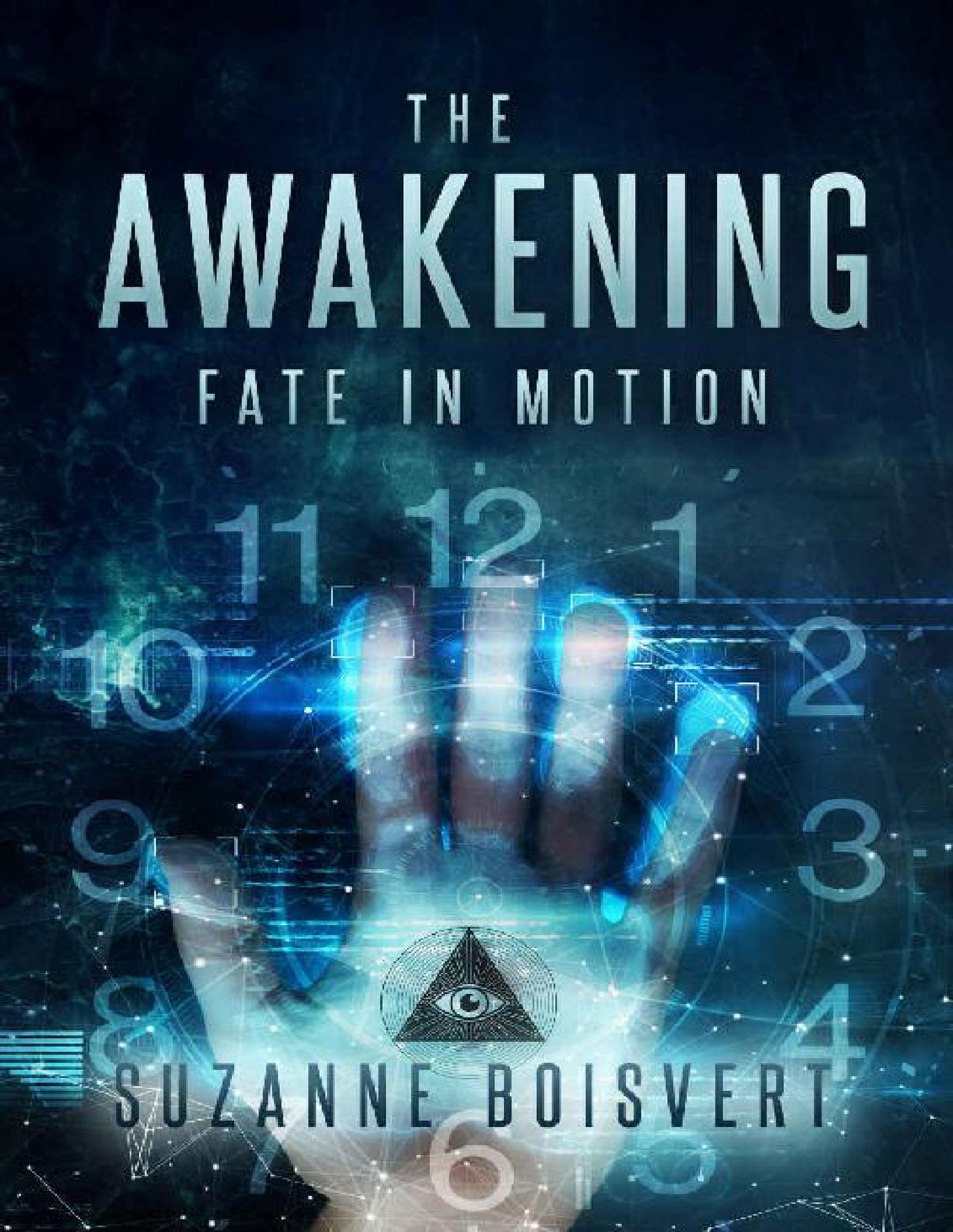


THE  
**AWAKENING**

FATE IN MOTION

A hand is shown with glowing blue energy emanating from it. The hand is surrounded by a digital overlay consisting of numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) and a central eye symbol (the Eye of Providence) inside a triangle. The background is dark with blue and green light effects.

**SUZANNE BOISVERT**

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# **THE AWAKENING**

## **FATE IN MOTION**

SUZANNE BOISVERT

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# ***PART I: THE WEB***



# CHAPTER 1

## *Malibu, California*

Not for the first time, the morning breeze off the Pacific caught the sound of Lanie Montrose's voice and elevated it to something that bordered on supernatural. That effect had haunted Lanie for longer than she cared to admit. But today felt different. There was something about this breeze. Something cleansing. It was as if it swept away all those years of numbness, all those countless nights spent chasing an explosive pleasure that usually ended with her curled up on the floor and shivering.

They had adored that voice. The label executives. The producers. The critics. The fans. And then the sycophants. And then the enablers. Idly Lanie wondered whether she had let them take her to places she had never intended to go, let them push her too far.

Lanie had only just slipped into the pool when she felt the presence looming on the deck behind her.

“You should've *listened* to me.”

It was a jarring sound, this new voice hollering over her music. The voice belonged to Ingrid, Lanie's personal assistant. Lanie looked back to see Ingrid standing by the edge of the pool, her hip jutting out to one side in that condescending posture of hers. She was pretty in a haggard, silent-film-star sort of way, her dry, bottle-blond hair tumbling in frizzy curls and stopping abruptly at her shoulders. Her classically Germanic build put her almost a head taller than Lanie, a fact that made it easier for Ingrid to intimidate her employer. She held a pair of Lanie's little friends in one hand, a bottle of water glistening from sun sweat in the other. “You need these. You can't *create* without them.”

She could hardly even believe it herself, but Lanie Montrose ignored her assistant and the pills she offered. The track playing over the formidable sound system wired into her sprawling patio had reached the bridge, and

she could hear her recorded voice climbing to crescendo. The sound penetrated her, filling her heart with that joyful sensation of youth and possibility that she was far too young to have forgotten.

“I only want what’s best for you, sweetie. We *talked* about this.”

Lanie delighted in the soft brushing of the teak floorboards against her bare feet as she shuffled down and let her toes dangle into the beach-entry swimming pool. The deep breath she took made her feel alive. It was a strangely foreign sensation. The water, the wind, and the clarion, harrowingly beautiful sound of what her voice had once been—it all combined to grant her a sense of release from the bonds that had shackled her for too long.

“Lanie, I swear to God if you don’t turn around and listen to me, I’ll leave.”

A soft smile curled Lanie’s lips. “You should leave.”

Ingrid’s silence said more than a reply ever could. For a fleeting moment, Lanie allowed herself to believe that her assistant had gone. But when she glanced back, she saw those same gray-blue eyes, that same carefully disheveled blond hair that made it look like Ingrid was perpetually waking up in someone else’s bathtub, that same sneer staring back at her.

Ingrid shoved the hand holding the pills closer to Lanie’s face, her fingers performing an enticing little dance. “If you don’t take these, you’ll prove them all right, the ones that say you don’t have another album in you.”

The rumors had reached Lanie’s ears. And she always read every tabloid. When she had announced her intention to begin recording her first new album in three years, the world had responded not with the breathless anticipation she had hoped for, but with a mocking sort of disbelief—or worse, *indifference*. People were saying that she had lost her gift at only twenty-six years old. Supposedly it would be that classic story of fame, the one that ends with a pool of vomit and a pretty corpse.

As she stood there with her toes in the water and the breeze filling her heart, she wished that she could tell them all that this was exactly why she had decided to get back into the studio. She understood their

disappointment—agreed with it even. All those musical gifts that she had once been too naïve to believe in, she had grown too hardened to hold on to. She had let fame get the better of her. Had followed the wrong people and chased the wrong dreams. Had been digging a hole for three years, and now she found herself neck-deep. But what she had only just realized this morning was that once you do get neck-deep, it's easier to smell the flowers.

“Last chance, Lanie.”

The morning couldn't have been more perfect for a swim—not because of the weather, but because of this urgency Lanie felt to cleanse her soul in the still waters reflecting the broad blue Malibu sky.

“You're fired, Ingrid.”

She could hardly hear the fury that came in reply. She walked into the pool in a kind of daze, Ingrid's screaming sounding more like a muffled warble. By the time she had gotten herself deep enough to submerge, the sound had faded. All that remained was the womblike gurgle of rippling water. The strange sense of peace that had woken in her heart that morning coursed through her like pure love. She wanted to stay down here forever, but at the same time, she felt as if she could leap from the pool and soar straight into the air.

When she broke the surface, she came up laughing. That sound meshed with the songbirds trilling overhead and her own heart-lifting music echoing all around her.

She circled in the water and looked back toward the palatial beach house that had played host to so many wonderful and terrible nights. The sun glinted off the two-story windows that served as the rear façade of the house, reflecting the ocean behind her, and nowhere was Ingrid to be seen. Lanie was alone. Finally. After all these many months and years. She was overjoyed at the realization.

Lanie rolled into a dive toward the deep end, where the water tumbled over the infinity edge and disappeared into a channel hidden among the rocks that separated her property from the beach below. It was all true. After more than a year of trying and failing to free herself, she had

finally done it. The breeze smelled sea-salt sweet. It combined with the sensation of the cool water on her face to make her realize that this must be what a baptism was like. She felt reborn—a warm, strangely contradictory sensation that she knew she could live forever if she chose, but then again, if she died at that moment, she would be genuinely okay with it.

Suddenly the songbirds stopped their chattering, leaving Lanie’s music to sing alone. Lanie looked up to see where they had gone, and found them replaced by a pair of hawks circling overhead. The sight puzzled her, for she could never remember seeing a hawk fly in any fashion but solo. But here were two of them gliding along together, side by side. She reclined and floated on her back so she could watch the hawks’ strange dance, then startled when yet a third joined them. It fluttered out from the tree line just up the hill from her house. Its wingbeats were frantic and uneven, and by the time it reached the pair soaring through the cloudless sky, Lanie could see that it was not much more than a baby.

The hawks called to each other, three distinct voices cawing into the sky. Lanie sighed at the majesty of this trio, this family dancing in the sky together. She was always one to favor the notion that the universe sometimes sent signs. To Lanie, these three hawks were a sign that she had finally returned to the right path. She watched them for a while as they flew rather aimlessly overhead. Then, after a time, they finally turned back for the trees, and the nest that surely awaited them.

There was a clattering from the patio. Lanie recognized it immediately as the sound of the tall, narrow glass door slamming. It had come unhinged during a party some months back, and she had been meaning to have it fixed. Every time she had heard that sound since, she had reminded Ingrid to look up a contractor who might be able to help resolve the problem. But the task just kept getting pushed back. By now, it had become something of an alarm heralding the arrival of some unexpected guest. But here there was no one to be seen.

“Ingrid?” she called out.

No reply came.

With a calming sigh, she relaxed back into her swim. It must have been her imagination, she told herself. Or perhaps the clattering had merely signaled Ingrid's leaving. Lanie could swear that she had been alone prior to her swim to the deep end, but maybe she had just overlooked Ingrid as she stewed in the corner. Whatever the case, Lanie was alone now. Alone, and free for the first time in three years.

Her laugh came joyfully, breaking into a giggle before rising to a soaring note unlike any she had produced since her first album. The ease with which the sound poured out startled her. Every recording session for years had been a slog, a struggle, an utter failure. But here, no recorded version of her voice could hope to match the beauty of what flowed from her lungs in that moment.

Such was her focus on the heavenly rise of that note that she scarcely noticed the gentle splash that rippled beside her. The sun had risen to a midmorning glow. The breeze was warm and calming. The birds returned to their singing as if eager to join their voices with one of their own reborn.

And then Lanie's head was under the water.

~~~~

## *Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains, Mexico*

"I said, 'You forgot your gloves!'" Rick Fielding called down into the shaft. He shook his head, a joyless smirk playing across his face. No matter how he tried, his Southie accent never did seem to translate, even to the locals who spoke decent English. When he heard no reply, he tried again. "Paulo says he felt heat coming off the thing. So you gotta wear gloves." His heart raced as he waited for some sign that Gerardo had heard him. A surprisingly chilly wind came down the mountain. He shivered as he ran a hand through his dark hair and waited. "Anything yet?"

Still no reply. Rick was beginning to grow frustrated. Three years invested in this lost mine just south of the tiny Mexican village of Topia in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, and right when he had finally hit

the payload, right when he had finally lined up a Chinese buyer for the gold, they stumbled upon a chamber that could bring the whole operation crashing to a halt.

“So, am I going to have to sit here holding my phone all day?”

The voice belonged to his sister, Becca, projected over the speaker on his phone. Since he still had no idea what he was dealing with, he wanted to make sure he could get some kind of documentary evidence of whatever it was that Gerardo was in the process of hauling up. If it was anything like what Paulo described, this would be a moment to remember. And since he had already buried the storage capacity on his own phone, he'd had to turn to a live stream with his sister in California, who he hoped had managed to figure out how to record the video chat, after all her poking around and swearing.

“You sure you're recording this?” he repeated.

“Stop asking me that,” she said. “Anyway, Indy, you should be focusing on getting your friend out of that hole.”

He groaned. “I've asked you not to call me that.”

Rick was no Indiana Jones. Lanie Montrose had been the first to playfully call him that when he approached her with his proposal to invest in the mine, and of course she'd passed the name on to his sister, with whom the pop star had become casual friends.

Becca's laughter from the other end of the line enhanced his anxiety. He could only imagine what would happen if they really had stumbled upon an archeologically significant find. There would be labyrinths of bureaucratic red tape he had no idea how to navigate. Never mind that he wasn't even in his own country. Never mind that the Mexican government hadn't exactly rolled out the welcome mat for him. If that chamber and the thing inside it could be connected to some lost indigenous culture, the game would be up.

“You sure he's still down there?” Becca asked wryly.

“Would you shut up?” Rick said with a cathartic chuckle. “You're ruining the integrity of the video.”

“Wait. I’m supposed to be recording this?”

He knew in an instant it was a joke, but his sudden surge of frustration caused him to snap the phone from its tripod and scowl into it. He saw his sister’s pretty face laughing back at him.

“I’m recording, I’m recording,” she said through her laughter. “I swear.”

“Why did I pick you of all people for this job?” he asked as he carefully returned the phone to the tripod.

He could still hear her carrying on as he went to the edge of the sinkhole and peered down. “Gerardo?” he called out. “You still in there?”

This time he was rewarded with a response.

“Sí, Rick. I am feeling the heat. My father was right.”

As he returned to his position at the rope that hung from the small block and tackle rig straddling the sinkhole, Rick wanted to be excited, but what he felt was dread. He tried not to think about how he would break it to Lanie that she had lost her million-dollar investment because some archaeological dig had elbowed its way into the mine. She was one of his oldest friends—and truly, after all he had sacrificed on this dream of his, one of the *only* friends he had left. He had met her in Boston almost ten years ago. That was before she was famous, and long before popular opinion turned on her. Rick had been sure to make their first meeting seem accidental, but the truth was that he had been watching her from the other side of the stacks for days. He had been a grad student at Boston College at the time, and she a lifelong local like him, only without a trace of the accent.

When he’d finally worked up the courage to talk to her, he’d learned that she had come to the library in search of information on her parents, or anything at all about her past. She had seemed somehow lost and flighty even then, but he loved her for it—even when she never reciprocated his efforts to turn their fast friendship into something more.

Not long after that first meeting, he told her about his dream to dig for gold in an abandoned mine in Mexico, and soon after that, she had

started calling him Indiana. She was as broke as anyone he'd ever known when he first met her, but she had promised to help fund his operation, if ever she came into money.

Rick took her up on the offer because he liked the idea of being in cahoots with her on something—anything—but also because, even from the first, he'd had a sense that Lanie Montrose was destined for success. She had her arresting beauty, and that voice was like something from another world. But how could either of them have known just how much money and fame would eventually come her way?

“I have it!”

Rick's heart stopped when he heard the voice echo up from the hole. “Gerardo?” he called down.

“*Sí*, Rick. I have it! *Levántame*. Pull me up.”

“The moment of truth,” Becca said over the speaker.

Rick grasped the end of the rope and began to haul up his hired help. His pulse raced faster with every hand-over-hand. One of the pulleys squeaked faintly. It seemed a long while before he could hear Gerardo's boots scraping against the hard, gravel-like rocks lining the walls of the sinkhole.

“You with me, buddy?” Rick hollered through gritted teeth.

“*Sí, sí*. Keep pulling.”

Even though this moment might have meant the end of everything he had worked for, Rick couldn't deny that he was starting to feel some excitement—that electric anticipation to discover just what the hell this thing could be.

It had been Paulo, Gerardo's father, who first stumbled upon it, and the poor bastard had done so literally. Rick had been working the drill not twenty meters to the south of where it happened. A rumble of rocks from below had kicked up a storm of dust, and then suddenly Paulo was gone. Rick had run to him, calling out his name, only to find that a narrow sinkhole had formed, and the semiretired local miner had tumbled into it, breaking his leg in the process.

The effort to get Paulo out had taken a day, and then another two days arguing with the local bureaucrats about whether the operation should be allowed to continue, given the injury. Rick had been forced to grease more than a few palms just for the opportunity to return to the mine to secretly investigate what it was that Paulo had said he found down there.

“It was *una caja*—a box,” the old miner had claimed, and at first Rick assumed the native Spanish speaker to have just confused the word for something else. But Paulo had been insistent. “A box with a blue—*cómo se dice?*—*glow.*”

At the time, Rick had rolled his eyes at the notion, especially when Paulo added that the glowing box seemed to have been giving off a strange, pulsating energy. Still, he had believed the old man’s story enough to keep it a secret from the bureaucrats. As far as he was concerned, the fewer people who knew about supernatural stories related to his mine, the better. These mountain folks were superstitious enough on their own without help from tales of glowing energy boxes.

That was why Rick’s breath caught in his throat when he saw it: a blue glow rising faintly out of the sinkhole. He couldn’t help himself; his hands stopped moving so he could stare. It was unbearably beautiful. He wished now that Paulo’s leg had allowed him to get back up the mountain, for the old man would surely feel vindicated by the sight.

“Holy crap,” came Becca’s voice from the phone.

“Gerardo?” Rick called out. “Do you see that?”

The sparse leaves on the gnarled old trees in the distance flickered through the wind. The arid heat played a shimmering haze along the cloud-white horizon. The chalk-yellow sand gusted into the rocky crag just behind the sinkhole. And out from the depths came a vibrant, penetrating blue. It was as if the sky itself was rising from the depths. Rick couldn’t help but stand and watch.

Then the rope twitched and slackened. A moment later, a great weight pulled from the other end, and Rick found himself reeling in an effort not to drop the rope.

“Rick, I don’t know about this,” Becca started. “Are you sure you —”

“Gerardo?” he shouted.

There was no reply. The blue glow intensified, growing so bright that Rick had to squint.

“Gerardo!”

For the first time, he sensed the energy as Paulo had described it. It felt as if it was coming from outside and from within him at the same time—as if the power of his own heartbeat had somehow escaped him and was trying to envelop everything on the mountainside. His first flash of instinct was to drop the rope and run, but that feeling was quickly overwhelmed by the sense that he *had* to see what was causing this glow, this energy, this feeling of complete joy and abject terror.

“Becca?” he called through the tightness in his chest. “Tell me you’re getting this!”

Then he realized that Gerardo must still be holding the thing. Frantically he began to pull the rope, but Gerardo wasn’t coming up as quickly as before. There was something weighing him down—a friction preventing the climb. Rick pulled and slipped forward a few inches, then caught his footing and pulled some more. He pulled until his back and shoulders ached. With every meter of rope he gained, the pulsing energy grew stronger, weakening him and sending his mind spinning.

Then finally he saw him. It was the top of Gerardo’s head, his hard hat having fallen off to expose the thick, dark, sweat-slicked hair beneath.

“Gerardo, *pull!*” Rick called, his voice sounding strangely muted against the fury of that glowing, pulsing box.

It was all Rick could do to perform the final tug that would free his hired hand. As he pulled, he felt his knees give out from under him, and he fell forward toward the hole. He managed to cling to the rope as he hit the ground, his body weight proving just enough to pull Gerardo out of the sinkhole and leave him on his knees at the precipice.

Becca sounded frantic. “Rick, what in the . . . ?”

For a moment, Rick lay panting in the dirt staring at Gerardo, who swayed on his knees, the box pulsing in the weeds beside him. It was smaller than Rick had imagined, and was made of a metal so black that it looked almost like a hole in the mountain itself—or not even a hole, but the very *absence* of space. If not for the blinding blue glow escaping its seams, Rick would not have noted the object as three-dimensional.

“Get away from it!” he cried out to Gerardo.

“Rick, *you* get away from it!” Becca screamed.

He had no way to tell his sister this, but he felt as if he couldn’t have run if he wanted to.

The young miner just knelt there, swaying, his eyes wide and sightless.

“Gerardo, you gotta—”

Before Rick could finish, Gerardo fell forward, his body limp. Rick watched in fear and confusion as the miner’s weight fell directly on the box before bouncing off and slumping down beside it. The blue glow rang out in pulses of warm light, penetrating rock and tree and machinery all around. When it entered Rick’s chest, he felt a strangely calming sense rise within him.

Then, before he could gather himself, it happened.

The box shattered, the blackness disappearing into the air as it revealed the contents. There, just above the rocky ground, floated a blue ball of light no larger than a marble. Now unimpeded, that pulsing energy sounded like a deep, intermittent hum. Rick sat watching it as he caught his breath. He couldn’t tell whether his heart was racing or had stopped entirely, but he was quite sure that Gerardo was dead. The young miner lay motionless, facedown, that glow settling over him like waves of azure mist. Rick braced at the sudden sorrow he knew at the thought of having to tell Paulo that he had lost his son.

As soon as the feeling arrived, it was buried once more under that same sense of calm. Though every instinct told him that he should leave this place, Rick found himself standing and slowly approaching the ball.

“Are you getting this, Becca?” he said, unsure whether he could be heard over the noise.

“Rick, please just get away from that thing,” his sister replied, and he could hear that she was crying.

He looked back for a moment to verify that the tripod was still standing, and there it was, six feet behind him. “Tell me you’re recording.”

“Yes, I’m recording!” she shouted.

The hum grew louder with every step. When he was two meters away, it was all he could hear. It sounded like his own blood flowing inside his head.

Then, one more step and all was silent. The ball collapsed into a searing white dot of light before flickering and growing. Reflexively, Rick took a step back. When the light was finished, it had become something else. It was an image. A hologram. A *woman*, Rick noted, but not exactly a woman.

She was beautiful, her hair flowing and her limbs lithe and a little too long to be believed. She was decidedly human in form, and yet her eyes were wider and narrower than he had ever seen in any woman, her features too sharp somehow, and her mouth so inviting that he couldn’t help but stare as she spoke.

“Rick, please,” his sister said.

He ignored her, transfixed by the image before him.

“The lord of darkness is close now,” the beautiful hologram said. “The one who sings is the key.”

Suddenly it was as if all the light had gone out of the sky. Rick might have thought that time had somehow sped up into night, but the sky was starless. All had become black—as black as the box. The only lights were the flickering hologram and the reassuring glow of his cell phone, still standing on its tripod.

“The one who sings is called Zalea,” the hologram said. “Her visit to Earth was granted so that she might observe the beauty the Xandonites created thousands of years ago. But her mission ended in disaster. The one

called Sar foresaw her arrival and held her prisoner with the intent of absorbing her power.”

“Rick, there is nothing about this that makes sense,” Becca said. “But you’re absolutely in danger. You have to—”

He cut her off by snatching the phone off the tripod and turning down the volume. He knew she was recording, still there and still watching. And now he wanted to focus—to focus and get closer to that beautiful image. The hologram began to flicker, compelling Rick to take a step forward in an effort to hear more of the disjointed words echoing from its mouth.

“. . . the one called Sar . . . influence of Corin . . .”

Rick drew as near to the hologram as he dared, then zoomed in the camera on his phone to bridge the rest of the gap. Through the lens, he could read the hologram’s lips, but the flickering image made it difficult to pick up everything the message had to relate.

“. . . detested his mother for years, until that moment when he saw Zalea . . . her voice exultant as she observed the beauty of Earth from her ship.”

A cold sweat broke out on Rick’s brow—and with it came a sudden desperation to know what all of this meant.

“But Corin was spellbinding, and her hold on him too great,” the hologram continued. “She deceived Sar, telling him that Zalea worked for those who murdered his father.”

The image flickered and faded to black, holding in this way for a long time. Rick nearly told Becca that she could stop recording under the assumption that the hologram had ended, but just as he drew the breath, the image sprang back to life. There was no sound for several seconds, though the hauntingly beautiful woman’s lips continued to move.

When the sound returned, the hologram said, “Finally her voice reached to the Xandonites, and the beings of light came to her rescue. Sar was cast out from this place, banished for all time, but Corin managed to

escape. In this way, the lord of darkness has continued to sow his evil on this planet.”

What followed was a flickering series of images. Against a backdrop of gray rock and black sky, a tall, sinewy man spoke to an improbably slender, gray being with large black eyes and no visible mouth. From the expression on the man’s face, Rick could sense that the two of them were arguing. Next came an image of more of the gray beings—three of them—and they stood side by side with small metallic discs cradled in their spindly hands. An arctic wasteland followed, nothing but blowing snow and jagged peaks of ice. A woman stood in the snow, a fur wrapped over her face to where the only thing Rick could see was a pair of eyes. There was something familiar about those eyes. It was as if he had seen them before, and many times.

The next image was unmistakable. Adolf Hitler barked and hollered from a podium, a massive crowd assembled before him. It flashed away, and the woman in the snow returned. Then that image faded, bleeding into a similar image of a woman with the same height and form standing in a desert of red clay. She spoke to a man with dark skin, a mop of curly black hair, and a bone sharpened into points on both ends and pierced through the skin over the bridge of his nose.

They smiled warmly at each other before the woman turned and Rick’s breath caught in his throat. It was the woman from the snow—those same familiar eyes, that same familiar form—and she looked so much like Lanie Montrose that he had to convince himself that this was not in fact his friend.

The image fluttered away, and the hologram returned. “The lord of darkness is close now,” it repeated. “The one who sings is the key.”

And with that, it fell silent. There was a flash of blue light, and an instant later the strange darkness retreated, daylight returning with such force that Rick had to close his eyes. After a few moments, his eyes had adjusted enough to where he could open them. He left the phone pointed at the site for another thirty seconds or so, just to make sure nothing else would happen. Then he looked into the phone to find his sister’s crying face

on the screen. He turned up the volume to hear that she was at least sobbing softly.

“I hope you didn’t cry over all the audio,” he said.

As if she had been too afraid to look, now Becca turned back toward the screen, her eyes wide with relief. “Oh, thank God,” she said through a sigh. “When it all went dark, I thought you . . .” She couldn’t finish.

“Tell me you got that,” he said.

“Ten solid minutes of pristine video.”

“Just promise me you’ll get this to Lanie.”

“I always do as you ask, big brother,” she quipped. “You should know that by now. Besides, you kind of just promised her yourself. We’re still recording.”

“Then you can shut us off.”

“Not yet, Mr. DeMille.” Now that old Cheshire smirk emerged from within the tears. “First I need you to tell our future audience of millions how it felt to be near that thing.”

Rick had no idea what to say. He could hardly believe what he had just seen—so much so that he worried people would think he was crazy, even with the recording in hand. What had happened was so otherworldly that he feared people would believe he had staged this somehow. The narrative would be that he was a miner who had lost his shirt on a gold-mine deal gone wrong, and in an effort to make a little money on the operation, had constructed an elaborate hoax about a magical talking box from another planet.

He laughed away the tension. But he would never get his chance to respond. So focused was Rick on his sister’s question that he failed to notice what was happening under his own feet. There was a great rumble beneath the surface, a cacophony of stone against stone that could only mean the mine’s collapse.

Not until the sinkhole began to widen and crawl toward him did Rick snap out of his daze and realize what was happening. He looked down to find that the ball of light had retreated back into its black box form, but it

was smaller now, as if it had collapsed in on itself. It looked almost as if it was sinking into the mountainside. Without thinking of the consequences, he raced toward the box and snatched it away from the widening maw opening in the earth below.

The moment he touched it, he felt a surge of energy rush through him. The power of it was such that his instinct was to let go of the box. The moment he did, it was as if he had short-circuited himself. He lost all ability to control his movement. His grasp on his phone failed him.

Suddenly the world was racing out from beneath him, and he was swallowed up in black. The rocks tumbled in cascades below him, and he felt himself falling. The last thing he saw as the abyss swallowed him was his phone hurtling down into the darkness, his sister's startled face calling out to him.

~~~

## *Malibu, California*

She woke to the acrid smell of piss and bile and the harsh caress of canvas against her skin. The walls were a soft, calming pink, and padded like a recording studio. Her first, utterly confused instinct was to try to sing, but when she let out the breath, she found that her head couldn't keep up with the act.

*How?* she thought groggily. *How did I get here?*

The last thing she remembered, she was swimming, and now it felt as if the pool was inside her own head. She made a move to bring an arm to her forehead, but found that she was bound up like a mummy. She had felt that claustrophobic sensation before.

*When?* she thought.

And then she remembered. It was the last time she'd tried cutting herself.

The media had enjoyed that stretch. Lanie Montrose had been the lead story every day for a week. Never mind that it had been an election

year. With a strange sort of desperation, she wondered if anyone would even care this time. The public had moved on from her, just like Ingrid had said they would.

*Ingrid.*

She had been the one to save Lanie from despair the first time. Only through Ingrid's friendship had Lanie found her way back to the waking world, albeit in a constantly inebriated state.

But she had fired Ingrid. And she had been clean. It was all coming back to her now. The peace. The pool. The hawks. The glass door.

*This has to be a dream, she thought. This can't be real.* "Hello?" she said.

Her voice came out like a slow, gravelly croak. She hardly recognized it. Not even on her worst days had she ever sounded like that. She felt like someone else—as if this could not possibly be her own body tied to this bed, head swimming and wrists screaming in pain.

"Hellooooooo?"

She cried out the word this time, her throat crackling and raw. She suddenly experienced a thirst more complete and urgent than she had ever known.

*How long?* she thought, wincing. *How long have I been here?*

She tried calling out again, but this time she couldn't be sure whether the words came from her throat or her own mind. They reverberated off the padded walls in stereophonic fashion, as if she was harmonizing herself. Her head ached as the sound kept rising, the volume increasing until she could bear no more of it. It filled her skull and made her feel as if she might explode. The pain radiated from her head down to her heart, which warmed it and sent it back to her head. She clenched her teeth so hard she feared they might shatter, her fingernails so tight to her palms she drew blood.

Then, all at once, it stopped. Silence. Total, complete silence.

Then the door. The loud clank of a heavy lock opening from the outside preceded the squeal of a bolt mechanism turning and the door

swinging open on reinforced hinges.

A man entered. He stared so closely at the pad in his hand that at first she couldn't see his face. He was balding and wore a white lab coat. That was all she saw of him until he spoke. Then finally he lowered the pad, and she got a look at his knoblike nose, his overlarge eyes, heavy jowls, short white beard, and a grin too eager for the moment.

"We're thrilled to have you with us, Miss Montrose," he said. "Of course, I do wish the circumstances could be different."

Something about his tone filled Lanie with icy fear. She struggled against the bindings, but quickly fell back into the bed, confused by the weight of her own limbs. "Why am I here?" she wanted to ask, but her voice wasn't working, choked as she was by the fear.

"Not to worry, Miss Montrose," the man said. "We're going to guide you back to health. I have some . . . exciting ideas I'd like to try."

There was something about the way he said it that denoted more control over her than Lanie was comfortable accepting. Something about the look of him. He didn't look compassionate. He looked *hungry*. Terror seized Lanie, forcing her to go rigid.

The man tapped his pen against the pad in a decidedly excited fashion. "Your bloodwork has just come back. You're full of alcohol and narcotics. Cocaine. MDMA." He paused to look down at her, his big eyes getting wider. "That must have been some party, Miss Montrose."

*No party!* she wanted to scream. *I was sober! I had to have been drugged.* Then a chilling certainty rose up her spine. "It had to have been Ingrid!" She couldn't tell whether she had managed to get the words out, but the man seemed to ignore her either way.

"You're lucky to be alive," he was saying. "And since your house was full of illegal substances, you're even luckier to be here and not in jail." Then he lowered his pad, and his glare was so dark that Lanie felt enveloped by it. "If you want to keep it that way, then I expect your full cooperation now, and nothing less. Do we have an understanding?"

Tears rushed from Lanie's eyes so quickly that she didn't even realize she was crying until she felt them trickle over her chin. The terrible thirst returned. It meshed with the horror coursing through her, rendering her into a husk of herself. *My phone*, she thought. *I just need to get to my phone.*

But before she could ask for what she desired, the doctor had turned, smirking as he slammed the door behind him.

*Please. Please, I was so close. So close to freeing myself. To leaving it all behind. To ascending for the first time in—*

Before she could finish the thought, darkness washed over her, and she felt her head slump back onto the bed.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Santa Monica, California*

It was the smell of the glue that took Suki Carter back to that day more than fifteen years ago when she'd visited her grandfather at his home on the outskirts of Amarillo. She was only seventeen years old—too young to fully appreciate her grandfather's wisdom, but old enough to recognize that there was something different about that day.

She could still see it as clearly today as ever, and smell it, too. The aroma of wood and glue hung in the air, meshing with a smoke-sweet smell from the pipe he often puffed. That friendly bouquet usually brought a sense of peace to her mind, but not on that day. On that day, her grandfather, TC Carter, sat on the edge of his workshop bench, hunched over his work and looking as worried as she had ever seen him. The sight scared her, for she had never known the man to wear such an expression.

“Grandpa?” she called to him, but he didn't seem to hear.

He just kept staring down at his work as she approached. Even when she crossed into what should have been his line of sight, he stared, motionless. For a moment, she worried that he'd had a stroke, but then he flinched, snapping out of it and forcing a smile in her direction. She could tell that there was something serious on his mind, for he stared right through her even as he acknowledged her presence.

*That was the day I knew*, she thought now as she sat at the rolltop desk she kept in the corner of her office, applying wood glue to the heel she had broken in the parking lot.

That was the day she knew she had been right to suspect that TC Carter was something more than just a restorer of antique clocks. She'd always felt it, of course. There were always strange things about him, and not just in the social and career sense. He had always seemed connected to a grander purpose.

As if reading her mind, her grandfather had looked up from his work and let go of a long, pained sigh, the smoke escaping from his nostrils. “Suki,” he said, pausing for a time as if to think about how to proceed.

Young Suki, as always, relished the sound of the nickname her grandfather had given her. She had been born “Michelle Carter,” but TC had never much liked the name, claiming that it didn’t suit the recipient. Even from the time she was born, he believed his granddaughter would grow up to be much more worldly and more exciting than “Michelle” could ever hope to be. And so he had dubbed her “Suki,” even at the protest of her parents, because it meant “beloved” in Japanese. Suki had delighted in that story from the moment she first heard it—and on that day, she had demanded that her parents stop calling her Michelle. Through that sheer force of will, the nickname stuck.

“Please listen to me,” TC said finally. “Something is happening, and it’s bigger than any of us can comprehend.”

Even today, Suki could feel that same trepidation she’d felt upon first hearing those words. She had always sensed a connection to her grandfather that transcended their generational differences—as if the man was an old friend first and a grandfather second, as if Suki had known him for far longer than her seventeen years. She often chalked up the sensation to the notion that TC was so much older than most of the grandfathers of her peers. He had, after all, fathered Suki’s mother at the rather unlikely age of forty-five. By early 2001, he’d reached his seventy-ninth year. This was a fact often lost on Suki, because the man never looked a day over fifty-five.

So now, as she looked back on that moment, she still wondered whether her grandfather had simply lost command of his senses, an elderly man succumbing to senility. The signs had been there for years by that point. The paranoia. The distant gaze. The occasional bout with nonsensical conversation.

“Please be vigilant, child,” he said. “Do not reject your power. Once the time comes, you will know what you must do.”

“My power?” young Suki said skeptically.

The old man nodded wearily, looking as if he had shrunk in the process. “I love you, Suki. And even though I won’t be with you, you’ll still hear me in that deep part of your mind. On occasion, I might even surprise you with a sign.”

“Grandpa, what are you talking about?”

Before the old man could answer, a bright, blinding light flashed from behind him, growing in intensity until Suki could feel the heat of it and had to turn away. It poured over her, forcing sweat to bead almost instantly. Such was the enormity of it that she nearly turned and ran from the room. But just when she thought she could take it no more, it disappeared as quickly as it had come, and there, lying on the floor beside his workbench, was her grandfather.

She knew before she even went to him that he was gone. He was unmoving, so limp that it looked as if he might melt right into the floor. “Grandpa!” she screamed. She leapt to his side and checked for a pulse, though she knew it was hopeless. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she burst into a sob so violent that she lost her balance and toppled to the floor beside him. She held him for a time, crying and calling out to him. But she would never hear his voice again.

In the years that followed, she had convinced herself that the light had been a figment of her imagination. A medical degree in psychiatry from the University of Texas only reinforced the notion that she had concocted the light as a means to soften the blow of witnessing her grandfather dying of a massive heart attack right before her eyes. It was easier to imagine him blazing out in some supernatural event, after all, than to accept that the strongest person and best friend she had ever known simply succumbed to old age.

But no matter how hard she tried to convince herself of this likelihood, she couldn’t shake the notion that there had been something in the air that night—a strange sensation, or even one of terror, an *urgency* to the moment. She felt that same sensation now as she finished applying the glue and set her shoe on her desk to dry.

Then she remembered something . . . something that she had forgotten for years. It wasn't just that her grandfather disappeared into the blinding light before dying. He had shouted something that didn't make sense to her when she was a girl.

"When the time comes," he had called through the light, "wind the clock!"

Reflexively, her gaze darted away from the shoe on her desk and settled on the old grandfather clock he had left her in his will, that clock she had feared all her life. Such was her trepidation around it that she often had to ask herself why she'd decided to have the movers bring it to her office in the first place. After all, it weirded her out every day.

It didn't exactly mesh with the rest of the furnishings and décor she kept in the office, either. Suki had always preferred a simpler, more classic motif—a no-frills approach to decorating that was all straight lines and hard angles. Her desk was impeccably clean and unimposing, the dark wood of its surface bare, save for the large, flat monitor, keyboard, and cordless mouse. She sat on an exercise ball at this desk, leaving her only office chair for the rolltop in the corner, where she kept her client files under lock and key, and also where she occasionally sat to repair broken heels. The only other furnishings in the room were a small black coffee table hastily assembled from IKEA, and a trio of high-backed, dark-wood chairs faced with micro-suede upholstery. Suki had always hated the client-couch cliché, so she preferred her clients to sit when speaking to her.

Against all that, the clock looked completely out of place. But then, she would always think about how this clock was her greatest reminder of the impact her grandfather had made on her life. As she looked at that clock now, it was almost as if she could hear the voice of her grandfather repeating those long-forgotten words.

"Wind the clock," she whispered to herself. "The time is nigh."

Speaking the words caused the hair to stand up on the back of her neck. She thought on those final words, and on the other thing her grandfather had told her, that he would speak to her in signs after his death.

The ceramic tile felt cold against her bare feet as she walked slowly toward the clock and resolved to do something she had refused to do since she was just a little girl: touch this terrifying old clock. Her heart pounded in her chest.

*Wind the clock.*

The clock's settings were wildly inaccurate, of course, given that she had never wound it. By the time she reached it, her hands were trembling. She didn't know what she feared, but she had the sense that this clock held the power to harm her physically somehow. Of course the notion was ridiculous.

*It's just a clock,* she thought, steeling herself up and reaching out.

She opened the door at its base and began the slow process of figuring out how to wind it. Her grandfather had told her once, long ago, but she had forgotten the technique. Her lips peeled back as she looked at the face of it. She never could quite understand why her grandfather had favored this infernal thing above all the others in his collection. He had restored many clocks over the years, and they were nearly as beautiful, but without the ugly history.

The clock certainly did scream German precision—so much so that Suki had always felt a little uncomfortable having it moved here, and then keeping it in her office. A discerning eye might have noted that this clock was built for a Nazi. It wasn't easy to pick out the telltale details, for the craftsmanship was so inspiring as to draw the eye to the whole rather than its subtler parts. The truth was that the clock was a masterpiece, no matter the ideology of its maker, or of its original owner.

Suddenly a flash of memory came to her, and she knew what she was looking for. In the base of the clock, she found the crank she would need to wind this clock to the correct time. Now all she needed to do was plug it into the slots in the clock's intricate face and turn. Every twist of the crank brought back another memory of her grandfather, and of her parents, who died when she was so young. The memories filled her with a deep and abiding sense of love—a sense that no matter how dark her world had

gotten, she would always find happiness, and would always serve a good far greater than herself.

Her grandfather had spoken of these kinds of things often. Being as young as she was at the time, she never quite understood his musings. But now, as she wound that grandfather clock, she *knew*. The sensation was nearly enough to cause her to laugh. Her lips parted into a thin, satisfied smile as she watched the hour hand rotate into place.

The moment she had set the clock to the correct time, an undeniably electric charge surged through her bones. It rippled in her chest, radiated out to her fingers, and rocketed back to her head. It brought with it terror and joy all at once. She could see her grandfather, and feared for him, and loved him, and missed him, and knew that some part of him still lived on. In her mind's eye, she was a child again, laughing and running through the field behind her grandfather's house, chasing after a cocker spaniel puppy named Duke. Then she was herself again, but different—a version of herself driven by happiness and free expression and positive energy and acceptance.

As she breathed through the moment of living as this wonderful version of herself, she felt an unimaginable power coursing through her. In an instant, she knew that she was capable of superhuman feats of strength and speed.

Then, all at once, the sensation dissipated, and she was staring at her own, true reflection in the clockface once more. There she was, the thirty-two-year-old psychiatrist to the stars. The Texas girl who followed her heart to hollow LA and the fortune she had hoped awaited her there. The girl with the Caucasian name but the decidedly Iroquois features. The girl obsessed with staying fit not because she wanted to live a healthy life, but because she always half expected that one day she would *need* to be fit to survive. The girl who had been born into a sense of sympathy for others, but who became more and more jaded over the years, having lost her puppy to a coyote, her parents to a drunk driver, her grandfather to a flash of blinding light, and her husband to drugs and booze. The girl who should probably be more sympathetic to her wealthy, famous, whiny clientele, but couldn't help herself because she couldn't imagine being sad when the whole world

adored you. The girl who always kind of thought she was special, but never really believed it—or even *wanted* to believe it.

She saw all of this staring back at her, and it was the most harrowing, disheartening, terrifying experience of her life. It was as if this clock had transported her back to that moment she watched her grandfather die. That white light that had enveloped her now surged within her, threatening to tear her apart.

An instant later, the phone rang, and the energy coursing through her drained away in a flash. She startled at the volume of the phone's ring, and of the finality it seemed to hold.

*The time is nigh*, she thought.

It was only reflex that directed her back to her desk to answer the call. If she'd had her wits about her, she would have been too afraid to pick up.

"Dr. Carter?" came the gruff male voice from the other end of the line.

"Yes," she said, and she was so caught up in her confusion that her own voice sounded foreign to her. "This is Dr. Carter."

"My name is Dr. Harold Schmidt," the voice said. "I'm calling because the psychiatric hospital I chair in Malibu has accepted admittance of one of your clients. And because she is such a high-profile patient, we're trying to manage her care as discreetly as possible. To that end, I'd like for you to come down and take a look at her so you can help us get a sense of how to treat her in the . . . shall we say . . . *quietest* way we can."

"Quietest?" Suki said distantly.

"She has been quite a handful so far, Dr. Carter. We're hoping you can give us some insight into her background—you know, something beyond the stuff we've all read in the tabloids."

At once, Suki riddled out who Dr. Schmidt was calling about. Lanie Montrose. She issued a silent sigh. She had heard from Lanie just that morning. Rather, her voicemail inbox had heard from her. The message had called to mind a vision of a starry-eyed, drug-addled pop star la-la-la-ing

her way through a particularly loving high. In her message, the euphoric Lanie Montrose had made the same pledge she had made at least a dozen times before: that she was giving up the drugs and planned to clean herself up so she could sing the way she used to.

At the time, Suki had rolled her eyes, but now she could see that she should have recognized the call as a cry for help.

“There’s a psychiatric facility in Malibu?” she asked.

“We’re a little off the beaten path,” Dr. Schmidt replied. “We’re more used to handling rehabilitation cases, in truth. It has been some time since we’ve had a patient of Miss Montrose’s particular . . . complexity.”

“Complexity?”

“The only reason we’re holding her is because we were the closest facility that could help treat her emergent need,” Dr. Schmidt said flatly. “Miss Montrose had enough narcotics in her system to threaten her life. We’ve admitted her as a suicide risk, and plan to bind her at least as long as it takes to calm her down.”

Suki, still lost in her confusion about the clock, heard herself agreeing to come down to the hospital in the canyons outside Malibu immediately. The moment she hung up, she regretted making the promise. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about Lanie Montrose. Out of all her famous clients, Lanie was easily the favorite. She just always had been a particularly challenging case—so much talent squandered on all the same old vices that had claimed the lives of so many great musicians before her. Suki understood many things about human psychology, but how a clearly bright young woman could manage to stumble into the more obvious trappings of fame wasn’t one of them. She would have given anything to have Lanie’s gifts, but instead, her gift was to stand by and listen intently while Lanie squandered them.

Before she knew it, Suki was sliding on her shoes, first the good heel, followed by the one she had only just glued back together. She tested the shoe’s stability, finding it wobbly but acceptable. Then she snatched up her purse, fishing the car keys from the bottom, and made her way to the door.

*Hold tight, Lanie, she thought. I'll be there soon.*

By the time Suki got down the stairs, she recognized how completely she was still reeling from the incident with the clock. She decided that she would never be able to face Lanie in her condition without first leveling herself out with a little espresso. Her favorite coffee shop called to her, so she stopped at her car just long enough to drop off her briefcase before crossing the street, expertly dodging the usual late morning rush of Santa Monica traffic.

The aromas of fine coffee were almost enough to snap her back to reality on their own, but it wasn't until that first bitter taste of frothy caffeine touched her lips that she felt like herself again. So invigorated, she carried her to-go cup into the outside world, where the bright Southern California sun caused her to squint and regret having left her sunglasses in her office.

She had successfully navigated the busy street again and was debating whether to make the climb back up to her office to retrieve her sunglasses when she heard someone call out her name. She turned to see a familiar face that she couldn't immediately place.

"Suki!" the woman said. She was young, her hair raven and her form unthreatening in tattered jeans and a light sweater. The expression on her face was one of sorrow, Suki noted, but it was unquestionably tinged with fear. From the way she kept looking back over her shoulder as she tried to cross the busy street, it was as if she thought someone was following her. "Wait, Suki!" Then she shook her head, correcting herself. "Dr. Carter!"

The psychiatrist stood in place, waiting, her interest piqued.

The young woman tried once more to step into traffic, and once more had to leap back onto the curb. She cursed, but Suki couldn't make out the flavor of the words over the traffic noise.

Then, as the young woman looked back over her shoulder once more, her hand finding that hair and brushing it back over her ear, Suki remembered her. They had met at a party that Suki had felt uncomfortable attending. The party had celebrated Lanie Montrose's twenty-fourth

birthday, and beyond feeling like the gathering's eldest and most out-of-place invitee, Suki also found discomfort in how Lanie seemed to have thrown therapist-client privilege right out the window. Not only did the thoroughly high hostess make sure that everyone present knew that Suki was her psychiatrist, but she filled them in on some of the seedier details they often discussed, as well. It was as though Lanie had thought about the whole affair as a group therapy session in which she was the only one allowed to participate.

At that party, this young woman—Becca was her name, Suki remembered now—had been the only one to appropriately recognize how the whole scene was stressing Suki out.

“I can see you’re a professional,” Becca had said. At the time, she was leaning against the wall that separated Lanie’s bedroom from the enormous chef’s kitchen the pop star never used. She held two drinks in her hand, chilled champagne served in crystal glasses so high-end that had this been Suki’s party, she never would have allowed these drunken hangers-on to get their clumsy hands on them. “But kick back, Doc,” Becca added, handing Suki one of the drinks. “Take the edge off.”

The way that drink had made Suki feel wasn’t typical of standard champagne. She was no stranger to Ecstasy, so she immediately identified the high. At first, she had blamed the laced drink on Becca, but would later find out that it had been Lanie’s idea to involuntarily drug all her houseguests. Afterward, Suki and Lanie would spend weeks in therapy trying to uncoil the wrongness of that impulse. But in the moment, whether it was their shared discomfort regarding the party or the drugs themselves, Suki had connected with Becca. It was often difficult for Suki to relate to people on an intellectual level, so the way their conversation had flowed took her as something of a surprise.

Finally, traffic cleared enough to allow Becca to brave the crossing. Two strides into the journey, she called out, “You remember me, right?”

Suki gave a slight nod, and for the first time stepped toward the young woman approaching her. She came to the edge of the parking lot and waited. Becca stepped quickly, jogging the last length of the street.

“I’m so glad I caught you,” Becca said, her smile sad and nervous. “I have something for you.”

“For me?” Suki said, confused.

After another quick glance over her shoulder, Becca looked even more anxious. “Sorry. Feel like someone’s been following me, you know?”

Suki said that she could relate, but the truth was that she couldn’t. Idly she wondered whether Becca was as high now as they had both been at the party. But something about her eyes said that she could not have been soberer.

“It’s not actually for you,” Becca said quickly. “It’s for Lanie. But I’ve been trying her cell phone all morning, and you know what it means when she doesn’t answer.”

With a nod, Suki agreed. “I was just heading to see her now.”

“Listen . . .” She had to pause for a long moment to fight back tears. “My brother, Rick—” A loud screeching of tires startled Becca, and she looked back over her shoulder one more time.

A car pushed through the traffic—a black sedan with dark windows and no license plates—and screamed over the street in their direction.

Becca darted to her right as if her instinct was to flee, but then she hopped back, passing something to Suki so quickly and imperceptibly that it was as if nothing had happened. “It’s true,” she said. “They’re after me.”

“What do you mean?” Suki said, but she could hardly hear herself over the sound of the roaring engine and squealing tires as the sedan barreled toward them. She could feel that the object Becca had passed her was small, but she didn’t have time to look at it, for the car was bearing down on them.

Becca gasped and started running across the parking lot. Suki called out after her, but it was too late, and by then Suki was scrambling back out of the way to save herself. When the car bounced up over the curb, Becca changed course and ended up back in the street, probably hoping to find shelter behind some of the cars that had come to a stop in the roadway.

The big car caught her in a flash. Suki lost her breath at a sight her eyes couldn't believe. The sedan struck Becca's legs, sending her toppling backward into the windshield, which cracked, spider-veining under Becca's weight before sending her hurtling in the air. She landed facedown ten yards up the street. The black sedan screeched to a stop and sat idling.

"Becca!" Suki heard herself screaming.

As if in response, Becca began to stir. She rose to her elbows, then shuddered as she tried to climb to her feet. Suki watched in horror as the tires on the sedan squealed again, and the car plowed into Becca, rolling her under. The dull thud brought a wave of nausea to Suki's throat. The chill washed over her as the driver threw the car in reverse and backed over Becca's limp body. Then it waited.

Suki stared at the blackened window on the driver's side of the idling car. Traffic in both lanes had piled up, everyone stopping to gawk at the scene. All at once, it occurred to Suki that the reason the car had stopped was that its driver was assessing whether to come after her, as well.

Reflexively she looked down at the object Becca had passed to her. It was a silver jump drive. She furrowed her brow, immediately regretting having looked, because the act triggered the car to roar to life again. Quickly the driver performed a three-point turn, crunching into the traffic in the opposite lane in the process.

As she watched, Suki found herself frozen in fear. But then, the moment the car came around to face her, instinct took over and she ran. She dropped her coffee and took off through the parking lot, weaving in and out of parked cars before reaching the grass on the opposite side. She could hear the car in pursuit, and thought almost that she could feel the heat of its engine. But then, in the grass, she found a new speed, her legs gliding effortlessly as she focused on the horizon. Her surroundings fell away, everything becoming a blur as she ran as fast as she could.

The engine became a dull roar, and her speed picked up once more. She closed her eyes and sprinted until her muscles burned and her ankles ached. The sound of the engine grew softer, and the heat disappeared. Still she ran. She ran through crowds, over grass and concrete and cobblestones,

and eventually found herself coming to a stop in a park, the car nowhere to be seen.

It took her a moment to gather her bearings. She wheeled around, making certain that she had lost the pursuing vehicle. When finally she was able to convince herself that she was safe, she checked her surroundings. As she searched for some sign of where she had ended her run, it occurred to her that she was not at all exhausted, or even winded. She wasn't sure how far she had run, but the speed alone should have had her doubled over and gasping for air. Her personal trainer kept her in top shape, but running never much agreed with her. The fact that she experienced no sign of the exertion made it all feel like something out of a dream.

*But it's not a dream,* she thought, noting the reality of the traffic sounds, the smell of the gardenia surrounding the beautifully landscaped park sign, the distinct variation of the hundreds of faces lining the downtown park—it was all too richly detailed to be a dream. The park in which she stood was unfamiliar, heavy pedestrian traffic working its way on both sides of the street just beside her. Even in this crowd, she felt remarkably alone. How had no one seen her running from the car? And where had the car gone, anyway?

She looked down at her hand, relieved to find that the jump drive remained. It occurred to her how startling and terrible it was that a young woman should have died to deliver this to her. She couldn't imagine how such a small piece of plastic and metal could hold something so apparently valuable.

And then she looked past her hands when something else caught her attention. It was her shoes. They remained on her feet, still intact despite the fact that she had only just glued one of them back together no more than ten minutes ago. She had run as fast as she could ever remember running, and she had covered grassy ground and even a cobblestone street. It was remarkable enough that she hadn't taken a single errant step, but even more so that she had managed to maintain that speed without rebreaking the heel.

She looked to the intersection a half block to the north. From the intersecting street signs, she confirmed it. Her sprint had taken her twelve blocks from the coffee shop.

“How in the . . . ?” she said, trailing off when she heard the commotion.

It was at that moment that the headache began. Suki had been no stranger to migraines, but this was something else. It carried the same blood-curdling levels of pain, but it wasn't nearly as all-encompassing as the typical migraine. Instead, it felt as if it was concentrated at the base of her skull—as if someone had electrified her with a cattle prod. She slumped to her knees as the pain intensified. For a moment, she could hardly see from all the agony. She did not know how long she was doubled over in this way, but it might as well have been a week.

When finally the pain released her, she exhaled, her heart pounding. She huffed through her next few breaths, trying to collect herself as the euphoria of the absence of that pain warmed through her. The headache had been so overbearing that it was almost like it had become the only thing she could think about. Suddenly the strange circumstances that had brought her here didn't seem so important to dwell upon. All that mattered was that she was free of the pain, and could breathe and walk and see again.

Across the street, a crowd had gathered outside a bodega with a TV in the window. Everyone was chattering and checking their phones as if confirming what they were seeing on the screen.

Suki, still reeling from the aftermath of the cattle prod in her head, did her best to nestle into a spot where she could see what everyone was looking at. There, flashing on the screen, was a shot of Lanie Montrose as a younger woman. She was so sublimely beautiful back then. In Suki's opinion, Lanie's impossibly smooth, mochaccino skin was always her most enviable feature. But coupled with Lanie's remarkable singing voice, those striking green eyes were what had made the record executives fall all over themselves to sign her.

The photo of the pop star in all her bright-eyed youth stood in stark contrast to the image that came next, this one depicting Lanie in her most recent mug shot. What stood out most in this photo was the comparative edginess of the pop star's hairstyle. Where before it had cascaded past her shoulders in soft auburn curls, now she kept the hair over one ear in a tangle heavy with product, while the other side of her head she had shaved close to

her scalp. On that side, she had pierced her ear with a considerable array of golden rings and rods. It was an altogether artful look when Lanie was clearheaded, but coupled with a pair of eyes that had gone four-a.m. red, it just made her look more like exactly the kind of person you would expect to see in a mug shot. A few people in the crowd were laughing and trading self-righteous scoffs.

Suki couldn't hear the newscaster through the glass, but she already knew the story.

*So much for keeping it quiet, Dr. Schmidt,* she thought.

In just a matter of minutes, the world had found out about Lanie Montrose's most recent brush with an overdose. This sort of thing was exactly why Suki always had so much trouble counseling her famous clientele on the temperance one could find in solitude. When your whole life was on video, how could you ever hope for peace?

Suki decided that she wanted no part of this public gawking, but then, just as she started to turn away, she saw it: a tattoo on Lanie's wrist. She spotted it in an image of the paramedics hauling the troubled pop star away on a gurney. Whether the tattoo was new or something that Lanie had managed to hide during their sessions, Suki wasn't sure, but either way, she couldn't believe that she had never noticed it before.

The tattoo depicted an unusual symbol. It was a trio of circles, one blue, one green, and one pink, that interlocked in the center, bound together by a small yellow triangle.

Suki had seen this same symbol many times in her grandfather's office.



## CHAPTER 3

### *Washington, DC*

The pages of the diary felt brittle in his hand as he leafed through them. With each new page, James Sinclair found himself tumbling deeper into memories he'd have rather forgotten.

The story was supposedly as old as the written word, but that never meant James believed it. Of course it didn't help that his mother was an absolute nutter. Her tendency to ramble about aliens and conspiracies and prophecies had condemned him to grow up the laughing stock of all his peers, a fact that had him leaving his native Scotland for the land of the free just as soon as he could scrape together enough money to emancipate himself and buy a plane ticket.

He suspected that she still wasn't certain why he had left all those years ago, and if he saw her now, he wasn't sure what he would tell her anyway. Maybe he'd tell her that it would've been easier to have a mom who cooked and cleaned and kept the abnormal nonsense from spewing out of her mouth all the time. Instead, what he'd gotten was a mother who told tales of her ancient ancestors guarding some key to a gate that kept out a dreaded alien overlord.

Even with fifteen years separating him from the last time he'd heard that story, James still couldn't believe how preposterous it sounded. As a younger man, he thought his mother belonged in a looney bin. He'd had all the evidence in the world to convince him it was so.

This was why he had such a hard time wrapping his mind around what he was looking at now. The assignment had come straight from his supervisor at the CIA, where he had been working as a conspiracy investigator for ten years. That wasn't his formal title, of course, but it was how James thought of his job. Now it had put him on the case of a diary someone had found in a subbasement, a diary that purportedly belonged to

Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself. Only thing was, the journal supposedly contained a number of cockamamie entries that sounded like something straight out of Elizabeth Sinclair's alien fantasies.

James no longer revealed to acquaintances that he was a conspiracy investigator for the CIA. The response had invariably brought forth a furrowed brow, and James had always found himself having to convince the skeptical listener that it was true. Nowadays he just told anyone who asked that he worked for the government as a historian. That wasn't too far off the mark. He'd earned a bachelor's degree in history before moving on to law school.

In truth, the US government cared not a whit about 99.9 percent of the stories people told about alien abductions, secret societies, and Elvis or JFK sightings. But 0.1 percent of these stories had just enough credibility to warrant an investigation, and occasionally the investigation would lead to something peripheral to the original claim that, in one way or another, could become a threat to the United States. During a decade of tracking down such claims, James had, more by accident than design, uncovered half a dozen actual plots at their embryonic stage and had passed the information to the people who knew how to put a stop to them.

Half a dozen solid hits in a career that spanned a decade didn't sound too impressive in itself, but the people in charge at Langley apparently felt that it was worth the investment in the one-man operation.

Even though James's actual title was conspiracy investigator, he thought of himself more as a conspiracy debunker. Up to this moment, the thing that James had valued most about his rather strange job was that it afforded him the opportunity to prove his mother wrong again and again. Every mysterious object or conspiracy or alien sighting he encountered, he could quickly and easily dispose of with a logical eye. Each new case was just further justification for his decision to cut her out of his life.

Here, though, he couldn't seem to find anything particularly false about this diary. The lettering was authentic enough to the supposed presidential source. The paper and ink appeared to be undoctored. Even the cloth it had been packaged in showed signs of an early '40s origin.

But it was the cover that had floored him.

On that cover was a symbol he had seen countless times since he was a boy—three interlocking rings held together by a small triangle. It was a symbol his mother doodled on just about every piece of paper she ever encountered. Whenever she would drone on about the bizarre family history that James was sure she had concocted in her mind, she would work on a new drawing of that symbol. She would scratch it out almost unconsciously, often line over line until the pen either pierced through the paper or ran out of ink. It was compulsive, the way she drew this symbol.

And now it stared back at him from the cover of this book. This was the first place, outside of his mother's drawings, that he had ever seen it, and seeing it now changed everything about his perspective—not just of his mother, but of the conspiracy she spoke of all those years ago.

*Thank God for your poker face*, he thought as he gave a casual glance to the nervously sweating young man who had found the diary and was eventually directed to James for authentication. If not for that poker face, James might have given away just how much this book meant to him, and perhaps to his government. But he couldn't allow that to happen—not unless he wanted to be labeled a nutter, just like his mother. The contents of this journal, after all, bordered on lunatic.

“So you think it's the real deal?” the journal-finder asked him. He was a slight, unassuming bureaucrat type named David. His wife had recently talked him in to buying and attempting to renovate an old Victorian home in Washington. During the renovation, David had allowed his sledge hammer to get away from him, and instead of smashing through the wall that divided his basement utility room from a space he intended to turn into a media room, he had broken a hole in the floor—a hole that revealed a hidden bunker beneath the house. In said bunker resided the journal, and in said journal supposedly resided the written word of FDR.

James tried to keep his voice from shaking as he lied to David. “It's a genuinely fantastic forgery,” he said, trying to convey a note of regret. “But I'm afraid it *is* a forgery.”

He waited for David to slump in disappointment, but when he kept that puppy-dog-hopeful look on his face, it was James who did the slumping. David, like most of the Americans that James had encountered over the years, didn't seem to have the ability to navigate the Scottish accent. So James repeated himself, slower this time, and with more finality.

Now the bureaucrat sank appropriately. He nodded, looking disappointed. "I thought it was a little farfetched," he said. "I mean, to think that FDR would've lived in my little house!"

James forced a laugh, wondering how it was that this man could've thought *that* to be the most farfetched thing about this journal. Never mind that the three-ring symbol etched in copper on its cover matched the one that Elizabeth Sinclair had been scribbling for decades, because inside, there were fantastic tales of beings with decidedly alien names and motivations.

*Visitations from Alil, a guardian from Xandon in the Orion constellation*, the first entry read. It was dated December 1, 1941, and it depicted a visitation from a beautiful alien female visiting the leader of the most powerful nation on Earth.

Even now, as James scanned the page again, he couldn't believe it.

*Alil came to me last night in my dreams and told me to document her visitations, because one day they would be important for our existence. She shared information last night that I do not quite know how to comprehend. In 1304, the burning of De Molay set forth the trek guided by the light to hide the artifacts. After remaining safe for eighty years, the Knights were warned that they must flee to the new land.*

*In 1384, the Knights were once again guided to safety under the guardian's light to*

*cross the Atlantic to the New World. Henry Sinclair, another well-hidden Knight of the Templar, led the voyage to Nova Scotia.*

*One day he will come, and this will make sense.*

On its own, this entry proved nothing to the world at large, other than the idea that FDR might've been a bit of a raving madman in his free time. But to James, it proved at least one hugely important thing—something that turned the world as he knew it upside down. It proved that his mother's ramblings were more than pure fantasy.

She had spoken often of an alien being called Alil, had told many stories of the Knights Templar, and James couldn't count how many times she'd mentioned Henry Sinclair as one of her most influential ancestors. She had often told James that she believed he would be the one to carry out Henry's prophecy, for God's sake.

And now, after all these years, James held proof that someone else believed these stories, and that someone might well have been the president of the United States.

The emotion this delivered to him was one that he didn't anticipate. It was guilt. All those years disbelieving his mother—and all those years since his emigration that he had shut her out of his life. Even if she hadn't raised him on the guilt associated with Catholicism, if not its actual mythology, he suspected that he would have felt terrible in this moment.

*God, Mom . . . why couldn't you have shown me some physical evidence when I was a kid?*

As he endured his existential mini-crisis, he felt the still-hopeful stare of David hot on his brow. He looked up, causing the new Washington resident to avert his gaze nervously.

"I'm sorry, David," James offered. "I wish I had better news for you. Perhaps if you let me take it back to my lab, I might be able to uncover some other historical significance that may be of value to you."

“Historical significance?” David said, cocking an eyebrow.

“Perhaps the forger himself was a figure of some importance. FDR did have some contemporaries of note in that field. The Depression raised a number of counterfeiters, as you might imagine.”

“I imagine,” David said, though it sounded like he still didn’t have a clue about the bulk of what James was saying.

James made sure to ask the question slowly this time. “So you don’t mind if I take the journal back to Langley?”

The enthusiasm of David’s agreement was something James had gotten used to. Often, it stemmed at least partially from his conversation partner’s excitement at having actually understood him. He loved this fact about his accent, even if it often led to misunderstandings that proved difficult to unravel. It was the perfect litmus test in this way, in fact. The only people he ever deemed worthy of his time and respect were those who could understand him without him having to repeat himself. David, it appeared, wouldn’t make the cut.

“Your country thanks you, my friend,” James said as he rose to take his leave. He moved quickly through the ramshackle Victorian and found his own way to the front door with David trailing dutifully behind him. He made quick work of saying goodbye, not wanting to linger long enough for the owner of this precious, weird journal to change his mind.

He tried not to look too harried as he made his way out to his government-issued sedan and fired up the engine. The way his tires spun from his haste to hit the accelerator as he backed out of the gravel driveway was regrettable, as it kicked up rocks and fired them toward the house. If David read anything into it, however, his wave and innocent smile didn’t betray him.

James couldn’t quite pin down the urgency he felt to continue reading this journal. On any other find with even moderate potential to be authentic, he would have had no trouble waiting to make the drive back to Langley and pick out an hour or two in the afternoon to examine the artifact. On this occasion, though, he found himself pulling over two blocks to the west, idling in a cul-de-sac that looked uninhabited enough that no

one would notice the oddball mulling over a decades-old journal in his government car.

He was so excited to get to the next entry that he nearly forgot to slip on his latex gloves before he thumbed the pages. At the last second, he remembered, and in his haste, wound up tearing through the first two disposable gloves before he finally got a pair to set. When he found the page, he couldn't believe how much more of his mother's story suddenly had corroboration.

*December 4, 1941*

*Alil came to visit me again. She spoke of an evil entering our world, one that will destroy all mankind. For the first time, I learned why she has chosen to visit me in secret. There are geopolitical implications at play, and those implications prevent the more logical measure of making her existence public. Hitler opposes the will of those who stand for what is good and right—that much has always been clear. But in this instance, he also opposes what is good and right beyond our own planet.*

*Hitler seeks the key to allow this evil into our solar system. It is difficult for me to reconcile this notion even as I write it. But it seems that evil knows where to find its bedfellows.*

*The evil that would invade our planet takes its leadership from a being named Sar. If Hitler finds the key on Sar's behalf, then an invading force will unleash an attack on this planet that will make the blitzkriegs look like a series of Sunday picnics.*

*If ever we needed reason to stop Hitler, this is it. Alil spoke of opening new, secretive branches of government and constructing pentagon-shaped buildings, and attempting to assassinate a number of global leaders. She seemed disappointed when I explained that I was not prepared to lead my country down such a path. She warned of a major event that would force my hand, but even with all her power, I have no reason to believe that she might see the future.*

The entry was shattering to James for many reasons, the first being that he had heard the name “Sar.” How many times had his mother rambled fearfully about this supposedly evil force residing just outside the border of our solar system? She had railed on about how the US may well have prevented more than the further genocide of the Jews by entering and winning the war, as well. Those stories had always struck James as preposterous on so many levels. But here was evidence that FDR himself believed them, just as James’s mother had.

He didn’t need his lab equipment to prove what he held plainly in front of his face. From his preliminary investigation, he already knew that the home it was found in had connections to Eleanor’s branch of the family. Every stroke of the pen fit what he knew about the president’s handwriting. And there were no discernable signs of doctoring. He would need to dig further, of course, but there was no mistaking its authenticity. He had never found anything quite like this journal.

*December 7, 1941*

*It seems my alien visitor’s prophecy has come to a head. With the attack on Pearl Harbor, I can be skeptical no longer. Alil was*

*right. The only way to keep Sar out is to build this pentagon she has mentioned.*

*She says to tell you that this is all I can write by hand. The rest can only be deciphered by the copper glasses she left with me. The glasses, alas, are not safe here, and neither is an instruction on how to find them. I leave it to you to riddle it out yourself. But you must find them. The fate of mankind may well depend on it.*

After finishing the entry, James scanned ahead to learn that the rest of the pages were blank—or at least blank to the naked eye. He suspected that were he to find these copper glasses, they would reveal much more to him. He didn't have time to ponder how unlikely that thought seemed because he was too busy wondering to whom the "you" in the diary was referring. It could have been anyone.

If Elizabeth Sinclair was to be believed, James came from a long line of people dedicated to exactly this mission. FDR's note could have been referencing James's grandfather, or some distant uncle, or even Elizabeth herself. His mother had told him often about his ancestor, Henry Sinclair, who she claimed had been so instrumental in saving the key to mankind's future and safety. Through his work, and with the aid of the Knights of the Templar, the key to keeping Sar locked out of Earth was safely hidden.

Hence James's lifelong skepticism. It always sounded so absurd. But now here it was, staring him in the face, and alongside the unmistakably authentic signature of one of America's most celebrated presidents.

It proved difficult for him to beat back the tears that came to his eyes. He hadn't felt this way since he was a boy—that overwhelming sense of harrowing guilt that can only come from knowing you have disappointed your mother. All those years wasted on the assumption that she had lost her marbles. All those times he had yelled at her to just stuff it with the

conspiracy theories already. All the insults and the threats he had made whenever she refused to stop rambling on about alien visitors.

She had at least been kind enough to keep these stories just between the two of them. Never once had she spouted this nonsense in front of his friends or anyone in the family she didn't particularly trust. And yet word had still managed to circulate in the community that Elizabeth Sinclair was a few twigs short of a stack.

The guilt he felt now started with the notion that he had actually joined the bandwagon of believers. He had badmouthed his own mother in front of his friends in some crude effort to make it clear that, in this case at least, the apple rolled plenty far from the tree. The guilt blossomed when he remembered all the times he had laughed at her expense with people she hadn't even met.

The worst part about it all was the strange feeling that he knew exactly who the "you" in FDR's journal was meant to be. All those years he had spent mocking his mother's notion that he was some kind of chosen one, and here he couldn't help but feel like maybe this was proof she'd been right.

His head swimming, he checked his phone. The screen flashed with a notification of five missed calls and three messages. The calls had all come from his uncle, a man he hadn't spoken to in years.

James raised an eyebrow, as the timing could not have been stranger. Hadn't his mother always told him that when it came to matters related to fulfilling one's destiny at least, there was no such thing as coincidence?

The first message was an impassioned plea from his uncle to return to his homeland to visit his mother. Her health had taken a startling and sudden turn for the worse. "Something is wrong with her brain," the message said before cutting out.

Darkly James thought about how that message would have caused him to roll his eyes, had he received it just an hour earlier. *So what else is new?* he would've thought.

The next message, apparently picking up where the first one had cut short, informed him that Elizabeth had been taken to the hospital by

ambulance, and that no one was sure if she would even last the night. James felt his pulse quicken.

The third message was more of the same, though delivered an hour later. His uncle had arrived at the hospital to find that the doctors had managed to stabilize James's mother, but no one had any real sense of what the problem was in the first place. It ended with an impassioned plea for James to find the first flight back to Edinburgh.

So that was what a reeling James did. He punched up the CIA-exclusive app on his phone, the one that allowed him to instantly bump his way onto a commercial flight bound for anywhere in the world. The moment he was finished making his selection, a notification appeared on the screen informing him of the airport, the airline, the time of departure, and even the name and background of the pilots assigned to the flight.

Given that the flight was scheduled for departure in just over an hour, he decided that he wouldn't even bother rushing home to pack. At a moment like this, he felt it far more important to be on that plane as soon as possible than it would be to arrive in Scotland with fresh socks. So he tucked the diary in the inside pocket of his suit jacket and slammed on the accelerator, tearing out of the sleepy cul-de-sac and making for Dulles.

After parking in a government lot and using his credentials to bypass security, he found himself in the terminal less than twenty minutes later. As he waited for his flight to be called, he kept thinking that it would be one of those great cosmic screwjobs—one of those noncoincidence coincidences Elizabeth always told him about—if his mother were to die on the very same day he learned she wasn't completely insane.

More than he could ever remember wanting anything, he wanted her to hold on long enough for him to tell her he was sorry. If she was still lucid enough to review the journal with him, that might be enough to set him on the path he could sense he had to follow.

He was so tied up in his anxiety that he failed to notice the flight attendant calling for the passengers to begin boarding. He shuffled into the line, and that was when he noticed it. Flickering in the corner of the gate was a television tuned to a headline-driven news station. In a red ribbon at

the bottom of the screen, the words *Pop Star Attempts Suicide* flashed in bold font.

In any other situation, James would have paid this headline exactly no mind. His years in the States had rendered him jaded to the typical news cycle, which he viewed as a perpetual motion machine designed to spew out nonsense about which star had overdosed, which star had died, which stars were careening toward divorce, and which star had gone utterly off the rails. But on this occasion, he found his attention seized by the image passing just above the headline ribbon.

Playing on a loop was a shot of the pop star being wheeled down the drive of her mansion and loaded into an ambulance. Just as the gurney made its turn toward the vehicle, the woman's arm fell limply from under the sheet and dangled into view. There, on the inside of her pale wrist, was that same symbol Elizabeth Sinclair had been drawing all her life, that same symbol imprinted on FDR's journal.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Santa Monica, California*

It surprised Suki how little time she had been asked to spend at the police station following the hit-and-run incident. She suspected that it had something to do with the notion that the investigators didn't genuinely believe she was an actual eyewitness. She had run so far at such an impossible speed that by the time she managed to wander all the way back to the scene of the crime, a good twenty-five minutes had passed since the police arrived. Given the timing, they had likely assumed that she was just some crazy lady trying to inject herself into the conversation.

It was, after all, an exciting event. A black sedan appeared out of nowhere, plowed into an apparently innocent pedestrian, and then tore around the neighborhood for several blocks before smashing into a tree, causing the gas tank to explode and roast the driver. Suki suspected that there were many people who had tried to share more information about it than they actually knew.

It seemed to her that if her account of the events hadn't been so detailed, the police wouldn't have taken her at all seriously. They had looked at her skeptically throughout her recounting, but had taken diligent notes, all the same. One of the detectives even looked as if he was telling the truth when he said that he would follow up with her later—after the scene had been fully investigated and the autopsies were complete.

Suki had shivered at the mention of the autopsies, and she shivered again now as she made the slow walk back to her office parking lot, where her car and the drive to Malibu awaited her.

When she reached the street where she'd watched Becca die, she tried not to look at the roped-off section of the sidewalk. She didn't care to think about what sort of carnage might still be left there, even after the medical teams and police had cleaned up the scene enough to where the

onlookers had moved on. She also tried not to get lost again in her pondering on how in the world she had managed to make her escape in a broken set of heels.

As if in reply, her next step proved errant, and her heel broke anew against the jagged curb at the edge of the street. She cursed, stumbled, and scraped her hand on the sidewalk as she braced herself from the fall. Her head rang.

Furiously she snatched off the broken heel, along with its twin, and barefoot-walked them to a trash can in the corner of the parking lot.

As she made the barefoot walk over the twenty yards of hot blacktop between the sidewalk and her car, the memory of the pain at the base of her skull kept her on edge to the point where she couldn't seem to focus on any thought, save for one: that vision of Becca handing off the jump drive before exploding against the car's windshield. She was so lost in this terrifying image that she was barely aware of the acts of grabbing her keys and sliding into her car.

Even now, as she started the ignition, she wondered if maybe she should have told the police about the jump drive in her pocket. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't believe she could trust this little piece of evidence with the police.

In any case, a young woman had died to get this information to her. She wasn't going to just hand it over before finding out what it was. So she told herself again that she would hang on to it for now, investigate it the moment she got home, and then turn it over to the authorities as soon as she was sure it was safe to do so.

But first, she had an obligation to her client.

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## *Malibu, California*

The early afternoon sun had made the blacktop lot warm enough to make for a painful barefoot walk to the front door, but in Suki's mind, it was better than it would've been in those broken shoes. She would have

never been able to wear them again anyway without thinking about the crunching sound of Becca's skull as she lost her life to that car.

The cool tile floor of the hospital's small, dim lobby proved a welcome contrast to the parking lot. The glass-block walls on the east and west sides of the long, narrow room provided the only natural light. On any other day, Suki might have found this outdated setting slightly depressing, but with the heat and the pounding in her head, she welcomed the relative coolness of the room. At the center of the far wall stood what looked like a heavily reinforced door flanked by a simple security panel. In a small recessed area just beside this door, there was a reception desk. It was there that Suki headed.

She could feel the fine grains of the blacktop sloughing off the bottoms of her feet as she padded across the tile. At the desk, she found a mousy but pretty receptionist with a phone pressed to her head. When it became clear that the receptionist was not actively engaged in the call, Suki announced her name and purpose. The receptionist nodded, clacked a few commands into her computer, and then wordlessly motioned for Suki to have a seat.

The security door swung open before Suki even had a chance to reach that seat. Out stepped a short, portly man with a white, undeniably Freudian beard.

"Dr. Carter!" the man said with exaggerated pleasantry. He strode forward and presented his hand for shaking. "We spoke on the phone. I'm Dr. Schmidt."

"Of course," Suki said, taking the hand. "Hello, Doctor."

"I thank you for taking my call seriously, Doctor," Schmidt continued as he wasted no time leading Suki back through the security door.

Beyond stretched a long, sterile corridor whose stale fluorescent lighting stood in stark contrast to the brilliant sunlight in the lobby.

Suki found her mood souring from the shift in light quality. "Please," she said, "call me Suki."

Schmidt paused his hasty retreat into the building to turn on a heel and shine an oily smile at his visitor. “Suki, then.”

“And I would have been here sooner, if not for . . .” Suki trailed off in part because her host had taken off again in his furious pace down the dimly lighted corridor, and in part because she wasn’t entirely sure that she wanted to share the bizarre circumstances of her day with this man.

If he was in any way interested in what she had to say, he didn’t show it anyway. At the end of the corridor, he pivoted to the right and led them down another corridor, this one seeming to narrow and darken with every step. She knew that she was imagining it, but Suki had the sensation that they were following this hallway underground. It was as if the farther they went, the farther they came from anything resembling sunlight or hope. This was a desperate, depressing corner of the building. Suki couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to stage a psychiatric facility in such a way.

She was just about to make a comment on the matter when Schmidt abruptly stopped at a drab, flat-paned door equipped with another of the security panels.

“Here we are,” he said, punching numbers. The latch clicked open, but Schmidt made no move to the handle. Instead, he performed another of those crisp turns so he could look Suki in the eye. “I assure you that we have her stabilized. She poses no danger to us.”

Suki wanted to tell him that this was the least of her concerns, but decided to hold her tongue until she could figure out what exactly the score was here. She had this odd sensation that Schmidt and his team had done nothing but prod one of the world’s most famous pop stars with needles since her admittance.

“In any case,” Schmidt said as he eased the door open on its creaky hinges, “it’s good to have her psychiatrist here to offer an opinion.” When he stepped into the dimly lit room, he passed a hand in front of himself as if presenting an armoire on a TV game show. “Although, as you can see, there’s not much you’ll be able to do for her at the moment.”

There, indeed, was Lanie Montrose, looking improbably unattractive. One of the true marvels of Lanie's celebrity was that even at her most strung out, she always had this way of being incredibly camera friendly at all times. Sunken eyes, disheveled hair, and an emaciated frame had only ever seemed to enhance her beauty. Even that four a.m. mug shot had been so celebrated on the Internet in part because of its oddly sexy quality.

Not so here. The hospital bed was propped up, and sitting slumped in a straitjacket chained loosely to the rails, Lanie Montrose looked unappealing. A filmy blue hospital gown barely covered her thighs. Her famously green eyes were open, but motionless and glazed over. Her skin ran paler than usual, having lost that supple and raceless tone. Coupled with the thick layer of greasy sweat encasing everything from her forehead to her neck, Lanie looked more like a wax statue replica of herself than like the living, breathing sex symbol she was. She was so drugged that her chin had sunk to the point of disappearing into her neck, her tongue lolling out, a long trail of drool arcing down to her chest.

"What exactly do you have her on?" Suki asked, not bothering to hide her outrage.

"Yes, I fear we may have taken the dosage a bit far," Schmidt admitted. "But initially we found that her tolerance for antipsychotics and even tranquilizers was so high that the normal dose for someone of her weight had no effect."

Suki managed to tear her attention away from the entrancing sight of Lanie Montrose looking like someone had scraped her out of a cardboard box house in an alley somewhere, and turned to glare at Schmidt. "Why did she need to be dosed at all? You said she came in on an OD. Attempted suicide. I saw the footage on the news. She was unconscious already."

"It was the darnedest thing." The doctor broke into an unsettling smile. "It's a matter of policy to jacket any patient we believe to be a threat to herself, at least until we can work up the preliminary evaluation. But the moment we started outfitting her with the jacket, she woke up and began kicking and screaming. I don't know how it was possible. Her bloodwork came back later, and she was swimming with so many narcotics that I

wouldn't expect an *elephant* to be able to stand. I have to say, I've never seen anyone move quite like that. And she was so *strong*. It took all five of my orderlies—and two of them are quite large men—to keep her pinned down to where we could inject her. In the end, we didn't have much choice but to pump her with sedatives until she finally calmed. It was an ordeal, I admit.”

Troubled by this revelation, Suki looked back at Lanie, and what she saw now startled her almost as much as that initial impression. Where before Lanie had looked as ugly as Suki could imagine her looking, something about her had utterly transformed in the past few seconds. Her breathing had slowed, and now she held her chin up and her eyes closed. The sweat suddenly looked less like grease and more like a glow, and all at once, the pop star was gorgeous again.

Suki sighed, awed by how very angelic her client now appeared. The only things missing were the trademark wings and halo. She seemed so peaceful that Suki found herself at peace for the first time all day. The soft smile that reached her lips couldn't be helped.

“She's lovely, isn't she?” Schmidt said, his admiring tone eliciting another shiver from Suki.

“I don't see how that's relevant to what we're doing here,” she snapped.

The doctor's face flushed. “Of course.”

Suki turned her attention back to the angelic Lanie and noticed that there was a small, leather-bound book lying on the foot of her bed. She stepped forward and picked it up.

“That was the other strange thing,” Schmidt offered quickly. “Paramedics supposedly found her in the pool, but by the time she got to us, not only was she completely dry, but she was clutching that journal, as well.” He gave a discomfiting chuckle. “I've never known anyone to journal in the pool.”

“Neither have I,” Suki said as she inspected the book and began reading the words scrawled in the journal.

*I looked up into the bluest sky I have ever laid my eyes on. And there you were, just beyond those circling hawks. You were that presence of safety and serenity. The warmth of love rippled over my skin as my soul melted with the glow of blissful peace.*

“You see how the euphoria expressed here is symptomatic of narcotic abuse,” Schmidt interjected from over Suki’s shoulder.

She took a half step away from him, as he was standing uncomfortably close behind her. Now at a safer distance, she continued reading.

*You were my saving voice of reason, and my life is so blessed by your love. Never go too far. Always be there in the shadows so that I can sense your beauty and know that I am here for you, too.*

That was it. Suki had hoped for more insight, but what she could glean was that these were not the ramblings of either a drug-addled or mentally unstable young woman. If anything, it seemed to Suki that this was some evidence that her client was at least seeking some measure of peace outside the drugs. This was no mad scribble; this was a cry for help. But who was the “you” Lanie was referring to? Who was it she saw—or thought she saw—up there in the blue sky?

With a scowl on her face, Suki turned back to Schmidt, who seemed to shrink under her scolding gaze. “You’re done drugging her into a coma.”

“With all respect, Dr. Carter, Miss Montrose is a patient in my facility, and—”

“And nothing,” Suki cut in. “She is *my* patient, and I’ll be removing her from your care just as soon as she’s conscious and clearheaded enough to sign the waiver.”

Schmidt gave a look like he had just tasted something bitter. “We shall see.”

Suki cocked her head to one side. “We shall *see*? You mean you intend to challenge me on this?”

The doctor looked down at his feet, pondering something for a time before his expression of feigned pleasantry returned. “I think our tone veered a little off track here,” he offered gently. “I meant only to say that I believe we might both have something to offer Miss Montrose.”

Suki drew a breath to argue, but her counterpart cut her off.

“I agree that we . . . *overdid* it a little on the tranquilizers,” Schmidt said. “That was a mistake, obviously, and one that won’t be repeated. Now that we have a better understanding of her tolerance levels—”

Now it was Suki’s turn to interrupt. “Fine.” She made a point of looking around the dark, dismal surroundings. “But this room is inexcusable.”

Schmidt softened. “On that, we are also in complete agreement. This room is—how should I put it? Wildly outdated. A relic from a time when psychotherapy resembled something more like torture.” He offered a thin smile, then dropped it quickly as though realizing it was out of place. “This is an old building, you see. We have managed to upgrade most of it, but this wing remains an outlier. We don’t typically use this room, but . . .”

“So you just thought you’d bring one of the highest profile patients into your relic of a torture room, is that it?” Suki asked indignantly.

“Precisely,” Schmidt said, leaving it at that.

The reply caused Suki’s blood to boil. She readied herself to lay into Schmidt again, but then he spoke up.

“I mean only to say that we are relatively unused to admitting someone of Miss Montrose’s particular fame. We have predefined protocols for the rich and famous, of course—I mean, who doesn’t in this town? But when their admittance hits the news before she’s even actually admitted? That . . . complicates things.” He sighed. “I’m sure you can appreciate how

difficult it is to ensure privacy for one of our patients in a situation like that.”

Suki’s anger continued to burn, but then, as the thought sank in, she found herself cooling considerably. She nodded with a huff.

“Had I been here when she arrived,” Dr. Schmidt continued, “I would have instructed the staff to situate her near the rear of the new wing. But since the new wing features such large, easily accessible windows, the staff feared that bedding her there might draw unwanted attention from the outside world.”

“So you put her in this broom closet,” Suki said, understanding but still hating the decision.

“Precisely.”

Suki shook her head for a time, trying to blow off more of the steam she still felt inside her. “Fine. I understand.”

“If you give us the chance, Dr. Carter, I think you’ll find that we are the ideal facility to treat Miss Montrose. But I wouldn’t dream of doing so without your oversight.”

Another sigh announced Suki’s defeat. As much as she distrusted Schmidt, she had to admit that he was right. Malibu wasn’t exactly a metropolis. Had Dr. Schmidt not given her directions into the canyons, she’d have been skeptical herself that the town would have a psychiatric facility in the first place. Now that she had seen the place, she could suppose that there was good reason for its existence. As off the beaten path as it was, it likely served as the perfect place for some of LA’s higher-profile people to come straighten out after any career-unflattering breaks with reality. If Suki hadn’t even known about this place, after all, then it had to have been incredibly hush-hush. Only the biggest celebrities, wealthiest players, and sleaziest reporters could have known what this building was even for.

Ultimately, even if Suki suspected that this place wasn’t fully equipped to handle someone of Lanie’s particular complexity—on a social, financial, or psychological level—she couldn’t deny that it would be best for her client to experience at least some measure of stability. Malibu was

Malibu. And subjecting Lanie to another hospital transport and another battle with getting acclimated to a new facility just seemed like too much for the moment. So, for now, this place would just have to work.

“She stays on three conditions,” Suki said.

“Name them.”

“First, no one speaks to her unless I’m present. I want to be involved in every aspect of her care, from the initial interview until her discharge. My office is in Santa Monica, and I don’t mind the drive, so this won’t be a problem.”

“Very well,” Schmidt said casually.

“Second, I want her transferred to a suitable room before she wakes. If she’s going to trust this place, then her first sober impression of it has to be better than this one. Curtain the windows in one of the renovated rooms if you’re worried about paparazzi poking around. And I want her out of that jacket.”

Schmidt frowned. “Until we know how she’s responding, I don’t—”

“You can use restraints, if you feel it’s necessary.”

He shrugged. “Done.”

“Third, I hold the right to check Lanie out of this facility the moment I believe she isn’t receiving the proper care or she demonstrates a readiness to return to the world.”

At this, Schmidt appeared to hesitate.

“You object?” Suki asked forcefully.

He sucked in a breath. “I . . . do not object.”

“There is clearly something else on your mind. Out with it.”

The expression on Schmidt’s face was like a child caught in a lie. “I have to admit that I was a little excited to have Lanie here. I believe she would be a uniquely intriguing patient for my work.”

She felt so creeped out by the remark that it took Suki a moment to formulate a response. In the meantime, she blinked her way through her

confusion. “I’m sorry?” she managed finally.

“You’re unfamiliar with my reputation,” Schmidt said with a too-wide grin. “I know it’s a bit outdated and a little controversial, but I’m a proponent of hypnotherapy. In this case, I think it has particular application. Miss Montrose’s memory of the incident is liable to be . . . foggy. Perhaps inducing her into a subconscious state will help us riddle out what really happened.”

Suki was inclined to believe that what really happened was exactly what Lanie would eventually tell them happened, but she didn’t want to argue in this setting. Besides, Schmidt had just given her a lot to unpack. She suddenly remembered his name from a paper that had recently circulated in the psychology journals. Schmidt wasn’t just a proponent of hypnotherapy. He was a believer in past lives. Of course the community had passed it off as quack science, but his paper claimed to have documentary evidence of the phenomenon.

Now Suki understood the score. What Schmidt had needed to validate himself was a high-profile case. And well, cases didn’t get any higher profile than Lanie Montrose.

Her first instinct was to snap at him about how Lanie wasn’t some lab rat, but she could sense from his eager expression that this would only lead to the kind of fight that might make it difficult to extract Lanie at the earliest opportunity. As much as it pained her, she had to at least pretend to play ball.

“I’ll have to dust off my hypnosis technique,” Suki said with a smile. “But sure. As you say, it may have application in this case.”

In his excitement, Schmidt clicked his heels together. “Excellent. We’ll be sure to taper off her drugs overnight so she’s clearheaded enough to begin in the morning.”

Everything about this arrangement felt strange and off-putting to Suki, but she heard herself agreeing to the plan. With that, Schmidt made to leave, suggesting that Suki remain with Lanie in case she woke while he was out arranging for her transfer to a more suitable room.

The moment the door shut behind him, Suki went to Lanie's side. One peek under an eyelid was enough to tell her that Lanie wouldn't be waking anytime soon, however. She was so limp and so cold to the touch that Suki felt compelled to lean in and make sure she was still breathing.

"Bastards," she said in a voice just above a whisper. "I'll get you out of here just as soon as I can, Lanie."

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Dr. Schmidt, it seemed, wasn't one for rest. Suki passed much of the night in waiting, watching Lanie for any signs of waking, but none came. Even when a stout-looking orderly had come to replace the straitjacket with padded restraints attached to the bed's rails, Lanie didn't stir.

Suki passed the time between chiding herself for throwing away her shoes and fretting about how badly she wanted to find a secure computer and figure out what was on the jump drive Becca had sacrificed her life to give her. She had her laptop in her shoulder bag, of course, but she couldn't count on the security of this place. Creepy as he was, it would not be at all surprising to learn that Schmidt had installed some kind of monitoring system that allowed him to watch or record all activity on any computer in use within his network.

By three a.m., the only people left in the building, apart from the patients, were Schmidt, Suki, and a pair of night nurses who had arrived several hours earlier. Every other familiar face had gone home to sleep. Schmidt, though, kept strolling down the corridor every hour or so, that same infuriating, unflappable smile on his lips as he asked if Suki needed anything, and would she maybe like to go home and start fresh tomorrow?

Suki always refused. She told herself that the jump drive could wait. And anyway, what would be the harm in catching a little sleep right here in this rigid, high-backed chair?

Before she knew what was happening, she had fallen asleep. The waking world drifted so effortlessly into the events of her dream that she hardly noticed a change at all. In her dream, she sat in the same uncomfortable chair, and Lanie lay there in bed just as before.

But then, as sudden as a blink, Lanie was sitting upright. But it wasn't Lanie exactly—at least not entirely. There was something different about the pop star. Something alien. Her beauty was so otherworldly that Suki could hardly take it in without having to turn away.

“Hello, my lovely friend,” the alien Lanie said, her speaking voice every bit as beautiful as the real Lanie's singing voice had been in her youth.

It took Suki so off guard that she found that she could only manage to suck in a breath in response.

“We are one, you and me,” Lanie said dreamily. “And we must go outside.”

Suki felt herself rising to her feet even as the dream Lanie began to hover over the bed. Lanie floated into the outer corridor as if carried on wings. Her heart skipping, Suki followed, and found that Lanie had disappeared.

*We must go outside*, Lanie's voice repeated, this time sounding so close that it was as if it came from Suki's own head.

Given that it was a dream, her legs felt leaden as she made her way down the ponderously long corridor toward the door. When finally she reached the door, she didn't have to pull it open, for it disappeared, opening not to the lobby, but to the outside world. But this was not the street outside. This was something entirely different.

She saw a man naked from the waist up. He was beautiful, his head perfectly round and bald, his face almost too pretty to behold. But he was doing monstrous things. He watched as a team of similarly beautiful men went to work on a human body strapped to a gurney. They were carving into the body, vivisecting it brutally. When Suki turned away, now she was looking at a vast field of wheat, and all was silent.

Then, steadily, she heard a droning rumble begin to rise. Then she heard drumbeats and the war cries of thousands of men. All at once, a row of men at least a mile wide emerged from the wheat and began the steady march through the field. There were thousands of them, lined up row upon

row as they marched toward the opposite horizon. They marched fearlessly, their bare chests exposed, their arced blades held at the ready.

The drone grew louder and louder—so loud that Suki had to cover her ears. Then, just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, the source appeared on the far horizon. It was a fleet of strange, bubble-like ships, each of them emitting an oddly peaceful glow. Below these ships, she could just make out the outline of another, smaller army. But with their air cover, they looked every bit as formidable.

The army passing beside her saw the enemy in the same instant and sent up a startling war cry. Then, all at once, they began to run. Collectively their charge seemed to shake the ground beneath Suki's feet, and she tumbled to her knees, closing her eyes. She saw nothing of the carnage, but she could hear it.

When finally she opened her eyes again, she saw a woman, her breasts bared and her belly swollen with child. She was beautiful, but she looked anxious. Suki watched as she followed an elderly man down to the edge of a wide, flowing river and boarded the reed canoe that awaited her there. The man and the woman spoke in hushed tones for a time before the woman, tears in her eyes, took up the oar and began paddling away.

Suki watched her make her way up the river. She could sense that this darkness was predawn, a suspicion confirmed when a soft pink hue formed on the horizon toward which the woman rowed. Then, when the sun crested, it shot a blinding white light straight at Suki that made her turn away.

Now she was looking at a familiar scene wreathed in a dreamy daylight. She recognized the sundress of a woman striding beside an oak tree to her right.

*I saw that yesterday*, Suki thought, realizing immediately what this meant.

Her heart heavy, she turned her dream gaze across the street, where she saw herself walking toward her, limping on that stupid broken heel. She heard the scream of her name, the squeal of the tires, and then watched it all

once more. Becca was there, thrusting the jump drive at her, and then Becca was gone.

When it was over, Suki was suddenly standing as herself in heels and staring back at the building she had just left. She looked down at her hand, which held the jump drive, and found that it was impossibly heavy. She tried to set it down, but couldn't, the device held to her palm by some unseen force.

*You must take this somewhere safe,* said the voice in her head. *Go, Suki, before it is too late.*

Suddenly the jump drive began to warm in her hand. "But I can't leave you alone here," she heard herself saying.

*Go. I can take care of myself.*

Now the object in her hand grew so warm that it was painful to the touch. Again, she tried to throw it away, but it wouldn't leave her.

*Go!* the voice yelled.

Suki woke with a start, and a vague sense that she had just listened to one of the loveliest melodies she had ever heard. She frowned, thinking about the dream, and even as she tried to find meaning in it, it started to fade. Within moments she remembered nothing of the dream, save for the sense that she had to leave as soon as possible so she could investigate the drive Becca had given her. When she looked down, she was unsurprised to find that she was already holding it in her hand.

"I won't be long," she whispered to the still-unconscious Lanie.

Then she gathered her bag and her jacket and flew from the room, giving no care to how she was going to get home in bare feet. Just as she passed the door to Schmidt's office, it swung open to the inside, and a startled, clean-shaven young doctor with dark hair gave her a cockeyed look.

"You must be Dr. Carter," the dark-haired doctor said.

"Yes," Suki said hurriedly. "Where's Dr. Schmidt?"

“He just left for the evening.” Then he smiled. “Or the morning, as it were. He wanted me to tell you that he will return this afternoon for the session.”

Suki didn't bother hiding her relief. “Very good. I'll be back by noon.”

She didn't wait for an answer, anxious as she was to get home and find out what secrets the jump drive contained.



## CHAPTER 5

### *Edinburgh, Scotland*

James Sinclair's feet practically slid over the linoleum as he shuffled slowly past the room numbers ascending toward the one where he'd been told he would find his mother. As anxious as he had been to get to this hospital as quickly as possible, now that he was here, he couldn't help but want to be anywhere else in the world.

Sometime during the long flight, that initial earthshattering sensation brought upon him by the FDR journal had worn off. What had started as mild skepticism grew with each passing mile into disbelief, and then to bitter certainty that he'd been duped. He'd spent much of the back half of the journey talking himself out of the authenticity of the journal, never mind the preposterous story contained within.

*It would be just like her and Uncle Simon to stage something like this*, he thought, trying not to recount all the times the two of them had assembled half-cocked plans to convince him of the supposed reality of his mother's raving stories. Often they had made him feel the eye-rolling revulsion of the eight-year-old whose parents tried to reconvince him that Santa Claus was real by having Daddy dress up as the jolly old fat guy and belt a few ho-ho's at the bedroom window.

While still aboard the plane, the more he had thought on it, the more sense it made that the journal he carried wasn't in fact proof of his mother's fantasy world, but rather, an exceptional forgery designed to get him to fly back to Scotland to visit his dying mother. With the Sinclair clan's means, it wouldn't have been difficult or even too costly to hire some underemployed actor in DC to pose as a homeowner who recently stumbled across this weird journal. And the journal itself, well, as a young man, hadn't Uncle Simon done time for forging medical papers designed to pass a few lazy but able-bodied Brits into worker's compensation?

By now, James had worked himself up into such a fury over the theory that he had half a mind to turn around and head straight back home. But then, there were those last tender vestiges of the boy who still loved his mother to contend with. He was here, after all. *Might as well look in on her.*

His search for the number denoting his mother's room took him to a bend in the hospital corridor. The moment he rounded the corner, an unmistakably familiar figure came into sight. The short, stout, hammerheaded old man had his back to him, but there was no question that it was Uncle Simon.

James slowed his pace further, but still found that he reached the old man sooner than he would have liked. He came close enough to hear that Simon was leaving a voicemail, and realized that the message was meant for him.

The old man gave a furious huff as he hung up the call and thrust his cell phone onto the weathered, plush bench along the wall outside Elizabeth Sinclair's room. Simon ran a hand through his thick white hair and sighed as he turned around. All in the same instant, his expression went from angry to shocked to relieved and back to angry again.

*A look only an elderly Scotsman could pull off,* James thought.

"Well, as I live and breathe," Uncle Simon said, his tone in no way reflecting happiness at seeing James. "I was just leaving you a message. It's as if my phone conjured you straight up from the linoleum."

James could hear the well-practiced delivery of guilt in his uncle's tone. It would have soured him, but the truth was that he was still swimming in the unexpectedly euphoric feeling of being surrounded by one's native accent after years and years in a foreign land.

"I know I should have called to let you know I was en route," he said with a nervous look at his mother's door. He felt altogether thankful that it was closed. "Your message just made it sound so urgent, I . . ."

"You took off without thinking," his uncle finished for him. "Par for the course, boy. You don't have to tell me." Then, in spite of his gruff tone, the old man surprised James by yanking him into a firm bear hug.

James returned the embrace with a halfhearted pat on his uncle's back.

Simon pulled back and clapped James on both shoulders, having to reach up to do it. "Gah, you grew even more after you left."

James looked down at his shoes, having been made uncomfortable for two reasons. First, he wasn't sure whether it was true that he had grown any since his departure at sixteen years old, and second, because it had been a long time since he'd had an older relative talk to him like he was just a boy. He had forgotten what it felt like.

"You always did have your old man's genetics," Simon continued. "That bloody *height*. And boy, you're as ruggedly handsome as he was. 'Tween that and your accent, I imagine you're having no trouble with the American girls." Then his eyes grew distant and dreamy. "Blond, and legs as long as the day."

This, James remembered—his uncle's tendency to dive headlong into fantasy. He waved his hand in front of Simon's eyes, snapping him out of it. His first instinct was to tell the old man that it wasn't true, that he hadn't had even one steady girlfriend since he'd left for America. Sure, there had been women, but never one he felt the need to get close to. Call it an intense focus on his career, or call it a subtle disregard for women on account of the fact that he'd spent his whole life running from the memory of his oddball mother. Whatever the case, he thought it best to just let Simon assume whatever he wanted.

"Heard about your work, boy," Simon was saying. "How can you live with yourself, spending your days going against your mother like that—and your birthright, Jesus-God?"

James chuffed. In truth, he was a bit conflicted. Something inside him was trying to hold on to that last twinkle of belief that the journal in his pocket might be real, but something else was more certain that it was nonsense.

"My job has trained me well," he said to his uncle, who had steeled up his jaw in that defiant way that made him look like he was half-ready to hold up his fists for a fight. "Well enough to spot a forgery."

The old man furrowed his brow, his white eyebrows reaching out like hundreds of furry little antennae. “Forgery?” he asked, sounding convincingly confused.

With a dismissive chuckle, James reached into his pocket and held out the journal. He ignored how Simon’s eyes went wide as if in disbelief. The man had always been an accomplished liar. Putting on these airs would not have been difficult for him.

“I’m well enough regarded in my field to have worked directly with the White House,” James said. “You didn’t think I’d know a planted forgery when I saw one?”

“The White House?” Simon asked distantly, his eyes still fixed on the cover of the journal, and the startling symbol it bore. Then the anger bubbling just beneath the surface seemed to startle him out of his trance. “Aye, the White House. Spending your whole career trying to disprove your mother’s theories like that. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

James shook his head. “Not the first time I’ve heard that one from a Sinclair, if you can believe it.”

“May I see the book?” Simon asked, extending a shaky hand as if to take it.

With another chuckle, James pulled the journal away. “Like you’ve never seen it before. You *created* it.”

For the first time that James could remember, his uncle’s face paled. “I didn’t make that, boy. I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

James was taken aback by the serious tone of Simon’s voice, almost to where he believed that his uncle was being sincere. He stared at him for a long while, trying to assess whether there was any semblance of truth behind the anxious expression on the old man’s face.

But before he had a chance to riddle it out, there came a scream from inside his mother’s hospital room.

Together, the Sinclair men bolted for the door, Simon the first to arrive and wrench it open. As he followed his uncle into the room, James experienced a feeling he had never had before. It was love, to be certain, but

a different kind than he had ever known—one led by grief and an overwhelming desire to help the suffering person he loved.

And Elizabeth Sinclair was most assuredly suffering. By the time they reached her bedside, her screams had reached a crescendo, and her face was contorted in such pain that he hardly recognized her. Her scream arrested him, freezing him in a fear borne by the yearning to help and the realization that there was nothing he could do.

Her eyes were sightless and searching, her lips curled back to bare a full set of teeth yellowed with age. But even in her state of agony, and even despite the fact that she had been holed up in a hospital bed for who knew how long, and even though he had not seen her in fifteen years, his mother looked every bit the age he remembered her. She had always been lovely—everyone said so—and now it seemed as if her beauty had endured it all. She was older than any woman that attractive had any right to be. But then, that was always Elizabeth. She had married a man twenty years her junior, and had given birth to James at an age when most people would've believed such a thing impossible. And now here she was, screaming and pounding at her head as if trying to free it of something, still looking as young and pretty as ever.

James had never wanted anything more than he wanted to help his mother get well.

Just then, he was shoved aside by a trio of people hurriedly entering the room. One was a doctor, while the other two wore nursing scrubs. Elizabeth's screams were so loud that James couldn't hear what the doctor was saying at first, but eventually he made out that the plan was to rush his mother to surgery.

"You said we were holding off on surgery," Simon hollered over the noise in an accusatory tone.

"Can't hold off any longer," the doctor said. "We were waiting to see if the pressure in her skull might abate." He gave an urgent glance at his patient as the nurses strapped her to the gurney and began the frantic process of trying to sedate her. "As you can see, that hasn't happened."

Quicker than James could believe, the sedative took effect, rendering his mother unconscious and stopping the infernal shouting. He couldn't deny the relief this brought him, but he also couldn't deny the chilling level of dread. He had come all this way to see her—and indeed, as he admitted to himself now, to tell her that she'd been right all along. She couldn't die on him now, not before he had a chance to say he was sorry.

His eyes flushed with tears as the nurses wheeled around the gurney and started heading past him for the door. He just managed to reach out and brush his mother's hand as she rolled by. And to his eye, he thought it looked as if she gave a knowing twitch. She had sensed his touch, and had tried to show him how delighted she was that he had come.

*Snap out of it, James, he thought. That's crazy. She's sedated and heading for surgery.*

The thought did indeed snap James out of it, startling him back to the reality of what was happening. With an unexpected urgency, he rushed after the team pushing the gurney. They were running, so he found that he had to sprint to catch up.

“Doctor,” he said, his words falling heavily as he panted through the jog. “Tell me what's happening.”

“No time,” the doctor said. “We have to get her to surgery now or we'll lose her.”

They made the corner of the hall, and here the turn took the gurney through a heavy set of automatic doors labeled *Operating Room: Hospital Staff only beyond this point.*

As much as he wanted to press on, James stopped in his tracks. “But Doctor,” he called out, “when will I see her again?”

The desperation in the question was not lost on James Sinclair. He had spent nearly half his life trying to avoid this woman, and now there was no one in the world with whom he would rather speak.

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It was a long three hours of waiting. Uncle Simon passed the time with practiced precision. He had been in this waiting room before. That

much was clear. Every ten minutes or so, he would get up to step through a side door that led into a courtyard, where he would smoke a full cigarette down to its filterless nub in less than a minute. Then he would pass the intervening period in the waiting room, just leaned back in his chair, his legs crossed as he stared at the wall.

Having watched this ritual over a dozen times by now, James had grown rather exhausted by it. As a child, he had always marveled at the sheer frequency of his uncle's smoking, but had always assumed the old man had quit in the time since last he saw him—or had at least cut back. Upon learning that neither was the case, the younger Sinclair could hardly believe that the older wasn't the one in the hospital bed in place of his sister. James couldn't remember the exact year that his uncle was born, but he did know he was older than Elizabeth, who was herself in her seventies by now.

"Why don't you go find a hotel for the night," Simon would say every time he returned from a smoke.

Every time, James had replied with a brusque, "No, thanks. I'll stay and see this through."

But this latest time, Simon added something that struck a nerve. "Seriously, boy," he said with evident snark, "you've left her alone a decade and a half. What's one night more?"

James had just drawn a hot breath to argue when the door swung open and out stepped a pretty little nurse, her chin pressed downward, her tiny hands folded demurely in front of her. "Misters Sinclair?" she said, her voice a nervous, thickly accented song.

"Aye," Simon said gruffly.

"Yes," James said softly.

"I've been asked by Dr. Gough to inform you that surgery will be some time now." She kept her eyes averted as if she feared locking gazes with one of the aggrieved might cause her to cry.

"How much longer?" James asked, his heart sinking.

"Not sure as to say," the nurse offered. "We've been unsuccessful as yet at relieving the pressure. We can't find the source, I'm afraid, and will

need to continue on into the night.”

“Best you get some sleep then, boy,” Simon interjected.

“Thanks, but I—” James started to say before the timid young woman surprised him by stiffening up and looking him confidently in the eye.

“No, he’s right,” she said. “She’ll be needing you to have your wits in the morning. There’s a hotel off the hospital if you’ll be needing a place to stay. Leastwise, we’ll call you when surgery’s reached an end.”

James cocked his head to one side as he admired the change in strength the woman had shown, but even as he looked, he could see her resolve cracking. To relieve her before she started crying, he thanked her and said he would do as she suggested. Then, as she scurried back toward the OR, James turned to Simon, who waved a wordless “good night” and took his leave.

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In his time working as a conspiracy investigator for the CIA, James had seen his share of supposed miracles. But real or otherwise—and they were almost always otherwise—he had never seen one that measured up to the miracle that was the hospital’s hotel featuring a bar adjacent to the lobby. He was still flying high on the relief brought him by the thought of a pint when he realized that he should have expected as much. He had simply been living as an expatriate so long that he’d forgotten how difficult it was to find anywhere in Edinburgh that resided any more than about twelve whole meters from the nearest pub.

When the wiry, middle-aged bartender with the thick mustache set an overflowing pint of Belhaven in front of James, he didn’t waste a second in raising the glass. He had long forgotten how refreshing was a proper, fresh pour of his favorite beer, but in one sip, he was a rebellious sixteen-year-old once more. He could practically hear his old friends chattering away beside him as he settled contentedly into his pint.

*God, how did I ever give this up?* he thought.

Then he remembered—the driving force that had caused him to leave, the instinct propelling him to take flight from the looney bin he called home, that same intuition and self-preservation that had made him such an excellent candidate for the CIA, and for the specialized work they assigned him to do. A memory as bitter as his beer roiled over in his mind. That woman he'd called his mum had tried to make him believe in crazy stories of aliens and Christ intertwined in some sort of millennia-spanning conspiracy. She'd wanted him to believe that his family was part of a long line of Knights Templar who had protected some unknown sacred relics that would prevent an alien monster from returning to Earth. Even back when he was young enough to believe in the possibility of such mysteries, it had all sounded like absolute rubbish.

*Not something an eleven-year-old boy wants to debate on a Saturday afternoon,* he thought.

He smiled darkly when, not for the first time, he pondered how his mother's timing on these discussions was always impeccable. She would always want—no *demand*—to talk about his so-called destiny on the one sunny Saturday afternoon that followed ten rainy ones in a row.

When he thought on it now, his doubts returned. The dusty old journal was surely a fake, wasn't it? But then he remember the news broadcast, and the tattoo of the symbol on that pop singer's wrist. There was no way his uncle could have faked that.

He gulped more beer and shook his head in confusion. "Give me a bloody break and shut it," he mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

James had been so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed that someone had come up beside him. At first, he thought the voice belonged to the bartender, but when he looked up, he saw that it was the full, throaty voice of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Even in his own mind, James had been a realist—never one for measures of hyperbole. His job had rather demanded it of him. But there was no hyperbole in this case. She was definitely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He had seen movies, of course, in which the hero was so taken aback by the beauty of the

heroine that he found himself utterly tongue-tied, but he had never experienced it before. Prior to this moment, he had thought it something reserved almost exclusively for comedic effect. But as he sat there unable to remember even a word of the king's English, he learned that it was true. Beauty could kill speech.

"You were asking me to shut it?" the woman said, her full lips curling into a half smile that took his breath away. Her icy blue eyes glinted with the kind of inner light that can only come from those supremely confident in their own physical appeal. With a long, delicate hand, she brushed her silky black bangs out of those eyes, revealing a set of sleek, perfectly groomed eyebrows.

James followed the hand down, finding a form that was full at the bust and hips, but appealingly slender at the waist. It was there that his eyes lingered—so long that she had to snap her fingers to break him out of his gaze.

"I'm sorry," he finally managed, and he was devastated to hear that his tone was that of a child caught misbehaving. "I didn't mean—" he tried to add, but his voice caught in his throat when her smile broadened, revealing a perfectly white half-moon of teeth.

She bent one of her long legs and slid onto the barstool beside him. James was so stunned by the allure of the movement that he felt as if his heart might leap into his throat.

The moment the woman raised a hand—her arms so long and slender—the bartender leapt to take her drink order. James called after him, trying to say that he would pay for the drink, but the only sound that left his lips was a guttural grunt. She turned back to him with confident bemusement. There was no question that she was used to men behaving in this way when she was around. The sight of it made James question every moment that had passed at this bar up to now. He was no stranger to women. Indeed, *he* was rather used to women behaving in this way around *him*. Never once had he tripped over his own tongue in speaking to a pretty member of the opposite sex. So why now?

He sucked in a calming breath and finally managed to speak an intelligible sentence. “I wasn’t telling you to shut it. I was telling *myself* to shut it.” When he realized how crazy that sounded, he forced what he hoped would pass for a charming smile.

She laughed it off and introduced herself as Christina. He found himself enchanted by the glint of her eyes as she made small talk about her background and what had brought her to town. Such was his intoxication with her beauty that he failed to actually hear any of it.

“Listen to me babbling on,” she said, turning away and releasing him from the spell of her eyes. “I haven’t even asked your name yet.”

“James,” he said, still a little unable to believe that she was talking to him at all, let alone chatting and giggling at his side. “I live Stateside, but I’m back to visit me mum in hospital.”

“Oh my gosh,” she said, aghast, and when her hand brushed against his, he nearly lost his wind. “I’m so sorry. Is it serious?”

“She’s in surgery now. Something with her brain—although no one seems to be able to give me a straight answer about *what*.”

James never would have guessed it was possible for two eyes to be dewier than Christina’s were naturally, but when they brimmed with tears, he saw that it was. It made his joints so weak that he had to set down his pint. James had never been emotionally close to a woman in his life. Physically he had known his share, but not once had he met someone he believed to be worthy of his time beyond a weekend or so. But he had never been surer of anything than he was about this woman being special beyond any definition of special he had previously imagined.

“So,” she said with a coquettish grin. “What do you do for a living, James? Stateside, I mean?”

Before he could even think to censor himself, James heard his lips forming the words. “I’m proud to say that my job is to debunk all the crazy bloody tales that bored people create to become famous for five seconds.” He wanted to stop there—and in fact, knew that he was rather honor bound to stop there—but he kept on despite himself. He told her of all the nutters

he had spoken with over the years, all the mysteries he had solved with logic, and all the miracles he had quashed.

Then he could hardly believe when he began opening up about his mother and the Knights Templar and the sacred disc she claimed to be the family's birthright. The more he spoke, the more he expected this stunning woman to roll her eyes and leave in a huff. But the more he spoke, the closer she drew to him, her interest seemingly piqued, her touch more familiar with every brush of her hand. She was leaning so close to him by now that he could smell her breath, sweet as strawberry, her lips full and ripe.

No one had any right to know about the diary and its contents. No one but his superiors back at Langley. And *least* of all a total stranger he'd just met in a bar—especially a stranger so beautiful as to utterly disarm a man. This much he knew. But he told her. He told her about the symbol on the diary's cover, about its contents, about its connection to his mother, and about the famous signature at the bottom of each page. He couldn't help himself.

“Well,” she said when he was finished, “that's certainly interesting.”

At that, she took her eyes off him for the first time since he'd started speaking, and James felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. It was like he'd been wearing a yoke and pulling a sleigh for the better part of an hour. His exhaustion was complete, and so was his confusion.

When he looked at her now, it was almost as if for the first time, except that he knew they had been talking for quite a while. Oddly, though, he couldn't for the life of him remember what they had been talking about. Frowning, he looked down at the pint in front of him. It was still half-full. He hadn't drunk nearly enough to account for this state of confusion.

Christina turned back to him, her eyes arresting him once more. “You know, James,” she said with the slightest hint of a smile, “you're a very handsome man. A girl could get used to looking at you.”

He was so floored by the words that he lost his breath once more. It was as if she stood over him, pressing her high-heeled shoe to his chest, and all he wanted her to do was press harder. His mind reeled as he searched for

something to say, finding nothing. Just when he'd become so desperate that he felt like yelling, he was saved by the buzzing of his phone. He huffed out an apologetic smile, fumbled for it, and saw that it was the hospital calling.

The voice on the other end of the line belonged to the demure nurse who had banished him earlier. “ “Your mother is out of surgery and stabilized. The doctor was able to wrap it up much sooner than expected. If you want to see her, you can feel free to come back.”

He told the nurse that he would return immediately. Then, when he hung up and turned to Christina, it was like he was seeing her for the first time. He remembered her beauty, of course, and the way she had floored him, but he couldn't remember a thing about what they had discussed—only his disbelief that she wanted to speak with him at all. It took a great deal of will to summon the strength to tell her that he had to leave.

“To see your mum?” she said.

“She's out of surgery,” he explained. “I need to get back to her.”

What she said next came with such effortless insistence that James could hardly believe he hadn't seen the clearly obvious solution from the first. “Well, I'll go with you.”

In a righter mind, he would have realized how preposterous that sounded. This woman was a total stranger. Gorgeous, yes, but what in the world did she have to gain from joining an emotionally tipsy man in his probably dying mother's recovery room? Still, one bat of those eyes of hers told him just how completely *right* the idea was.

“Of course,” he said.

They rose together. When she performed a little shimmy as she straightened her tight skirt, James nearly lost his balance. She didn't seem bothered by the way his eyes lingered at the hem of that skirt, her legs so firm and smooth and soft. She stepped past him with those legs, leading him toward the hall. He got all the way to the door before he realized that he had forgotten to pay his tab. He made a turn to go back, but she grabbed him by the lapel and kept him heading toward the hospital.

“He won’t mind,” she said, referring to the bartender, and one look back over his shoulder told James that she was right. The bartender was sitting in his stool, staring ahead as if he hadn’t even seen the two people that had just left his bar.

On any other day, this would have struck James as odd, but on this day, he had the most beautiful woman he had ever seen leading him back into the hospital by his lapels. Her form was so appealing as she walked that it never even once occurred to him how strange it was that she seemed to know exactly where they were going.

*Why was she in the pub in the hospital in the first place?* he thought to ask, but he couldn’t seem to form the words. *And how did she know how to get to the recovery wing? I didn’t even know where it was.*

Nevertheless, there they were, standing outside an unfamiliar room that James was somehow certain housed his mother.

Christina turned him toward her and straightened his jacket, his heart pounding at the touch of her hands against his chest. Then she leaned in, exposing just enough cleavage to draw his eye as she whispered in his ear. “I’ll stay out here and let you have your privacy.”

He nodded. Then he found that pulling away from her felt a little like pulling apart a pair of powerful magnets. She gave him a reassuring smile as he opened the door. It was with that last lovely vision in his mind that he left her.

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The moment he got past the door and into his mother’s room, his sensibilities changed. He felt like himself again, and the weight of the moment crashed back onto his shoulders. His mother presented a stark contrast to the vision of the woman he had left in the hall. Her pallor was a corpselike gray, her brow slick with sweat and her hair shaved completely from the crown of her head down to her left ear. James had been in hospitals before, but had never seen anyone looking quite so sick, or so close to death.

Simon must have been on a smoke break, because the only other person in the room was an unfamiliar man with a stooped posture and a set

of thick plastic glasses. His weary smile told James that this was the surgeon who had saved—or at least prolonged—his mother’s life. He introduced himself, spouted a few platitudes about how lucky they were to have found the tumor and removed it, but all James heard was the word “tumor.”

“Will she recover?” he asked.

The doctor furrowed his brow. “Hard to say until we’ve seen the post-op x-rays. I’m confident we cleared all that we could find, but when it comes to brain surgery, there is only so much you can access without fear of harming the patient.”

James thanked the doctor and told him that he would anxiously await word on the x-rays. Then the doctor quietly took his leave. James knelt beside his mother’s bed and set her hand in his. It was startlingly cold.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, a pain forming in the back of his throat as all the regret came flooding back. “I’m sorry for how awful I’ve been to you these past many years.”

He thought for a moment that she stirred, but then told himself it was all in his head. The doctor had explained that the surgery had wound up finishing much quicker than the aesthetician had planned. This meant she wasn’t likely to regain consciousness for at least another hour or two while she worked out what remained of the anesthesia.

“There is a diary, Mum,” he said as the tears poured over his cheeks. “It was found in some crawl space in Washington. But it mentions Henry Sinclair. If you wake—” He shook his head, correcting himself. “*When* you wake, I’ll show it to you.”

His heart leapt when her eyes began to flutter and then slowly opened. He told himself that she was still unconscious and that this was just some kind of involuntary muscular reaction, but then she turned her head and took a clear, lucid look at him.

A tear rolled from her eye as she drew a breath to speak. “A journal?” she said, her voice croaking weakly.

James sprang to his feet and retrieved it from his jacket pocket. “Have a look,” he said when he handed it to her.

The tears continued for Elizabeth Sinclair as she scanned the pages of FDR’s journal. When she had read a few entries, she closed it again and passed her weakened hand over the familiar symbol on its cover. “It’s time, son,” she said softly.

“Time for what?” James asked uneasily.

“This prophecy has always been about you. There are others, of course, but they will be like you. They won’t know who they are until someone tells them. It’s up to you to find them, and to show them what they’re capable of.”

James knelt beside his mother once more, his mind reeling. “But how in the world can I do that? Mum, I don’t half believe this business myself.”

She reached out and took his hands in hers, her grip remarkably strong for someone who looked so frail. “You have to find TC Carter.”

“Who?” James said skeptically. In all his mother’s ramblings, he had never heard the name.

“I haven’t seen him since I was young,” Elizabeth explained, “but he will know where you must go.”

James sighed. “The journal mentions copper glasses.” He took the book from his mother and opened to the page that referenced them, pointing it out to her. “See? Seems to me that this is the next step. Just tell me where to find them and—”

Her grip tightened to the point that it nearly hurt him. “I’ve heard nothing of copper glasses,” she snapped. “But TC will have the answers you seek. TC Carter is your only hope.”

Just when James began to fear that his mother had lost some of herself on the operating table, she looked past him, and her expression changed from one of desperation to one of revulsion and fear. The grip became stronger still, and now he had to pull away from it before it threatened to break his fingers. He turned to see what had troubled his

mother so, and found his knees weakening once more at the sight of Christina. She had entered quietly and stood in the doorway. Her beautiful face was framed by lustrous black tresses, and she was the vision of perfection.

“Get out of here!” Elizabeth shrieked as James stood beside her in disbelief.

“Mum, she’s just Christina. A woman I met—”

“No,” Elizabeth cut in. “She’s one of them. Get her away from me. Get her away from *you!*”

James was too concerned about the violent change in his mother’s demeanor to fully process what she was saying. In any case, one look at Christina’s calm, concerned, achingly gorgeous expression reassured him that she was not someone to fear. He could love her. *How* he could love her.

“Please, James!” Elizabeth was hollering. “Please don’t let them take us.”

James snapped out of his confused trance just in time to see the needle go into his mother’s IV port. The doctor had returned in a hurry, and looked to be sedating his mother. James’s first instinct was to try to stop him, but when he saw the calm that crossed his mother’s face, he held back.

“Doctor, what’s going on?” he asked as soon as his mother had fallen back to sleep.

The doctor calmly led James into the hall. Christina followed, lacing her arm under James’s in an intimate way that made him feel like he could conquer the world.

“The tumor we found,” the doctor began, “it was *vast*. I’d have thought it one of the most aggressive cases of cancer I had ever seen if I hadn’t also found signs that it had been growing for years. Decades, even. Your mother has been living with this tumor for quite some time.” He softened, looking at James with an almost fatherly light of sympathy. “I wonder, has your mother ever demonstrated behavior that you might call delusional? Has she ever seemed to suffer from flights of fancy, or even hallucinations?”

James opened his mouth to say yes, of course she had. He'd spent most of his life pushing back against those delusions. And again, the doubts found their way into his consciousness. But there was that symbol on Lanie Montrose's wrist. Had he imagined it? Was he starting to form his own delusions?

Before he could formulate an answer to the doctor's question, Christina's arm tightened warmly over his, and she looked up at him with those dewy eyes. "My grandfather suffered the same way before he died," she said sorrowfully.

*She understands me,* James thought, quickly dismissing any suspicion his mother had raised with her screaming accusations.

"I'm afraid there's more bad news, son," the doctor cut in. "The x-rays reveal a shadow remaining at the base of her skull even after the surgery. We fear it might be more of the tumor we were unable to see, but we can't be sure without further testing. We'll need to transfer her to London for more intensive treatment."

James nodded, his mind racing so completely that he wasn't even sure how to feel. But when Christina leaned her lovely head into his shoulder, it all rushed away in an instant.

"Very well," he told the doctor. Then, with more confidence than he could believe, he took Christina's hand in his. "We'll be staying in the hotel here until you've made the preparations to transport her."



## CHAPTER 6

### *Santa Monica, California*

The video was so unreal that Suki Carter, viewing it on the small television in her home office, couldn't help but believe it was staged. But then, that idea seemed almost as difficult to believe as what she was watching. What was more likely, after all? That some supernatural being had recorded a hologram message into an ancient artifact stumbled upon by a gold prospector? Or that a guy like Rick Fielding, who Suki knew was living hand to mouth in Mexico, had somehow found the money to hire a supremely capable special effects team to put together this odd video as a ruse, just to put one over on Lanie Montrose?

The more Suki thought on it, the less she believed anything she was seeing. But then, whenever her doubt grew strongest, she would remember that a girl had died to deliver this to her. If it wasn't true, then why had someone wanted so desperately to keep Becca from sharing it?

She brushed that thought aside, chalking it up to exactly the kind of paranoia that comes with PTSD. Just when she thought she was starting to get a handle on what she was watching, the video flickered and stopped. She could see from the track bar that there was still at least half of the content yet to play, but it wouldn't continue no matter what she tried. All she could do was restart it and watch it again—which she did three full times before she felt comfortable processing what she was watching.

It all looked like a pretty standard scene on some barren mountain range. There was an impossibly black box in the center of the frame, and beside it was a man lying facedown in the dirt. Whether it was from the look of him or from Becca's anxious hollering for Rick to run, Suki could sense that the man was dead. Then the box broke apart, and from its center rose a searingly bright ball of white light. It hovered several inches off the ground as it projected the image of a beautiful woman—or rather, an almost humanlike beautiful woman.

“The lord of darkness is close now,” the almost-woman said. “The one who sings is the key.”

“The one who sings,” Suki said aloud.

“The one who sings is called Zalea,” the hologram said. “Her visit to Earth was granted so she might observe the beauty that the Xandonites created thousands of years ago. But her mission ended in disaster. The one called Sar foresaw her arrival and held her prisoner with the intent of absorbing her power.”

For the next minute or so of the video, the sound played only intermittently. Suki couldn't make much sense of what she could hear, whether over the broken words from the hologram or over Becca's insistence that Rick get as far away from the light as he could. Something about Sar again, and a mention of someone named Corin. Zalea's voice was apparently exultant at the sight of Earth's beauty. It seemed to Suki that this Corin was some kind of dark influence on the powerful Sar, and that she feared Zalea somehow.

Then the hologram disappeared, only to reappear and mouth some words soundlessly. The final words Suki could hear before the video changed were, “Finally her voice reached to the Xandonites, and the beings of light came to her rescue. Sar was cast out from this place, banished for all time, but Corin managed to escape. In this way, the lord of darkness has continued to sow his evil on this planet.”

She paused and replayed these lines enough times that she managed to memorize them. Then, one final time, she allowed herself to watch the last image that flickered on the screen before the video paused of its own apparently irrevocable accord. With a black sky in the background, a long, thin man spoke to an even longer, thinner being with gray skin, enormous eyes of pitch black, and no apparent mouth. The image seemed to zoom in on those dark pools of eyes on the gray being before freezing there, that gray head staring blankly back at her through the screen. Whatever the source of this recording, Suki had to keep telling herself that it *was* a recording—and in fact, a recording of a recording—and that the beastly, black-eyed thing wasn't actually looking directly at her.

No matter the source of this video, no matter whether it was real or some strange prank from Rick, the chills that this final image gave Suki were undeniable. The feeling was enough to make her want to abandon further attempts to get the video to play through to the end. And she knew that even if one of her techie former college friends who'd stayed behind to assemble their startups in the Valley could fix the playback issue, she couldn't exactly *show* this thing to them. How would she explain what it was? Or where it came from?

*No, she told herself. You need to just turn this over to the police.*

But she put that thought out of her mind as soon as she had it, because for some reason, she found the idea as chilling as those dead, black eyes. Obviously if it could help the police get to the bottom of who killed Becca, they would need to have it. But something told her that she needed to figure out its meaning for herself first. It was as if the video spoke directly to her, and it was telling her that the only person in the world who would understand it was the person for whom it had been made. She had to get it to Lanie, to see what she had to say.

That, however, would have to wait, for Lanie was still unconscious. Suki had called to check in on her, and had been relieved to find out that Schmidt had not yet returned. The doctor who had answered had explained that Lanie had been semiconscious for about an hour in the early morning, but had slipped back into sleep shortly after. Given that they were still tapering off her doses of antipsychotics and tranquilizers, the doctor didn't expect her to be fully lucid until at least the afternoon. Even so, and despite how tired she was after such a short night of sleep, Suki decided that she would need to get back to the hospital before Dr. Schmidt. This meant she would need to leave soon.

First, however, she wanted to follow a hunch. She still couldn't believe that Lanie had tried to commit suicide. In Suki's view, the only other possibility was an accidental overdose—and where overdoses happened, Lanie's assistant, the infamous Ingrid, was never too far away. Suki had never actually met Ingrid in the flesh, not even at that party where she'd been dosed with Ecstasy. But she had always meant to research the woman's background. If nothing else, getting a sense of where Ingrid had

come from might have helped Suki understand how she held such influence over Lanie. But until now, she had never found the time to get the process started. Well, now that Lanie's situation had become dire, it seemed like there was no time like the present.

“What was her last name again?” Suki asked herself.

When she couldn't remember, she decided that she would parse through as many photos of Lanie shot by the paparazzi as possible. In most of them from Lanie's younger, healthier days, she was only ever photographed with some gorgeous young celebrity boy of the week or one of her burly bodyguards. But in her more recent years, she was mostly photographed alone or with some emaciated groupie. For a long while, Suki failed to find a single photograph that showed the same companion twice. But then, in those photos taken within the past year or so, a familiar face began to come up from time to time. It belonged to a pretty, if imposingly tall and darkly made-up, blonde with a perpetual scowl.

Every time Suki encountered a photo that bore this woman's likeness, she would click through to the hosting website in search of a photo credit or some description of the people depicted in the shot. The credits led her nowhere, and most of the descriptions either failed to list the blonde's name or referred to her simply as Lanie's personal assistant. In any case, Suki could see that she was onto something. No matter if Ingrid was real, someone meeting Lanie's description of her had served as Lanie's personal assistant for at least a portion of the past year.

After another ten minutes of feeling disgusted with the general content of the sites she was offering her clicks, Suki finally stumbled upon a proper listing for the blonde's name. It was in fact “Ingrid,” and Suki could have kissed this blogger, for he listed her last name as “Saint Eve.”

Of course that sounded like a false name—the kind of name that never would have worked for an A-lister or even her assistant. Suki chuckled when she thought about how it would have been right at home among the porn star set. But she decided to pursue it anyway.

When she typed the name into her browser, the strangest, most frustrating thing happened. Her computer locked up. This wasn't like the

way the video had frozen, either. The thing just turned into an absolute brick. She cursed at the screen the first time it happened. This was a new computer, so it made little sense that it should suffer such a catastrophic failure so soon after she'd bought it. Sure, it was true that she had spent the past twenty minutes or so poking around some of the seedier websites in the celebrity gossip sphere, but she had no reason to believe that something like that could cause this new, virus-protected machine to seize up so completely.

So she tried again. She powered down and rebooted. She opened a browser and entered the name. Again, the moment she hit the enter key, her computer froze. This time, it didn't just stick on that same image of the browser stalling out, either. This time, the operating system flashed the dreaded blue screen before her computer utterly crashed.

Undeterred, she tried a third time. This time, instead of just going straight for the Ingrid search, she opened a browser and navigated around to some of her favorite websites. Everything worked fine—was lightning quick, even. No matter what sites she visited or programs she opened, all was right with her computer's world. So she returned to the search for Ingrid Saint Eve. For a third time, her screen froze the moment she hit the enter key. This time, moments after the freeze, her computer bypassed the blue screen and just went straight to dead black.

Her first instinct was to resist the idea that there could possibly be any connection between the search of Ingrid's name and her computer taking an unwelcome nap. It was only a coincidence, she told herself. It wouldn't be the first time she'd bought a lemon of a computer. Or maybe she really had picked up a virus at one of those sleazy gossip blogs. Anyway, she would have to run her antivirus scan after she returned from the hospital, because a look at her watch told her it was time to leave. She snatched the jump drive from her USB slot and gathered up her things.

Just a block away from her Lincoln Boulevard condo, she felt it: that sense that her car was being followed. A glance in the rearview mirror confirmed the paranoia, if not the truth of it. Had she seen that deep blue SUV before? She took the turn past the palm-lined promenade that led through the heart of her neighborhood and onto the sunny street that would

lead her the ten blocks to the freeway. She couldn't help but train her eyes on the rearview mirror. Her heart rate picked up when the SUV followed. Were its windows really tinted black, or was that just a trick of the morning light?

Trying to take her mind off the matter, she turned up the radio and started drumming her fingers against the steering wheel to a tune she didn't even like. Could she just chalk all of this up to a lack of sleep and coffee?

*No, she decided. This isn't happening. It's all the PTSD. You've had a weird couple of days, and this is all in your head.*

Still, she couldn't help but pay close attention to the rearview mirror as she picked up speed and tried to make haste for the freeway.

*It's not like you could possibly have anything someone else would want anyway,* she thought, forcing a smile.

The smile faded immediately when she remembered the jump drive in her handbag.

The on-ramp came into view, and she attacked it with such vigor it was like she was trying to take flight. The moment she was safely in a lane on the busy California freeway, she looked back, her shoulders slumping when the SUV came roaring up the on-ramp after her.

"It's nothing," she insisted aloud. "Why *wouldn't* he take the freeway? *Everyone* takes the freeway. Calm down, Suki."

The terror couldn't be helped. It was a feeling she had first experienced while witnessing TC's otherworldly death. After changing lanes suddenly and then putting the hammer down to try to separate herself from her potential pursuer, Suki looked in the rearview mirror and went numb when the trailing SUV caught her up. It never got close enough that she could get a read on anything about it, other than the idea that it was intent on remaining behind her, and yes, its windows were tinted black.

She was so lost in this fearful thought that she failed to notice how she had pressed her eyes shut. The freeway's start-and-stop-and-fly-and-halt dance was happening all around her, and she wasn't even paying attention.

Still she drove, and she could sense when she needed to apply the brake and when she could accelerate.

Her focus went inward, to the thought that she wanted nothing more than to be wrong about everything that was happening to her lately. Her sprint from the car that had killed Becca. Lanie's situation at the creepy hospital. The bizarreness of the video on that jump drive. How Ingrid's name always crashed her computer. But most of all, she wanted to be wrong about this SUV trailing her. She wanted—desperately, even—for it not to be following, for it all to be in her head, and if it wasn't in her head, she wanted the SUV to suddenly run out of gas or have engine trouble or just decide not to follow her anymore.

When her foot reached out unconsciously and eased the brake pedal until the car had come to a complete stop, Suki opened her eyes to see that she had successfully halted behind bumper-to-bumper traffic. It would be a parking lot for the next mile until her exit.

Normally this would frustrate her, but for the moment, it terrified her, because she was being pursued. But when she looked in the rearview mirror this time, she found that her wishes had been granted. The SUV was gone. She was so relieved that she failed to fully appreciate how she had managed to stop her car so perfectly without the benefit of sight.

And then, coming on like an electrical storm, that blinding headache returned.

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## *Malibu, California*

By the time Suki arrived at the hospital, her mind was humming with an anxiety that chased away what remained of the pain in her head. She had a sense that something huge was about to happen, just as TC had told her it would on the day of his death. She wasn't yet sure what that something would be, but she knew that she had to get Lanie Montrose out of this place.

In the corner room, she was delighted to find Lanie awake and smiling. Gone were all signs of the heavy medication, prescribed or otherwise. She looked clear-eyed and startlingly happy.

“Dr. Suki!” she said cheerfully. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Suki had been so deep into her own fantasies about conspiracies that she had forgotten that Lanie, when sober, could have a sharp sense of humor. She hadn’t been expecting Lanie to be so awake and lucid, so she wasn’t prepared for what to say. All at once, she wanted to tell her about how Becca, and apparently Lanie’s old friend Rick, had died in connection with the oddities she had seen on the jump drive, but she couldn’t bring herself to lay that on someone who had just tried to kill herself. She would have to find the time and place to reveal these awful truths. This was decidedly not it.

“Still always one for a laugh, I see,” Lanie volunteered when it was clear Suki wouldn’t break her stony gaze of examination.

After a forced chuckle, Suki took a seat beside Lanie.

“You seem tense, Doc,” Lanie said.

“Of course I’m tense,” Suki said in a voice just above a whisper.

Lanie looked back over her shoulder conspiratorially. “You sound paranoid. Shouldn’t that be my job?”

“Has Dr. Schmidt told you what he intends to do today?”

Lanie shrugged and broke into another of those devastatingly pretty smiles of hers, her full, pastel-pink lips revealing straight white teeth that practically glimmered along with her golden skin. “Yeah. I’m pretty stoked, to tell the truth.”

“*Stoked?*” Suki spat.

“It means I’m excited,” Lanie offered.

Suki shook her head dismissively. “I know what it means. What I mean is, how can you be stoked about hypnotization? It’s a quack science. We’re just going to sit here and watch you babble like a baby for twenty

minutes while Schmidt writes notes about needing to peel back more layers of your repressed identity.”

“‘Schmidt,’ eh?” Lanie arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “Dropping the ‘doctor’ formalities, are we, Carter? I suppose I should take that to mean you and *Dr. Schmidt* don’t exactly see eye to eye.”

Suki huffed a frustrated breath. This seemed to happen every time she met with Lanie: she felt almost as if *she* was the one in therapy.

“I’m excited about the whole thing,” Lanie said. “I just want to get the truth out. I didn’t try to kill myself, but no one believes me. I’m telling you, Sook, I was clean. It was Ingrid.”

Suki cocked her head to one side, intrigued, and sensing that it would be more productive if she just let Lanie speak.

“Maybe if I can relive the pool stuff subconsciously,” Lanie continued, “people will start taking me seriously.” She leaned forward and tried to reach out to place her hand on Suki’s wrist, but the restraints holding her to the bed prevented her from completing the motion. She took one furtive look at the restraints and another at Suki and added, “I’m not crazy.”

At the same moment that Suki cracked into her first genuine smile of the day, the door cracked open as well. In walked Dr. Schmidt, carrying a tray bearing a tea service and wearing an oily grin. “Of course you’re not,” he said, having apparently overheard.

“That’s right,” Lanie said, nodding jovially at Suki. “I’m not crazy, you’re not crazy, he’s not crazy. We’re all just so not crazy, it’s crazy.”

Schmidt gave a polite laugh, then silently offered some tea by breaking into a hopeful, wide-eyed look and performing another of his trademark gameshow hand swoops.

“Yes, thank you,” Lanie said. “But . . .” She made a show of tugging on the restraints that connected her wrists to the bed’s rails.

“Ah, yes, I suppose it’s time we removed those.” Schmidt produced a small key, and a moment later, Lanie’s wrists were free. She rubbed them briefly, then accepted the cup from Schmidt.

Suki refused the tea in a tone that said she wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. Lanie sipped her tea, giving Suki an amused look over the rim of the cup, then placed the cup on the nightstand next to the leather-bound journal that had been brought with her to the hospital. “Okeydokey, Smokey. Let’s do it.”

Schmidt reached into a pocket and plucked out the penlight he would apparently use to put Lanie into a hypnotic state. When he started speaking softly and asking Lanie to count backward, Suki rolled her eyes in an expression meant for Lanie. The pop star missed it, though, because she was too intent on leaping into hypnosis. She sat up straight and edged forward in her bed, then concentrated vigorously on everything Schmidt was saying.

As much as she doubted the actual application of hypnosis, Suki had to admit to herself that just listening to Schmidt’s calm tone made her feel sleepy, at least. Of course, she also might have assigned that feeling to the less than three hours of actual sleep she had gotten last night, and how thoughts of the mysterious SUV following her had caused her to space out about picking up her morning coffee.

When her eyes began to get heavy, Suki decided that it would be best to turn away from the proceedings. Her gaze found the newspaper on Lanie’s nightstand. Her first thought was that she was surprised that Schmidt had allowed his patient to accept news from the outside world.

Then she froze when she noticed the cover story. There was a picture of the car smashed against the massive California oak tree, police tape in the foreground. The headline made mention of a hit-and-run in Santa Monica, the driver and victim still unidentified.

The story of Becca’s death transported Suki’s mind back to that moment she saw it all happen. This time, rather than dwell on the horror of watching Becca’s body break, she recalled with clarity how she had run from the car, outpacing it for more than a city block before taking off across a packed parking lot, weaving through cars with all the grace and speed of a gazelle. Even as she relived the memory so vividly in her mind, she couldn’t believe it was real.

Then again, over the past few days, she had seen many things that she couldn't believe were real.

Now she could add to the list what came next. The moment Schmidt's countdown reached zero, Lanie looked transformed. Her body stiffened, and her voice became softer, and prettier somehow. When she spoke, it was almost like she sang. Suki was so startled by the unexpected transformation that she rose to her feet and came around behind Dr. Schmidt, whose own expression mirrored her shock.

The moment Suki got a look at Lanie's eyes, she understood why. The irises had disappeared. They weren't rolled back in her head, either. They were simply *gone*, her eyes a glowing, pure white that was both alien and beautiful at the same time. They gave Suki the sense that Lanie was looking through not just her, but through the building, through the surrounding mountains, and through time itself.

"Is this . . . ?" Suki managed to say before trailing off into wonder.

"Normal?" Schmidt said breathlessly. "No." Then he seemed to collect himself. He sat up straight and slid closer to Lanie in his chair. "No, this is not normal. But it is surely fascinating."

"Fascinating," Suki repeated absently, lost in Lanie's gaze. That scene with the clock was replaying in her mind, then shifting to the superhuman sprint from the car, then to the memory of the video that wouldn't play all the way through on her computer. Suki felt terrified and reassured all at once at the notion that she wasn't the one causing these visions to flash in her mind. Distantly she could sense that it was Lanie who was parsing her memory.

"You have seen me," Lanie said in that beautiful, songlike voice.

"I have . . . seen you?" Suki said. She could feel Schmidt looking at her, aghast.

Lanie's sightless face broke into a slight smile. "The real me. And you have begun to understand your gift."

Suki's heart started to pound. "My gift?"

“Yes,” Lanie said, happily drawing out the syllable. “When you give something positive to the universe, the universe gives something positive back to you.”

For longer than she knew, Suki felt transfixed by Lanie’s gaze, as if it was the only place in the world where she could feel safe and understood.

She hated Dr. Schmidt for choosing that beautiful moment to start asking questions.

“Am I speaking with Lanie Montrose?” he asked, snapping Suki out of her trance.

Suki glared at him from behind, her expression twisting into revulsion. They had talked about using the hypnosis to help uncover what had happened to Lanie in the pool, but this was the kind of question she had feared he might ask—the same kind of question a stage hypnotist asked when pretending to reveal evidence of past lives.

“In a way, yes,” Lanie replied, that same comforting smile returning.

“In a way,” Schmidt repeated as if to himself. “Can I assume that you are also someone else?”

Suki scoffed.

“Yes,” Lanie replied.

“Who else are you?” Schmidt asked excitedly.

“My name is not important now, for it has changed many times.”

“And where are you from, one of many names?” Schmidt asked lamely.

“Xandon. It is a planet far beyond your galaxy.”

When Schmidt looked hopefully back at Suki, she shook her head to dismiss him. *What a crock*, she thought. She had been so startled by Lanie’s white eyes that she had allowed herself to get sucked into this glorified parlor trick. Helping clear the way for the subconscious was one thing, but past lives, alien planets, and alternate universes? Suki Carter had heard quite enough. She stood, ready to put a stop to this, when Lanie said something that stayed her.

“The Guardians sent me here,” she said. “I serve them, and have served them for millennia, through many lives and many guises. And Suki, you serve them, too—though you seem to have forgotten it.”

Every logical part of Suki’s mind raged against this ridiculous claim, but somehow, it still rang weirdly true. So, with a huff, she decided to return to her seat and at least see where this silliness went.

“Why did they send you?” Schmidt asked, apparently undeterred by how farfetched his patient was sounding. In fact, from his tone and his posture, it almost seemed to Suki that he had been *expecting* to hear something like this. Given his paper, she knew he’d been hoping for confirmation of his past lives nonsense, but to just brush this story off as an everyday occurrence struck Suki as more than a little odd.

“To protect Earth from him,” Lanie said flatly.

“Who is ‘him?’”

The question appeared to cause Lanie great pain. She abandoned her rigid posture and pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. In clear frustration, she began rocking forward and back, gripping her hands together so tightly that they went white.

“Okay, Dr. Schmidt,” Suki said, standing and putting herself between him and Lanie. “I think that’s enough of the crap for one day. Could we get to the reason we’re doing this in the first place please?”

The doctor shrugged. “I don’t choose the direction of these sessions, Doctor. I can’t control where the hypnosis takes the patient.” He pointed to Lanie. “She has chosen to visit a past life.”

“Oh my God,” Suki said dismissively. She made a motion for Schmidt to get up so she could take his place in the interview seat. She glanced at Lanie’s journal on the nightstand, then turned a soothing, casual gaze on the still white-eyed Lanie Montrose.

“Lanie, what can you remember about the day the police found you by the pool?”

Lanie calmed at Suki’s voice. “I arrived on Earth five thousand years ago by your calendars,” she said.

Suki groaned and snapped her fingers in front of Lanie's eyes. This seemed to gather her attention, but didn't return her irises. "Lanie," she said flatly. "Lanie, listen. We need you to come back to reality." She glanced at the journal again and decided to try a new tact. "What can you tell us about that moment when you saw the three hawks circling in the beautiful blue sky? You wrote about them. Remember?"

The question sent a jolt through Lanie, and for the first time, she seemed to look at Suki instead of through her. "You are one of them," she said in a dreamlike tone. "You will be one of the three to prevent Sar's return."

Suki fell back in the chair at the mention of the name. All her life, she had borne witness to coincidence, and all her life, TC had told her that there was no such thing. The universe did not allow for coincidence. It only made connections. Prior to that morning, she had never heard the name "Sar." Then, on that bizarre video delivered to her by a woman who gave her life for the cause, she heard it once. Now here she was hearing it again. And with the connection made, she suddenly remembered something. In a dream, she had seen a pregnant woman boarding a canoe. *Sar*, she thought, strangely certain that the connection made sense.

She was so shocked by her own thoughts that it took her a moment to register what Schmidt was whispering so urgently into the void that was Lanie's gaze.

"You must forget who you are or they will find you," Schmidt whispered, leaning toward Lanie.

Suki snapped out of her revelation and looked to her fellow psychiatrist, who wore an expression of genuine concern for the first time since she had met him. He fumbled in his pocket and produced the penlight. Then he repeated his plea one more time, even more softly now, that she must forget who she was, before he quickly started counting Lanie out of the hypnotic state.

"What the hell is going on here?" Suki said.

Schmidt reached ten and snapped his fingers. Lanie's white eyes blinked rapidly before slamming shut. A moment later, they were open

again, that lovely shade of green that had helped make her famous having returned.

“We going to get started with this show, or what?” Lanie asked.

Suki found that she was having a hard time keeping her composure. She looked to Schmidt, who was scribbling something on his notepad. At first, she assumed it was some message about the truly bizarre session he had just witnessed, but then he quickly folded it up, handed it to Suki, and without a word, turned away and shuffled from the room.

“What’s going on, Suki?” Lanie asked, fear in her voice now.

“It’s okay,” Suki said in a way that failed to convince even herself. Her hands worked feverishly over the folded note, opening it and flattening it against her thigh.

*We must not speak of this to anyone, Schmidt had written. They have their ways of listening, and they must not know. I will keep her here as if nothing has happened. But I urge you to remain silent.*



## CHAPTER 7

### *Washington, DC*

The senator sighed at the picture of his family on the corner of his desk. The familiar beauty of his wife and two sons had become less a reminder of the people he cherished most and more of a reminder of what he was missing, thanks to this increasingly contemptible job. The truth was that he had run for this office because he believed it would be simpler than holding a congressional seat. Sure, the battles would be more focused and the stakes potentially higher, but there would be much less travel, slightly less concern about appeasing a local constituency, and ideally, much more time at home.

None of that had turned out to be true. Indeed, taking this office had exposed him to additional layers of stress, because now he carried not only the demands of his home state, but the demands of a government that would have him keep and advance secrets. He soon came to learn that these were not your everyday secrets, either. They were so heavy and blindingly vast that at the end of each day, he felt utterly exhausted, as if he had just spent twelve hours carrying the full weight of everything his country didn't know about the government, about the world, and indeed about the universe itself.

His sons still tried to make the most of what little unencumbered time he had for them, but his wife, he could tell, was running out of patience. Her indifference of late had proven difficult for her to mask. It had been a long while since they had carried on a conversation that didn't include a heavy subtext of discomfort, but more disconcerting was her physical response. The last time he had touched her, she actually flinched and pulled back. The awkwardness and dislike that had burrowed their way into the relationship, he always assumed he could fix. But this was something else.

With a sigh, he turned the picture away from him and got back to work.

Not three keystrokes into the report he owed to the Bosenberg Group, there was an unexpected knock at the door. He looked up, anticipating his secretary's nervously smiling face, and slumped when the woman who'd had the nerve to call herself Ingrid Saint Eve stepped into the office unannounced, as if she had just managed to slip her intimidatingly Germanic frame past the reception desk.

Senator Edwards hated everything about this woman, but what he hated most was the blasé way she had assumed that she could pull off the kind of name only befitting a Bond temptress. She was pretty, sure, but in a tight-lipped, Prussian sort of way, and she was surely no mastermind of espionage.

Still, she carried herself like a proper spy, even if she was an FBI informant doing favors in exchange for more lenient drug charge sentencing. How his government would trust such a critical role to such an untrustworthy woman, Edwards had never been able to wrap his mind around. The Bosenbergs had insisted that the person filling Ingrid's position would only be believable as a soul-sucking drug pusher and financial leach if she was in fact a soul-sucking drug pusher and financial leach. Of course, it only helped her cause that she was also physically strong enough to carry Lanie Montrose from place to place, whenever the need arose.

"Miss Saint Eve," Edwards said with mock pleasantry. "How nice of you to drop by."

Even the way she took a seat across from his desk bothered him. She made herself comfortable, as though she thought she should be the one to occupy this office.

"You know, I always trip up on the 'Miss' before your name," Edwards added. "I mean, should it be 'Miss Saint Eve,' or 'Miss Eve,' or just 'Saint Eve?' It's all very confusing."

He was glad to see that his sarcasm wasn't lost on Ingrid. She gave a wry grin and leaned forward far enough for her floor-length jacket to fall open and expose a top cut too low for the senator's comfort. It wasn't that he didn't care to see all that exposed flesh—it was that it bothered him how

much it still managed to arouse him despite his contempt for the woman who wore it.

“You owe me money,” she said.

He laughed. “You do understand how this works, right? You realize that it’s not me personally who pays you? That it’s an organization affiliated with the United States government that cuts your checks?”

She shrugged and leaned back in her chair, still looking too comfortable. “Yes, but you’re the one who signs them. So, how about we get to signing one, shall we?”

Edwards folded his hands and set them on his desk. “And what exactly is it I’m signing for?”

“Keeping Lanie Montrose silent. I was told the big payday would come when the job was done.” She twirled a finger next to her ear, then pointed to the sky. “The job is done. So, I’m here to get paid.”

Now the senator had to work to suppress his anger. He would hate this woman completely if he didn’t partly admire her moxie. “I shouldn’t have to remind you of this, but the job was to keep her too drugged to remember her talent, not to kill her.”

“You say tomato, I say toma—”

“Enough!” Edwards snapped. “You’re lucky I don’t have *you* killed.”

The woman at least had enough sense to keep her silence after that.

The senator stewed for a time, trying to decide what he could and couldn’t tell Ingrid to keep her in line. “If keeping Lanie Montrose silent meant killing her,” he said finally, “don’t you think we’d have done that by now?”

Ingrid blanched, looking suddenly less sure of herself.

“Lanie Montrose is important to our clients,” Edwards said. “They need her alive, but not fully lucid.”

“And who are your clients?” Ingrid had the gall to ask.

“That’s not your concern. What is your concern is that we’re paying you to keep her so addled with drugs that she can’t function normally. If she’s dead, then she can’t function at all, can she?”

Ingrid shifted forward in her chair, her expression like that of a child trying to explain her way out of an uncovered lie. “But the drugs weren’t working anymore. She was fighting me. Hell, she *fired* me before I . . .” All at once, she seemed to lose her desire to argue.

“Before you decided to resort to murder,” Edwards said, shaking his head. “So we’re having this conversation because Lanie Montrose wounded your pride?”

Ingrid looked down at her hands, which she had balled together so tightly that her knuckles were starting to flash white.

“I guess you were too busy skittering cross-country to see the news,” Edwards said.

Ingrid curled her lip. “What news?”

The senator reached into the top drawer of his desk and produced the entertainment section of the newspaper, which he tossed on Ingrid’s lap. He watched contentedly as she read the front page, and her expression changed from smug defiance to disappointed acceptance.

“Seems our Lanie Montrose will still be needing her medicine after all,” Edwards said.

Ingrid slumped, letting the paper fall loosely off her lap and scatter across the floor.

His satisfaction was such that Edwards nearly burst into laughter. Instead, he straightened up and put on his ordering-around face—the one he always wore during campaign speeches. “Stop wasting my time, Ingrid. We’ll call you when you’ve completed the job to our satisfaction. As it happens, we’ve bought you some time.”

“Time?” the contemptible woman asked.

“If you must know, we’ve brought to heel the head of the clinic that’s holding her. He’ll keep her properly sedated until you return. But we’ll need some help with her shrink. What was her name?”

“Suki Carter,” Ingrid said.

“Fine,” Edwards spat. “Just get back out there and clean up the mess you’ve made.”

She took a good long while to collect herself and stand. As she did so, she turned and bent at the waist to pick up the newspaper. Given the sheer length of her slender legs, the posture only made it more difficult for her hands to reach the floor. Edwards could tell that she was trying to give him a glimpse of her ass—another manipulation from a woman who seemed to live on manipulations. He hated himself for taking the look he was offered, and hated himself more for enjoying the view, if only on an instinctual level.

The phone rang as she was still picking up.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Edwards said when he recognized the scrambled number on the caller ID.

“Don’t mind me,” Ingrid cracked. “I’m just straightening up the mess I’ve made.”

Inwardly Edwards growled. He wanted to stand and physically escort Ingrid from the room—maybe rough her up a little in the process—but he knew that the caller would be furious if he failed to answer. So, even though she was still in earshot and seemed in no hurry to get out of it, he picked up.

“Well hello, Manti,” the senator said with forced pleasantries. “You know, I was just reaching for the phone to call you.”

“I’m sure,” said the gruff, troubled voice from the other end of the line. “You know why I’m calling.”

Edwards passed another casual glance at Ingrid, who had bent over again to retrieve what he hoped would be the last scattered section of the newspaper. “You’ve seen the news.”

“Of course I’ve seen the news. You think it doesn’t reach me out here? Why do you think we set up where we did? We hear *everything*.”

“I am aware, my friend,” Edwards said, trying to sound calmer than he felt. “And you can rest assured that we’re taking care of the problem

even as we speak.” He hoped that Manti couldn’t sense from his tone just how literal the statement was. His anxiety peaking now, Edwards pressed his hand to the phone and stage-whispered for Ingrid to get out of his office. He was somewhat surprised when she quickly complied. He snapped the mute button on the phone so he could call after her. “And Ingrid!”

Her frustratingly attractive face appeared from behind the door once more, a feigned grin bearing straight but drug-yellowed teeth.

“Watch the doses this time, would you?”

She straightened up and performed a formal salute before disappearing again through the door.

“Need I remind you of your job, Senator?” Manti was saying as Edwards unmuted the phone.

“No, of course not.”

“Your job is to keep Lanie Montrose out of the public eye.”

Edwards drew a breath to argue, but then stopped. There was just no convincing Manti of the truth: that drugging a pop star into a career-destroying spiral wouldn’t *decrease* her celebrity. In this culture, it would only enhance it. But Edwards had voiced this seeming contradiction enough times to know that it was pointless to mention it again. Ultimately, Manti called the shots. And the group executed the plans accordingly. Edwards just signed the checks.

“Lanie Montrose is in possession of information we need,” Manti said. “And until we can determine how to extract it from her, we keep her silent and out of sight. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“You do your job, and your government will receive the technology you crave.” Now the voice adopted an uncharacteristically sarcastic tone. “It seems to me that this is a relatively straightforward arrangement. Is there something about it that you have failed to grasp?”

For a moment, Edwards brooded on just how unstraightforward his group had made the matter. Of course, the US government had been enjoying this technology-exchange relationship with Manti for several years

now, but the government's relationship with another technology supplier dated back many decades before that. Even if the older relationship hadn't produced anything close to the level of advancements for the human race that Manti had shown in just a few short years, Edwards's group wasn't one to close any doors. Sure, it meant that they had to keep secrets from Manti—and the mere thought of that sent a shudder through Edwards—but in the view of the Bosenberg Group, secrets were the surest means of remaining in control.

“No, sir. There's not—”

“Then let me remind you that your government will never find itself leading the new order if you don't recover the discs and all *three* of their holders by the solstice. Are we clear?”

“Absolutely. Abundantly clear, sir.”

A short but wildly uncomfortable silence followed.

Manti broke it. “There has been an awakening, Senator. Surely you have noticed.”

“I have,” Edwards lied. He had no idea what Manti was talking about. He made a mental note to ask his friends in the subbasement at the Pentagon. But then again, what would a bunch of beings trapped underground know about anything?

“Then I have had enough insolence for one call,” Manti said. “You will continue monitoring Suki Carter. Thanks to your colossal failures, she is now our only access to Lanie Montrose. She may have a deeper connection to our efforts, as well. There have been many of what your people call coincidences surrounding this woman, and the universe does not create coincidences. Only connections.”

“We'll keep following Dr. Carter. Will there be anything else?”

In this next silence, Edwards read hesitation. He wondered if Manti was deciding whether the time was right to share some information about his true purpose.

“There is another,” he said finally. “A man by the name of James Sinclair.”

Edwards failed to stifle a surprised bark of laughter.

“Something is funny?” Manti snapped.

“Just another coincidence,” Edwards said. “I know James Sinclair. He’s with CIA. He and I were roommates in college.”

The grumbling from the other end of the line was impossible to mistake. “You must send someone to track him, as well.”

“Hell, I’ll do it myself,” Edwards offered. “I’d love to catch up with old Jimmy.”

“No,” Manti said flatly. “We have sensed that a dark power has come into Sinclair’s space. We can’t risk drawing attention to it. You are a United States senator. Your movements do not go unnoticed.”

Edwards had a hard time hiding his disappointment. “Fine. There’s another with the Bosenberg Group. Another of my college roommates. He knows James, and few know him. I’ll send him instead.”

“Very well,” Manti allowed. “I trust that I need not remind you of the importance of discretion. If darkness has found James Sinclair, then he must be critical to the mission.”

“I don’t need a reminder. Thank you.”

The silence was so complete that at first, Edwards made the mistake of thinking that the caller had unceremoniously left the line. He was just about to hang up when he heard Manti’s guttural voice once more.

“We are close,” he said. “Which means that *you* are close to changing the world, and the role your government plays in it.”

Edwards’s breath caught at the reminder of just how much power he stood to gain. Never mind the presidency. If everything played out as planned, the whole world would bend to his will.

“Find the discs and their wielders,” Manti said, “and you will have all that you desire.”



## CHAPTER 8

### *Malibu, California*

The note Schmidt had left her had remained in Suki's head all day. She had already called her assistant and asked her to postpone all her client sessions for the rest of the week. The thing about having a celebrity clientele was that they tended to be needier than most, so Suki made a mental note to call Jane, a psychiatrist friend of hers. Suki and Jane had an arrangement where they would take on each other's workloads whenever one of them wanted to go on vacation. Usually this required more advanced notice, but Suki had only just met Jane for coffee last week, and knew that her friend's schedule was unusually light in the coming weeks. For now, she would try to just kick the can down the road for her clients, but if necessary, Jane would come to the rescue, as she always did.

So, while her assistant worked on the rescheduling, Suki passed most of her time sitting at Lanie's bedside, talking about whatever the pop star seemed comfortable talking about. Suki didn't want to press the issue of the near-death in the pool, nor the news that two of Lanie's friends had died. She had been around the block on this whole star-psychology thing enough times to know that the last thing you wanted to do was start dropping truth bombs before you had a chance to rebuild trust. Usually it was just a matter of sympathizing on a level that bordered on fawning. Suki had never encountered anything quite as fragile as a celebrity's ego.

Her efforts to genuflect at the altar of Lanie Montrose that morning had been halfhearted, and it was all because Schmidt's note so dominated her thoughts. What had he meant by "they have their ways of listening?" The whole thing had read like a textbook entry for clinical paranoia. So she spent all morning pondering what he'd been on about. What could he have meant by "ways of listening?" How many ways were there to listen? For that matter, who were "they?"

No matter how many times she tried to parse the words for a more pedestrian interpretation, she kept coming back to the grander reading: Schmidt was afraid that someone—someone powerful, presumably—had bugged the room, and that saying too much would give that someone too much information.

But that made no sense. First, Schmidt owned this place. If he thought it was bugged, he could just hire someone to waltz in and check. Second, if someone was going to set a listening device to gather information, why would they put it in a psychiatric facility? No less, why would they be interested to hear about the post-traumatic ramblings of a drug-addicted pop star? The only organizations to whom that kind of information would appeal were the tabloids, and they didn't exactly need audio to help them craft their stories. When it came to the rags, theories and conjecture were always more than enough. Why face a federal wiretapping charge when printing the wild musings of a bottom-feeding journalist would move just as much copy?

That prevailing interpretation of Schmidt's note could only mean that Lanie's admitting psychiatrist believed that some shady entity was listening in to his conversations with the express purpose of learning about Lanie Montrose's secrets. The "secrets" in question had turned out to be mad ramblings about some nutty alien adventure. The efficacy of hypnosis aside, Lanie's story had been pure fantasy—most likely a delusion brought upon by PTSD. Schmidt, meanwhile, seemed to think that Lanie's weird "past-life" reminiscences contained information of value to some third party who might overhear if they weren't careful.

By the time the morning rolled into the afternoon, and Lanie had settled in for a mindbogglingly long nap, Suki had started to wonder whether the doctor needed to spend some time as a guest in his own facility. There were always rumors about this kind of thing happening to other doctors—spend enough time with mental patients, and you start to *think* like one—but she had never seen evidence of it in the real world. Then again, she had seen lots of things in the past twenty-four hours that she never would have believed actually happened in the real world.

A girl died trying to get her a jump drive. Suki had outrun a car. Her pop star client had been checked in to a psychiatric rehab facility that Suki didn't even know existed. The dead girl's brother had also died, and on a video that featured footage of a not-quite-human lady speaking a cryptic message through some obviously alien technology. Then she had watched an accredited psychiatrist honestly believe that he had helped a patient recall a past life through hypnosis before he buggered off with a note referencing people listening in on the conversation.

No, nothing that had happened to Suki in the past twenty-four hours should have happened in the real world. It had all been so much to take in that she had nearly forgotten the otherworldly experience she'd had upon touching her grandfather's Nazi clock.

"We must not speak of this to anyone," Suki said.

She regretted saying the words aloud, because they stirred the still-slumbering Lanie. Suki hoped that her client wouldn't wake. Lanie was just so much easier to watch over when she was sleeping, after all. Besides, Suki felt like she still needed more time to riddle out what was going on here before she could share anything more with Lanie.

But then she glanced at her watch and realized that far more time had passed than she had noticed. Somehow Lanie had managed to nap for four hours, long enough to carry them to the brink of sunset. As the pop star yawned and stretched, Suki marveled about how she had been so lost in thought that the growing darkness through the thin pink curtains had failed to register. She had been anxious about Schmidt all day, and it seemed to her that the time had passed for Schmidt to go home for the night. It struck her as odd that he had allowed her to go all day in this room without even checking in once—not even so much as to send an orderly. In what kind of facility would a psychiatric patient coming down off some serious tranquilizers, a more serious drug habit, and a bizarre hypnotherapy session be left unattended all day?

*One in which the head shrink is afraid that someone is listening in,* she thought wryly. Then she thought, *They must not know,* the words echoing in her head for the millionth time.

She rolled her eyes.

“Suki?” Lanie said through a yawn as she rolled over to face her visitor. She had clearly slept hard, given the way the drool had pasted her hair to her cheek. Even so, such was her nature that she still managed to look jaw-droppingly gorgeous. Suki would’ve hated her for her physical perfection if she hadn’t been so awed by it. “What are you doing here?”

“You don’t remember?” Suki asked, instinctively reaching for her notepad.

“No, not now.” If Lanie hadn’t pointed at the pad, Suki might have misunderstood the meaning of the words. “Don’t be my doctor right now, Sook,” Lanie insisted. “Just be my friend, okay?”

With a sigh, Suki agreed. The truth was that she felt like she could use a friend, as well. It was a strange sensation, given that she knew she wasn’t the woman in this room most in need. Sure, she had seen more weirdness in a day than she could remember seeing in all her adult life, but Lanie’s twenty-four hours still had her beat. After all, Lanie was still sleeping off a truckload of tranquilizers following a hallucinogen-driven retreat into a heavenly near-death experience in her swimming pool. Then she had spent the morning hallucinating herself back into La-La Land, this time imagining an altogether alien plotline.

And worse, the withdrawals would come soon—just as soon as the last of those tranquilizers finally released their tentacles. Suki had never experienced withdrawals, but she had seen people suffering from them. Soon, Lanie would be clawing at her skin as if her very insides were infested with spiders.

No, Suki wasn’t the one who most needed a friend.

“Listen, Lanie,” she said, trying to sound as friendly as possible. “I’m a little concerned about . . .” Maybe it was Schmidt’s paranoia rubbing off on her, because she felt compelled to lean in to Lanie and lower her voice to just above a whisper. “I’m concerned about Dr. Schmidt. I think he may have gone off the rails a bit.”

Lanie stretched once more, dreamily, and then swiped the drool-sticky hair away from her face. “What do you mean?”

*They have their ways of listening*, she heard once more in her head. Crazy though the idea of it was, she decided to write down her next thought, rather than speak it. *I want to get you out of here.*

“Fine,” Lanie said with a shrug. “Just give me enough time to straighten out, though, okay? I know it’s weird, but this place has kind of grown on me.”

“Lanie, you can’t—”

“No, just let me have this,” the pop star interrupted. “My whole life has been in motion. Moving around as a kid. A nomad before my fame. And then the whole fame thing has me on my feet or on a plane, like, *constantly*. I finally found some peace right before Ingrid tried to . . .” She trailed off for a time as if trying to remember whether this was true. “Just let me enjoy the tranquility for a little while, yeah?”

Suki wanted to argue, but she could see from Lanie’s expression that it wouldn’t go well. *Fine*, she thought. *You want to stay in this looney bin, I’m not going to stop you.* The thought made her suddenly and surprisingly angry, but the heat of the anger quickly faded, as her sympathy won out. “I have something I need to tell you,” Suki allowed.

Lanie pulled her legs to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, her eyes fluttering to demonstrate interest.

“Your friend Becca . . . she’s . . .” The doctor found that she couldn’t finish.

“You’re talking about Rick’s sister, right?” Lanie furrowed her brow.

The tear came to Suki’s eye quickly when she recalled the scene and heard that sickening thud one more time. “She died, Lanie.” She had no idea how to continue with the rest of the news, so she just blurted it out. “And so did Rick.”

If the revelation stirred the pop star, it didn’t immediately show on her face. After a time, Lanie’s lips parted slightly, but she didn’t seem to share the same level of sorrow that Suki felt. The look struck Suki as

similar to the one Lanie had worn during her hypnosis just before her face changed.

“They were my friends,” Lanie said, halting when Suki motioned for her to keep her voice down.

“Becca died right in front of me,” Suki said in a conspiratorial whisper. “And Rick, he . . .”

Now the shock and sorrow registered on Lanie’s pretty face. Her legs fell flat on the bed as she brought a hand to her chest. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“Becca died while trying to deliver this to me,” Suki said, producing the jump drive from the hidden pocket in the liner of her briefcase and passing it to Lanie. She couldn’t believe how she was acting, but in the off chance that Schmidt was right about someone listening in, she didn’t want to draw too much attention to what she held.

“What is this?” Lanie asked.

Suki shook her head and motioned again for Lanie to keep her voice down. “I can’t explain it right now. Not here. But suffice to say I’ve seen some strange things. I haven’t seen all of that, but Becca said Rick died on that video. And I have no idea what any of it means, but clearly it meant something to whoever killed Becca.”

“She was *killed*?” Lanie didn’t bother lowering her voice. In fact, these words delivered more like a scream.

The volume startled Suki to where she realized that in her halfhearted attempts to play this cloak-and-dagger routine, she had withheld a rather important piece of information. Rather than speak the words aloud, Suki decided just to hand Lanie the newspaper she’d been carrying in her briefcase. She waited while Lanie pored over the article. With each line, the pop star’s expression grew more pained. By the time she finished, her eyes were brimming with tears and she was sniffing.

“That happened the moment after she gave me that thing,” Suki said, nodding to the jump drive still cupped in Lanie’s palm.

The pop star tossed the little piece of plastic back to Suki as if it had scalded her. Her eyes were searching Suki now, desperately, the tears spilling over her cheeks. “Whatever’s on that, I don’t want to watch it,” she said finally.

“But, Lanie, Becca wanted you to—”

“It’s video of Rick *dying*,” Lanie cut in. “He was . . .” She trailed off into a long sob. “He was my best friend. Probably my only *real* friend.”

Suki shook her head mournfully, wanting to say that *she* was Lanie’s friend, too. But instead, she said nothing. She watched as Lanie’s expression went from one of sorrow to one of doubt to one of certitude, and then finally, her eyes narrowed as she sprang into action.

It was the first time that Suki had seen Lanie get out of the bed since her hospitalization. She could hardly believe how quickly and comfortably the younger woman moved. Anyone else trying to rise after more than a full day on her back likely would have found herself a little off-balance—especially if she was coming down off a tranquilizer overload—but Lanie moved with enviable grace and athleticism. In no time, she had found a fresh hospital gown and nudged her feet into a pair of slippers, and now she was sweeping back to Suki to pull her to her feet.

“Never mind what I said before,” Lanie whispered. “Let’s get out of here. I *have* to see what’s on that drive.”

Her heart skipping, Suki rose and gathered her things. But by the time she reached the door, Lanie had already discovered that it was locked. She started working the handle softly at first, then frantically, her expression tense.

“Locked?” Suki said, a sinking feeling blooming from her chest.

Lanie looked as if she was fighting back tears. “Why are my instincts about places always so wrong?”

“They’ve never locked me in here before,” Suki said, producing her phone from her bag with the intent to call the front desk. But then that sinking feeling returned, and she had a sense—no, a *certainty*—that they were alone in the building. She pulled back one of the curtains to peer

through to the hallway, her fears confirmed by the total darkness outside the room. How long had she felt it, she wondered? How long had she known that Schmidt had left, taking with him every nurse and orderly in the building?

Now that she thought on it, she realized that when she arrived that morning, several of the beds she had seen occupied by patients on the previous day weren't there anymore. In fact, she couldn't remember seeing a single other person, patient or employee, all day. The receptionist had been there to let her in, of course, but once she made it through the security door, she had been alone.

"Do you have a way to unlock it?" Lanie asked. "Maybe you could call the desk."

"No," Suki said flatly. She backed away from the door and looked up toward the ceiling, which was a tangle of exposed steel beams and pipes—very industrial chic. Now that she looked up, she had another one of her premonitions, this one telling her that they were being watched. She looked to Lanie and put a finger to her lips before pointing up at the ceiling.

"You think there are cameras up there?" Lanie asked too loudly.

Again, Suki tried to shush her friend. She reached back into her bag and produced a notepad. Then she started scribbling, *I don't think they're watching us. I know they're watching us.*

Lanie's first expression upon receiving the note spoke to fear. But then it appeared that something dawned on her, and she looked at Suki with a new light in her eyes. "Did someone tell you this?"

Suki shook her head slowly, meaningfully.

The pop star gave a knowing nod. "You feel it, too, don't you?"

*Feel what?* Suki wrote, but she knew already that her friend understood.

Lanie grabbed Suki by the arm and led her over to the corner by the bed. Then, like a schoolgirl gossiping with her best friend, she pulled Suki down so they were sitting cross-legged in front of each other. Then she

slung a length of the curtain over their heads. “Like you’re, I don’t know,” she whispered, “*waking up* somehow.”

“Waking up?” Suki mouthed, but again, she could sense that she was speaking to the only person in the world who could understand the feelings she had been having and the unbelievable things that had been happening to her.

“Like there’s this *power* growing inside you,” Lanie whispered. “Like you can see and do things that you weren’t able to do before—things that shouldn’t even be *possible*.”

Suki tried to hide her relief at the confirmation that someone else was feeling the way she felt, but she couldn’t stop herself.

Lanie’s striking green eyes went wide with excitement. “I thought I was crazy,” she said, not bothering to whisper this time. Then, after Suki brought her finger to her lips again, she lowered her voice. “I’ve been able to make things happen just by thinking about them. I mean, this morning, I told Schmidt to leave and to take everyone with him. And now? They’re all gone. That’s, like, definitely crazy, right?”

“Before yesterday, I would’ve said yes,” Suki whispered. “But I can’t even explain what I’ve seen and done since then.”

Lanie was suddenly harried as she grasped for the notepad in Suki’s hand. Quickly, she wrote, *The drugs numb the power.*

*They’re still drugging you?* Suki wrote, the anger plain on her face.

“They said they’ve stopped,” Lanie whispered. Then she wrote, *They don’t bring the pills anymore. They hide it in my food.*

“How can you tell?” Suki asked.

Lanie gave a sardonic expression as if to say, “Lady, I’ve had my share of drugs. I know how this works.” She wrote, *Seriously?*

With a nod of understanding, Suki took the notepad back and began writing down a plan to help Lanie taper off the drugs. The goal would be to sober her up slowly, and without Schmidt or his orderlies knowing.

*If Schmidt ever comes back,* she thought darkly.

But then, the moment she finished, she heard something she hadn't expected. Someone was unlocking the door.

With a start, both women came to their feet, the curtain falling back behind them. Suki felt her breath catch in her throat when the familiar face emerged from the darkness of the hallway.

"Ah, Dr. Carter," Schmidt said in a tone of exaggerated pleasantry. "I must apologize. I've only just returned from . . ." He paused, looking confused about where he had been. Then he brightened up quickly. "Well, no matter. No one told me you were here."

Suki wanted to say, "You might've bothered telling me you had my patient on lockdown," but didn't wish to share her knowledge of that information with the overlord of the facility. She felt with abundant clarity that the only hope for escape would be to play dumb and play it slow.

"It's no trouble," Suki said. "I was planning on staying the night, if that's not a problem."

Dr. Schmidt looked at Suki for a long time, saying nothing. His unwavering stare made her uncomfortable, but then, just when she felt she would crumble under it, he glanced quickly at the ceiling—so quickly that Suki wasn't sure she had seen what she thought she saw. When she cocked her head to the side to show her confusion, he did it once more. Now Suki understood that he was trying to motion subtly to the cameras embedded in the ceiling.

"I'm afraid we can't accommodate you in that way, Dr. Carter," Schmidt said finally, his tone suggesting feigned sympathy. "It was all good and well for you to remain by your patient's side on the night she checked in. We wanted her to be greeted by a familiar face when she woke up, after all. But for the benefit of our other patients, we can't allow that to continue. Our policy is to restrict visitation to daylight hours." Again, he shot a glance at the ceiling, and this time, it was as if Suki could read his thoughts. *They won't like you staying, is what she could hear him thinking. And if you do, I'll be the one to pay the price.*

Lanie seemed to sense the tension, as well, because she stepped forward and laced her hand under Suki's arm. "It's okay, Sook," she said

softly. “You know I can take care of myself.”

When Suki turned to face her, she met a knowing gaze. *I’ll follow the plan, she seemed to say. You get out of here and find out whatever you can about what’s going on.*

The two held each other’s stare for a time before Suki nodded reluctantly. “I suppose I should give you some space to clear your head,” she said.

Lanie nodded. She glanced at the still-hovering Schmidt, and he immediately excused himself and left the room.

Suki frowned. “Did you just—”

“Shhh . . . ,” Lanie admonished. Then she added in a whisper. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

Suki drew a calming breath. “Okay. I’ll be gone no more than a day or two.”

The pop star fell into her therapist’s arms, embracing her. “Do what you must do,” she said in a voice just above a whisper. “But I feel that something is close. We need information.”

Suki was so startled by the words that she found herself leaving the room in a kind of daze. Not until she got out of the building and stepped into the late afternoon sun did it occur to her why they’d had such an effect on her. She had felt it, too. Something was coming. And if they hoped to face it, she would first need to find out what it was.

She had seen so many confusing things over the past two days that her mind was reeling, but she was now certain of two things: first, she and Lanie were experiencing these newfound powers for a reason, and second, the most likely place where she might find answers was at her departed grandfather’s house in Amarillo.

She reached for her phone. With luck, she might be able to get the next flight.

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*Edinburgh, Scotland*

James Sinclair couldn't remember a time when he'd felt less in control of himself. The intensity of his attraction to this woman was such that, now that he thought on it, he couldn't even remember checking into this room, let alone climbing the stairs to it and charging inside. But now he was edging backward toward the bed, his hands settling on her perfect hips, and somehow she had slipped out of her skirt already. When her hand found him, a pleasurable warmth radiated from her touch and made him so weak he fell backward onto the bed. She climbed over him, her smooth knees tracing the outside of his thighs.

*Where have my clothes gone?* he thought, unable to remember how and when he had lost them.

It didn't matter, because she was over him now, the radiance of her lovely face blocking out all that could distract him. They searched each other with their lips, their tongues, their hands. James felt as if he was falling from a great height as she tightened her legs around him.

He didn't remember much after that, save for the most intense, singular, and all-encompassing pleasure he had ever known. The depth of it was such that it was as if his mind had left him entirely, allowing him to shed all measure of care and concern and crippling self-awareness, rendering him into a taut, primal version of himself that knew only pleasure and spoke only in vowels.

They stayed together in this way for hours, days, minutes, weeks, seconds—he couldn't be sure. Time no longer meant anything. Just when he thought he had found the absolute height that passion could deliver to a man, he shuddered into a release that made him feel as if he was filling with warm, rippling water. He fell completely into the ecstasy of that release, and when it was over, he felt more relaxed and numbed and cradled than he ever had before.

Moments later, his sleep was so deep that it was almost as if time had stopped completely. At first, he saw nothing but blackness, his body utterly at peace. But then, out of the black emerged a figure. It was beautiful

—intoxicatingly so—and at once, he knew it was Christina. Her lithe form moved with such fluid grace that it made him ache for her once more.

She took another step, and now James's desire turned to fear. She looked different somehow. She was still as lovely as any woman he had ever seen, but something in her eyes had changed. He told himself it was a dream, but even as he had the thought, he couldn't make himself believe it. Somehow he knew that this was actually happening, that what he saw was true. He watched her standing several feet away, and yet he could sense that she had him pinned to the bed, holding him down with some unseen force. He couldn't have moved if he'd tried.

The eyes fixed on him, black and unblinking. Her face was slack, almost like a gorgeous mask stretched over her true face. With that same enchanting grace, she reached out her arm and extended her fingers toward him, palm upturned. James's first instinct was to try to reach out for it, but his arms felt weighted down. He watched as Christina stood over him in this way for a time, perfectly still.

Then, subtly at first, but then building in urgency, he thought he saw motion near her shoulder. Something was wriggling inside her skin. That something bloomed into a tiny, writhing thing that darted down her arm with such speed that James couldn't make out what it was until it leapt onto him.

His heart felt as if it would explode in his chest when he saw it—a tiny, jet-black spider. It skittered over his bare chest and up his neck, the tips of its legs pricking him like sharp needles. He broke into a nervous sweat and began blasting hot breath out through his nose as it climbed onto his lips, its presence cold and metallic, and stopped. In protest, he forced a quailing groan through his pressed lips, but there was nothing more he could do. Even his fingers felt as if they weighed more than he could manage to lift.

The spider remained on his lips as James panted and fretted. Then Christina stepped forward, her mask of a face tightening back into the vision of the woman he had first met at the bar. When she smiled at him, despite everything, he calmed. It was at that moment that the spider darted into his left nostril, and his mind exploded in pain.

He tried to scream, but it came out only as a moan. He could feel the spider crawling and clawing into his nasal cavity, the agony growing with every rapid step. Then, at once, it disappeared, and now he felt as if his mind was no longer his to control. Christina's face lit with an ambient blue glow. James saw that she was holding something—a tablet perhaps—and watching it intently.

In flashing vignettes, James recalled meeting David, holding the diary that David had found and brought to him, seeing FDR's signature, reading about the copper glasses. He tried to struggle against the recollection, because he could sense that Christina could see them on the flickering device she was holding. His memory flashed forward to his first visit with his mother, and he flinched in agony as he realized that now Christina knew his next steps. Now she had heard the name "TC Carter."

Then the pain returned, wriggling in his sinuses as the thing inside him ascended. The relief when it left him was such that he actually managed a sigh. He still felt pressed to the bed as the spider leapt from his face and returned to Christina's outstretched hand. It melted into her skin in an instant, and then she was turning and searching through his bag. He strained his eyes to look down far enough to see her take the journal. An instant later, she was gone.

At the slamming of the door, he tried to rise, but found that he was still stuck to the bed as if held down by a lead-heavy blanket. All at once, he realized that this world still looked like a dream.

He forced himself awake, and after a moment to reorient himself, he felt his unseen bonds lift, and he could rise. Still naked, he ran for the door, throwing it open. He saw no sign of Christina, and heard only the gasps of two elderly women as they shrank away from him and scurried as fast as they could down the hall, their eyes never leaving his naked body.

Sheepishly he covered himself and backed into the room. He went to his bag and confirmed that it hadn't been only a dream. The journal was gone.

He slumped to the floor beside the bed, mortified by how much of a fool he had been. His sinuses felt raw, as if he had a cold coming on, and

his limbs were heavy and numb as though he had been drugged. He tried to remember what had happened to him to make him feel this way, but the memory was fleeting. He'd had a dream, and there was a woman, but was the woman real? What had he been doing for the past two hours, anyway?

*You had a pint at the hospital pub, he remembered. And they're moving your mother to London.*

He stood and went to the bedside table to fetch his phone. It was six o'clock in the evening on the twenty-third, he noted. Hadn't it been the twenty-second? When had he seen his mother? Was she still in the hospital, or had they moved her already? He felt as if his skull was filled with a thick fog.

From a note he had written into his phone, he found the number to his mother's room, but when he called, the nurse told him that they had moved her by ambulance earlier that afternoon.

"Why wasn't I informed?" James asked.

There was a long pause. "We told you this morning, sir. When you were in the room with your mother and that woman."

*That woman?* James thought. He couldn't remember. "Oh, that's right," he lied. "When can I expect her to arrive in London?"

"They left some seven or eight hours ago. I wouldn't expect it to be long now."

James's mind reeled as he pondered his next move. His first instinct was to fly south, to see his mother again, and to ask her about all the questions still swirling in his head. But then that name returned to him, "TC Carter," screaming with urgency. He couldn't remember much about the past day or two, but he could remember that name—and with it, a sense that his mother wanted him to seek the man.

Through the fog in his brain, James heard his mother say, "TC will have the answers you seek. TC Carter is your only hope."

"How is she?" James asked through the phone. "I mean . . . was she . . . ?"

“I wouldn’t have called her lucid, if that’s what you mean,” the nurse said tersely. “But she was as stable as you might expect after extensive brain surgery.”

“She was awake, then?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“And you expect her to recover?”

There was another long pause before the nurse sucked in an audible breath. “If you’re asking whether she’ll keep until you can get to London, then yes. She’ll keep.”

James sighed. It wasn’t exactly the answer he had been hoping for—he had hoped, in fact, that the nurse could definitively tell him that he was okay to take a day or two to search for the man whose name kept popping into his head. Even so, he thanked the nurse and hung up. Then he started searching the room for his things. His clothes he found scattered all over the room. That was odd. He couldn’t imagine why he would have undressed in this way.

The more he thought on it, the more it occurred to him that he remembered nothing of the afternoon, or of the details of his time in the hotel. He knew only that, despite the fear of losing his memory, and despite his desire to make sure his mother would be all right, his strong, urgent, overwhelming need was to start the search for TC Carter. And suddenly he knew where to look: Amarillo, Texas.





## ***PART II: THE MISSION***



## CHAPTER 9

### *Dark Side of the Moon*

No matter how long Manti spent in this place, he couldn't quite get used to the darkness. How many decades had it been since the last time he had visited his home? As he stalked from his vehicle to the base, he recalled that he was little more than a child when he was forced to leave. Even so, he could still remember the bright yellow sky and the intensity of the light. It was warm there, he thought—or at least that was how he remembered it.

*Too long, he thought. And what does it matter anyway? It's gone.*

These were the kinds of reminders Manti had to give himself every day as he worked to free his captive children and secure a better future for his people. He had been at this so long, in truth, that he often forgot what it was that he was fighting for.

The moment he reached the heavy security door to the base, a red, flashing scanner passed over him, reading and accepting his biological markers before allowing the door to slide open with a thick, metallic whoosh. The nitrogen-enriched air inside the structure rushed out into the cold, dark vacuum outside, and when the door swung shut, Manti could feel the pressure of the cabin wash over his head.

She was a capable assistant, Varnel, and in any other circumstance, he might consider her a suitable second lifemate. But this was a time of diplomacy as well as war, and if they were to save their people, such things would have to wait. Agreeable as she was to him, he didn't enjoy the sight of her now, for he could read her thoughts through those tiny red eyes.

*He does not like to wait, does he?* he communicated to her.

*No, she replied, her eyes unblinking, her tiny mouth unmoving. His call awaits you in the command center.*

Manti lifted a hand to refuse the idea. *I will take it in my private quarters. I do not wish to share his impatience with the others.*

Varnel bowed gracefully. *Very well.*

By the time Manti worked his way down the winding network of narrow corridors that led him to his bedchamber, he could sense that his assistant had already transferred the call. Indeed, when the scanner outside his door verified his identity and the door slid open, Sar's scowling face was awaiting him on the monitor on the far wall of the room. Manti didn't bother feigning pleasantries. His people were never much good at fawning, anyway.

"I trust you know why I am calling," the scowling face grumbled through the video feed.

Sar's distance from the base prevented Manti from communicating with him telepathically, so instead, he would need to send his replies through a translator. First, he would need to call the translator to his side, a matter of keying several strokes into the personal command pod he kept inside his left wrist. With the long, dexterous fingers of his left hand, he dialed the command.

Moments later, a pod rose from a panel in the floor beside the video screen. Held captive within the pod was a rotund, pasty-skinned human male. Manti did not favor this translator over his predecessor, for this one had a tendency to whine and mince at the pain his pod caused him. The chair on which the translator sat stuck out from the wall of the tall, narrow pod no more than a few centimeters, not nearly enough to hold up the human's considerable mass.

"Please," the translator said in a whimpering tone. "Please, my feet are—"

*Silence*, Manti projected to the human. *You will not speak out of turn. Translation: that is how you remain alive. Do you understand?*

The human nodded vigorously, the flesh around his face rollicking in a way that made Manti feel ill.

*Then translate this, the muscular, mantis-like alien said. I know why you are calling, Formidable Leader.*

The fat translator performed his duties in that same desperate, pleading tone that he had led with—a tone that did not suit Manti in the slightest. Before Sar could respond, Manti clacked the device on his wrist and sent a mild shock into the translator’s pod. The human whimpered at the pain and fell back into his too-narrow chair.

*You will deliver your translation in a firm tone, Manti ordered the translator. Need I remind you what happened to your predecessor?*

Again, the human’s chins danced when he nodded.

“When you are finished torturing that one, Manti,” Sar said flatly, “perhaps we could have a conversation about how it is possible that your people are no closer to finding the answer I seek.”

“We have detected an as-yet-unseen power coming from the surface,” Manti insisted through his translator, whose tone was closer now to acceptable. “This may not seem like progress, Formidable Leader, but it is now only a matter of finding the source.”

Sar shook his head, the scowl never leaving him. “Your people told me this already. You heard a voice. So what? There are billions of them on that planet alone.”

Manti wanted to portray calm, and hoped that his translator could manage the subtext. “Not like this one. There are human voices, and there are nonhuman voices. This one was something else.”

“And you suppose it is my Zalea,” Sar said with a huff.

The alien bent its thick neck as it gave a slight bow. “If you may permit me the assumption, Formidable Leader, I do not know what other living creature on Earth could have made such a sound.”

From Sar’s reaction, Manti could deduce much. He did not need to be close enough to read his leader’s mind to know what he must have been thinking. Sar touched his face, which was scarred, weathered, and sagging with age. The greenish tint of his skin darkened as it neared his jawline, which was wide and sharp and menacing. His eyes were sunken and

yellowed, and the wispy hair on his head had gone to gray. When he sighed, his lips parted, revealing hooked, brownish teeth and a glimpse of the spiny tongue within. To any human—and even to any being that met the description of Zalea that Manti had been given—Sar would have looked monstrous. And in the monster’s expression, Manti could read that Sar *knew* this. The look he gave now was one that Manti had seen on his face many times before: He was doubting whether Zalea could ever love him with this visage, even if Manti’s followers did manage to locate her.

Manti had heard the stories. Upon her landing on Earth, Zalea had been electrifyingly beautiful—so beautiful as to bring to his knees the unrelenting leader of the largest slave army the galaxy had ever seen.

“I must admit, my old friend,” Sar said, his tone soft and wistful, “even though I formed this pact with you so long ago, I’ve always had my doubts that Zalea remained on Earth.”

“It is understandable, Formidable Leader,” Manti allowed. “And now it seems we have at least some evidence.”

The fury returned to Sar’s face. “But you lost the signal.”

“Yes.”

Now the leader rose, the video feed rising with him. Behind him was a thin, black sky penetrated by the light of a rising sun so bright that Manti had to look away. Manti longed to stand again in that star’s light—to feel its warmth and to live under its gaze.

“Need I remind you of what happened to your predecessor?” Sar said.

Despite the coldness inherent to his race, Manti shivered. This was not the first time he suspected that Sar could read his thoughts, even from this distance, but the way he echoed what Manti had told his translator chilled the alien leader to his core. Even the translator seemed to note how shaken his keeper had become.

“You do not,” Manti said, anger flaring in his mind when he heard the mild amusement in his translator’s voice. “But we haven’t the power to

enter the atmosphere, Formidable Leader. We are forced merely to listen and hope.”

“Hope?” Sar screamed. “I am done with *hope*. If you don’t get me what I want, your children will be the first to die upon my triumphant return. Your dark-side army will go next. Do not think that I cannot strike you all down with little more than a flick of my finger.”

Manti bowed once more, holding it low this time. “I have no doubt.” He hoped suddenly that the overlord couldn’t read what flashed through his thoughts. He pictured his children. He had not seen them for decades, trapped as they had been with the imprisoned Grays. But in his mind, they were still as young as the day he was parted from them. Sentimentality was not a common emotion among those of his race, but Manti had managed to mask this weakness of his from anyone he had ever encountered, save for his first lifemate.

“Find me a means to get to Earth,” Sar hissed. “Or I will make you watch them suffer before they die.”

The alien leader did not have to guess who the “they” was to which his overlord referred. The thought caused a strange, almost foreign desperation to rise inside him. He wanted to rage against this monster on the other side of the screen. He wanted to curl up and die right here in this room. He wanted to run to the nearest ship and blast his way through the ancient defenses, into the atmosphere, and into the crust of that infernal planet itself to find his children and break them from their bonds.

Not for the first time, this thought stirred in him a fear that if he were to finally free his captive children, they wouldn’t even remember him. He had always been fascinated by human sadness—the way their emotional pain could cause such a physical reaction. And if it had been in his species’ ability to cry, that thought would have made him do so every time.

Just when he believed he could take the feeling no more, he discovered something new about desperation. With it came wisdom—an idea so simple that he couldn’t believe it hadn’t occurred to him before.

“Formidable Leader,” he said, his translator failing to relate his excitement, “it has just occurred to me that if we can’t get you to Earth,

then we must bring the humans to you.”

For all his bluster and fury, Sar had a way of looking altogether pleasant when he was pleased. The smile repulsed Manti, but the alien did well to hide it, as ever. He had no idea of his overlord’s plan for Earth, but he knew that this idea might well be the only chance for the survival of Manti’s race. If this monster called Sar needed gold, and if he needed to get to Earth undetected, then whatever he meant to do once he got there would be worth it, so long as Manti’s children might live.

“You surprise me, Manti,” Sar said, a chilling grin punctuating the words. “But how would you manage such a thing?”

Manti stepped forward and threw open the latch on the pod beside the video screen. So weak was his translator that he fell forward and thudded against the metallic floor. Since the translator wore no clothing, Manti was forced to pull him to his feet by his hair. The human came up whimpering, but found the strength to stagger after Manti, who held him several inches off the floor now with the considerable strength common to his people. With no more than a thought, he slammed the heavy human against the wall beside his communication module. From behind, he could hear Sar chuckling at the violence. Manti typed in the command to call his contact in Washington. He could feel the heat of Sar’s gaze hot on his back as he waited for the module to dial.

It was an uncomfortable minute before the contemptible Senator Lewis Edwards answered the phone. “Manti, my good friend,” he said with feigned jocularly. “Calls on consecutive days! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Do not waste my time, Senator,” Manti forced his translator to say.

“You okay, Manti?” Edwards said. “You sound different.”

Though his new translator blanched, Manti ignored the question. “The device you have been waiting for . . .” He paused, wanting to give the senator enough time to savor his desire for what he intended to offer. “It is yours, provided you do something for me.”

In the silence, Manti read that he had played the senator well. He wondered whether Sar, who was still watching, appreciated how the alien

leader had come to such mastery of human manipulation.

“Yes,” the senator said. “Name it and it’s yours.”

“You will expedite the Mars mission. You will launch in a month.”

“A month?” From the way Edwards’s voice cracked, it was as though he had spilled coffee on himself. “My friend, NASA’s still no closer to the fuel cells we need to make the return mission without having to refuel. At this point, it’d be a one-way ticket for anyone volunteering. We can’t just—”

At Manti’s command, his translator interrupted with, “We can supply you with the advancement you need. A propulsion technology that will get you to Mars. And farther, if you desire. What you do with it beyond the mission is not my concern. Might that be useful to you?”

“Useful?” Edwards quipped. “I tell you what, Manti, you are the king of understatement. You just tell me what you need.”

The triumphant alien leader turned to face Sar’s sneering face on the monitor. He exchanged with his overlord a knowing gaze. Then he turned back to the communication module. “If you are to expedite this mission, you need more than just the technology. Your people will need to be united in a common cause.”

The senator laughed. “And how exactly am I supposed to unite my country in a common cause? You see the news lately?”

“The news is exactly what I am speaking of, Senator. If you want to rally your people, what you need is a national tragedy.”



## CHAPTER 10

### *Dallas, Texas*

As he ran down the long corridors at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, James Sinclair weaved and jostled his way through a crowd of travelers who were milling about and chatting with one another as though they had all the time in the world. The flight over the Atlantic had been delayed by bad weather, and his connecting flight to Amarillo was probably even now pushing back from the gate.

When he freed himself from the scrum of a massive terminal intersection, he found a long corridor full of people at least swimming in the same direction. Given that he wasn't pulling a large piece of luggage like everyone else, he had little trouble darting through the slower-moving herd.

Finally his gate came into sight, and his heart sank when he saw how empty it was. Surely this meant his flight had already boarded, and had likely taken off. Still, he picked up the pace and pressed on.

Then, when he rounded the corner into the lounge outside his gate, he saw the large LED sign that explained why the gate was virtually empty. *Flight Canceled*. He slumped.

"Damn," he muttered.

"Just what I was thinking."

He turned to glance at the woman who was standing next to him, also staring at the sign. She gave him a wistful smile, and his heart froze in his chest. He knew this woman. He knew those brown eyes. They yanked him back almost three decades.

He was a young boy, maybe eight years old. Much of the memory was vague, but what he did remember haunted him still. His mother had taken him to England to visit a former friend of hers. In all the years since

that day, James could only remember two things. The first was the sound of his mother arguing with their hostess about something he couldn't quite piece together.

But it was the second that had been the most indelible. He could still see her face, the girl about his age, or perhaps a couple years younger. Their mothers had apparently sent them into the living room to play together while the adults bickered in the kitchen, but neither of the children felt much like playing. Instead, James remembered staring into the little girl's eyes. They were brown, those eyes, and her hair dirty blond.

Although he was too young at the time to have felt anything like a romantic connection, something about that girl had resonated with him. It was as if he had known her for years, even though they were far too young for that feeling to have been real. He never knew her name, or even why they were visiting her mother in England in the first place. But her eyes had stayed with him all these years.

Who was this girl? He had asked his mother several times, many years ago, but she had always refused to tell him. He couldn't remember what her house looked like, what her voice sounded like, or even what they did that day, but he would never forget her brown eyes.

He was staring into those eyes now. The girl was a grown woman, but there was no mistaking them. And it wasn't just because he recognized the eyes themselves, but because he could not ignore the way they made him feel. That connection—that sense that he had known this person for years, maybe decades earlier than would have been possible in one lifetime—immediately made itself apparent to him.

It was clear that she felt it, too. Her lips parted in surprise, and now he remembered her voice from his memory.

“You,” she said. She sounded different now. Grown-up.

“You,” he echoed.

He couldn't explain it, but he was compelled to pull her into an embrace. She didn't resist him, instead falling into his chest and pressing her cheek there. The hug was in no way romantic, and neither was his attraction to her, despite her obvious beauty. He felt secure in her arms, as if

he had reconnected with some lost part of himself. From the way she sighed contentedly, he knew she felt it, too.

Finally she pulled back and looked up at him. He smiled, a smile she returned.

“We met when we were kids,” she said softly, and with certainty.

He nodded. “I’ve thought of that day often.”

Her lips parted further as she shook her head incredulously. “How is it possible to *feel this way* about a total stranger?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“And how is it possible that we should run into each other here, in this ridiculously busy place?”

A chuckle escaped his lips. “I’ve no idea.” Then he glanced at the *Flight Canceled* sign and added, “Maybe because we’re going to the same place?”

She nodded. “Amarillo.”

“Right.”

“Well, that does it then,” she said, throwing her hands in the air. “I guess I’m on the right track.”

Since the flight had been canceled, James knew he had all the time he needed, so he took the familiar woman by the hand and led her back to the lounge, where they sat next to each other and stared out at a giant plane taxiing away from the neighboring jetway. Through all the confusion and awe, something else occurred to him: Unlike every other American he had ever met, she hadn’t had even a shred of difficulty navigating his accent.

“Your name is James,” she said.

He grunted, impressed that she had remembered. But before he could tell her so, he was stunned when her name returned to him. “And you’re Suki,” he said. “Suki . . . *Carter*.” The connection bowled him over, causing his mind to race. The odds of this meeting were astronomical—so much so that it seemed ridiculous to think it could have been an accident. “Your father is TC Carter.”

“My grandfather,” she corrected, her lips forming an awed half smile. “And you’re looking for him.”

James fell back in his chair, shaking his head in disbelief. “How do you know that? How do you know *me*? And for that matter, how do I know *you*?”

Timidly at first, she reached out and placed her hand on his. He felt himself relax the moment she touched him. Then she looked into his eyes just as she had as a child, and it was like he knew everything about her that she wished to share. With a smile, he shared some of himself with her, as well. He could feel her delight in the exchange, and he was delighted also, even though this almost telepathic sensation should have terrified him.

“You have the same ability I’ve been developing,” Suki said finally.

“I can’t explain it,” James offered. “It’s like I can *sense* things. Like I can know more about a person than I ought to be able.”

Suki nodded eagerly. “I don’t know about fate, but something brought us together. Maybe it’s just this sixth sense we’re developing that drove us both to this spot at this moment.”

“My mother says I’m meant for something important,” James said, trying and failing at not rolling his eyes.

“No, she’s right,” Suki said. Then she eased back and shook her head. “Or at least I hope she’s right, because my grandfather used to tell me the same thing before he . . .”

From the way she trailed off, he knew that the worst had happened. “He’s gone,” he volunteered.

Her eyes glistened with sudden tears as she nodded.

He set his hand on hers now, and could see the light of how the old man had died. “My mother said he was the only one who could tell me what to do next.” He couldn’t keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Then I’m sorry to bear the bad news.”

They sat together in relative silence for a time, the only noise the constant whir of the moving walkways that rolled in either direction,

spanning the length of the terminal's long corridor.

"I thought maybe getting back to his old house would help me figure out what's happening to me," Suki said finally. "I left it just the way it was before he passed."

That piqued James's attention, causing a new sense of hope to rise within him when he realized that maybe the copper glasses could be found in the old man's house. "What do you think you might find there?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I've searched the place pretty thoroughly already, of course. I just thought maybe with this new *sense* of mine, I might be able to see things I failed to see before." She smirked. "Pretty crazy, right?"

James returned the smirk. "Not exactly. In fact, if you'll have me, I'd like to join you."

She didn't need to speak her reply for him to know that she welcomed his company. "You're looking for something specific."

He nodded, ready to tell her everything he knew about the copper glasses, but just as he drew a breath to speak, he heard someone call out his name.

"Why, James Sinclair, as I live and breathe!"

The words were delivered in a faux Southern accent, and in an exaggeratedly feminine tone that James immediately recognized. How many times had he heard his old roommate Steve Deveraux don that singsongy voice meant to mock the debutantes from his aristocratic Louisiana upbringing?

His face lit up as he caught sight of Steve moseying sideways on the moving walkway. Out of the corner of his mouth, James said to Suki, "Another coincidence," the happy disbelief evident in his tone.

He snapped to his feet and went to meet Steve at the end of the walkway. There, Steve let his shoulder bag drop to the floor and they embraced as old friends, hands clapping each other's backs as they chuckled about all the gin joints in all the world.

“Well, where in the hell are you heading, old friend?” Steve asked as they made their way back toward the lounge.

Before James could answer, they had reached Suki, who stood as if to be introduced.

“Oh, hold on now,” Steve said boisterously. He gave James the side-eye. “I wasn’t expecting you to be with such pleasant company. Don’t tell me you’ve finally given up the bachelor life.”

Feeling awkward, James laughed it off. “No, it’s not like that.” He motioned toward Suki to make the introduction. “This is Suki Carter. Our friendship is—”

“It’s complicated,” Suki interrupted, her smile looking forced.

Steve laughed nonetheless. “Well, Mama raised me well enough to know when to leave well enough alone.” He reached out a hand and introduced himself in courtly fashion. Suki accepted the handshake, though it seemed to James that she was a bit reluctant about it.

An uncomfortable moment passed. James took note of how his old friend hadn’t seemed to age in the decade since they had last seen each other in law school. He supposed that was because Steve had come from money, and money had a way of staving off the ravages of time. As always, Steve wore one of the finer suits James had ever seen, and his shoes gleamed as if they’d been freshly shined. His haircut, James noted, looked like it probably cost more than James’s monthly rent.

Finally, Steve lit up. “Can I buy you a drink? Or are you taking off?”

James motioned back toward the sign that read *cancel*ed just behind him.

After a groan, Steve said, “Don’t that just beat all.” Then he furrowed his brow. “Well, hell, son. You could *drive* to Amarillo. It’s round about six hours, but you’d probably get there long before any rebooked flight.”

The flicker of hope James felt didn’t last long. “No car,” he said with a shrug. He looked to Suki, who shook her head to indicate that she didn’t have a car, either.

“We can rent one,” she suggested.

Again, Steve beamed. “As it happens, old friend, *I* have a car you can use. A particularly fine car, in fact.”

It sounded as if Suki was drawing a breath to refuse the offer, but James beat her to it. “Thanks, Steve, but—”

“No, no, no,” Steve cut in. “I insist. My driver only just dropped me off half an hour back, so he won’t be far.” Already his hands were working over his phone as if sending a text message. “I can have him turn around, come back, pick you up, and roll you to Amarillo in exactly the sort of luxury that two weary travelers deserve.”

“That’s very kind of you, Steve,” Suki said. “But I wouldn’t want to put your driver out. That’s a long round trip.”

As she spoke, James could feel her skepticism. It was as if she believed there were strings attached to the offer. He wanted to tell her that she had no reason to worry, that Steve wasn’t like that—but now that he thought on it, he felt it, too. He tried to hide his wariness from Steve, but his old friend picked up on it immediately.

“Now, c’mon, y’all,” Steve said. “You both are looking at me like I’m trying to sell you something. You know me, James. I make connections for people. Always have been a man of favors. And how many times have I ever put *anyone* out?”

James smiled, for he could think of a few. “It’s really kind of you, Steve, but—”

“Then it’s settled,” Steve interrupted like a salesman closing the deal. He held up a finger to silence any further objection as he pressed a few more keys on his phone. He paused, presumably reading the responding text message, then slid his phone back into the pocket from which it had emerged and broke into that magnetic smile of his. “Jonathan’s thrilled about the idea.” To Suki, he added, “Jonathan’s my driver, you see. Young man just *loves* to drive. Particularly when I’m paying him to do it in overtime fashion. And as it happens, his family’s *from* Amarillo, so we’re essentially sending him out for a nice little weekend reunion.”

“Another coincidence,” Suki said in something of a grumble.

Steve cocked his head to one side, apparently having failed to hear. “What’s that?”

Suki shook her head to dismiss the question, then forced another smile. “I have to say that I’m unaccustomed to people doing me such favors.”

With a chuckle, Steve laced his hands under James’s and Suki’s arms in turn and started them out of the lounge. “Are you kidding? A young lady as lovely as yourself? I bet you get at least five offers a day better than that one.”

An incredulous smile pressed on his face, James looked past his old friend just in time to catch Suki’s blush.

“Now,” Steve said with a note of punctuation as he led them back to the walkway. “Jonathan says he’ll be an hour to arrival. I believe somebody mentioned something about a drink.”

James laughed warmly, his delight to be in the company of one of his oldest and best friends momentarily outweighing his skepticism that two such remarkable coincidences—reuniting with Suki at the exact moment that he needed her, and bumping into a wealthy and powerful old friend at the exact moment he stood a chance to help him—could possibly occur on the same day, and within ten minutes of each other, no less.

By the time they reached the bar, an oblivious Steve had already launched into a jocular story about the last time he had seen their other roommate from law school, Lewis Edwards.

“I can still hardly believe our old boy is a senator already,” Steve said, gracefully removing his jacket and signaling for the bartender in one fluid motion. “He still can’t hold his liquor, though, I’ll tell you.” He elbowed James. “Not like you Scots, in any case.”

The polite laugh died too quickly on James’s lips as he took his own seat next to Suki, who reluctantly situated herself on the stool beside Steve. He could see from her expression that Steve hadn’t done much to dispel her doubts. James wanted badly to tell her that it would be okay—that

sometimes, maybe the universe does favors to those it means to help. Then, to his great surprise, it occurred to him that he *had* just told her that. Somehow, she had heard the thought.

He knew because she turned and looked him deeply in the eyes. Then he heard her voice inside his own head.

*My grandfather used to say something to me often, she said. Beware gifts given too freely.*

The sense of excitement and confusion he felt at having just communicated telepathically with another human being was short-lived, for it couldn't contend with James's sudden sense of dread.



## CHAPTER 11

### *Malibu, California*

On the first day of Suki's absence, Lanie learned the hard way that she couldn't refuse the food outright. Dr. Schmidt visited her an hour after an orderly delivered her breakfast, and made a show of concern about how she hadn't eaten anything.

"I don't like oatmeal," she lied.

Schmidt nodded, and as he completed his daily check of her retinas and heart rate, said that he would have something else sent to her. The scrambled eggs arrived around ten a.m., and this time the orderly who brought them decided to stay while she ate.

"I'm not hungry," she said, but the orderly flatly refused to let her skip the meal.

Before she knew it, there were two other orderlies in the room—these two the same hulking men who had pinned her down while they drugged her in that horrible windowless room in some other part of the facility. For the second time since her admittance, she found their powerful arms holding her to the bed, only now it was so the other orderly could fork lukewarm eggs into her mouth.

The numbness of her mind began not long after that breakfast, and given how quickly lunch arrived after, and how threatening this latest orderly looked with this latest meal, she found herself scarfing down more of the drug-laced food and assuming an even deeper sense of the numbness. In this way, she spent much of that day lying flaccidly in bed, scrambling to form coherent thoughts out of the swirling fear of her surroundings and doubts about letting Suki leave her here with these lunatics running the loony bin.

Two hours after dinner, just through the purpling light of dusk, she regained enough of her senses to turn her head and look through the pink,

semitransparent cloth that served as her privacy screen from the outside world. Her heart nearly stopped in her chest when she saw the silhouette beyond the curtain. She couldn't make out the person's face, but she knew Ingrid well enough to recognize the scraggly shadow of her head, the outline of her shoulders, and the shape of her hips.

Her heart rate monitor had kicked into overdrive as the dread formed icy in her veins. The specter of Ingrid just seemed to stand there on the other side of the curtain, staring motionless as if she couldn't see anything of Lanie at all. But Lanie knew. She knew that Ingrid knew. Ingrid always did have a sense for these things—she seemed capable of finding her employer anywhere. Who was it that had, against all odds, found her writhing in that back room of the overcrowded club, the room with the door that locked and the free mountain of cocaine? She hadn't told Ingrid that she meant to follow the club owner's gorgeous son back to that room that night, and yet Ingrid had found her in the moment Lanie needed her most.

That was Ingrid. Always there when Lanie needed her most. Between the memory and the drugs dulling her senses, Lanie almost felt wistful about it, if only for a moment. Then the orderlies returned, the fear and anger pounding through Lanie's heart monitor all the alarm they needed to check in on her. Lanie tried to resist as they responded to the monitor by injecting a clear, warm, *orgasmic* liquid into her arm. But it was no use.

She spent the first night after Suki's departure riding such a current of beautiful opiates that she didn't care whether Ingrid had truly found her or not.

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She awoke the following morning to the sense that she had failed Suki somehow, and had failed herself, as well. More importantly, she had failed the mission. If by the time her friend and therapist returned, she was going to be ready to do whatever it was she felt destined to do, she would need to have a clear head. So she started anew on the process of weaning herself off the drugs Schmidt was lacing into her food.

She couldn't believe how easy it was to hide food under a hospital mattress. It might have been difficult in a normal hospital, where the

orderlies actually changed a patient's bedding from time to time, but not here. And because she got away with it, she supposed that this was proof enough that at least her room wasn't being video monitored.

As her head continued to clear, Lanie found herself thinking about that moment when she'd glanced at Schmidt, wishing he would leave so she and Suki could have some privacy—and he'd immediately done just that. She began to suspect that it wasn't just coincidence, but that she really *could* influence people with her mind.

She tested her new theory the next morning when she told the giant blond orderly that she wasn't hungry for breakfast and that he should take it away. When he frowned at her, she gave a mental nudge, and without a second's hesitation, he did exactly as she asked. She spent the hour that followed expecting him to return with new, freshly drugged food, but he never came back.

When lunch rolled around, Lanie tried a new tack with the redheaded brute of an orderly who cared for her in the afternoons.

"I'm starting to think my food is poisoned," she said to him.

He didn't even so much as blink in surprise. Instead, he looked eager to believe her.

"Do you think you might . . . taste my food for me to make sure it's okay?" Lanie added coyly.

She had trouble hiding her disbelief as she watched the brute dig in to the macaroni he had brought for her, his brow furrowed as if he was vigorously sifting for some sign that something was amiss with the meal. Since he had volunteered to taste the food so readily, Lanie's first assumption was that the hospital staff had decided not to drug this particular meal. So she invited the brute to stay with her for a while, just so she could observe him. Sure enough, he complied, and sure enough, he was passed out in a tranquilizer-induced stupor inside of twenty minutes.

Lanie spent quite a lot of time that afternoon gawking in disbelief at the snoring giant in the chair beside her bed. When the evening nurse entered to check her vitals, he startled at the sight of the brute still conked out in the corner.

“I guess he had a late night last night,” Lanie volunteered to the nurse, who blanched. Then Lanie braced herself as she prepared for the next level of her experiment. “Maybe you could send someone in to get him out of here.”

“Of course,” the nurse said. “Right away.”

This shocked Lanie, because before now, she hadn’t gotten anything more than monosyllabic terseness from this nurse.

In less than five minutes, a small army of nurses and orderlies arrived to carry the brute away—none of them even batting an eye about how strange it was that he wouldn’t wake when they tried to rouse him. They just carried him out like an old futon, all of them huffing and pulling and not saying a single word. They just did their duty, like worker ants.

Lanie’s mind raced at the possibilities of what she thought she was experiencing. It was clear that her net of mental influence extended beyond the person she was in direct contact with. The only drawback was the headache that followed. Every time she made one of her requests, she would have to spend the next thirty seconds or so wincing through completely debilitating pain in the back of her head. She wasn’t sure what it meant, but she suspected she would kick the symptom once she had mastered this strange new power. And either way, it seemed like a fair trade-off—the ultimate power of suggestion for a few moments of discomfort.

So, when the nurse returned, Lanie submitted another order.

“My bed stinks,” she said. And in fact, it did. The food she’d hidden under the mattress was going rancid.

“I can change your sheets,” the nurse quickly offered.

“No,” Lanie said. “Not good enough. I’d like for someone to wheel in a whole new, totally clean bed. And then I’d like this bed taken outside and tossed in the dumpster.”

She assumed that the sheer preposterousness of the request would force the nurse to turn it down—or would at least make him snicker—but

he never even cracked a smile. Instead, he nodded dutifully and turned toward the door.

“Wait!” she called.

He turned back and gave the pleasant, wide-eyed blink of a man eager to serve.

“Can you leave the door unlocked?” She braced for the sound of vigorous rejection. Schmidt had ordered her under lockdown. If not for the constant assault of the drugs in her food, he’d have likely kept her chained to the bed twenty-four-seven. There was simply no way this nurse would agree to leaving the door unlocked.

“Of course, Miss Montrose,” he said, performing another bow and disappearing into the hall. The door swung shut behind him, but she heard no telltale sounds of the lock mechanism snapping into place.

The pain bloomed at the back of Lanie’s skull and radiated outward until it seemed to fill every inch of her head like an expanding balloon. She heard herself hissing through the pain, and for a moment, she felt like screaming. But then it faded away.

As she sighed into the comfort of normalcy, something unnerving struck her. Maybe she wasn’t as lucid as she had thought. Maybe this was all in her head. Maybe Schmidt had been switching her tranquilizers for hallucinogens, and she had accidentally ingested too much of it during her last meal. It would explain how she might be imagining this sudden power of persuasion, in any case. Or maybe she really was a crazy person, and kicking the drugs had just allowed the full bouquet of her battiness to emerge and take hold.

*There has to be a way to test this,* she thought.

Then it occurred to her that all the proof she needed was in that locked door. If she went to the door and found that it was in fact locked, then she would know that she had imagined everything and that she was indeed either tripping on hallucinogens, or was a dyed-in-the-wool crazy person. But if she could open the door and enter the hall—a hall she had never before seen consciously—then she would know that she had unlocked a new door within her own mind.

*You know how crazy that sounds, don't you?* she asked herself, laughing as she rose from her bed and padded barefoot for the door.

She held her breath as she reached out for the handle and pulled. It clicked, the latch firing open. She reeled with awe and surprise as the full weight of what this meant sank down on her. The first impulse that seized her was to run. The staff was occupied, and her door was unlocked. There was nothing stopping her from escaping. But then, before she could act on it—or even pull the door open—the nurse returned, pushing the door in and backing her up.

Lanie expected the nurse to scold her for testing her boundaries, or even just for being out of bed for the first time in days.

But instead, he smiled at her and explained that her new bed would be arriving shortly. “I’ll have some orderlies take the old bed to the dumpster, per your request. In the meantime, I’ll round up some clean sheets.”

Before Lanie could shake off how stunned she was that all of this was happening, the nurse had finished his subservient bow and backed out of the door.

So this, whatever it was, was real. Suki had admitted to a growing sense of *knowing*—a certainty that she was developing a supernatural gift to communicate with her mind. To Lanie, this was merely her own manifestation of that same emerging power. She felt instantly and completely drunk on that power.

She cranked open the door and stuck her head into the hall. “Hey!” she called after the nurse, who stopped in his tracks and turned to face her. “Bring me something substantial to eat while I enjoy my new bed, would you? A steak, how about? Medium rare. No drugs, please.”

The nurse nodded cordially.

“Oh!” she called out to him again just as he turned. “And a baked potato loaded with everything.”

An hour later, she was sitting cross-legged on her cushy, stink-free new bed, delighting in the freshness of the chives on her sour-cream-soaked

potato as the biggest, juiciest porterhouse she had ever seen awaited her on the other side of the plate.

As she ate, she plotted. The truth was that she had been so focused on the complex task of just getting sober before Suki returned that she hadn't yet considered what might happen next. She would have to find Suki. That much was certain. And then they would have to decide how to pursue the keys.

*The keys*, she thought.

It was a concept that hadn't occurred to her in a long time. She had carried the knowledge of some keys that would help stave off a great evil, and she had carried that knowledge all her life. Indeed, the more she thought on the keys, the older the memory seemed—so old that it almost felt like it predated the life she consciously remembered. But that was silly. She had experienced many new and unexplainable things since that transcendent moment in the swimming pool, but she knew who she was and where she came from. She was Lanie Montrose. She was born into poverty on the wrong side of Boston, and she rose up as a singer-songwriter and pop star. She could remember every family member who had cared for her and every friend she had ever made. Her life was her life. If she knew something about a set of mystical keys, it had to be because she had learned about them as a child. Or maybe an old, forgotten friend had told her about them.

It was at that moment that an old friend stepped through the door. Lanie startled and looked up. Ingrid. She wore that same self-satisfied smile she had always assumed back when they were close.

“Hey, kid,” Ingrid said, the sound of her voice like a drum beating inside Lanie's head. She glanced at the steak. “Looks like they feed you well here.”

Instantly Lanie wanted her pills. Just the sight of Ingrid triggered it in her, and her skin began to itch. She pushed the plate and uneaten steak away and got out of the bed. She intended to confront Ingrid, but instead she clenched her teeth and brought her hands to the sides of her head, one hand brushing against the stubble of her buzz cut while the one on her

longer-haired side took her curly red locks between her fingers. Ingrid always did know how to push her buttons, how to get her all turned around.

Before Lanie could stop her, Ingrid closed what remained of the space between them and pulled her into a hug, the much larger Ingrid's cheek coming to rest on Lanie's head. There was no warmth in the embrace.

For what felt like a long while, Lanie's mind reeled and filled with doubt. Had she really been controlling the orderlies and nurses with her mind, or had it all been a game run by Schmidt? Had the nurses and orderlies been running around like her handservants just to get into her head? She hated herself for believing she had developed some supernatural influence over people—or that she could think it possible for her to hold any kind of power at all. The only powers she ever had were an otherworldly voice and a cover-ready body, and both of those were fading.

It was almost enough for her to want to sink into Ingrid's embrace, to put herself in her hands once more.

But then something very different happened to Lanie Montrose. Her doubt swirled and spiraled, melting away into a rage unlike any she had ever experienced. Furiously she shoved Ingrid off her, and when the brutish assistant toppled back and fell on her butt, Lanie saw her for what she was. All had been right in her world until Ingrid returned. She had felt so empowered and so clearheaded and so in control. Even if it had been a game, what did that matter?

The moment before her fury burned so hot that she feared she might not be able to contain it, a new thought occurred to her. If it had been a game, then Ingrid, too, had a role to play. And if it hadn't been a game, then Lanie's newfound power was real. The unlocked door had been the first test, but the greatest would reside with the woman who had once held ultimate control over her.

“Get out of here,” she said.

Ingrid gave her a puzzled look as she climbed to her feet.

“I said leave.”

For a moment, as Ingrid continued to stare at her—the expression on her face rising from surprise to bitterness to absolutely peaceful acquiescence—it seemed to Lanie that she understood the command and would obey it. But she also stood in place long enough to seem as if she would resist.

“Go now!” Lanie barked, her tone strong and proud. It had been such a long time since she’d heard such assurance in her voice that it almost sounded like someone else was speaking for her.

Ingrid cocked her head to one side. “You want me to . . . leave the hospital? To go . . . outside?”

“Yes!”

“What should I do then?”

“I don’t care. Just go. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Ingrid nodded as though that cleared up everything for her. Without another word, she turned and left the room.

Lanie had been focused so intently on her former assistant’s next move that it took her a moment to realize that another headache had come, and she was holding her breath from the pain. When she let it out, a charge of relief started in her head and trickled down to her chest. She didn’t fully understand what was happening to her, or quite grasp the scope of what it meant, but she knew one thing: if it could chase away Ingrid Saint Eve, then it could get her out of this hospital.

Confidently, she strode to the door, where she paused and took one last look back at the room that had housed her for longer than she really knew. It had felt like such a prison before Suki had come. Now all that stood between her and flight was a long, narrow hallway. The freedom beyond that hall was intoxicating and terrifying at the same time. What would await her out there? It felt like a lifetime even since she had last contended with the mob of paparazzi likely scrumming to get the first shot of Lanie Montrose exiting therapy.

She would cross that bridge when she came to it. For now, the need to get out of this place, and to find out what was happening with Suki, took

hold.

The door swung open, and there stood Dr. Schmidt. His first reaction was to smile, but the smile quickly gave way to the frustration or curiosity in his eyes.

“You’re not supposed to be out of your bed, Miss Montrose,” he said flatly.

“I’m leaving,” she said, wishing she had sounded more assertive.

The doctor smiled. “I’m afraid that’s not possible. We haven’t yet finished your evaluation, let alone weaned you off the—”

“No,” Lanie cut in. “You don’t understand.” She locked her eyes with his. “I’m leaving. You’re going to let me leave.”

Schmidt pursed his lips as if he had just tasted something sour, and his eyelids fluttered. He drew a breath to refuse, but what came out instead was, “Yes, of course. Let me get your personal effects.” He glanced at the flimsy gown that barely reached her knees. “Perhaps you would like some clothing, as well? If you intend to leave . . .”

“Yes, thank you.”

After he had gone, Lanie gasped, still in awe of what she could do. She suffered this next short flicker of electric pain almost pleasurably. Soon he returned, carrying a small plastic bag that looked to contain the bikini she’d been wearing when she lost consciousness, a clutch she had been carrying earlier that day, the leather-bound journal in which she sometimes jotted her thoughts, and her cell phone. He held the bag out to her, along with some neatly folded clothing. A nurse’s outfit, she thought—pale blue cotton pants and shirt.

“My phone,” she said, retrieving it from the plastic bag.

“Yes,” he said with a dutiful bow. She had asked for her phone several times, and he’d told her that it had not been brought to the hospital.

“You lied,” she said.

“Yes.”

When it looked like he had no intention of rising from his bow, she reached down, grabbed him by the lapel, and pulled him upright to look her in the eye. “Why did you lie?”

He sputtered and stammered, clearly at war with his discomfort at having to share the information and his lack of choice on the matter. “I was . . . *told* to lie.”

She jerked his lapel, trying to snap him out of his fear. “By who?”

“Please,” the doctor said, groveling. “They’ll . . . do terrible things to me . . . and my family . . . .”

Lanie took a step closer to him, looming over him, though she was no more than an inch taller than the man. “Tell me.”

He nodded, huffing as if in pain. “I don’t know who they are. I only know that they said to keep you away from the public eye at all costs, and that . . .” He trailed off, seeming to lose steam.

“That what?” she barked through the headache.

A tear came to the corner of Schmidt’s eye. “That they needed me to sedate you. And . . .”

“And what?”

“They want me to give you an MRI. That’s what I was coming to tell you about. I have the procedure scheduled for tomorrow morning.”

“An MRI? Why?”

“They need to track what you have in there.”

She gave him a sidelong glance, wanting very much to punch him for his continually cryptic replies.

He seemed to sense her frustration, for he straightened up and said clearly, “You have a chip in your brain.”

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For Lanie, the world seemed to spin. A chip in her brain? She was so startled and confused that by the time she got outside, the evening breeze cool on her skin and the shouts of the paparazzi washing over her ears like

water over rock, she couldn't remember how she had left Schmidt's side. She couldn't even remember changing into the clothing that now hung on her thin frame. She wanted so badly to crawl inside herself and remove what did not belong that the real world around her almost seemed like it no longer existed. From what she had seen of her own power, she knew that Schmidt couldn't have been lying. If she had asked him for the truth, she had gotten it. But the truth made her want to run, and the notion that there was no running from this problem made her want to curl up into a ball.

She didn't know what the chip meant or where it had come from or who had put it there. She knew only that she had to find a way to get it out.

Suddenly she felt as if she knew exactly what she needed to do, but she couldn't think because of all the noise buzzing around her. She pulled out of her confusion to notice that she was standing barefoot in the parking lot outside the clinic. Even though it was well past nightfall, a swarm of men who called themselves reporters were hollering insulting questions from all sides. Before her power, this moment would have terrified her to the point that she would have tumbled back to Ingrid and the drugs she always carried. But today, she just wanted it all to stop so she could think.

“Stop!” she yelled through the din. “Back off. I need to think.”

In an instant, every man among the paparazzi horde shut his mouth and slunk back. Lanie looked at them, one at a time. Some of them she knew. Some of them had been so foul to her in the past that she had come to fear them, even seeing them in her nightmares. But now they looked like what they were: scummy, slobby, pudgy little bottom feeders with cameras and greasy skin. She smiled at them. For years they had ignored her pleas to leave her alone. And now she had looked them in the eye and bent them to her will. Such was her satisfaction that this time, when the pain came to her skull, it was almost better than sex.

She stepped through their silent circle, leaving them in her wake.



## CHAPTER 12

### *Amarillo, Texas*

They had been at it nearly five hours by now, and Suki still wasn't entirely comfortable about riding in some strange man's limo with another man she hardly knew. The driver, Jonathan, had proven to be every bit the sweetheart that Steve had said he would be—a bit overly talkative, maybe, but sweet. And she supposed that he felt so compelled to speak through most of the trip because his passengers had been so uncomfortably silent. What he hadn't realized was that there was good reason for the silence.

Back when they first got started on this long trip in a borrowed limo bound for Amarillo, James had been all too comfortable with speaking about the more mystical parts of his past. For a while, Suki had worried that Jonathan might overhear, and might think them crazy, and so she had spent the first few minutes just trying to silence James with her eyes. He didn't get the message. First, she thought maybe it was because James was unused to a woman's company, and so didn't quite grasp the subtle hints she could give him with her expression. But from the look of him, she knew that this couldn't be correct. He was beautiful, in truth, though she couldn't quite put her finger on why that hadn't registered with her right away. Perhaps it was their connection to one another. Or maybe it was just that James seemed so different—not just from the other men she had known, but from other human beings of any kind. Whatever the case, he spent the first twenty minutes of the trip so wrapped up in his discussion about his mother's wild theories that he didn't seem to notice Suki's silent signals that he should stow it for a while.

So, when she had finally had enough of trying, she spoke to him with her mind. The startled look he gave her in reply was almost comical in its completeness. But she was satisfied that she had gotten his attention.

*We don't know this driver, she told him. If you keep talking about Knights Templar and magical keys and Nazis, he's going to think we're*

*completely insane.*

James had given her a quizzical little smile. Then he furrowed his brow as if struggling to reply in kind. *I guess I'm just used to people thinking I'm insane*, he managed. *My mum's been talking this nonsense all my life.*

Without speaking, they agreed that continuing to communicate on the subject out loud wouldn't make sense. James didn't entirely share Suki's skepticism about Steve's sudden appearance, or his curiously generous offering of a driver and limousine, but he at least agreed with her that it was best not to let one of Steve's employees think that an old friend had lost his marbles.

And besides, James didn't have to agree with Suki about whether Steve's intervention in their problem was something more than a coincidence. She knew. It was no accident that he had happened upon them. Someone had sent him. Perhaps someone had even pulled strings to get their flight canceled expressly so they could stage the coincidence of bumping into Steve.

Since she knew this, she suspected that this gift of a car had been part of a grander plot.

*The car could be bugged*, she had communicated to James.

*C'mon*, he had said dismissively. *I'm the one that works for the CIA, remember? If Steve were involved in some kind of espionage, I'd know about it.*

She gave him a skeptical gaze. *So you think it was just a coincidence that you bumped into me and an old college buddy within five minutes of each other?*

For a long while, that had silenced him in both the speaking and telepathic sense. She could tell that he was mulling something over—searching for something, maybe—and then his eyes went wide.

*This car is bugged*, he had thought to her.

*How do you know?* she asked, trying not to show too much of her surprise on her face, lest the driver see.

James furrowed his brow. *I have no idea. I can just . . . feel it.*

*Do you know where it is?*

He gave the slightest nod.

*Can you get to it?*

He seemed to think about it for a time. Then he shook his head just as slightly. He looked afraid somehow—or perhaps just shocked that his friend would have a limo that came equipped with a listening device. Then he winced, rocked back in his seat, and grasped at the bridge of his nose.

*What is it?* she asked.

He didn't respond immediately. Instead, he just sucked some air through his teeth. *I had a searing headache just now*, he managed after a time. *But it seems to have passed.*

Suki nodded. Her own head was pounding, as well, but she had learned to deal with it by now. *It seems to be a side effect of using our powers.*

*Our powers?*

She shrugged. *Every time I communicate this way, I deal with the pain, too. It doesn't seem to affect the recipients of my telepathy, but it always bowls me over.*

*You seem to be handling it well.*

*I'm an old hand at this by now.*

James furrowed his brow. *So what's with my headache, then? You said it doesn't affect your recipients.*

*It must be related to how you suddenly knew the limo was bugged. Maybe your telepathy has to do with machines somehow.*

With a sigh, James sank back in his chair. *This is all just so surreal.*

For a mile or so, they remained silent, both in the speaking and thinking sense.

James was the first to break it. *Why would Steve want to spy on us?*

Suki was just about to reply when she was cut off by another voice from the front seat.

“So . . . ,” Jonathan said. “Where y’all from?”

That started the awkward ballet of trying to fend off small talk from Jonathan while attempting to communicate telepathically with James.

All of this had happened almost four hours ago, and by now, Suki was starting to feel more than a little exhausted by the effort it took to speak on two different channels. The cattle prod in her head had been shocking her for such a long time that she hardly even noticed it anymore. A cool and clear head was little more than a distant memory. The only real frustration about Jonathan’s insistence on keeping up the chatter and trying to engage his guests the old-fashioned aural way was that every time he spoke up, Suki’s concentration would break, and then she would have to center all her mental focus on the task of returning to that place she had discovered in her mind—that place where she could speak in silence with anyone who shared her capacity for superhuman ability.

James, it seemed, was one of those people, even if he didn’t fully understand his gift yet.

And so it was that for four hours, Suki and James spoke silently about how James had left Scotland in search of TC’s house in Amarillo, because his dying mother had told him that TC was the only man alive who could help him on his quest, as meanwhile, Jonathan chattered away about the customs and finer qualities of Amarillo and the many backyard-barbecuin’ families with whom he’d become acquainted there.

It was only fitting that the last road sign Suki noticed had announced that they were passing through a town called Goodnight. She very much felt like going to sleep. “How far are we from our destination?” she asked politely of Jonathan.

“Oh, Goodnight’s round about half an hour, give or take,” the driver replied. Then he launched into a long story about how he used to drive out to Goodnight as a kid and look for cows to tip. “Of course, it’s all a legend about cows sleeping standing up.” He turned to look back at them over his

shoulder, his grin a handsome one. “Mostly it was just an excuse to drink beer in the fields.”

She chuckled, but James was too dour to join in. He looked as if he was still puzzling through how anything that had happened during the past few days could even be possible. She was feeling the same way. She wondered how long James had known about his power—or even that sense that he was meant for something greater than himself. So she asked him with her mind.

*I didn't know about any power until I met you, he replied. Finding that bug is the first thing I've ever done. But I assumed that was only possible because our minds were connected.*

*You don't think that now?* Suki asked.

He gave a purse-lipped smile. *My mother's been telling me since I was a kid that I was special somehow—and not in the ways every mother tells their sons they're special.* He looked to the cockpit of the limo then and squinted his eyes. A moment later, the country music that had been playing on the radio crackled out and was shortly replaced by the peeling notes of Led Zeppelin.

“What the heck just happened?” Jonathan said as he fumbled with the dial, trying to turn the station back to his favorite channel. When it didn't respond, he took his attention off the road just long enough for the tires to graze the rumble strips, snapping his attention back to driving. He left his right hand on the dial, though, and kept turning. When it became clear that the radio wasn't agreeing with him, he fired another of those handsome smiles back over his shoulder. “Sorry, folks. Technical difficulties.”

Suki noted how James kept his attention focused on the radio. The Zeppelin song ended, giving way to a commercial about erectile dysfunction tablets. James lost interest in his game, finally turning back to Suki. The moment James broke his focus on the radio, Jonathan was able to turn it back to the country station. A soft smile formed at the corners of James's lips. He looked impressed with himself. Suki beamed. She was impressed, too.

Then both their smiles disappeared when James tumbled into another silent fit of head pain.

*Well, you're right about that part, too,* he thought when it was over. *Our powers certainly do have some vicious side effects.*

The rest of the drive passed in relative peace. Suki closed her eyes and decided to try to squeeze in a nap. When that proved impossible, she instead stared out the window at a countryside that was becoming increasingly familiar. How many days had she spent with her grandfather, tooling around these same roads in his beat-up old pickup? Every summer, her parents would send her down here for a month to visit her grandfather, and every summer, that month would prove to be the best out of any year.

When finally Amarillo came into view, it greeted her like an old friend. Her heart skipped a beat as, five minutes later, they were pulling down that long, familiar, dusty drive that led to her grandfather's house. The old place looked just the same as it had when she'd left it last. Jonathan had to get out to manually open the swinging iron gate. It wasn't locked. It was never locked. In fact, since her grandfather never kept any cattle, Suki never quite could understand why the old man had insisted on keeping the gate in the first place. She had always suspected that he just liked having to stop and get out of his pickup to swing it open, like a proper cowboy.

Even now, the thought made her chuckle to herself.

At the end of the drive, Jonathan parked and got out to open the doors for them. Suki thanked him dutifully, and when James tried to tip him, he refused.

"Steve and his group keep me comfortable," he said. "And besides, y'all got me delivered back to my hometown." He winked. "That's tip enough."

Suki wondered what Jonathan had meant by "his group," but decided not to press the issue. Instead, she waited until he had left, then let her excitement carry her toward the door to that place where she'd formed her fondest memories. The key she always kept with her was the only one in the world that opened this door. She had often fretted about what she would do if she ever lost it. Making a spare had proven impossible, because

the thing wasn't like the common, modern keys she used to enter her own apartment. It was a bulky old thing, long and spindly and made of rusty iron.

"That's quite a lock," James said, watching over her shoulder as she cranked the key into the giant slot.

She laughed. "You'll find that my grandfather was a bit . . . eccentric."

Finally the key turned and the door swung open. Inside was all the proof she needed to back up her claim about her grandfather's state of mind. Even when she was a child, Suki could *feel* the history in every corner of this house whenever she entered. It was a warm sensation, one carried on the scent of old books, ancient metal, and well-weathered leather. And there was always that smoky-sweet scent of her grandfather's pipe providing a calming, homey undertone.

"Amazing," James said, eyeing one of the ancient documents TC kept framed on the wall near the door. He took a moment to absorb what he saw, shaking his head every once in a while at some piece of antiquity or another that caught his attention. "Where should we start?" he asked after a time.

*The workshop*, Suki told him with her mind. Then she glanced at him, wondering if he'd heard her. She hadn't been looking him in the eyes when she projected to him. In the limo, she had found that they had to stare at one another to communicate in this way—indeed, she had suspected that it would have made Jonathan uncomfortable, had he noticed it in the rearview mirror. But maybe five hours of practice had been enough to teach her how to send the messages without eye contact.

"Did you hear me?" he asked, putting her theory to rest.

"Oh," she said. "Tried to tell you with . . ." With a wry expression, she pointed to her head. "Guess we can just speak the proper way now, huh?"

"Unless your spy senses have you thinking the house might be bugged, as well," James quipped.

Suki started to laugh, but then quickly grew serious. “Is it?”

James shrugged. “I’ve been trying to see, but I don’t think I could sense anything in this house. There’s just too much . . . *energy* here.”

“I know, right?” Suki said, brightening up. “It’s like the objects in this place are *alive* somehow. I’ve always felt that way.”

They passed a long moment just looking into the tight, boxy, sunlit living room just off the entry to the farmhouse. Suki had passed many hours playing in this room as a girl.

“Let’s start in the workshop,” Suki said finally. She led him down the hall toward the staircase, that wistful sense of being back in this place of so many fond memories warring with the rising dread that they were heading for the room where she had last seen her grandfather alive. She tried not to remember that flash of light and her grandfather’s mysterious death. What they would find in the room was all that mattered now—not what had happened there.

By the time they had descended the narrow stairs into the basement workshop, Suki’s heart was racing. She could swear that the same acrid, burning scent that had accompanied the flash of light that preceded TC’s death still hung in the air down here, even all these years later.

Everything was the same. Apart from the places that the medical examiners and coroner had disturbed, everything in the room was just as TC had left it. Even though it all belonged to Suki now—and even though packing everything up and selling the place would have made far more sense financially—she preferred it this way. She knew great sorrow every time she thought about how she would never see him again. At least with his house still as he’d left it, she could retain some small piece of his memory, and even visit it from time to time.

She just never envisioned herself visiting it under circumstances like these. The search for whatever they were looking for would be time-consuming, she knew, for the old man liked to keep his workspace cluttered. As a clockmaker and repairman, he always lined his tools and parts up neatly, but everything else about the room was in complete disarray.

TC tended to fly into wild, whimsical tangents whenever engaging with or adding to his artifact collection. The tangents would always cause him to misplace the things he was so focused on to begin with. The evidence of his absentmindedness could be found everywhere—a half-repaired grandfather clock standing open in the corner; a broad, thick desk of heavily lacquered wood bearing a scattered layer of papers, file folders, trinkets, tools, and old fountain pens, which were a particular favorite among TC’s collection; a dozen rusty antique kaleidoscopes set up on the sill of the basement’s lone egress window; groves of statuettes, masks, and other artifacts gathered from all over the globe and then stored in less than meticulous fashion; a player piano with no keys; an array of turn-of-the-twentieth-century typewriters, another of TC’s passions; and on and on.

“I don’t even know what we’re looking for,” Suki said. “I just know I’ve felt drawn to this place ever since . . .” She nearly told him about Lanie, but stopped herself. On the one hand, she had an obligation to her client to keep the matter a secret. On the other, she badly wanted to tell James that there was at least one other person in the world who seemed to share their gift. She had pondered the question often since they left the airport, but she still wasn’t sure why she didn’t feel comfortable telling James about Lanie.

In any case, he was too focused on looking over the many items in the room to notice. “I do,” he said in a voice just above a whisper.

“And what’s that?” Suki asked. “Maybe I can help you find it.”

He pointed to the side of his head. “This is going to sound crazy, but I’m looking for a pair of glasses.”

Suki’s mind raced. She knew immediately what glasses he meant. “Copper glasses.”

He looked at her, startled. “So you can *read* my mind, as well? I was kind of afraid of that. Was hoping your telepathy was more just a communication thing . . .”

She sighed into a smile. “No, no. Nothing like that. Your private thoughts are safe. I just kind of *knew* the significance of those glasses. Even when I was a kid.”

James looked excited now. “So they’re here.”

Suki weaved through the forest of reliquary and went straight to her grandfather’s desk, pulling out the top drawer to find them. They were dusty and old, but that was how she always remembered them being. Their lenses were far too thick to belong to a pair of standard reading glasses, each of them centered by a small circle of metal that upon closer inspection, seemed to be lined with tiny gears. They were significantly heavier than they looked. It was less like picking up a pair of glasses and more like hefting a loose part from a car engine. She gave them one last appraising look before handing them over to James.

When he touched them, something seemed to spark within him. He looked excited at first, but then suddenly overwhelmed with dread.

“What is it?” she asked. “Why are you—”

“I remember something,” he said, the revulsion evident on his face.

Suki stood in her confusion, waiting for him to elaborate. He appeared to grapple with the weight of the memory before finally drawing a breath to speak.

“For the life of me, I couldn’t remember why I was looking for a pair of glasses. I only knew my mother had told me to find TC Carter, and the thought of the glasses kept flashing through my head. But now I remember what put me on their trail in the first place.”

The color drained from his face, and he looked quite faint. Suki leapt to his aid, guiding him over to the nearest chair, a dusty old Adirondack that TC kept in the corner.

He set the glasses on his knee, glaring at them with an expression like they had just told him he was adopted. “When you gave me these things, it triggered a memory,” he began rather breathlessly before he collected himself. “It’s not a memory I forgot, but one that was taken from me.”

“Taken?” Suki asked with concern. She knelt by his side and set her hand on his.

“I won’t get into the details, but I met a woman. She wasn’t like any woman I’d ever met before.” He gave Suki a grave look. “I don’t think she was a woman at all, in fact. I think she was something . . . different.”

Suki couldn’t hide her confusion. “James, I—”

“I’ll explain some other time,” he cut in. “What matters right now is that I remember something that I was made to forget.” He stood, his faculties quickly returning. “I found a journal. Or rather, someone brought me a journal.” He went on to explain to her about how he had been in possession of a journal that had once belonged to FDR, and that it detailed many of the same elements from his mother’s old fantasies. “Or at least, I thought they were fantasies until I saw that journal. It was one of the entries that put me onto these copper glasses.” He paced away from Suki, shaking his head. “The journal was stolen from me, along with the memory—until now. But here you’ve led me to these glasses, and now I know what I have to do.”

Suki stood. “And what’s that?”

James began to pick through the items on the desk as if searching for something. “TC would have kept a journal, yes?”

With a nod, Suki went to help James in his search. “I’m sure he did, but I don’t know where he might have kept it.” She smiled wistfully. “You know, it’s funny. As disorganized as he was, he was always really secretive about his writings. If you asked him for a screwdriver, it would take him ten minutes to find it among all this clutter, but if you needed an answer that he could only find in one of his books, he’d have that book in seconds.”

“So where did he keep his books?”

Now Suki’s smile grew larger as she gestured toward the keyless player piano. When James gave her a confused expression, she went to the piano and opened it from the top. He came to stand by her side and look down into the body of the instrument, which TC had hollowed out to make room for a series of tall stacks of very old books. The smell of leather and weathered pages took Suki back to her childhood.

“Do you know if any of these would’ve been a journal of his?” James asked.

Suki shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

They spent the next hour attacking the stacks, but nothing significant caught their attention. Then, when they reached the bottom of the third stack, James paused, his breath catching in his throat. Suki looked down into the piano and knew immediately why he had stopped. There, lying on the floor of the compartment, was a leather-bound book pressed with the same symbol that Suki had seen tattooed on Lanie’s wrist: three interlocking circles held together by a triangle. Here, the symbol was merely pressed gold, lacking the multicolored look of Lanie’s tattoo, but it was undoubtedly the same.

“You know that symbol,” Suki said.

James nodded. “My mum used to draw it constantly. And it was on the FDR journal. It’s the reason I started to believe that any of this stuff could be real.”

Immediately Suki knew that she now had no choice but to tell James about Lanie. That symbol clearly meant that the three of them were connected somehow—and it was more than just their supernatural abilities.

But that explanation would have to wait for later, because James had already gathered up the journal and was taking it back to the chair in the corner. He looked nervous as he prepared to put the glasses on his face, but when he slid them on, that nervousness was quickly replaced by awe. To Suki’s surprise, the glasses began to whirl as if they contained intricate machinery that somehow activated at James’s touch.

“Amazing,” he said.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It feels almost as if these glasses were literally meant for me. You see how they’re moving? Changing?”

Yes, she thought to him.

*They’re not doing that on their own, he projected. I’m doing that with my mind.*

“Then it’s true,” she said.

With a deep, affirming breath, he slid them on his nose. James looked rather like TC when he wore the glasses, Suki noted, if only because their thick frames were reminiscent of the magnifiers a watchmaker might wear.

As the glasses whirred on his nose, James seemed disappointed by what he saw on the first few pages, but then, as he neared the back, he groaned in wonder.

“What is it?” Suki asked. “What do you see?”

“Oh my,” he said distantly.

She nudged him out of his reverie.

“It’s the same symbol,” he said, turning the book around and showing her the page, which she perceived as blank.

“There’s nothing there,” she said.

He gave a satisfied smile. “It was the same thing with the FDR journal. I thought most of the pages were blank, but his last entry referenced copper glasses that could decipher some code. I think that’s what I’m seeing take shape here.”

“And what do you see?”

“The symbol on the cover of this book. Through the glasses, it doesn’t just appear. It seems to lift from the page, and the interlocking circles separate.”

“So what does it look like now?”

“Like three discs,” James said. “They’re just floating here, right in front of my face.” Gently he set the book in his lap and reached out as if to interact with the objects. He giggled excitedly when something seemed to happen.

“What is it?” Suki asked.

“I can move them.” He played with the invisible objects for a time, rapt as a child with a new toy.

“But what does it mean?” Suki cut in.

He laughed softly. "I have no idea."

She suggested that he try turning the page, and when he did, he immediately broke into another groan. Suki suddenly wished that she could actually read minds, so she wouldn't have to wait for him to fill her in on what was happening.

"I see it now," he said.

"What is it? What do you see?"

His mouth fell open as he watched what was clearly an inspiring scene unfold before him. "The symbol is meant to represent the discs."

"Discs?"

"There are three discs." He watched for a while longer. "They're keys. They open portals that will usher in a new age for mankind."

"Um," Suki said, confused.

James turned the page and smiled. "And we're meant to carry them. Two of them, anyway. There's a third key here, and a third person. A woman." He took the glasses off and looked Suki straight in the eyes. "We have to find her."



## CHAPTER 13

### *Washington, DC*

Senator Edwards had seen the giant, muscular, insect-like alien on a two-dimensional transmission screen many times, but nothing could have prepared him for encountering Manti in three dimensions. In exchange for their latest compliance with the alien race, the Bosenberg Group had received a new piece of technology that they were now testing for the first time. Thanks to this technology, there at the head of the Brazilian rosewood conference table occupied by a dozen wrinkled, white, unsmiling faces stood the insect-like alien in holographic form. The technology was purported to deliver an incredibly lifelike vision of the subject, but Edwards had not anticipated just *how* lifelike it would be. Indeed, it was as if the alien was standing among them in all its terrible glory.

As he watched the being assess them each in turn, Edwards experienced a sudden dread that the presence of this hologram would somehow allow Manti to sense that it wasn't the only alien in this building. Even at that moment, some fifty feet below this office on the ground floor of the Pentagon, a powerful race of gray aliens did their work on the human subjects the government provided them. Edwards wondered what Manti would think about the arrangement, and about how the Bosenberg Group had kept it a secret all this time.

Edwards fretted on this thought as the fire crackling in the oversized hearth behind one of the five wealthiest men in the world played a strange glow against the tiny black eyes of their holographic, nonhuman guest. Manti looked as real as anything or anyone else in the room, no matter how much Senator Edwards wanted to disbelieve it. The thing was otherworldly in the most absolute sense, but at the same time, it looked right at home here in this setting. Its expressionless, nearly *featureless* face projected a cold sense of superiority. And for good reason, Edwards supposed. Even among these men who would, and in fact did, rule the world, Manti reigned

supreme. This sprawling mansion full of the finest finery on the planet did not impress him, but it might as well have belonged to him, for all the group was in his debt.

One such member of the group was Steve Deveraux, the senator's oldest friend and closest confidante, and one of the five richest men in the world. Edwards's heart went out to Steve as he groveled, head down, about how he hadn't been able to pick up anything of substance from his surveillance of James Sinclair and his unlikely companion, Suki Carter.

"I can tell you that they spoke of Nazis," Steve was saying to the hologram. "And James mentioned some kind of mission to save the world." The laugh he forced was wooden. "I wish I had more for you."

To Edwards, it did not seem that Manti appreciated the laughter. The alien's image stood silently at the head of the table, its strangely human hands tented together, its gaze unwavering from the cowering Steve Deveraux.

"They're in Amarillo," Steve continued. "I've sent people to tail them, of course, but I have no reason to believe . . ." He stopped himself, and for the first time, looked up at his alien interlocutor. "If they're connected to Zalea, like you think they are, then they have no idea how or why. But in any case, we'll keep watching them."

To this, the alien said nothing, but Edwards could sense its satisfaction. The feeling was a relief, for he and his fellow board members had gotten quite used to the threat of Manti's anger.

"We'll find her for you, Lord," came another voice from across the table. Edwards didn't have to look away from Steve to know that the voice belonged to the sniveling head of the super PAC that had won the last two elections almost singlehandedly. The ultra-wealthy libertarian always adhered to a special brand of bootlicking where Manti was concerned. "But I think we're all anxious to hear about the offer you said you had for us."

Without hesitating, it was, in fact, this offer that the alien spoke of now.

Edwards shook his head. That wasn't right. To think of the way this thing communicated as "speaking" wasn't proper. It didn't even have a

voice in the traditional sense. But then again, to describe the way it communicated as “telepathic” wouldn’t have done the notion a service, either. Telepathy had always been Edwards’s assumption, based on the way Manti communicated through his human slaves while on video conference. But now he learned that when in Manti’s holographic presence, it was as if the alien’s wordless desires filled the senator’s head, and all the other heads in the room. Manti did not communicate; Manti made your mind his mind.

The overarching sense of what the alien was telling this collection of rich and powerful men was this: they could have what they had long sought. The technology that would allow them to break free of the bonds of their earthbound existence—the technology that could allow them to rule not just this world, but worlds beyond—was theirs, if only they paid the price.

Edwards waited for some time for one of his brethren to raise a voice to the question on everyone’s mind. When no one volunteered the courage to speak, he cleared his throat. Insofar as the alien could express annoyance on the projection of its cold, calculating face, it did so at the senator’s interruption.

“And what is that price?” Edwards heard himself asking. His voice sounded hollow, weak, and insignificant in the shadow of Manti’s manner of communication.

Ever so slightly, the giant praying mantis of an alien cocked its long, narrow head to the side. For the first time since it had invaded the meeting, Manti communicated in a direct fashion. *In exchange for technology that will revolutionize your space program and make you all more powerful than you can imagine, he expressed, my people demand two things. The first is that you will use the technology to embark on a mission to Mars.*

“And the second?” Edwards asked.

*Human sacrifice.*

The senator had to stop himself from laughing. It was all so surreal. To his alarm, he could sense that Manti knew what he was thinking and feeling.

*You find this amusing?* Manti said, his dead eyes boring into the senator.

“No, no,” Edwards managed, his voice cracking in a way it hadn’t since prepubescence. “Sending our people to Mars is all good and well. I’m just having trouble understanding what you mean by ‘human sacrifice.’”

*For our shared mission to succeed, there must be terror on this planet. Chaos.*

The thought caused a low murmur to ripple around the table.

“Why?” Edwards challenged.

As the alien’s unflinching gaze remained on him, the senator could feel a dull, familiar pain forming at the base of his skull. The pain quickly ramped up from dull to searing—so much pain that he couldn’t even find the strength to scream. He suddenly felt blindly driven to give Manti whatever he wanted. “Fine,” he managed through clenched teeth. “We’ll do whatever you want.”

Immediately, the pain dissipated, and he slumped back into his seat.

He could feel the other men staring at him, wide-eyed, as he collected himself. Some of them, of course, had felt Manti’s wrath just as Edwards had, and they had learned to keep their silence and devotion every day thereafter. But the senator had always refused to sit sheep-like, even if raising a question meant another round of Manti’s torture. When finally he looked up, every eye in the room averted from his gaze—every eye save for those two black pools in the center of the holographic projection of Manti’s praying mantis head.

“You’ll have your mission to Mars,” Edwards said, surprising himself at the strength he heard in his own voice. “Hell, we *all* want that. A little space travel is just what the doctor ordered to keep the American people from thinking so much about what it is we’re all trying to do here. But I’m still a little foggy on the sacrifice part of it.”

Now the alien returned to overpowering the minds in the room, bending them toward the thoughts it meant to share. Edwards felt chained to his chair as the alien injected the visions into his head, forcing him to parse through them. What he saw was fire. What he heard was the screaming of a panicked crowd. What he felt was abject terror.

“When?” Edwards asked, hating everything about himself as he realized he truly was willing to give this thing whatever it wanted. For the power it promised, he would give it even *this*.

Even through a hologram projected from the moon, the alien’s gaze burned into the senator. *When I give the signal.*



## CHAPTER 14

### *Amarillo, Texas*

He wished that the bitter shock hadn't shown so plainly on his face. But he hadn't been able to help himself. When Suki told him that she already knew who the third person was, and that this third person was pop star Lanie Montrose, the first feeling that flickered in James's heart was disbelief. It was preposterous to think that a woman he had only ever seen on television before—in fact, a sex symbol of a woman about whom he had fantasized on several occasions when he was a slightly younger man—could be caught up in something this critical and strange. But that thought was quickly overrun by an unexpected feeling: he felt betrayed. Why hadn't Suki been comfortable enough to tell him about this before now?

*I should've told you*, she communicated to him, and again James feared she might be reading his mind.

"I should've known, truthfully," he said, trying to tamp down his disappointment at the lack of trust from this woman to whom he had felt so immediately and completely connected. "I saw the report on her overdose. That tattoo on her wrist . . ."

Suki sighed through a nod.

"Wait!" James said suddenly. He stood so quickly that the copper glasses slid to the tip of his nose. He caught them and stuffed them in the pocket of his leather satchel. "Her overdose! Is she . . .?"

"She's fine," Suki said in an assuring tone. Then her expression darkened. "Or at least as fine as she can be in that facility."

He didn't have to ask her what she meant, because he could feel that same sense of foreboding. That connection he had shared with Suki, he suddenly knew he also shared with Lanie. The thought still struck him as completely unlikely, the spirit of the uncomplicated Scottish immigrant

being somehow kindred with one of the most famous and talented and beautiful women in the world.

“She’s special, too,” Suki said. “Like us.” Then she rolled her eyes at herself. “Not that we’re, like, *special-special*, but you know what I mean.”

“I’m starting to,” James said, striding back toward TC’s desk. He was looking for some sign of where they might start searching for the discs, even though he felt certain that he wouldn’t find it here.

Suki trailed after him. “I’ve known Lanie for years. Really, since she started the emotional turmoil that the tabloids like to follow. But it wasn’t until after her overdose that I felt the connection we shared. She was the first person I ever communicated with telepathically. God, I don’t know how I could’ve left her in that place. I guess I just kind of knew she could take care of herself, you know? And I felt somehow *guided* to come back here—like I was meant to leave immediately for Amarillo.”

James heard Suki, but his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking about holding his mother’s hand in the hospital right before her surgery, about seeing that symbol that had haunted him his whole childhood because he had always equated it with crazyville. But now it meant something—something real and tangible, something he could feel in his soul. The shame and remorse for having doubted his mother for so many years was enough to make him feel weak in the knees. He leaned forward and pressed his hands to the desk, steadying himself.

“What are you looking for?” Suki asked softly.

He shook his head, but didn’t reply. Tears welled in his eyes as he silently mulled how deeply he could use his mother’s guidance. All those years, she had been trying to point him in the right direction, but here, now, when he needed her most, she was in some hospital bed on another continent.

“I’ll do everything in my power to make it up to you,” he said to himself in a voice barely audible.

“I’m sorry?” Suki said, leaning closer as if straining to hear.

James righted himself and stood up straight. “I think we’re meant to find these discs,” he told her, and even as he spoke the words, he knew they were true. The thought delivered to him a sense of peace he couldn’t recall ever experiencing. It was as if he had carried a huge weight of doubt and uncertainty all his life—a weight so massive and so constant that he didn’t even realize it had been there until it was gone. He knew what he had to do now, what he was *meant* to do, and the sensation was more liberating than anything he had ever experienced.

Even with his eyes still brimming with tears, a bubbly smile rose to his lips. Suki’s face lit up in a way so lovely that, for a fleeting moment at least, it made James ache with a desire to hold her.

“My mother was right, Suki,” he said, a tear spilling over his cheek. “I was meant for something important. *We* were meant for something important.”

Quickly she closed the gap between them and reached up to brush away his tear with a delicate finger. Her touch caused warmth to bloom in his chest. As the feeling ebbed, it was replaced with a vision—so clear and so complete—in James’s mind. He saw the silhouette of a beautiful woman standing on a rocky crag. The precipice at her feet overlooked a stunning vista of rolling green hills, an orange-red sun bowing low near a snowcapped mountain range to the west. Clasped with both hands, she held something high above her head. It was formless and colorless at first, but then collapsed into a circular shape that seemed to project every color James had ever seen all at once.

He knew immediately that this woman was Suki.

“James,” came a voice. He startled from his vision and glanced down, expecting to see Suki looking up at him, but she had gone to a door in the corner of the room and was standing there as if considering whether to enter. She was speaking to him, he could see, but he couldn’t hear her—neither with his ears nor his mind.

“You have had the power all along,” the voice repeated, and now he recognized it as belonging to his mother. “Don’t let the darkness stifle you any longer. You can unlock your gifts through the power of light.”

“James?”

Once more, James snapped back to reality, this time when he felt the tug on his sleeve from Suki. She had returned from the door and was now gazing up at him, her eyes dewy with concern.

“My mother sent me here to find my destiny,” he said. “And I believe we’ve found it.”

She nodded. “What do we do next?”

“We have to locate the discs. I just don’t know where to start.”

Suki paced away from him, seeming to fret. He watched her for a time, trying to remember any clues from the FDR journal that might point them in the right direction. No matter how he tried, he found that most of the details were still foggy, still stolen from him. If only he hadn’t lost that journal, the trail wouldn’t feel so cold.

His desperation was just starting to rise when Suki stopped its flight with a disarmingly pretty smile. Her expression stood in stark contrast to how she had looked only moments ago. In some circumstances, James might have found the change rather odd, but somehow it fit the moment perfectly. With one smile, Suki had managed to obliterate James’s anxiety.

He sighed, wondering what it meant that no other woman had been able to do that for him. “What is it?” he asked.

“I just thought of something TC used to say all the time when I was a kid.”

Her lifted mood was infectious. James felt suddenly light.

“He used to say that when there’s a question you’re having trouble answering, the best thing is to find your thinking chair.” Fondly she looked back over her shoulder, toward the door she had been examining earlier, as if confirming the memory. “And then he’d go off to his private study and shut himself in there for an hour or so.”

“So you’re suggesting we sit down and think?”

Suki beamed. “In his study.”

“But I don’t understand. Why—”

“I didn’t realize the true meaning of his advice until I was in college,” Suki cut in. “That room wasn’t a study. Not in the traditional sense, anyway.” She motioned to the desk and all the clutter around her. “*This* was his real study.” Then she fired a thumb back over her shoulder in the direction of the door. “The old man kept a pool table in that room. A pool table and his liquor cabinet . . .” She cocked an eyebrow. “Well, I say we take the old man’s advice. We clearly have some thinking to do. And some traveling. But I’ve had enough of both of those things for one day.”

He nodded. He’d had enough of them, too. “I suppose we’d better have a drink, then.”

She pointed to her head as if to say, “You read my mind.”

With a laugh, he followed her to the big, heavy wooden door in the corner. It creaked on its hinges and gave way to a room that, by comparison to the one they’d just left, was impeccably clean. In the center was a large oak pool table with clawed feet, intricate inlays, and leather-lined pockets. The red felt on its surface was a bit dusty from lack of use, but everything else about it promised a professional game. Hanging above it was a billiard chandelier with an old smoky-green Budweiser shade.

There were four small but plush chairs set along the walls at each corner of the table, as if giving the player the perfect vantage to sit and think about the next shot. A set of solid, thick, expensive-looking cues hung on the rack on the wall to James’s left. And to his right, in the far corner of the room, stood a vintage ’50s-era jukebox, complete with what looked like an extensive record collection.

“You’ve got to be kidding me with that thing,” James said, awed as he made his way straight for it.

“It doesn’t always work,” Suki warned.

James reached the machine, turned around, and as coolly as he could manage, knocked the side of his fist against the glass over the record player. Nothing happened.

“You have to plug it in first, Fonzie,” Suki said sardonically.

With a start, James dropped down to one knee and searched for the plug. He found it and quickly plugged it in, but it took a solid minute for the thing to warm up enough for its lights to start flickering on. It whirred to life shortly after, and in a brilliant array of primary colors. Full of hope, he pressed the keys that would play Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away," but nothing happened. His disappointment must have shown on his face when he turned around, because Suki pursed her lips.

"TC always had a trick to it," she said. "Maybe you can . . ." She pointed to her head, reminding him of his newfound power.

Excitement fluttering his heart, he wheeled back around, set his hands on the warm, lit, rounded top of the machine, and tried to tell it to play Buddy Holly. To his great disappointment, it didn't respond. It had been so easy to find the bug, to control the limo's radio, to sense the electricity coursing through this house. But this machine . . . it was as if it didn't operate on the same frequency as everything else. The pain he felt this time was more like a short burst of heat at the base of his skull. It passed quickly.

*It's not listening to me,* he thought to Suki.

She clucked her tongue. "I'll poke around with it later."

As Suki started the process of turning on the various lamps scattered around the place, James tried to console himself by surveying the rest of what turned out to be a remarkably large room for the old man to have hidden for so many years. His gaze found what must have been TC's so-called thinking chair. It was high-backed and horned, upholstered in a red leather that matched the pool table's playing surface. To one side stood a circular stone table that rose to the perfect height to set one's highball glass.

To the left was a tall armoire with grainy wooden doors and polished brass handles. Having finished with the lights, Suki opened these doors and proudly stepped to the side to reveal that the armoire converted into a full bar. The interiors of its doors were lined with shelves stocked from end to end and top to bottom with truly exceptional liquors. It seemed to James that TC had been a bourbon man. Below the bar was a miniature drawer-access freezer and a wine rack half-stocked and inset with a wooden drawer

that promised a humidor. The mirror above the bar reflected the awed look on James's face.

Suki snickered at him, then got down to filling one of the highball glasses with what had to be Blanton's, given the bottle's recognizable shape. Using the bar tools that slotted in on either side of the mirror, she made quick, professional work of the bourbon and ice before returning with a pair of glasses. She handed one to James, then clinked them together. "I made the assumption you'd want rocks," she said casually before taking a sip. "Only way to enjoy Grand-Dad. At least that's what TC always said."

He sucked air through his teeth, relishing the flavor of one of the finest bourbons he had ever tasted. It described citrus and oak, with just a hint of vanilla on the back end. "This is Blanton's," he corrected.

Her lips parted as she nodded her head back conspiratorially. "Ah, so you know your bourbons. I was just testing you on the Grand-Dad thing." Already she was heading over to the other end of the room, where she set her highball in the drink holder positioned in the arm of the nearest chair beside the pool table.

Sensing that this meant Suki intended to challenge him to a game, James set his drink up in the chair at the opposite corner. "Truthfully I was more of a beer man until I came to the States," he admitted. "But the beer here is so terrible that I had no choice but to cultivate an appreciation for whiskey."

Suki gave a good-natured groan. She had taken a pool cue down from the rack and was inspecting it for straightness. "Oh, you're going to play the 'beer is better in the Isles' card, huh? That play's a little outdated, wouldn't you say?"

In reply, James nodded toward the Budweiser sign.

Suki shook her head. "That hasn't truly been the king of beers in almost two decades." She finished chalking her cue, then got down to the business of chalking her fingers and rubbing some of the blue stuff in the grooves between her thumb and forefinger. She did all this as casually as a pool hustler. "Clearly you've been asleep for the past fifteen years or so.

You seem to have missed the news about the great American beer revolution.”

James chuffed as he picked up his glass. He held it under his nose for a time, savoring the scent before taking another lightly chilled nip of the beautiful liquid. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

With her cue resting on the edge of the table, Suki started retrieving the billiards from the pockets and arranging them on the end nearest James. “Well then, my friend, we’ll be introducing you to a proper American beer before this adventure is over. That’s a promise.”

“If you must,” James said with feigned disinterest.

“Cure you of that bourbon habit yet.”

He laughed, the remnants of the whiskey on his tongue sending a light, pleasant burning sensation to the back of his throat. As she grabbed the triangle from the hook on the wall and started racking the game, James took great pleasure in watching her work. In any other circumstance, he would have looked upon this beautiful, intelligent, and charming woman with a fair share of sexual hope, but there was something about Suki that made him appreciate who she was on an entirely different plane. It wasn’t that he wasn’t attracted to her. If he could have described everything he wanted in a mate, she would have looked, talked, and behaved in exactly the way Suki did now. She had a brilliant mind, an erudite wit, talents that would always challenge him, a pretty face, and an undeniably desirable form. But she was more than that—so much more that he found himself assessing her on levels that rendered these qualities irrelevant.

When she finished racking the game, she looked over at him and lifted an eyebrow. *We gonna play this game or what?* she projected to him.

With a smirk, he rose from the chair. He had seen how comfortable she was around a pool table, so he could guess that he was in for a challenge. But what she couldn’t have known about him was that without a set of parents to support him Stateside, pool hustling was the way he’d put himself through college. He kept his hustler’s blank expression as he strode to the rack and thought about how he would play this exactly as he had so many hundreds of times at the pool halls that had made him so much

money. Only on this occasion, he'd have to work the con while navigating the interplay between aural and telepathic communication. *I'm not sure how much money I have on me, if you're planning on making this interesting*, he thought to her.

The playfulness that shone on her lovely face was infectious. "You think I don't know this con?"

He shrugged, then made a show of fumbling with his cue.

*Cut the crap*, she thought to him. *I saw how you were looking at this table. You don't think I know a hustler when I see one?*

For a heartbeat, he tried to maintain the befuddled expression that had set so many traps for his marks. But he couldn't manage it much beyond that first effort, the smile cracking at the edges of his lips.

"Yeah," Suki said. *That's what I thought.*

He laughed. *Have it your way. A straight game, then.*

Suki was already lining up the first shot. *I break.*

As she let fly, James scrambled in to remove the triangle, snatching it away just in time. When the cue ball struck, the set exploded, sending billiards scattering and sinking three of them in the process.

"Oy," James said, striding back to the bar as Suki quickly lined up her next shot. He clinked the ice in his glass. "I'm going to need another one of these."

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Between failed attempts to get the jukebox to do anything but project light, they'd split the first two games, and James was having trouble hiding how impressed he was with his opponent. But her win in the second game had meant that he would break in the third, and that left her in trouble. What she couldn't have known was that bourbon had a way of improving James's game. He'd had three of them by now, the bottle of Blanton's getting low, and the truth was that his feel for the table was better than he'd experienced since college. He easily could have ended the deciding game before Suki had even had a chance to take her first shot, but out of a sense

of good sportsmanship, or perhaps chivalry, he intentionally flubbed his attempt at the eight ball.

On her turn, Suki had started out well enough, but she was moving much slower, taking her time as she absorbed herself into the conversation and the booze absorbed into her bloodstream. As she lined up her latest shot, she looked a little wobbly.

“Too much Grand-Dad, kid?” he asked.

He had taken to calling her “kid” the moment she’d told him that TC used to favor her with the pet name. “Just like ‘Casablanca,’” she’d said wistfully.

She furrowed her brow and stood up straight as if to collect herself. “You wouldn’t think so,” she said, her words slurring slightly. “I mean, I’m still on, what? My second glass? Afraid I just can’t help my heritage.”

He chuckled. “What are you? Swedish? Norwegian? I know you can’t be Irish or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

She held a finger aloft. “Believe it or not, my grandmother was Native American. I know it’s hard to tell, given my pallor.” Embellishing the grace of a model—though a slightly drunken one—Suki ran a pale hand through her dirty blond hair, her brown eyes twinkling. When she finished, she had to steady herself on her cue.

James rose and gently took the glass from her hand. “My competitive spirit says you could use a refill.”

*Jerk*, she thought to him, and James marveled at how she could manage to communicate a sarcastic ribbing telepathically. “I suppose you don’t have that problem,” she said aloud.

“A northern European’s coloring?” he quipped as he fixed another drink for her, this time cutting the bourbon with plenty of water.

She gave a mock grumble. “No, a weak constitution in the face of bourbon.”

“Nay, me roots are strong,” he said, laying his accent on thick. He returned the drink to her, making a face that said she should be careful and take it slow.

She rolled her eyes at him. “You’d think with TC being English, I’d have similar roots.” She took a quick sip, set her drink down, and proceeded to rattle off two straight, true shots. Three more like that and she would make James pay for his sportsmanship by winning the game.

“You should’ve seen the old man play pool,” she said wistfully. She brushed away an errant lock of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes, tucking it back behind her ear and baring her delicate jawline and strikingly long neck. “He made his way in the navy. Used to take the other officers of their leave pay.”

“And I assume he taught you from a young age.”

She scoffed as she fired off another shot, sinking it. “It’s like I told you. He kept this room a secret until I was in college. I guess he figured I wasn’t old enough to play until I was old enough to drink.”

James’s eyes went wide. “You mean you’ve only been playing this game, what? Four? Six years?”

Her expression let him know that she was on to his ham-fisted attempt at flattery. “Ten years, but nice try, Scotty.”

He laughed, wondering if she would continue with the obvious nickname even after she sobered up. With most people, it would’ve made him blanch to be called Scotty. But with Suki . . .

“I’d bet that brogue of yours stirs up *all* the ladies,” she was saying as she lined up her next shot. With a cracking follow-through, she nailed it. Now all that remained was the eight ball. If Suki sank it, she would complete the improbable comeback that James had allowed.

He shook his head, honestly unsure of the effect of his accent. He drew a breath then, wanting to ask whether she heard that same accent in her head when they communicated telepathically, but at that moment, the jukebox sprang to life. Both of them looked over at the machine just as the arm rose to select a record, spinning the disc sidelong before setting it on the player. The thrumming guitar hook crackled through a surprisingly rich set of speakers, and the “bop-bop, bop-bops” of the Buddy Holly ditty set James’s feet to shifting in the slightest dance he could manage without feeling like a fool.

“Did you do that?” Suki asked, looking wide-eyed at the jukebox.

James shook his head. “Must’ve just taken a while to spool up.” He started shaking his shoulders to the rhythm. “I couldn’t sense its energy before, but I can feel it now. So that’s got to be it.”

She caught the subtle way he was dancing and cackled. Then she performed a little dance of her own. It carried her over to the drink she had left at the corner chair. It was clear from her movements that she was not an experienced dancer, but James couldn’t say that she was ungraceful. He thought about asking her to dance, but felt suddenly uncomfortable about it. They had hardly known each other a day. And though he felt drawn to her, he couldn’t say whether that attraction was romantic. He felt as if he had known her for several lifetimes, and yet he still didn’t know whether it would be appropriate to ask her to dance. Before he could decide, she rescued him from his indecision.

“So you ready to make this interesting?” she asked. The red bloom of her cheeks had reached down to her neck, and she looked a little unsteady on her feet.

He didn’t particularly want to win, but he couldn’t help but play the game. “I’ve never seen this con,” he said jovially. “Typically you lay the money down *before* the mark knows you’re any good. Now that I’ve seen you clean up this table, you’re asking me to bet on whether you’ll miss one of your next two shots? Not great odds.”

“Ah!” Suki said, raising a finger thoughtfully. “But I’m *drunk*.”

He laughed. “Tell you what. I’ll take the bet if you pull this next shot with your eyes closed.”

“But I can line it up with my eyes open?”

He shrugged.

She scoffed and stalked back to take her position at the table. “Easiest bet I ever made.”

After taking her time lining up the shot, she made a show out of closing her eyes tightly. But just as she drew back, the part when Buddy

sings about his love being bigger than a Cadillac blared through the jukebox, and James couldn't help himself.

"I've always wanted a Cadillac," he blurted loudly, startling Suki off her shot.

Her cue missed the mark, and the shot skittered and rebounded to the near corner.

"Maybe a fifty-seven Eldorado," James continued.

She leveled a good-natured glare. "Looks like you win the bet, Cadillac Man."

"We didn't wager anything."

She paused, wrinkling her nose. "Oh. Right." She went back to take another drink of her bourbon. Then she assessed him with her gaze. "You don't seem like a classic-car guy."

"I get that a lot, I suppose. I think it's the Scottish thing. Americans aren't used to foreigners being obsessed with classic American cars."

"But you are?"

"I'm what?"

"Obsessed."

"Ah. Yes. Definitely." He took a thoughtful sip of his fourth bourbon before setting it down and returning to the table. "It's just that . . . I don't know. There's just so much *energy* in those big American classics." Once more, he made sure to look as if he was carefully lining up his final shot, and once more, he purposely missed.

Whether she was on to the sportsmanship bit or not, she paid no attention. Almost absently, she lined up and sank her last ball, leaving only the eight. If she sank this one, she would win. But whether it was from her increasing drunkenness or her own sense of chivalry, she, too, missed the final shot.

"Think our eight ball is cursed," James said, but she wasn't paying attention, still furrowing her brow as if she had realized something, but still

couldn't put her finger on *what*. While she was thinking, he decided to miss just one last time. "You're up, kid."

Before she could answer, the Buddy Holly song ended, and next came Elvis's "All Shook Up." As if realizing the same thing at the same time, they both looked to the jukebox, their eyes going wide. As one, they stumbled over to it, their hands hovering over its glass as if wondering how they might crack it open without completely destroying it. James strained to focus through his drunkenness so he could communicate with it, but even though he could feel its electricity, it didn't respond. Something told him that maybe this meant the jukebox's *purpose* was to remain silent—as if it intended to mask the supernatural energy it contained. The thought made him feel suddenly frantic to find out.

As he used his fingers to pry at the place where the glass met the metallic base that supported the record player, Suki thought to pull the plug, quieting Elvis mid-hum. But then, the moment she climbed drunkenly to stand next to him and set her hands on the glass, they both deflated. The quiet electricity of the jukebox was gone, and there was nothing of the energy left inside it.

*It's not here*, she thought to him.

*I know*, James said. *We'd feel it*.

Suki sighed and steadied herself on the jukebox. "Maybe we just need Lanie."

"Lanie?"

She shrugged. "Maybe it's like a Wonder Twins thing, where our powers are only at their fullest when we're together."

"Except we'd be triplets."

Suki scoffed into a chuckle. "I'm serious here, James. Maybe we won't be able to figure out where to search for the discs until we're all together. Three discs, three people who are connected to this thing. We both felt drawn to Amarillo somehow. Clearly you and I were meant to find each other. Maybe the next step is to get back to Lanie so our trio is *whole*."

James nodded, pondering the thought for a while. “So you’re thinking we should head to LA . . .”

“In the morning.”

He pursed his lips, his mind warring between the boyish excitement of meeting Lanie Montrose and the odd sense of anxiety he felt at the notion of spending the night in this place. He wasn’t sure why he felt anxious. He was too drunk to quite riddle it out. “I get the sense that none of this is going to be easy,” he said finally.

“Makes two of us,” she echoed. She brushed her hands against her jeans, dusting away the blue chalk that had collected on her fingers.

She was fit, he noticed not for the first time, her legs taut and long and slender.

She caught his gaze, but said nothing. Instead, she nodded toward the pool table again. *Tell you what, she communicated. Since we’re both so clearly unwilling to beat the other, let’s just say we leave that eight ball where it is.* Then she finished aloud. “We’ll settle this thing after we find Lanie and the discs and do whatever we’re supposed to do with them.”

“Okay,” he breathed. “I like that.”

They leaned next to each other, the jukebox still warm, and shared a moment of uncomfortable silence. James wished he’d brought his drink along so he could fill the gap with a sip, but then all at once the thought made him feel sick. Whatever happened next, he was done with bourbon for the night.

“I just realized something,” she said.

“What’s that?”

*We no longer have to look at one another to communicate this way,* she projected.

“Ah . . .” he murmured. *You’re right. I guess we’re getting better at this.*

After another short silence, she said, “We should go to bed.”

A pulse of fear and excitement numbed him from the chest all the way to his fingertips. If his gulp was audible, it betrayed him, but then, he wasn't even sure whether he had actually gulped, or just imagined it.

"Separately," she added, blushing.

It occurred to him in that moment that he had been holding his breath. He let it out through his nose, a sense of relief meshing with another emotion he couldn't quite identify. Was it disappointment? "Of course," he said finally.

Another uncomfortable moment of silence followed, and neither of them pushed away from the jukebox. Then finally Suki spoke, telling him that there was a guest bedroom where James would be comfortable, while she would sleep in her grandfather's room. He agreed to the arrangement, and she led him upstairs to show him the place. She offered towels and explained where he would find a toothbrush and toothpaste he could use. Then she thanked him for helping her blow off steam, gave him a lingering hug, and left.

When the door closed between them, James thought about doing something to prepare for bed, but then found that he was too tired to want to do anything but sleep. His head hit the pillow a moment later, and he prepared to plunge into sleep. Sleep did not come, though, no matter how he tried. It wasn't the bed, which was comfortable, and it certainly wasn't for lack of exhaustion. His mind was just too preoccupied with all he had learned over the past day-plus.

The more he thought on it, the more he realized that it wasn't the mystery of his mission or even all the supernatural things he had witnessed that had his mind reeling. Rather, it was Suki herself. She enchanted him, and in a way unlike anything he had ever experienced.

Then, just when he thought he couldn't take any more of this sleeplessness, he heard her voice in his head.

*Good night again, James,* it said.

A smile crossed his lips. He didn't know how far her room was from his, but regardless, it was impressive how far she had come with her power in just one short day.

*Good night*, he thought back to her.

Contented by his connection with her, he finally succumbed to sleep.

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In her dream, this world looked different, and yet it looked the same. Upon seeing this place, she knew she had experienced this dream before, many times. And yet she hadn't recalled it until just now. In this dream, she walked down an idyllic path just behind her house. There were trees on both sides, and plush grass working its way back to the overgrowth under the tree line of a dense forest. She could feel his hand in hers, and instinctively knew who he was before she looked up to see him.

Yes, it was him. It was always him. Had always been him. He was hers and she his. That was the way it had always been—not just in this lifetime, but in all lifetimes. It was all so perfect and real that it took her a long moment to realize that it wasn't real at all. This was all a simulation. This seemed so much like the planet she would come to occupy, and yet it wasn't. This was just a dome, a replica of Earth, a training ground on which she and her life-mate would need to prove their worth. If they could do so, then they would be transported to the real thing, to that place where they could be reborn into a life that would allow them to make a difference.

“Do you think we will remember each other?” she asked him.

He smiled that reassuring smile of his. “That depends. Do you think it is important that we remember each other?”

The question struck her as offensive, and so her first reaction was to blanch angrily. But then she saw the laughter in his eyes.

“Of course I think we will remember each other,” he said. “The elders said we would remember what was important, and I can't imagine anything more important than you.”

In this dream, she melted now, just as she had melted then.

“The elders also said that we would remember nearly everything in dreams,” he said. “We just need to keep those dreams with us, and we can return here to this place.”

“I wish we could stay here forever,” she heard herself saying.

“A part of me does, too,” he agreed. “But we both know that can’t happen. We both know what must be done.”

Her heart filled with love and appreciation for this man who strode beside her, hand in hand. She had never met anyone so absolutely in tune with herself, and she knew that she never would again. She wanted to burst with the gratitude for him, and for what they shared.

At the moment of that feeling, she saw it. Ahead on the path, a fissure had formed. It was as though the world had pulled back, revealing a darkness beneath the fabric of reality. It terrified her, but she knew in an instant what it meant. She looked to him, and could see that he knew it, too. They had never felt closer to one another, and now they would have to part.

“I love you,” he said.

She did not have to reply, for he knew. He had always known. Hand in hand, they walked toward the darkness, and hand in hand, they stepped into it. The moment their reality fell away, an impossibly bright light washed over them. She had never known such hope or innocence or possibility. She was going to fulfill her mission, and she would do it as a new soul in a new place and time.

Her fingers tightened over his hand, feeling the warmth of his soft skin one last time. And then his hand began to retreat from her, to disintegrate, to fall away.

The terror she felt upon losing him was such that she startled, and was suddenly awake.

Confused, Suki rolled over and looked at the clock. It was four in the morning. She’d had a dream, she realized, though she could recall nothing of it. Then she thought of the night she’d had with James, and couldn’t help the smile. Sleep returned to her quickly.

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The two of them were carving up the kitchen in search of some morsel, some canned good, that Suki hadn’t thought to unload after her grandfather’s death. He could tell from her body language that she was

certain they wouldn't find any food. Either that or she was terribly hungover.

He felt fine, in truth, and he couldn't imagine why. Except that he was famished.

"It's crazy," he said. "We've been doing all this *chasing*—chasing ghosts and glasses and discs, and now food—that I don't think either of us properly thought about how we're going to get where we're going next."

"What do you mean?" she said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"We had that Texan chap drive us from the airport and drop us here at your grandfather's house."

She nodded, oblivious.

"So how are we going to get *out* of here?" he asked. "We're out in the middle of nowhere, and we've no car."

She gave a knowing smile, an act that seemed to exacerbate her hangover. "Oh, just you wait, Scotty."

They agreed to call off the search for food and try to find a drive-through out on the road. Since there was nothing to pack, they simply left through the front door, Suki leading him toward a detached, three-car garage he hadn't noticed on the way in. Now he understood how she would solve their predicament. She had gotten rid of all the food in the house, but had thought to keep at least one car.

Then, when she opened the garage door, he saw it, and it stopped him in his tracks. He never quite imagined that the day would come, but in this of all places, he was staring at a dream from his childhood.

"Well, it's not a Cadillac," she said. "But I suppose it'll have to do."

There was no way she could have known that this was one of the American classics he'd fantasized about for as long as he could remember. It was a 1970 Ford Mustang Boss 302, and beneath its coat of red Texas dust, the high shine of its sky-blue paint glimmered.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said.

She forced a grumpy smile. "Like it?"

“Oh my God, yes.” He said it so quickly it was like one word.

“ Last time I drove it was almost a year ago. I hope the battery hasn’t gone flat.”

“It hasn’t,” he said with confidence. He wasn’t sure how he knew this. But that wasn’t all. As he opened the driver’s door and slid into the cockpit of this magnificent machine, he knew everything about it—that its owner had cared for it meticulously, that its transmission had been rebuilt by hand, that its tires were perfectly pressurized, and that its gas tank was three-quarters full. It needed an oil change, sure, but apart from that, it would hum like new the moment he turned the key.

“Have you got the keys?” he asked. When he looked up from his childlike entrancement on the dashboard, he saw a wincing Suki dangling a shiny set of keys beside his face. “I’ll tell you, kid,” he said as he snatched them from her, “this is going to be one of the finest experiences of my life.”

“Wait,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Who says you’re the one driving?”

He looked at her aghast, but her playful smirk quickly said she was teasing. He groaned and reached out to shut his door. She hopped back and out of the way, and it slammed shut with a solid, satisfying *thunk*. Then he leaned over and opened the passenger door for her. She slid into the seat just as he roared the engine to life.

The experience of hearing his dream car howl for the first time was even grander than he had ever imagined. He wasn’t sure whether he owed the sensation to his longtime adoration of American cars or to his newfound power to sense and control machines, but he felt not as if the engine rumbled in the car itself, but rather, inside his own chest. His exhilaration was such that he hardly even noticed the accompanying pain in his skull. “Bloody hell,” he breathed.

Suki looked pleased, but slightly uncomfortable. “So, the airport is just on the other side of the city. We’ll have to get out to—”

“Airport?” James cut in. “Are you kidding? This is one of the finest cars your great country has ever produced.”

She looked at him, blinking rapidly through her confusion.

“We’re not *flying* to LA, kid. We’ll be driving there.”

Slowly, a knowing and accepting smile played across her lips. She leaned back contentedly, motioning toward the driveway ahead.

He didn’t hesitate to punch the gas, the raw power of the finely tuned engine roaring in his heart, his mind racing forward, the peeling of the rear tires bringing that same gratification his feet always felt as he began his daily morning jog. As he chewed up the gravel driveway at speed, he could feel her nervous gaze on him.

*Maybe you should, um, ease into it,* he heard her voice in his mind.

“Trust me,” he replied. “This is unlike anything I’ve ever—” But he couldn’t finish the thought, because what he saw at the end of the drive excited him in a way he hadn’t anticipated. It was the rickety iron gate that had always made TC Carter feel like a cowboy.

“James . . . ,” she said anxiously. *The gate!*

He pressed harder on the gas, the RPMs cranking and the tires fishtailing in the deep gravel. When finally they found purchase, the car rocketed forward, causing its driver’s heart to soar.

“Trust me,” he repeated.

In a flash, they were upon it. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see how Suki recoiled, clinging desperately to the passenger door, trying to hold herself steady.

If he’d had the occasion to drive such a fine car at any point in his life prior to this one, James would have felt that the proper way to respect it was to drive it carefully and responsibly. But in this moment, he wasn’t simply driving the machine; he *knew* the machine, and what that knowledge told him was that he *had* to crash through this gate like he was in some kind of bad action western.

When the black maw of the Mustang’s front end connected with the gate, the iron peeled back, its screeching objection drowned out by the throaty snarl of the engine and James’s own laughter. At the moment of impact, James felt a pang of pain in his chest, but it quickly faded, and he

knew immediately that although he had taken a risk of damaging the car, it was no worse for the wear. In fact, the car itself seemed *exhilarated*. Of course he knew this wasn't possible. It was just that his power allowed him to blur the lines between where the car ended and the driver began.

From his right, Suki groaned. "Beyond the fact that it's possible your old friend Steve still has reason to surveil us," she said wryly, "I did mention that I have a raging hangover this morning, didn't I?"

A burst of laughter escaped James's throat. And though his veins still coursed with the thrill of not just driving, but *experiencing* the car of his dreams, he understood that playtime would have to be over—at least for now. Even though this beautiful car was the antithesis of low-profile, a low profile was indeed what they would have to keep as they made their journey westward, and to the pop star awaiting them.



## CHAPTER 15

### *Malibu, California*

Over the past few years, Lanie Montrose had gotten quite used to disappointment. Yet somehow this one was different. Deeper. And the worst part was that she couldn't deal with it in the way she had grown so accustomed. She had made a promise to Suki, after all, and this time she intended to keep it. She would avoid the drugs, would remain clearheaded until her psychiatrist returned and they could practice more of their weird, mental communication. Then, together they could figure out why Lanie couldn't seem to solve the problem that was the chip in her head.

She had been so certain that her idea upon escaping the hospital had been a good one.

*Get back to where it all started*, she had told herself.

That had meant returning to the pool, where the sunshine and the warm breeze and those hawks circling beautifully overhead had first sparked her awakening to a new sense of how everything in life was connected.

But after trudging barefoot out of the canyon—and after exhausting what remained of her mental power on convincing the Uber driver that she wasn't driving a famous singer home, but rather, just some random young lady who nannied in Malibu—she had found her darkened house less inviting and the pool far less inspiring.

Not wanting to waste any time, she had stripped off the hospital clothing and plunged naked into the water. She swam for an hour in this way, her fingertips wrinkling and her bones taking a chill, before she decided that maybe this would only work if the conditions were the same as before: the sun up and the breeze warm.

She was exhausted, anyway, so she returned to the house and slept for a few hours on the living room sofa. It was well into the morning when

she had awoken and returned to the pool. Still, no matter how hard she tried, she had not been able to recover the euphoria of the morning of the hawks.

Now, clinging to the side of the pool and breathing hard, she was feeling something beyond mere disappointment. It was desperation, and tears were welling in her eyes.

Then another thought came to her. Was it possible that the bikini she had been wearing had something to do with it?

She groaned when she realized that she'd left the plastic bag with her swimsuit in it at the hospital. Still, an idea was an idea, so she climbed out of the pool, dripping and towel-less, and tracked water across the cedar deck, the graphite tile flooring of her kitchen, the glass staircase, and the Brazilian teak hardwood upstairs. When she started to put her second favorite suit on, it occurred to her that it wouldn't hurt to try all of them, so she spent the next ten minutes just pulling the dozens and dozens of them out of the various drawers in her sprawling walk-in dressing area and trying to clutch them all in her arms.

It took her a good long while to get them down the stairs, because she had to stop every couple of steps to retrieve a teal bottom or paisley top that had fallen from the pile she'd balled up in her arms. Every time she had to stop, she would curse her own obsession with adorable bikinis. How was it possible for one woman to own so much swimwear?

At the bottom of the stairs, she found the full-length mirror and paused for a moment to examine her nude form. Her first thought was that the hospital food had done her well. But then something strange happened. Her own image flickered and faded, and now it was like the mirror was a window into a different world. Or rather, a different time. She saw herself in a dozen different places, reliving a dozen different regrets. Some of them she recognized immediately, but others were older—so old that it was almost as if they belonged to someone else.

She stood there for a long time, watching, her eyes welling. Eventually she felt she could watch no more. She closed her eyes, and the tears spilled over her cheeks. It felt as if the mirror was compelling her to

watch, but she shook her head, refusing. But when a bright flash of light filled the room, she couldn't keep them shut any longer. There in the mirror, she saw familiar silhouettes, people she had known long, long ago. Their names she had forgotten, but she recognized them, and in that recognition, she knew an undeniable connection of love.

Another flash of light rocketed out of the mirror, and the images disappeared. Now she was standing and staring at her own body once more. The bikinis she had been carrying had fallen to the floor.

*What the hell was that?* she thought as she busied herself with picking up the swimwear.

By the time she got back to the pool, the mirror incident had passed like a dream, and she was back to thinking about how ridiculous it was that she owned all this useless stuff. She knew a sudden urge to give up all her earthly belongings. This would be her last time in this house. She would let some hobo live here, would sign over the deed to him on the spot. And she would take all her clothes—all of them—to the nearest Goodwill, and would leave herself only that smart, light cotton jumper she really only ever wore on the days when Ingrid had forgotten to do her laundry for a month or so. She might get back to singing, sure, but otherwise, she would live like a wandering, though skinny, Buddha, and would spend every waking moment practicing the art of connecting more deeply to the universe.

But then, one look at her second favorite swimming suit put those thoughts straight out of her head. She so loved worldly things. And besides, the tabloids would have a field day if she started showing up to every recording session in the same cotton jumper. She'd probably spill coffee on the damn thing on the first day, anyway.

The thought caused a tightening of her brow. *The tabloids*. Even as she spent the next two hours swimming and trying on various suits to try to get herself back into that original mental state, she thought about how comparatively peaceful life had seemed since her escape. No Dr. Schmidt. No orderlies. No paparazzi. No *Ingrid*. The more she thought on this, and the more she fretted about how she was no closer to connecting to that original feeling, and the more she settled in to the idea that she couldn't disable this chip in her head without help, the more fearful she became.

It was true that she had managed to convince Dr. Schmidt that neither he nor his staff should come looking for her, and she had backed the paparazzi off her trail so completely that no one in the world even knew that she had returned home. The only problem was that she couldn't be sure how long the effects of her power of suggestion would last. Even if her power of suggestion was indefinite, surely someone would eventually turn up to the hospital in search of her—someone whose mind she hadn't bent to her will. And then the whole game of living in a glass house would return, only now the story would be juicier, because the press could report on the mystery of how a drug-addicted pop star had managed to check herself out of an inpatient psychiatric facility without anyone noticing.

So she abandoned the swimming, leaving her dozen scattered suits to dry in the various places she had left them around the pool and deck, so she could hole up in her house, hermit-like, passing the time with crocheting, occasionally checking the security footage on her tablet or even peering out the window, and watching reality television. The outside surveillance and the bad TV were as comforting as old friends, but the crocheting came back to her slowly. She hadn't done it since before stardom. Or rather, since before Ingrid. The truth was that in her early days as a singer, she found the hobby that her grandmother had taught her to be particularly calming. But then Ingrid told her that it wouldn't help the slightly bad-girl image Lanie was cultivating if some snooping camera happened to catch her with a pair of hooked needles in her hand.

Now, though, in her newfound freedom, she could crochet to her heart's content. So she worked and worked until she ran out of the yarn she had been surprised to learn that Ingrid hadn't thrown out. She had passed a sleepless night in this way, finishing with a shapeless, nine-foot-long scarf of many colors. Now she sat trying to enjoy her badly planned and poorly executed grapefruit juice and banana smoothie—Ingrid had been in charge of smoothies, as well—as she watched the sun rise on her first morning of freedom.

Something about staring at the orange horizon reminded her of why she had come back home, and of the peaceful epiphany that had landed her

in the hospital in the first place. And that made her think of Suki. Idly she wondered if her psychiatrist would ever bother coming back like she'd said.

Then, all at once, Lanie startled, realizing that she'd been so intent on figuring out how to return to the level of connectedness that would let her disable the chip in her head that she had forgotten to tell Suki of her escape.

She spent the next three hours calling her psychiatrist constantly. Sure, it was still early in the day, but she couldn't imagine why Suki wouldn't just turn her damn phone on. Every time she called, it went straight to voicemail. Lanie quickly lost count of how many times she tried the number between dawn and the point when the sun reached its midmorning blaze, but after this latest call, she knew that it was at least enough times for her to have filled up Suki's inbox.

Her frustration and fear mounting, Lanie gathered up her many errant swimming suits and took them upstairs to the laundry room. But when she got there, she realized that she didn't know how to work the machine. Ingrid had always done that for her. And before Ingrid, there was that other girl. What was her name? Whether from the confusion of her awakening or from all the brain cells she'd drunk and smoked and snorted out of her head, she couldn't remember.

"Get it together, Montrose," she said as she dropped her pile of laundry at the base of the machine.

Her sigh was cut short by the sound of the chime that meant someone had rung the bell at her barrier gate. Her heart raced. She had been so preoccupied with calling Suki that she had forgotten to peer nervously at the security camera program on her tablet from time to time. Was it someone from the hospital? From the tabloids? Had her power of suggestion worn off?

She raced down the hall and flew down the stairs, which were cloudy with chlorine residue from yesterday's swim, and found the security panel by her front door. For one fleeting moment, she allowed herself to hope that when she pressed the button to turn on the screen, she would see Suki waiting impatiently at the other end of the feed.

But to her disappointment, it wasn't Suki. It wasn't some orderly or paparazzo, either. This was a man she didn't recognize. From the angle of the high-resolution security camera, she could see that his blond hair was thinning on top, and he was strikingly handsome in his high-end aviators and perfectly tailored gray suit. Before Ingrid, she would have laughed at the idea of spending an extra ten grand just so her security cameras could broadcast in 4K instead of the usual high-definition, but now she could see that it was money well spent. She could read every nuance of this stranger's expressions as he grimaced and shifted in wait. In fact, she could even see that he'd clearly had a facial recently—either that or he was blessed with perfect skin. In either case, he was supremely rich. That fact was written all over him.

“Uh,” she said hesitantly as she depressed the call button, “can I help you?”

“Ah, you are home!” the man said in a genteel fashion. “Miss Montrose, I wonder if you might do me the pleasure of accompanying me.”

The forwardness of the man's reply was such that Lanie snorted out a little laugh. “I'm afraid I've heard that one before, mister,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “But I'm accustomed to men telling me a little about themselves before they make such a request.”

Through the camera, she watched the other man chuckle heartily. “Where are my manners? My name is Daniel Stetson. I'm with the FBI.”

Lanie pursed her lips. It all seemed pretty dubious. She'd never seen an FBI agent in person, sure, but if the movies and TV shows were to be believed, they didn't typically dress in such expensive suits. For the first time, she noticed his shoes. She couldn't recall the brand, but they were a pair of Oxfords not unlike a former boyfriend had worn. He was a movie star, the former boyfriend, and the only thing he had been more concerned about than his hair and his perfectly waxed eyebrows were those ridiculous shoes.

“They cost more than most cars,” he'd told her once.

Of course the relationship with the movie star hadn't lasted, and neither had her memory of his shoes until this moment. This supposed

Agent Stetson was wearing the same pair. And there was no way an FBI agent could afford shoes like that.

“Mr. Stetson—” she started to say, and whether it was out of urgency or the doubt he could hear in her voice, he cut her off.

“It’s a matter of some importance, Miss Montrose,” he said. “I was wondering if I could come in and ask you a few questions about a woman by the name of Ingrid Saint Eve.”

Lanie’s heart froze. “Is there something . . . ?” She didn’t bother finishing the thought.

Now Stetson looked directly into the camera. “I’m afraid she’s dead, Miss Montrose. We found her washed up on Belmont Shore early yesterday morning. The police went looking for you at the hospital, but . . .” Now it was his turn to trail off.

A sickly feeling rising to her throat, Lanie felt suddenly compelled to hold down the button that would open the gate. It was the buzzing of the gate unlatching, coupled with a hearty thanks from Stetson as he stepped through, that woke her up to what she was doing.

*Are you out of your mind?* she thought. *You don’t know this man.*

Her nerves shot through with numbing anxiety as she jittered by the front door in wait. He arrived quicker than she could believe, and she opened the door while he was still mid-knock.

His smile upon greeting her was unsettlingly beautiful. “Miss Montrose,” he said, his bayou accent even more apparent in person. “I appreciate you seeing me unannounced. My mother would be so disappointed if she knew I was calling on a lady without informing her first.”

This struck Lanie as odd, and she didn’t bother hiding it. “Doesn’t it kind of come with the territory?” she asked. “You know . . . with your *job*.”

If the insight threw him off-balance, he didn’t show it. He merely flashed another of those courtly smiles and asked if there was somewhere they might sit down. Lanie felt uncomfortable turning her back to this man. She could feel his gaze hot on the back of her neck as she led him into the

living room, where they took seats opposite each other in a pair of leather Danish deco sofas on either side of a low glass coffee table. She tried to calm herself with the reminder that if things got out of hand, she could do what she'd done during her escape from the hospital. She would just tell him to leave, and he would leave. End of story. In the meantime, she couldn't help her curiosity at finding out what had happened to Ingrid.

Even though he was pretending at cordiality, and even though she wanted to play along, Lanie didn't bother offering him a drink, and he didn't ask.

Instead, he reached into the brown suede satchel he carried and produced a tablet that he quickly punched to life. "I'm sorry again," he said casually. "It's just that when the police turned up at the hospital yesterday, no one could explain where or how you'd gone. In fact, it was like your doctor didn't even know you'd *existed*. Was the strangest thing. There was your file, right there, plain as day, and it was like Dr. Schmidt had never even heard of you." He laughed. "I mean, never mind doctor-patient privilege. To think that there was someone left on this planet that didn't know Lanie Montrose!"

Lanie forced herself to smile politely.

"Anyway," Stetson said, his expression quickly becoming serious, "that's how I got involved."

"I see."

The two of them looked at one another for an uncomfortably long while. She could see the shape of his well-muscled chest and the bulging outline of his upper arms through his suit jacket. The man was certainly fit. But the way he looked at her made his physique register as more of a threat than an attraction.

"Maybe you could get straight to it," Lanie said, anxiously pulling her ankles up beside her on the couch.

"Of course," Stetson said with a glinting smile. "I understand that you knew Ingrid Saint Eve. That she worked for you. Is that correct?"

She nodded.

The pleasure this reply seemed to give him was unsettling. “And when was the last time you saw her?”

Lanie held her breath, unsure of whether she should tell him about the hospital visit, or about the pool, or about the last time she’d seen Ingrid before the whole saga began. She opted for the latter. “I guess it was when she said she was going out to pick up my dry cleaning last Sunday.” She didn’t bother mentioning that “dry cleaning” had been their personal code for “cocaine.”

“Last Sunday?” Stetson said, surprise in his tone. “Is it common for you to go nearly a week without seeing your assistant?”

Through a gallows chuckle, Lanie explained that her week had been slightly hectic.

“Right,” Stetson agreed, poking around on his tablet a few times. “Tell me about your hospital stay.”

“Umm . . .” Lanie dragged out the syllable as she glanced around the room, wondering whether it was time to take control of this situation already. She knew that she could tell this man to just be out with it, and he would comply. It was just a matter of finding that place in her head where she could wield her power. So that’s what she did. She closed her eyes and tried for the first time since the hospital to return there.

“Miss Montrose?” the agent asked, sounding concerned.

She blocked him out.

“Miss Montrose, is everything okay?”

Almost there.

She could sense that Stetson had stood, and was stepping toward her as if to help. Then, in a flash of light just behind her eyes, she found it. She opened her eyes to see him standing over her, his arm outstretched tentatively. The power flowed through her now.

“Please sit down, Agent Stetson,” she said calmly.

And calmly, he complied.

She wanted to ask him to tell her what he knew, and to explain the truth about who he was and why he had come here. She just wasn't buying the FBI act. But she didn't want to play that card until she was certain she actually had him in her mental grip. "Listen," she said. "I think you should take a quick trip to the bathroom."

"Okay," he said flatly. As he rose, he made to gather up his satchel.

"You can leave that."

Without question, he complied, leaving his bag behind on the couch and stalking toward the hall. Lanie fought off the headache and darted for his bag so quickly that she had to freeze when he returned from the hall with a smile on his face.

"Bathroom's this way?" he asked.

"Second door on the left," she explained, and if he'd noticed her snooping, he didn't show it. He merely clicked his heels and made his way.

Her hands were shaking as she opened the satchel, its suede so fine and soft that she paused to admire it. Inside, she found few items. A set of keys with a BMW logo, the aviators, a leather cigar case, a trio of expensive-looking pens, and a wallet. She snatched up the wallet and opened to the driver's license.

"Steve Deveraux," she read, her heart sinking. *You were right, kid*, she told herself. *FBI, my left elbow.*

The hard-soled footsteps in the hall alerted her to her guest's return, and quickly she replaced the wallet and returned to her place on the sofa opposite. She turned around and forced another smile, meaning to pretend that she hadn't just been mind-controlling him by changing the subject and offering a drink. But the look on his face stopped her short.

It was outrage. Fear, perhaps. But the underlying anger was evident.

"Agent Stetson, is—"

"I'll thank you not to do that again," he said, his eyes, and his finger, trained on the tablet she only just now realized he had taken with him.

“Do what?” she asked, her anxiety climbing as she sank back into the sofa.

He stood over her, and she watched as his finger held to the tablet and slowly moved upward. At the same time, the back of her neck grew warm, a dull pain blooming at the base of her skull.

“You know exactly what I mean, Miss Montrose,” Steve Deveraux said with a sneer. Even through the steadily increasing pain, Lanie noticed how the man’s accent had faded.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Lanie lied, clenching her teeth as she massaged a hand over the back of her neck.

Deveraux gave a mirthless laugh. “I didn’t want to have to do this. But I guess it’s just as well that you’re getting to know my friend here now instead of later.” He swiped his finger downward, and the pain instantly disappeared.

“Friend?” Lanie managed, her breath heaving as she rubbed her palm over the hairline on her neck.

“You’re aware of your chip,” Deveraux said. “That much seems certain. God knows how you managed to do what you did to Schmidt, but my guess is he proved to be a talker.” He shook his head in awe. “I have to say, we knew you had the power in you—we’ve known for years—but I don’t think any of us could’ve foreseen how it would show itself.”

“I don’t understand,” Lanie said, still a little disoriented from the flame that had so recently flickered in her skull.

Deveraux leaned forward, towering over her. “You have to understand, we tried to do this the easy way. That was Ingrid’s job. But I’m afraid she’s washed up—so to speak.” He pointed to his tablet. “And now we’re on to the hard way.”

Lanie’s heart began to race. All at once, she wanted desperately to run, to fly, to be anywhere but here. At the same time, she wanted to stand confidently, seize this man’s mind, and triumphantly send him on his way, just as she had all the others. Then she remembered the pain, and she felt collared somehow, pinned down under the weight of his gaze. She wished

Suki were here. Something told her that with Suki at her side, there was nothing this man—or any man—could do to overwhelm her in this way. With Suki, she could conquer the world, or save it. *Oh, Suki*, she thought. *Where are you?*

At that moment, Lanie's phone rang. She glanced down at it, resting there on the couch beside her, and saw the familiar name. *Doctor Sook*.

“Leave it,” Deveraux said, pointing to his tablet once more. “You’ll be coming with me.”



## CHAPTER 16

### *I-40 Westbound*

*Two Hours Earlier*

Suki had been foolish enough to believe that she had escaped her night of heavy drinking with a manageable hangover, but by the time they had the Amarillo skyline in the rearview mirror, it was clear to her that this would be a rager. Despite the cheap gas station sunglasses she had found wedged in the crevasse of the Mustang's bench front seat, the sun looked three times brighter than usual. Every creak of the car's worn shocks echoed in her head, and every pothole might as well have been a canyon. The ten minutes it had taken them to get through the city felt like three hours, for all the effort she'd had to put in to avoid getting sick.

"I completely forgot!" James said so loudly that it was obvious he didn't share her ailment.

She winced. "C'mon, Scotty," she said in a stage whisper. "Hangover."

With a smile, he continued in a softer tone. "I completely forgot that we're near the Cadillac Ranch. Always wanted to see the place. All those cars stuck nose-first in the sand." He turned his eyes from the road and cocked a brow. "Can we stop?"

She shook her head as adamantly as her roiling head would allow. "No time. Have to get to Lanie. ASAP." It took quite a lot of effort to keep the contents of her stomach down as she spelled out the acronym.

"Why don't you just call her and tell her we need to make a stop?" James said playfully.

She was so annoyed and in such pain that it took her a moment to realize that what her new friend said had triggered an important thought. *What?* she pondered. *What is it he's getting at? Something about a call?*

Then, flashing like lightning through the fog, she had it. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “I’m just the *worst* therapist. And friend.”

“What is it?” he asked as he roared past a tractor-trailer rig.

“It’s been almost *two days* since I called to check in with Lanie,” she said morosely. “And I can’t even be certain Schmidt passed on the messages I left for her over the first couple days.”

“Call her, then.”

Sick as she was, Suki was already a step ahead of her driver. By the time he finished the suggestion, she had her phone in her hand, and was trying to get it to jump to life. But nothing happened. No matter what she tried, the screen remained black. “It’s dead,” she said, her heart sinking at the realization that she hadn’t bothered to charge it last night.

With a shrug, James suggested that Suki use his phone. He slid it from his front pocket as Suki tried to figure whether she knew the number to call.

“You can just look up the hospital’s number, right?” he suggested as if reading her mind.

Whether it was the hangover or just her general forgetfulness, Suki couldn’t remember the hospital’s name, but a quick search of psychiatric facilities in Malibu turned up only one result. Quickly she dialed through, and after the first ring, the familiar voice of the mousy receptionist greeted her.

Suki identified herself and explained that she was calling to check in on her patient. Given the nature of Lanie’s celebrity, she didn’t want to say the patient’s name out loud, but she figured using her own name would clue in the receptionist. This wasn’t her first call into the facility, after all, and this strategy had worked before.

“I’m sorry,” the receptionist said. “We don’t have any Dr. Carters here.”

With a sigh, Suki explained herself again, then decided there was no point keeping her guard up. “I *am* Dr. Carter. I’m calling about a high-profile patient, and was trying to be discreet. Lanie Montrose is the patient.”

The receptionist, despite her wallflower nature, squealed at the mention of Lanie's name. "I'm afraid Lanie isn't staying with us."

Suki pinched the bridge of her nose. She suspected that the paparazzi had been poking around a little harder of late, and that this was what the receptionist had been told to say whenever someone called about Lanie Montrose. It made sense, as there were plenty of gossip columnists in town who were more than willing to impersonate a doctor if it meant getting access to the kind of information that drives blog clicks.

"May I speak to Dr. Schmidt, please?" she asked impatiently.

"Please hold."

It felt like a long wait as James piloted the Mustang over the interstate at a rather aggressive speed.

Finally, Schmidt answered, and Suki explained herself.

"I'm sorry," Schmidt said distantly as soon as she had finished. "We've never treated a Lanie Montrose in this facility."

Suki was beginning to feel like she had stumbled into a bad dream. "Dr. Schmidt, please. I'm not with the press. It's me. Suki."

"As I said, ma'am—"

"It's Dr. Carter," Suki cut in, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "You remember me, right? We did that whole hypnotism thing on Lanie."

There was a long silence that gave Suki the belief that she had finally broken through Schmidt's lame anti-publicity defenses.

"I appreciate your efforts to reach your patient, Dr. Carter," Schmidt said finally. "But it is as I said. We have never treated anyone by that name, with hypnosis or otherwise. And what's more, you and I have never met."

The sudden anger that roared into Suki was almost more than she could contain. But then, just as she was about to let it loose, it occurred to her that this whole charade was likely a product of Schmidt's paranoia about the supposed surveillance on his hospital. She guessed that this was just his way of hinting that someone could be listening in on this phone line. So instead of hollering at him, she thanked him, forced a chuckle, and said

that she must have made a mistake and called the wrong hospital. “That was weird,” she said to James as soon as she hung up.

“What happened?”

She explained how Schmidt had pretended not to know who she was.

“That *is* weird,” James allowed. “Why don’t you try Lanie’s cell phone?”

Suki slumped. “She doesn’t have it. They claim she didn’t have it on her when they found her.”

“Well, then, I guess we’d better just hurry up and get to her.”

The idea of not being able to contact Lanie at this key moment didn’t sit well with Suki. This thought must have been written on her face, because James picked up even more speed in the Mustang.

“Let’s just try not to get ourselves killed before we get there, okay?” she said.

James eased off the gas a little. Meanwhile, Suki was feeling stir-crazy at the thought that if Lanie was in trouble somehow, there would be no way to reach her. In an effort to occupy her mind, Suki opened the glove box, spilling much of its contents onto her feet. Scowling, she riffled through it. She found half a pack of mint gum, another pair of cheap sunglasses, some documentation about the car, and a set of binoculars.

“Who carries binoculars in the car?” James asked.

“Grandpa was a birdwatcher in his free time.”

“Ornithologist. Brilliant. He must’ve been a hit at parties.”

Suki rolled her eyes, and even that small movement caused her pain. “You have no idea.” Disgusted with herself, she stuffed everything back into the glove box, curled up her legs, folded her hands between them, and pressed her cheek to the window. In the distance, she could just make out the iconic Cadillacs sticking out of the ground. James didn’t seem to notice. She decided not to tell him, as it would spare him the disappointment about

not getting to see them up close. “I can’t believe I let it go this long without calling her.”

For a time, James didn’t reply. Suki drank in the silence, but it did little to improve her sour mood.

“Maybe you should try her phone anyway,” he said. “Just in case she found it somehow.”

Suki shrugged. “It’s no use. I haven’t memorized her number, since it’s just on my phone. And the world’s biggest pop star isn’t exactly listed on four-one-one.”

“Set your phone on the seat, would you?” James said.

Without thinking about it, Suki did as she was asked. Then, when more silence followed, she turned to look at James, whose concentration was such that he held his breath and his eyes were nearly closed. “Are you . . . ?”

He let out a whoosh of breath. “It’s no use,” he said, sounding disappointed. “I can sense the phone’s circuits, but I can’t seem to make it charge.”

Suki sighed. *Thanks for trying*, she thought to him, immediately deciding that this would be the last telepathic communication she would commit to until her head was clearer. It hurt more to think a message than to speak one.

For another minute, they flew down the interstate, which was strangely absent of traffic on that Friday morning. There were no cars within sight ahead of them, and only one that Suki could see in the rearview mirror. A black sedan. All else was open road, flat, dusty horizon, and a contemptibly bright sun.

“Do you have a wall charger?” James asked.

“I do. But it doesn’t matter because—”

“Maybe Lanie tried calling you,” James cut in. “Maybe she left some messages that might give us some clues about what’s going on.”

Suki wanted to disagree—to point out that Dr. Schmidt didn't seem like the type to give a patient like Lanie phone privileges—but the hangover urged her to hold her tongue.

“Let's just make a quick stop so you can plug in and check,” James suggested.

Even though it was extremely unlikely that stopping would do anything but delay their reunion with Lanie, Suki had to admit that the thought of just checking her messages made her feel better.

What she hadn't expected was for James to jerk the car suddenly at the exit they happened to be passing right at that moment. In the process, her face parted from the window and then smacked back against it from the inertia. She turned to glare at him, and happened to catch a glimpse in the rearview mirror of the black sedan making the same sudden turn onto the exit.

With only two cars on the road, what were the odds that they would both suddenly and unexpectedly need to stop at this random suburban exit?

“What is it?” James asked, sensing her fear.

“That black car,” she said as she looked back over her shoulder. “Could it be following us?”

James's first reaction was to laugh it off, but then, when he took a look in the rearview mirror, the humor died on his lips.

“What is it?” she asked, but James wasn't paying attention. He was too focused on guiding the Mustang back onto the interstate they had just exited. As they rolled up the on-ramp, he kept his eyes trained on the mirror.

Suki looked back, her breath catching in her throat as the sedan paused for a time before following their path. She felt the tension clench at her shoulders, and her palms began to sweat. Suddenly her sickness was gone, chased away by a jolt of flight adrenaline.

“He's following us,” she said flatly.

James nodded. “And he's with the government.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Government? What makes you think he’s with the government?”

“I’ve seen sedans like that one before. I’ve *driven* one, actually, on a joint operation with the Secret Service.”

She slumped. “What in the world does the Secret Service have to do with any of this?”

In answer, he pressed down on the gas, and the Mustang’s enormous engine roared. Quicker than Suki could believe, they were going faster than she had ever gone in a car. She was so nervous about the incredible speed that she couldn’t bear to look back to see if they were still being followed.

“It has to be Steve, right?” she asked, her knuckles whitening on the door handle.

James went rigid as he kept the hammer down. “He’s not government.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because *I’m* government. I’d know if one of my best friends was working with the Secret Service.”

Suki grumbled as she looked nervously at the landscape zooming past them. “Don’t they call it the Secret Service for a reason?”

As they approached another exit, James eased up on the gas and looked as if he was considering exiting again. But at the last second, something stopped him and he returned to full speed. He appeared to mull things over for a time before he finally shared a thought with her.

*The binoculars*, she heard in her head.

“What about them?” she said.

“I’m going to slow down. Let him get close. Maybe you can use the binoculars to get a look at him.”

She opened the glove box door—more carefully this time—and retrieved the binoculars. She snapped off her seat belt and hopped up on her knees on the bench seat. Leaning forward, she looked through the viewfinders and tried to steady herself enough to see into the trailing car.

Given James's starting speed and the way he seemed to be battling with the wheel as he slowed, it was difficult to keep on a line, but eventually she caught sight of the glint of sunlight off the black hood of the car, then guided herself to settle on the driver. What she saw was not what she expected. "It's a *woman*," she said.

"A *woman*?" James replied incredulously.

"There are women in the Secret Service, right?"

"Not many."

Suki squinted as the car jolted, and she lost sight of the car for a moment. She got back on line quickly this time.

"She's actually . . . kind of . . ." She pulled the lenses down and turned to look directly at James. "She's kind of *hot*."

"Hot?" James asked, his eyes narrowing with confusion.

"She's extremely pretty." To Suki, it looked as if the color drained from her companion's face. "What is it?"

"What does she look like? Describe her to me."

Suki wheeled around for another look. "I don't know," she said, aggravated at the difficulty of assessing someone's facial features through a set of unsteady binoculars. "Black hair. I mean *really* black. Perky nose. Full lips, I guess. Nice skin tone. Sort of sloped shoulders."

"What color are her eyes?"

She let the binoculars drop and looked at him with disbelief. "How should I know? Even if she wasn't wearing sunglasses, she's a hundred feet behind us."

"You've got binoculars."

With a smirk, she tilted the binoculars as if handing them to him in suggestion that he try. To her surprise, he made a move as if to take them. She pulled them away. "You're *driving*."

"I can keep the car at speed with my mind," he insisted. "And I'll set the wheel, too. I *have* to see."

She chuffed. “That’s ridiculous. I’m not dying in my grandfather’s Mustang just so you can get a glimpse of the hottie in the car behind us.”

He looked stern now. Serious. “I believe I know her. But there are millions of women with black hair, full lips, sloped shoulders. I have to see her for myself.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Look,” he snapped. “If this is the woman I think I remember, then believe me, it matters.” He snatched the binoculars from her hand. “Hold the wheel if you want to, but I’m having a look.”

She dived forward to grab the wheel just as he rose to turn around. To her great surprise, the car didn’t slow or even lurch to the side. Whatever he had yet to learn about his power, he was improving with his control over this car. She waited in this way, leaning past him and nervously gripping a steady wheel, as he gazed and breathed.

“Is it her?” she asked. “The one you thought it was?”

He didn’t reply. She chanced a glance back, and saw that he was still peering through the scopes.

“I think so,” he said finally.

“You *think* so?”

He sat back down, handing the binoculars to her absently as she returned to her seat. For a time, there were no hands on the wheel, but it kept steady. Then, suddenly, it jerked to the side and James bolted out of his trancelike state and brought the car back under control the old-fashioned way.

“What do you mean you *think* so?” Suki asked when she’d caught her breath.

“It’s the eyes,” he said distantly. “I don’t know how to explain it. But I believe I met a woman in Edinburgh, at my mother’s hospital. I have this distinct memory of spending time with a beautiful woman, but I can’t quite remember what happened or everything about what she looked like.” He made a fist and pounded once on the wheel. “If only I could see her eyes.”

She watched him brood for a time as he struggled to find the memory that eluded him. Slowly, his expression changed from regret to frustration and then to anger. He leaned in to the wheel and put the pedal to the floor once more.

“I can’t be certain if this is the woman I met,” he said. “But in the end, it doesn’t matter. We have to lose her.”

Anxiously Suki buckled her seat belt and made herself small in her seat. The landscape began rocketing past once more. In the distance, she spotted a large mile-marker sign that approached to the point she could read it quicker than she could believe. It was sixty miles to the state line, a hundred miles to a town she’d never heard of, and two hundred twenty miles to Albuquerque.

“How exactly do you propose we do that?” she asked, glancing nervously into the rearview mirror. “Whether that’s a government car or otherwise, it’s keeping up.”

James didn’t bother answering, and Suki had a feeling she knew what was going to happen. They drove for ten minutes in this way, the Mustang howling at top speed and the sedan giving chase.

“What did we get ourselves wrapped up in?” Suki asked, tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

Her companion kept silent, his eyes fixed either on the road ahead or on the wheel in his hands. Another hour passed, and the numbers on the distance signs shrank rapidly. Suki could hardly believe how quickly they had drawn near to Albuquerque. They had seen few other cars on the way, and had passed them by as if they were parked. Suki felt a wry sort of confusion at how they were driving as fast as they were, and she actually *hoped* to encounter a police cruiser. But there had been none to be found.

Just as they passed an exit into an Albuquerque suburb, and just when she felt she could hang on to the door handle for dear life no longer, James startled her by slamming the brakes, cranking the wheel to take the Mustang through a 180, and flooring it thirty yards or so down the wrong way on the highway. The black sedan closed in at bullet speed, and James narrowly avoided hitting it head on. With remarkable deftness, he cranked

the wheel back to the left and rolled them at high speed onto the off-ramp, tires screaming. Suki looked back through the rear window to watch the sedan fishtailing in an effort to stop quickly enough to get back to the ramp, as James had done.

James wasted no time on waiting to see if their tail would collect herself. He floored it, blowing through red light after red light and winding his way through the desolate suburban sprawl. The way he made the car move seemed almost impossible to Suki. She tried to ask him what his plan was, but he didn't reply. When she asked with her mind, she couldn't find him. It was as if he had disappeared somehow—perhaps into the car itself. Whatever the case, he moved the car with such grace and precision that Suki suddenly felt completely at ease. In any other circumstance, careening around like this would have made her sick. But with the way James was driving, she might as well have been sitting comfortably in TC's thinking chair.

He performed a balletic turn around a corner that led them back toward the interstate. They had wound around so many buildings and flown over so many different streets that the only reason she knew it was the interstate was because she could see the overpass looming above them. He darted under that overpass, the sun blotting out as he suddenly brought the car to a halt, peeled it into reverse, and backed them into a hidden network of concrete support beams holding the highway aloft. A moment after he had it in park, he switched off the engine, and they sat in silence and darkness.

She wanted to ask him a question, but wasn't sure he had returned to reality just yet. "What are we—"

"Quiet," he said, removing all doubt about where his mind was.

They waited for several minutes, watching what they could see of the road that ran beneath the underpass. Suki's heart raced as she realized that yes, this was a great hiding spot, but if their pursuer found them, she could easily pin them in here. They would be sitting ducks.

Just when she thought she could take no more of the silent waiting, James drew a loud breath and spoke. "Well, that was interesting."

She scowled at him. “*Interesting?* Are you serious?”

He shrugged. “What would you call it?”

For a time, she brooded, because she couldn’t think of a better answer. All she knew was that it terrified her to know that someone wanted to follow them, but she had no idea who that someone was or what they wanted. The desperation made her think of Lanie again—the poor girl all alone in that terrible hospital.

“We need to move, James,” she said. “We have to get to Lanie.”

He nodded. “But unfortunately, we have to consider our tail. Give it until the sun goes down. Then we’ll continue under cover of night.”

She wanted to argue, but she knew he was right. They had to lay low for a while. “If we’re going to hide,” she said, “then can we do it somewhere with an outlet so I can check my messages?” Her stomach rumbled as if it wanted to contribute to the thought. “Oh, and someplace with food? I’m starving.”

James smiled and started the engine.

They wound through the suburb until they reached some back roads in the country that kept Suki’s nerves on edge. In the sprawl, they had risked encountering their pursuer around some sharp corner or across a busy intersection. But out here, she could see for miles in any direction. James seemed to sense her trepidation, because he turned back in the direction of Albuquerque.

She wasn’t sure what they were looking for until she saw it. The place was perfect. The parking lot was crowded enough that they could lose their car in it, and yet the building was far enough off the main road that it would be difficult to imagine their pursuer just stumbling across them. Inside, it turned out to be a hipster-grade stone hearth pizza joint. The aroma practically crippled Suki, as hungry as she was. Plus, there had to be an electrical outlet somewhere.

“Let’s ask for a booth near an outlet,” she said.

Minutes later, they were sitting at the only booth in the place that the hostess thought might have access to electricity. James perused the menu

while Suki contorted herself into a position that would allow her to reach the wall under the table. She found it, felt around for a bit, and inserted the plug.

By the time she returned to her seat, she was exhausted by the effort. “I’ll be glad when you figure out that battery charging thing,” she said.

He tensed. “I could’ve done it. I just—”

“Calm down, Scotty,” she interrupted with a smile. “Just yanking your chain.”

If she hadn’t been so keyed up by the impatience she felt about waiting for her phone to charge enough that she could turn it on, she might have laughed at her companion’s expression. When the waitress arrived, James tried to order a Guinness, but Suki had just started to look over the impressive beer menu, and insisted that he finally allow himself to delve into the refreshing waters of the American microbrew revolution.

“What do you recommend?” he asked, the waitress smiling impatiently over them.

Suki chose a local IPA at random, and he told the waitress to bring two of them, along with the largest, filthiest pizza on the menu. With a smile—this one genuine—the waitress went off to fill their order.

The chilled glasses were frothing in front of them in less time than Suki could believe. She hadn’t even had a chance to think about checking her phone’s charge level by the time the waitress was setting them down. With baited breath, she waited for James to take the first drink.

His expression was one of surprise, and begrudging delight.

“So?” she said. “What do you think?”

“Actually, I was thinking how interesting it is that you’re always driving me to drink.”

Her laugh was mirthless. She couldn’t shake the anxiety about their recent chase, nor could she deny the deepening sensation that Lanie was also in trouble. She hated herself for allowing it to get to this point. She checked her phone, seeing that the charge light had come on, but the screen

was still dead. She was struck by a sudden worry that James had broken it somehow in his efforts to charge it, but didn't say anything.

"I hope I didn't break it," he offered, and she wondered if maybe all their telepathic communication had somehow given him a path to read her mind. Then he concentrated, closing his eyes. "No," he said. "It's working. Just needs a minute more to charge."

She drummed her fingers on the table, her eyes shifting from the beer to her phone and back again. She gave in and took her first swallow of beer, which she found surprisingly light and refreshing.

"So, assuming we've lost our tail for good, what do we do when we get to LA?" James asked after swallowing another healthy slug of beer.

"Straight to Schmidt's hospital in Malibu," Suki said. "I can't believe I've been out of touch for so long."

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the flicker of her cell phone's screen. The battery charging logo had appeared, meaning that it was strong enough to power up. Quickly she pressed the button, holding her breath as it began the agonizingly slow process of coming to life.

When finally the home screen appeared, she wasted no time clicking through to her voicemail. Her mailbox was full. Her heart skipped when she recognized that all the calls had come from Lanie's cell phone. There were twenty messages.

"Where the hell are you, Sook?" the first one said, before rambling on about "home," and "freedom," and "chips in our heads." Suki couldn't quite make it all out, as the connection was bad and the wind in the background muffled two-thirds of every sentence.

The next one was much the same, and the next one, and the next, with Lanie's voice sounding more agitated in each passing message. By the time Suki had listened to all of them, James watching her patiently for some sign of what she was learning, she felt no surer about what Lanie was talking about than she had been before she started.

"So?" James said after she finally set the phone down. "What's going on?"

Suki shook her head. “I have no idea. It sounds almost like Lanie checked herself out of the hospital somehow. But that’s impossible, since she would’ve needed my approval for that. She keeps referencing her house and pool, though. I suppose that could be just Lanie rambling about the incident that got her in the hospital in the first place. And then she kept talking about chips in our heads.” Her hands were shaking as she gripped her glass. “God, I hope she hasn’t fallen off the wagon again.”

James cocked an eyebrow.

“We had a plan to wean her off the drugs Schmidt was sneaking her,” Suki explained. Then she heard herself filling James in on all the details she had forgotten to share with him, about how the Malibu facility was strange, and that Schmidt seemed to have a dual agenda somehow. The more she spoke about the situation, the guiltier she felt about leaving Lanie alone in that place.

James must have read it in her expression, because he reached over and placed a calming hand on hers. “It’s okay. We’ll get to her. It’ll all be fine. And in the meantime, you know she has her phone, so you can call her.”

Without hesitation, Suki placed the call. It went straight to Lanie’s voicemail, much to her frustration. “Great,” she said after she’d left a message. “Now it seems like *her* phone is dead.”

James sighed. “We’ll keep trying.”

The pizza arrived, and as much as Suki wanted to take off right then, the smell of food pinned her to her seat. “Eat quickly,” she said, already lifting a slice to her mouth. Then, through her almost erotically stimulating bite of her first food in more than a day, she said, “We need to get to LA as soon as possible.”

The two of them ate ravenously until they had polished off two full slices each. Finally, Suki felt like she could come up for some air and relax a little. As she slowly enjoyed her third piece and sipped on her hair-of-the-dog beer, she was struck with a feeling of clear headedness unlike anything she had experienced since before this whole ordeal began. They were in a restaurant in a city they didn’t know, having driven for hours at top speed in

her grandfather's prized Mustang, and someone was looking for them. Meanwhile, she had no way of reaching poor, unsuspecting Lanie. And yet she felt a calm and a spa-like clarity.

And then she had an epiphany. It came when she noticed the flickering of the battery charge light on her phone. "Energy," she said, her lips parting.

"I'm sorry?" James said.

"We both sensed it when we entered my grandfather's house." Adamantly, she motioned all around her. "The *energy* of that place. The energy in that journal of yours. The energy in those glasses we found. The energy in that flash drive Lanie's friend gave me. These objects were all imbued with an almost supernatural power. So if we're looking for the three discs . . ." She lowered her voice so none of the other patrons would hear. "If we're looking for the key to saving the world . . ."

"Then they would emanate with incredible power," James finished for her.

She nodded.

"That's all good and well," he said. "But it still doesn't get us any closer to knowing where to look."

Now the fear came to her as suddenly as had the calm.

"What?" he said, looking like he was worried that she might be sick. "What is it?"

"It's been under my nose all along." She shook her head. "His grandfather clock. God, it's been in my office for *years* now. And when I *touch*ed the thing . . ." She settled the questions in his eyes by telepathically showing him what she meant. In a flash, she sent him a vision of her sitting in that sunny office, fiddling with some wood glue and a broken high-heeled shoe. She showed him how the grandfather clock called to her, and when in the vision she touched its face, he pressed back into the booth as if floored by the feeling of the light and heat that had coursed through her.

When the memory ended, he slumped as if drained.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it before now,” Suki said, chiding herself. “But that clock’s face . . . it *has* to be hiding the disc.”

As he collected himself, James looked ashen. “I have a clock nearly like that one,” he said. “Or rather, my mother has it.”

“And you think it might . . . ?” She didn’t finish the thought.

“All I know is that I was afraid of it as a kid. Wouldn’t go near it. I used to think it was because the chimes scared me, but now that I think on it again, I can’t remember the thing ever chiming. I wonder if maybe I had an experience like yours when I was a boy. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why Mum’s always been so certain that I was meant to fulfill this prophecy she believes in.”

The two of them sat in silence for a time, pondering the mystery.

“We have to split up,” Suki said finally. She braced for an argument, and was surprised when none came.

“Normally, I’d say we would be crazy to split up after what just happened, but I think you’re right. Lanie needs your help, and my mother is the only person left alive who knows more than we do about what’s happening. We have to get to our respective discs as soon as possible, but I also need to speak to Mum first, before she . . .”

The way he trailed off made Suki’s heart go out to him. She could sense that he felt his mother’s death would come soon, a feeling with which she could sorrowfully relate. Not wanting to allow it to linger for him, she quickly shifted back to logistics. “So how do we do all that?”

“How do you mean?”

Suki shrugged. “Well, we know there’s someone out there looking for a classic blue Mustang.”

“We could go to the airport. I book a flight to London, where they’ve moved my mother, and you get a ticket to LA.”

“What if they’re waiting for us there?”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t seem likely.”

“Why not? They know we’re around here somewhere, and they know we’re in a very recognizable car. They’ll certainly be watching for it on the interstate, and they’ve probably called up local reinforcements to watch all the major roads—including the one to the airport. I doubt we’d even get that far without being spotted.”

James lost his wind, defeated.

“You need to get to London and then home,” Suki insisted. “Your mother’s insight is as valuable as the disc. So the risk is one we have to take.”

He drew a breath. “But that leaves the problem of how to get me to the airport without being spotted, and you getting to LA. As you said, they’ll be watching for the Mustang.”

James had just plunged into one of his thinking faces when the waitress returned. “Get you folks anything else?”

“No thanks,” Suki said. “Just the bill.”

The waitress placed it on the table, and as she was turning away, Suki spoke up again.

“Excuse me, is there a car rental place around here?”

The waitress turned back and thought for a moment. “Closest one is at the airport, I think. Several of them there.” Her eyes shifted, and she looked out the window. “That gorgeous Mustang is yours, isn’t it? Pretty sure I saw you get out of that. My husband would just about die for a car like that.” She returned her gaze to Suki. “Why would you want a rental car when you have something like that Mustang to ride around in?”

Suki glanced at James, then back to the waitress as an idea started forming. “Actually, it’s a bit too much for us. It was my grandfather’s car, but we don’t really need that big engine. And the ride’s kind of stiff.”

The young woman nodded. “Sure it is. That car’s built for speed and cornering. Needs a tight suspension.”

Suki hesitated, glanced at James again, then decided to go for it. “If you like the car, maybe we could do a trade.”

The young woman stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“What do you drive?” Suki prodded. “We can go straight up.”

The waitress’s reaction was to laugh politely, but the laugh faded when she saw that Suki was serious. “A motorcycle.” She offered an apologetic shrug. “It’s an old, beat-up thing. It’s my husband’s, but he lets me take it to work when my car’s in the shop. I think it’s called a . . . a Triumph. Yeah, that’s it.”

“Does it run okay?”

“Oh, sure. My husband keeps it in good shape mechanically. Doesn’t look like much, though.”

It took some doing, and more than a little flexing of her new powers, to get the waitress to accept that Suki was serious about trading a classic Mustang for a beaten-down old motorcycle. But eventually Suki had convinced her trade partner that the car wasn’t stolen, and that she had good reason to make such a crazy trade. “It’s more than the big engine and the stiff ride,” she explained. “Truth is, the car just reminds me too much of my grandfather. He just passed away, you see, and I’ve been wanting to get rid of it as soon as possible. You’d be doing me a favor.”

When hesitantly the waitress exchanged keys with Suki, James looked deeply saddened. The waitress skipped away to the manager to ask if she could go out to the parking lot to test drive a car, and James looked across at Suki, downtrodden.

“I can’t believe you’re going to trade away that car,” he said. “I love that car.”

Suki swallowed her last sip of beer and shrugged. “Casualty of war. Nobody’ll be expecting us to be on a motorcycle.” She scooted out of the booth and tipped her head toward the window. Outside, the waitress was already admiring her new set of wheels. “We’d better get out there so I can sign the papers over to her before she takes off with it.”

“There’s one problem you may not have thought of,” James said as he dropped some money on the table and slid out of the booth to follow her to the door. “How do you expect to drop me at the airport and then get all

the way to LA on some crappy old motorcycle? I mean, do you even know how to drive one?”

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One of Suki’s greatest pleasures was the look on James’s face as she left him there on the curb outside the Albuquerque airport. They had said their goodbyes and promised to keep each other updated as their missions unfolded, but he still seemed dumbfounded by how brilliantly she had driven the Triumph. There was no way for him to have known that TC had taught her how to drive a motorcycle almost exactly like this one the day she’d turned sixteen. She had felt rather in tune with motorcycles ever since, and was delighted to have used that fact to blow James’s mind.

And his mind was clearly blown as he waved, slack-jawed, while she raced away.

Now it was just a matter of completing the next leg of their respective missions. He would keep a low profile and book a ticket for London. Suki would keep the visor down on her helmet and race as inconspicuously as possible for LA. And with Lanie still not answering her phone, Suki only hoped she would find her friend sober and safe.



## CHAPTER 17

### *Malibu, California*

Dawn broke on a wild-eyed Suki. An afternoon of flying down the freeway had turned into an all-night run, but the bike had proved finnick. She had forgotten that about Triumphs. But the waitress, elated as she was about the Mustang, had included the leather gear satchel as part of the deal, and so Suki had always found the right tools to keep her moving down the road.

It had been over twelve hours since she'd parted with James, and she knew that by now he was on a transatlantic flight and out of communication. The last she'd heard from him, he had reported a delightful lack of suspicious characters at the Albuquerque airport, and had said he was about to board a flight to Atlanta, where he would pick up another bound directly for Heathrow.

She had wished him luck. And then she had made that long final haul into the parking-lot traffic that, even in the predawn hours, had already picked up around East LA.

Five hours later, having gone nearly a full day without sleep, she arrived, frantic and windblown, in Malibu. She would have loved a mirror, but there was no time for that, so she checked what she could in the reflection of her phone. It was impossible to frame the whole picture in the small window at one time, but as she panned the screen up and down, what she did manage to catch were chapped lips, a wind-walloped neck, and a torch-like case of helmet head.

*Forget it*, she thought as she stepped through the gate outside Lanie's compound. She tried not to fret about how strange it was to have found the thing standing wide open. Typically there was a security protocol to follow, but the place was laid bare to anyone. Given that Suki had just come from a psychiatric hospital and a bewildered Dr. Schmidt who knew nothing of Lanie's whereabouts—or even who Lanie was, for that matter—

Suki wouldn't have been surprised by anything she found at this house. A swarm of paparazzi? A surrounding force of FBI vehicles? A pod of gray aliens beaming strange instruments around the place? Given all that she had learned over the past several days, none of it would have surprised her.

But what she found instead did in fact give her pause. She found total peace at the compound, and an open gate. That didn't sit right. Something was amiss.

Suki knocked on the door, then didn't bother waiting before she tried turning the knob. To her surprise and alarm, it opened. She stepped into that same swanky house she had seen a dozen times before, and was heartened to see that the lights were on in every room within her line of sight, and a soft drone of deep house music twittered through the recessed speakers in the ceiling.

"Lane?" she hollered. "*Lanie?*"

No reply.

She ran up the glass stairs to where she knew Lanie kept her bedroom, her heart racing at the thought that the addict had finally done it, had finally managed to take her own life. She imagined finding Lanie motionless on her bathroom floor, lying in a pool of her own drug-induced vomit. An open gate, a fully lit house, music still playing—that was the only way any of this made sense.

The sigh of relief when she found the bedroom empty was nearly enough to wind Suki. She sat on the edge of the bed and, fighting the urge to lie down and sleep, peered out the window overlooking the pool and wondered what in the hell could have happened. She pored through her memory in search of some clue she might have gleaned during one of their deeper therapy sessions. Lanie wouldn't go back home to Boston, Suki knew. She had washed her hands of that place long ago. She refused even to stop there on her tours, for God's sake. But where else might she go after escaping a mental hospital in apparently supernatural fashion?

Suki rose and wandered the house, finding confusing clues scattered everywhere. There was yogurt souring on the counter. An open bottle of Clase Azul Ultra tequila stood headless in the breakfast nook. From the

tequila, Suki assumed the worst, but upon checking the bottle, she found it full.

Outside, the clues were even stranger. Swimming suits littered the pool area. The umbrellas on the various tables were open, and one of them had blown over in the wind and found its way into the pool. A half-eaten cheese-and-tomato sandwich buzzed with flies.

“What the hell, Lanie?” Suki said to herself. She dialed her friend’s number again, now fairly certain that there would still be no answer. The moment she pressed her phone to her face, she heard the ring in the other ear. She turned and saw the telltale flashing of Lanie’s cell phone on the coffee table in her living room. She rushed inside to reject her own call before hanging up and seeing if she could find any clues in the phone’s messages.

The lock screen was a simple matter, because Suki felt certain that the code had matched the name of one of Lanie’s early singles, and as such, she got it right on the first try. The voicemail messages would be no help, because every one of them was from Suki herself. But the text messages yielded something. There were thirty-six unread messages. Some were from people Suki didn’t know, and even a few that Lanie didn’t appear to know, given the numerical identifiers in place of the names. But nineteen of the messages were from “Ing.”

“Ingrid,” Suki breathed, her teeth grinding reflexively.

The first few messages were expectable. Missives that ran the gamut between guilt trip and ego fluff. The next group of them threatened to withhold Lanie’s “friends,” and Suki could guess what that meant. Suki felt her chest swell with pride at how Lanie had clearly ignored all these messages from a woman who used to hold so much power over her. Maybe she really was serious about kicking the habit this time.

But then the messages took an unexpected turn.

*Lane, I’m doing what you told me. I’ve left. Now what?*

The next message came ten minutes later on the timeline.

*Awaiting your instruction. Just standing outside the hospital. I saw you leave, but I stayed out of sight like you told me. It's getting hot.*

Suki furrowed her brow, confused. "Standing outside the hospital?" she said incredulously. "What in the . . . ?"

*Lanie? Why are you leaving me this way? At least tell me what to do next so I can get a drink of water or something. I'm sweating.*

Another hour had passed before the next message.

*Please, it said. Please. I don't know what to do.*

Though she had never met her in person, and had half suspected that she was a figment of Lanie's imagination until recently, Suki tried to picture Ingrid standing in the parking lot outside the hospital—just standing motionless, as if dutifully awaiting instruction from her employer. It was a strange enough sight on its own, stranger still if Lanie was to be believed about the sway Ingrid used to hold in this house. For three long years, Lanie had been so dependent on her personal assistant that she had started to behave like something of a lapdog. Every time Lanie relapsed, it was because Ingrid had wanted to party. Those parties always happened at Ingrid's insistence. When Ingrid felt like staying in, they would do so—often for days. And when Ingrid felt like going out, they would go out on her terms. And every time Ingrid called during one of Lanie's sessions with Suki, Lanie would invent some lame excuse to leave immediately.

And now this. Now the text messages detailing a woman standing like a statue in a smoldering hot blacktop parking lot, just *awaiting instruction* from an apparently disinterested Lanie.

The next few messages had come frantically.

*Lanie, there's*

*There's a man coming!*

*Coming this way, Lanie. I know him. He's not. I don't think he sees me.*

*He went inside, thank God, but I can't stay here, Lanie, please. Please tell me what to do.*

*I don't know how mch lnger hell be inside. Baby doll, if you ever cared about me, plz say I cn leave.*

Five minutes passed on the timeline before the next message came.

*He's back outside! God, I think he saw me. Lanie, plz! It's Steve Devro. The one I told you about.*

Suki pursed her lips at the name. *Steve Devro* had to be *Steve Deveraux*.

*LANIE! He's smiling at me. Plz tell me I can go.*

She held her breath as she reached a point in the messages where Lanie finally responded.

*Run, she wrote.*

And that was the last of them. The messages had come in almost thirty-six hours ago. In that time, Lanie had neither sent nor received a message other than the voicemails and texts from Suki's phone. Nothing about the history on her Internet browser or her search bar provided anything of value either. Just like with the hospital, Lanie had apparently vanished without a trace, and she had left her beloved phone behind.

"Where are you, Lanie?" Suki murmured as she took a seat on the surprisingly comfortable sofa. Given its expensively artful appearance, Suki had expected it to be hard as a rock, but it gave pleasantly in a way that made her feel instantly sleepy. She had forgotten how much work it was to tune and pilot a motorcycle, how much physical stress it caused her. Her body begged for sleep, but she knew she couldn't rest. At least not yet. Not until she found Lanie.

So she sat, struggling to keep her eyes open, as she tried to imagine where Lanie might go. *Deveraux*, she thought, remembering the man's handsome but oily smile, his remarkably timely arrival at their gate following the unexplained cancelation of their flight, his suspicious offering of a bugged limousine, his apparent appearance at Lanie's hospital, and his smiling pursuit of Ingrid. What could his motivation for any of this be? What could the man be up to?

Then, in a flash, a thought occurred to her. She rushed to the door, where she found the security panel she had seen Lanie fiddle with a dozen times before. The woman was obsessed with the thing, even when she wasn't knee-deep into a binge. Suki had once asked her during a therapy session if Lanie had ever considered that her expensive security system had worked to make her feel less secure. The pop star had rolled her eyes at the question before tumbling into one of her patented giggle fits that always accompanied her days on cocaine.

It took a full five minutes of poking at the screen to make any progress. She managed to figure out how to switch the camera angles, and even to get the system to attempt to scan her face as a means to process her identity. By the time she finally found the menu that allowed her to watch recorded footage from earlier in the day, she was plenty frustrated at the complexity of the program. But then, after another minute or two of scanning back through the video, she found the first movement on any of the cameras. Working on rewind, she saw a man stride backward through the door, a tablet in his hand and Lanie back-walking in behind him. Lanie then stumbled down onto the sofa Suki had just occupied, with the man turning to stand over her.

Suki paused the rewind and froze the frame. Then she fiddled with the controls in an effort to zoom in on the man's face. She managed to stop, start, rewind, and fast-forward it several times before she paused it in a good spot again and finally figured out how to zoom. But zooming in wasn't like the movies. There was no way to enhance the pixelated picture of the man's face. Despite the high definition of the shot, the man had been standing too far away from the camera to get a clear view of his features. But from his fine suit, his thinning blond hair, and his broad shoulders, Suki supposed that this could have been Deveraux.

*What does it matter who it is anyway?* Suki thought, a sudden desperation icing her spine. *A man came and led her away.*

She played the video from front to back. Though she couldn't hear the conversation, she could tell from Lanie's body language that the man made her uncomfortable. From the way he moved, it looked almost as if he, too, was uncomfortable for a time before he returned from the hall with his

tablet. By then, his swagger had returned. After, it was clear that Lanie left with the man against her will.

*Where did he take you, Lanie?*

The security camera outside told her nothing beyond the fact that they climbed into a \$100,000 BMW and headed east.

*Where could you have gone?*

As she pondered the question, Suki returned to the sofa, taking a seat in the exact spot that Lanie had occupied just before the man led her away. Whether it was her intense focus on figuring out where Lanie may have gone or the fact that she was sitting in that same spot, Suki couldn't say, but what she knew was that the moment she sat down, she felt suddenly and completely connected to Lanie. It was the same feeling she had whenever she communicated telepathically.

*But this is impossible,* she thought.

Softly at first, but then, out of the inky blackness of her concentration, there came a voice.

*Suki?*

Her eyes flew open, the surprise so sudden that she nearly leapt to her feet.

*Lanie?* she thought, concentrating hard on sending the message out into the world.

*Yes! It's me. Suki, where are you?*

Despite the pain blooming at the base of her skull, a smile formed on Suki's lips. *I was about to ask you the same thing.*

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## *London, England*

His mother was clearly dying from whatever had invaded her brain. James could hardly believe that these were the kinds of thoughts he was having, but by now, he had seen enough bizarre things to know for certain

that Elizabeth Sinclair had been right all along. She looked ashen now, hollowed out, but her eyes were as clear as they had been since this whole medical ordeal began. In the hall, his uncle Simon had insisted that Elizabeth was dying, and that there was no way she would be able to speak to him, given her condition. He had described her as comatose, so it was to James's great surprise to see those eyes flutter open the moment he touched her hand.

"It's a miracle," Simon had said, awestruck.

"Simon, if you could give us a moment," Elizabeth had said, her voice as strong and clear as it had ever been in James's youth.

Dutifully Simon had left, and as soon as the door closed, Elizabeth's gaze had taken on a filmy, distant quality. To James, it looked as if she was staring through him as she spoke. Her voice, too, had changed, deepening and filling his ears.

"The Knights Templar guarded the secrets to the gates," she began. "And so they were murdered in the most torturous ways."

James braced himself, for he had heard much of this before. But then she shared a detail he had never heard.

"The one who would deliver such darkness was the being of pure evil, Sar himself, the annihilator. He may not have committed the deeds in his own flesh, but his darkness has remained here on Earth throughout the ages. Locking him out has not barred his presence from this place. He is and ever has been able to infiltrate and sow his evil into the hearts of man." For a heartbeat, she sank back into her pillow, looking weak, but then suddenly her strength coursed through her limbs once more, and she sat up straight. "In 1304, the burning of De Molay set forth a trek guided by the light to hide the bloodline. They kept it safe for eighty years before they were warned once more to flee. This time, they departed for a new land across the Atlantic." Now, for the first time, she looked at James as if seeing him. "Your ancestor, Henry Sinclair, was a well-hidden Knight of the Templar. He led the voyage to Nova Scotia. While on the journey, the crew encountered a blinding light, and were frozen in a dream state while Henry alone engaged in an encounter with a being from Xandon, of the Orion

constellation. The being told Henry that he was the keeper of the bloodline, and that the Xandonites had designed a trio of coded keys meant to keep the dark force from entering this planet.” A tear escaped over her cheek.

She went silent for a long time after that—for such a long time that James briefly worried that she may have been slipping back into her coma.

But then she looked at him again, and her lips parted. “The last remaining knights successfully landed in the new world,” she said. “They had the gate keys, and explicit instructions for how to pass and safeguard them into the future. They have succeeded, my son. And now the task falls to you. Your destiny is to use the keys.”

James sighed, but didn’t listen to his instinct to pull his hand away from his mother’s grasp. He had heard this talk of destinies before. Even though things had been screwed-up lately, he still had a hard time believing that he had an ancestor who was the savior of humans, was visited by an alien from the Orion constellation, and that his family had been protecting humanity from a dark alien for thousands of years.

Was it real, or was it the brain tumor? All along, perhaps. Maybe it had gone unchecked for decades, and the bigger it grew, the crazier his mother became. Hell, maybe *he* had a brain tumor of his own. Maybe they ran in the family. It would certainly explain all the crazy things he had seen over the past few days. It could have all been a delusion.

For a moment, he took great comfort in the idea that perhaps he had a tumor.

Then she squeezed his hand. “Believe what you must,” she said as if she was reading his mind. “But you have met the granddaughter of TC Carter.”

James’s eyes went wide with surprise. He hadn’t told her that. How could she have known?

“You and she both know that you must save the world from this evil. You know that there is a third. And more, you know where to find the discs.”

“But we don’t,” James snapped. “We think we know where Suki’s is, but we’ve not the foggiest idea where to find—”

“Don’t be silly, James,” Elizabeth cut in. “You know exactly where to find your disc.”

“Mother, I—”

“Do not be the reason we all die! Try to believe in something, you stubborn fool!”

James sat back, shaken up, his hand falling away. His mother had never spoken to him so harshly. He had treated her like she was a lunatic for as long as he could remember, and never once had she lashed out at him. Her patience had been one of her most admirable qualities. But now, with the way she looked at him, it was as if she might slap his face, if only she could manage the strength.

That strength seemed to leave her all at once. She slumped to the side in her bed, tumbling down to her elbow, and then to her shoulder.

“Mum!” James said, sliding in to catch her and try to roll her onto her back.

“You . . . ,” she said slowly. “You know . . . everything you need to know.”

“But I don’t, Mother, I—”

She clasped his hand as he clutched at her shoulder, and her grip was strong enough to hurt him. “You just have to believe.”

Then her fingernails began to dig into his skin, her grip tightening to where he feared she might break his fingers. When she opened her mouth and began to scream, he felt her agony entwine with his own. It was a white-hot fire that burned at the back of her skull, and he felt it in his own.

“They’re killing me!” she bellowed. “Just like TC said it would be. Just like they did to FDR!”

The heat and pain grew and grew until James could hardly see from the pressure. He couldn’t tell whether his breathing was shallow and rapid

or had stopped completely. His heart he could feel pounding inside his head.

Then, all at once, it stopped. In that instant, Elizabeth's frame went slack, and her hand let go of him. In that instant, she was dead.

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## *Los Angeles, California*

Suki followed Lanie's telepathic signal to a warehouse at the edge of the Arts District of Los Angeles. The building bordered on Skid Row, and its blown-out windows and the startlingly colorful and intricate graffiti that adorned its walls from top to bottom said that it was abandoned. Telepathically Suki mentioned this to her friend, who insisted that there was a working hotel-like room buried somewhere inside the building. Steve, it seemed, hadn't bothered blindfolding Lanie, because according to Lanie, he believed he held total control over her by way of his tablet.

The pain in the back of her head and her exhaustion prevented Suki from asking too many questions about the tablet. She trusted Lanie, and knew by now that this fear was real, and not something chemically induced.

*I'm so afraid he's going to use that thing to make me . . .*, Lanie started.

*Don't think that*, Suki had told her as she parked the Triumph in an alley about a block away from the building. *Focus on getting your power back. Where is he now?*

*I don't know. He punched in some commands on that damn device of his and told me to stay put. I've been unable to get up from this chair since he left. God, is this what I'm doing to people?*

The thought confused Suki, but there was no time to ask about it. She tried to look as inconspicuous as she could as she made a beeline for the warehouse. She supposed that here in the most artistic slum of downtown LA, her sixteen-hours-on-a-motorcycle mien blended right in.

That was the least of her worries. What brought her anxiety to the redline was the notion that it seemed a little like maybe she was striding toward some kind of Secret Service black site, and somewhere inside, she would encounter a deranged man with an apparently magical tablet PC.

She spent so much of her focus on that concern that she found herself blindsided by the truth of it. One step through the door, and she didn't encounter the magical beams of a tablet held by a grinning, handsome Louisianan in a seersucker suit, but rather, she encountered the hard meat of his fist.

Suki had never been punched before. The feeling was unlike anything she had ever experienced. Searing white light rocketed from the point of impact and filled her skull with a heavy, almost liquid pressure. Her ears rang and her vision actually sparkled with stars. She had thought that concept an effect of cartoons, and was weirdly fascinated to find out that it was real.

Then she found herself on the floor, the pain radiating from the elbow and hip she had used to break her fall. And now Steve Deveraux was standing over her, sneering as he thumbed away on his tablet.

The quickness with which she lashed out surprised even Suki. Deveraux stumbled back, startled, as the kick she sent after him managed to strike the tablet and send it skittering across the floor. As he gathered his balance and scanned the darkness for his weapon, he looked nakedly terrified.

*Lanie, Suki communicated. Move. I need your help.*

Suki didn't have time to wait and see whether the message had any effect on Lanie's state, because Deveraux had spotted the tablet and was running after it. Her first step was toward him, but then she recalled the bulk of the man and knew she would never overpower him physically. Her only chance was to get out of sight, to try to war with him from afar.

The warehouse was empty, but cavernous. Clearly it had been a space shared by many different companies doing many different things, for there was a vast network of cinder block walls carving here and there, mazelike, into the heart of the vacant building. High above, those broken

windows provided the only light as Suki darted and dodged through the maze, trying to find a perch where she could feel safe and hidden.

“Suki Carter!” came the Southern-accented voice. “I have to tell you, this is about the last place I’d ever expected to find you. Weren’t you and James supposed to be off on some hunt for your dead grandpa’s diaries?” There was laughter in these words, a mocking sort of barb.

*Lanie, where are you?* Suki projected.

At first, there was no reply, but then Suki heard a stirring at a distance to her left. She could sense Deveraux slowly approaching from the other direction, so she knew suddenly that she wasn’t alone.

*I don’t know how you did that, Sook,* came the voice of Lanie Montrose in Suki’s head. *But the moment you told me to move, his hold over me disappeared.*

A moment later, she saw the frightened grin of her old friend and favorite client emerge from the darkness. “Lanie!” she said in a stage whisper.

“How did you find me so fast?” Lanie hissed.

Suki shrugged. *I could, I don’t know, feel you.*

At first, it looked like Lanie might ask how that was possible, but then the truth of it seemed to dawn on her, and she nodded.

“You could make this a lot easier on everyone if you just told me where you were hiding,” Deveraux shouted. He had drawn closer now, but Suki could sense that this was only coincidence. His tablet, for whatever power it held, could not tell him where they were hiding, and it seemed it would hold no control over her until Deveraux could *see* where to direct its power.

“I *will* find you,” he shouted, and now he was closer still.

That painful warmth began to rise at the base of Suki’s skull. She looked to Lanie, who’s expression was an icy fear as she rubbed at the back of her neck. *You feel it, too?* Suki asked.

Lanie nodded, her eyes glassy and terrified. *That's how he controls me. There's a chip.* A tear spilled over her cheek. *Suki, that's what I've been trying to tell you. You have a chip, too.*

“Have to admit you caught me by surprise,” Deveraux was saying as he wandered from their right to their left. “James probably didn’t know this, but I’ve had my combat training, and used it, too.” He laughed mirthlessly. “But you, what? You been taking some aerobic kickboxing or something?”

Suki had a memory of working over the heavy bag in her grandfather’s garage, the old man giving her tips on how to direct each strike as if it was meant to pass *through* her opponent.

“You were quick, is what I’m saying,” Deveraux offered, and now he seemed to have paused. In that pause, Suki could sense that he believed he had found some sign of them. “The thing about this little device is that it’s pretty darn *convincing* once it gets hold of you. You can ask your friend Lanie about that when you see her.”

Reflexively Suki crouched and readied her fists for a fight.

“I just need to *find* you first,” Deveraux said with a chuckle. He was close now, and drawing closer.

Suki braced herself, but then slackened when she felt Lanie’s hand on her shoulder.

*We have no hope of overpowering him that way,* Lanie said. Then she pointed to her head. *But if we . . .*

Her eyes wide, Suki dropped from her fighting stance and sat down beside Lanie, who had gone into a cross-legged position and was holding her hands out to join them with Suki’s. The moment their hands touched, Suki felt her power roar in her head. In an instant, she saw everything in the warehouse. She could feel the bones of the building, the chill in its walls. She could sense the birds on its tin roof, the rats scurrying in its corners. Lanie emanated a warm, calming, bluish heat that pulsed into her, feeding her power. And behind her, she could sense Deveraux. He was pressed against the cinder block wall that covered them just to the east. He had found them, she knew, and she knew that the power that would come from his tablet was real.

She could feel it. And because she could feel it, she knew inherently that she could destroy it.

As if from above, she watched as Deveraux stood up straight, smiling, and tabbed away on the device. Then, just as he was about to send the command that would seize his quarry, Suki sent a pulse of energy from her mind, and the screen went instantly black.

“What the—” Deveraux said, pounding away at the dead screen.

Suki didn’t hesitate in sending another pulse, this one meant to knock Deveraux to his knees. She heard the sick squish of bone slamming into concrete as the big man fell. Suki could feel the man’s pain, and could sense his fear. It did not matter who he was or who he worked for; she knew that he *knew*. He had been briefed on Suki’s potential, and now that she was showing it to him, he was terrified. Even though he outweighed her by nearly a hundred pounds, without that device of his, he stood no chance against her.

She could feel Lanie’s power coursing through her. With it came a new feeling. Meshing with her own power, it gave her a sense of omnipresence, as if she could occupy any mind or any location at any time. The combination was intoxicating. But as she mentally pulled back to examine what was happening, she could see that it was possible to separate Lanie’s power from her own, and use it independently, as well.

*Get up,* she communicated to Deveraux.

To her surprise and not to her surprise, he complied instantly.

*Wow, Lanie,* she thought. *Your power is . . . cool.*

Lanie made no sound, but Suki could feel her laughter in her heart. *I’m still learning how to use it. But your power is . . .* She seemed unable to quantify it.

*I know.*

They rose, their hands still clasped together, as Suki turned her gaze on Deveraux. *We’ll be leaving now,* she said.

“And what do you want from me?” he asked dutifully.

A flash of possibilities flickered in Suki's mind. She could order him to stay, just like a hound, just as Lanie had made Ingrid stay, but she had no way of knowing how long the effect would last. She could tell him to jump off a bridge, but she was no killer. She could command him to destroy that device of his, but she didn't want to risk putting it back in his hands. Then she knew what she had to do.

"Keep your enemies close," TC had once said to her.

*You have a car, I trust,* Suki communicated.

Dutifully Deveraux nodded.

One look at Lanie said that the pop star wanted to resist the idea, but Suki calmed her with an assurance that as long as they were together, they would be able to keep this man under their control. Lanie sighed and softened, nodding, her hands warm against Suki's.

*Then we'll be leaving that tablet of yours behind.* Suki smiled. *And you'll be driving us to my house.*



## CHAPTER 18

### *London, England*

“I’m sorry, my boy. But at least we can take comfort in the knowledge that she got what she always wanted, just before she passed.”

The whole thing still struck James as terribly unsentimental, the idea of boarding a train for Edinburgh with his uncle Simon while the morgue doctors prepared his mother’s body for transport on some sort of refrigerated lorry. But he’d been told time and again that it was necessary. The transport of her body would take time, and while they waited, the house would need to be made ready for a wake.

“I don’t think I can stay for the funeral,” James said, hating himself for having to say it.

Simon assumed that same pained look of disappointment that James had gotten so used to seeing, but his reply didn’t match the expression. “Aye. Your mother would understand. You’ve your mission to fulfill now. No sense in waiting.”

“But I still need to go home first,” James explained.

“Oh, I know, son. I know. Something’s awaiting you there. You’ll find it in the clock.”

James’s heart skipped. At once, he felt excited to learn what his uncle knew, and angry that no one had bothered to tell him the information before now. All this wild, naked truth about this so-called prophecy, and yet all this secrecy about the tools he would need to fulfill it? It didn’t make sense. “You might’ve told me you knew about the disc,” he said flatly.

With a sigh, Simon sank into the forward-facing chair in their private car. Outside, an uncommonly sunny day made the hills of southern England awake in a verdant green. “I’ve been arguing with your mother about that for years. She was adamant that you had to come to these

conclusions on your own, without influence from the disc itself. ‘Just let him touch the clock,’ I often told her. ‘One glimpse of that power and he’ll have no choice but to believe you.’

“‘The power could seduce him,’ she would always say. ‘It might corrupt his own gift and make him unstable. He *has* to realize his gift on his own.’” Simon shrugged. “Of course we never agreed on that point. And the rift only deepened when you ran off to America. I told her she should have listened to me and this whole mess could’ve been avoided.” He turned to look James in the eyes insistently. “But you know, your mother never gave up on you. Not for a moment.”

The thought made James’s chest feel heavy, and his eyes began to water. In this way, the two of them sat in silence as the countryside rolled by. A steward came shortly to offer refreshment from his drink cart, but both men declined. James’s head hurt too badly, a feeling he had been carrying ever since his ride with Suki.

“That brain tumor was a bitch,” Simon said. “But that isn’t what killed Elizabeth. Nor the operation to remove it.”

James looked at him with surprise, but in his heart, he knew already.

“She had an implant in her brain. Whoever put it there had the means to use it to control her. She would occasionally battle with the damn thing. You’d have seen those bouts as fits of her more . . . eccentric behavior. But the truth was she spent her whole life trying to figure out how to circumvent it. And you know what? I believe she succeeded. How else could she have told you about any of this?”

James frowned and reflexively rubbed the back of his neck. “So you think . . .”

“It was just like the way FDR supposedly went,” Simon offered. “Whoever had that chip in his control decided it was time to detonate it. Small explosion, of course. For most, it winds up looking exactly like an aneurism. In your mother’s case, it looked conveniently like post-op complications following the removal of a tumor.” Simon raised his bushy eyebrows. “Our enemies are many things, but they are not fools.”

James stared out the window, noting that they were crossing a channel that contributed to the network that fed into the Thames. Along the water was a pasture dotted with fluffy white sheep. James saw no shepherd. “How is any of this possible?” he asked his uncle finally.

“I don’t know,” Simon said. “The alliances and their secrets go back thousands of years. I know only that there are beings that protect this planet, and beings that would do this planet harm. We work for the former, and there are clearly forces working for the latter.”

James sighed. “I fear those forces may have infiltrated the US government.”

His uncle did not look surprised. “It’s been my understanding that many different governments have chosen sides over the years. Your grandfather William, for instance, fought against one of them.” He cocked his head to one side. “Did your mother ever tell you how your grandfather died?”

Given how much time he had spent ignoring his mother’s ramblings and brushing them off as lunacy, James couldn’t be sure. He shook his head.

“The Allies had the Nazis on the retreat, and it was your grandfather, along with a Yank named TC Carter, who infiltrated Hitler’s own bunker to recover something. I was never told what it was, but I know that it was critically important to our mission. And I also know that your mother always believed that had Hitler gotten to his bunker and found the discs still there, the war might’ve ended differently. If that’s true, no one will ever know just how great a hero your grandfather was.” Simon shivered. “The things he had to say to earn the trust of the Nazi brass. How he ever managed to get into the most secretive and heavily guarded place in the Reich, I’ll never know.”

“The discs,” James said as if confirming something for himself.

“I’m sorry?” Simon said, looking confused.

“There are discs that I need to find. Three of them. My guess is that Grandfather’s mission was to take those discs from the bunker. So he has at least one of them, and if Carter was with him, then they recovered at least two.”

“And the third?”

James shrugged. “No idea.” When his uncle asked, James decided there was no reason not to tell him about the history of the discs. He explained that one of them had been passed down within his own lineage, and that according to Elizabeth, the record of that passage went back as far as the Knights of the Templar. “But what I don’t understand is how Hitler got his hands on the discs in the first place,” he said.

Simon shrugged. “It was a hell of a war machine. If those discs were in Europe at the time, and he crossed paths with them, he’d obviously have seized them.”

“But Mum always said that our family’s disc went to America with the Templars.”

“The Nazis must’ve had a sympathizer in the US. God knows there were more than a few.”

As the train rumbled north, the two men discussed James’s theory about how his disc must be hidden in his mother’s old clock. He explained that TC Carter had been a clockmaker, and that it seemed clear that the Carter family disc was hidden in the face of a Nazi grandfather clock belonging to Suki. “William must have told TC that his family’s disc belonged in Scotland, and TC must’ve offered to hide it in that strange, oversized clock on Mum’s mantle.”

“So that makes two you think you’ve found,” Simon said. “Whatever happens next, you and the others have to find that third disc as quickly as possible. Because one thing’s for certain: if even one of those things falls into the wrong hands, the human race will be in grave danger.”

Before James could respond, a commotion kicked up all around them. Where before the train was silent, save for the clacking of the tracks, now it sounded as if everyone aboard was speaking anxiously to one another. Then, a minute later, there was silence again—a silence interrupted by the slowly rising volume of the television in the club car just ahead.

After exchanging a confused look, Simon and James left their cabin together. Everyone in the private cars had had the same idea simultaneously, and so it was a bit of a jam in the hall. James’s height allowed him to just

make out the top of the flickering TV screen over the heads of the other passengers. He couldn't make out the whole image, but what he could see were the red borders of a breaking news story, and a massive plume of smoke.

He caught the expressions of a few of the passengers toward the back of the crowd. They all looked crestfallen and stunned. One woman was crying silently. Everyone was either checking their cell phones, watching the news report, or trying desperately to make a call. James had never seen such silent desperation in one place. Not since that day he was walking through Soho in London on 9/11/2001. He would never forget that day, as he was with his mother, and she was dragging him around looking for a place to get him a haircut on what was supposed to be a vacation to the big city. The place had been bustling one moment, and then came to a dead stop the next, as everyone stood aghast and watched or listened to whatever news source happened to be closest at the time. And just like now, right there on that train, everyone had a cell phone pressed to their head.

“What happened?” James asked of the old man in front of him in the throng.

“Not sure,” came the reply.

But then the word traveled back that it was an attack of some kind, in America. The first rumor was that the White House or the Capitol had been hit, but then finally someone from near the television shouted that it was the Empire State Building.

“Can you believe it?” the old man asked. “Another attack in New York.”

“And one in Seattle, too,” someone else said from ahead of them.

“Seattle?” James called out.

“They hit the Space Needle. Ten minutes after the Empire State.”

A murmur rumbled through the crowd as the reality sank in.

“It'll be just as it was the last time,” Simon said breathlessly. “You'll see. Everyone in the world will rally together.”

James nodded, trying to take comfort in that notion. He remembered the feeling of the whole world assembling in acts of love and support. But he also remembered how fleeting those acts had been. This time, though, something felt different. Maybe it was that he was too young back in 2001 to truly feel the depths of it, but this time, he could sense—from the very core of himself—that something fundamental had changed. And it wasn't just that the attack had happened in two cities on opposite coasts, either. Something had changed about the world itself. And it had changed for all the people even right here in this train car. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but he suddenly felt little hints of that same sensation he had only ever known in the presence of one other person. Suki.

*Suki*, he thought, hoping that his words would reach her even from nearly halfway around the world. *Suki, it's happening. These people . . . they're waking up.*

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## *Santa Monica, California*

*. . . waking up . . .*

Suki shook her head, trying to clear her mind enough to make sure she had actually just heard the words, or had she only just imagined them? It had been a long few days of using her power and suffering through the headaches, after all, and her concentration particularly over the last hour had drained her. But she could have sworn she heard James's voice through the noise of Lanie's power coursing through her, and Deveraux's protesting mind. "That's impossible," she whispered to herself. James was on the other side of the world.

"You say something?" Lanie asked, and in the asking, the driver jerked the wheel and the car swerved recklessly into the opposite lane.

"Lanie, concentrate," Suki barked.

With that, she felt Lanie's power strengthen, and the driver returned to driving as she instructed.

Suki could still hardly believe how easy it had been to overpower Deveraux with Lanie's help. There was a time not long ago that a man like him would have terrified her. But now she and Lanie had his mind so under their control that he didn't even blink unless she told him to. Which reminded her. "You can blink normally," she said.

From the driver's reflection in the rearview mirror, she saw him blink rapidly several times, looking abundantly relieved.

"You don't need my permission for that."

He drew a breath as if to speak, but she had definitely not granted him permission, so he swallowed the breath.

*You'll take a right at the next light, she told him telepathically. And then you'll find my street at the base of the hill.*

Dutifully Deveraux followed her instructions, driving without incident until they were pulling up to the familiar parking lot outside her office building.

What struck Suki first was how empty the lot was. It was the middle of a workday, but there were only a few cars parked there. Now that she thought about it, traffic had been light all the way here. It was as if the whole city had ground to a standstill. She could only remember one other time when such a thing had happened, and the thought of that day made the dread rise in her heart. "Park here," she told Deveraux.

When he came to a stop, she got out of the car and motioned for Lanie to join her. The pop star had gotten so deep into her meditative state that she looked startled by the prospect of having to move.

Suki bade Deveraux to roll down the window, and she leaned in to give him a threatening gaze. "Give me the keys."

He did not hesitate to hand over the keys.

"You wait here," she told him. "Don't try to leave us. Don't even move, or we'll end you."

Now that Lanie wasn't concentrating her meditation on connecting with Suki, the power of suggestion had gone cold.

Deveraux smiled. “You honestly think I’m going to—”

“Stay!” Lanie cut in, making a claw of her hand and flashing it at him as if casting a magic spell.

The driver straightened up and nodded obediently.

Her stride confident, Suki led Lanie up the stairs to her office, chuckling all the way. “What was that claw-hand thing about? What, are you like a witch now or something?”

For the first time since Suki had met her, Lanie blushed. “Just thought it would look cool and threatening, you know?”

Suki was just getting her keys out to open her office door when she heard it. The door was open in the dentist’s office just down the hall, and though it was clear that the staff had left early for the day, a TV still bleated from the waiting room. Suki had never liked that TV, for the dentist always insisted on keeping it tuned to a news network she didn’t care for, but on this day, it woke her to a new reality.

“The estimates have now risen to twenty-four hundred people either missing or presumed dead,” the newscaster was saying. “Of course I don’t need to remind our viewers about the similarities to the attack on the Twin Towers almost exactly twenty years ago. We do not expect the loss of life to be as great in this case, but make no mistake, this was a devastating terrorist attack on American soil.”

“What’s happening?” Lanie asked breathlessly. “What is that?”

Suki slowly stepped closer to the office, squinting to get a better look at the television. There, her fears were confirmed. “It’s the Empire State Building,” she said, not because she could identify anything in the smoldering rubble or the towering flames, but because of the buildings immediately adjacent. New York was always her favorite city in the world. She couldn’t count how many times she had been near that same space from where the camera was now broadcasting.

“Oh my God,” Lanie said, covering her mouth.

They watched silently as the network shifted from camera to camera, capturing the devastation from the ground and several angles in the

sky. For Suki, it was like a bad flashback to her childhood, that day she learned of the first attack on her favorite city. As she did back then, she cried now. She looked to Lanie, whose cheeks were glistening with tears of her own. They fell into a long, sobbing embrace.

“What does it all *mean*?” Lanie asked after a time.

Suki drew a shuddering breath and pulled away from her friend. “It means we need to get these discs together, *fast*.”

With a nod from Lanie, Suki led the way back and through her office door. There, at the back of the room, stood the grandfather clock, a swath of golden sunlight carving across it from the window. From the time she had parted with James, all through her search for Lanie and her battle with Deveraux, Suki had been afraid of this moment. She knew that a new power had been unlocked within her, and she suspected that this power would help her do what she had not been able to do before. But still, the last time she had touched this clock, it had sent pain and sorrow coursing through her. The fear of having to endure that again was considerable.

Yet, when she thought on it, she could sense that she was meant to do this now, in this moment, with the world reeling from tragedy. She could sense all around her a strange sort of awakening—as if she had borne witness to a moment when all of humanity’s eyes had opened at once. Today, the world was changed, and it would be up to her and those like her to ensure that the change was for the better.

“Suki, do you think you should . . . ?” Lanie started to say, trailing off when Suki began striding confidently straight for the clock.

The closer Suki came to the disc, the warmer she felt. At first, it was a pleasant warmth, but by the time she was standing before the clock, it felt almost like a fire had started to burn inside her. The excitement was considerable, but so was the pain. Still, she knew she was meant for this moment—she knew that James and Lanie and maybe the whole world was depending on her to reach out and seize the disc.

Her hands grew numb as she drew them toward the clock’s ornate face. The fire in her chest roared, causing her vision to falter and flood with

white light. She drew a breath and screamed, and then she touched the clock.

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She didn't know how much time had passed before she woke. The first thing she saw was the clock, only now its hands had stopped moving and its pendulum had gone still. All around the edges of the disc in the center of its face, there were coronas of dark soot.

Her hands ached. The pressure in her head was like she had woken up at the bottom of the ocean. Her legs were numb. It took her a moment of assessment to realize that she wasn't alone in the room. Suki stumbled in her attempt to rise to her feet, and Lanie startled as if from sleep.

"You're awake!" she said, relieved. "I thought I was going to have to drag you to the hospital."

"Wha?" Suki said. "What happened?"

Lanie rattled off a rapid explanation of the things Suki had most feared. The disc had seemed as if it was rejecting her. The moment she touched it, the whole office exploded in warm light. Suki had fallen into what Lanie slowly came to believe was a coma. And in the chaos, Deveraux had escaped.

"Ugh!" Suki said, pinching the bridge of her nose in aggravation. "Why did we leave him in the car?"

"It's a good thing we did," Lanie offered. "If he'd been in here with us, who knows what he might've done after he saw what that clock did to you. This way, at least he just ran off."

Suki had to agree that Lanie had a point.

"And besides," the pop star said, proudly holding up Deveraux's tablet, "he won't be as dangerous without this."

Even though she wasn't so sure, Suki didn't say anything.

"Strange thing about this tablet, though," Lanie said.

It took some effort, but Suki finally found the strength to rise and go over to Lanie. The pop star had made herself comfortable at her therapist's

desk, and it looked as if she had been using the tablet to watch a video. Suki's heart skipped when she recognized it. There rested the startlingly black box that had begun the video that Suki had never managed to play in full on her computer. She knew what would happen next. The beautiful woman would appear, she would spout some prophecy-sounding gibberish, and then the video would freeze.

“How did you get this onto this tablet?” she asked Lanie.

“What do you mean?” Lanie said. “It was just on here.”

Now Suki's heart sank, and her hope soared at the same time. On the one hand, this meant someone in Deveraux's camp had somehow stolen the video—either from her or from Becca prior to the transfer of the jump drive. On the other, if someone had stolen it, maybe that someone had also managed to crack the playback issue.

Suki sidled up to Lanie, and the two shared her desk chair as they stared down at the tablet. In the video, dust blew over the mountain, but nothing seemed to touch the black box. Then, suddenly, it broke apart, and the ball of light floated out of it. In a flash, the image of the beautiful almost-woman projected into the air.

“The lord of darkness is close now. The one who sings is the key.”

She nearly told Lanie about how this video had made Suki feel almost like the woman was speaking about Lanie, but one look at the pop star told her she didn't have to. She knew. Lanie's pallor was stark white, and she was shaking her head slightly as if trying not to believe what she knew to be true.

“The one who sings is called Zalea. Her visit to Earth was granted so she might observe the beauty that the Xandonites created thousands of years ago. But her mission ended in disaster. The one called Sar foresaw her arrival and held her prisoner with the intent of absorbing her power.”

Now Suki braced for the stretch of the video that featured broken sound. But as she watched, she noticed out of the corner of her eye how Lanie wasn't only mouthing the words that could be heard from the hologram, but the words that should reside between, as well.

“Wait!” Suki said. “You know what she’s saying?”

Lanie held up a hand for silence. She had clearly been watching this video over and over since Suki’s blackout, and was looking for clues. She mouthed the words about Sar and the great struggle, and every time she came to a part about Zalea, her eyes would flutter. Her shoulders grew noticeably tense when the video reached the narrative about Sar being cast out from Earth while Corin escaped.

Then Suki held her breath, waiting for the video to freeze. To her surprise and not to her surprise, the version on Deveraux’s tablet played on.

“Zalea is the key,” the hologram continued. “She must be protected. We have hidden her among the earthlings, and will keep her in the dark about her identity to protect herself and to protect everyone. But there will come a day when she must awaken, when she must find her disc and defend this planet from the machinations of Corin and Sar.” The hologram then bowed its head reverently. “To the natives of the largest undiscovered continent, we give over Zalea. And to the natives of the smallest undiscovered continent, we gift the disc for safekeeping.”

With that, the hologram rushed back in on itself, forming a ball of light and disintegrating into the box. The box began to vibrate and pulse, and a sudden burst of energy shot out in all directions. The video flickered out shortly after.

“So I didn’t imagine it,” Lanie said, shaking her head sadly.

“Didn’t imagine what?” Suki said, still trying to riddle out what it meant that the being in the hologram had left a disc in the smallest undiscovered continent.

A single tear escaped over Lanie’s cheek. “All this time, I’d thought it was the drugs they had me on in the hospital.”

Suki sucked in a breath, confused.

“When you told me that Rick and Becca had died,” Lanie explained, “I heard you, but I don’t think I completely believed you. And until now, I had convinced myself that it wasn’t true—that I had just imagined you

telling me about their deaths because of the tranquilizers at Schmidt's clinic."

Suki didn't know what to say. It had been bothering her for some time, the way her client and friend had rather shrugged off the deaths of two of her best friends. But now she realized that it had been a matter of Lanie's denial all along.

"He was the only man I ever thought maybe I could love someday," Lanie murmured. "I was so convinced that what you told me was all in my head, you know? And when you never mentioned it again, I figured maybe . . ." She couldn't seem to finish.

Suki nodded, the regret feeling like it might burst out of her chest.

"So he did die?" Lanie asked.

After a deep, calming breath, Suki reexplained everything she knew—about how Rick had found the box at the mine, had taken the video, and had transmitted it to Becca somehow before he went missing. She paused for a time to let that sink in before she recounted the story of how Becca had died in her effort to get this video to Lanie.

For a long while, Lanie cried. Suki could feel her sorrow radiating from her chest and into her own heart. She wished that she could accept it fully from Lanie—take the burden from her so she wouldn't have to bear it. But all she could do was experience it. The sadness was almost crippling.

"There's a reason so many gave so much to get this message to me," Lanie said finally. "It's the clue we've been looking for."

Suki nodded. She felt it, too.

"I don't know who this Zalea is, but I feel connected to her, you know?"

Suki nodded again.

"So what does it mean?"

Suki sighed. She didn't know.

Lanie fell into a pensive mood. "The largest and smallest undiscovered continents. There *aren't* any undiscovered continents."

“Maybe the woman was speaking about a different planet.”

“No,” Lanie insisted. “It’s all here. Your disc. James’s disc. So mine must be, too. Along with this Zalea.”

The two traded theories for several minutes before Suki felt her mind connect to Lanie’s, and in that moment, they had an epiphany simultaneously.

“The answer is with James,” Lanie said.

Suki shook her head. “The answer is in the three of us. *Together.*”

“Then let’s get to him. Or bring him here. You want to call him?”

Instead, the TV remote called to Suki. She used it to turn on the screen hanging above the chairs in the small waiting room outside her office. She almost never used the thing—it had been a holdover from the previous tenant, a private practice doctor. She had always thought TV made her clients unsettled when they first stepped into her office, and so she had made a policy of leaving it black. Now when it hummed to life, she was reminded of how right she had been about its effect. She felt immediately rattled.

There on the screen, the images of the giant, burning pile of rubble continued to flicker, intercut with images of crying people young and old. The pundit was saying something about fundamentalist terrorism, but nothing had been confirmed. Suki waited for the confirmation of her suspicions to scroll across the ticker on the bottom of the screen. A minute later, she saw the message: All commercial US flights had been grounded.

“He was supposed to be working on freeing his disc,” Suki said. “But I’ll call him. He’ll tell me the same thing the TV just did, though. How are we going to get together with all the flights on the ground? Take a *boat?*”

Lanie pursed her lips coquettishly. “Girl, how long have you known me?”

Sensing a dig, Suki shrugged. “Five years or so.”

“And in that time, you’ve been aware of my superstardom, correct?”

Heavy as her heart was, Suki allowed a smile. “Your point?”

She pointed to the TV screen. “That thing said ‘commercial’ US flights.”

Suki narrowed her eyes.

Lanie offered a wry smile. “I may have blown through most of my money, but if you think I was letting my private jet go, you’re crazy.”

With that, Suki let go of a long, cathartic laugh. Then, without hesitation, she picked up her phone and dialed the contact. “James?” she said, delighted that he picked up and a little worried at how out of sorts he sounded. “Yeah, I heard. I know. It’s not safe here anymore. Listen. I think we should get the band together. All three of us. No, no. We’re coming to you.”



# ***PART III: THE FALL***



## CHAPTER 19

### *Scottish Highlands*

“Oh my God,” Lanie said. “Who’s the witch now?”

“I just thought it might help us relax and focus,” Suki said defensively, but now that she took a step back, she had to admit that it did look like she’d just created a ritual circle. She’d aligned a set of eight candles in a loose circle around a trio of pillows on which they planned to sit. With the lights dimmed, there was no question that the whole affair had the appearance of some kind of halfhearted séance.

“I think it’s perfect,” James said, stepping in from the living room, where he’d been staring at his grandfather clock for the past hour.

It was good to hear James say something positive, because the truth was that he’d been completely dour for the three weeks they had spent cooped up in this cramped, lonely cottage in the northern Highlands of Scotland. Suki knew that he owed his mood not just to the frequent headaches that came from using their powers so intensely, but rather, to the fact that, like her, he had not yet managed to remove his disc from the clock. And with chaos reigning in America and what was left of the European Union, he had grown quite restless.

Suki often tried to console him with the reminder that reports were emerging all over the globe that some people were awakening to new powers. That day three weeks back had seemed like just another standard, though devastating and bicoastal, terrorist attack, but the truth seemed to be that it was a seminal event in human history. Not only was the awakening happening, but in the immediate aftermath, the US president had announced a new rocket-propulsion technology that would allow NASA to launch a mission to Mars. He had dedicated the mission to those who died in New York and Seattle, and had astonished the world when he revealed that the first man to walk on the red planet would touch down in less than a month.

From that day onward, the media had bounced from stories about a dramatic ramp-up in terrorist activity, stories about the mysterious rise of people who seemed to possess powers that could counteract the chaos, and stories about the NASA mission's successful launch and progress toward Mars. Indeed, by last estimation, the ship would be touching down in a matter of three days.

Suki and Lanie had spent many late nights talking about their theory that the attacks had somehow served as a triggering event for the next step in human evolution.

"And we're right there at the forefront," Suki had said.

Lanie had beamed about that. "I've never felt so special before."

Suki rolled her eyes. "Are you serious? You've sold millions of records and have legions of adoring fans."

The shrug had become something of a trademark for Lanie. "Yeah, but this is the first time I've ever been able to make people do whatever I want them to do." Then she added sardonically, "Also, there's that whole matter of me being one of three people tasked to save the world from an evil we don't even fully understand."

The trio found themselves in the Highlands because James's uncle Simon had moved the clock there sometime during James's absence from Scotland.

"Neither your mother nor I knew of its significance," the old man had said. "I just thought it was a nice clock. And when Elizabeth said she didn't want it, I figured it would look nice in the cabin."

This was why Lanie's private jet had taken them not to Edinburgh, but to Inverness. From there, they had taken the train as close to the cabin as they could before James met them and drove them the rest of the way in his uncle's rickety and practically ancient Argyll GT. With Uncle Simon spending most of his time hunting and fishing around the picturesque mountains surrounding the hidden valley in which the cabin stood, the trio had spent almost every waking moment of the past three weeks trying to figure out how in the world they could get James's disc out of the clock. The assumption was that if they could work together to help James, then

they would know exactly what to do when removing Suki's. Then it would just be a matter of finding Lanie's disc and finishing the job.

On the subject of Lanie's disc, James had solved the mystery almost immediately. Suki and Lanie had spent most of the flight to Scotland theorizing about how it was possible for undiscovered continents to still exist on Earth, but James had shown them that they'd been too busy focused on the trees to see the forest.

"You're assuming that holographic message was modern," he said. "But according to my mother, this all stretches back *thousands* of years."

Lanie had seemed confused by that, but Suki had picked up the connection immediately.

"Then the largest undiscovered continent would be North America," she had said. "That must be my disc. And the smallest is, what? Australia?"

James had shrugged. "That would be my interpretation."

So, with all three disc locations at least vaguely determined, the group had set about the task of figuring out how to remove one from its protective housing. But time and time again, no matter how they tried to align their powers, James would touch the clock and get shocked unconscious, just like Suki had with her clock. They had tried everything they could think of—even going so far as to guess that maybe they had the clocks backward, and the one that had been at James's boyhood home had belonged to Suki and vice versa. But that attempt, just like all others, ended with someone toppling to the floor and drained of energy. Suki had only faced that feeling three times in her life, and had no desire to ever face it again. She couldn't imagine how James must have felt, having subjected himself to that nightmare several times a day for weeks. By now, he looked like a hollowed-out version of the vibrant, healthy James she had first come to know. But still, he was determined.

All of this was what brought them to Suki's makeshift séance. The latest working theory was that they were unable to touch the discs because of the chips that Lanie had discovered in their heads. It seemed a stretch to assume that this was what could be causing the disconnect, but if they could accept the idea that the discs were alien, and bend their imaginations to

Elizabeth Sinclair's belief that the chips in their heads were also somehow alien, then maybe it made sense. Either way, for all three of them, removing those chips had taken a close third on the priority list, just behind figuring out the exact location of Lanie's disc and freeing James's. They had felt fortunate that the chips didn't seem to be tracking devices—at least not to the extent that their enemies could use them to find their ultra-hidden location in the Highlands. But James, at least, believed as his mother believed: that they could be used to control or even end the life of the carrier. So with every passing day, they had grown more desperate to figure out the solution for removing them.

What had struck them immediately was that Suki and James should have had all the tools they needed. Suki's telepathy and ability to see inward allowed her to find her own chip in no time. With James's ability to control machines coursing through her, it should have been a simple matter to find and disable an apparently nonorganic microchip. But on the first attempt, they found that the chips were contained in a decidedly organic barrier that was particularly efficient at blocking James's power.

On the second attempt, they had tried combining with Lanie's power of persuasion, under the theory that she could convince the organic barrier to pull back so that James could access the microchips. But Suki had not yet had enough practice channeling three distinct powers at once. The pain in her skull was also more intense when she was bending three powers at once, and her companions felt it, too. On top of that, the night before, Lanie had stumbled upon Simon's secret stash of booze, and had relapsed badly. Her soaring hangover had prevented full focus.

So now, after a week of re-sobering from Lanie and practice from Suki, they were ready to try their hand at destroying the chips once more. Suki had created her ritual circle in a perhaps misguided effort to remind Lanie how serious this was. And now they would sit down together in the middle of the circle and try to channel their combined power through Suki. It was decided that they would attempt to destroy James's chip first, since it would be easier for him to concentrate on the machine closest to him physically. If that worked, they would tackle Lanie's next, and then Suki's last.

“Are we ready, then?” James asked as he stepped into the circle.

“Hold on!” Lanie said loudly. “I need a drink first.” The pop star had held a straight face for just long enough for Suki to believe she was serious. Then she cracked a broad smile. “Just a joke, you guys,” she said. “Jeez, everyone takes everything so seriously around here.”

“There’s a reason for that,” James said, sounding slightly miffed as he took his position. He moved gingerly, like a man suffering from terminal disease. Suki had scanned him inwardly several times and knew that he was not in fact sick. But she could see how his muscles had depleted, and how badly he needed rest and to stop subjecting himself to the pain of rejection from the clock.

Lanie groaned playfully. “Fine. If you insist. Let’s get it on.”

With the slightest smile at her friend, Suki closed her eyes and opened her mind to accept the distinct streams of power from the others. She found James’s first. In her mind’s eye, it looked like a trail of greenish smoke pouring out from the center of James’s forehead. Lanie’s followed the same path from her forehead, her power taking on a pink hue. Suki’s own power looked blue to her, and joining it with the others was a difficult though practiced matter of entwining the streams in a kind of braid, then guiding that braid to where they intended to direct their power. She had fumbled this task several times on the previous two tries, and was delighted to find on this attempt that she managed it easily.

The effort at turning all three powers together toward the base of James’s skull was a different matter. She found that each strand of the braid had its own will. Moving them in any direction simultaneously was a little like conducting a silent, rather forceful negotiation. Every take had to be accompanied by an equal measure of give. This proved difficult as her headache built in intensity. The concentration required from Suki was so complete that she had almost none left to focus on seeing into James’s head and finding the exact location of the chip.

But in time, she worked through the silence, and found that the candlelight flickering through her eyelids did in fact soothe her. She stretched the braid to James’s chip, and now the real work could begin.

*Lanie*, she thought to her friend, *you're up*.

Suki watched telepathically as Lanie's thread grew brighter in hue until it was almost a fiery red. She allowed her hope to rise at the thought that maybe Lanie would manage to hold up her end of the bargain this time, and that this whole theory would pay off. But then Lanie's thread sputtered and went out.

Trying not to look or sound too frustrated, Suki opened her eyes and found Lanie staring at her fingernails.

"Sorry," Lanie said. "Felt a hangnail."

James groaned, so Suki jumped in to soften the blow.

"Remember what we talked about, Lane?" she said in a sing-songy way. "This is a tough process for me. We all need to keep our focus."

Lanie sucked in a breath, furrowed her brow, and nodded thoughtfully. And with that, the second attempt was on.

This time, Suki had just managed to thread the power into a braid when Uncle Simon burst through the front door and announced that he'd killed a buck and would have just enough time to gut it, butcher it, and grill it before dinner. After a few minutes of bickering with James, he agreed to leave them alone in the cottage for the rest of the afternoon, provided James would help him haul the buck into the shed. Suki shuddered at the thought of it, and hoped that James wouldn't return with blood on his hands and a disturbed conscience at the corpse he'd just dragged around.

Lanie spent the ensuing twenty minutes talking about how nice it was that the worldwide chaos allowed her to ignore the upkeep on her social media platforms. So many celebrities had gone dark after the attack. She was glad to leave that stress behind and just blend in with the crowd who'd decided that the attack was sufficient reminder that there are so many more important things in the world than telling everyone about your morning workout or what you had for brunch.

Not long after, James returned with clean hands and a face as determined as ever.

They started their third try with little fanfare. By now, Suki had had enough practice to get the powers threaded and directed in no time at all, but she feared that she felt too drained to hold on to the effort for long. Fortunately, Lanie seemed to have found her missing focus, and to Suki's surprise and delight, the organic casing around the chip slowly began to untangle and roll back.

*Now, James,* she thought to her friend.

James wasted no time bringing his power to a brightness that matched Lanie's. At first, it looked like it was having no effect on the microscopic, silvery, bullet-shaped chip lying in the lotus of organic casing, but then, just when Suki feared her strength might leave her, the chip began to spark and pop. She held on just long enough to watch the chip flame out before her friends' threads dissipated and the organic casing coiled and then darkened over the short-circuited chip.

A pleased sigh washed out of James as he slumped forward into the circle and brought his hand to the back of his head. He lay there long enough that Suki worried he might be hurt. But then, just as she reached out for him, he sat up, looking healthier and happier than he had in days. "I can't tell you how good that feels," he said, beaming. Then he buried into an expression of concentration.

Shortly after, the toaster popped, startling Suki and Lanie.

"And now I'm free of the headaches," James said with a sigh. "It seems it was the chip causing them all along."

The thought made Suki's desire to remove her own chip redouble. She had been living with this pain for so long that she had almost started to accept its inevitability.

James turned to Lanie, his pupils dilating and his speech returning to that smitten-teenager tone he always used when talking to the woman for whom he still clearly harbored a bit of a crush. "Let's do you next, Lanie."

The pop star clapped her hands giddily, but Suki, drained as she was, had to throw cold water on the excitement.

"I need to rest," she said.

And so it was agreed that they would part for a time before returning to work on Lanie. James left to check on Simon. Lanie went out for a walk in the foothills beside the glassy lake just down the valley. Suki napped on a divan piled with furs that Simon had collected, most likely by way of the hunt, over the years.

After an hour or so of deep sleep, her rest became fitful. She felt restless at the notion that while the world was progressing so quickly toward a new reality, and while this great evil she was supposed to be fighting drew nearer—she and her friends had spent weeks just sitting around trying to figure out their own powers. For as long as they had spent on this effort, she was no closer to removing her chip, or to figuring out how to get past the barrier on her grandfather’s clock. James’s research was clear. There were three of them, and they each needed a disc. If Suki couldn’t manage to get hers, then it wouldn’t matter what the others did. One failure and it would all be for nothing.

She spent the next hour pacing the room, trying to think about what she might do to break herself out of this trap she felt like she had fallen into. She had made so many advancements with her power, and yet here she was, feeling powerless. TC would have known what to do. About that much, she was certain. But she couldn’t quite imagine what the old man would have said, were he here.

It was during one of these memories of her grandfather that something occurred to her. The realization hit her with such force that she had to sit down for a moment.

“It’s so obvious,” she muttered. “Why didn’t I think of this before.”

All this time, she had been wondering what her grandfather would say or would do if he had been in her shoes. And all this time, she had evidence of these very answers close at hand. Sure, her grandfather himself had passed long ago, but his journal, and his copper glasses, remained. In fact, they were in James’s possession. He kept them in the very next room.

She ran to that room, pawing over James’s desk in search of the glasses. *How could you be so shortsighted?* she thought as she checked the top drawer, finding nothing. All this time, she had been operating under the

notion that the glasses were meant only for James, but in retrospect, that seemed so silly. Why should they work only for him? Just because he had mastery over mechanical devices?

She found them in the second drawer, and the moment she touched them, they began to whir to life.

Her plan had been to put them on and then look for the journal, but as soon as she slid them on her face, her surroundings changed. Suddenly she was back in TC's study in Texas. Everything was exactly as she remembered it. At first, she thought she was alone in the room, but then she caught that scent of his old pipe, and it sent a feeling of pure love coursing through her veins.

She turned and saw him. He was leaning against the wall beside the door, one ankle crossed over the other. He was just as she remembered him, and yet different. This was the same man, but there were no memories she could recall that showed him quite so young. Those bright blue eyes and the mischievous smile were familiar, but this version of TC Carter could not have been a day over forty. With a quiet, effortless cool, he held his pipe out and said, "The time is nigh, Suki."

Confused, Suki cocked her head to one side.

"Go to the clock," he clarified. "Run like the wind. It's waiting for you."

Suddenly, two other figures appeared beside him. Her parents, smiling so brightly as they reached out for her. She was overwhelmed by those faces that she hadn't seen in years. For the longest time, she had thought that they died in a car accident when she was young, but now she saw the truth of it. They had been taken from her against their will. Whether it was the power of the vision or of her own telepathic abilities, she could suddenly sense that she had been the reason for their abduction. Whoever planted this chip in her head had to have known somehow—they had to have known about her unique DNA—and they clearly targeted her parents as a result.

As the vision of her smiling parents reached out to her, her heart filled with love—not just for them, but for everyone on the planet that

needed her now.

“You will see it all,” her mother said.

“But only when you run with the new speed in your soul,” her father continued.

“You must go now and not look back,” TC said.

With that, the vision disappeared, and now Suki could see the real world all around her. The first thing she noticed was that she wasn’t alone. James and Lanie had both returned, and they were gawking at her.

“So . . . ,” Lanie said slowly. “That seemed interesting.”

“My glasses,” James said. “What did you see?”

After removing the glasses, a bewildered Suki explained to her friends what had just happened. By the time she finished, Lanie was reaching out for them like a child trying to grasp at her turn with a toy.

“Let me try, let me try,” the pop star said.

When James nodded, Suki handed over the glasses, and Lanie slid them on quickly. She couldn’t have worn them for more than three seconds before she tore them off her face, huffing and panting.

“What did you see?” Suki asked.

Lanie went on to explain a vision so detailed that it was hard to believe she had taken it all in during such a short time. She explained that she saw herself flying over Australia, passing over desert land until she reached a strange ridge that looked something like a backbone. “I heard a voice,” she said. “It was familiar somehow, but delivered in a strange accent. It was the friendliest, most enchanting voice I’ve ever heard.”

“What did it say?” James asked.

“I couldn’t quite make it out,” Lanie said, sounding disappointed. “But he definitely told me it was time.”

“Time for what?”

She shrugged. And then her mood darkened. “Next, I felt this terrible pain in my head, and then I saw what looked like these enormous,

insect-people things all lined up in a huge crowd. They were standing in the darkness. It was like a slave ship or something, they were packed in so close. Except that I could sense that they were underground somewhere. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Lanie began to cry. “I just can’t . . .” She trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

For a time, the three of them stood in silence, trying to get a hold on everything they had just seen and heard.

Then Lanie sucked in a breath and seemed to collect herself. “I’m ready now,” she said. “I understand what we need to do.”

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An hour later, after everyone had collected themselves, they managed to disable Lanie’s chip in short order. They celebrated the success, but the day would end in defeat when the ensuing effort to destroy Suki’s chip fell short. The others told her encouragingly that she probably just needed more sleep, but from the start, Suki could tell that this effort would be different. Turning the power outward was one matter, and turning it inward was another. The truth was that she didn’t think she could do it, no matter what her parents and TC had told her in the vision.

The next two days of trying proved just how right she was. They made the attempt at least a half-dozen times, but even though Lanie and James had gotten quite adept at keeping their focus on the effort, Suki just couldn’t manage to bend the braid toward herself. She would have tumbled into self-loathing and frustration if not for the overwhelming success that came later that morning.

James, feeling rested and up to the task of trying the clock once more, braced himself for another harrowing shock from the protective barrier around the disc, but he reached in and pulled back the decorative face of the clock as simply as if he were opening the refrigerator and reaching for a beer.

The three of them stood, wide-eyed, at the sight of the object they had worked so long and hard to obtain. There inside a compartment just behind the clock’s face was an opaque, glasslike disc that glowed with that

same greenish hue of James's power. There was no question in Suki's mind that they had been right. This disc clearly belonged to James.

At no more than six centimeters wide, the disc was much smaller than Suki had anticipated—so small that she envisioned herself wearing her own disc like a pendant necklace. But the thought only made her sink in self-defeat. The chips were clearly what was barring them from accessing their discs. James had his, and Lanie would soon have hers. But Suki would never break through her own barriers until she figured out how to direct her power into her own mind.

With the clockface standing open, James looked back at Suki, that handsome smile of relief spreading over his face. "Shall I?" he asked.

"You *shall*," Lanie said sardonically.

Suki furrowed her brow and nodded.

His hand was shaky as he reached for the object. He was so hesitant that for a moment, Suki thought maybe there was another barrier, this one invisible, to clear. But then at the last instant, he rather lunged for it. When his fingers touched the glasslike surface of the disc, there was another shock of light. It flashed and filled the room. And then, all at once, James was gone.

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The change in his environment was so complete that it took James the better part of a minute to get his bearings. He looked down at his hand, finding that he held the disc. He still had no idea what had happened or how he had gotten here, but he dared not let the disc go. He had only just been standing in a rustic cabin in northern Scotland, his friends behind him, the clock before him, a high morning sun pouring through the breezy windows. Now he stood in dim, unnatural light in the corner of a massive rectangular room with what looked like stainless steel floors and smooth walls of a dull gray.

The only interruption in the wall was a softly glowing screen on the far end of the room. Even from this distance and in this light, James could sense what it was. It showed a broad expanse of gray pocked by little pricks of starlight. On one end was a depiction of Earth. On the other, Mars.

Snaking from the blue planet toward the red one was a green trail with a yellow triangular head. In the bottom right corner was a countdown clock depicting the days, hours, minutes, and seconds remaining on the journey. Whatever this room was for, whoever used it was clearly quite interested in the Mars shuttle's progress.

The only other feature of the room that James could make out stood at the center. From where he stood, it looked like a mass of medical equipment, a clump of squat, metallic devices and tangled wires that rose from floor to ceiling. From behind the equipment, there beamed the brightest source of light in the room. It was a stark white carving through the neutral yellow fluorescent beaming from high above.

*Those lights*, James thought when he looked up at the ceiling. They were the same shape, style, and color of the ones he'd gotten so used to hating at the Pentagon. Come to think of it, the walls, too, were the same drab color of paint found all throughout the wing of the building where he kept his office. Even the air smelled the same. He couldn't be absolutely certain, but he felt a sense that he was back in Washington, in some room of the Pentagon he had never seen before. From the lack of windows and the clammy mustiness of the air, he could guess that he was underground. Of course he'd heard rumors of underground facilities beneath the Pentagon, but he'd never believed them. He'd spent his whole career investigating conspiracies, after all, so it never made much sense to him that a conspiracy of that sort could exist literally under his nose.

When he saw it, his heart stopped and his flight reflex flashed, if only for an instant. The thing stepped soundlessly out from behind the column of devices. It was so unnaturally slender and so disturbingly alien that it was all James could do to keep himself from hollering in shock. He would have run if the thing had noticed him, but fortunately its attention was trained on something just to the opposite side of the column. James couldn't tell whether the being was improbably tall, or just seemed that way because of its astonishing slenderness. Its limbs were long and lithe to the point of being almost pin-like, its shoulders slight and pointed, its hips narrow. Its feet and hands, though long and skinny as the rest of it, were decidedly and terrifyingly human. But its head set it completely apart. It

was wide and squat, flat on top and rounded on the sides before meeting at a pointed chin. It looked almost like the face of an ant, minus the mandibles. Indeed, there was no mouth that James could see, and its nose was little more than a slit in the center of its smooth, green-gray face.

Then there were the eyes. Their length stretched horizontally, and they appeared lidless until—like a reptile—they blinked in a flash of pinkish skin that closed over the center from both sides. The eyes were unsettlingly black. There were no irises. The black was so deep that no light reflected from the eyes. They seemed to drink the light like twin black holes in the center of an unflinching, antlike face.

Of course James had seen a creature like this before. Thousands of people had met with the FBI to describe their supposed alien encounters, and nearly all of them had described the infamous gray aliens so ubiquitous in pop culture. James had always chalked up the similarities of these claims to groupthink—a myth that began as a description of every feature that might best unsettle a human being's understanding of what was natural, a terrifying yin to humanity's yang, a campfire tale that passed quickly from community to community, culture to culture, and country to country until everyone in the world knew exactly what an alien looked like. That was what had made the other handful of descriptions stand out. From out of the thousands of cases, a few described not gray beings, but rather, long, slender beings with antlike heads.

And now James was staring at one in the flesh. Everything he had carefully crafted into his belief structure worked hard to deny what his eyes were telling him.

With a slow, deliberate grace, the antlike being reached for the column and came back with a long, spindly rod connected to the column by a thick cord.

The first noise James heard since arriving at this terrible place was the high-pitched whirring of what was unmistakably a drill. The being leaned forward slightly and reached out, the noise of the drill meshing with a sickening sound of tearing and grinding of whatever it touched. James flinched, looking away for the first time, and when he looked back, he was

startled to see that a second alien had emerged from the opposite side of the column.

At first he thought the being had spotted him. It was looking precisely in his direction. James was wreathed in darkness, but perhaps it was a feature of those dark, black eyes that they needed no light to see. For half a heartbeat, his flight reflex kicked in once more, and he frantically began looking for an exit.

But then the alien turned its head toward what one of its brethren was doing, and James realized that it hadn't been looking at him, but rather, at another person in the room. The white light from the other side of the column made it impossible to identify her by her features, but her form was decidedly female. It was a disquieting sensation, to be so attracted by the physicality of another human being in a place so terrifyingly alien. But there it was. Those wide hips, those long legs, those perfectly sloped shoulders, that delicate neck, that small and perfectly round head with its long hair pulled back. His body ached for her.

Then, suddenly, in that ache, he remembered something long forgotten. Or at least he started to remember. He knew this woman. He just could not recall why or how. His desire for her wasn't purely instinctual. It was familiar somehow. When she reached her hand toward the column, his chest felt tight. She had reached for him once, with that same terrible grace. In her smooth, tiny hand, she held a vicious-looking device. It was a long, wand-like thing crowned by what looked like a circular saw flanked by a pair of mandibles. She handed it to the second alien, and the beast went straight to work with it.

As he stepped around the alien, passing into the light, James was certain. He knew her. Who could forget a gait so alluring? It was like sex itself had learned how to walk. Seductively, she traced her hand from shoulder to shoulder along the alien's back as she passed from one side of it to the other. Then she turned, and James braced himself to see a face he recognized.

He would have been disappointed if his first emotion hadn't been shock and revulsion. The face of the woman whose body was clearly so young, so supple, and so very sexy wasn't just discordantly old, but

*decrepit*. It was more weathered and unappealing than any face James had ever seen on a living person—as if it wasn't just time, but something else that had disfigured it. The wrinkle lines were so deep that they almost looked chemical in nature. The skin around the eyes had recessed to the point where James could see too much of the reddened eyeballs within. The lips were thin and chafed and lifeless. The teeth were tiny and dull gray. There was no nose, but merely a hole that disappeared into the spongy flesh of her face.

James had to suppress his gag reflex. When he turned away, he finally managed to get his feet to unstick from the floor, and he took a single step to his right.

Now he saw it. Just on the other side of the column was a stainless steel gurney. Resting on top was a human being, a man. At least that was what James could assume from the slightly hairy, softly pinkish feet extending over the edge of the steel toward the alien with the drill.

Horror gripped him, and now he was motionless again. The fear only deepened when the dead-faced woman reached toward the man on the gurney.

Then something happened. The woman jolted as if shocked. For a time, she held her arms in position as if struggling against something. At first, nothing seemed to happen. But then all at once, she changed. The muscles behind that terrible face began to contort, and with a sudden, liquid roll, the flesh changed. The wrinkles disappeared. Her lips grew full and pink. The eyes went from dead to devastating in their beauty. From out of the center there appeared a tiny, slightly upturned nose. All at once she was gorgeous. A knockout. A face to match the body. A face that James suddenly knew he recognized.

*“Christina,”* he breathed.

And to his great fear, she heard him. Those pretty eyes jerked toward him, and she let go of what she was doing. The process to return her beauty to her must not have completed, for her face appeared to age a decade in an instant as she made a walking but purposeful beeline toward him.

James quivered, a cold sweat quickly forming at the base of his spine. Frantically he looked again for a door, but could see no break in the vast four walls surrounding him. As before, his feet felt anchored to the floor, just like one of his bad dreams where something unseen but terrifying pursued him, but his legs were weighed down with cinder blocks.

At least fifty feet of open floor stood between them, but she stalked with purpose and alarming speed. He felt helpless. Weak. Beaten down by the very stare of the woman who approached him. The fear redoubled when the soulless gaze of the two aliens followed after her and found him. His heart pounded in his chest. He tried to breathe, but couldn't find the wind. A little groan of terror was all he could manage.

Then, in the second before she would reach him, his fingers found the disc. He didn't know what compelled him to do it, but he squeezed the object between thumb and forefinger. She was on him now, and he closed his eyes in anticipation of the blow. But then he felt a soft charge flow through him, and when he opened his eyes, he was back in the cabin, alone in the room with the grandfather clock.

Such was his anxiety that he collapsed to the floor, the breath he'd been holding rushing out from him in a loud moan. A moment later, he felt hands on him, and his first instinct was to shrug away from them violently, his flight response still fresh in his mind. But when he turned, he saw the pretty, inviting face of Lanie Montrose. He could still hardly believe that he knew this woman personally. And now she was looking down on him with all the care and concern of a mother.

"Oh my God, James," she said. "We didn't know what happened. You just . . . we just—" She bolted upright and ran for the front door.

He watched after her, her fashionable boots pounding on the old hardwood.

She flung open the door and screamed into the wilderness that James had returned.

Overwhelmed with a strange combination of relief, the residue of terror, and the sheer mental exhaustion of having just occupied two very different places in the span of minutes, James lost consciousness.

By the time he woke, Suki had returned. The women fussed over him for a time before he finally insisted that he was fine, and that they now had bigger fish to fry. He explained where he had gone, how he believed it was the Pentagon, and how he had seen Christina and a pair of aliens performing some kind of ritual extraction from a human being.

“But I don’t understand,” Suki said, furrowing her brow. “Why would the disc send you *there*, of all places?”

James retrieved the disc from his pocket and held it in his palm. “I think this is more than just a defense mechanism, as my mother always told me. And I think it’s more than just a gateway, as we’ve come to believe. I think it’s simply a tool designed to fight the enemy. And in this instance, to fight the enemy, we first needed to know what we’re up against.” James sighed. “It was difficult to see what the enemy stood for before now, but now I see it.” Even as he spoke the words, he felt his resolve to destroy this enemy swell within him.

The women fell silent for a time, Suki retreating into a pensive mood and Lanie picking at her fingernails.

It was the latter who finally spoke. “So . . . what do we do next?”

“We don’t have as much time as we’d hoped,” James said. “They had a countdown clock. I think the Mars landing is more significant than we realized.”

“Why?” Suki asked. “How?”

James shook his head. “I don’t know. I only know that I have this sense that we need to hurry.”

The three of them argued about where they should go and how. Suki seemed hesitant, and James could sense why. Even if she’d had the vision of TC Carter telling her to run home to the clock, she still carried the chip in her head. As if she’d read his mind, she placed her hand on the back of her head. “If I’m going back to get my disc, what if I—”

James quieted her with an affectionate brush of his hand against her cheek. Then he pulled her into an embrace, and for the first time, felt something for her.

Lanie seemed to sense it, for when he looked to her, she quickly turned her gaze, rolling her eyes and smiling impishly. She let the moment hang for a while before clicking her tongue to get James's attention. "I'm just going to go out on a limb and suggest that you two don't really need me here anymore," she said with a smirk. "I'll start packing for Australia." She cocked her head to one side. "Say, what do you think a girl wears when she needs to just sort of *poke around* the Outback, anyway?"



## CHAPTER 20

### *Washington, DC*

The only emotion that matched the senator's exhilaration was the unease about his visitor. There he stood in the secret Washington briefing room known only to the Bosenberg Group, and his only company was the holographic projection of a seven-foot-tall insect of an alien that couldn't have weighed less than three hundred pounds. The physicality of the being who called himself Manti struck Senator Edwards as rather irrelevant, however, given that he was still only a hologram. Besides, anything this being could do to Edwards with his giant body, he could more than surpass with the power he wielded with his mind. Edwards had been on the wrong end of Manti's unpredictable wrath on more than one occasion, and he could only hope that the landing would go well so he could avoid facing it once more.

*The countdown is incorrect*, Manti said so suddenly that he startled Edwards—or rather, the alien projected the words directly into the senator's head.

"Is that so?" Edwards said, trying not to sound doubtful.

The alien turned his long, narrow head ever so slightly, enough to demonstrate his annoyance that the senator had forgotten again about how his company preferred to communicate telepathically, if not his annoyance that the puny human speaking to his hologram would dare to express doubt. *It is incorrect by nearly five full seconds*, the alien insisted.

Edwards shrugged, not wanting to provoke the creature's ire. He hoped that Manti couldn't read his revulsion about having to share this space with Manti's projection, and without the benefit of the company of another human being, no less. So he forced himself to think, *Our scientists are good, but they could never hope to match your mind. If you say it is incorrect by five seconds, then it is incorrect by five seconds.*

If this pleased the alien, he didn't show it. He merely kept those cold, black eyes trained on the screen. Senator Edwards watched the images flicker. From four different angles intercut with one another, the broadcast depicted the shuttle's final approach to Mars. The color and depth of the images was inspiring. The closer the shuttle came to its destination, the more the deep red of the planet dominated the screen.

Edwards had pondered the notion regularly for the past month, but he still couldn't wrap his mind around the concept of a man setting foot on Mars. And if Manti could be trusted, this would merely be the first small step in a startlingly rapid ascension toward mankind harnessing interstellar travel. The way the alien told it, so long as the Bosenberg Group continued to play ball and spread chaos on Earth, human beings would be exploring neighboring star systems inside a *year*. For an agency like NASA, that had spent its history thinking in terms of decades, the possibilities sowed endless speculation on what was now suddenly possible.

First, however, they would need proof of concept. NASA's top scientists had been blown away by the rocket propulsion technology delivered to them by the Bosenberg Group, which the group itself had secured from Manti in exchange for staging a minor terrorist attack in New York and another in Seattle, but none of them seemed completely convinced that the mechanism designed to slow the shuttle and land it safely would actually *work*.

Thirty seconds remained before touchdown, at least by the screen's apparently flawed countdown clock. Edwards felt like a kid again, excited and awed and afraid all at once. When the explosion rang out, his heart sank. But then the camera changed angles once more, and he saw that it had merely been the sound of the shuttle cracking at fantastic speed through what remained of Mars's thin atmosphere.

The next explosion Edwards was prepared for. This was the one the scientists had been dreading from the beginning—the one that meant the reverse thrusters had kicked in and would slow the craft with a force that many of them believed was too strong for the human body to endure. Manti had been insistent that it would work, and so then had the president. So NASA shrugged off the calculations, took the bravest volunteers from its

pool of trained astronauts, crossed its collective fingers, and fired the rocket.

Now it would all come to a head. Ten seconds remained, and the rocky ground below was still climbing toward the camera at an incredible rate. For three full seconds, Senator Edwards felt a macabre sort of smugness at the thought that six astronauts would die to prove Manti wrong. But then, at seven seconds, another explosion rang out, and the reverse rockets righted themselves, bringing the craft to an impossibly gentle touchdown on the surface of Mars, exactly five seconds sooner than expected.

Manti said nothing.

Edwards felt like screaming in celebration. Everything he had worked for his whole life—from college to amassing a fortune to successfully running for the Senate to jumping through the hoops necessary to get in with the Bosenbergs—had all led up to this moment. It was the moment he had been dreaming about since childhood, the moment when his fellow man would walk on the surface of another planet. There was a time when he had dreamed to be the man himself, but a right leg that was only a quarter inch shorter than his left killed that dream on the day he first tried to join the Navy ROTC. But now he could enjoy a thrill that was to him a close second, the knowledge that a man now walked on Mars, and he had been instrumental in getting him there.

His joy died half a heartbeat later. In the instant the bay doors opened on the shuttle, Edwards saw something approaching. It moved at such a wicked speed that he had no time to process what it could be before it was upon the shuttle. What he saw was something like a mass of light that moved almost as if it were liquid. In decades of observing Mars, NASA had never picked up anything even remotely like this. Quickly it enveloped the shuttle, and now it was succeeded by something else far easier to discern.

From the flashing camera angles, Edwards was forced to piece it all together in short spurts. The light appeared to have held the shuttle and its occupants in place as if frozen in time. Behind it rushed a horde of beings that looked stunningly human. The closer they got, the clearer it was that

they were far larger than the average human being, and they wore no armor to protect them from the harsh elements of Mars.

They were beautiful beings, in truth, manlike and womanlike creatures, gorgeous and terrible to behold, and they approached at distressing speed. When they reached the ship, they quickly proved their savagery. What had been six astronauts clad in full, bulky space suits were reduced to clouds of red, misty droplets of blood in an instant. It all happened so fast that Edwards still didn't quite know what he was seeing. He had gone from overjoyed to overwhelmed with horror in a matter of seconds, and his mind still needed time to catch up.

From out of the midst of the horde, there emerged a man with a perfectly bald head and a broad, strong chest. Unlike the others, who were dressed in formfitting, two-piece clothing, this one was nude from the waist up. He was the most beautiful among them, Edwards had to admit, but there was something strange about his face. He was so symmetrical and so flawless that he looked almost false. He drew awe in his beauty, but he also repulsed in his waxlike form. From the way the others looked to this man, it was clear without words that he led them.

The man turned and nodded for the gathering behind him to part. Through the alley they created, another group marched, pulling a train of huge container cars behind them. Each container was piled high with what was unmistakably gold ore. The sight confused Edwards almost as much as everything else he had seen up to this point. What would this army possibly need with gold?

As Edwards watched, trying to riddle it out, the beautiful leader turned and was wordlessly ordering his followers to tend to the gold. They formed lines and began taking pieces of the ore from the carts, passing them down the row and loading them into the Mars lander.

Edwards chanced a glance at Manti's hologram. The alien, for the first time since Edwards had met him, showed the slightest outward hint of emotion. His shoulders slumped gently, and his head hung low. As Edwards watched, he curled his spindly hands into long, bony fists.

"Manti?" Edwards said.

The alien ignored him, instead snapping his focus back to the screen as the leader on the other end of the broadcast approached one of the cameras.

*So you have seen*, the leader said, not through the camera, but directly into Edwards's mind, and he suspected into Manti's mind, as well.

*I have, Master Sar*, Manti said, and to Edwards, it sounded almost as if the alien was afraid.

*Then you know the truth of it. You know that I have what I need to restore my strengths. And you know that I am coming.* Then he smiled and spoke into the camera. "People of Earth, witness my wrath, and fear it. For in one week's time, it is coming for you."

With that, the cameras flickered and faded to black. Edwards's heart raced, and he suddenly felt like he couldn't keep his feet still. He paced to one end of the briefing room and back again, fiddling with his phone as he struggled to think about who he should call first. Everything that had just happened had been broadcast on every news network and key social media feed in the world. If a terrorist attack in New York and Seattle could spread such chaos for the past month, what would a murderous attack from an unidentified alien horde on the surface of Mars do to mankind's collective psyche?

Edwards's worst fears boiled to the surface as he pondered whether he should call his own president first, or one of the presidents from the more trigger-happy nuclear nations. And how would he work to prevent civilization from tearing itself apart from the ground up?

*Senator Edwards*, came the voice of Manti inside Edwards's head.

For as many years as the senator had known the alien, he had never heard Manti address him by his formal title. Hearing the salutation was strange enough to momentarily shock him out of his fear spiral. He looked to the alien, perplexed.

*I have been double-crossed*, Manti allowed—also the first time the alien had ever admitted to anything even bordering on fault. *It is time we change tack. You will call off the agents of chaos you have employed and begin preparing the people for the master's arrival in seven days.*

“Prepare them—” the senator began before remembering himself. *Prepare them how?*

*For war.*

*But . . .*, Edwards thought before his mind fell into a dizzying array of confusing thoughts. *But that man . . . Sar . . . he knew you.*

For the second time, the alien lowered his head. *He has known me since my birth.*

*But how can he—*

*I never wanted this*, Manti cut in, his tone making it clear that he was as angry with himself as anyone else. *I never believed the master would be able to return to Earth. I wanted only to rescue my brethren imprisoned here.*

The senator’s mind raced and his eyebrows raised. “Your brethren?”

Even through the holographic projection, it was clear that the alien was drained, exhausted. *That, Senator Edwards, is a story for another time. For now, prepare your people.* True to form, he was already setting up the sequence that would end the holographic transmission, apparently intending no parting words.

“Prepare them?” Edwards called out to the fading projection. “Prepare them how?”

*I do not know*, the alien allowed as his image flickered out. *I know only that in seven days’ time, we will go to war with one of the most powerful beings in the history of the known universe.*



## CHAPTER 21

### *Australian Outback*

There was no escaping how unlikely it all had been. Before she discovered her power, Lanie Montrose had fostered a habit of losing things so completely that she would just shrug and buy new things rather than look for what she had lost. She once misplaced the keys to her Maserati, and then sold the thing on Craigslist the next day, as was, no key included. The star-struck lucky buyer had shown up an hour later with a tow truck and a bewildered little smile the entire time it took Lanie to sign over the papers. The dealer delivered her replacement Mas, this one two model years newer, an hour after that.

But now, after having spent a quarter lifetime of blackbelt absentmindedness, Lanie Montrose had found a needle in a haystack with absolutely no effort at all. When first she had hatched this plan with James and Suki, none of them held any real hope that she would succeed in this mission. No matter how many times James had pored over the documentation he had taken from his mother's house or collected from his conspiracy cases over the years, and no matter where he shined those copper glasses of his, he could get no closer to revealing the mystery of the specific location of Lanie's disc. He could deduce only that it was in Australia, likely in the Outback with a tribe that called itself the Awalaraba. After touchdown in her private jet at Darwin International on the northern coast of a continent she had only visited on tour once, Lanie had managed to find a guide with enough grit to lead her.

The grit had been necessary because most of the guides she interviewed were too smarmy to look past her beauty or her fame to avoid coming on to her, and the rest had proven unwilling to take her into what she referred to as the "deeper, less mappy places" of the desert. The first one she interviewed hadn't been able to get past how it took her six tries just to pronounce the name of the obscure aboriginal tribe she was looking

for. But Charles had been game from the start, and he was old enough not to outwardly care about her curves, and Outback enough not to have any idea who she was. So she hired him on the spot, and they set out on horseback for the less mappy places.

She had ridden with him for only a day, eating the terrible meat stew he refused to name and suffering his old-man-Aussie jokes. Then, the moment they came to a red ridge that jutted up from the sandy grasslands like a spine from the back of the world itself, Lanie knew she didn't need old Chuck anymore.

"I can make it on my own from here," she'd told him. It took nearly an hour, and all the money and valuables she had carried with her, to convince him to check his grandfatherly affection and leave her well enough alone. He had insisted that she at least let him leave the horse he'd leant her, but she refused. "I have to do this on foot," she said, removing her shoes, which she gave to him because they were worth more than Chuck would ever believe. "Alone."

"Fine, then," he'd said as he climbed onto his horse, her shoes shoved into his pack with the rest of what they'd brought. "You mighta told me your plan was to come all the way out here to die. Woulda packed lighter if I'd known."

Lanie had chalked up his terseness to a misplaced sense of chivalry. "Nice!" she'd called after him as he turned the horses and headed down the path they'd just beaten into the sand. "When I'm done with this mission, I'll be sure to check in with you first so you can thank me!"

But by the time she finished, he'd gotten well out of earshot. And now she stood alone, facing the ridge along the horizon. She had known that this was her destination because she had seen it many times in her dreams. The moment she looked upon it, she could sense two things that perplexed her. First, she sensed that this was not the first time she had visited this place, even though she had no conscious memory of ever coming here before. And second, she felt certain that the first visit had somehow occurred centuries ago—as if they had happened to some distant, past-life version of herself. Since she had never really believed in past lives,

not even when Schmidt had supposedly drawn a past-life memory out of her, the whole thing felt entirely eerie.

This would not be the last time she would feel this way on the final leg of her journey. Indeed, an eeriness would hang over every barefoot step she took toward that bony red ridge.

When she had made it perhaps half a mile in its direction, the wind grew so still that it felt almost like the air had left this space. At first she found it difficult to breathe, but then slowly she acclimated to the stagnancy and started to feel almost euphorically lightheaded. Another quarter mile later, her feet burning from the rocky soil grating against them, all sound disappeared. The chattering of birds and rustling of the crawler creatures on the desert floor had been so constant that she hadn't much noticed them until it was gone. But now her surroundings were so still and so silent that her own breathing was loud enough to distract her from her thoughts.

The closer she came to the spine, the lower the sun drew near to the horizon. She had seen enough sunsets in her time to recognize that the sun was moving far faster toward the earth than was natural. Had the rest of her surroundings sped up to a similar degree, she might have had the thought that someone had hit the fast-forward button on the final hours of the day, but as it was, everything else seemed to move more deliberately, lending the feeling that she alone was somehow moving quicker through time. It was like the whole world had gone about its usual pace as only Lanie and the sun sped toward the spine.

When she reached the foot of the ridge, the sun disappeared behind it. In any other circumstance, Lanie might have expected the beauty of the sun's refracted light to play across the sky and the painted desert all around her, but at this dusk, she was unsurprised to find that the light utterly and instantaneously disappeared.

Now she stood in complete darkness at the base of the spine, slowing her breathing so she could listen through the stillness for some sign of what would come next. Out here in the middle of nowhere, she had no reason to believe that anything at all would come next, but somehow she knew that she had arrived at this place for a reason. She had seen it in

dreams a hundred times, and yet could not quite call the memory to her conscious mind. Something was coming. Or someone.

As she waited, the darkness intensified to where she could see nothing of her immediate surroundings, nothing of the clothes she wore, or even the hand she held before her face. But strangely, she could still see the ridge—that reddish backbone rippling up from the earth as the only thing visible against the ink-black sky.

With nothing else to see, she found herself concentrating all her attention on the ridge. Soon she discovered that the deeper she stared at the strange rock formation, the more her sight returned. Then she picked up her tender feet and began walking toward it, the light growing with every step until something like the glow of dawn hung over her.

It was when she came to within a hundred yards of the ridge that she saw him, the man from her dreams. She knew him even from his shadowy outline, for she had seen him many times before in her mind. Her heart quickened as she drew nearer to him. He stood no taller than her shoulders, but his wiry gray hair rose another six inches above his head in a loose, curling arc like a painter's brush. His skin was as dark as the predawn light, and leathery from decades of sun. The intensity of his gaze was broken only by the glint of kindness she saw in his eyes.

But what dominated her impression of him was the smile—a smile so broad that it seemed to bisect his face with a crescent of pristine white. Well, that and the bone he wore through the columella of his nose. It was thick in the center and sharpened to points on either end, and was yellowed to where she could sense its owner had worn it for years.

“Zalea,” he said.

In the instant he spoke the name, she remembered more than her mind could process at once. She had heard the name once before, of course, back in Schmidt's facility, but she had never really believed in its significance. Now, to hear this strange little man speak it, she knew. She *knew* that Zalea was her name—her true name, her earliest name—and that she had lived under many names for a very long time. She had led only one

life, but many identities. She also knew that this man before her had experienced the opposite: a single identity spread over many reincarnations.

“Apari,” she said, for at once she knew his name.

“I am Chief Apari in this life,” he said with that same broad smile. “But that is no matter. What matters is that my service has ended, for now you have come to this place on the day we need you most.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, trying desperately to parse through all the new information rocketing through her mind. It was as though her memories returned to her in a series of random colors, and she had to carefully arrange them into a mosaic of her long-forgotten life.

“Oh, but you do,” the aboriginal chief said, his voice a deep rumble. “You must simply wash away the darkness that has hung over you for centuries.”

Lanie sighed, overcome with the enormity of what he was asking of her. “But how do I do that? There’s just so *much* darkness.”

With that, Apari took a seat on the pebbly earth, crossing his legs in front of him and flattening his woven skirt over his thighs. His belly was round and perfectly smooth, Lanie noted as he rested his hands on it casually.

“You have come to hate yourself for the bad choices you made,” he said. “Your voice will return to you, but not until you abolish those feelings of hate and guilt and realize that this was your destiny. Love is the key.”

For a flickering instant, Lanie saw herself as a child, and remembered the time that she truly loved who she was.

“You need only to feel the pure love that you once knew,” Apari continued. “Zalea, you have long forgotten this, but you are a being of pure light. There is no darkness that can bind you.”

“But I’m—” Lanie started to say, her memories both real and ricocheting inside her skull.

“You are Zalea of the planet Xandon,” Apari finished for her. As he spoke the words, the ridge behind him came to light as if midday had suddenly struck.

Lanie stared at it in awe. She had been traveling in search of something very specific. The moment James's research had revealed the hint, Lanie had taken action on a plan she hadn't really thought through, and didn't really need to. She had followed this sense of certainty that her disc could be found in the Australian Outback. But now, with the warm light from the ridge shining on her face, she knew what she had truly come for. Tears reached her eyes as a sad smile came to her face.

"Yes," Apari said slowly. "You know what you must do."

Lanie was overwhelmed with the joy of finding what she had lost so many years ago. She could see her arrival here, could feel that beautiful sensation of descent, could recall the awe and wonder that had greeted her upon finding this beautiful place among the cosmos. It had been so lovely then—so pure, so untouched by the degradative tendencies of modern man. The tear spilled over her cheek as her smile widened.

But then she remembered him, and that warm feeling vanished.

"Ah, yes," Apari said. "He has a part to play in this. But you must not let him hold sway over you as he once did."

Doubt flashed in Lanie's mind. She could remember his face—so beautiful, so commanding—looking upon her tenderly. She hadn't just loved him all those centuries ago. She had adored him. Worshipped him, even, as so many thousands of his unwitting acolytes had worshipped him. She had given herself to him so completely that she nearly lost herself. Indeed, if the still-assembling mosaic of her memory was to be believed, she *had* lost herself as a result of their love. "How could I possibly do that?"

Chief Apari's laugh was deep, and despite it all, strangely infectious. "It is as simple as it has always been," he said. "You must *sing*."

Lanie lowered her head. "I don't know how."

"Of course you do."

She shot him a frustrated gaze. "Not like that. Not for a long time."

"You speak of the control that has been held over you for all this time." The aboriginal chief batted a hand at the air dismissively. "It is

nothing compared to the power of your voice.”

She shook her head as she stared down at her hands, which she realized she had been wringing in her lap, her legs tightly crossed as she sat in the dirt.

“Come on, Zalea,” Apari said with another of those infectious laughs. “Sing! It has been many years, but you have not forgotten how. You *cannot* forget how. It is not just a part of you. It *is* you. It is what brings you to that place in your soul where beauty and life are made.”

At Apari’s words, the roar of colors in her mind suddenly began to take shape, and now she could see that he was right. Her memories were clear, and so was the path to that place inside herself about which the chief spoke. It was beautiful, that place inside herself from where the music came. Even in her most lucid days as Lanie Montrose, she had never truly found this place. Really, she had only seen flashes of it in her most inspired turns as an artist. But now, here in this dark place at the base of the spine, she saw it clearly for the first time since mankind and their allies had sought to silence and hide her.

She took a quick, sharp breath and began to sing. The sound was at first familiar—a sound that millions could have heard on any one of her records—but then the sound rose and blended before fading into the most beautiful sound that any living thing on this planet had ever heard. It was her true voice.

Apari’s smile toppled into openmouthed awe as he listened. She trilled and intoned for him, a serenade so lovely that he began to cry. As his tears fell, the ground beneath them began to shake. Apari leapt to his feet and wheeled around to see what was happening.

At the sound of Lanie’s voice, the spine in the earth had begun to move. Its jagged ridges rumbled and advanced to the east before disappearing into the ground. Suddenly it looked not like a spine, but like the spokes of a rotating cog. The roar of the moving earth was so loud that it drowned out all other sound, save for Lanie’s voice. Her song continued, the words foreign to this place but not forgotten. Apari fell to his knees in

fear and awe of what he witnessed—of what he had spent dozens of lifetimes awaiting.

The ridge finished its rotation the moment her song had finished, and now a broad gap lay in the center of what used to be the spine. The sky had returned to its deep darkness, but out of that gap there shone a column of heavenly white light.

Rising from out of the light, she saw it. It had been so long that she had forgotten its simplicity. It was spherical and transparent, visible to her only because of the intense light through which it soared. Her heart pounded from the familiarity and the joy at reuniting with this beautiful object. She had nearly forgotten the sheer size of it, so when it reached her, she found herself stepping back so she could take it all in. It was a liquid-like bubble with a diameter of perhaps fifty feet, its soft pink hue glowing from the backlight of the column of sunshine still pouring up from the fissure in the ridge. This was the ship that had borne her here, not just centuries ago, but *millennia*. In its presence, the time seemed so insignificant—a mere blip in the timeline of what she had come to do and what she knew she must do next.

Lanie laughed as she reached out, her voice still projecting that familiar, nearly forgotten sound of absolute beauty. The moment her hand touched the surface of the ship, that mosaic of her memory took perfect shape, and she saw everything she had forgotten as if it was projected directly onto the fluid, pink walls of the ship. She recalled the day of her first descent to this heartbreakingly lovely place. She could see Earth, still unravaged by modernity. She could see her first sunrise on this planet, its orange-purple hue causing her heart to soar. She recalled that first breath of crisp, life-affirming air. Then she watched in her own memory as her younger self took flight once more, the vast ocean rocketing along beneath her ship, the morning sun climbing with improbable speed, its light glinting off the seemingly endless water.

Then she crossed a continent of varied and astonishingly beautiful landscapes, a place full of life, but dotted only occasionally by signs of civilization. At its far shores, another ocean awaited her, and by the time she crossed it, midday had come. That midday shone brightly over the next

continent, a place of such big skies and fertile plains that it took her breath away. Even if she hadn't seen it, she would have settled here. With her supernatural sight, she could see most of the continent in one glance, and what she saw were millions of intelligent beings of all ages toiling in the fields, all of them harvesting crops or erecting edifices or warring with other men and women and children. The blind aggression against the land and against each other looked at first like chaos, but then she found the center of it and realized that these beings operated with some sense of order and purpose.

Back then, she'd had no way to anticipate his arrival. Her ship was supposed to be invisible to all beings of this planet. But of course, he was no being of this planet. Yes, his mother had given birth to him on the banks of a flowing river on this very continent, but his father was not of this world. The old warrior king had come millennia before and had enslaved these people almost without effort.

Slavery was exactly what Lanie had seen when she first set eyes on this continent, and that sight had filled her heart with darkness. But all indignation melted away the moment he came to her. He was the most beautiful being she had ever seen. One look into his eyes made her feel connected to him on a level she had not known possible.

"Yes," Apari said, startling her from the ancient memory and returning her to the reality of the moment. "That was you, Zalea. And he is the reason for all this."

Lanie strained against her still-foggy memory, but found that no matter how she tried, she could not recall much beyond her first meeting with Sar. She knew that she had loved him, and could sense that something darker resided beneath the surface of this memory. Sar had enslaved those people, just as his father had tried to do so many centuries before him. And so she should have feared and hated him, the very embodiment of the power that ran counter to her people's purpose. That much she knew.

But there was something else there, just beyond what she could remember. There had been good in him. She hadn't merely projected it onto him out of the love he stirred in her, either. He was a being dedicated to darkness, but deep in his soul, the most brilliant light still shone.

“No,” Lanie said, bowing her head reverently to Apari. “There is more to Sar than the evil your people have seen. I need to find out more.”

“Do not be foolish, Zalea!” Apari said, sudden desperation lining his voice. “There is no changing him. You must not even try.”

The two of them locked eyes for a time, each assessing the other.

Finally, Lanie let go of a sigh. “You are right,” she said. “I will do what must be done.”

This seemed to satisfy Apari, who bowed low. “Go now. The ship will take you to what you seek.”

“Thank you, old friend,” she said, smiling warmly at the chief as she set her hand against the surface of her ship. Then, all at once, she was drawn inside the bubble and rising into the air.



## CHAPTER 22

### *Santa Monica, California*

Suki couldn't get over how terribly useless she felt. She wished that James, or even Lanie, were here to comfort her, but the former had remained behind in Scotland to await her signal, and the latter was flitting around the Australian Outback somewhere. Suki tried to laugh at the vision in her head of Lanie wandering through an unforgiving wilderness in a pair of Jimmy Choo heels, but she was too morose to truly indulge in the humor.

James had wanted to come along to LA with her, but Suki had insisted that she make the journey alone. For one thing, she didn't want to risk taking James out of a place where they knew from experience that his disc actually worked. She had no way of knowing this—and James's own research hadn't turned up anything definitive—but she suspected that there had to be a reason their ancestors decided to hide James's disc in Scotland.

“What if there's some kind of triangulation thing going on?” she had asked him as they debated whether James would accompany her to the States. “I mean, it makes sense. Maybe each disc has to be at or near a specific point on the globe in order to activate.”

James had debated the matter rather hotly, but on that point, he had to concede. “I guess that makes sense,” he had said. “I don't know about any specific location requirements, but there has to be a reason the Templars have kept the three discs so distant from one another over the years.”

“And the only time any of them were ever together,” Suki had reminded him, “things didn't go so well.”

“Not sure we can blame the discs for that exactly,” James had said with a chuckle. “I mean, hard to pass blame to anyone or anything else when Hitler's involved.”

In this way, they had agreed that Suki would travel alone to LA while James remained behind to await some signal from Lanie that it was time to trigger their discs. When she'd left him in that cabin with his uncle Simon, Suki had told herself that the relief she felt had everything to do with their mission and nothing to do with the spark for James suddenly flickering in her heart. That spark had confused her from the moment she first felt it, and she'd believed that maybe putting a little space between them would be a good thing. They didn't have time to think about romance right now—at least not until their mission was at an end.

But now she was regretting everything about that decision, if only because James would know exactly how to comfort her. She felt hopelessly lost, painfully ill-equipped for what she had come to do, and furious with herself for always wanting to go everything alone.

Her efforts to free the disc from the grandfather clock had been a disaster from the moment she first boarded the plane. She was still operating under the assumption that James had only managed to free his disc because the trio had worked together to remove the chip from his head. But Suki had never managed to turn that effort inward on her own chip, and with Lanie in the Outback and time running short on the mission, she would just have to figure out how to overcome the problem on her own.

She had started the effort as soon as she was alone and in a place where she could focus. All through the flight, she had tried to meditate on the chip still embedded in her head, but riding in coach had proven far too distracting. The cab ride from the airport hadn't been any better, because even with Deveraux out of the picture, she was still so paranoid about shadowy organizations following her. She's spent the first half a day in her office periodically peering through the blinds on her windows, looking for black sedans that never came.

This was how, after twelve jet-lagged hours since her landing at LAX, she stood alone in her office, having made no progress on the matters of her chip or the disc taunting her from that infernal Nazi clock. James's frequent calls and text messages hadn't helped her concentration, so now she sent him a text message letting him know that she had arrived safely and politely asking him to let her focus on the task at hand.

For the next several hours, she poured herself into the work, not bothering to rest for even a moment as she concentrated all her energy on the foreign object inside her head. When it became clear that she was far too keyed up to handle this task on her own, she started staring at the grandfather clock, the fear getting the better of her. Every time she thought she had worked up the courage, she would picture her grandfather sitting at his desk, that flash of light ending his life.

Six more times on that first day home, she would pump herself up to make a run at the clock, and six more times she would talk herself out of it. With each passing failure, she wanted to call James to ask for his advice—or really, just to hear the sound of his voice—but the shame would always stay her hand. She just felt like such a failure. James had already held up his end of the mission, and Lanie was charging bravely into the unknown. But there Suki sat, too afraid to touch a stupid old clock.

It was that thought that had driven her to another five sleepless hours of sitting cross-legged and trying to untie the knots around her chip without the help of her friends. That effort had proven just as fruitless, and so now she sat on the couch, digging in to the batch of deliciously comforting mozzarella sticks she had just microwaved as she stared at the television.

For days, the stories had all been the same. They alternated between the chaos that continued to rage in some parts of the Middle East, Europe, and the US following the attack in New York, the mystery surrounding what exactly had happened to cut off the broadcast of the Mars landing, and a strange phenomenon spreading across the globe. To the media and every scientist or social observer they brought on the air, explanations for why people seemed to be awakening to new powers were fleeting.

Suki, however, knew exactly what was happening. It was the same thing that had happened to her, and to her friends. She still didn't know why she possessed these new abilities—or why there were people the world over who could suddenly heal themselves and others, levitate, or even control the elements—but she did know that there was a reason for it. Her current working theory was that these abilities had kept dormant in the human genetic code for centuries, ready to trigger at the moment humankind

needed them most. With all the chaos breaking out on all corners of the globe, and with what looked to have been an alien attack on the Mars shuttle, that moment appeared to be at hand.

All humanity needed now was a trio of leaders to guide them in the fight that was sure to come.

“And here you are,” Suki said bitterly, “sitting on the couch, eating cheese.”

The sentiment reenergized her exhausted mind and body. She stood and returned to the grandfather clock, more determined than ever to free the disc. “There has to be something I’m not considering,” she told herself.

For another hour, she stared, wanting desperately to just give up. But then she heard the breaking news siren on the television.

She wheeled around to see that the network had switched to a live feed of what looked like a calm blue sky. The banner across the bottom of the screen read *El Giza, Egypt*. All Suki could see was that sky, and there was no sound on the broadcast at first, but then the reporter’s microphone kicked in, and he started screaming about the noise.

“I hope you can see what I’m seeing,” he was saying frantically. “But if you can’t hear it, I really can’t explain how loud it is. I can’t hear anything in my earpiece. I can’t even hear myself speak. Guys, if you’re picking me up at the desk, it’s absolute pandemonium here.”

Suki’s jaw dropped when the camera finally steadied on what the reporter was talking about. Indeed, she couldn’t hear the explosions, but she could certainly see them. Against a clear blue sky, dozens of red-orange bursts rippled outward and joined together, forming what looked like rivers of fire trickling over the atmosphere. It looked terrifyingly as if the sky was tearing apart. But then as Suki watched the unsteady camera feed, she noticed something. Whenever there was a lull in the firestorm flickering through the sky, she could see a massive black rectangle positioned at the center. Her first thought was that this was some kind of alien spacecraft, and it was attacking Earth from space.

But if that were the case, why in the world did the explosions seem to be happening *outside* the atmosphere? It was almost as if some

translucent barrier was keeping the attack at bay.

The reporter seemed to pick up on this thought at the same moment. “I can’t fathom what it is that we’re seeing,” he said, “but I have to say, it certainly looks like something is attacking this planet.”

“I’m sorry,” the anchor’s voice chimed in from offscreen. “Can you repeat that, Ari? Did you say we’re under attack?”

The reporter named Ari couldn’t seem to hear the anchor through his earpiece, because he just kept rambling on about what he was seeing.

When the explosions intensified, all hell broke loose on the video feed. Ari began shouting unintelligibly, and the camera became even less steady. Then finally it settled on ground level, and Suki saw what had so terrified the reporter. A mass of people had gathered, all of them staring up into the sky, all of them projecting various bursts of energy and light at the source of whatever was causing the explosions. Suki couldn’t quite make out who these people were or where they had come from, but seeing them gathered together to defend their planet filled her heart with hope.

*It’s the awakening, Suki suddenly realized. People are fighting back.*

Her heart began to race as this all settled in for her. She knew now that she couldn’t waste any more time. It appeared that everyone who had woken to these new abilities had joined together in defense of a planet under attack. Everyone save for her. How could she let her fear of a stupid grandfather clock keep her from doing what she’d been born to do?

So driven, she stalked back into her office where, without hesitation, she reached for the clock’s face, her fingers sparking with a familiar electric charge the closer she came to touching it. Then, the moment her fingertips landed, a surge of energy sparked through her, and she felt herself falling.

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James was there with her, just as he had always been. She longed to reach out and take him into her arms, but in the next instant, she realized that this was a dream. This place was familiar. She had been here many times before in dreams. All her life, she had been confused by this dream, but for the first time, she understood. She knew why she dreamt of this

place, and she knew why James was always there. This place that looked like Earth but was not exactly Earth wasn't merely a dreamscape. This place truly existed. She had spent many years here, long ago. And for the first time, she recalled its name.

"Xandon," she whispered, that joyful sensation of returning home from a long journey warming her from the inside.

On the back of that feeling, little wisps of truth began to emerge from the fog of her subconscious. Her name was not Suki Carter, she remembered—at least not originally—and Suki Carter had not been her only name during the many lives she had led on Earth. This place about which she now dreamed, this place had been her launching point.

"Soon we will join our brethren in the search for Zalea," came the voice.

With a smile, Suki turned to see James—or at least that's what he was calling himself in this lifetime. She couldn't recall his true name, but she did know that she adored him. She loved him more than she loved herself, in truth. If she could tell him that now, she would, but in this dream, she couldn't seem to draw the breath to speak. Instead, she watched as the man known as James came to her and set his hand on her cheek. She could feel the warmth of his touch, and his breath on her cheek.

"When the time comes," he said, "we need only remember our love."

At the words, Suki's heart began to race so quickly that she feared it might burst. And it was that feeling that carried her back to the waking world.

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In the moment when Suki's eyes fluttered open, she forgot everything of the dream, save for the certainty about what she had to do. The secret to freeing her disc had nothing to do with focusing her mind. She needed only to focus her heart. She couldn't remember *how*. It had been so long since she had relied on her heart to lead her, after all.

Uncovering the answer proved simple. She needed only to allow herself to accept her love for James. When she let down the barriers to her feelings for him, she could see everything more clearly. Her love for him filled her with a warmth unlike anything she had ever experienced before, and with that warmth came courage. The chip in her head didn't matter. Her power didn't matter. All that mattered was the love that had freed her.

When she stepped toward the clock this time, she did so without fear. And without fear, she reached out, broke through the electric charge, and swung open the clock's ornate face. She smiled at what she saw. There, buried among the gears, was a disc very much like the one James had found, except that while his glowed with a bluish hue, hers was decidedly green. The instant she extracted it, she felt whole. And in the next instant, she was ready to do what she needed to do.

She knew that James had his disc, and suddenly she was certain that Lanie would succeed in finding hers, as well. It had been prophesied—fated for centuries. Two of the three discs had been returned to their rightful owners, and the third would soon follow. She could feel it as clearly as her own heartbeat.

And as the television roared through the confusion of what was happening in Egypt, Suki knew exactly what she had to do.

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## *Scottish Highlands*

It had been three days since the women had left him, and James had spent basically every waking hour of that time pacing around anxiously, waiting for someone to call. He knew Lanie well enough to recognize that she wasn't likely to check in—particularly given the fact that her journey would be taking her deep into the wilderness and far beyond the range of any cell phones—but he had expected Suki to keep him updated on her mission. Suki had sent the one text to let him know that she had arrived in LA, but after that, no call came. And no matter how many times he called or texted her, she never replied. So James had spent those three days fearing the worst.

Of course it didn't help that the news in the interim had been confusing and generally grim. A strange sort of darkness seemed to be descending over the planet, and millions of people were waking to new abilities. This sudden emergence of millions of superhumans only seemed to stoke further fear across the planet.

Then, one day the sky itself started to explode.

It was all James could do to hold it together as he stood beside his uncle Simon, staring at the fire washing across the southern horizon. Just like everyone else, he didn't know what was causing it, but he could feel in his heart that this was the event for which his mother had spent her life trying to prepare him.

"What do I do?" he asked as he watched explosion after explosion crackle into whatever barrier was protecting the planet from the onslaught.

Uncle Simon sighed. "Your mother would've known, but I'm afraid I won't be of much use on this one."

Anger surged in James's mind. "I can't just stand here and wait. I have to do something."

Just when James turned back toward the cottage with a mind to take up his disc and see where it sent him, Uncle Simon gasped. James stopped and looked to his uncle, whose face had gone ashen. The old man was staring at something happening off to the west. James turned to follow his line of sight, his heart leaping when he spotted it. The western horizon was lit in a comforting blue glow. James had seen that same hue before—it was the color that Suki's power had assumed during their telepathic efforts to disable their chips.

"She did it," James said.

"Aye," Uncle Simon agreed. "And now you must join her."

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*Antarctica*

Lanie's memories were still not complete enough to recall exactly how to pilot this strange, bubble-like ship, so she was glad to see that it seemed to know exactly where to go. She stood in the center of the transparent sphere, the world below rocketing past her. Whether she was invisible or traveling too fast for anyone on the whole of the Australian continent to notice, she couldn't be sure, but she did have the sense that she couldn't be seen. This left her to guess at where the ship was taking her, and also to watch the sky in fear as the explosions met their mark.

"Sar," she whispered, shivering at the sound of his name.

In what felt like a matter of seconds, she had crossed the continent and was gliding at great speed over the Pacific. She had never needed to develop a sense for nautical direction, but from the setting sun, she knew which way was west. So, after quickly humming a song she'd picked up somewhere about how to calculate north and south based on the sunset, she realized that she must be heading south.

This was the only clue about her direction that she would receive for several more minutes, as she traveled what seemed like hundreds of miles of open ocean. But then, with the explosions rippling overhead and combining with the setting sun to provide just enough light, she spotted something on what she was calling the southern horizon.

The closer her ship came, the larger it grew, until she realized from the size of it that this could only be Antarctica. She suddenly knew a moment of worry that she wasn't even wearing shoes, let alone a single stitch of clothing that would keep the harsh elements at bay while she searched for her disc. But then those worries evaporated when she saw it.

There in the distance was an icy mountain, and as her ship rose, she could see that its peak wasn't a solid mass. Rather, there was a barely perceptible gash on its southern edge, and from that gap poured a soft pink light that comforted her. She knew immediately that this was where her ship was bearing her, and though she had no conscious knowledge of this place, she could sense that her scant attire would not be a problem.

Her ship reached the base of the mountain and began its ascent. In a flash, they had reached the top and were plunging down into the fissure at

its peak. Her heart leapt as the pink glow enveloped the ship and they descended toward its source. Then she gasped at what she saw. There in the center of this mountain was a giant pyramidal structure that looked like a cross between an exoplanet base from a sci-fi movie and the poshest castle of some Disney princess.

Quickly her ship descended onto a landing pad just outside the oddly familiar structure.

“Thank you,” she said to the ship.

The moment the words escaped her lips, she found herself standing outside the bubble, her aching bare feet soothed by the gentle warmth emanating from the landing pad. She had a feeling that she knew what would come next, even though her conscious mind protested the idea. She had never been here before. The whole affair was alien in nature.

*I mean, c'mon, Lanie, she thought. You're standing in front of a weird pyramid in the center of a mountain in Antarctica. How could you have ever been here before?*

But then she reminded herself of all she had seen and experienced since she'd left her friends in Scotland. She had known Apari well, despite never having thought about him so long as she could remember. In the visions she'd had in the Outback, she had learned that her name was not truly Lanie, and that indeed she had been walking this earth in some form or another for *thousands* of years. Unless she'd lost her mind completely, and this was all just some intricate hallucination or intense, prolonged drug trip, she had no business questioning what she had or hadn't done. Everything that had happened since her check-in at Schmidt's clinic pointed to something much bigger than her, and now she stood right at the center of it all.

It was at that moment that the others chose to make their appearance. Nothing could have prepared her to accept the sheer radiance of them, but seeing them caused any remaining trepidation to leave her in an instant.

There were three of them, and they were tall and slender, their faces human and yet not entirely so. They dressed in long, light robes that were at

once formfitting and flowing, and they walked with an almost heartbreaking level of grace. Lanie had never seen anything or anyone so beautiful.

“And so you have come back to us, Zalea,” one of them said, the voice gentle in its masculinity. This one was the tallest of them, his lovely face perhaps the most aged. To hear him speak sparked a memory to rise from the fog.

“Om,” Lanie said, unsure how she could possibly know this being’s name. But now that she had spoken, she knew the names of the others, too. The one with the lighter hair and the curvier, more feminine form was called Cietra, and the shorter, broader-shouldered one with the proud brow was Acharo. “Been a while.”

The laughter from her hosts was musical.

“That is perhaps an understatement, old friend,” Om said, his gorgeous smile fading. “Even by our own standards of time.”

“We have been searching for you for millennia,” Cietra said, something of a sisterly relief apparent in her voice.

“In the end, we might have known that we needed only to wait for you to come to *us*,” Acharo said wryly. “That always was your way.”

Lanie couldn’t recall any memories that might have confirmed Acharo’s claim, but she had to admit that it did sound like her—no matter what “her” meant, in terms of her true identity, these days. “You sent them for me,” she said, a sudden joy bubbling to her face in the form of an uncontrollable smile. “Suki and James. They were meant to find me.”

Om gave a single nod. “They have taken many forms and endured many lifetimes in their search.”

“All the while, we have remained here,” Cietra said. “Tending the light.”

“And your disc,” Acharo added.

Mention of the disc caused Lanie’s breath to catch in her throat. “May I see it?” she managed.

“Of course,” Om said, turning gracefully along with the others to lead her toward the pyramid.

They entered through a tall door black as obsidian and decorated with intricate golden inlays. The room just beyond the door was simple in shape but vast in scope. It was a massive, rectangular room with almost nothing inside. Passageways opened here and there on the two longer sides of it, but there were no doors on the far end. There, all that stood was a single, triangular block of ice. Given that the temperature of the room was quite comfortable even in bare feet, Lanie could only guess at how her hosts had been keeping this ice solid for as long as they had claimed to be searching for her.

But its solidity was not the most interesting thing about this triangle of ice. Rather, what captivated Lanie was to learn that this was the source of the pink glow she had seen upon first entering the mountain. The radiance was at its most intense at the center of the triangle, growing softer and less brilliant the farther it projected into the air. The light seemed to fill the room like mist, and now she could see how it escaped the pyramid through a small, square gap at its apex.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said as they approached.

“It has been waiting for you,” Om offered.

Only when they reached the ice could Lanie see the source of the glow. She knew what it would be, and yet it still awed her to look upon it. It was her disc, shining in the ice in a breathtaking pink.

“After all this time,” Cietra said, gesturing toward the gap in the ceiling as if to remind Lanie about what was happening just outside Earth’s atmosphere, “the timing of your return is fortuitous.”

“Yes, not a moment too soon,” Acharo said, sounding rather miffed.

Then they all paused as if waiting for Lanie to act. She looked to each of them in turn for some clue about what she was supposed to do. When they returned her gaze with blank expressions, she shrugged. “So, um,” she said, trailing off. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Your friends are in possession of their discs,” Om said at once.

“Oh,” Lanie said flatly. “Good.”

“Their discs control the shields preventing evil from penetrating the atmosphere,” Cietra explained.

“Our enemy circumvented the outer shield when he seized the human spacecraft on Mars,” Acharo said in clear frustration. “And the inner shield will not take much more damage from his armada before it fails.”

“So, um,” Lanie repeated, trailing off again. “What am I supposed to do?”

The humor was not lost on Om, who smiled in a fatherly way. “Before we found you, we had little hope. Your friends’ discs control the shields that protect this planet, but your disc is the only one with the power to banish evil from the galaxy.”

Another uncomfortable silence followed as Lanie’s company stared at her expectantly.

“So, um,” she said finally. “Why don’t you guys just go out there and stop him? Why this elaborate mission with these discs?”

The trio seemed to smile.

“It is forbidden to interfere with human destiny,” Om said.

“Humans must figure out what to do on their own,” Cietra said.

Lanie huffed through her frustration as she pondered the situation. “So how do I get my disc?” she asked finally.

Om bowed his head. “You need only speak the name.”

Lanie feared that she had no idea what that name might be, but then, a heartbeat later, she knew. “Sar,” she said, the name causing her heart to flutter.

The moment she spoke the name, the ice began to melt. The process was slow at first—just some perspiration appearing on the surfaces of the triangular structure. But then the sweat beaded into streams, and the streams became rivers as the disc’s prison melted away. At this rate, in less than a minute, Lanie would be holding the very thing she had crossed the planet to find.

“You must be careful,” Cietra said in a friendly tone. “We have seen how the evil one holds sway over your heart.”

For the first time, Lanie was able to tear her gaze away from the melting ice. She held her old friend’s gaze and tried to look reassuringly confident.

“Your love for him could end this planet,” Acharo said, sounding slightly less friendly.

Lanie furrowed her brow as she looked to him. “I don’t remember much about my past,” she said, “but I do remember *that*.” Despite the resilience she projected, Lanie felt terrified at the thought that the fate of this planet rested squarely in her hands. *Or rather, in your heart*, she thought grimly.

“Our only hope is that it is not too late,” Om said. “You must work quickly before the evil one breaches the final shield and enters the atmosphere.”

“If he succeeds in his efforts . . . ,” Cietra started to say before she seemed to lose the desire to finish the thought.

“He will not merely enslave the people this time,” Acharo finished for her. “He has spent centuries working himself into a rage. If he breaches that shield, he will torture every living being on this planet. He will destroy everything that we have worked so hard to protect.”

Lanie pursed her lips and stared at Acharo for a moment. “Thanks for the pep talk, Achie,” she said, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cietra stifle a laugh. “I have no intention to get friendly with Sar again. You’re forgetting that my purpose runs far deeper than any love for him ever could.”

“So you say,” Acharo said.

“And what is that purpose?” Om asked.

“To save these people from him,” Lanie said.

At that moment, the last of the ice fell away, leaving the disc to rest on the obsidian pedestal once buried at the base of the triangle. Lanie didn’t

hesitate to reach out and grab it. The moment she did, she was enveloped in a blinding pink light.



## CHAPTER 23

### *Washington, DC—the Pentagon*

James's first thought when he opened his eyes again was that he would be glad to leave this form of travel well enough behind him. As it turned out, instantaneously transporting from one part of the world to an entirely different part was more than a little disorienting. So, when at first he noted that his surroundings were swirling, he chalked it up to dizziness and nausea.

But then it didn't stop. All he could see was a blur of darkness interrupted only intermittently by a single swirling light. He dropped to his knees so violently that he lost his grip on the disc he carried. Only when he lunged to grab it and started clasping it in both hands did the spinning begin to slow. He found that if he looked down at the floor and clutched the disc, the effect began to wear off.

It was then that he first sensed that he wasn't alone in the room. He heard the footsteps before he saw who they belonged to, and braced himself when they quickened their pace. The spinning finally came to a stop just when the footsteps were close enough to sound like hammers against the concrete floor. When finally he was able to look up, she was already upon him.

He saw only a flash of her before he felt himself jerked to his feet by an incredible force. The disc was warm in his hand as he struggled to get his feet under him, but then he realized that he was suspended in the air somehow, his feet hovering several inches above the floor. As he struggled, he avoided looking at his captor, for he feared what might happen if he gazed into her eyes.

"Together at last, my darling," she said, her voice every bit as seductive as he remembered.

“You took something from me,” he replied, the words coming slowly as he found that it was a challenge to move any of his muscles, including the ones that drove speech. “And then you made me forget you.”

When she didn't reply, he finally allowed himself to look at her. She was as gorgeous as he remembered, but something fundamental had changed. She still had that delicate neck, those long limbs, that slender waist, and her outrageous curves stood in silhouette against the lone light in the familiar basement room of the Pentagon. Her physical presence was such that his instinct was to want her, even though he loathed her, even though he knew the truth about who she really was. The last time he had visited this room, he had watched her perform acts on unconscious human captives, acts too chilling to recall. And as he looked on her now, he noted that her face was lovely to behold, but somehow unnatural—almost plastic—and she seemed incapable of meeting his gaze.

The notion emboldened him, making him feel far more in control of the situation than any man held six inches off the floor by some kind of telekinetic force had any right to feel. “The only thing I can't figure is your end game,” he said. “What is it you want, Christina?”

Her laugh was oddly guttural and unsettling. As it faded, she finally returned his gaze, but then she turned away from it once more. In the moment he had seen those eyes, he had noted a change in them. The first time he'd looked upon them, he had been struck by how full of confidence and passion and *sex* they had been. Now they reminded him of a shark's eyes: cold and lifeless.

“After all your discoveries and all your research,” she said, looking at the floor, “you still don't know my true name.”

With the way she kept her eyes averted, James suddenly felt in control. His first, overly macho, thought was that by sleeping with him, she had somehow lost some of her power over him, but then he realized that his sexual prowess had nothing to do with it. It was the disc he carried. She couldn't seem to look at it.

Then he knew. *She fears it.* The moment he squeezed the disc, he dropped from her levitating hold, his feet clapping against the floor. The

amusement left her plastic face when he showed her what he held.

“Why don’t you tell me, then?” he said confidently as she backed away from him. “What is your name?”

She continued backing away as he approached her, and with each step, she looked more like she was cowering. “I have gone by many names,” she said.

“What is your true name?”

Now she had reached the far end of the cavernous room, her narrow shoulders slamming against the concrete wall. “No,” she said defiantly. “You aren’t worthy to know.”

“Tell me,” he demanded, holding the disc up to her face.

She shrank away from him. “Corin,” she said, shivering. “My name is Corin.”

At that moment, the room began to quake, the ground beneath James’s feet rumbling. First he thought this was some trick of the temptress before him, but then he heard the explosion from somewhere overhead. It was a deep, raucous boom that seemed to shake not just the building, but the planet itself. In the confusion, James felt a strike against his hand, and before he could react, he saw Corin’s hand clasping his wrist, and watched in desperation as the disc fell away. It clattered against the floor before skittering away into a corner of the room so dark that James lost sight of it. He took a running step in its direction, but then halted, held fast by Corin’s power once more.

“That explosion you just heard,” she said triumphantly, “I have experienced it before.” She looked almost giddy as she beamed. “It means that Sar, my dearest love, has returned to the place he once ruled.”

Given that they were buried in a bunker somewhere below the Pentagon, James had no way to verify that this was true, but the name Corin spoke stirred in him a visceral sort of terror. He knew that his only hope against the one called Sar rested in the corner of this room, but standing in his way was a woman with power far beyond anything he had ever seen before, or could ever hope to overcome.

He suddenly heard himself wishing for a quick death—anything but the agony he had witnessed on the operating table looming just to Corin’s right.

As if she could read his fears, she cast a furtive glance at the table, her dead eyes coming to light for the first time. “That’s a good idea,” she said.

She didn’t hesitate in stalking toward the table. James’s feet floated above the floor after her as she moved. He had never felt so helpless as he did while watching her spool up the machinery surrounding the table.

Then, just as he was about to lose what remained of his hope, another explosion erupted, this one far more violent than the first. As the ground shook, James could hear the concrete cracking all around them, the bones of the building starting to break. The aftershock was so powerful that it brought the far wall toppling down, cold earth spilling into the foundation and sending Corin off-balance. The moment she fell, thousands of pounds of soil swallowing her, James was freed from her hold. He wasted no time in sprinting for the corner where he had last seen the disc.

There, all he found was darkness. But then, as his eyes adjusted, he could just make out its faint green glow. He snatched it up quickly, then wheeled around to check on Corin. He saw no sign of her, the foundation still collapsing all around where she had stood. He knew better than to assume she was dead, but he didn’t want to wait around to find out, as he could hear the walls buckling, threatening to collapse over him.

He found the exit adjacent to the ruined wall, and hurried up the buckling stairs toward a light pouring in from above. A moment later, he was pushing through a security door into a place he recognized well. It was the parking garage beneath the Pentagon, where he had parked more times than he could count.

His bearings collected, he ran for the exit ramp as fast as his feet could carry him, stone and dust and rebar tumbling from the structure above him. Outside, night had fallen, but there was plenty of light from the fires raging in the sky to the east.

James looked in horror to see that Corin had been right. Sar had finally broken through the barrier that had been holding him back, and now it was clear that he had arrived with an armada. From where he stood, James could see the pulses of fire rocketing out from all directions, but was surprised to see something else, as well. From beneath the slowly descending fleet, there glowed a familiar blue light.

“Suki,” he breathed, and in that instant, he knew he had to help her.

From his breast pocket, he produced the copper glasses. He slid them on and could suddenly see beyond the reality he knew. In all directions, chaos raged, but through these glasses, he could see exactly where he needed to go. It was just like the numerous drawings from FDR’s journal and elsewhere. Glowing all around him was the five-sided structure that was the Pentagon. Then, at the very center, and just below his feet, was the chamber where he knew he must go. The connection hit him suddenly and sent him running back toward the building from which he had just escaped.

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## *Egypt*

It took only a moment for Suki to orient herself to where she stood. In any other circumstance, a journey like the one she had just taken might have thrown her bearings into disarray, but there was no mistaking this particular spot. She stood at the base of a smooth, flat pyramid that, despite the close perspective, she recognized immediately as the Great Pyramid of Giza. She had just been watching this same location on the news, and now her disc had delivered her to the one spot where she was needed most.

All around her, a golden, mist-like light rose toward the sky. She looked back to see that it was coming from the gathering of people she had seen on the television in her office, half a world away. Inwardly, she gasped at the sheer number of them. She had believed that there were only a few hundred, but now she could see that tens of thousands had gathered, and they were all projecting that beautiful energy into the sky.

Her gaze followed that energy upward, where it met with the underside of a truly massive array of alien spacecraft. There were hundreds of them all clustered around the giant black rectangular ship at their center. The crowd below seemed to be concentrating the majority of the golden light on this ship, and the effort appeared to be slowing the armada's descent. But Suki could tell that it was only a matter of time before the enemy broke through.

The sense that had driven her to open her grandfather's clock had gotten her here, but now that she was in the presence of all that beautiful, comforting light, she had no idea what to do. She wished again that James were here, a thought that caused the disc to glow in her hand.

She smiled. All this time, she'd been searching for the answer, and she'd known it all along.

In a flash, she pressed the disc to her chest, its power coursing through her. And now she could see where she had to go. Where before the base of the pyramid had seemed flat and unbroken, now there appeared a blue glow in the shape of a doorway. Carefully she stepped toward the glow, and right through what otherwise looked like a solid stone wall. Inside was mostly darkness, save for that same blue glow leading her straight ahead on a path she could not otherwise see. Following this glow, she weaved and wended her way through a complicated path of dark, dank hallways, chillingly small chambers opening up on either side from time to time.

Finally she came to a wall at the end of the path, and there another blue, glowing passage opened to her where there had been none. Beyond was a secret chamber ornate enough to have belonged to Nefertiti herself. Along the far wall was a golden crown with sharp spires tipped with jade. At the center of the crown was an empty space exactly the size and shape of Suki's disc.

Carefully she reached out and set her disc in the groove. In a flash, a beam of blue light shot straight upward, passing through the ceiling of the cubical chamber. As the light warmed through it, the ceiling seemed to disappear, and with it, every inch of stone in the massive pyramid above Suki. She could sense that the pyramid still remained, but now she could

see through it somehow, her gaze following the light on its powerful journey toward the heavens.

She watched in awe as the blue energy wafting up from the collection of people outside the pyramid began to direct itself toward her, as if the disc were drawing it in.

As the light poured into her heart, she felt an overwhelming sense of love—for James, for Lanie, for everyone gathered here, for everyone on the planet, and last of all, for herself. She had never known a sensation of the like, but it gave her such joy that she knew she could happily die, right now, right here in the center of this pyramid, if it meant saving her planet.

The thought filled her with such love that she knew she couldn't hope to contain it. And so she closed her eyes and turned her face toward the sky. The moment she opened her eyes again, she found that she was standing not in the center of the pyramid, but rather, at its apex. Somehow the light had transported her here, as if this was the spot she was needed most. She felt the love rushing out through the gathering in a beam of searing blue light. The sounds of the explosions and of the crowd below her went out, and all was silent.

The next thing she knew, she was falling. She felt her shoulder strike something hard, and then she rolled violently and at great speed until she smashed like a rag doll into cold, hard ground. Next came darkness, but only for a moment. When it pulled back, she saw that she was surrounded by the crowd. Her sense for sound returned next, and now she could hear that they were cheering.

Two men she'd never met helped her gingerly to her feet and began pointing and jabbering gleefully at her in a language she didn't understand. Eventually she pieced together what had happened. The armada no longer hovered above them. The power that she had channeled through her disc had been enough to banish it from the planet, and in the exhaustion following the effort, Suki had tumbled down the side of the pyramid. Looking up at the structure now, she couldn't fathom how she had survived the fall.

She knew only the gratitude of the thousands that swarmed around her, and the joy of having fulfilled her destiny.

But the joy was short-lived. Just as before, the explosions began to rock the earth from above, only now they seemed to be targeting something else. Where before the fire had been concentrated on a single point of the atmosphere, now it was erupting in little bursts from horizon to horizon. To Suki's eye, it looked almost like the enemy's armada had turned its sights on the thousands of satellites circling the earth. One after another, the alien ship exploded every working object in orbit.

The celebration suddenly turned to panic. Reflexively Suki reached for her chest, intending to gather her disc for another assault, but she found that it had shattered.

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## *Washington, DC—the Pentagon*

James had cheered at the moment he saw Sar's fleet rocketed beyond the atmosphere. And as he watched the sky repair itself and the blue barrier of Suki's shield return to encompass the planet, he allowed himself to believe that the battle was won and the war was ended.

But then the explosions began once more, their vastness and intensity beyond anything James could have imagined. At first, he believed that the enemy had mounted a new attack on the shield, but as the explosions rippled in the sky like popcorn popping, he realized what was happening. Sar was targeting satellites.

His suspicions were confirmed when, after one such strike, his cell phone lost service. Then, in the next, the lights went out in the Pentagon. Now he was standing alone in the courtyard at the center of an iconic American building, wreathed in darkness, the enemy attacking from above and his purpose suddenly clear.

With a deep breath, he clutched his disc and slid the glasses onto his face once more. But in the instant before he could seek out his path, he was struck from behind and felt himself toppling to the ground. The disc

clattered from his hand for only a moment, but it was enough for Corin to get the drop on him. He froze as he was reaching for the disc, and once more, he was brought to heel and made to float just above the ground.

He cursed under his breath.

Her smugness had left her, at least. Where before she had seemed so confident, so beautiful, now she looked shaken, and the dirt from her temporary grave still clung to every inch of her. She was monstrous now, half her plastic face having sloughed away and the other half soiled beyond recognition. But her eyes still glinted with death, and her teeth still flashed white as she spoke.

“Your friend only served to delay him!” she screeched. “But this pathetic resistance ends now.”

A groan escaped James’s lungs as a great weight began pressing in on him from all sides. He couldn’t see what was crushing him, but he could feel it—it was as if the space around him were shrinking, pressing him ever inward. He suddenly knew that this was how he would die.

But then a thought flashed in his mind.

*The satellites.*

In his response to being expelled from the planet, the enemy had begun attacking the machines orbiting all around him.

*The machines*, James thought, chiding himself for not thinking of it sooner.

As the air compacted in on him, he focused all his energy on finding whatever machinery he could in the immediate vicinity. At first, all he could sense was his own cell phone, but then hope surged within him when he found Corin’s, as well. He almost laughed at the idea that this otherworldly, ultra-powerful being might be undone by the insignificant little piece of technology she carried in her pocket.

He directed all his energy toward his target. First, it began to vibrate, and then it heated so completely that he could see the fiery orange light erupting from Corin’s front pocket. She screamed at first in defiance,

but then in pain as she turned her attention to getting the glowing phone out of her pocket.

In the next instant, he was on the ground again, lunging for the disc. But by the time he returned to his feet, she had tossed her phone and had started running for the exit to the courtyard. James might have pursued her, but he knew he had precious little time. His gift was the control of machines, and if he was going to hold up his end of the resistance, then he would have to act before the enemy snuffed out every last machine in orbit.

Quickly he finished what he had started, turning and looking through TC Carter's glasses in search of the entrance to the room he sought. He found it just beside the entrance to the parking garage. It was such an unexpectedly conspicuous location that he found himself removing the glasses just to make sure he wasn't seeing things. As soon as he took them off, the doorway disappeared, leaving only a bare concrete wall beside the entrance to the garage. But then when James returned the glasses to his face, the doorway returned.

With a deep breath, he stepped through it. On the other side, he found a room unlike anything he could have anticipated. It was almost Egyptian in its ornateness, the hieroglyphics lining the walls oddly familiar. He could sense that this place had been here for a long time. At the center of each wall, he saw a massive, stone-carved version of the symbol on Lanie's wrist, the one his mother had been doodling for years. On one wall, there stood a column, and on top of the column, a crown. It was brightly polished silver accented with what must have been diamonds. But at the center was a groove that looked exactly the size and shape of James's disc.

Then he heard an explosion so terrible that it seemed to rock the earth all around him. Recognizing that he had not another moment to lose, he stepped forward and pressed the disc into the gap on the crown. All at once, he could feel the energy emanating from every piece of machinery that man had built on Earth and fired into space.

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*The Moon*

Lanie had to admit that, even though it was almost unbearably cold, the place her disc had taken her had afforded her an incredible view of the battle. She still couldn't quite understand how she was able to stand in that spot, without a spacesuit or any breathable air to speak of, and watch all this unfolding. But there she was.

"Yep," she said casually to herself. "Just watching an intergalactic space battle from the surface of the moon." She looked down at her feet and wiggled her toes. "With no shoes on."

She could see that Suki had been successful in locking Sar from the planet. Her former lover's fleet bubbled up from the atmosphere as if propelled by a geyser of blue light shooting up from below. Then she watched the frantic assault on the satellites circling Earth, only to see those satellites suddenly start to fight back. She stood on the moon, awestruck as hundreds of the machines pieced together, forming a giant version of James's green disc. Sar's armada threw everything it had at the massive machine, but it seemed incapable of piercing its hull. The energy that poured out from the center of the disc of machines was so intense that Lanie could feel it from her viewing deck more than 200,000 miles away.

And yet Sar's armada was still not giving ground.

Lanie knew what she must do. Suki and James had completed their parts. Now it was time for her to activate her power and banish Sar forever. But before she could try to conjure up the memory on how to do that, she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye. Given that she was on the supposedly lifeless moon, this rather startled her.

But, yes, there it was. There could be no question. Gliding silently toward her was something that at first looked like a smooth chunk of metal. But the closer it came, the more it took shape in her vision. Soon, she saw that it was smooth and conical, its surface a polished, mirror shine, and a radiant glow of blue trailing behind it. Clearly it was a space ship, but given its unbroken surface, Lanie couldn't imagine how its pilot could be seeing to guide it around the arcing surface of the moon—and directly toward her, it seemed.

"Uh-huh," she quipped to herself.

Under any other circumstance, she might know fear at the thought of an unidentified flying object gliding in her direction, but everything she had seen so far today was so bizarre that she almost had quit registering surprise or alarm. Besides, she was starting to awaken to just how powerful a being she was. Whatever this ship's intentions, she felt confident that she could rebuff them, should the need arise. In any case, the only ship she feared was Sar's, and his was clearly engaged in the battle with Suki and James, and where the ships from his armada were the same giant, rectangular death machines she remembered from thousands of years ago, this approaching cone clearly belonged to another race of beings altogether. But if it wasn't Sar's people, and it obviously couldn't be human, to whom did it belong?

Now just a moment of doubt crept into Lanie's mind, causing her heart to skip. "Calm down, moron," she told herself. "You can make anyone do anything you want just by thinking it. And your singing can literally move mountains. What on Earth do you have to fear from whatever's in that ship?"

Then, wryly, the part of her that doubted her position reminded her that she wasn't on Earth. She was on the moon.

"Same thing," she said aloud.

That was the moment when the sleek ship reached her and eased to a stop some twenty meters away from her position. She performed a couple stretches to loosen her shoulders, and she wiggled her toes in the weird, motionless lunar sand.

"Come on," she said to pump herself up. "I've made it this far. So let's get this over with."

Just at the base of the hovering ship, a small slit appeared, sliding across the mirrored surface and taking on a rectangular shape. Through this opening slid a long, slender ramp. The end of the ramp came to rest in the sand. For a long, uncomfortable moment, nothing happened. But then, just when Lanie started to think that maybe whatever it was that was piloting this thing wanted her to *board* the ship, out stepped the craziest looking creature she had ever seen. To Lanie, it looked something like a praying

mantis, if maybe she could imagine a praying mantis being brought up on a strict diet of popstar-grade cocaine and equine-grade steroids.

But then the being's claw-like feet reached the ground and covered the space between them so quickly that in the next breath, she could see the creature's eyes. Contrary to the being's appearance and movements, the eyes spoke not of threat. They were kind, in fact, and had a way of making it seem as if this being was looking directly into her soul and adoring what it saw. Those big, buggy eyes were like the blackest of black holes—so black that it was almost as if Lanie stared back at herself.

“Zalea,” the being said, not with the tiny hole that was its mouth, but with its mind.

Lanie could hear the being's words inside her own head. It might have alarmed her, had she not spent these past few days hearing Suki's in there, as well. Plus, there was something about the being's telepathic tone that seemed entirely nonthreatening.

“Many souls have suffered on the surface of your planet,” it said. “But none of them quite so deeply as the thousands trapped below the surface. You must help them, or all will be lost.”

With a bemused little snort, Lanie made a half-turn back toward her ship as if preparing to leave.

“Wait!” the being said desperately. “Hear me out, Zalea.”

“I'm calling myself Lanie now,” she corrected. “Feel like it suits me better. A new name for a new millennium and a new understanding of my position in this universe. Speaking of which, you haven't told me *your* name or *your* position in the universe, and here you are barking orders at me about saving thousands of beings whose origins I don't even know.”

The mantis-like creature slumped, but its expression did not change. Lanie got the sense that its expression *couldn't* change. “I am called Manti,” it said. “I am ashamed to admit that my place in the universe has been to help Sar.” When it saw how this made Lanie react, it quickly added, “But I am here now because I have been actively working against him for decades—since the Earth year 1945, in fact—and I need your help to complete my mission to free my people and join the battle to destroy him.”

With a sigh, Lanie thought on whether to trust this Manti. All at once, it occurred to her that there was only one way. “Show me,” she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest.

After a barely perceptible nod, Manti stepped next to Lanie, and with his long, insect-like finger, drew a rectangle into the empty space in front of them. Lanie marveled as the black rectangle began to glow like a warming TV screen. In a moment, images began to appear like a movie.

“You’ll have to teach me that trick when you’re done,” Lanie said.

Manti ignored her. “This is how they became imprisoned, Lanie.”

In a series of flashing images, she saw it all happen. There were Manti’s people working alongside another race of aliens she recognized from all the folklore of Earth—the tall, slender aliens with the gray ovular heads and the big black eyes. Suddenly Lanie saw the resemblance between the two races, almost as if Manti and the rest who looked like him were evolved or graduated from the wraithlike grays.

“Some of us escaped before it was too late,” Manti explained. “But for those who remained earthbound, Sar treated them like slaves.”

The next few images depicted wildly militant-looking humans, all of them in vaguely familiar uniforms. But it wasn’t until she saw that weird, gimp little mustache that Lanie recognized what she was looking at. There was Sar, her beautiful former lover, communicating with Adolf Hitler by way of a video screen far too advanced for the humans of the period.

The next image showed a fleet of saucer ships that could only be alien in origin heading over the open ocean. Those ships next reached a giant outcropping of glaciers before gliding over desolate, snowy terrain. Lanie knew where they were heading before the next image confirmed it. There stood Hitler, flanked by military men of various ranks, in the very room Lanie had only just departed. He held a disc that looked similar to Lanie’s, but even with one fleeting glance, she could tell that it was different from hers somehow.

“Why did the protectors let him enter and try the disc?” she asked Manti in confusion.

“They knew he held a replica,” Manti explained. “They knew because they helped TC Carter place the replica for Hitler to find. Indeed it was all part of an ingenious ruse. Hitler sought control over this planet. In promising him absolute power, they compelled him to bring about the end of his own war machine. Trying the wrong disc in the lock would activate the third shield and end the Nazis’ evil rampage for good. And Sar would be no closer to opening the two shields that held him at bay. This, unfortunately, is also why my people remain imprisoned on Earth. When they failed Sar, they lost their only means of escape.”

“So you’re asking me to let your people go,” Lanie said, feeling a little guilty about the unintentionally sardonic tone of her voice.

Manti gave another of those slight nods.

Something gave Lanie a moment of pause. These beings had worked with the Nazis, after all. But in the next instant, she understood. Like anyone, they had merely been doing what they could to survive as a race. The aliens’ acts on Earth may have been viewed as unforgivable through a human lens, but Lanie had to keep her lens on a much broader focus. Certainly the events of the most recent life she remembered allied her closer to humankind—she would never betray her friends Suki and James, at the very least—but she also felt honor-bound to fight for any force that would gratefully work toward the expulsion of Sar. And from Manti’s gaze, she could sense intrinsically that even if his people intended to flee rather than fight, their hatred for their oppressor ran deeply enough for Lanie to put faith in them.

With a soft smile, Lanie grasped the disc in her hands and closed her eyes. Then she reached into her mind as Suki had shown her and thought to free the beings trapped beneath the earth. Through her boundless love and compassion for all creatures who respect life, she could feel the shield binding these many thousands peeling away.

She opened her eyes, and to her great joy, she saw them. Already they had begun pouring out of their prisons in droves, boarding their long-dormant and long-hidden ships and rocketing into the atmosphere. She could feel Manti’s adoration and gratitude as his people finally escaped their earthbound torment.

“My children are returning to me,” Manti said, projecting the sense of a smile, even if it couldn’t show one physically.

The joyful feeling was short-lived for Lanie, for in the next heartbeat, she could sense what she had to do now. She didn’t have time to indulge in the happy sight, for in the moment the alien fleet slid through the barrier barring Sar and slipped past the armada, Lanie could feel the pull of the being she had once loved so completely that she would have gladly died for him.

In the thousands of years of living in anonymity and the fog set upon her by her captors, she had forgotten what that felt like. She had told Om and his acolytes that she would not succumb to the temptation of Sar’s love, but now that she had felt it once more, she realized that she had thoroughly underestimated its power over her. In that instant, she remembered every detail of his perfect form, every heartrending word he had ever spoken to her, and everything she had forgotten about the time they had spent together.

She also remembered her significance in all this. The prophecy had been perfectly clear before it was lost to the ravages of time. There was only one being in the universe that could banish Sar. She would need to go to him and lead him out of the galaxy. But then, doubt crept into her mind. She didn’t consciously remember much about what had happened to her or what she had been doing for the past few millennia, but she did know one thing for certain: Sar had spent every waking moment trying to get back to Earth. There had to be a reason for that.

And all at once, Lanie saw the truth.

*I am that reason,* she thought.

“Yes, Lanie,” Manti said. “It has always been about you. You are all he has ever wanted. But in his tireless search, he has become too dark to turn back to the light.”

*I have to try,* she thought—to herself as much as to Manti.

In reply, Manti returned her attention to the screen it had created in the space before them. Now it depicted a scene of pure evil that made her

breathless. Her once beautiful Sar was terrible to behold, his face twisted and destroyed by hate.

To restore her calm, she had to take a deep breath and force her mind to the task at hand. Suki and James were already at war, their discs holding Sar's armada back. But only once Lanie brought the power of her disc to bear would Sar be expelled. Suddenly she realized that the future of this planet rested in her hands.

For a moment, she nearly did what she had been sent to this spot to do. But then she remembered something Sar had said to her once—something she had pondered for centuries before she lost all memory of who she truly was.

“If ever we are parted,” her lover had said thousands of years ago, “then I will never stop until I find you.”

Back when he first spoke those words, Lanie knew that he meant it. She had heard the story of his mother and could sense that it was this love and loss that so compelled him to hold on to Lanie's affection. He had seen the effects of genuine love being separated by circumstance and was clearly and unflinchingly determined to never see it happen again.

Suddenly she knew that even the discs wouldn't dissuade him from attempting to return. And she had always known that, no matter what, he would find a way. Sar was an immortal being, and for as long as he drew breath, he would never stop trying to find his Zalea. The discs might expel him for a time, but they would not banish him forever.

Manti seemed to sense what she was thinking, for it said, “Your soul has been protected from Sar on Earth for a very long time, Lanie, and for good reason.”

The creature's pleading tone made Lanie feel sad inside because she could never make it understand that Sar was the only true love she had ever known. If her protectors had treated her more like protectors and less like captors, maybe she could have allowed her love to blossom elsewhere, but instead, they had kept her hidden and had even stolen her memory from her. She wasn't sure if she could ever forgive them for that. But more than anything, she felt compelled to get back as much as she could of what they

had taken. She needed to know everything about who she was and where she came from. She wanted to remember her home world and her parents. She wanted to know where her kind stood in this endless battle.

And as much as she hated herself for it, she felt certain that Sar was the only being in the universe both willing and able to help her find the answers she sought.

“If I go to him,” she said, “then it will stop his attacks on Earth just the same.”

“You cannot be certain,” Manti insisted. “You know as well as anyone that his wrath is boundless. When he discovers that it is true how they have kept you captive, he will not show mercy.”

“He will if I implore him.”

Before Manti could object further, Lanie reached with her mind into the void between the moon and her lover’s ship. She connected her consciousness to Sar and could sense that it stopped him cold.

“Zalea!” she heard him shout. His call was so loud that she could not tell whether it happened within her mind or in physical space, but it sounded loud enough that the whole galaxy might have heard it.

“Yes, my love,” she replied softly. “I am coming to you. I will sacrifice myself to you, but you must agree to stop your revenge on Earth.”

Lanie Montrose had never felt so powerful as she did in the next breath, when the armada immediately ceased firing on the planet she had once known as home.

Manti looked sullen as Lanie clutched her disc and summoned her ship. She took one last long look at the blue planet spinning peacefully below her.

“Goodbye, Manti,” she said.

“Pure evil never changes, Zalea,” the creature cried out in her mind.

As she boarded her ship, she smiled down at him. “He is only half evil, and you don’t know me that well. Have faith, my new friend.”

She remembered her significance in all this. The prophecy had been perfectly clear before it was lost to the ravages of time. There was only one being in the universe that could kill Sar, and only one that could banish him. Since Lanie was not the one who could kill her former lover, she saw only one other option. If Sar would never stop pursuing Zalea, then Lanie Montrose would bring Zalea to him.



## CHAPTER 24

### *Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains, Mexico*

The last thing he saw before he woke was a vision he would never forget. She was beautiful, this being that had come to visit him in his dream. She was human and yet not human. He recognized her immediately from the hologram he had seen at the gold mine.

“The battle has ended,” she said in her lyrical voice. “But the one who sings has fled, and so the war is not yet won.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked through the fog of his dream.

The beautiful being smiled. “Zalea’s love for Sar has clouded her judgment. Her love for you may be the only thing that can save us.”

“Her love for me?” he said. “But I don’t even know anyone named Zalea.”

Before he could ask what she meant, the being began to drift away.

“Wait!” he called. “What am I supposed to do?”

“If you follow your love,” came the voice from out of the darkness, “then your path will open to you.”

When Rick Fielding woke, he didn’t recognize his surroundings. He knew only that the air was stale and everything was white. As his eyes adjusted to the harsh light, he saw that there were tubes snaking out from his nostrils, with another burrowing into his mouth and diving down his throat.

All at once, he knew an urgent need to remove these tubes. The ones in his nostrils came easily, but the moment he started pulling at the one in his mouth, his throat screamed in protest, and a shrill alarm began to sound.

Still he persisted, yanking and pulling and grunting through the pain. Finally, after two feet of slimy tube had escaped him, he was free of it. He sighed in confused relief and sank back into his bed, an action he immediately regretted, for it taught him the hard way that his back was lined with bedsores. His scream joined the alarm in assaulting his tender eardrums. Every sound was like a claw scratching at his throbbing brain.

Just when he thought he could take no more of it, a pretty young woman entered, wide-eyed with concern, and flipped a switch on the wall, silencing the alarm.

“*Dios mio!*” the woman said, performing the sign of the cross. “Mister, we thought you . . .” The words seemed to escape her as her pretty eyes danced in a quick examination of him. “We thought you never waking,” she finished.

From her broken command of the language, Rick remembered something. He had been in Mexico—had embarked on a venture that everyone had told him was foolish. *The mine!* he thought. That was the last thing he could remember. Then he pictured Gerardo slumped facedown on the ground, and a sudden sadness overwhelmed him. “The mine!” he said frantically. “The box!” He tried to rise from his bed, but found every muscle in his legs screaming in protest. “Listen, I—”

Her delicate hands found his lips and silenced him. “Mister, please. You have a comma for weeks. You must relax. Must not raise blood pressure.”

*A coma?* Rick thought, his mind racing. Soon he found the memory of how he’d been recording the strange box when something fantastic happened. A flash of light. Some kind of holographic message. And then the mine collapsed. That was the last thing he could recall. “A coma?” he said softly.

“Sí, yes, a coma.”

The woman was dressed as a nurse, he noticed for the first time. The medical scrubs she wore looked as if they had once been stark white, but now they were yellowed from breast to thigh by stains that had not entirely come out.

“But how—”

“The men from the government,” she cut in excitedly. “They hear the earthquake and come search. They fine you in the hole. We do not even know your name.”

“Rick,” he said, glancing from side to side, finding all the signs of a low-budget hospital.

“Rick,” she repeated with a smile, her accent making music of his name.

“Where am I?” he asked.

She explained that he was indeed in a hospital, or the nearest thing to one that the rural region could offer. “We have you hooked up to tube for *weeks* now,” she said. “Doctor is ready to give up, but then you . . . you . . . you *waking*.”

All at once, Rick felt the weight of the news crash into him, and he fell back onto his bedsores once more. He cried out, his throat painfully parched, and the nurse responded quickly by bringing him a glass of brownish water. He drank it as though he’d spent all this time lost at sea.

“But then again, *everyone* waking,” the nurse said with a pretty little grin. “Hey, maybe even I waking.”

Sated by the water, Rick’s urge to leave gave way to an overwhelming desire to rest. His muscles burned, his skin was raw, and he’d been sleeping for weeks, but sleep was all he wanted now.

The nurse seemed to sense this. “I leave you now,” she said. “Doctor will need to know anyway.”

When she tried to stand, he reached out and clasped her by the wrist. She gave him a surprised look.

“No, wait,” he said. “My phone. I need to call my sister.”

The nurse’s expression melted into one of regret. “No phone, mister. I mean *Rick*. They only find you.”

Rick slumped in disappointment. He had to contact Becca—and Lanie if she’d ever pick up—to let them know that he was okay, but first he

would have to figure out how to do that without his phone. It had been years since he had last memorized a phone number. “I need to call home,” he told her. “How do I do that?”

The nurse nodded and turned for the door. “I fine out,” she said before stopping and smiling. She held a finger in the air, then reached for something on the table just beside the door. She pointed it at the small television hanging in the corner of the room. “You have no idea how much you miss, Rick,” she said. “You want to catch up.”

Then she was gone, off to figure out how her newly revived patient might call the US from rural Mexico when he didn’t even know which number to dial.

“God, Becca,” Rick whispered as he ignored the commercial break babbling in Spanish on the small TV. “You must have been so worried.” Suddenly it occurred to him that if what the nurse said was true, then Becca had likely presumed him dead by now. Had she searched for him after what she’d seen on the feed they’d shared over the phone? He didn’t think she’d have been able to scrape together the money to get a ticket to Mexico. He’d burned most of their inheritance on this mining venture, and what was left, she’d thrown away on parties in LA. So, had she just been left to assume he was dead? Had she mourned him already?

Then he remembered why he’d asked her to make the recording in the first place.

“Lanie,” he said, his heart performing that old familiar flutter as he spoke the name of the woman he couldn’t help but admit he loved. He was just pondering what her reaction might be when he visited her for the first time after his supposed death. But then, the smile that the thought delivered him faded into openmouthed awe when he parsed through the Spanish broadcast and realized what he was seeing on the TV.

Though he couldn’t pick up everything they were saying, he could follow enough. Breathless commentators were arguing about the images flickering on the screen. Rick saw the explosions in the atmosphere, and a gathering of people outside the Great Pyramid at Giza. He furrowed his brow at the image of those thousands of people all projecting some kind of

strange yellow light into the darkening sky. Then he gasped at the sight of the alien ship descending into the light, fire raining down from all sides.

He sighed and shook his head.

*This can't be real, he thought. She thought she was putting on the news, but this is just some movie.*

Soon after, the nurse returned with a bounce in her step and a little plastic card in her hand. She gave it to him, and he saw that it was a prepaid calling card.

"I bring you phone as soon as I find one that will work."

He thanked her before nodding up at the TV. "You almost had me there," he said with a wry smile. "I thought this was the news."

She glanced over at the TV, her eyes going wide with seriousness when she looked back at him. "That is news."

Incredulously, he listened as she explained what she could about the events of the past few weeks. She kept mentioning something called the awakening, where people all over the world were coming to terms with what the nurse described as supernatural powers. To Rick, it sounded as though Earth had toppled into chaos while he slept, and had nearly been annihilated by that ship he had seen on the television, but just before he woke, so, too, had the planet.

The nurse described the peace and prosperity that had followed the grand events from the previous week. "You would not believe it," she said, crossing herself once more as she went on to recount an event that she couldn't quite seem to explain completely, and that Rick couldn't quite wrap his mind around anyway. It seemed like she was saying that in the hours that followed the main event, a host of other alien spacecraft began emerging from somewhere underground. "When they went to the sky," she said excitedly, "everyone think they will attack. But then they just . . . they just go."

"Go?" Rick asked, confused.

She cast a hand at the sky as if to swat at a bug. "They fly away into space."

Rick sighed and tumbled into his thoughts for a time, trying to make sense of all that he had learned. It just sounded so unbelievable. “Who were the people?” he asked after a time.

“*Que?*” she said. “What?”

“You said there were three people who led the fight against these alien ships. Who were they?”

“That is crazy part. One works for US government, but another is some doctor from California. And the other—” She brightened up as if to prepare him for shocking news. “The other is Lanie Montrose, the famous singer!”

Rick’s heart nearly stopped. “You have to be kidding me.”

She shook her head vigorously before turning toward the TV. “Look! Here they are now!”

A voice was speaking in English about the heroic efforts of someone named Suki Carter and another named James Sinclair, but Rick couldn’t make it all out over the sound of the translator relating the message in Spanish. But then the image of a bright light spewing from the top of the Great Pyramid cut away to an image of three happy but exhausted-looking people.

Rick quickly realized that the voice that had been speaking was coming from the mouth of a woman who looked remarkably like Lanie. But this was not Lanie. He was completely and immediately sure of it. For one thing, the voice was all wrong. And for another, there was something about her eyes. The color was different perhaps, but mostly they were just unsettling in their shallowness. He had known Lanie Montrose for years, and one thing had always been true: even during the period she had spent in the depths of drug addiction: her eyes had always been the liveliest he had ever seen. These eyes were dead.

“That’s not Lanie Montrose,” he said flatly.

When the nurse looked at him, it was with an expression that bordered on confusion and concern. “Maybe you should sleep, Rick,” she said.

Because he couldn't find the strength to argue, he let her believe that he was losing his mind. Then he nodded, and she switched off the TV before taking her leave.

He didn't yet know how to process everything he had just learned about this vastly new planet he called home, and he couldn't begin to guess how or why some imposter had come to take Lanie's place.

But as he lay gingerly back in his bed, he recalled what the being from his dream had told him, and he saw his path open up before him. He needed to follow his love. He needed to find the real Lanie Montrose before it was too late.

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Thank you for the universal language of music... Its power is endless.

## **BIO**

Suzanne grew up in Richardson Texas with her sister and two brothers. She learned from her parents that everyone can make their dreams become reality, and that life is a combination of luck and skill. She began to dream big at a young age and feels extremely lucky in this life being the mom of four incredible children.

Immediately after graduating from high school, Suzanne was discovered and left for Paris to pursue her modeling career. She traveled around the world living in Tokyo and Milan, and then ultimately moving to London with her former husband.

After eleven years in England, Suzanne moved to Santa Barbara where she lives with her husband, Phil, her best friend and inspiration.

Through the years, Suzanne created Boisvert Lingerie, Avia Spa, and became a DJ. The story that has haunted her since she was a young girl has found its way out and into her first novel which is the first of a trilogy. The amazing support from her family and friends helped her realize her dream and she is very grateful for this opportunity to self-publish. She would love to eventually help others self-publish because she believes everyone has a story to tell.

When Suzanne isn't writing, she's enjoying time with her family, their three dogs, listening to music and traveling. She's also an avid soccer player and feels very lucky to play on a co-ed team with her husband, and on her awesome women's team, The Cosmos.

## **Dedicated with love**

to my parents and grandparents.

Thank you for this beautiful life  
filled with hopes, and dreams,  
magical gold bugs, and fishing streams.

**Never stop dreaming...**

**Have faith...**

**Love conquers all in the end.**

<https://www.suzanne-boisvert.com>

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