

### Chapter Three

You might be wondering, of course, what I, the humble chronicler of this tale, was doing all this time, during the days when the twins were building a fantasy fairy tale castle in their dreams. We were all growing up during those days, I can tell you, growing up in our separate worlds, waiting for our individual paths to collide and interface. I had a bit of an edge on things, of course, though at the time, I wasn't aware of the situation, wasn't aware of how the peculiar physics of post-modern fiction had allowed me special access to certain things and certain places, by way of my role as author of this mess. We were growing up fast and furious, faster than children ever had before, we thought; and you could blame that on the general pace of western civilization if you wanted to, the furious technological drive toward higher and higher orders of complexity and efficiency, the encroaching ascendancy of television as a medium for the manipulation of the general public. Or, if you wanted to, you could blame it on us in particular, accuse us of being too eager to exit childhood, and too much ahead of our game. Either way, the results are pretty much the same. I spent my childhood in the arts: performing in countless plays, writing countless stories, inventing countless characters. You could consider that training for the work I would later be required to do. In high school, I acquired the nickname Scotty; this name was given to me by a close friend named Gary, who would later have an unfortunate encounter with some quicksand. Gary and I lived in Cedar Falls, the same small Iowa town as Melody and Laurel, twin sisters of the impossible. Whereas they lived up in the hills, away from all the trouble, Gary and I lived right in the thick of our little city, where we could imagine that things actually happened. Gary and I will attempt to introduce ourselves more formally later on in this chapter; in the meantime, Melody and Laurel now demand our immediate attention.

It's been a few years since we last saw them, back when they were twelve and first learning to dream together. They're now seventeen, completing their last year of high school. You might not recognize them at first, if you take them separately, since the human body is capable of working many changes during these particularly formative years. When you see Melody, you see a glowing smile and long black hair, a constantly cheerful demeanor and a somewhat outrageous style of dress; Laurel, on the other hand, has developed into a very reserved figure, with an understated way of moving through a crowd and an expression of

thoughtfulness that smooths the starkness of her features. The two of them are rarely ever seen together in public, and when they are, it's an astounding sight, for there's something electric about these two twins when they enter each other's presence, as though a literal arc of electricity is passing between their cerebellums. They were aware at an early age that many identical twins tend to develop identical interests as well, and they made the decision that this would *not* be an efficient system. Melody began developing an artistic sensibility, and Laurel began developing a scientific sensibility -- now, they can truly call themselves *complements*, by several of that word's connotations.

"Unbelievable," says Melody, as she turns on the lamp. "Simply unbelievable." She and her sister are sitting in their battered old treehouse, out in the back yard, late one fall evening. When they were younger, it was a game in the fall to pile on as many layers of clothing as physically possible in order to stay warm up here, but last year, they decided to bring up a space heater. It is now possible to use the tree house for late night relaxation all the way into the early stages of winter; and indeed, every evening before going to bed, Melody and Laurel meet here to talk, and get in touch, and prepare for the coming night's dreaming. A casual observer might expect that "unbelievable" is in fact a reference to the dreaming, but this of course is not the case; rather, she is simply remarking upon the lamp that Laurel has brought tonight, which casts a groovy yellow light across the interior of the treehouse.

"I found it in a consignment shop," Laurel says. "The base of the lamp can also light up red, blue, or green," and she demonstrates a few combinations of colors.

"Now what we need is a stereo," Melody says. "And maybe a stove or something."

Laurel laughs, says, "All of this will pretty much defeat the purpose of the very idea of 'treehouse.' Typical."

"I was on my way to acting class tonight and I saw you standing in the hallway talking to some strange looking boy," Melody says with a slight smile. "Care to elaborate on this unusual situation, my dear, or shall I let my imagination wander?"

Laurel smiles slightly as well, and says, "His name is Gary. He needed help with the math and computer tutoring sessions after school, and one of my teachers gave him my name."

Melody's forehead wrinkles, and she says, "That's it? Discouraging. Unfortunate."

Laurel has never socialized the way Melody does, rapidly flitting from one group to the next and acquiring friends and fans like trinkets and baubles. For Laurel, the process of meeting another human being is enormous and complex, worthy of great consideration. She asked her parents once what falling in love was like, and her father, a very warm and rational fellow, good sense of humor and lust for life, replied, "Love is, among other things, a constant series of compromises that allow you to function as a union instead of as two separate individuals. Does that make sense?" Yes, she thought to herself, because that describes Melody and me. On her way up the stairs to go to sleep that night, she overhears her mother, extraordinarily caring and keenly focused, highly aware of the differences between her two daughters, ask, "What do you suppose will happen if one of them finds a steady boyfriend and the other doesn't?" And her father has no easy answer, and neither does Laurel, for the whole business is trickier than she ever believed possible.

Gary is first of all an amazingly intense individual. Laurel can see him coming down the hallway toward her as she stands outside the computer laboratory. He is tall and lanky, unruly brown hair, conservative clothes underneath a battered green trenchcoat, a strange look almost frozen on his face that suggests his default psychological mode is 'angry and sarcastic.' She stands motionless like a deer caught in headlights, unprepared for contact with a stranger. He carries himself with an arrogance that belies his appearance, and the first words that come crashing out of his mouth are,

"You're Laurel, right? I was told you're smart enough to tutor with me after school. Is that true?"

And from that moment on, Laurel is taken with this strange bird.

For the sake of synchronization, Gary happens to be, at this moment, hanging out at his friend Scotto-the-writer's house, playing a role-playing game that Gary has invented. And while on a break, the conversation has turned to, not at all coincidentally, "this girl who's helping me tutor my math and computer sessions," Gary says. He's lying on Scotto's bed, while Scotto is sprawled out on the floor, listening to Gary ramble. "I wondered if I was ever going to meet anyone as smart as me in this school, and I think I finally found someone."

"What's her name?" Scotto asks.

"I don't want to tell you her name," Gary says, "because I don't want you looking her up, or trying to find out anything about her. In fact, I don't want you coming around after school trying to catch a glimpse of her or anything like that. I'm determined to have a private life, damn it."

"You don't want to tell me anything about her at all?"

"No, I want to tell you just enough to get your curiosity piqued, and then I want to keep the rest a secret. I'll speak in broad terms, so that you can't get a handle on her actual identity. She's incredibly intelligent. She's amazingly attractive. Very low key, subtle sense of humor. We hit it off right away talking about programming. We were, in fact, making programming jokes, but unfortunately, Scotto, you're not bright enough to understand them, or I'd repeat them for you. Is your curiosity piqued yet?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then I don't want to talk about her anymore." He pauses, considers the course of the conversation so far. "You know, it's this kind of thing that fuels the search for meaning in the lives of people our age. We really have no conception of what constitutes the real world, the world of responsibility and hardship and working for a living, and so these minor dramas, usually involving sexual politics of one kind or another, are what motivate us and keep us alive on the planet. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes," Scotto replies wearily, having heard this monologue on more than one occasion.

"It's fairly silly for a solipsist like me to worry this much about what other people think," Gary says. "It's not very consistent, that's for sure. One minute I'm perfectly content to be contained philosophically within a self-defined enclosure of a universe, and the next minute, some attractive math whiz walks into my life and the next thing I know, I'm reordering entire bodies of mental experience in order to accommodate her. I don't like it one bit, that's for sure."

"I can tell," Scotto says, deciding not to attempt a word in edgewise.

"Let's just finish the game," Gary says. "You're either going to take over the planet or you aren't. What'll it be?"

Scotto smiles, and says, "I don't believe it's my style to simply take over the planet." He pauses, then says, "Let's have a little fun with it first. We'll start by building theme parks..."

Meanwhile, as we arrive back at the treehouse, we find Melody and Laurel continuing their approach to the dream state. Tonight, however, will be a change from the usual routine. For the first time since their dreaming began:

"I won't be coming home tonight," says Melody abruptly.

Laurel blinks, pauses, says, "Pardon me?"

In a rush, the words come out: "I got invited to a slumber party at a friend's house. It's a theatre party. All the drama department girls are

getting together. Mom said it was okay if I went." Quick pause for breath, then: "I hope you don't mind. I *really* hope you don't mind."

Laurel stares intently at her sister, getting used to the implications. "Wait a minute."

"Look, I know what you're going to say, believe me, I do."

"No, you don't!" exclaims Laurel, hurt by the notion that for the first time since their shared dreaming began, Melody doesn't intend to be there. "You're not going to get any sleep tonight, are you. And you waited til *now* to tell me? What am I supposed to do?" Pause. "I should stay up all night and wait for you. That would be simple. It would throw off our sleep schedule, but we could dream together in the morning."

"Actually," says Melody, "we may be getting a little bit... *drunk* tonight. It's kind of a party."

The implications sink in almost immediately. Melody is off to some social occasion tonight, and does not intend to dream at all. The alcohol will certainly hinder any reliable entry for Melody.

"You'll be okay," says Melody.

"You made this decision without me," replies Laurel.

"I'm allowed," says Melody, and that much, at least, is true.

"It's new," says Laurel.

"Yeah," replies Melody, "it is. My friends were starting to wonder why I never went out, though. Theatre's very social, you know. It's all outgoing and interactive. And I—" She pauses, trips over the words, says them anyways, "I have a hard time thinking that the dreaming is our only social life."

"You seem to be challenging," Laurel says, "the integrity of everything we've constructed in the dream state."

There is an awkward pause, as Melody considers the challenge at hand. Then:

"Who knows?" she says suddenly, a dare we call it mischievous gleam in her eye. "This is one lesson I'm willing to learn the hard way. I'm going out tonight. I'm going to *get down*, if you know what I mean." And Laurel can't help but smile despite herself.

Tonight's dreaming is going to be *very* interesting, that's for sure....

Laurel always arrives first in the fairy tale dream castle; for some reason, Melody always has a little trouble with the shapes. In some ways, Laurel finds the few moments before Melody arrives a treasure, and in

some ways, she finds them to be a small terror; it depends upon her mood, needless to say, but at any rate, she wouldn't give up these moments for anything.

Here she is, then, surveying the house as it stands. Over the last few years, quite a bit of rebuilding and redesigning has gone on here. At first, the interior of the house as they dreamed it was identical to the interior of their actual house, but over time and with experience, additions were created, tunnels were discovered, entire wings appeared from nowhere, new stories erupted on top of the original two, strange new furniture arrived and bizarre and wonderful artworks graced the walls, until quickly it became apparent that this house was growing not only with Melody and Laurel's direct aid and assistance, but was even growing of its own accord in ways and means that remain mysterious. The house is like a far out kind of labyrinth now, and each night, Laurel and Melody continue the process of mapping the known castle.

They are assisted in this process, by the way, by the other inhabitants of the castle. For Melody and Laurel aren't alone here, that's for certain: almost immediately after they began creating this dream house together, visitors began arriving at the front door from who knows where, and the house developed a staff to take care of it when the twins were absent. They now have friends here in the dream world -- strange, ethereal friends to be sure, but friends nonetheless. The issue of whether these phantoms, these dream apparitions are "real" is singularly moot; early on, the twins realized in true relativistic fashion that reality is entirely what you make of it, and if the reality they were making in their dreams involved other actual entities, then who were they to challenge those entities' integrity?

"Welcome, Laurel," the castle's head of staff, a butler-ish fellow called Dawson, greets her as she strides into the main hall. Originally, the main hall was simply the living room, with a couch, a TV, and a stairway to the second floor, but now it's a vast chamber with a giant fireplace, an enormous vaulted ceiling with hanging candelabra, two sweeping, curved staircases with gilded railings, plush red rugs, statues, mirrors, and a hot tub set into the floor. "Can I get you a towel for the tub, or are the two of you planning an exploratory expedition again this evening?"

"Actually, Dawson," Laurel replies, remembering suddenly that she is alone tonight, "I'm not sure what I feel like doing tonight. But Melody won't be joining us."

Dawson's eyebrows raise slightly.

"She's having a night on the town," she says.

"I see. May I suggest, then," he replies, noting her anxious mood, "you join some of the others in the kitchen? They're having a bit of a cocktail hour. You might enjoy their company."

And she's not entirely sure what she thinks about that, not any more. Melody's words are ringing in her ears: "I have a hard time thinking that the dreaming is our only social life." Yet it's hard to argue with the presence of these figures here in the dreaming. Something entirely compelling is still going on here, whether or not Melody is here to experience it on a given night.

Laurel heads into the kitchen, which is not so much a tight little economy kitchen anymore, having expanded into a makeshift banquet room and cooking extravaganza. In addition to the regular chef, Alain, and his assistants, the kitchen tonight is already host to half a dozen of the regulars, who live inside the castle as though it were a hotel or a vacation resort in the middle of the dream world. Laurel recognizes them all, greets them all by name: there's Derald and Janszen, two psychic agents from the United Association of Interdimensionary Travelers; there's the boy genius, Tanner Mildew, who spends his spare time inventing space ships and other technological marvels; there's Susie Satori, the blissed out ingenue who invented the PermaGrin; and of course, there's the far out rock singer Airee Macpherson, and her sidekick Sierra, who plays the drums.

"Hey, Laurel's here, everybody!" says Susie Satori, swaying back and forth to her own internal rhythm.

"Laurel!" shouts Tanner Mildew, the boy genius. "Fancy meeting you here. So what are the twin sisters of the impossible up to this evening?"

"I hear the basement is expanding," Derald the psychic says.

"At an exponential rate," Janszen the psychic says.

"Might be worth checking out," Derald continues.

"If you're into that sort of thing," Janszen continues.

She takes them all in slowly, for the first time, perhaps, slightly unnerved by these beings instead of excited to see them. It feels awfully strange around here without Melody.

"Actually," Laurel says, "Melody's not coming tonight. And I don't know what I'm up to this evening."

"Melody's not coming?" says the astonishing singer, Airee Macpherson. "Sounds like an interesting evening." There's an awkward silence, as these regulars take in Laurel's current state of mind. "Where is she, if I might ask?"

"At a party, with friends," Laurel replies.

"A party with friends," says Derald the psychic, shaking his head.

"Could be trouble," says Janszen the psychic, shaking his head.

"She said she needed to get out more," Laurel explains. "And tonight's the night she's trying it."

"A ha," says Airee with a smile. "That doesn't sound so bad."

Moments later, Laurel and Airee are off walking together through the castle. Usually it is Laurel and Melody sauntering through these halls, and for the first time, Laurel takes in as much as she can of Airee's presence. She's a small woman, probably in her early twenties, with a completely magnetic personality about her. All Laurel knows is that Airee is some kind of singer, some kind of performer; she doesn't know precisely how she knows, though, and chalks it up to dream knowledge, that special knowledge a person can have of something in a dream without ever being told directly. She wonders how much Airee knows of her, how much she and her sister are embedded into this very environment. She wonders, but can't bring herself to ask out loud. Melody is the social one, after all.

"This is quite a place you have here," Airee says at long last, as they walk down the corridors of the bizarre, located somewhere in the west wing. "I don't think we've ever talked much, so I don't think I've gotten the chance to tell you how much I enjoy being here."

"Oh," says Laurel, pleasantly surprised. "Thank you."

"Really, you and your sister have created something strangely wonderful here," Airee continues. "My drummer Sierra and I had been wandering for I don't know how long, across the dreamscape. Performing where we could. The dreamscape is obviously very very weird, I mean, that's practically a given. And this castle is like an oasis."

"We haven't left the castle yet," Laurel replies. "It's against the rules."

"Against what rules?" Airee asks.

"Against... against the rules, that's all I know. It's part of how we keep the castle alive. We can't leave. What we do together is too... too powerful, I suppose. Too powerful to spread randomly. We have to move slowly."

They move through the first of the corridors of the bizarre, passing up the hall of despair altogether and moving directly into the passages of sweetness and light, talking as they go.

"Yes," Airee says at last, "I wondered about that. About the two of you dreaming together. Symbiosis, in a way. When the two of you are together, everyone can tell there's something intense going on."

"That's why," Laurel says, letting her guard down slightly to this friendly singer, "tonight is such a problem."

"Is it a problem?" Airee asks. "Has my company bored you?"

"No—" Laurel begins. Airee didn't ask the question to be mean, though, did she. Airee is an intriguing figure, as are most of the people here. Yes, go ahead and call them "people," no matter how uncertain the whole thing is, no matter how *dreamy* it all is. "No. I just miss my sister. I don't pretend to understand it."

"I do," Airee says. She smiles, says, "You'll get used to it."

Moments later there is a strange shimmering in the air ahead of them, and then Melody herself unexpectedly arrives in the castle, directly ahead in the gallery of uncertainty.

"Hi," says Melody, a bit breathless.

"Melody, what on earth are you doing here?" Laurel asks, certainly surprised by this turn of events.

"Well," says Melody, a bit sheepishly, "I basically... got a little lonely, and I, uh... well, I thought I'd come see what you were up to."

Laurel smiles.

"Hi, Airee," says Melody.

"Hi, Melody," says the singer, Airee Macpherson. "We were just talking about you."

"Oh, really?" says Melody. "Do tell."

"It seems Laurel doesn't like it when you're separated."

"It's true," Laurel agrees. "But Airee was suggesting that I should get used to it."

"I don't think it'd hurt," Melody says. "But we don't have to do it tonight, do we?"

"No," Laurel replies. "Not tonight."

"Good," Melody says. "The party was a bore, and besides I... I just felt guilty leaving you here. Is that bad?"

"I think you were right, Melody," Laurel says. "We need to get out more. If we can't leave the castle, we should do it in real life, shouldn't we?"

"God knows what could happen," Melody replies. "But yeah, I'm game for anything."

And Laurel notices what Airee has always noticed, barely visible waves of energy washing back and forth between she and her sister. They will never meet anyone in the real world who could possibly understand all this.

But they may as well try....

The next day, before the usual meeting in the treehouse....

"Hello, is Gary there?"

"This is Gary."

"Gary, this is Laurel."

"Laurel? Why are you calling me at home?"

"Chill, Gary, I just wanted to ask you out."

"Ask me out? What does that mean? Like on a date?"

"I think I haven't been spending enough time with... with other people. Maybe we could go out some time, you and me."

"Is this on the level? Are you really Laurel? How do I know it's really you?"

"Cut it out, Gary. I just want to have dinner or something, see a movie. What kind of movies do you like? We could rent something."

"Rent a movie? And watch it? Together?"

"We have a lot in common, don't we, Gary?"

"This is very weird, Laurel, I have to admit."

"I wouldn't trust it otherwise. How about tomorrow?"