

Chapter Two

Laurel was certain there was something unusual about tonight's apocalypse. At school, staring at the clock, kidding with friends, and then comes the announcement over the intercom, an announcement that not just she and her schoolmates can hear, but that everyone on the planet can hear and understand, all at once. A voice calmly and carefully announces that the end of the world is six hours away, and so there isn't much time to get your things together, so to speak. At first, as usual, Laurel finds herself skeptical, but one by one a dead white look of crazy fear passes among each of her friends, and suddenly, questions: Where to go? What to do? Who to see in these last hours to make these hours seem worthwhile? The answers are never clear, and tonight is no exception, but the rhythm is certainly familiar; she knows it's time to run. She'll figure out where she's headed on the way.

She wanders in and out of houses, buildings, stores, looking for someone she knows or recognizes to spend her final moments with. In one living room, a row of pay phones is occupied by a family who seems to be calling some kind of telethon, in order to reserve their places in the afterlife. In another, people who have never really liked each other are kissing and touching each other passionately. For contact's sake. She finds some comfort in an empty building with people who aren't quite people, a couple of bittersweet faeries and a stoic, resolute centaur. The room begins to fill with water, and the four of them quickly build a submarine. The world is flooding, and this is how it might end, and they ride their submarine down the city streets, amidst the city skyscrapers, amidst the drowning city people. On slightly higher ground, Laurel realizes with horror and amazement the scope of the situation, angels from heaven herding helpless people into lines of those who are saved and those who are not. She feels the sun heating up, and in a moment they will all be incinerated, and it seems as though there are no safe places left.

And then she sees her Home, the house she lives in, way up in the hills away from all the trouble. Her companions have vanished, and the desperate sprint to her own front door is a blistering relief. It seems as though the floodwaters are licking at her heels as she bounds up the steps to the front door, charges inside, and slams and locks the door behind her. This house, the house in which she grew up, is safe beyond all measure, safe because it is Home. Her tired, tiny body slumps to the floor in exhaustion, borne of loneliness as much as physical exertion. If the world

ends around her, who will keep her company? Who normally keeps her company? Who should she be looking for?

She breathes in deeply, sucking implications into her lungs. It's always in these moments that she feels timeless, ageless, no longer trapped within a twelve-year-old body and mind, but somehow etceterated into an eternal continuum of awareness. And always, in these moments, it is loneliness that sets the stage for such profundity, loneliness that sharpens her senses to their greatest potential. Night after night after night, surviving this that and all the other insidious ends of the world, only to realize that if she remains while the rest of the world destroys itself, her own end will be much more insidious, much more sincere. It will come here, inside her Home, as the strands of her consciousness slowly unravel and disintegrate from lack of exercise.

Tonight, however, something's different. Tonight, lucidity has crept upon her in a most unusual fashion, and she feels as though every hair is standing on end, she feels as though for the very first time in all of these dreams, the plot is about to be rewritten. Slowly she stands, slowly she dares to take a step or two, slowly she begins to search the house for what she now suspects is present. Climbs the steps in mystical apprehension of what's to come, climbs the steps as though a magnet were drawing her forward, climbs the steps as though her own volition has suddenly been discarded, walks the length of the hallway to the room at the very end, the room where she sleeps, finds herself amazed that it's only now in this dream that she remembers who she shares that bedroom with, and inside, she finds

a rainbow, a rhythm, a kaleidoscopic whirlwind of sheer color and sensation, a pulsing, shimmering, tangible presence in her dream, a presence that *is not generated by her own mind*, and the thought, the image, the connection that has happened is astounding, transcendent, holy and beautiful, and she is not alone here any longer, and she can *recognize* the figure that has made itself at home within her dreams, she feels already the implications of this visitation, and as she does a mesmerizing song escapes the figure, comprised of a dozen crystal voices in purest, impossible harmony, and Laurel falls onto her knees in blessed gratitude, and wonder, and sudden joyous Hope. "Tell me your name," she whispers. "I need to know that you're real." But there will be no response. For the crescendo of experience that has brought her here to this moment continues ever forward, and soon she feels herself waking up, for the first time in months

disappointed instead of thankful and relieved, and for the first time in months she wants to talk about her dreams.

Is somebody screaming in the bed above her?

Laurel slept on the bottom bed, of course, while her sister of the identical twin variety, Melody, insisted on sleeping in the top bed, close to the ceiling, close to the stars and the clouds and outer space and all that. From her vantage point in the top bed, Melody could stare out their bedroom window at the lonely street lamp across the road, and if she unfocused her eyes just a little bit, she could stare all the way down into the city. Their house was way up in the hills, away from all the troubles of the city, and Melody somehow knew, or had decided, or had discovered, that here was a magical place... here in the top bed, perhaps, or more generally, here in their house way up in the hills. (Their mother often told them that their house was just a space ship, and that someday they'd all blast off together into outer space...) Perhaps the magic was actually centralized around her, such that wherever she went, that was where she felt it, or perhaps the magic actually did extend to the entire house and the vicinity, their backyard, the woods beyond, their treehouse, and all the local haunts. "Maybe," Melody thought this night before falling asleep, "the magic is concentrated right here in this bed, right here, perhaps, under these very blankets." The blankets this night covered her from head to toe, as though she might somehow symbolically envelop herself in mystery; and the thought was a crystalline one, and it satisfied her in an ambiguous fashion.

She slept this night and soon began dreaming of the jungle. She was in a hut, in the middle of the jungle, somewhere mysterious, somewhere elegantly dirty and murky. Sitting next to a fire, her back resting against the solid hut walls, the logic of the dream informed her that she was no longer simply a twelve-year-old girl living in her house way up in the hills. Somehow, she could feel an ocean of untapped potential beginning to spill forth, threatening to quench the fire; and her hair was longer than it had ever been, and her features were no longer soft and whimsical; somehow, in this strange jungle in her dreams, pointed sticks had punctured the protective bubble of her will, and somehow, in this strange jungle in her dreams, she felt, for the first time, trapped.

"I can't go outside ever again," she said aloud. Her unseen companion on the other side of the fire, the medicine man who lived here, probably nodded. "Don't you know what that means?" she gasped, suddenly stricken with panic and realization and simple sorrow. "Yes,

well, it's certainly devastating to me at least," she said, her unseen companion's desire for silence now plainly apparent. If she listened closely enough, she could certainly hear the Thing outside the hut, prowling around, stalking the surroundings, waiting for Melody's emergence. Each passing moment, Melody felt it coming closer and closer, testing its own resolve, and hers. "I can't go outside ever again," she repeated. "It just isn't safe out there."

and hunted. This feeling too was new, but she imagined she could get used to it. The hut, after all, was impregnable, magically so in fact. She wanted to fly, but the hut was too limiting; she wanted to sing, but her unseen companion would be disturbed. She began to dig for buried treasure underneath the ground below her, and quickly she found herself in a passageway leading down into hidden catacombs; and the many hurried faces that rushed past recognized her at once, and she felt her lieutenants and her aides giving her top secret information as she moved swiftly through her secret hideaway. She passed her very own bedroom and decided not to stop and see if a little sleeping her was still there, tucked up under the covers. She arrived at a very large banquet hall, where all those under siege with her settled in, and raised their goblets to a toast; and she couldn't contain her tears of gratitude, or loneliness, and she couldn't erase a nagging suspicion that something was very very funny about all of this.

terrified, really, when she got right down to it, which is the entire idea behind a Thing to begin with. You could hardly begin to imagine what horrible form the wretched Thing must have taken, although it was probably fairly specific in its terrifyingness. "If you are dreaming," her unseen companion across the fire said to her, "then all you have to fear is you." But this kind of logic was real logic, not dream logic; for experienced dreamers, Melody among them, knew well that dreams of jungles and far away places and spurious adventures and of course nightmarish turns and twists could easily surprise even the most practiced of nighttime voyagers.

like the crashing and pounding on the door, the horrid Thing has actually dared *approach* the hut, *touch* the hut, pound on the boundary that separates them and send shivers and shakes all through the tiny structure and its inhabitants. She turned toward her unseen companion, but she could only hear him smiling, whispering, "Here comes your future, little one, here it comes," shivers and earthquakes and the fire begins to spread, catching the walls, catching her friend, catching her hair and her clothes

and her skin, and the door breaks apart, shattered shards of protection fill the air and batter her with ironic glee

and the Thing appears in the doorway, and her first glimpse of it inspires a shock and a scream, and she tumbles onto her back, enveloped in flames and mystery, crawling backwards, screaming, scrambling, the lumbering form of the horrible Thing filling the nascent doorway with its shimmers and its ooze, its tentacles reaching for her now, slowly, deliberately, she finds her back pressed tight against the burning walls, her melting skin preventing her from standingfleeingshoutingsfighting, and the tentacles approach, and grab her left foot, then her right

and the touch

is familiar

"Laurel?" she asks in a plaintive tone.

And then, Melody finds herself awake.

It is her mother who wakes her, of course, her mother who somehow manages just in time to save her from the Thing. The entire philosophy of dreaming -- not the philosophy of *interpreting* dreaming, mind you, but the philosophy of actually *doing* it -- boils down to one simple question, with no simple answer: If you die in a dream, do you die in real life? "Ssshhhh..." her mother says, gently shaking Melody to wake her. "You'll wake the whole neighborhood." The street lamp outside the window illuminates her mother's face, gives it a kind of blessed and holy aura, though Melody knows that it's only a trick of the light. "That must have been quite a nightmare," her mother continues, and Melody decides to nod.

"Is Laurel awake?" she asks quietly.

"Of course," Laurel replies from the bed below. "I woke up just a moment before you began to scream."

"Would you like something to drink?" her mother asks. "Some water, or juice? It's probably too hot for this blanket, you know."

"I'm fine," Melody replies.

"All right, then," her mother says, kissing her on the forehead. "The next time you decide to have a nightmare, try to wait until our alarm clocks are ready to go off." Her mother's giggle is slightly contagious, and Melody sits up to hug her before she climbs down the ladder to say goodnight to Laurel.

After their mother has gone, Melody jumps down, as is traditional in cases of nightmares, and climbs under Laurel's covers, and the two of them wait a long moment before deciding who is going to speak first.

"Yes, well, *my* dream was pretty amazing," Laurel said. "It was the end of the world, and everything was falling apart, and..." She sighed. "It's already fading, the details. But... at the very end, something highly surprising happened."

Melody held her breath for a moment, wondering if she was going to enjoy the implications of whatever it was all this implied, and then said, "Yes, well, I had something highly surprising happen right at the end of *my* dream, too. Please don't take this personally, but... I saw this giant monster in my nightmare. I don't know what kind of monster it was, really, but of course it was nasty and horrible and all that... and then, it started to touch me, and I had this sudden flash of awareness that... that it was you, Laurel." Pause. "Hanging out in my nightmare."

"Yes, well, I didn't see it that way at all," Laurel replied. "I saw *you* as something extremely beautiful and wonderful."

Pause.

"Umm, hold on," Laurel said. "I think we just skipped a step."

Their father had long ago built them a treehouse in the giant tree in the backyard, as recognition that the twins would always need a special place all to themselves. "This is where you share your secrets," he told them long ago, "and this is where you hatch your secret plots." Secret plots: the kind of intrigues only possible in a royal court, or in an underground revolution. If, as their mother said, the house was a space ship which would someday blast off into outer space, the treehouse was itself a tiny space station, as distant from the planet Earth and all its troubles as the sun is distant from the moon. Tonight, as with every night just after dinner, the space station is humming with activity.

"This boy from my acting class might call me tonight," Melody says, as the two twelve-year-olds sit up in the treehouse, playing chess and listening to music. "He said we should get together and 'rehearse' sometime, but I think I know what he means."

"I couldn't be more impressed," Laurel replies.

"I didn't ask you to be impressed," Melody says. "Anyways, it isn't my fault you never leave the house."

"Listen, I've been thinking all day about what happened last night," says Laurel, ignoring Melody's implications. "I was thinking we could probably do it again."

Melody pauses, captures one of Laurel's rooks, and then says, "You show up in my dreams all the time." There is silence, as Laurel advances a pawn, and then Melody says, "How do you know we were actually in each other's dreams? I saw this giant monster and thought it was you, and you saw this beautiful whatever and thought it was me. What does that leave us with?"

"We just aren't used to it," Laurel replies. "We just need to get used to receiving each other in our heads, you know?"

"That's pretty mushy," Melody replies. She moves a bishop, effectively snagging one of Laurel's knights.

"I know what it *felt* like, Melody. It didn't feel like any ordinary dream that I've ever had. I could *tell* that it was you."

Melody pauses for a moment, giving the scenario some thought. She says, "We were dreaming in different places, of course. I was in the jungle somewhere. That could be part of it too. We need to meet in a shared dream space, you know? Instead of whatever dream environment our heads decide to cook up. That way, when we see each other, we'll be more likely to recognize each other, and more likely to be able to--"

"--communicate," Laurel finishes. "Why don't we try to meet in our house tonight? I mean, a dream version of our house. We both know exactly what our house looks like, so that shouldn't be a problem." She moves one of her pawns. "Check."

"There's only one missing link," Melody says, glancing down at the board and finding herself suddenly in trouble.

"What's that?" Laurel asks.

"We don't know *how* we're about to do this," Melody replies. "And we don't know *how* we did it last night."

They consider that one long and hard, before Laurel finally suggests, "Maybe it's a natural talent. Maybe it's in our genes, so it's intuitive. Maybe we don't have to think about it, now that we know that this talent is there."

A long pause follows.

"Yeah," Melody finally says, taking the only move available and producing a stalemate, "that must be it."

And for the first time in a long time, Laurel isn't afraid of the end of the world as she settles down to sleep. For the first time in a long time, Laurel is shivering with anticipation, drinking in the last few moments before her waking self dissipates into something else entirely. Breathe in deeply, breathe out smoothly, breathe in deeply, breathe out smoothly....

Melody chants to herself a quiet mantra in the bed above, reminding herself continually that Laurel isn't going to scare her when they run into each other tonight, when they literally *do something impossible* tonight, and Melody isn't as fearless as Laurel, and Melody too is shivering with anticipation, and the quiet glow of the eerie street light outside her window casts such a weird and sinister shadow across the room that Melody can't help wondering....

Smoothly, smoothly....

I can feel myself collapsing, she thinks in the bed below, I can feel myself wafting away into that which isn't, I can feel this which that and there it is that creeps up next to me and cuddles up nice and close, I can feel

magic here, I pull up the blankets, seal myself within this magic shell, this impervious shield, if the room filled up with lava I'd be safe under this blanket, drowsy and hot, sweating like the jungle under here, in my cocoon of quiet sleepy time

and I can feel shapes, I can feel the bed, the mattress underneath me, the softness of its softness and the smoothness of its sheets against my skin, and I can feel myself melting, sinking, and I can feel myself floating, seeping, and I can feel

that which will take me there, I am hot, and drowning, I am sailing quietly, and you will see me

in my essence, you will feel me this which every way and why, and I can't tell you what it means to me to have you here inside of me,

smoothly, smoothly,

and my eyes are shut shut shut, tight as a locked safe, what's inside is mine,

you know this sharing is

quiet

smooth and warm.

Can you see anything yet?

I'm having a problem with shapes.

You need to focus.

I know that.

I've got our entire bedroom.
Don't brag.
Concentrate. Do it smoothly....
I can feel the bedroom. I can feel the whole house. I just can't...
Dive in to where you feel it.
All these swirls....
Can you feel me? Can you see me?
Intensely... an ocean of you and me... What are we doing to ourselves?
Take my hand.
ELECTRIC contact there it is and here we are and you are Here now, and this is what Here would like to ask of you, take my hand whose hand this hand and that and now
Oh my god oh my god oh my god, Melody says.
"Pardon me?" Laurel says with a small smile. "Come out from under the covers. I can't hear you."
And moments later Laurel floats out of bed, tears the blankets away from Melody's crystalline self and yanks her to the floor in a terrific embrace, and slowly ever so slowly in an instant Melody realizes the implications
and begins to smile like there's Simply No Tomorrow, and she shouts, "Music!" and a rousing waltz fills the air, and it's just the two of them, alone together late at night when they ought to be asleep!
prancing through the house and screaming and shouting like little girls and addressing the philosophical side like dying grownups and you wouldn't believe how quickly they speak inside each other's heads, but there they are we are,
"We can go into the basement in the dark and not be scared," says Melody, "and we can leave all the lights on if we want to...."
"God knows what happens if we turn the TV on!" shouts Laurel.
"And we've got all the food we'll ever need, and I'll bet we can even fly if we want to!" Melody exclaims, and that is the best part, and the soundtrack is so wonderful,
and it is raining out,
and as the first clap of thunder makes itself apparent, the two of them stop and listen in silent, reverent respect. Even here, within this world within their dreams, even here did the world of Nature speak plainly, clearly. A thunderstorm outside,
a chill runs down her spine,

and Melody runs to the front window and solemnly, symbolically, she locks the door, she turns to Laurel, and says, "We mustn't leave this house, you know. We mustn't ever leave."
And Laurel nods, and says, "It's the end of the world out there, after all."
"We mustn't ever leave," Melody reiterates. "Not ever."
"I understand," Laurel says.
And for a moment, the implications
threaten them too much, until
"That doesn't mean, however," Laurel says with a mischievous smile, "we can't make *this* place *bigger*...."
smile
together....