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PROLOGUE

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Confined by gravity and free in mind, I walked that plane where my humanity never ceased.

Before the world ended, I lived in a small apartment with my grandmother. It was warm and comfortable, full of a wide variety of knitted things, guarded by kitschy porcelain angels who insulated the warmth and safety of our home. Their faces seemed especially cherubic every time I awoke from one of my many nightmares. Judgmental, even. But welcoming, regardless.

The apartment had only one bedroom, and it belonged to my grandmother. Though it bothered me as a child, I gained an appreciation for my sleeping situation as I grew older. When I rested at night, I always sank deeply into our ancient brown couch, flipping the rainbow of crochet that perpetually rested on top of it over my body. Doing this always provided a comfort so bone deep that I'd fall asleep in seconds.

Here is something that I've realized since everything changed. There is absolutely no feeling in the world quite like being surrounded by the lingering scent of a warm dinner that now fills your belly, ribs a bit sore from the laughter you shared with someone you love, legs tired from a long day at the menial yet exhausting job you took (You know—the kind of job that's merely meant to fill the liminal period between childhood and adulthood while you look for something better, but it overstays its welcome for too long to be considered “liminal” anymore), and finally, after such a long and rich evening, crashing on the old couch that has cradled you since you were just a child. See, other children had stuffed animals, blankets, sweaters, even...I had that

couch. In fact, I had a whole apartment, even. All of it felt like one big comfort object. It took on its own essence. It had its own life. Intuitively, a child feels that a comfort object is alive although she logically knows that it is not. That's how I felt about the apartment. Still feel, really.

Anyway. The only feeling that even comes close to that is the swell you get in your chest when you are on your way home, it is raining outside, and you can see the orange glow of your apartment's window breaking its way through the deep blue landscape as if it is a beacon of safety. If it's during the right time of day, the smell of everyone's dinners cooking coalesces into one warm aroma, the streetlights hit all of the puddles just right, and you may have a small prize for your loved one clutched in your fingers. It could be a trinket for their collection, a dessert, ingredients for the dinner that you will cook for them. Something small. Something meaningful.

When I was young, I loved to participate in all of the joys of life that I possibly could. I had long since learned that it is short. I have now learned, at my bigger age, that the reasons why life can be so short is *because* of overindulgence in its joys. Sometimes they are not truly "joys" in the first place. Sometimes they are mirages that we chase out of desperation. This nuance, however, was lost on me for a very long time. I'd been overwhelmingly, painfully drunk, and overwhelmingly, painfully sober. I also knew the euphoria that both states of existence had the potential to hold. I had objects of passion to the point of obsession. That passion rooted from rage or love or lust. From immense grief.

Sometimes, I hoped to be the object, and often my wish would be granted. Through a series of partners and predators, some like vultures, some more like hawks, I learned that being

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the object felt better than being *an* object. But being *the* object, I now know, is a very dangerous game.

In the beginning, there was nothing.

In a beginning, there was nothing.

Though I have that knowledge now, it took experience to gain it. It felt special to be *the* object as a fresh teenager who still had the narcissistic and deeply buried desire to be one of the pin-up girls in the posters on my boyfriend's wall. It was a girlish desire to be a princess, I think, a trinket to be placed on some pretty boy's shelf and worshiped. Really, I guess I just wanted to feel loved. Was I wrong for mistaking that simultaneous reverence and degradation for the way that I was meant to experience affection and care? For digging desperately through all of the sickness and pain to find just one scrap of love? Do you blame me? I hope you don't. Or that if you do, you can forgive me, regardless. I don't know what's my fault and what isn't anymore. You be the judge.

Those relationships only started to feel wrong to me when my "*the*" changed to an "*an*." I failed to see the myriad ways that all of them were doomed from the very start. The article that came before the word "object" was never the problem. The noun itself was. Unfortunately, that was my label. *Is* my label. *Has always been* my label. Literally and metaphorically. Long before my world ended. Long before I learned what I know now. It is now too late to change what I am. *Object*.

And the voice was the subject.

It started on my eighteenth birthday. The voice explained to me that it has been passively observing me for my entire life. I knew nothing about it. Rather than talking about itself, it chose to talk about me. It told me things about myself. Some of them were

things that I did not know before, or things I didn't particularly think were true, not even after the voice would tell me them.

It was wrong, what they did to you.

If you did this, you would look quite a bit prettier.

That outfit looks nice on you.

I asked the voice if it were me, if it was just another way my teen self-centeredness was manifesting. I felt uncomfortable with those comments being thrown my way from inside my own head. It didn't *feel* like I was the one saying them, but I supposed that the voice had to be *some* aspect of myself. Some kind of weird Freudian narcissism. Every time I would ask, however, the voice would tell me no and would refuse to elaborate any further.

It lived alongside me. Strangely, the voice did not even speak to me in my own language, but I inherently understood its words as if it were prewired within me.

The language of God.

For my own comfort, I chose to believe it was a normal experience to hear such a voice. Still, I never discussed it with others. Perhaps it was some kind of taboo, some kind of open secret, like when I got my first period and I thought that something was wrong with me. Nobody had ever told me about it before. Despite that, everyone gets one, I learned. Regardless, something inside of me knew better than to bring the voice up with anyone else. It was quite passive and harmless, anyway. It felt more familiar as the years went by. It tried to influence me quite often, but I can't say that it really worked. I wondered, even, if it was a weird way that my relationship trauma was manifesting. At times, the voice sounded somewhat like a jilted lover. *Is this something dissociative?* I would wonder. *A maladaptive way that I'm coping?*

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Still, I said nothing to anyone. The most knowledge I had on “hearing voices” came from movie depictions of psychosis. Not the most accurate. I didn’t want to seek any more knowledge outside of that. Therapy would hurt. I feared pain. I feared the truth. I feared gaining any more unsavory labels.

Object.

I have learned since then that the voice is in fact *not* like a period, not like facial hair or stretchmarks or masturbation, not even like passive suicidal thoughts or active suicidal thoughts or the absolute depths of mental illness. The voice is not something that many experience and few discuss. Sure, some people hear voices, but only I have heard *the* voice. As for why I was chosen, I still don’t know.

Supposedly, God chose Mary because of her purity. I know I am not pure. God chose Abraham because of his faith. I am not faithful. Perhaps I was chosen for my vulnerability. Or my body. The God that chose me is animal, privileged, wired to conquest and colonize and control, particularly what is physical—what he can see right in front of him.

Maybe I was just at the wrong place during the wrong time. Maybe something about me was inexplicably attractive. Maybe it was the fact that he was watching me through what was essentially a one-sided mirror, developing a parasocial relationship with me. And he knew that I was vulnerable. That made me worthy of taking. I just needed to be made physical.

There’s no point in overanalyzing it, I guess. What’s done is done.

I only have one request for you—think kindly of me. I didn’t ask for this.

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CHAPTER ONE
CREATION
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I think that it was early autumn, if that means anything.

At the time, I was working at a local deli. I spent my days making sandwiches, filling sauce bottles, sweeping, mopping. Incredibly mindless work. I didn't see that as a bad thing, necessarily. Being able to zone out so often and think of other things was pleasant. I'd long mastered the art of orienting myself away from reality.

I thought that I might be promoted to supervisor soon. As I walked to the store for my opening shift, feeling the cool breeze, inhaling the earthy smell of dead leaves, I wondered if I wanted to get ahead of the game and quit my job before that ever happened. This is something that my grandmother might have clicked her tongue at disappointedly and referred to as *self-sabotage*. I thought of it as a breakup before things got too serious. If I was going to commit myself to a job, it was not going to be at a deli. Nor at the fish factory, or a cafeteria, or as a cashier at the music store. I wanted something bigger, which obviously required some credentials. Credentials that I did not possess.

I'd saved a decent amount of money, but not nearly enough to afford going to school. I'd taken a few classes at our local community college, but I knew that I had no shot when it came to a four-year university. I didn't even know what I wanted to study, for one. Something to do with natural sciences, maybe? Biology? What kind of job could I even get with that? For two, I barely scraped by in high school. I would have been the last person to be considered for a merit scholarship of any sort. My best shot

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would be pulling the “dead parents” card in an admissions essay to receive financial aid. Even my grandmother had hinted toward that option before.

But I couldn't. I'd always refused to use them as a sob story. Not that I was offended by the idea of it. I wasn't interested in protecting their honor or their sanctity or something, nothing like that. *Not that they had any honor to protect*, I thought. I was aware that sounded cruel and calloused, but I didn't mean it in a derogatory way. It was simply the truth.

I supposed that my resistance to telling their story was because it left an important question unanswered. What did I have to show for it? My parents dying, I mean? I was far from a success story. I didn't contribute back to society in any meaningful way. Sure, colleges love it when applicants go against the odds, somehow; and God knew that I had plenty of odds. I didn't go *against* them, though. I moved with them. I didn't thrash against the tide. I passively let it carry me back to shore over and over and over again. What was the point? Could I overcome the small waves? Yes, easily. But they'd always turn into bigger waves along the way.

And either way, I knew that I'd end up back on land.

I hummed as I unlocked the store. My humming turned into a loud grunt when I heaved the equipment I'd need for the day onto the counter. As I did this, I became uncomfortably aware that a big part of my refusal to do anything more with my life was complacency. I liked going home after work to my grandmother. Going on dates that I knew would never go anywhere further. I never grew out of my love for cheap thrills and childish comforts, and I never grew out of my repulsion to responsibility. As I matured, I'd just learned how to take advantage of those comforts

more carefully, how to avoid getting hurt in the process. And that almost made it *boring*.

At least it was familiar.

Even more than every other activity I consumed my time with, I loved pretending to be stupid. It felt like I was getting one over on somebody. It was also a way to protect my ego, I supposed. To keep myself from being vulnerable. At one point, long ago, I did it to entertain myself, to play with whoever I was courting. The Machiavellian nature of it had long since dissipated. It became a form of protection.

You're quite the seductress.

I inhaled sharply. No matter how long I lived with the voice, I never did get used to it interrupting my thoughts. There was a stinging pain in my fingers. I dully looked down. I'd cut them open on the tomato slicer, my blood combining with the fruit's acidic juices. Crimson liquid poured out from underneath the tomatoes, nearly blending into their watery orangish juice. I blinked.

"Fuck," I whispered. "Do you ever shut up? Do you have to distract me while I'm at work?" Tears of frustration squeezed out of the corners of my eyes. I hated the sight of blood. As I searched the room for our first-aid kit, I thought about some other things that I hated. I hated meat. I hated the way the meat at the deli came prepackaged and pre-sliced and soaked in its own juices. And the plasticky chemical smell that emanated off of it when you opened it up. I hated how I was treated like a piece of meat. Pre-sliced, pre-packaged, shelved up for sale. With a sense of *fakeness* that everyone pretends is natural. I wrapped my fingers in gauze until the bleeding stopped. It would leave a scar, but it didn't look deep enough to necessitate stitches. "I'm not a seductress," I said out loud.

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The voice was silent.

I hated the way that none of the bandages were really waterproof, regardless of what the package said, so I'd have to wear rubber gloves when I did the dishes. I hated that water would inevitably get inside the rubber gloves, anyway. I hated that I had to do the dishes. I hated that I had to work. I hated that things cost money. I hated that I just couldn't muster the willpower to want any more for myself than this.

...There's more for you in store.

I scoffed. *Okay, asshole. And who are you?*

I felt smug when I was met with silence. I knew that the voice wouldn't answer.

A frown crept across my face. *Normal people don't act this way.*

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"What happened?" My grandmother's brow was furrowed in concern as she ran her thumb across my fingers.

"I cut myself on the tomato slicer at work." I avoided her gaze. "It was an accident." The fact that I even had to clarify was deeply embarrassing. Still, she did not look away from my face.

"Hm," she muttered. "You been clumsy, lately?"

"I'm always clumsy."

"You sure it's accident?"

I felt some of the hot rage that coursed through me as a teenager every time my grandmother sent me down this line of questioning. I didn't react to it, but it served as a vestigial reminder of what our relationship used to be like. Strained, to say the least. I felt ashamed that it was still latent within me. "Yeah."

"Okay." She sighed. "I believe you."

I still didn't look her in the eye.

“I don’t think you crazy,” she clarified gently. “Just making sure. You know?” Somehow, she always knew my exact anxieties. It could be as frustrating as it was soothing. As a child, it made me feel *too* seen. Naked, almost. As an adult, it was more appreciated than not.

After a beat of silence, she continued speaking. “Time for make dinner.” She turned away from me and started shuffling toward the kitchen. She had a funny way of physically removing herself from the situation every time it got too weird, every time the air felt too thick. She especially had a knack for making the situation awkward, then diffusing the awkwardness just as quickly as she brought it about. I think it might be a talent that all old women possess.

“Time *to* make dinner,” I corrected her softly, slowly pacing behind her. She turned around and poked her tongue out at me.

“And how many languages *you* know, huh? In this house,” she said, “time *for* make dinner.” She grinned slyly. “Just like time *for* you to get out of kitchen.” She smacked my arm playfully and began to ignore me in that way only old folks can get away with, humming to herself as she took a bag of carrots out of the refrigerator. I laughed and sank into the couch. Everything was okay again for the very last time.

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Suddenly, it was dark. I had fallen asleep. I missed dinner—I could still smell it lingering in the air. I heard my grandmother snoring in her bedroom. Most prominently, I felt a sharp pain throbbing right between my eyes. I attempted to slip back into unconsciousness, thinking that it would be gone by morning. This did not work. For the next couple of hours, the sporadic sleep I caught came in bursts of vivid and confusing dreams that heated the inside of my skull until I was forced to awake again. It was as

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if my eyelids were forcibly snapped open every time I tried to go back to sleep. Overlapping whispers crowded my brain, all frantic.

A denial-of-service attack is when a legitimate user cannot access a system. This is because it is maliciously overloaded with illegitimate traffic until it can no longer respond or crashes.

Hospital? Grandma?

Fuck

and the bolt goes right through the cattle's brain right through it and the cattle dies painlessly but this is not painless oh no

sleep—fuck you're so annoying

mom

dad

After a few minutes of this, one resounding voice spoke over all others.

Walk outside.

Its tone had changed. It was more human, more evolved. It was now working in complete separation of my own consciousness rather than feeling as if it were rooted into it. Its vague suggestions and attempts at influence became demands. Finally, it was acting, a benign affliction turned malignant. Out of all the stimuli swirling in my brain, it was strangely the only one that soothed me. So, I followed its commands.

Carefully, I snuck past my sleeping grandmother's room. Everything in my head was so loud, I felt a strange worry that the volume of my thoughts could somehow wake her up. I opened the door slowly, the sound of its hinges nearly as deafening. I avoided all of the creaky floorboards. I always joked that I was as familiar with that house as I was with my own body. Every little feature that could get in my way—doorstops I've stubbed my toes

on, items around corners, things like that—had long been memorized and accounted for.

But my jokes about familiarity with my grandmother's apartment were no longer truthful. I was less familiar with my body at that point than I was with most things, let alone my home. At least the home felt like mine. My body did not. It never did, to be frank, but the voice's sudden activity made it more true right then than ever before.

I stopped thinking about that. I could not afford to dissociate right then. It could trigger a panic attack. If my mental state got any worse, I might have done something that would awaken my grandmother. That was the last thing I wanted. It would be impossible to explain why I was going out so late. I knew that I would be far too incapacitated to lie to her. She might even try to take me to a doctor or something if she witnessed how delirious I was. Maybe she would think I was drugged. Maybe she would imagine that I'd had a secret night out on the town and that I'd been roofied. I didn't want to worry her that way.

Nothing in my own head made sense. I couldn't string a single thought together. The only thing that I could understand, the only thing inside of my own brain that made any sense at all, was the voice. So, I had no choice but to follow its instructions.

The next thing I knew, I was in the elevator headed downstairs. I couldn't really remember getting there. All of the different locations that made up my journey are now just flashes in my memory, everything in-between grey and uncertain. Like constellations.

When I got to the lobby of my apartment, I rushed through it and pushed the doors open with a flourish, the cold air crisp and welcome against my face. I found myself wishing that my brain

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could experience that same sensation. I imagined that my mind was an overheating computer.

Keep walking. I innately knew where to go, just like how I innately understood the strange language that the voice spoke to me in. I let my legs take me there (though I can't say I truly felt I had a choice) until I had walked through the urban landscape for hours. I felt as if my body was no longer mine, and I simply allowed it to do the work that my brain was commanding of it on its own. I eventually found myself at the edge of the city, but my legs did not cease. The sense of danger that came with walking alone in the city was replaced with the stark countryside's eeriness. Oddly, I didn't have any run-ins at all when I walked through the urban area. I didn't even see another living soul. Additionally, I felt oddly indestructible. Safe. Like there was no possible obstacle that could get in my way. Ironically, this, in itself, made me feel afraid.

My feet carried me beyond dirt paths and fields of dewy grass despite the pain that was shooting up into my thighs from my ankles. The pain inside my skull still felt even worse. I thought I might die. *Is this what they call a manic episode?* My suspicions felt confirmed when I realized I was standing inches away from the edge of a cliff.

Alright, the voice said, look up. See the stars? Touch them.

"How?" I whispered aloud. When I heard how foreign my own voice sounded to me, I winced at how little control I had over my strange behavior. *Dissociation, for sure,* I thought to myself.

Try.

That was my moment of truth. Underneath my blind faith in the voice, I felt the weight of the reality of the situation—that I was in the middle of nowhere, atop a ledge I did not entirely

remember arriving at. That I was about to see if I could “touch the stars.” It was so similar to the numerous tragic psychotic breaks written about in newspapers that I struggled to believe it was happening to me. Those were things that happened to *other* people. Things that *we*, as people who had a typical perception of reality, could not understand. Things that happened inside of heads that we thought of as so far from ours that there was no way we could ever truly comprehend why they did what they did, no way that we would ever do the same.

But here I was. About to do what I was about to do. Able to *make sense* of what I was about to do in a gut-feeling sort of way, even if my logical mind was screaming for me to stop. But there was nothing I could do to stop myself. It was going to happen. Just like it had happened to many before me. And just like them, I would be thrown into the category of *atypical*, sick, an “other” from the people who consider themselves “normal.” I supposed that’s what people do to comfort themselves. Convince themselves that there’s no way they would ever be subject to the same mistakes that the people who are “different” from them make. The reality is that anyone can be driven to do anything, under the right conditions. This was proof.

Do it.

I looked down past the edge. The night made whatever lay at the bottom invisible, but it still looked like it was at least a 20-foot drop. I backed up and focused on the sky above me instead, praying that it was a weird dream. Perhaps I should have sought out help about the voice earlier.

But there was no time for regrets. It was too late for that.

As soon as the correct neuron fired, I took off sprinting toward the edge and jumped, reaching my arms toward the night sky.

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There was no drop.

I floated.

My heart fluttered. I was flying. All of the pain I had collected in my body and carried with me throughout my lifetime seemed to melt away, too heavy to stay attached to me, forced to remain on the ground. My fears and earthly worries could not come along with me. *I could fly.*

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I desperately reached toward the stars. I hadn't ever been anything special before. All my life, I was orphaned and forgotten, only really having my grandmother as a source of stability, always knowing that she was impermanent and that I would one day be left all alone. Finally—finally, I had accomplished something God-like, something significant. There was no need to look down ever again.

Almost there, the voice said encouragingly.

My body approached the twinkles of light, warm and playful. They almost looked like they were swirling around one another, playing chase, innocent and welcoming. My mind reverted to childhood. As a kid, I had hours to look at the stars for as long as I wanted to. As an adult, I had to feel restricted in the world's smallness. I rarely got the chance to so much as look up at the sky. There was so little time to stop and take in the beauty of the world. I had to savor the moment whenever I was able to do so. I was finally put in a position where I could feel wonder for the world once more, forever falling upward. I remembered what it felt like to look up at my kindergarten teacher, a kind giantess. To look up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the classroom's ceiling during naptime. Her slow and patient voice echoed in my mind. *Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.* That's what I needed. Slowness. Endless possibilities at my disposal. Unfortunately, my childhood was cut short far too early.

I was herded into a singular fate before I was ready. At last, I got another taste of the slowness and vast freedom that comes with getting to be a child.

I realized I was approaching a darkly painted ceiling. There was no infinity despite what I had been led to believe.

I wanted to *make* infinity. I wanted to break it.

No, the voice said, not unkindly. *Look closely at the star in front of you.*

I did. I noticed that not only that star, but all the stars, were merely strings of LED lights attached to the ceiling I wanted to destroy so badly. Small, puny, even, always nearby. Not natural. Constructed by somebody else. I was closer to the wonders of my world than I thought I was.

Upon hitting the ceiling, I finally decided to inspect the landscape below me. Everything seemed so fake! The city below me was small and plastic. I was bigger than all of it. Seeing it all at once made me feel a deep admiration for my home. It was a profound appreciation for the smallness of it all. Cozy and tight knit like my grandmother's apartment.

Touch the star, the voice encouraged.

I reached out and pressed the tip of my finger to the warm bulb.

The night turned blindingly white.

I blinked my eyes rapidly. My floating feet became flattened by a smooth surface, but I was too stunned to pay attention to the gentle bodily sensations surrounding me. My back pressed against something. My eyes closed, but I could still only see that same pure whiteness. Nothing felt real. As my vision came back into focus, the white settled into something slightly less intense, slowly faded into shapes, took on various shades.

I was in a room. Every surface was pearly and luminous. Perhaps “room” was the wrong word. It felt more as if I woke up in a shiny box. I was lying on a hospital bed. I realized that I had been unconscious for an unknown period of time.

“Hello?” I nervously gripped my elbows and pulled them into myself. I was speaking in the language of the voice. My tongue naturally fit around the words I never dared to speak aloud.

The language of God.

I was never the especially pious type, but I still decided to take my best guess. “...God? Have I died? Mom? Dad? Are you here?” For a few seconds, there was only thick silence. Then I heard a chuckling voice break through the still air.

“I’m no god, in the Christian sense.” A door in the room slid open and a man in a suit entered. He was followed by a group of people who were dressed more like me. That is to say, they wore casual and comfortable clothing. They all looked as if they’d never slept in their entire lives. A tense aura of exhaustion lingered around them. I almost felt tired just looking at them. All of the people in the room looked ever so slightly...*inhuman*. I recognized them as members of my own species, but their bone structure was different. High cheekbones, huge owl-like eyes that burned into your soul. Although they looked uncanny, they looked unconventionally, hauntingly beautiful.

“Who are you?” I asked meekly.

“My relationship to you is closer than you think.” He paused, as if he was thinking carefully about what he was going to say next. Then he shook his head. “Not from a spiritual standpoint, though. If you define ‘God’ as a holder of life, a controller of worlds, then...well, yes, I suppose I would fall into that category.” He grinned. “But that’s quite the loaded term, don’t you think? And my power is in no way mystical. Purely science.”

When he said the word *mystical*, he half-chuckled, half-spat the word irreverently. When I stared at him blankly in response, he cleared his throat and continued, changing the subject. “I believe you’ve named me ‘the voice.’ I mean, you could have been more creative!” He smirked at his own joke.

I didn’t laugh. I glanced at the crowd behind him. None of them laughed, either. They were too preoccupied staring at me in wonder.

“...But you’re not my creator,” I finally responded.

He smiled and inhaled sharply through his teeth. “Well...yes and no. I *did* cultivate the conditions that led to you.” His eyes wandered across my body before meeting my own again. “What were millions of years for your world were mere months in mine.” He slid his hands into mine. “But waiting for you felt like an eternity.”

He moved forward as if to kiss the back of one of my hands. I pulled them away from him with haste, shocked. I was far too surprised about what I was learning to entertain his freshness. “I’m...” I paused. I was speechless. “Please...explain everything. I’m so confused.”

He looked offended for a beat before letting out a low laugh. “Of course you are. I’m happy to.” He sat down on the floor of the room and crossed his legs. To see such a well-dressed man sit on the floor criss-cross applesauce as if he were a child would have been humorous if I weren’t so afraid. I joined him.

“It’s truly quite simple. You are from a pocket universe that exists within *my* universe. A pocket universe that I created. I first began the project five years ago. Rather than going through the trouble of cultivating the conditions for billions of years of evolution, allowing your world to germinate from a big bang or primordial soup, I chose to replicate my own planet as it existed

during the beginning of the Stone Age. See, I took a more humanity-centric approach to my project. Inherently flawed, I know, but I would have been more than a bit disappointed if I cultivated all the conditions for intelligent life only for humans- or *humanoids*- to never exist. That's why you and I look ever so slightly, yet fundamentally, different. Neat, huh?" He chuckled. "What can I say? I just love people."

"And you replicated fossils, too? So after all this time, after all our scientific advancements, the fundamentalists were kind of...well, *right*? Evolution *didn't happen*?"

"Well, evolution is real in *my* world. To be fair, I misled the people living in *your* universe by copying my own world's conditions, so of course the evidence would lead the people in your world to come to that conclusion. But not everything lines up perfectly between our worlds. Far from it! You'll learn to adjust."

"Learn to adjust?" I repeated. I looked down at the ground. A deep pit formed at the bottom of my belly. "What do you mean, 'learn to adjust'? I want to go back home, eventually."

The group of scientists behind him shifted their feet in discomfort. He looked at me with slight sympathy in his eyes. His tone became apologetic. "My dear, you don't understand. What was formerly your 'home' no longer exists. I've ended the project. When you came into existence, I was fascinated with you. I wanted to be there alongside you. I chose to slow down my own perception of your world's time *just so I could take in every detail of you*. And as you grew..." he sighed dreamily. "Well," he continued with a bashful tone, "I found myself falling in love."

"Falling in love," I dryly repeated under my breath. "*Ending the project*"? *What the hell does that mean?* I stared hard into my hands.

I realized that they were not my own.

“This...is not me.” I glanced up at him frantically. “I’m not in my own body,” I said, hushed and panicked. I couldn’t believe the very words that were coming out of my own mouth. In fact, they were so unbelievable that my body was numb to the gravity of their meaning. It was too incomprehensible, too impossible.

But it was true. Oddly levelheaded, the man responded, “For you to survive in this universe, we had to make some adjustments. Your old universe’s conditions are far different from mine, so I engineered a new body for you that could more easily survive here before you arrived. It must have felt only like seconds to you between being in your universe and being in mine, but we transplanted you into your new body while you were unconscious.”

I continued to stare hard into the ground, intentionally placing my hands behind me so they were outside of my field of vision. I was in too much shock and denial to cry. My new body couldn’t even begin to process the news he had given me. Could anyone? Is this something that humans are equipped to handle? Am I even capable of coping with the existential questions and grief that this was bound to cause in me? It felt unreal. I expected to wake up any moment.

He lifted my chin and gazed into my eyes. “That was the most intensive and revolutionary project I ever attempted. It was my life’s work. I ended it all for you. I wanted you to be here with me.”

A soft chorus of mushy cooing and *Aaaw*’s erupted from the small crowd behind him.

“My grandma’s gone?” I asked, dread flooding my chest at the very suggestion.

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“And everyone else. I know it must be jarring, but if it helps, it’s not like it was a painful ending.” He stood up and turned to the group, his cheerful demeanor unwavering. “Alright, team. Project Metaworld has officially sunsetted.” A collective and exasperated cheer emerged from the crowd. I stayed on the ground. I stared into the tile hoping, again, desperately, that I would wake up, hoping something would happen to make everything make sense.

I never did. Hoping wouldn’t help. Praying wouldn’t either.

The language of God. And God is in love with you.

God loves his children.

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CHAPTER TWO
GOLDEN CALF

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The billionaire, as I learned he was, gently placed his hand underneath mine as he helped me into a heavily guarded vehicle. It was akin to a futuristic limousine. Not only was he unusually young for a billionaire, but he was also the world's richest man.

"I want to celebrate you," he said. He kissed the back of my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I let him. My anxiety, quelled enough to only be surface level by then, unraveled and pulsed in waves throughout my body once more. I tried to feel attraction for him, but it refused to be summoned. Trying to muster together that kind of feeling felt like trying to strike a wet match or play with a Ouija board by yourself. My nerves dampened all other possible feeling. So did my skepticism. I knew that my safest bet would be to play along with whatever would please him.

Feeling attracted to him would please him.

I simply couldn't do it.

I rolled down the window of the vehicle and looked at the sun. It was brighter than it was in my original universe. Everything was ever so slightly different. The feeling of the air coursing through my lungs felt a little bit harsher than it did before. Whether it was because of my new body or the different air quality or altitude, I did not know. But it was still different. I didn't like it. It felt like a dream.

Everything was far too unforeseeable for me to feel any comfort whatsoever, having just arrived in this new universe and already having to take a giant plunge into the public eye. I was the creation of the world's richest man. His romantic partner, too.

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Just yesterday I had come home from work to my grandmother sitting at our janky kitchen table, pouring tea for both of us, her ever-comforting aura and unconditional love brightening the entire apartment, beautifying it. Just enough to warm the small world that we shared together. To heal me, whenever I needed it. I still didn't feel sad about the fact that she was gone. I hadn't had any time to process it. Aside from that, my new situation was far too inconceivable to feel real, regardless. Really, I still expected to wake up and see her standing in the living room's doorway. She would inform me that I had been screaming in my sleep. Not the first time it's happened.

The billionaire interrupted my train of thought. "Do you know what they're calling you?" he said to me. "The alien girl. My little alien girlfriend. Isn't that cute?"

Slowly, I turned my head to face him. I could not manage to make my face look anything other than blank. He didn't seem to notice.

"From another universe," he continued. "Do you have any idea how amazing you are to the people here? You're unique to them. Everything about you..." he trailed off and looked me up and down. Already, I noticed that he did this a lot. Getting used to his wandering eyes would be yet another thing I'd have to add to my mental list. "You look ravishing," he finished.

I felt indifferent to his compliment. The beauty standards, too, were different in this new place. Before we left, I had been treated like a doll, my face painted over and my hair tightened into a style that was foreign to it, clothes chosen for me and tailored to my body to hide some features and accentuate others. I didn't think of my hidden features as undesirable until then. I didn't consider the features that they chose to accentuate particularly attractive, either. All of this was done to help me

conform to this new world, to make me more acceptable under the public eye. I supposed that I must have looked beautiful based on the reactions of the cosmetologists once I was finished, but I didn't grasp what "beauty" in this new world actually entailed. I had no choice but to trust the people who did, just like I was going to have to trust others about everything else. I didn't like the vulnerable position that this put me in. In fact, I hated having to trust anyone at all. Throughout my life, I'd been forced to adopt the attitude that if I wanted something to be done right, I had to do it myself. If I didn't want someone to hurt me, I simply needed to prevent them from getting too close.

But the billionaire knew everything. Had heard all of my thoughts, knew my deepest vulnerabilities and insecurities, knew all about my darkness. I had no other choice but to trust him with this information.

Eventually, the car stopped in front of a museum. It was a large and simple building made mostly out of glass. The only opaque pieces that broke up the endless clarity were metal support beams and a few places in the vast building that had no windows, only matte blackness. They contrasted intensely with the surrounding reflective and open glass. I wondered if it was for customer privacy reasons, copyright reasons, light-sensitive artworks, or maybe something else. Either way, those spots seemed as if they were there out of necessity, not aesthetic. Whatever architect designed this building obviously intended to make a statement with its complete openness to the world; Tall, big, intimidating, but ultimately delicate and vulnerable. I supposed that the strange windowless spots in the building were the best compromise between functionality and form.

If you looked carefully at the museum, you could see that even the walls inside of it were mostly glass, allowing an outside

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viewer to look right through it. Two people on either side of the entire building would be able to see one another. Anyone inside the building, too, is exposed, as if they are art pieces to be observed and picked apart in themselves.

I noticed the building before I noticed the spectators congregated outside. There were hundreds of them. I felt the urge to hide my face from them. “Don’t worry,” the billionaire whispered to me through a smile. “The party’s inside. It’s very private. I’ll introduce you to some friends of mine.”

His arm awkwardly lingered around my shoulders as we stepped out of the vehicle and slowly walked toward the entrance. I wanted to speed up, but it was as if the billionaire was insisting on making a spectacle out of us. He soaked in all of the attention with pleasure, continuing at a leisurely pace, stringing me along with him as if I were his pet. The spectators also seemed to regard me as if I were a statement piece, an accessory, a novelty item. Maybe my insecurity or lack of understanding on how the people in this world worked caused me to have that perception. Either way, I could not bring myself to look at the crowd. Any reminder that this world was not my own introduced a new pang of nausea to my stomach, and their big piercing eyes did not help. I could still feel them burning into our backs whenever we entered the museum.

The inside of the building was dark, small spots of ambient lighting only serving to highlight the pieces on display. This meant that the natural light from outside, or lack thereof, did most of the legwork. It was difficult to see the pieces from outside of the building, but I could now tell that it was a museum of *modern art*, specifically. Or was it? *Is this what they call modern art, here?* For a second, I felt more existential dread creeping beneath my skin as I again pondered the conventions and status quo of

this brand-new culture that I would likely never fully immerse myself into or understand. I expelled those thoughts from my mind for the sake of preventing a public breakdown. Or putting it off, at least. I had a foreboding feeling that one would happen, eventually. But not here. Not in this giant glass box, not where everyone both inside and outside would be witness to it on full display.

The anxiety I felt ceased a little as I allowed myself to take a bit of satisfaction in what was still similar between my new world and my native one. The artworks easily looked like they could have come from my own world. Some paintings were mere bold and bright strokes across canvas, the colors so saturated that they burned into my retinas. Others were soft and blurry portraits of girls, yellow and brown-tinged, a little ruddy, their come-hither looks inviting the viewer in. Looks of desperation that could be confused with seduction. Maybe the other way around. Girls that ignored the viewer flirtatiously. Evilly, if not flirtatiously. Abstracted figures of women that danced nude in the sun. Men charging into war, men charging into sex. Never exposed, though. Nakedness was only for the public display of the feminine form. As it was in my own world. Unfortunately ubiquitous.

My focus switched from the portraits to the glass wall.

They were still staring.

So I switched back. I lost myself in the paintings of the girls again. *No matter what*, I thought, *humans are destined to create for the sake of creating and build temples for their creations*. I took comfort in this.

Creation is the language of God.

I wanted to get a better look at all of the works and read their plaques. The billionaire had been clinging to my arm the entire time, talking to some other men in expensive-looking suits about

things I did not understand. I gently walked away from him so I could examine the art more closely. When I leaned down to read one of the artist's blurbs, I heard the billionaire chuckle from a distance. "She's a mysterious one, isn't she?"

A voice to his left responded, "Sure seems that way. Is she adjusting well?"

I pretended I couldn't hear them as I continued my exploration.

"Hmmm. She'll get there."

"How does she know our language? Surely, her kind's language didn't develop exactly how ours has." A loud and booming laugh erupted from the disembodied voice. His tone became infantilizing when he uttered the phrase "*her kind*." I couldn't help but flinch. Flustered, I tried to play it off.

I heard a coy smile in the billionaire's voice. "I taught her without her ever knowing it."

"You sure do enjoy playing God, don't you?" Another loud laugh.

Frustration shot down from my head. Fear shot up from my stomach. They intersected in my chest, created tightness, birthed anxiety. At that point, I actively tuned out the conversation instead of pretending to. I didn't want to think about the conversation behind me. I didn't want to be a part of it. I didn't want to be around anyone who would talk about me that way.

Object.

Despite the museum's unique architecture, it was still much like any other building I'd been inside of since arriving to this new world. Geometric, overly smooth. Unfortunately, that meant that the sound of my heels clicking against marble easily betrayed my attempt to sneak away. I didn't care. I needed to get rid of that tight feeling before it exploded outside of my body. Fast.

Everyone could see me. Soon enough, I would spiral into a panic in front of the hundreds of people who were observing my every move. *I just need to make my way to a bathroom, or something.*

I glanced around desperately and quickly found one of the odd places where there were no windows, just matte darkness. It was a hallway.

When I made my way down it, I heard rapid footsteps gaining on me. I powerwalked. I kept my chin up. I overcompensated in fear that I would lose composure. They still caught up to me. I felt a hand grip my forearm and I whipped around. “Let go of me.”

“Where are you going?” The billionaire sternly looked me in the eyes. His tone reminded me of the way a father would scold his daughter. With disgust, I yanked my arm away from him. “They’re treating me like I’m an object. Like I’m not a real person. I don’t want to be here anymore. Actually, I didn’t want to be here in the first place.” My words ran together and became uncontrollably shrill. I was too upset to be self-conscious.

He gave me the same sympathetic look he had given me when he informed me that my world had ended. I could see it up close that time. It looked forced, upon closer inspection. Maybe he’d even practiced it in the mirror. Maybe he rehearsed the suave speech he would give me beforehand. Maybe he didn’t expect me to reject the stupid pick-up line he decided to lead with.

“Waiting for you felt like an eternity,” My inner voice mocked.

His dumb fucking face when I pulled my hands away from him. The only expression he’s given me that looked human. I took some satisfaction in that.

His insincere, robotic facial expressions made me think of a powerful man practicing a public statement he must make about a

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scandal, finding the best way to make himself look as good as possible. *The pure inauthenticity*. I filled with even more rage merely at the thought of it.

After a couple of seconds, he broke my feverish stream of thoughts. “Baby...” he whispered.

I snapped. “Don’t call me that. You don’t know me like that,” I spat.

He blinked in shock. I cowered away from him instinctually.

After a tense pause, he spoke again. Slowly, this time. “I know you better than anyone else *ever* has. I’ve been watching you for your entire life!” He sighed and closed his eyes. After a moment, he opened them again. The fire in them had dissipated. “I’m sorry they were talking about you that way. They’re only treating you like an object because they’re putting you on a pedestal. You’re the alien girl. You’re amazing.” He tenderly put his hand to my cheek. I looked downwards and made no effort to move it away.

“For now, the amazement they feel toward you is...well, superficial. But they’ll get to know you. They’ll get to see what *really* makes you shine.” He took my forearm again, gently this time. He slid his hand down my wrist until it met with my own, interlocking our fingers. I sighed and chose to swallow my anger. What use did it have anymore?

“Come with me,” he muttered warmly.

He led me further down the hallway and turned a corner. The talking and laughing voices echoed and became more distant. I realized that it was my first time alone with him. I supposed that it was better than being a spectacle to hundreds of complete strangers, despite the uneasiness it made me feel for just the two of us to be alone together. Either way, there would be uneasiness.

Like a square peg in a round hole.

“Where are we going?” I asked cautiously.

“A surprise,” he responded in a playful tone. He turned to look at me and pressed his finger to his lips. He winked. I startled myself when I let out a giggle. A small bubble of frustration popped in me. *I don't like him. Why am I laughing?*

We approached the door that I previously thought led to a bathroom. “Stay right here,” the billionaire whispered to me. He pulled a key from his pocket and pressed it into the knob, fumbling with it for a few seconds. He entered the room and shut the door behind him. After a few beats and a little shuffling, he spoke again, his voice muffled. “You can come in now.”

My chest swelled with awe when I walked inside. A huge table with rows and rows of little plastic buildings on top of it stood in the center of the room. Faintly, I could hear city ambience echoing through hidden speakers. The sounds of *my* city. The room was housing a mini replica of my hometown. All of the walls were painted midnight blue—a warm blue, purplish, welcoming, not like the unforgiving cold vastness of the sky that I usually envisioned when I thought of nighttime. Rows of little LED lights were attached to them, meant to resemble stars. The stars I reached out and touched the night prior. I walked up to a wall and gently placed one of them between my pointer finger and thumb. *Warm, small, encased.*

These walls are unbreakable.

When I dissociate, the sky always looks like a giant wall.

“I commissioned it just for you. Nobody else has seen it, nobody ever will.” He stood behind me with his arms crossed. “So you don't ever have to forget where you came from.”

Every single detail that I could remember from my past was present. I recognized the deli across the street from our apartment building. I didn't *love* working there, but I missed it, regardless. It always smelled like freshly baked bread in the morning. All of the

cracks in the sidewalk that I'd always carefully stepped over were present. My high school was there, carrying all of the gravity that it always had. Everything was where it should be.

I started at the replica of my apartment and slowly paced my way around the table, getting a close look at all of the little buildings and landmarks. When I looped back around again, I kneeled to the ground and looked into the miniature version of my grandmother and I's window. Inside of it was a miniscule sculpture of her sitting on the big brown crochet-covered couch, knitting.

My elbows hit the floor. The breakdown I had been putting off had finally arrived. All of the shock that shielded me from crying was gone all at once. The reality of the situation hit me like how my body should have hit what lay beneath the cliff. It was pure gravity. I cried softly for a few seconds, then my sobs got louder and more guttural until they sounded like the screeches of a fatally wounded animal. My screams hurt my own ears, but there was no way for me to control them. All of my surroundings were greyish blurs, melding together, colors chasing each other wildly like how the stars seemed to swirl before I reached out to touch one. It felt like I was stuck in a vortex. For a moment, I felt as if I were one of the abstracted girls I had seen in the paintings earlier, inhuman, all violent strokes, painful and bold and messy and stuck right in the middle of an otherwise blank canvas.

The billionaire rushed to my side and fell, half-tripping, to the floor next to me. I did not see his face. I couldn't really comprehend anything outside of myself, in fact. I barely even registered it when he pressed my head into his chest. He stroked my hair feverishly and harshly. It reminded me of the way a toddler might pet a cat. I muffled my screams using his body and grabbed for his shoulders, clawing blindly and wildly, embracing

him in my complete desperation for connection. I felt drool and tears pool around my face and soak into his shirt. I kept screaming hysterically as if all of my pain could be purged through my voice. As if it could be absorbed into the billionaire's body and disappear forever. But it would keep coming up again. And again. And again. I was experienced with trauma. I knew that it was just an endless game of mental whack-a-mole. But it was a lot easier to act as if it could all be screamed out, vomited out, bled out, cried out, drowned out, poured out of some sort of orifice. It can't. The sickness stays. The damage is permanent.

The billionaire's hand met the small of my back. "Shhhh," he whispered.

He knows me better than anyone else ever will.

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END OF PREVIEW.

Author's Note: If you're seeing this, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading my work. **DAISY BELL is set to release on June 7th, 2024.** Please consider subscribing to my newsletter on my website (www.jkpetrie.com) for exclusive updates, previews, and freebies. I'd love to have you along during my self-publishing journey.

If you have any feedback, comments, concerns, or questions about the book's release, please reach out to me at daisybellbook@gmail.com.