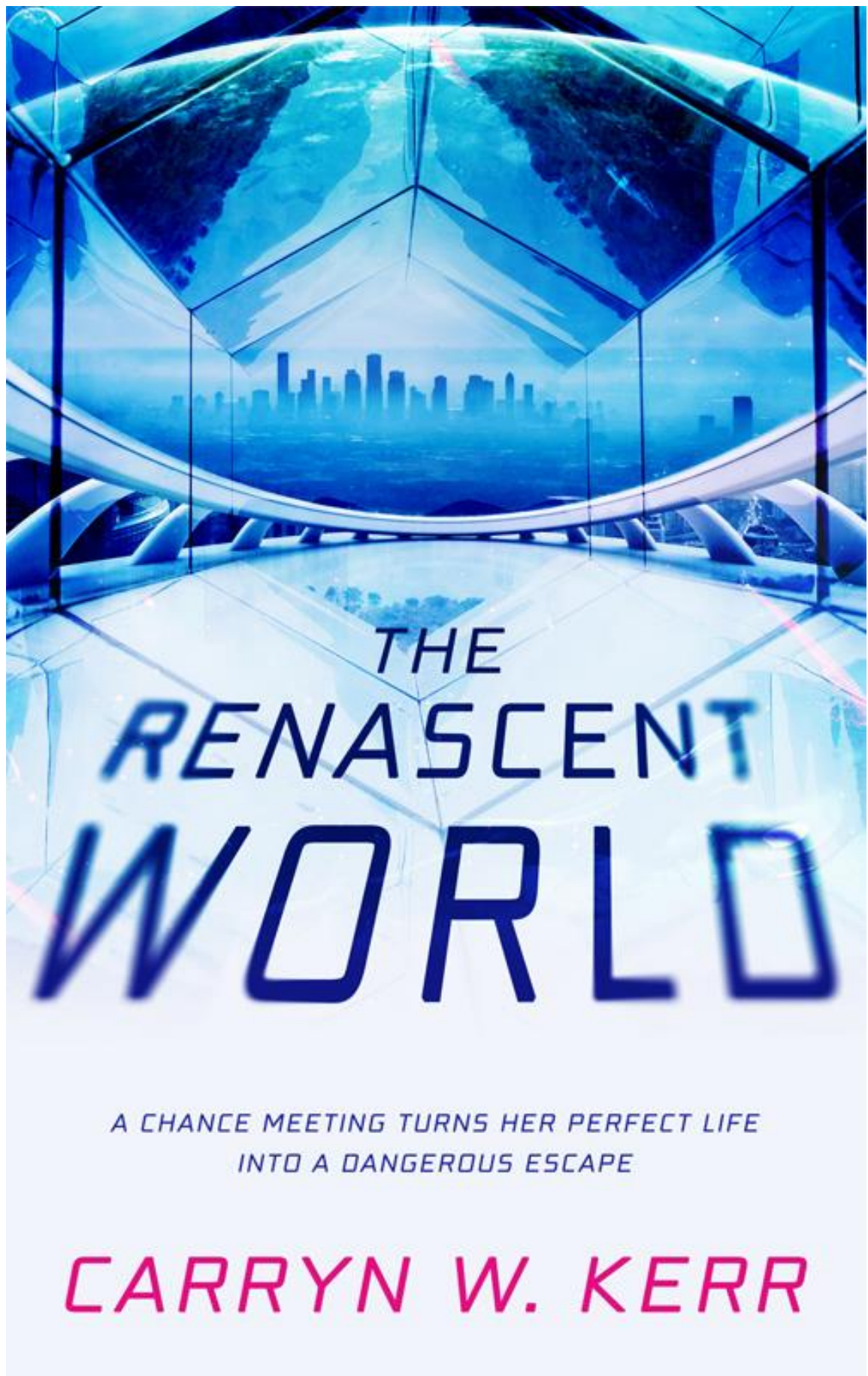




THE RENASCENT WORLD

*A CHANCE MEETING TURNS HER PERFECT LIFE
INTO A DANGEROUS ESCAPE*

CARRYN W. KERR

THE RENASCENT WORLD

CARRYN W. KERR

The Renascent World
ISBN # 978-1-913186-00-5
©Copyright Carryn W. Kerr 2020
Cover Art by Louisa Maggio ©Copyright July 2020
Interior text design by Claire Siemaszkiewicz
Finch Books

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher, Finch Books.

Applications should be addressed in the first instance, in writing, to Finch Books. Unauthorised or restricted acts in relation to this publication may result in civil proceedings and/or criminal prosecution.

The author and illustrator have asserted their respective rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Acts 1988 (as amended) to be identified as the author of this book and illustrator of the artwork.

Published in 2020 by Finch Books, United Kingdom.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the authors' rights. Purchase only authorised copies.

Finch Books is an imprint of Totally Entwined Group Limited.

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book".

THE RENASCENT WORLD

At five years old, Cassidy had outlived almost Earth's entire population. Now, at sixteen, she's in a forbidden relationship with an unworthy Earth boy.

Cassidy Jones was five years old when her parents escaped Earth with her and her brother. They were safe in Earth's orbit in the town of Petriville — hovering at the center of an indestructible sphere — when the meteor impacted Earth and killed Cassidy's grandparents, aunt and cousin.

But now, eleven years later, Gina Petri, Petriville's founder, assigns a mate to each youth. When Cassidy refuses to participate in this forced mating, her dissent places her and her family in Gina's firing line. This becomes especially pertinent when Cassidy enters a communication pod and meets an alluring hologram. Eric isn't in Petriville and he insists Gina will murder his people if she discovers their existence, because he is one of Earth's few survivors.

The more Cassidy gets to know Eric, the more she's drawn to him — and the feeling seems mutual. He has lost so much in his life and her compassion for him runs deep. Despite the intensity of the static electricity when Cassidy and the hologram of Eric touch, she yearns for the day when she will meet him in person.

All the questions will be answered when Petriville returns to Earth, and that day is quickly approaching...

Dedication

For Mom and Dad.

If I had a thousand words to thank you, they
wouldn't be enough to express my eternal
gratitude for your unconditional love and
encouragement.

Trademark Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Oliver Twist: Charles Dickens

The Three Musketeers: Alexander Dumas

At five years old, Cassidy had outlived almost Earth's entire population. Now, at sixteen, she's in a forbidden relationship with an unworthy Earth boy.

P r o l o g u e

I stood outside our home virtual experience slash living room, trying to summon the courage to enter, but my stomach was clenching so hard that it threatened to double me over. I hugged myself, rocking back and forth, and a soft moan seeped through my lips. When footsteps approached, I looked up. My eighteen-year-old brother strode across the dark wood flooring of our hallway toward me then leaned against the door frame and crossed his feet.

Although his stance was relaxed, he was not. His dense blond brows were as knotted as his fists, and his knuckles were turning white. His speech betrayed nothing when he spoke in his usual rapid-fire way. "Don't you want to wait until Mom and Dad get home from work before you go in, Cassidy? You might need them when you come out of the VE." Then he wrapped his arms around my head and shoulders. "Damn, little sister, I wish you didn't have to do this."

I loved how Liam cared for me, but his concern didn't ease my tension. I bit my lip, not exactly answering his question. "Were they here when you went in, Li?"

"On *my* 'Age of Understanding' birthday? No. You were at school, if you recall, and I went in while they were at work. Call it pride or whatever, but I hardly wanted Mom and Dad to see me break."

"And did you?" I met his bright green eyes. "Break, I mean?"

"Not to scare you, Cassidy, but everyone does."

I fixed on my leather sandals. "I know I'm supposed to go in alone, Li, but I really wish you could go with me."

He puffed a smile. "Honestly, Cass, I'd prefer that. Plus, I don't really care what Gina thinks."

Liam dropped his arms from my shoulders. He looked around as if we'd be caught and stopped or he or I would change our minds and back away. He jerked open the door to our home virtual experience room and held his hand, palm up, toward the center. I wanted to flop into the corner of the L-shaped leather couches, but I knew we weren't using them today.

Liam took my hand as the door sealed behind us. I sucked in a sharp breath and Liam gulped. The ceiling-mounted VE cube whirred, throwing a triangular light to the floor. The light expanded, sliding over our feet, up our legs, bodies and heads. A gravitational pull sucked us to the middle of the room, and a thick mist swirled around.

A light shone from out of the eye, and I grimaced. The stumpy body of Gina Petri, Petriville's founder, emerged through the mist. Horn-rimmed spectacles magnified her steel-gray eyes, and a toothy smile grew beneath her parrot nose.

Liam squeezed my hand as if to calm or comfort me.

Gina's oh-too-sweet melody reminded me a little of a snake. "Miss Jones, I hope you do not take too much stock in what you observe today. You must understand that I wiped this memory from our children only to protect you when you were young. At sixteen, I believe you will comprehend the miracle of the occurrence. This incident is now, after all, mankind's history. You may resent that I did not save your grandparents, Aunt Susan and her daughter Sarah, but only you were of the caliber I desired." She paused, and I wondered if she gave personalized messages to every sixteen-year-old in Petriville. I was about to ask Liam when Gina held her palm out toward something just past us. "Now, bear in mind what I have said as you visit your virtual experience."

The thick mist again swirled around and consumed Gina. Some seconds later it dispersed, leaving us in another time, just a short distance from where we now stood, right outside our front door.

I drew in the fragrance of spring flowers and freshly cut lawn. The soft early-evening breeze brushed my skin and tiny recording drones floated around spectators like silent flies, recording the events. As sunset's orange glow deepened, a three-dimensional version of Dad exited our home, looking all of the eleven years younger than he was now. The drones took in every facet of Dad's tall, fair, sculpted physique. The image of Mom stretched out on our front lawn. An incredulous expression lit her olive-toned face, her dark hair haloing around her head, her jeans never quite long enough to reach her ankles. *My beautiful, elegant mother.*

At seven and five years old, Liam and I buzzed around our parents. The breeze fluttered Liam's soft blond curls as he clasped my tiny hand in his and pointed to the sky. I recalled none of it but noted how, even then,

we were tall for our ages and my deep blue eyes contrasted with my olive skin and straight, dark hair. And the knobby knees Liam had so often teased me about protruded below the hem of a pale blue dress that I could almost remember.

The scene was so lifelike that it drew me into the moment. All the way up and down our block, neighbors stood. They lined the cobbled walkway, stood on their front lawns or in the park. No eyes left the darkening sky as the myriad of tiny recording drones floated around families, capturing what would become our history.

Petriville's launch into space should have left me with a thousand vivid memories, but mine were like broken shards of glass—shimmering or shattered. To an onlooker, Petriville's launch must have seemed unnatural—a town within an indestructible dome, a transparent kaleidoscope of rainbow colors. The dome had ballooned into a sphere that had grown and grown until thrusters had propelled it into Earth's exosphere. Complete with houses, gardens, trees, conveyor streets, schools and shops, Petriville seemed to magically hover at the sphere's center. It was pure science, of course.

My focus drifted back to the VE, my gaze drifting upward. The most magnificent scene materialized, laced in tones of the softest blues to the deepest greens. Draped over it all, clouds floated in languid majesty—crisp white to deep, dark gray. It was as though we were Earth, and Earth was our enormous moon.

I stood, a spectator in the scene, and turned to Liam. "This is not new, though, Li. Earth isn't much different now from how it was then."

Although he'd seen this all before, he wore an incredulous expression. "Wait, Cassidy. This is so *you* can see how it was back then. Plus, you know Earth wasn't like this for most of our lives."

Almost as soon as Liam had spoken, a swirling mist once more stole the scene. From its depths, a new visual experience emerged. Liam firmed his grip on my hand, clenching his jaw.

Again, we were outside our home, this time in the park over the curved, cobbled walkway. Everyone was outside on this dark night, ignoring the drones, which were skimming the standing crowds. All eyes were locked on the night sky. Whimpers escaped men, women and children. I followed their skyward stares, and my chest constricted.

Dad pulled Mom back against him as tears flooded her deep blue eyes and cascaded down her cheeks. All around, deathly silence fell.

The asteroid hurtled through space, its trajectory placing Earth in its direct path. It drew nearer, so much nearer.

Even though I knew the outcome, I found myself wishing things would turn out differently—that the meteorite would incinerate in Earth's atmosphere or the asteroid would glide past and miss our home planet entirely.

As the asteroid entered Earth's atmosphere, flame enveloped the monstrous bulk, turning it to a fiery meteor.

The fireball and tail shot across the sky, its speed impossible, incomprehensible, as it burned its way through the atmosphere toward Earth. And it barely lost any of its immense bulk as it neared. Then an ethereal brightening seared the dark sky. A shimmering mushroom of debris, light and dust shot into the air before raining back toward Earth.

Screams shattered the night, an echo in a chorus of onlookers' grief. But all I heard was Mom as my young parents collapsed to the ground, comprehension

slamming into them. They had just lost almost everyone they loved. Searing pain tore into my gut. I clenched my fists until my fingernails bit into my palms. I barely noticed that I was clinging to Liam, that he held me against him, his arms as tight as the vise gripping my heart, that I shook, sobbed and that tears slid down his cheeks too. My parents' continued screams cut a burning, stabbing pain through my chest, constricting my throat. But I couldn't drag my eyes from them or escape the suffocating VE. My body numbed. A weighted, nauseated, distant dream took hold. I tried to lift my hand to wipe at the tears burning my cheeks, but my hand wouldn't move.

The VE faded into the swirling mist then slid away. We were back in the room with the familiar leather couches. After the longest time, Liam loosened his grip and I stepped away, wiping my cheeks. Liam kept his eyes on me. "Are you all right, Cass?"

A choked "Why would they make us—?" was all I managed as my tears gushed. Some fell onto my wrist, splashing Grandma's antique, white-gold wrap-around bracelet pen and the sixteen silver sparkle bangles Mom and Dad had given me that morning. My 'Age of Understanding' gift. Sixteen. The old maxim really applied to me. But it felt back-to-front, like the soft sensation of a boy's lips on mine should have preceded what I'd just witnessed.

And it wasn't for lack of wanting. I yearned to be in the arms of a boy, tasting his sweet lips. But I hadn't yet met the boy who had recently begun starring in my dreams—the boy with eyes the color of a tropical ocean, dimples etched into his cheeks and the body of an athletic Greek god. He most likely didn't exist, but he had ruined me for anyone else. A single, soft word made its way through my lips. "Why?"

Liam absorbed my gaze. “Not witnessing this doesn’t erase nor diminish what happened. Don’t you think this a fair way to honor the people who lost their lives?”

The words scraped through my throat. “I thought that was what our annual ‘Extinction Day’ commemoration was for.” I hated the crass term. It didn’t sound at all like an honor. Instead, I added, “I hate Gina for terming it something so cold.”

Liam took my hand. “You shouldn’t worry about her, Cassidy. She’s just a crazy old bat.”

Although it wasn’t his fault, I glared up at him. “Are you sure that’s all she is, Liam? Because I’m not.”

* * * *

I was to learn from Dad that over the weeks following the meteor strike, live images of Earth had flashed across Petriville’s digital billboards. Although the impact had flung rubble far out into space, the encasing compound had deflected any that floated too near to us. The hazy, red firestorm blur had steadily expanded from the impact site, consuming massive areas before finally burning out. What had remained of Earth had no longer been visible – no oceans, no land masses, no distinctions at all. A dense, solid gray cloud had shrouded the planet. As dust had blocked the sun, plants had withered and died – and life had dwindled and ceased.

Scientists had estimated that more than a hundred years might pass before we could return to Earth or that an ice age might follow.

Neither happened.

By three years post-impact, the haze had become significantly clearer, the shroud less dense. Some variations had appeared through the fog. Europe and parts of Asia, the hardest hit, were blackened, stagnant

wasteland. But, in the southern Americas, forests and rivers appeared – for lack of a better term – *less dead*.

Many years before, world-renowned geologist Dr. Graham Porter had researched the Eltanin Impact Crater in the Southern Pacific Ocean. He had discovered a remarkable compound and had named it Kaleidotonium.

Gina Petri had gotten her hands on the Kaleidotonium and had had a dome constructed. It was permeable to water and the unique breathable-gas concoction required by organic life. While it had kept the cold out, inside, the town of Petriville had been built and populated.

Deep in Petriville's core, power was generated, and the high-speed rotation of the Kaleidotonium shell kept our town at its center. Like on Earth, our sky was blue. Ice and water particles that we encountered in space permeated the shell and fell in the form of raindrops. Artificially stimulated, our seasons and weather patterns matched Earth's Northern Hemisphere.

But as fascinating as it all was, to us – the youth of Petriville – it was just home.

Chapter One

A few months later

The playground equipment lay still, the night calm. A nearby sprinkler system *whoosh-whooshed* a fine spray over the park's flower beds. My friend Harriet and I dropped to adjacent sectors of the roundabout, and the familiar rough, cold metal scratched my back—but not irritating enough to make me leave. It never was. We tolerated nearly anything for our favorite nighttime activity—even the unexpected, fine rain that was sure to shower us in a mist at any moment.

We kicked off from the ground, and the silver roundabout glided into a slow rotation.

Harriet raised her blonde head, a smile dimpling her cheeks. As usual, in her diluted Scottish accent, she announced every sentence as if it were an exclamation. "Still amazing, hey, Cass? Earth-gazing!"

"Mm-m." I shrugged. "It's a beautiful planet."

She changed the subject. "Why are Liam and Jonas still training? They should kick back for a while!"

I shrugged. "There's always next year. Anyway, what does it matter how the boys spend their holidays?"

Harriet giggled. "They make me feel guilty for relaxing."

I laughed, rolling my head in her direction. "Forget them." A strand of hair fell over my eyes. I attempted to thrust the heavy tresses back inside the confines of my red beret.

Harriet gaped at me, arching a blonde brow over her bright blue eyes. She sat up. "Hey, lanky, let me help you with that. Half your hair has fallen out."

"I'm not lanky," I groaned, sitting and sidling over to her.

She rearranged my hair. "Uh, I think you are. And these" —she reached up and held my hair in one hand then tugged at my jeans belt loop with the other— "ankle coolers only accentuate your long legs. What are you complaining about, anyway? I'd swap my height and hips for your athletic frame in a heartbeat." She tucked my hair back inside my beret. "There! Much better."

"Oh please, Harriet. Boys love your curves."

"Yeah? Boys might, but my clothes don't." Then she yelped, "What the —? What is *that*?"

For the briefest moment, I considered her weak attempt to divert my attention. But, in my visual periphery, I had caught a flash too. As I jerked my gaze skyward, the flashes withdrew. I jolted upright, and my heart thumped. Harriet was on her feet beside me, both of us gaping at the sky. For long minutes, we stared upward, but the flashes were gone.

Although we retreated to the roundabout, my eyes did not leave Earth—a beacon against her star-flecked backdrop. Still, no repeated pulsing light materialized. Concluding the flashes had been the result of something striking Petriville's outer dome, we fell back into casual

conversation—that was, until a quick motion made me swivel my head toward the conveyor street that fringed the park.

“Why is my mom in such a rush?”

She was walking in long strides, almost running. Her upper body was visible over the top of the park’s surrounding hedge. The conveyor gave her the appearance of someone floating.

Harriet raised her head and I answered my own question—my voice a squeak. “She saw the flashes!”

We leaped up.

Harriet gestured toward the corner. “That way, Cass!”

I needed no encouragement. We raced toward the intersection where the walkway passing our home met the dual conveyor street.

As Mom caught sight of us running, she slowed her stride for a few seconds. We made it to the corner, just as she stepped off. The conveyor continued its revolving journey beneath the transparent, glowing intersection footbridge.

Mom did not break pace as she sped along the walkway toward our house, her voice flat and dry. “Come with me.”

After passing the garden-path entrances of two homes, we turned into ours. I looked into Mom’s deep blue eyes, a mirror of my own. She pursed her lips, glancing back over her shoulder then around.

“What’s up, Mom?”

“Indoors, Cassidy. Please wait to speak until we’re indoors. Dad is waiting.”

That did not explain her agitation but I didn’t pursue it further. Not then.

We strode along the garden path between rows of flowers and our perfectly manicured lawn, vaulting all three patio stairs as one.

A moment after we burst through the front door, Dad and our third-generation Dobermans, Achilles and Yvon, came running from the kitchen. All their eyes rested on Mom's strained expression.

Dad frowned. "Hey, Emily, tell me what happened."

"Dare we hope, Peter? But I think Graham might be alive!" she exclaimed, still looking around as if someone might have followed us inside.

I sometimes considered how at-odds my mother's pompous-sounding speech was with her soft, gentle nature.

Mom turned to me. "Please, girls, go upstairs. Cass, your father and I need to talk. We'll tell you what we need from you in a moment."

I mouthed at Harriet, my heart still thumping. "Need from *me*?"

Harriet silently met my gaze as she and I ascended the stairs to my bedroom, closing the door behind us.

Without pausing for a break, Harriet fired the questions as a statement. "What was that? Will your mom tell us? It must be about the flashes!"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know, Harri. It's bizarre."

A short while later, a soft *rap-rap* fluttered my bedroom door. I leaped up and jerked it open. Mom and Dad stood on the landing.

"Come in," I said quickly. "Is this about the flashes?" Their eyes widened as they entered, and Dad closed the door.

"I thought you girls might have seen it." Mom's voice was tight.

I took in her ashen face. "Why would that bother you, Mom?" I turned to my father. "Dad?"

Harriet stood in uncharacteristic silence beside my pale mint-draped four-poster bed.

Dad glanced at Mom. I focused on her as she drew a deep breath, placing both hands over mine. Her intense eyes shimmered with a desperate plea. "I will explain in time, Cass. But since you have enrolled to study environmental sciences after summer vacation, I can justify offering you an internship. I'd like you to start tomorrow. You may not tell anybody what you're doing there. Understand? Not *anybody*!"

My temples throbbed as I considered her offer, but before I could speak, Dad took over in a stern voice, finally involving Harriet in the conversation. "Harriet, Emily and I will discuss this with your parents, but please" —he paused, darting his eyes between Harriet and me— "please," he repeated, "do not mention a word to anybody. We'll tell you everything once we've made sense of it ourselves."

"What was the light, though, Dad?" I shot out. "And who were you talking about, Mom? Did you mean Graham Porter? The same Graham who discovered Kaleidotonium?"

Dad's tone sharpened. "As I told you, Cassidy, *we* need to make sense of this. What we think, however" —he hesitated, then added in a grating whisper—"is that many lives will be at stake if this gets out!"

I opened my mouth to say more but closed it again. Although I wanted to know what was going on, it was clear that whatever the truth of the matter was, it *terrified* my parents.