

ESCAPE TO A WORLD FILLED WITH BEAUTY . . .
AND LIES.



ELUSION

CLAUDIA GABEL & CHERYL KLAM

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DEDICATION

To Ben and Brian—we couldn't have done this without you.

CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Back Ad](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

PROLOGUE

“DON’T BE SCARED, REGAN,” MY FATHER says. “I’ll be next to you the whole time, I promise.”

But I’m not scared at all. The reason my breath is coming out in quick, little gasps is because I’m excited. After all, I’ve waited for this moment for such a long time.

I shift in my seat, carefully listening to my dad as he gives me the instructions, to the point where I’m actually focusing on every syllable.

Place the microlaser visor over your eyes.

Insert the audio buds into your ears.

Slip your hand through the acrylic wristband.

Click on the app with your finger.

I follow each step, double-checking myself so I don’t screw this up. This trial run is way too important to him. Computer scientists still don’t believe in his work—an alternate reality program and device he’s spent the last four years building—but all that is going to change.

We’re going to prove them wrong.

My dad said that to me, just before we assembled our Equips and locked our hands together.

We.

I haven’t heard that word in a long time. I think I forgot how amazing it is when he’s around.

Within a few moments, trypnosis sets in and I begin to feel my body drifting away from me. Piece by piece, molecule by molecule, I break apart and dissolve until there is nothing left.

Nothing but absolute happiness.

When I open my eyes, I’m in this other dimension, which for now is only made of gauzy, incandescent light. A soft wave of electricity trickles along my skin. It almost feels as though I’m being lifted off the ground by an invisible current and suspended in midair. I’ve never felt anything like this in the real world, and since it’s generated by a hypnosis program that’s preloaded onto my Equip, I never will.

“The light is going to fade in a bit,” I hear my father say. “And then the real magic will begin.”

I smile. He is right by my side, just like he promised.

“When you see it all, you’ll understand everything,” he says.

He sounds almost apologetic, and I’m wondering if by “everything,” he means this inaugural trip to Elusion will somehow explain the late hours my dad keeps at Orexis; how he constantly breaks plans with my mom and me so he can work in his computer lab; all the time he spends with Patricia showing him how to code and design every inch of this place.

A warm breeze blows a piece of wavy strawberry-blond hair right into my eyes. Normally I get upset when I think about how my father has been for the last couple of years, but none of it bothers me now.

“Can you see me yet?” he asks. “It might take another second or two for the visuals and other sensory perceptions to kick in.”

I blink a few times and my dad slowly comes into focus. Although his silhouette is outlined by a shimmering golden glow, he’s wearing the same plaid flannel shirt and khaki pants he had on in the living room. His salt-and-pepper hair is still messed up and in need of a wash. His brown eyes twinkle as he reaches out to me and takes my hand in his.

“Great. Now just breathe in and out very slowly. It will increase the dopamine response and he

your body adjust.”

I inhale, noticing a deep, sweet scent that's carrying on the wind. “It smells like . . .”

“Pine trees. Just wait till you see them.”

“Are you kidding me? There are actual pine trees here?”

A world with plant life and fresh air instead of Florapetro factories, grease clouds, and acid rain. I can't even begin to imagine it.

“The one thing I want you to remember while you're here is to trust your thoughts. Don't discount the power of your mind. What you're experiencing is very real.”

I loop my arm through his and gently lean my head on his shoulder. “Okay.”

“I know it's confusing, but everything will make sense soon, I promise.” My father grins. “A little later, right, brace yourself. Here come the fireworks.”

I raise my head in awe as I watch the veil of white light float up from the ground like a fog and evaporate to reveal a sapphire sky. Dad and I are perched on top of a rocky cliff. Miles and miles of dark green forest are stretched out in front of us. The view is so crisp and clear I can almost see every leaf and needle jutting out from each spindling branch. Beyond is a chain of mountains with snowcapped peaks, which borders a large lake with shimmering swirls of turquoise and jade. Everything is subtly traced with a translucent glittering substance, almost like fairy dust.

It's an incredible sight. And although I've never been a fan of heights, here I am, standing at the edge of a steep embankment, feeling that sweet electricity being absorbed by all my nerve endings.

“It's amazing, Dad. It's . . . it's like a dream,” I say. “Is this Escape based on a real place?”

“Yes, a spot near Lake Michigan,” he says, sounding oddly prideful, like he somehow created one of the Great Lakes himself. “It's long gone, though.”

I take another step forward and spread my arms out to my sides as rolling clouds cast shadows around us. My feet are firmly planted on the earth, but inside it feels like I'm flying.

“Remember what I used to say to you when you were little?” he asks.

“Stop wearing your oxygen shield inside the house?”

He laughs. “What else?”

I turn around and squint at him. “HmMMM, let me think.”

“Come on, I know you remember,” he says playfully.

“A meaningful life is filled with contributions,” I say, reciting his favorite mantra perfectly.

“Well, this is it. My biggest contribution yet, Regan.” He walks up right beside me and tucks the unruly strand of hair behind my ear. “This is how I'm going to give us our planet back.”

“People are going to love this, Dad.”

My father tips his head toward two red weight-shift gliders that are parked less than ten feet away. “So, want to get a closer look?”

Normally, the thought of hang gliding over a ravine would completely freak me out. But standing on this cliff, here in Elusion, looking at the beautiful world below, I feel as though I can do anything. Before I know it, Dad is helping me into the hang glider's harness. I feel a tiny jolt to my brain, and my arms twitch.

“That was Elusion streamlining the apparatus's instructions into your subconscious,” my dad says. “It only takes a second.”

“This is amazing,” I say. “I wish I could have stuff streamlined into my head at school.”

My dad laughs and then gives me a playful wink. “Now remember, you can't get hurt in the Escapes, okay? Just allow the program to guide you.”

“Got it,” I reply as he finishes snapping me in.

“You know how to work this?”

For once in my life, I feel no self-doubt. “Yes, I do.”

“Great, just wait for me to get set up with my—”

~~But I can't wait. That electric feeling inside of me is rising with every passing second, so I have no~~
choice but to run forward as fast as I can and . . . JUMP!

“Hell, yeaaaaaah!” I squeal with delight as the wind picks up the wings of the glider, causing me to soar high into the iris-colored sky. I lift my gaze toward the golden sun, relishing the warmth on my face as I expertly zigzag in and out of the clouds.

Soon I catch sight of Dad flying right next to me. He doesn't look the slightest bit angry that I left him behind. In fact, he's smiling. Together we burst through pockets of mist and zoom over a long plain of grass filled with a rainbow of tall wildflowers twisting and bending in the direction of the wind.

“Race you to that mountain?” Dad's brown eyes flash with excitement.

My heart beats faster as my thoughts start to lose their shape. I'm not concerned about the ticking clock on my wristband and how much time we have remaining in Elusion. I'm not sad about how much my father will have to spend days—maybe even weeks—at the office, leaving right after we wake up from the trynopsis. There's only one realization that's firmly set in my mind.

Soon, Elusion will change the world and everyone's lives as they know it.

Especially mine.

“Game on!” I laugh in reply, swinging my hang glider to the left as I charge ahead of my father and into the miraculous, digitally painted sunset.

ONE

FIVE MONTHS LATER

I'm packed in tightly among motionless bodies with barely any room to breathe. I tell myself to relax. I'm only going to be on the Traxx for a little while longer—fifteen minutes tops, if the Inner Sector express line doesn't have any delays. I try to ignore the harsh chill coming through the vents of the air purification unit just above my seat. The cold bites at the skin on my bare legs.

An eerie silence hovers in the train as the hundred or so people crammed into the seats sit perfectly still—their heads bobbing to the side and their eyes covered by sleek one-size-fits-all visors. Apparently I'm the only one aware of the cold or the large clusters of synthetic oil refineries whizzing by at two hundred miles per hour outside my sludge-streaked window, the only one worrying about things, like whether or not I passed my chem exam this morning.

The rest of my fellow travelers are all someplace else—a world with no pain, no concerns, and no stress; an enchanting, make-believe world that exists solely in their minds.

I could Escape along with them if I wanted, but I haven't been to Elusion since late December. Not even for a quick zip-trip, like these people are having.

Actually, I'm not sure I'll ever use my Equip again.

The connecting car door slides open and a concession salesperson—a thin, gray-haired woman in a blue-and-red uniform—begins to make her way up the aisle. She's carrying a medium-size square cooler, her eyes scanning for signs of life in this crowd of zonked-out Elusion users.

"Huh, you're awake," she says to me with surprise.

"Shocking, isn't it?"

"Very. I'm so used to seeing everyone with their Equips." The woman leans over, opening the top of the cooler to reveal an assortment of junk food and beverages. "It's nice talking to someone for a change. See anything you'd like?"

I spy a pack of triple-flavor-shifting gum and my mouth waters almost instantly. "I'll have one of those," I say, pointing to a small box marked *Citrus-Mint-Dark Chocolate*.

"That'll be fifteen credits," she says.

I grab my bag and rifle through the contents to find my passcard. In an effort to hurry things up, I dump my bag out on my lap. Lately I've been so disorganized and distracted. I just can't lose my passcard. If I don't find it, I'll probably get kicked off the train. I also won't be able to buy anything to get into school, or unlock the front door at home. It's the key to everything.

"I haven't bought an Equip yet." The salesperson carries on, oblivious to the fact that I'm becoming more flustered by the second. "But my grandkids can't get enough of it. They're always telling me about their adventures. My grandson said he went rafting last week in an adventure Escape," she says proudly. "My other grandkids live in DC and they're so jealous. Can't get Elusion there. At least not yet."

Thank God, I finally find my passcard. Stupid thing was hiding under my O2 shield. "Here you go. Sorry."

The woman takes the card and scans it, then hands it back to me, along with the pack of gum I just purchased. She also continues to ramble like someone who hasn't had a real conversation in months.

“That Patrick Simmons kid is going to be a zillionaire when the CIT approval comes through. I don’t want to even think about how old he was when he invented Elusion.”

“He didn’t invent it,” I correct her. “David Welch did.”

The woman raises a curious eyebrow. “Wait a minute. I think I heard about him on the news while back. HyperSoar accident, right?”

I nod my head and avert my eyes. I avoid discussing my dad with my mother or Patrick as much as possible, so I’m certainly not going to turn all chatty with some stranger on the Traxx.

“What a way to go. Burning up in the atmosphere like that.” The saleswoman leans her upper arm against the headrest of a man sitting on the end of the opposite aisle and he doesn’t even flinch. “No pain, though. I’m sure that’s a comfort to his family.”

Oh God.

I dig my fingernails into my hand, hoping the sting and pressure in my palms will distract me.

I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry.

All of a sudden, the Traxx loses speed, causing everyone to lurch forward in their seats. A robotic-sounding voice notifies passengers of a stalled turbotrain on the T line, the central connection for the entire transport system. The saleswoman mutters something about how awful all this construction is on the Traxx and curses some guy in charge of the expansion program before stalking away, leaving me alone as she moves down the aisle and into another car.

I let out a sigh of relief and stretch forward a little, so I can see past the man on my left and out the Traxx’s egg-shaped window into the Florapetro cloud-filled sky. No other trains are lurking in the distance. That’s a good sign. Perhaps they’ll be able to return to full throttle soon.

I twist my head to get a better view of the city beneath. We’re on the outskirts of the heavily industrialized Inner Sector, the giant cinder-block factories and towering steel skyscrapers forming an impenetrable wall. Nearly nineteen million people live and work here, making the Inner Sector stations the most congested. There are always delays.

Luckily, the train isn’t stopped for long, and within a few minutes it’s rocketing past huge electronic billboards, many of them flashing advertisements for Elusion and the company that manufactures it—Orexis.

A better world is inside your mind.

Orexis will take you there!

It’s never been so easy to get away.

Find the perfect destination with Elusion!

I place a piece of gum on my tongue and wince at the tart citrus taste. I glance at the redheaded, identical-twin sisters perched in the seats across from me, totally spacing out behind their visors, their mouths agape in the same zombielike fashion. Dressed in pencil skirts and fitted blazers, they look like they’re traveling for work. Most office jobs operate on the Standard 7 cycle—seven a.m. to seven p.m., seven days a week. Whatever Escape they are in right now is probably the closest they’ll ever get to a real vacation, given how hard it is for people to take time off.

My mom was like that—a successful nurse-practitioner with a hectic reverse-shift schedule. Somehow she always found a way to make time to be with her family, but now . . .

I rub the back of my neck, willing myself to think of something else, but it’s really hard to do with all these Equips around me, triggering memory after memory of the way things used to be. I know my father would have been so happy, seeing how much people are enjoying Elusion. And if he were here, he’d probably ask me why I’m not one of those people.

Elusion could help me feel better—make me forget how difficult it is, living each day without him—even if only for a short while. But the last time I Escaped and came back to reality, the pain of losing him was a thousand times worse.

A few moments later, my gum has changed from citrus to mint and the robotic voice of the Trax crackles through the speakers once again, announcing our arrival in the Inner Sector. All around me Elusion wristband alarms begin to sound, lulling everyone out of their Escapes. The twins sitting across from me move in slow motion, taking off their visors before pulling the buds out of their ears. Their eyes flutter open and they stare into space, the muscles in their faces quivering. My stocky neighbor lets out a deep moan as he disconnects from his Equip and then sits there, almost like he's catatonic.

Some people think Aftershock symptoms are a small price to pay for time in Elusion, but I don't miss the side effects one bit.

The station we're pulling into isn't far from the Orexis building. Even though I'm running late, I think I can make it there on time if I use the pedestrian bridges and take a couple of illegal shortcuts. I grab my bag and rush to the cabin door, getting in line to exit before everyone else in the car. Once the door opens, I leap off the train and push my way through the mob descending down one of the fifty jumbo-size escalators that weave together in what looks like a gigantic aerial spiderweb.

I race out of the station, glancing toward the giant billboard that projects the latest air quality report. It's a negative ten, which means this area is currently a red zone, so O2 shields are highly recommended. Although it's going to cost me time, I break from the surge of people who are streaming out into the streets and duck behind a towering copper pylon to pull out the pear-shaped plastic mask and place it over my mouth and nose. Once it's correctly positioned, I press the silver button on the right side, activating the suction that will keep the shield fastened to my face and emit the steady stream of oxygen that I'll breathe until I go indoors.

And then comes the acid rain. Just a couple of drops at first, but by the time I navigate my way through the hundreds of cars and buses crippled by traffic and reach the base of the first pedestrian bridge, it's coming down in sheets of gray. I dig inside my bag again and find my umbrella, but when I try to open it, the top spring jams, preventing the special oil-proof vinyl material from staying up.

For a split second, I consider turning back. Maybe this is a sign that I'm supposed to skip Patrick's press conference. Maybe the universe is trying to tell me that going to Orexis is a bad idea—I won't be able to escape the memory of my dad there.

But then I think about the train a few minutes ago and how Elusion was everywhere. After today there'll be no place for me to hide.

At least not in the real world.

So I toss my umbrella into the trash and spit out my gum as I take the first step up the bridge.

"I don't see you on the admittance log," the stocky, surly-looking Orexis guard says, his eyes glued to the view screen in between us. He touches my passcard to the code reader on his glass desk once more, scanning it again.

Orexis headquarters is located in the refurbished Renaissance Center, or the RenCen, as it's been referred to ever since it was built. A titanium building complex on the shores of the Detroit River overlooking Canada, it has a 200-story hotel, a mall, and a variety of office buildings. It's practically a city within a city—or a "brilliant micrometropolis," as the *Detroit Daily News* labeled it. The lobby is packed with people eager to witness Patrick's big announcement. It took me nearly a half hour just to reach the ID checkpoint at the elevator bank. If I don't hurry, I'm going to miss the start of the press conference. Even though my demerit count is dangerously high, I still skipped my last class at school in order to be here, so I definitely want to make the most of my AWOL time.

"I'm sorry, but you're not on the list of media that has been cleared to attend the event," I announce loudly, his eyes focused on the information from my passcard that has popped up on his glass desk.

“I’m not with the media,” I say. The stocky guard has my passcard, and clearly my name isn’t ringing any bells, so I lean over the desk and whisper, “My dad is . . . was David Welch.”

God, I really don’t want to make a scene—being here is uncomfortable enough, knowing my father is never going to walk through this lobby again. “Patrick Simmons invited me himself.”

“Ms. Welch!” A tall guard with a shiny head devoid of any hair whatsoever comes hurrying over as soon as he recognizes me, his voice high-pitched and eager. “Do you want to use the private elevator, or—”

People are beginning to stare. So far no one else has placed me, but if I went up in the V elevator, I would kiss my anonymity good-bye. My father’s HyperSoar accident was headline news and I don’t want reporters hounding me like they did a day or two after the funeral. Some of them even camped outside my house.

“If you could just swipe me in, that would be great,” I say quickly.

The tall guard yanks my passcard away from his coworker and scans it, handing it back to me. I give him a grateful nod of thanks and then hurry through the gate, scooting inside a crowded elevator. I’m pressed up against one of the rectangular mirror-paneled walls. My eyes shift down toward my feet, but not fast enough. I catch my reflection, and to put it mildly, I look disgusting.

Due to the rain, my strawberry-blond hair has a strange dullness to it, and my bangs are in desperate need of a flatiron. My mascara is caked around my lashes, making my green eyes appear washed out and almost translucent. My uniform—an ugly navy cargo skirt with an ivory button-down shirt—is wet and clinging to me in all the wrong places, streaked with sootlike residue from the tainted precipitation. I run my fingers through my hair in a vain attempt to freshen up, but it doesn’t help much.

Only a full-blast decontamination shower could help me now.

When the elevator doors open, I step off to the side, letting everyone move ahead of me. There’s a crowd hovering near the theater entrance, probably because it’s already full. My best bet is to sneak through the back. I walk through an unmarked automatic door a few feet to my left and enter a gigantic hallway.

The soaring ceilings are glittering with lights and the glass walls are projecting glowing, larger-than-life testimonials regarding Elusion: a paraplegic who became an expert skier in a mountain Escape, a single mom of six who takes a relaxing “vacation” to a beach Escape every day on her way home from work, and a doctor who claims that using Elusion regularly can significantly relieve tension.

I stop at another unmarked door and wait for it to slide open.

I step inside the auditorium, my back now up against the wall. The two-thousand-seat auditorium is packed, including the enclosed observation deck at the top of the cavernous room. Even though the paneling is slightly tinted, hiding the faces of the people inside, I spot the silhouette of Patrick’s mother, Cathryn. She has a distinctive figure that is hard to miss—poufy bobbed hair, wide-shoulders, and a tall frame. Patrick’s mom always makes him a bit nervous, so it’s a good thing she isn’t sitting in the first row.

The lights dim and Patrick takes the stage, appearing more confident and proud than I have ever seen him. He is also being projected on a gargantuan screen, so it’s easy to see that his Italian suit is a little big on him. His mom is probably pursing her lips in disapproval, but I kind of like that he hasn’t fully bought into the whole young-businessman thing. Patrick’s also wearing a tie that my father gave him the day he began working at Orexis full-time. I can’t help but smile at his sentimentality. Like me, he holds on to the things that matter the most.

The crowd bursts into feverish applause. The two brunettes standing beside me start snapping pictures of him and gasping as if he were some Hollywood heartthrob. Patrick grins and his chin

dimples. I can tell from the twinkle in his eyes that he doesn't mind the attention one bit.

Suddenly, something inside me begins to hurt.

No matter how much I want to believe it, the demanding schedule Patrick has been keeping late is clearly not just a busy phase. Then again, Patrick has been pretty much fully booked as long as I've known him. His standardized test scores were off the charts, starting from kindergarten, so even though he's just two years older than me, he graduated from high school when he was fifteen—valedictorian. When he wasn't studying, he was doing some kind of extracurricular activity during his free time. I often wonder how he managed to make room for me, but he always did.

I take a deep breath once all the clapping dies down, moving away from the back wall of the auditorium and hoping that Patrick will somehow be able to see that I'm here to cheer him on. To hell with how I look. Patrick's my best friend. He's not going to care about what I'm wearing or that I'm having the worst hair day in the history of my life.

"First off, thank you all for coming today, and on such short notice." Patrick glances down at the teleprompter, hesitating for a moment before looking up and flashing the audience a gleaming smile.

"As you all know, for the last six months Elusion has been available on a trial basis in only three cities: Los Angeles, Miami, and Detroit."

At the mention of Detroit, the room bursts into a small round of applause.

I hold my fingers to my lips, whistling like my father taught me on a summer road trip to Montreal. I see a sliver of a clearing in the center aisle and make my way toward it. Patrick stops in the middle of his speech as if he heard my little birdcall. As he canvasses the dark auditorium with his blue eyes, I begin to push through the crowd a bit harder.

"Shane, can you bring up the house lights, please?" Patrick asks.

And just like that, the auditorium is bathed in brightness. When I look toward the stage, Patrick is staring right at me, the corners of his lips curving up.

"There," he says. "Now I can see you all much better."

I grin back at him and mouth the words "good luck."

Patrick nods and picks up where he left off in his speech. "For the past hour, Orexis has been flooded with calls, spawned by the rumors that Elusion is about to be released nationwide. Well, I don't know where your sources are getting their information, but they are one hundred percent correct! Elusion finally received the coveted safety seal from the Center for Interface Technologies and by the end of next week, both Equips and apps will be available for purchase in ten more cities. By the end of the month, the entire country will have access to the most exciting technological advancement of the century!"

The auditorium once again erupts in thunderous applause.

A woman holding a large box of sparkly acrylic wristbands walks in front of me. She presses one into my hand and then points to the left.

"Miss, you're going to need to sit down for the demonstration. There's an empty seat in row L."

"Wait, what kind of demonstration?" I whisper. "Are we all going to Elusion together?"

I'm not ready to go back there. Not even close.

The woman shakes her head. "No, of course not. It's just an immersive video accompanied by some music and acupressure hypnosis. Will you take a seat, please?"

I blow out a nervous breath as I walk up the aisle and spot the empty seat on the left. It's practically in the middle of the row, which means I have to crawl over dozens of people to get to it.

"The new Elusion app is an updated version of the program that has been on the test market," Patrick continues. "Our team has worked very hard to give you the most dynamic, original Escapes we could think of, and we'd like to give you a taste of the Elusion Universe today."

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I hunch down and try to get to my seat discreetly.

apologizing for brushing against people's legs and temporarily blocking their view.

~~"Please put on your wristband," Patrick instructs us. "There is no need for earbuds or a visor.~~ Sound will be provided through the speakers. Just bear with us for a minute while we set everything up."

A murmur floats through the crowd as the house lights slowly dim again.

I flop down in the seat, my bag firmly in my lap. I gather my hair and put it in a messy bun. Patrick's larger-than-life presence appears on the screen. The moment I slip on my wristband, earsplitting guitar chords come barreling through the speakers. As the music crescendos, a milky haze forms on the screen. When it fades into a sheet of pitch black, a million dots of white appear and glow with fierce intensity. I duck for cover when a streak of flames bursts from not only the screen but the walls around me. Balls of fire ricochet across the room, exploding in midair.

It's as if the auditorium itself is careening through the galaxy, narrowly avoiding collisions with gigantic asteroids, orbiting planets, and crescent moons at every turn.

I wince as a round ball of fire heads straight toward me, veering off to the right at the last second. This isn't real, I remind myself. But it sure feels like it. There is no pretty fairy dust here, and this is not the serene Elusion that my father introduced me to—this is something more terrifying and bewildering. Then I feel a shred of something I've felt many times before but have forgotten the past few months. A tiny surge of electricity rises in my chest, and within seconds it spreads all the way through my arms and down to my fingertips.

This ghost of a feeling is enough to take me back to when my father first brought me to Elusion, but then a shimmering, warm glow fans out in front of my eyes, distracting me from my thoughts completely. The hard-rock music disappears, and soon a soft murmur of a sound—almost like the white noise one might hear on an antique radio—radiates through the air. A large constellation comes into view, twinkling in a soothing, rhythmic pattern that loosens all the tension in my neck and shoulders. I feel every muscle in my body unwind.

One of the stars lights up brighter than the rest, hues of neon yellow and shades of orange and magenta flashing in the most radiant spectacle I have ever seen. I can feel the power pulsating at the core of the star. I inhale deeply as I stare at the unreal beauty of the universe around me.

For the first time in what seems like forever, I think . . .

Everything is going to be okay.

TWO

WHEN THE SCREEN GOES BLACK A FEW minutes later and the only sound I can hear is my pulse pounding in my ears, I sit back in my seat, staring straight ahead but seeing everything as a faint blue glow. I shake my hands out and roll my shoulders forward, trying to snap myself back to normal.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Patrick says to the crowd. “It might take a minute to regain your equilibrium. It’s to be expected.”

My gaze shifts around the room. Other people seem to be rubbing their eyes, blinking as they fight to readjust to the real world. I join in the pockets of applause that are coming from different corners of the auditorium.

“What you just experienced was a sneak peek at another new feature of Elusion,” he continues. “It’s called the Exhilaration Setting, or ExSet for short. Now users can control the amount of brain stimulation they experience inside Elusion, and the intensity of their destination will change accordingly. CIT was truly amazed by this.”

So am I. At least, I think I am. The thoughts in my mind and my eyesight are still a little bit fuzzy. I squint to see if that helps anything, and luckily it does.

“Whenever you’re ready, I’d like to open up the floor to questions,” Patrick says as a podium made of translucent material rises from a secret door in the floor of the stage.

“Mr. Simmons, will this universe-themed Escape be a standard dimension along with the World?” a bespectacled reporter says into the ladybug-size Orexis-issued microphone that’s attached to his jacket.

“Yes, it will, and I really hope that users enjoy traveling into these uncharted destinations together,” Patrick replies. Then he points over my shoulder. “You in the gray blazer.”

“Is it true that Elusion will be released with higher trypanosis settings that will allow you to stay in your Escape longer and with less Aftershock?” a tall man with a neatly trimmed beard inquires.

Patrick shrugs. “Not exactly. Instead of the five minutes in the prototype, Aftershock will only last a minute—unless you’re on a zip-trip that lasts less than twenty minutes. Then Aftershock is pretty mild. Also, the amount of time allowed in an Escape has not changed. It’s still an hour.”

Wow. The symptoms of Aftershock now only last a minute? My dad would be really impressed. He hated that users had to suffer through Aftershock and struggled to figure out a way to make the symptoms less severe.

Patrick gestures to a woman in a red suit toward the rear of the room. “Ma’am?”

“Mr. Simmons, my followers are in Ohio, where Elusion hasn’t been available. Could you please explain the technology used in the Equip and the app? It’s still foreign territory for a lot of us.”

“Absolutely. To put it simply, the Equip and the Elusion app work together. Kind of like an EEG machine, but operating in reverse.”

A hint of a grin forms on my face. This is the exact analogy my dad used when trying to show me why the project he was slaving over was so groundbreaking.

“Instead of measuring all the rhythmic changes and patterns that occur in our brain waves, the computer hardware in the Equip components redirects them through the use of trypanosis, so that you experience a deep level of consciousness called trance. The software in the app acts like a remote control, giving us plenty of channels or settings we can visit while we are in a trance state.”

My father would be so proud of Patrick right now.

“Fascinating,” the reporter says, typing notes furiously on her tablet. “So how does trypnosis work exactly?”

I can recite the answer to this question in my sleep. When my dad was alive, he and my mom used to talk about medicine and trypnosis over dinner. It used to bore me a little, but today I’d give anything to have one of those nights back.

“Trypnosis is a combination of hypnosis techniques, created by three distinct computer-generated tools, which make up the Equip components,” Patrick responds. “The visor has microlasers embedded in the lenses, which tap into the cerebral cortex and create an imbalance of brain-cell activity. The earbuds utilize aural symphonics, like humming sounds and voice triggers, to lull the brain into an even deeper level of consciousness. Lastly, there are two raised pieces of plastic on the inside of the wristband that apply pressure to nerve endings connected to the meridian centers of the body.”

Patrick pauses to clear his throat and then steals a happy glance at me. In this moment, everything about him is so self-assured, and so . . . adult. Sometimes I wish I could leap forward with him and go straight to being in control of my own life.

“When all of these elements, including the app for Elusion, are engaged, trypnosis is achieved. At the risk of sounding immodest,” he continues, “it is one of the greatest achievements in science and technology. The more often Elusion is used, the better it gets at delivering the type of experience the user prefers. The consumer can be transported to a toxin- and stress-free alternate reality in the safety of their own mind.”

“*Safety?* How can you say that with a straight face?” says a loud, booming voice from the center of the auditorium. I spin around in my seat to see an auburn-haired teenage girl in a vintage army jacket and glasses, standing in a fighting stance and holding clenched fists at her sides.

Ugh. Avery Leavenworth.

“What do you have to say about Elusion addiction? It’s a big problem here in Detroit, especially with kids my age,” she barks. “I know my viewers would love to hear how you plan on addressing that. Although first you’d have to admit your product is more like heroin than a great achievement in science, right?”

Self-righteous student activist and star of the famously stupid vlog *AveryTruStory*, she’s impossible to miss at school because she’s always wrapped up in some kind of campus uprising. How did she even get in here? Did she really get legitimate press access? That never would have happened if Dad were around. He was very strict about which media outlets were allowed to cover his conferences. Apparently, Patrick is running the show a bit more loosely.

“Miss Leavenworth, Elusion is not a drug, and medical addiction isn’t possible,” Patrick says calmly. “If it was, then the CIT wouldn’t have approved it, now would it?”

“You’re screwing with people’s brain chemistry! You said so yourself!” Avery shouts, refusing to back down. “My sources tell me that the Elusion system releases levels of serotonin and dopamine so high it’s like the user is totally strung out.”

“No!” I yell. “You’re wrong!”

There’s a faint murmur in the audience.

Oh. My. God. Did I just jump out of my seat and scream that out loud?

I peer toward the stage. Patrick grins and nods toward someone beside him. Before I know it, a man dressed in black approaches me and clips a mic to my shirt collar. I shoot Patrick a discouraging look, hoping that he’ll step in and carry on this confrontation with Avery. But he just bows his head and smirks.

He’s giving me the floor. In front of thousands of reporters. On a day where I look like something stuck on the bottom of someone’s shoe.

“The serotonin and dopamine aren’t *released*,” I say, my words now reverberating throughout the

entire auditorium. “That makes it sound like they’re coming from another source, which they’re not. All Elusion does is stimulate the body’s production of certain chemicals that are already in the brain.”

Avery crosses her arms over her chest and glowers at me like I just slapped her face, but that doesn’t deter me at all.

“The sensors in the visor and the wristband both have safety controls that are monitored by a special server that keeps tabs on every single Equip. If the levels are too high, the signal is cut off. End of story.”

Patrick is practically beaming with approval when the audience claps for me. “I’ll take one more question. Yes, you in the green sweater.”

I sigh in relief as I unclip my mike and give it back to an Orexis staff member. I catch sight of Avery out of the corner of my eye. She’s being escorted toward the auditorium doors by two burly guards. Her mike has obviously been turned off, but her mouth is still moving and her face is red with rage. I think about following Avery outside and giving her an even bigger piece of my mind. How dare she throw accusations at Patrick like that, and give Dad’s prized work a bad name?

But before I can grab my bag or come up with any insults to sling, my tablet buzzes. I pull my tablet from my back pocket and unfold it. A note has popped up on the screen.

Meet Mom at M&W. 6:30.

Damn. If I don’t leave now, I’ll be late for yet another commitment, and Patrick is fielding a scandalous question about Elusion’s rising “virtual hookup” rate, which I definitely want to hear about. I’ve never had one of my own, but at school the rumor is that making out with someone in a virtual Escape is way more intense than the real thing. Still, as much as I want to listen to all the details, I don’t have the heart to keep Mom waiting. I’m going to have to sneak away and text Patrick why I had to leave.

For a moment, I feel bad that I won’t be able to tell him in person what a fantastic job he did today, but from the adoring looks he’s receiving from everyone in the room, I figure he’ll get to hear about it.

Maybe even a few thousand times.

Where is she?

I’m pacing inside the lobby of Morton & Wexley, Detroit’s largest and most prestigious depository. Every thirty seconds I look at the automatic doors, hoping to see Mom walk through them. I barely made it here on time—there were more Traxx delays, of course—but when I arrived, the clients’ lounge was filled with people who were hooked up to their Equips, zip-tripping in Elusion, and my mother was nowhere in sight. I scoped out the clerk area to see if the meeting had already started, but all the employees were either on their tablets or conducting business with their customers in the confines of their glass-walled cubicles.

I check my watch. I’ve been waiting for nearly a half hour, and the building is about to close. I tap on my tablet to see if I can get a signal, but the reception is completely blocked, probably because the depositories in this sector are steel-enforced and take strict security measures so that people can’t coordinate a heist from inside the building with the help of their handheld devices.

After another minute ticks by, I throw up my hands in frustration and perch myself on the lone empty chair. I drum my fingers impatiently against the curled armrest, praying that nothing bad had happened to my mom. Expecting the worst in a situation like this is pretty understandable, given what

we've both been through, but I can't afford to latch on to those kind of negative thoughts. Not he anyway.

"Ms. Welch?" A bald-headed man with a mustache is now standing in front of me, wearing a badge that reads Mr. Xavier Burton. "Are you and your mother ready to recover your father's items?"

"I need a few more minutes, please. My mom still isn't here."

When he inspects his watch, his lips press together in a way that is all too familiar. My English teacher, Mrs. Thackeroy, has the same annoyed expression on her face when I'm late to her class, which is pretty often, considering that it's the first one of the day. With Mom at home to look after, we never seem to make it out of the house on time in the morning.

"We're only open for another ten minutes. You'll have to come back tomorrow if she doesn't arrive by then," Mr. Burton says, straightening his suit jacket with a harsh tug at the sleeves.

"Is there any way I could claim the contents of the security box myself?" I ask.

"No, I'm afraid not. The ledger states that pursuant to his will, Mr. Welch's wife becomes the principal owner of the contents. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. I'm sure she'll be here soon." I give him a somewhat insincere, halfhearted smile.

Mr. Burton issues me a curt nod and ducks behind a glass cubicle with a ribbon-like image scrolling around the middle with the words "Assistant Manager" in square-block digital lettering, and an update of the stock market.

I look at my watch again. In seven minutes, the staff of Morton & Wexley is going to kick me off the curb. True, Mom and I could always come back another day, but then we'd have to spend more sleepless nights wondering what was so important to my father that he kept it locked up here, without anyone else knowing until his lawyer executed his will.

Did Dad have some kind of dark secret?

"Hey, Ree."

My head pops up when I hear the familiar voice. Patrick is walking toward me, a sympathetic smile on his face. I'm so happy and surprised to see him I hop off my seat and give him a big hug.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Just wanted to see if you needed any help. I tried calling, but then I remembered my dad and a lot of the security rules at his trust company." He pulls back a little as he grabs hold of my hands. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"No, not at all," I say, grinning. "But don't you have stuff to do? What about the conference?"

"Once I left the stage, my job was over."

"Yeah, right," I say with a laugh. I know he's just saying that to make me feel better, and I appreciate it. "I don't know how you managed to sneak away, but you just scored major best-friend points for showing up here."

"Good." Patrick peers around the lobby as he lowers his voice. "How's your mom handling everything?"

"No idea. She hasn't even shown up yet. And of course, I can't call her in here . . ." I shrug, frustrated.

"Did you ask the manager to use their emergency phone line?"

"I don't want to go through all that. Maybe she got stuck on the Traxx or something. There's construction everywhere."

"Yeah, I'm sure it's something simple like that."

"Or maybe she just blew me off. It wouldn't be the first time," I say, my voice tinged with irritation.

It isn't fair of me to be angry. Mom is doing the best she can.

Patrick squeezes my hands gently. "It's going to be okay, I promise."

“How? This place is about to shut down for the day and I’m not authorized to receive my own father’s . . .” I swallow hard and slip my hands away from Patrick’s. “Forget it. We should just leave.”

“Give me a second. I’m going to talk to the manager,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t even bother. He has a Mrs. Thackeroy attitude.”

“I have no clue what that means, so I’m going to talk to him anyway. Be right back.”

I keep my gaze trained on Patrick as he wanders into the clerks’ area, waving at Mr. Burton through the glass door of his cubicle. The man’s face lights up when he recognizes Detroit’s most famous resident standing in front of him. Patrick shakes the assistant manager’s hand and chats with him like he has known the guy for years. It takes less than a minute for Mr. Burton to nod his head in affirmation and begin finger-pounding the screen of his tablet. Patrick looks out at me and gives me a thumbs-up.

It’s official. Patrick has just advanced to hero status.

Once Mr. Burton and Patrick emerge from the glass cubicle, an announcement sounds over the loudspeaker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Morton and Wexley will be closing in five minutes, so please complete your transactions. Thank you for your business.”

I expect Mr. Burton to quicken his step, since he was so conscious of the time, but his stride is just as leisurely as Patrick’s, who doesn’t even try to hide his self-satisfied grin.

“Miss Welch, I’ll take you to security block G now,” the assistant manager says as he gestures toward a corridor off to the right, which leads to a large elevator bank.

“But aren’t you closing up?” I ask.

“That shouldn’t concern you, Ms. Welch.” Mr. Burton pats me on the hand. “We are more than delighted to extend you and your family every courtesy.”

I glance at Patrick, who just smiles at me innocently and shrugs.

What the hell did he do?

“Thank you, Mr. Burton. That is very nice of you.”

As we follow Mr. Burton toward a foyer filled with industrial-sized elevators, Patrick and I nudge each other playfully. The assistant manager halts in front of the elevator marked *SBG* and pushes a button labeled 28. Once the doors whoosh open, Patrick and I file in behind Mr. Burton.

“This block is subterranean, so it takes a little while to descend. Are either of you claustrophobic?” the man asks.

I shake my head. “No, I’m not.”

“Neither am I,” replies Patrick.

“Good. Then enjoy the ride,” Mr. Burton says.

Patrick waits a minute before pulling his tab out of his interior suit-jacket pocket and typing on it. He’s probably trying to get some work done; he’s such an overachiever. He’ll figure out soon enough that signals can’t be sent outside of the building. But then I feel my rear pocket vibrating. I reach back and pull out my tab, noticing I have a text. It’s from Patrick.

At first, I’m a little bewildered—how can I be receiving a message inside the depository? But then I remember just how advanced Patrick’s hacking skills are. He probably found some kind of back door in their security system and glommed onto an admin network, making a signal available to both of us while we’re in the elevator.

I drag my thumb and pointer finger across the screen so I can zoom in and read his note.

Patrick: How awesome am I? Go on tell me, I can take it. ;-)

When I laugh out loud, Mr. Burton cranes his neck and stares at me like I’m nuts. I mutter “sorry” under my breath, and thankfully he spins back around.

I quickly type a message back to Patrick.

Regan: Your awesomeness can't be measured. What did you say to him?!?!

~~**Patrick: I said you were my illegitimate sister.**~~

Regan: Ha-ha, very funny. Now tell me or I'll drop-kick you.

Patrick: I love it when you make empty threats.

Regan: TELL. ME!

Patrick: Fine! I promised I'd open a huge account here if he gave you access to your dad's box.

My cheeks flush. Since Dad's accident, Patrick has been making grand gestures like this for months and each time he does, I feel a little more embarrassed. His intentions are good, no doubt about that, but as the months rack up, I just . . . I just can't help but feel like I owe him a million and one favors—and have no way of paying him back.

Regan: Thank you. For everything.

Patrick: Thank you—for coming to Orexis today. I know that couldn't have been easy.

Regan: Well, you were GREAT! Did you create that demo?

Patrick: Me and my nerd army. We are invincible.

Regan: Can't say the same for Avery. She had a lot of nerve, spreading lies like that. What an attention whore!!!

Patrick: You totally shot her down! I can't believe he missed it.

A breath catches in my throat, but luckily it only hurts for a second.

Regan: Yeah. My dad would have been really proud of you.

The elevator comes to such a soft stop that I barely even feel it. When the doors slide open, Mr. Burton exits and waves at Patrick and me.

"Follow me, please," he says.

We tuck our tabs away, and Patrick puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder. Obviously, he senses the sudden tension that has taken hold of me once we walk out of the elevator and into a long, narrow corridor that looks like it belongs in a morgue. The dimly lit hallway extends in both directions for what seems like a thousand yards, and there are multiple sets of steep metal staircases leading to other floors filled with windowless rooms.

"Don't worry, I'm right here," he whispers.

I take Patrick's hand, locking fingers with him. "I'm fine," I lie.

Mr. Burton guides us to the left and ahead a few feet before pausing in front of a set of stairs and offering me an orange passcard.

"Your father's security box is waiting for you in chamber twenty-eight. It's on the middle level and you'll have complete privacy there. Feel free to take your time. I'll wait to escort you back up to the main floor when you're done," he says.

"Thank you, Mr. Burton," I say.

Patrick and I walk up the steps to chamber 28, still hand in hand. I let go to swipe the passcard in front of the code reader, and the door whooshes upward, barely giving us enough time to enter before swooshing back down again behind us. Inside is a large, brightly lit, gray cement room with a tall aluminum table surrounded by several black high-backed stools. On the table is a square metallic box affixed with an electronic lock.

I shoot Patrick a nervous glance, but his calmness doesn't waver at all. I hate to admit this, but I'm actually kind of glad that my best friend is here right now instead of my mom.

"Go ahead," he says, prodding me a little.

I inhale and wave the passcard in front of the lock. I hear the click of a hinge, and the top of the box snaps open just enough so I can see a crack of darkness. I draw in another breath and lift it up the rest of the way. There's only one thing inside—an old, worn paperback copy of *Walden* by Henry

David Thoreau.

A book? Dad left Mom a used book?

While I'm really relieved that there isn't anything scandalous in here—like a birth certificate revealing that I'm adopted, or an apologetic letter from Dad admitting he has a secret family stash away in China—I don't know what to make of this.

I gently pick it up and flip through the pages, hoping that some kind of hidden meaning will jump out at me.

"Is there anything else?" Patrick asks. "Like notes in the margins?"

"No. Nothing."

Patrick leans over and inspects the book over my shoulder. "What about an inscription?"

I check both the title and the copyright pages to see if my father wrote my mom or me a message.

Still nothing.

"I don't understand," I say quietly. "Why would he put a book in a safety-deposit box?"

"What if it's a collector's item? It could be worth a lot of money," Patrick suggests.

"I doubt it. There's a bunch of dog-eared pages, and the cover is just holding on by a thread."

"Well, maybe it doesn't make sense right now," Patrick adds. "But there has to be a reason why David kept this here, and why he wanted you and your mom to have it."

When my dad was alive and Patrick would give me insight into his behavior, it made me feel like such an outsider, like he understood my dad better than me. And the sad thing was, he did. But it always bothered me, and given the ripple of heat that's creeping across my brow line, it obviously still does.

"You're right." I tuck the book into my bag and close the metal box, crumpling my emotions up into a little ball. "Do you think you could give me a ride?"

"Sure, but what about your mom? Shouldn't we wait around a bit longer?"

I smile at Patrick but shake my head. "That's okay. I think I know where she is."

"Really? Where?" Patrick asks.

I swipe the passcard near the code reader, and the door rises to the ceiling again.

"Right where I left her."

THREE

MY MOTHER IS CURLED UP ON THE COUCH with a pillow tucked underneath her head and a blanket throw covering her legs. As I sit beside her, I see the sprigs of gray in the roots of her chestnut-colored hair and the deep lines in her forehead.

She's so worn down. Sometimes I fear she's going to give up.

I lean over and whisper, so I don't startle her too much. "Mom? Mom, wake up."

She stirs a bit, turning from her left side so that she's flat on her back. But that's all the response I get. I notice a tiny circle imprint near her right temple, and my eyes flick over to the end table next to the couch. Near the base of the silver halogen lamp are the components of her Equip. I clutch Dad's book in my hands so hard that it bends into an arch.

Mom has been back and forth between reality and Elusion so much lately that sometimes I'm not sure she knows which is which. She's trying to do the impossible—Escaping so that she can feel a release from the agony of losing her husband—but all I needed was one trip to understand what she can't accept just yet.

Coming back from Elusion is like finding out he's dead all over again.

High pollutant levels or no, I need some air.

I stand up, setting the copy of *Walden* in my place, and sneak out of the living room through the front door. There's a chill outside that wasn't there fifteen minutes ago when Patrick dropped me off, and it's enough to make me shiver. The cool temperature feels really good against my flushed skin, so I push up my sleeves and unbutton the collar of my shirt down to my breastbone. But when I breathe deeply, it feels like something is scraping against the back of my throat.

I know I should get my O2 shield. Dad was so militant about protecting ourselves from inhaling Florapetro residue. He would have a conniption if he caught me without it. Still, retreating into our house isn't an option right now.

To me, it seems more toxic inside than it is out here.

I park myself on the steps and look down Hollow Street, which hasn't changed since the day I was born. The rows of historic brick townhomes are all perfectly indistinguishable, with one exception, of course. The pathway in front of our house is the only one with the shape of a star pressed into the concrete, signaling that someone important—in this case, my father—once lived here. Usually I walk right over the seal and pretend it's not even there, but tonight it takes a Herculean effort to keep my eyes focused on the pops of light coming from behind my neighbors' windows.

Thankfully, the roar of a V12 synthetic-oil engine pulls my attention somewhere else and my head turns. A bulldozer-size delivery truck lurches down the road and comes to a stop a few feet away. I rise to my feet when a slender man in a light gray shirt and black pants exits the driver's side, carrying a large parcel. When his shoes walk across the star on our pathway, it feels like something is coiling around me and squeezing.

"Regan Welch?" The man's words come out quick behind his O2 shield, like he's in a big rush, so I just nod. He sets the package down on the steps with a thud and types on his tablet, his eyes never meeting mine. Then he shoves the tablet in front of me. "Scan here, please."

I reach into my pocket and pull out my card, tapping it against the screen. Once we hear a chirping sound, the deliveryman yanks the tablet away from me so he can dash toward his truck, practically knocking over the package in the process.

“Thanks for being so careful!” I shout sarcastically, but he slams the truck door in reply and slowly chugs away, a stream of exhaust hurtling behind him.

Sighing, I pick up the package, which is surprisingly heavy considering that it’s packed in durable foam box. The tag reads Alessandra Cole. The trendiest boutique in the Heights Sector.

It wasn’t my birthday. Who would send me something from Alessandra Cole?

I’m about to rip it open on the steps, but when I see how secure it is—there are thick, orange strips of quick-seal on every side—I realize I’m going to need a laser pen to tear into it. The other thing I realize is that I’m starting to wheeze a little, so going back inside the House of Darkness is an absolute must now.

I hold the package in between my knees as I wave my passcard in front of the lockpad near the front door, unlocking it and pushing it open with my left hand. I gently set the box on the ground and nudge it forward until it passes through the entryway. The door shuts softly behind me and I lift the package up with both hands, almost dropping it when I see my mother standing in the middle of the living room, her back to me. She’s holding the book my dad left in the lockbox.

She must sense me, because she slowly glances over her shoulder, her eyes meeting mine. She doesn’t seem rested at all. In fact, from the dark half-moons that have formed right above her cheeks, it doesn’t look like she’s slept since December.

“Where did you get this?” she asks, her voice weak and hoarse.

For a moment, I worry that she’s upset with me, but then I notice the small smile forming on her lips, like she’s trying to remember how to be happy.

I set down the package, but I hesitate. I know that when I respond, the small smile is going to disappear. I consider lying and telling her I found the book hiding somewhere, but she keeps the house like a shrine to my dad—everything he owned is still sprinkled around this place—so she wouldn’t believe that for a second. I almost feel a little angry with her for putting me in this position.

“At the depository. It was in his lockbox.”

“Oh my God, Regan. The appointment.” Mom covers her mouth with her trembling hand, and just like that, the smile is gone. “I’m so, so sorry. I got a call from Orexis about Elusion’s CIT approval a few hours ago, and I just got so worked up, thinking about your dad; I went to Elusion, and then I was just so tired. I sat down on the couch and . . .” She shrugs, choking back tears. “I must’ve fallen asleep.”

“It’s okay, Mom. Really.”

I want to believe what I just said. I tell myself I just have to be more patient. But I know what she’s going to say next.

“All I need is a little more time. I’m going to do better tomorrow, I promise.”

Mom wipes her eyes with her shoulder so she doesn’t have to let go of the book. My head immediately replaces anger with guilt, and the shift makes me hunch forward. Suddenly, I have the posture and regret of a woman five times my age.

“You’re right—tomorrow will be better,” I say.

She sits back down on the couch to collect herself and looks up at me. There’s a lot of red around her green irises, but that doesn’t stop her from forcing a grin for my benefit. I know this sounds selfish, but I wish she’d do that more often. Just to let me know she’s fighting to come back from wherever she is.

“This book,” she says, tapping on the cover, “this is the first gift I ever gave your father. It was his birthday, and we hadn’t been dating that long. But I knew he was a nature buff, so I just ordered it on a whim. I had no idea he still . . .”

When she pauses for a while, I sit down next to her. “Well, he liked it enough to keep it under lock and key. That’s really sweet.”

“I suppose. I just thought he, I don’t know, was protecting something more important than this.”

“What do you mean?”

“The monthly fee of a security box at Morton and Wexley is almost a thousand credits a week. I’m sure this book represented a lot of fond memories, but it’s strange he’d spend so much just to prevent it from getting damaged or lost.”

“Or stolen,” I say, even though that thought seems a bit ridiculous.

Mom must think so too, because she chuckles a little. “Regan, who’d want to steal this? It’s not worth anything; it’s falling apart.”

“I know. I’m just trying to make sense of it.”

“Well, sometimes things don’t make sense right away, so you might as well put them aside and wait until they do.”

She finally lets go of the book and takes my hand. I was expecting her skin to feel cold, but it’s just the opposite. Her palm is warm and soft.

“So what’s inside the package?” she asks me, a hint of playfulness in her tone.

“I don’t know, something from Alessandra Cole.”

My mother’s eyes brighten. “Oh good, it’s your dress. I’m so glad I called over there this morning to confirm delivery. They totally messed up the dates.”

It takes me a second to register what she’s talking about, but when I do, my stomach performs a little flip of excitement. Before my dad died, she and I went to Alessandra to get fitted for formal ball gowns for Cathryn Simmons’s huge spectacle of a fiftieth birthday bash, which Cathryn has been planning since the day she turned forty-seven. I had seen a dress I loved, but because it was so expensive, I had put it on hold, intending to get my friends’ opinion before buying it. With everything that happened, it had slipped my mind entirely.

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense. Open it up,” she says, squeezing my hand.

The way I spring off the couch catches me by surprise. I’m not really a girly-girl who squeals at the thought of putting on a pretty dress. But my mom is, and since she is clearly looking forward to seeing me in something sparkly and decadent, I don’t want to sour this moment.

Maybe she’s trying to find her fight.

After running into the kitchen to snag a laser pen from the utility drawer, I come back into the living room and waste no time aiming the red dot at the quick-seal and slicing through the sides of the box. Inside, there are a lot of small foam peanuts, tissue paper, and plastic to wade through. I have to admit, it’s fun throwing it all onto the floor. When I finally dig deep enough and get to the dress, I remember every single detail I loved about it.

The sweetheart neckline adorned with sequins. The mermaid fit that makes my waist look freakishly tiny. The bold emerald color that contrasts my light complexion perfectly.

As I pull it out of the box and hold it up to myself, my mom almost gasps.

“It’s every bit as perfect as I remember it,” she says proudly.

As much as I hate to admit these things, she’s right—it is.

“Go upstairs and put it on; then make an obscenely dramatic staircase entrance,” she adds, laughing.

This feels so good, being normal with her.

“Okay, but only if you try yours on with me,” I say, holding out my hand. We had also picked out a dress for my mom to wear. “Is it upstairs in your room?”

She visibly stiffens, and I feel my arm dropping.

“Regan, I’m sorry. I . . . I can’t go with you to the party.”

And suddenly, I’m clinging to the dress like it’s a security blanket. “Why not?”

“Honey, it’s tomorrow night,” she says, casting her eyes away from me. “I don’t think I’m ready

be out in public just yet.”

“But you just said that tomorrow you’d be better.”

God, I sound like such a little brat. What I said is so manipulative and whiny, and I want to take back, but it’s too late.

“I will be better. Just not enough to be social in a group of people who are going to want to talk about your father,” she explains. “Can you understand that?”

I want to say yes, but my bottom lip is quivering. I’m so ashamed for acting like a five-year-old who’s not getting her way, but . . .

Doesn’t she understand how hard it is to miss both Dad *and* her?

Mom gets up, leaving *Walden* behind on the couch, and comes over to hug me. My dress might get wrinkled, pressed between us like a pancake, but I couldn’t care less.

“Listen to me, Regan. I want you to go and have a great time with Patrick,” she says as she strokes my hair. Then all of a sudden I feel her start to shudder, like she’s about to cry too. “And don’t be afraid to keep living your life, either. Whatever it takes for you to heal from this, that’s what you should do.”

I want to say something, but if I let one word escape my lips, I won’t be able to hold us together anymore. So we stand like that for a while, quietly, until we’re both strong enough to let go.

I don’t look or feel at all like myself.

Maybe it’s because I’m not used to wearing haute couture, diamond chandelier earrings, waist-length hair extensions, or the pound of makeup that I let my mother layer on my face.

Or maybe it’s because the last time I followed hordes of guests up the polished granite walkway of the Simmons estate, Mom and I had just finished watching an empty coffin being loaded into our family crypt.

I inhale deeply, trying not to remember Dad’s memorial service or the reception that Patrick’s mom hosted for us afterward. But images from that day start flooding my mind, and I freeze, right in the middle of Cathryn’s stream of incoming party guests.

The boring black shift that I mindlessly slipped on that morning.

The minister bestowing blessings that I paid no attention to.

Mom doubled over when we said our final good-byes with the help of two single red roses.

I was in so much shock then; I didn’t even shed one tear. Perhaps if I’d seen my father’s body, I might have cried.

As I stand here, unable to move in my perfectly fitting, two-thousand-credit designer gown, I wish that shock had never gone away. Sometimes I desperately miss the beautiful numbness that gets you through that first stage of grief or, if you’re lucky, makes you think that what’s happening to you isn’t even real.

Before my dad’s accident, Patrick and I used to escape together with our Equip prototypes so we could feel that wonderful nothingness, but now . . .

Running my hands up my bare arms, the same way I did at my dad’s funeral, I feel like all the nerves on my skin are raw and exposed. It only gets worse post-Aftershock.

I know it. And so does my mom.

Suddenly, two women whiz by in identical hot-pink pantsuits, almost knocking me over. I’m actually thankful for their rudeness, because it propels me forward, although in baby steps. I steady myself and set my gaze on the enormous villa that Patrick grew up in. I don’t recall this place looking so intimidating, which is strange, because it’s the size of a city block and, with its large, domed ceiling, bears a strong resemblance to the old Detroit Observatory. It’s also on top of a steep hill in the exclusive Heights Sector, far from the reaches of Florapetro pollution, so no one has to worry about

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