

He is not the most original guy, but I smile as if I'm flattered.

"What's your middle name?" I ask.

“Give me the mint.”

I breathe it in. “Not yet, please. Come on. Tell me your middle name.”

“Try to guess.”

It must be something creepy. “Roderick?”

He laughs. “It’s John. Ian John Cowles. It’s kind of repetitive because ‘Ian’ is Scottish for ‘John.’ Now give me the mint. Be good.”

I hand him the mint slowly. “And what’s the date today?”

His smile fades. “You don’t need to know that.”

“Yes, I do,” I say, smiling again. “Please? Tell me what the date is. Is it still February?”

“The last time I told you the date, you got upset.”

“I won’t be upset,” I say. “I just need to know. I can’t tell how much time is passing unless you tell me.”

“It isn’t too much time,” he says. “Close your eyes.”

“Don’t put me out again! We have to talk!”

“We did talk. That’s enough for now.”

“Did we have Valentine’s Day yet?” I ask.

He hesitates, looks guilty.

We did. I can tell. Time is vanishing without me.

“You have to let me out of here!” I say. “Please, Ian. You can’t let them keep me here. It’s not right!”

His expression shuts down, and he reaches for the clamp on my drip. “We can’t have these little breakdowns, Rosie.”

I struggle against my panic. I’ve made a mistake. “I take it back,” I say, and I reach for his hand. “I’m fine. I know you

can't let me out. That wasn't fair to ask. I want to stay here with you, anyway. I love being here with you. You're taking such good care of me."

He sighs and pulls his hand free. "Just close your eyes, Rosie. Don't make this hard."

"Why? What does it matter if I close my eyes?"

"I don't like seeing the whites."

"Are there others here who don't close their eyes?" I ask.

He shifts uncomfortably. "No."

"Ian, is there another dreamer like me? One you talk to?"

"There was only one who opened her eyes sometimes," he says. "She never talked to me. I'm not sure she even saw me. She's not here anymore."

Alarm shatters through me. "Where is she?"

He doesn't answer.

"Did she get mined out?" I ask. "Is that what happened? Did they move her to the main research center?"

"Close your eyes," he says more loudly. "Don't make me be mean."

With a sense of horror, I obey him. I squeeze them tight, and I struggle to make my tone light again. "Thank you for bringing me the mint. It was such a perfect surprise."

"I try to be nice," he mumbles. "It's never enough."

"Of course it's enough," I say. "You're amazing. I'm sorry I lost it there a few minutes ago. I just started hoping we could be together for real."

"We can't. We only have this."

Sightless, I wait to feel his kiss on my cheek again, and I fight a new wave of despair. It's so hard to make any progress with him, and now I fear I'm not the first to try.

"You're pretty when you relax," Ian says quietly.

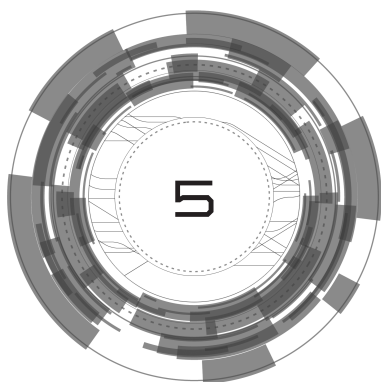
A soft, bumbling touch along my hair sends my scalp tingling.

I loathe him more than ever. "Thank you," I say.

"Let's never fight."

The meds are already making it hard for my words to come. "Okay," I whisper.

He strokes my hair a second time, and a third, like I'm some big pet doll. I catch another whiff of the mint, very near. This time, I don't fight the narcotics, but it still takes a full, awful count of five before I'm out.



— THEA —

THE POINT OF A FORTUNE

MY BODY WASN'T A VIRGIN ANYMORE.
Clearly.

But *I* hadn't had sex. The most I'd done with Linus was kiss him. The kissing had been very nice, actually, but we could never go too far on *The Forge Show*, and honestly, that was okay with me. In a way, the cameras made it more exciting because I felt the buzz of taboo at the edge of my consciousness. I could sense the viewers coming on board and my blip rank rising. But the cameras also set a safe boundary, a precise edge of frustration. I could give in to the wild pull I felt with Linus because we both knew, at a certain point, we would have to stop.

It was strange to think of how much I'd shared with Linus, and how messed up things had gotten with him. Now I was

pregnant without even a memory of the sex that had gotten me here. It seemed totally unfair. I didn't even know what Althea's boyfriend looked like. I had no way to imagine kissing him, let alone anything more advanced.

"I can't help wondering what she's thinking," Diego said.

I'm thinking about the sex I haven't had, I thought.

Diego was back in his chair by the window, and Madeline was sitting beside me, reading some report. She glanced up and flipped the page closed.

"Does her face look a little fuller to you?" Madeline asked.

"Maybe," he said. "Yes."

Behind him, the sky was overcast today. The roses had been replaced by a vase of red tulips with loose, arching stems.

In the four days since I'd woken up at the Chimera Centre, I'd been prodded by more people than I cared to think of. Dr. Fallon came regularly to examine me, and a nurse midwife came every morning to listen to my fetus's heartbeat and check my urine. When I wasn't getting another MRI, I was in physical or speech therapy.

The first time I'd had a proper look at my body happened when the nurse, Ida, came to change my catheter. She'd rearranged my sheets and gently pulled up my gown. My new legs were skinny and puffy, like ecru-colored nylons stuffed with mush. Far at the other end, my feet sported a waxy, violet tinge between the toes, and when I ordered them to wiggle, they responded in the most casual, disinterested way. *Who, us? Hello.* My belly resembled a spreading, giant jellyfish that had swallowed a basketball. My boobs were tender,

and way bigger than before. Compared to my old body, which had been tight and strong, this one felt like bread pudding.

My physical therapist was jubilant in his torture of me. I learned to roll from my back to my side, and then to push upward with my arms, protecting my belly during the effort. I felt like a monstrous baby training my weak, clumsy body to obey me, and it hurt, too. My muscles burned from the unaccustomed exercise, and my sessions left me exhausted and irritable.

My garbled efforts with the speech therapist were a joke. But I had quirky, nice surprises, too. Just that morning, I had discovered that I could read nametags, which apparently weren't written in a strange script after all. Letters formed magically into English words that had not been there the day before. It gave me hope that my mind was healing, along with my body.

Madeline leaned near and traced her finger over my cheek. "You've always had the prettiest skin," she said.

It was such a mom thing to say. Madeline made me miss my ma, and I was hungry for news about my old life. I pointed at Diego's breast pocket where I could see his phone and focused my mouth as best as I could: "FFoe."

He touched a hand to his pocket. "You want my phone?"

I nodded. Yes.

"Sure." He arranged my swivel table above my lap and positioned his phone before me. "What do you want to see?" he asked.

I couldn't speak to tell him, but he opened an Internet

search window and let me type. Alien and klutzy, my thumbs worked the letters: ROSIE SINCLAIR.

The browser produced a scroll of posts, all in tiny letters. I had to enlarge them to read them, but I fumbled with the open-tweezers move and the print wouldn't expand.

"Diego. She's using her right hand," Madeline said.

I glanced up at her.

"You're left-handed," she said to me.

I flexed my stubby fingers experimentally, and then I tried my left hand on the screen instead. Instantly, my fingers moved with the smoothness of a familiar tool, astonishing me. Madeline laughed, but I hardly heard her. I manipulated the screen to bring a headline into focus: *Where's Rosie? Still No Sign of the Forge School Star*. The next read, *Rosie Sinclair Sighting: Latest Forge Hoax*.

"What do you have there?" Diego asked. He angled the screen so he could see, and his curious smile faded to a puzzled expression.

"What is it, Diego?" Madeline asked. When he passed the phone to her, she became engrossed. "Who's Rosie Sinclair?" she asked, flipping through the phone. She frowned. "She was a star on *The Forge Show*," she said. "She was expelled last semester. There's some story here about the dean becoming her guardian. Very strange. Have you ever watched the show, Diego?" she asked.

"It's that nonstop one about the art kids," he said. "I never did, but Althea could have. Maybe this is that celebrity quirk Dr. Fallon talked about."

Madeline looked thoughtful and passed the phone back to Diego. "I suppose." She turned to me and smiled. "Don't worry, darling. They told us that certain patients develop a fascination for some celebrity or random stranger. It can be a kind of identity escape. It's just a phase. It doesn't last."

I flicked my gaze to Diego. He was staring down at his phone, thumbing slowly through the posts. I reached to indicate I wanted it back. Instead, he slipped the phone into his shirt pocket.

I vocalized again, more urgently. "FFOE."

"Don't be difficult, Diego," Madeline said. "Give it to her. She can type to us."

"I think it'd be better to let her get reacquainted with her real life before bringing the Internet into it," Diego said.

"For heaven's sake. She just wants information. Who wouldn't?" Madeline leaned over my table and held her own phone in front of me. "Maybe you'd like to see some friends. I have some pictures." Her fingers got busy. "See? These are your cousins, and here you are for prom, with Tom. You have more on your own phone. We'll have to get that for you."

The picture showed an arresting girl with sharp features and vibrant eyes. Her slender arm encircled the neck of a muscly white guy in a tux as she mock-choked him. I liked the soft, deep blue of her dress and his bowtie of the same hue. A headband of pearls and glitter was threaded through her hair. The two looked enviably relaxed and happy together. Stylish, too. I slid the photo sideways, and the next pic showed them together again, only this time, the girl was goof-facing the

camera, and the big guy, very chill, was smiling at her with open adoration.

Cute, I thought. And then, *that's the guy she slept with. Has to be.*

"You know what'll kill me?" Madeline said. "If she knows Tom but she doesn't know us."

"But she does know us," Diego said. "Don't you, sweetheart?"

I hesitated, uncertain what to say. I couldn't look at Diego. I needed these people, and I was likely to get more of their support if they believed I was their daughter. But I couldn't lie. "No," I said. "Mm sorry."

Madeline bit inward on her lips. She patted my hand. "Not to worry," she said softly. "Give it time."

"But the other day," Diego said. "I swear she knew I was her father."

"Let's give it time," Madeline repeated. "She's coming around. That's the main thing. Every day she's better."

Her tender optimism killed me. When I glanced at Althea's dad, he had a lost, gut-punched expression, and then he turned to the window with the stoic silence of an eagle. The baby kicked inside me again.

"Mm sorry," I said again, and I was.

The snow on the pine had come loose in a couple of places and dropped off to reveal the darkness of the tree underneath.

"I don't suppose you've called Tom," Madeline said.

"No," Diego said. "He signed off on the baby. You know where I am on this."

“But we have to think of her wishes, now,” Madeline said. “Althea,” she said to me, and I turned. “Would you like us to tell Tom you’re awake again? Just say yes or no.”

I was curious about the guy in the pictures, but I had no idea what Althea would want, and I couldn’t guess how her awakening might affect Tom now. As I wavered, Althea’s parents went on.

“Think for a second, Madeline,” Diego said. “She was *leaving* him. She was *riding away from him* when she crashed.”

“She’d left us, too,” Madeline reminded him. “None of that matters now. I’m thinking about his intrinsic rights as a father, regardless of what he signed. The situation has changed.”

“But she’s still our daughter,” he said. “She might not know us, but we have to protect her. He’d only rile her up. You know he would. That’s what the bonehead does.”

“You just don’t want him involved at all.”

“Correct.”

I watched, intrigued. I’d never seen an argument like this between parents. It seemed so calm, with no one throwing anything or yelling. I kept expecting Madeline to give in like Ma would, but she didn’t. She just waited, firm and civil, like a blade.

Diego looked at me. “Do you have an opinion?” he asked.

I balked. *Yes?*

Diego gestured impatiently. “Fine, Madeline. Do what you want.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I think the news would be best coming from you.”

“I don’t want him under my roof.”

“He’s not coming under your roof,” Madeline said. “He’s just getting some information. I’ll feel better when he knows. You can text him. Do you have his number?”

“Of course,” Diego said, and poked at his phone for a minute. Then, “There. Done. Happy?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I reached again for Madeline’s phone and switched to a notepad app. It took ages with my slow thumbs, but I typed: *What happened to me?*

Madeline sat up straight. “Look what she’s typed, Diego. She doesn’t remember.”

Diego glanced at the phone and then peered thoughtfully at me. “Where to start,” he said slowly. “You were in a motorcycle accident. This was last August, August twenty-second, the night before you were supposed to leave for college. You had a fight with your boyfriend Tom, and you borrowed his motorcycle. It was raining, and you hit a wet curve and flew thirty feet into a gully. You had a helmet on, but still. That was six months ago. Your doctors kept on saying we had to wait and see. You’ve been in a coma ever since.”

Six months. From September, that put us into February. I’d lost more than three months since I was at Forge, but Althea’s coma had lasted even longer.

“You broke your shoulder and your arm and three ribs,” Madeline said. “They’re healed now. We thought you might miscarry at first, but you didn’t. We flew in different experts. We consulted with the top neurologists.”

“None of it made a difference. They tried to be optimistic, but when pressed, not one of the doctors could say you’d get any better,” Diego said. “We finally decided in December to hire a team of nurses and bring you home, where you could be comfortable.”

“Where you could have your horse and your dog nearby,” Madeline said.

“That was hard,” Diego said.

“Yes,” Madeline agreed softly. “That was hard.”

A rolling cart went by outside in the hall. All this time, they’d watched their daughter day after day, overseeing her care, waiting while her bones healed and her fetus grew, and wondering when or if she would ever wake up. My heart ached for them.

“Remember Christmas?” Diego said. “The cherry cobbler?”

“Yes,” Madeline said, with a misty smile. “And the crèche camels Javier put on her bed?”

Enough of this. I looked down to type some more.

I want to go home.

I spun the phone on the table so it faced them. Madeline and Diego both leaned near enough to read it.

Diego cleared his throat. “I’ll call the pilot and tell him to fire up the jet,” he said.

“Diego, please,” Madeline said.

“You saw what she wrote, Madeline,” he said. “Let’s get her out of this place. We’ve got plenty of good doctors back in Texas now that she’s out of the woods.”

“She’s not out of the woods,” Madeline said. “Dr. Fallon’s

the expert. We're not leaving here until she says it's safe for Althea to go."

Diego lifted both hands. "If Dr. Fallon's so smart, why didn't she tell us Althea could type?"

My laugh came out as a weird, hiccuppy sound that startled me. Madeline and Diego both looked shocked, and then they laughed, too.

"Was there ever a sweeter sound?" Diego asked.

Madeline nodded. "But we're not leaving, Diego. It's too soon."

Go home, I typed again.

Madeline hitched her chair nearer, swiveled my table out of the way, and took my hand.

"Try to understand," she said. "Every expert we talked to said, in so many words, that your case was hopeless. You had no reasoning or thinking ability left. But you could breathe on your own. You had your baby growing. I couldn't get past the idea that some of you still existed inside somewhere. Some tiny spark. Some memory. And then we heard about Dr. Fallon."

I frowned, remembering. I'd looked up Dr. Fallon myself. She donated money to Forge, and I'd read about her clinic, never guessing that I might end up here myself. Madeline looked over to Diego, who rose to lean back against the windowsill and cross his arms.

Then Madeline patted my hand and continued. "We owe her everything. She took a chance on you when no one else would. I trust her implicitly."

“Tell her what Fallon does,” Diego said.

“Dr. Fallon specializes in an experimental form of brain surgery,” Madeline said. “She takes brain cells from people who have died in accidents. Donors. It’s the same principle as when they harvest healthy hearts and livers for people, but Dr. Fallon rescues brain tissue. Dream seeds, she calls them. Her team here grows the cells into a kind of patch, and she injects that into an injured brain, like yours. Your old connections regrow through the patch, recreating your memories and thought processes until you wake up. That’s why we’re here.”

I got it now. They took my dream seed out of my body, grew it for however long, and put it here, in Althea’s brain. But Althea hadn’t recovered. My dream seed had taken over instead.

“What’s the point of having a fortune if you can’t spend it on the ones you love?” Diego said dryly.

“We took a chance,” Madeline said. “We brought you here and took a chance on Dr. Fallon’s technique, and she took a chance on you, even though she warned us it might not work. You’re a miracle in so many ways.”

Except the procedure hadn’t worked right. I wasn’t Althea. I didn’t have one tiny hint of Althea’s memories. She was as lost as ever. I still wanted to leave this place.

Madeline turned to Diego. “We can’t take her home yet,” she said. “It’s too soon, Diego. What if something goes wrong? We have to keep her here.”

“Okay, Madeline,” he said.

“Please understand,” Madeline said to me. “We’ll take you

home as soon as it's safe, but we can't go yet. Can you put up with all of this a little longer?"

I typed again. *I'm scared.*

Madeline glanced at the screen, and her eyes welled up. "Oh, honey," she said, and she strengthened her grip on my hand. "I know you're scared, but the worst is over. Believe me. You have so much to live for. We'll get you through this if it takes every penny we have."

That brought up a question that had occurred to me. *How rich are we?* I typed.

Madeline's gave her attention to my words and let out a bright laugh. "Oh, Althea. You are too much," she said. She held the phone toward Diego.

He smiled and shook his head in amusement. "Your mother invented a nuclear process to synthesize helium," he said. "We're rich as thieves."

"I wouldn't put it that way," she said, smiling. "But I do tend to get what I want. You're rich yourself, too. We gave you eighteen million on your last birthday."

Wait. Eighteen million *dollars*? I grew up in the boxcars of Doli, Arizona, which had the poorest zip code in the United States. I'd never had any money except what I'd earned baby-sitting and running errands for the McLellens. Eighteen million was enough to buy every home in Doli, or feed a smallish country of hungry children. Eighteen million was madness.

I stared, puzzled that Althea's parents could look like normal people when they were so rich. Madeline didn't wear any expensive jewelry. Her outfits were so understated that I'd

barely noticed the muted greens and blues. Diego wore white or blue button-down shirts and conservative jackets. Yet here we were, in an elite, experimental clinic in Iceland, where they'd just bought a miracle for their daughter.

Me, they'd bought. Sure they'd aimed to resurrect Althea, but if I looked past all the research and medical advances and techniques that had gone into Dr. Fallon's surgery, it all boiled down to one basic thing: they'd bought my mind for their daughter.

That was not okay with me.