

RENA IN THE DESERT

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RENA IN THE DESERT

It had to be a trick, Rena knew it. Even as she hit the brakes, stopped cold in the middle of cracked and empty Highway 50, and twisted around to check. Trick of the eye, trick of the mind, trick of some hidden enemy with an evil agenda—the question was which. Rena hoped for the last. At least then the swimming pool would be real.

After ten hot days on waterless roads, though, she could be seeing things. The So-laire should've zipped across the Basin in eight hours, no problem. She'd expected to arrive at the Refugee Center in Tahoe by dinnertime, maybe talk to Jack that very night. But fifty miles out of Provo, the battery ran down—that was as long as it could hold a charge. After a couple of hours soaking up the sun it got going again, but now a scary shake vibrated the whole chassis whenever the speed nudged past thirty. Two thousand dollars she'd paid for this junker, to some creepy religious objector whose *thou-shalt-nots* apparently didn't say shit about selling her a lemon. And here she was, creeping across the desert in fits and starts.

She'd packed extra, just in case, but her food was down to a couple of energy bars, broken into meager rations that left her tired and sick and starving. And she was more than tired, more than sick, she was fucking revolted with all her being at her diminished, yellowed water supply. She'd had the foresight, at least, to save what cycled through her own body. She filtered it through an old shirt, diluted it with flat cola, but there was no real pretending that she wasn't drinking her own piss. The last water she'd seen, a week ago now, was the trickling remains of a once-great river. She'd waded into a shallow pool and bathed, naked and tiny within canyon walls carved over millions of years by glorious flowing torrents of water. Almost gone now. The whole filthy planet ached with its absence.

Yet here sat the Rock Springs AutoMotel like a postcard from the past, its electric sign flashing *SWIM* and *AC* and *VACANCY*: a single-story, L-shaped building, spread low beside a parking lot with one lonesome, dust-coated truck. Behind a

chain-link fence the pool sparkled in the sunlight, a cleaning skimmer dancing across its surface. It had to be real, that water—maybe those Rock Springs still existed, underground somewhere now. Next to the pool, dangling small plump feet, sat a little girl, staring back.

How was that even possible? Settlement was illegal from the Rockies to the Sierras. Back in Chicago the tabloids babbled about outlaw gangs preying through the mountains, doomsday cults, radioactive corpses piled by the roadside. Military escorts guarded cargo trucks driving between Vegas and LA. But on 50 Rena had seen nothing and nobody—only the remnants of gas stations, dried-out husks of ruined towns, and dispirited clumps of dead brush. From horizon to horizon, nothing was moving but her and a few wary birds.

On the Coast, with its forests and desalinization plants and fish-filled oceans, tourists still drove up and down, burning money on hotels and restaurants. Or so people said back home, wondering in hushed tones, dreaming in the winter cold. So Rena wanted to believe.

She threw the car in reverse, drove backward into the lot. The little girl hopped up, waved at the pool skimmer, and ran inside with slapping feet.

Was there really a spring? Was there food, too? A vending machine . . . Rena parked neatly between painted lines out of habit, imagining herself gorged on chocolate bars, fingers dusted with cheese. There had to be some strings attached, though, some bizarre dark side to the bright vision. Maybe it was a trap, and she was about to get arrested—technically emigrating wasn't illegal, but that wouldn't matter. Or raped and eaten, or sacrificed to the iguana god by some fucked up cult. She dug her gun out from under a blanket, checked for ammunition, and tucked it into the waistband of her shorts. In the laundry bag she found a cleanish shirt, one of Jack's old button-ups, to cover her dirty bra. No doubt her credit cards were frozen by now. She thumbed through her remaining cash, lost count, then shoved the sweaty wad in her pocket. Would they even take U.S. dollars?

Too good to be true, she thought, looking at the pool again. Yet she was up and out of the car before she could reason against it, and when her glance passed over the yellow water bottles in the back seat, well, the door slammed that much harder.

The office window reflected a stringy, sunburnt woman, dust-stained and wary. As she approached, a voice greeted her.

"Welcome to the Rock Springs AutoMotel. For English, say: hello," it said in calm and maternal tones. "*Bienvenido al AutoMotel Rock Springs. Para español, diga: hola.*"

"Um. Hello," Rena answered. Her reflection swung away as the door opened. She pushed her sunglasses up into her hair.

Inside stood the little girl. About six, Rena guessed, or maybe a smallish seven. Her yellow shirt was faded but clean, with a cheerful daisy printed on the chest; her dark hair was shoulder-length and shiny, with a matching yellow barrette at one temple.

"Hey there," Rena said. "Is your mom here? Or your dad?"

The girl stared with great brown eyes and said something in Spanish.

A million years ago, in an entirely different world where such things were considered useful and not unpatriotic, Rena had taken high school Spanish. She fumbled for it now. "*Habla ingles? Un poco?*" she asked. "*Tu madre . . . está aquí?*"

The small sentry gave her another second's examination, then stepped aside without answering.

Rena entered the small office and its heavenly air conditioning, pausing as a vacuum pod swooped across the beige carpet. The little girl clambered into a chair behind the reception desk and swung her bare feet.

"Thank you for choosing the Rock Springs AutoMotel," said the computer voice. "Do you have a reservation?"

"No, but—" If she got turned away from that pool on a technicality, so help her God she'd scream.

The AutoMotel began listing its offerings and amenities as a touchscreen flashed

images of beds and steaming cups of coffee. Rena stood still, stuck in the dream. Was there really free breakfast? Could she really have an extra blanket?

"A single room," she interrupted. "For one night."

"You have selected: one single room. For: one night," affirmed the AutoMotel. A slot on the desk blinked red. "Please insert cash or card to select your currency."

Rena expected the bills to come spitting back at her, but the AutoMotel sucked them in and informed her of the increasing total. At eighty-nine, another slot lit green, and a card popped out. The girl pounced on it, then slid it ceremonially across the desk.

"Your room is: 2B," the AutoMotel said. "Please take your keycard."

Rena stared. Something wasn't right. Little girls did not run motels alone—even an automated system like this one—little girls did not face unknown travelers alone, and they sure as shit didn't control large supplies of fresh water, currently one of the more valuable commodities in this part of the North American continent. Not by themselves. And even if they did, they wouldn't sell that water, or anything else, for paper money issued by a failing government with no authority in this region. Hell, even in Chicago the black market ran on CAD. Somewhere, there must be somebody else. A mother or father, hiding, waiting to catch her off guard.

Alarm bells should have been jangling down her spine, sirens blaring through her subconscious, but somehow all was quiet. She took the keycard.

The girl slid off the chair and took Rena's hand with her warm fingers. In bemused silence Rena allowed herself to be led out of the office, past her car, to the door labeled 2B in dull metal letters. The keycard worked; the door swung open. Bedside lamps lit. Air conditioning roared softly from the vents.

The girl bustled in and, with a small flourish, presented the space.

"This is a trick," Rena said helplessly. "Right?"

"Welcome to your room," the AutoMotel said. "Please use the touchscreen to see our menus and options. How else may we assist you?"

"Oh," Rena said, too startled to think of even one of the million things she wanted. "Nothing right now. Thanks."

"Please enjoy your stay."

The little girl waved and dashed out, the door clicking shut behind her. Rena deadbolted it.

The room was still and dim, the bed an expanse of cheap sateen with pillows pancaked at its head. An empty stand lacked its television. Not exactly luxury, but at least everything looked clean. Rena drifted, dreamily, to the bathroom and the taps. She turned one, trying to expect nothing. But there it was: a brief gurgle and then water, pouring out over her fingers. She bent down to shove her mouth into the flow. Clean, cold. A miracle.

She flipped the flimsy lock on the doorknob before setting her gun on the toilet, stripping off her filthy clothes and turning on the shower. Much as she wanted to luxuriate under the hot spray, instead she lathered and rinsed quickly. Then, with the water off, she stood listening, holding her breath. All was silent. She squeezed the last trace of toothpaste from its tube and started brushing, then paused.

"*Shit*," she sputtered, toothbrush clamped between her teeth. She wrapped a towel around herself and rushed to the window, separated the blinds with her fingers, preparing a string of curses at her own stupidity.

But no, the Solaire was right where she'd left it.

The truck was there, too. Entirely covered in dust, its wheel tracks erased. Like it hadn't moved in days. There had to be a driver somewhere. She'd have to think about that.

But for now, more water. Maybe some food. And the pool. *Shit*, and of course she didn't pack a swimsuit.

A memory caught her: Jack and her lying out on Montrose Beach, taking selfies against the backdrop of the city skyline. Their third or fourth date—nine years ago now. Her in a bikini that revealed tattoos and ass and everything, swigging cheap wine; him sticking with water and wearing a tight athletic shirt, because even then, before ID laws and bar raids and everything else, he didn't want strangers seeing his scars. She'd been so careless back then. She'd never experienced any real danger, never saw it coming. But he always did. He'd always had to.

Chicago was really home back then, the place she'd loved: brash and brilliant, full of movement and energy and lights. Now the skyscrapers stood dark, and the people crept through the streets like mice. And Jack was in LA, or maybe San Francisco . . . Unless he'd gotten stuck farther north. Jack couldn't just bus across the U.S. like Rena could—not after his hormone supply dried up, even on the black market. With his cheeks softening and his hips padding out, he couldn't *just* go anywhere, not to work or the bar or the corner store. Couldn't risk getting asked for ID when his appearance didn't match the sex. The runners promised to get him across the border at Warroad, no ID required. In Canada travel should've been simple. *Go west, young man*. Just get on a bus and go west.

Unless the runners took Jack's money and dumped him in a cornfield. Unless he got stopped at the border. Unless he was dead.

No. Jack was in California, waiting for her. Of course he was. A few more days on the road, and she'd be there, too. From Tahoe she could call, she could look him up on the internet—good god, the Coast probably still had internet that wasn't all state networks and advertisements. They would find each other again.

Rena slammed a lid on the doubt, rinsed her mouth, and decided to investigate the touchscreen. The hunger she'd kept tamped down came roaring up. Cheeseburger and fries, yes, amazing.

"We're sorry," said the AutoMotel. "That item is unavailable. Please select another item."

Taco platter? Unavailable. Enchiladas? Select another item. Mac and cheese? A ham sandwich?

"Goddamn right, you're sorry," Rena snapped.

The AutoMotel did not reply.

Well, maybe a vending machine. She pulled on a black bra and shorts that passed for swimwear, stowed her money and her gun in a tote bag, and left the room.

Outside the sun blazed just as hot and bright, but somehow less malevolently than before, less like it was trying to suck her dry personally. Before heading to the office, Rena strolled very casually down the narrow sidewalk. The other rooms' doors were all closed, the blinds flat against the windows. Nothing to see. On the way back she made light, irregular taps against the doors, paused and listened. No sound, no motion. All around and within the AutoMotel, only the wind moved.

As she approached the office, though, Rena heard the girl talking. And a second voice, a woman's voice. Rena pressed herself against the wall outside the office door.

Princesa, she heard. The little girl was talking about a princess. The woman was asking questions. Not exactly a murderous plot, but . . . Rena edged closer, trying to peek in unnoticed. The girl sat alone, crouched on the floor over a couple of toy horses.

"Welcome to the Rock Springs AutoMotel," said the same voice—the woman's voice, the AutoMotel's voice. She'd sounded different in Spanish. "For English, say: hello."

"Hello." The door swung open. "I was, uh, wondering about food. The menu's all unavailable. Do you have anything at all?"

"We're sorry for the inconvenience," the AutoMotel answered. "Please wait while we check our inventory."

The two horses danced and wacked their heads together, one blonde with tangled

streaks of magenta, the other lavender and blue. The girl watched them, whispering, continuing their story. She must've been playing with the AutoMotel.

Rena crouched down and asked, "Which one is Princesa?"

The girl looked up in surprise.

Rena tried pointing from one horse to the other. "Princesa?"

The girl held up the lavender-maned horse and started explaining, too fast for Rena's twenty-years-rusty vocabulary.

"Thank you for your patience," the AutoMotel interrupted. "These are our available menu items. Yogurt, five dollars. Cereal, eight dollars. Chicken fingers, twelve dollars . . ."

The nearest touchscreen showed images from the children's menu—Rena hadn't seen that menu before. "Okay, chicken fingers," she said. "And fries?"

"That item is available only for children aged ten and under. Please select another item."

"What? But you just said—"

"We're sorry for the inconvenience."

Rena felt like her stomach was about to rip itself out of her throat and start pummeling something. But she couldn't beat food out of an automated system. Couldn't reason with it either. What she could do, later, was maybe break into the storage unit.

"*Hola tía?*" The girl sat up. A brief argument ensued, the AutoMotel remaining calm, the girl increasingly whiny.

The AutoMotel conceded. "You have ordered: chicken fingers. And: french fries. Please wait while we prepare your order."

"Oh thank god," Rena said, but that wasn't who needed thanking. She knelt again and extended a hand. "Hey. *Muchas gracias, señorita.*"

The girl looked at the hand, then thrust into it a horse—the blond one, not the Princesa. "Teresa," she said.

Playing horses Rena could manage, so long as the girl did all the talking. She made Teresa dance and whinny and follow Princesa as needed. When a lull came in the narrative, she pointed the horse at herself, then at the girl. "I'm Rena. *Tú?*"

The girl turned shy, examined Princesa's hair.

"Rena." She tapped the horse against her own chest. Come on, high school Spanish. "*Me llamo Rena. Y tú?*"

"Adela," the girl said.

Rena felt a weird flush of victory. "Adela," she repeated. "*Mucho gusto, Adela.*"

"Your order will be ready in: two minutes," said the AutoMotel. "Please retrieve your order at the Pick Up Window."

"Uh, *dónde?*" Rena asked the girl.

Teresa and the Princesa were carefully placed in a desk drawer, then the girl pulled Rena down the hall into a small dining area. The Pick-Up Window's aluminum panes were closed, with a promising whir of microwave behind them. A glass door led out onto the shaded patio; beyond it glimmered the pool, so empty, turquoise and strange.

The whole place was empty and strange. Rena bent to child's-eye level, and asked, "Hey Adela—um—*dónde tu mamá?*"

The girl frowned, but before she could answer, the vacuum pod zipped in from the lobby. It made a wide circle around them, then snuck between, spun and jiggled. Adela laughed, dropped to her knees and patted its plastic lid. "*Hola Roombo,*" she said.

* * *

"Your order is ready," the AutoMotel announced—could an AutoMotel be passive aggressive?—before breaking into Spanish. Roombo spun again and then ran away, with Adela giving chase through one of the *Staff Only* doors. "Please enjoy your meal."

Rena took her tray from the opening Pick Up Window and peeled back the plastic packaging. Steam rose up in heady waves. She tried forcing herself to wait for the soft, pale chicken to cool, but her belly felt like a black hole, like she could've devoured a thousand steamed chicken fingers and a mountain of floppy fries on top of this child's portion. Protein, carbs, salt, fat. Who gave a shit if it burned.

Next, the pool.

It was everything she'd imagined: coolness and chlorine, weightlessness, the sunshine above her rendered gentle. She swam the length of the pool twice, then hung from the edge while she drank. Water inside, water outside. Amazing. She turned on to her back, pushed off the wall and floated, feeling light, hazy, the hydration like a drug after all those days so relentlessly dry. The skimmer whirred softly around her, collecting invisible flotsam.

Maybe, in LA, Jack was floating in a pool like this. If he was there—of course he was. Though maybe San Francisco. Tomorrow she'd start driving again. About ninety more miles to Tahoe. Maybe she could hack that truck out front, get there in two hours rather than two days. If not, well, maybe she could break into the food storage here, get some supplies.

That was stealing from Adela, though. And her parents, wherever they were.

A pounding noise. A muffled shout. *No*, she thought, but then it came again: a man's voice. Yelling: "*Hey. Ma'am? Excuse me, ma'am? Hey!*"

Rena flipped over and dove, swam underwater to one side, surfaced as far as her nose, and listened.

"Ma'am, you gotta help me—"

She peeked over the side. The man was inside one of the rooms, staring through the window. Faded polyester curtains framed a stubbled face and desperate eyes, a fist pressed white against the glass.

"Oh come on, lady," the man yelled. "I can fucking see you."

Cautiously she pulled herself out of the pool and knotted the flimsy towel around her chest.

"Oh thank God," he said. "I've been stuck here for days."

Rena took a couple steps closer. "What do you mean, stuck?"

"I mean I'm trapped, okay? She won't let me out."

"Who won't let you out?"

"The *motel*. The computer or whatever. She locked me in." He looked young—a skinny twenty-something, shirtless, with a shaggy, grown-out haircut and a Texas-shaped tattoo over his heart. "Please," he said. "I'm going batshit in here."

"Why would she trap you?"

Swiftly he sketched out his story. He was Josh, a courier from Austin. He didn't say what he delivered, and Rena didn't ask. Usually he drove west through Mexico and up the coast to Humboldt, but lately migration patrol was sewing up holes in the border as fast as they opened—his partner got snapped a couple of weeks ago. He'd managed to bolt through this time, but decided to try an alternate route home. Got a late start out of Tahoe and stopped here for the night.

"Like three in the morning," he said. "The girl woke up, started crying. I tried talking to her but I guess I set off the computer, that's all I can think of. When I got in the room, the door slammed shut behind me, and I've been stuck ever since. I tried kicking it down—tried breaking the window, too, but it's security glass or something. You're the only other person I've seen for twelve days, except that girl, and she won't come near me. I'd've starved to death if there wasn't free breakfast."

"Free breakfast," Rena echoed. So it was true.

"It's fucking *oatmeal*." Josh's voice broke.

No hidden parents, then. Just Adela. Who would leave a kid all alone like that?

Well, not quite alone. There was Roombo and the pool skimmer, and there was the AutoMotel. Her *tía*. Maybe, Rena thought, kind of an AutoNanny, programmed to babysit when the parents were gone. They'd have to get supplies somewhere; nothing growing on trees out here in the Basin. The AutoMotel could feed the girl, play movies and read stories, even watch her play—and protect her from strangers. Which was probably why Josh was trapped.

And unless Rena got out, the AutoMotel might trap her, too. She'd eaten some of Adela's food, played with her, asked questions. What if she looked like a threat?

"Your truck," she said. "It runs good?"

"Yes ma'am. It's a hand-lock, though. Only I can drive it." He didn't trust her. Fair enough.

"Okay. I'm gonna try something. If it works, you're driving me to Tahoe. Deal?"

"You got it." He pressed his hand against the glass. "Wherever you want."

"Give me a minute. I'll be back."

As she walked through the office, she could hear Adela talking behind a *Staff Only* door, and the AutoMotel's calm replies. Was it intelligent or just automated? Again Rena regretted all the times she'd skipped Spanish class. Old Señora Johnson was right—it didn't stick if you didn't practice.

Roombo sped past and settled in his station. A small red light glowed, like an eye, watching her.

Back at the room, she wedged a chair in the doorway before changing back into her cut-offs and Jack's shirt. The room felt dark and sad, the bed neglected. She'd looked forward to sleeping in it. But she was less than two hours from Tahoe.

She hadn't really unpacked much: a few clothes, her toothbrush, that's all she had to gather. In the bathroom she bent to drink from the faucet again. The springwater, still so perfect, poured forth. And quietly, below the faucet's gush, came the sound of the bathroom door gliding shut.

Rena's foot shot out just in time, catching the slam on her big toe. She yelled something incoherent and kicked the door as it bounced back. Another bang—she spun and hopped into the bedroom on her good foot. The front door swung open and back, smacking into the chair she'd propped there, and swung again, banged back again, the chair shifting with each impact. A few more smacks and it would dislodge; she'd be stuck like Josh was, surviving on oatmeal in solitary.

"Well, fuck that," Rena snapped. She grabbed her laundry bag and limped furiously out into the sunlight, to the truck. Underneath the dust it looked relatively new, with a palm-reader panel next to the steering wheel. The back storage area was all shadows. Whatever he was delivering must be hidden—probably illegal in the U.S., but a lot of things were illegal in the U.S. these days. A few greasy fast-food wrappers littered the passenger side floor.

Real food. Now there was some extra motivation. Rena headed for the office, hoping she wasn't locked out. Otherwise she'd have to climb the fence.

"Welcome to the Rock Springs AutoMotel," said the computer. "For English, say—"

"Hello. Come on, you recognize me."

The door opened—was it slower? She blocked it open with her laundry bag, just in case. Television noises came from somewhere—maybe Adela was watching a movie. Twelve days, Josh had said, and he hadn't seen any adults. A long time for a little kid to be left alone.

Rena gave the *Staff Only* door a gentle push, but it didn't budge.

"Administrative password required," said the AutoMotel.

Reluctantly she moved on, out the patio door, where Josh saw her and banged on the window.

"Okay. Get back from the door," Rena said. "All the way back." She adjusted her

sunglasses to shield her eyes, raised the gun and took aim, the movement a sweep out of muscle memory. It was Jack who'd bought her the gun and taken her to the range, insisting she learn. Not that the gun even helped, the last time he got mugged. The attacker stole his gun and used it to crack his face, and he couldn't even go to a hospital. Taping the gash together, blotting up the blood, that was when she realized: Chicago wasn't home anymore. For months she'd been resisting, thinking it wasn't *really* bad, not really—even as every day things got a little worse. Another shop shuttered or burnt, another neighbor vanished, more patrols on the trains, more desperate people taking what they could on the streets. Now it was that bad, for Jack, especially. They'd started planning his departure the next day.

But hey, she was glad to have the gun now. This worked on TV, right?

The first shot went high, but the second was bang on, straight through the keyreader. Shards of plastic stung her cheeks; the explosions felt like balloons bursting inside her ear canals.

A sudden whoop started blaring. "Damage detected," the AutoMotel announced. "Please wait. An administrator will be with you shortly."

Rena grabbed the doorknob like a movie star, tried to turn it, shook it, and then gave the door a useless kick, like an idiot.

The siren continued, punctuated by the AutoMotel's declarations: "Damage detected. Please wait."

"Goddammit," said Josh. "Try the window."

Before she could consider this, though, Rena heard a breath hitch in and then wail out: Adela, standing in the doorway with giant eyes, hands clenched in front of her open mouth. Terrified. Of course a bang like that would scare the kid—it'd scare anyone who wasn't expecting it—and the alarm, too.

"Oh, honey—" Rena knelt, set the gun on the pavement. "That was loud, I know, but everything's okay."

Adela sobbed and waved a small shocked finger at Rena's face, which was bleeding a little where the plastic had scratched her. Rena wiped the blood off and smiled to show she wasn't really hurt—but the alarm kept whooping, and Adela kept crying. Not knowing what else to offer, Rena held out her arms. Adela rushed in.

The hug reduced sobs to tears and snot, and gradually Adela pulled back and started talking again, wiping her face with the back of her arm. Rena tried to pick words out but couldn't put the meaning together.

When a pause came, she pointed at the room, at Josh's face behind the window. "*Mi amigo*," she said.

Adela's head gave a vigorous shake. She said *tía* and *no* and a whole lot of words in between.

"*Sí*," Rena insisted. She took Adela's damp little hand and pulled her gently toward Josh's door. "*Mi amigo*."

He waved from the window and said, "*Buenos tardes, señorita*," following it up with what sounded to Rena like decent Spanish.

Adela listened, thought, and called out, "*Hola tía*."

The alarm stopped, and after some discussion, the AutoMotel apparently relented. The door clicked open, and Josh emerged, gaunt and squinting. Adela stared and ran off.

"Good thing we still got some Spanish speakers in Texas," he said. He was already packed; like Rena, he didn't have much to carry out.

Most of Rena's stuff was jumbled in the back of her car. She felt a sudden pang at leaving the Solaire—however broken and uncomfortable, she'd limped three hundred miles across the Basin in it. It was just a machine, but that car was currently the closest thing she had to a home—everything she owned in the world was inside.

Josh opened up the truck, lifted a rug and shifted some flat cardboard cases to one

side. “Pretend you didn’t see those,” he said.

“What is it, tincture?”

He grinned but didn’t answer.

Evening was falling, the heat vanishing from the dry air. The AutoMotel’s sign flashed in brighter contrast; underwater lights illuminated the pool a paler, gentler turquoise. Next to it stood Adela, a small shadow melding into the dusk.

“Shit,” Rena said. “What about her?”

“Parents must be somewhere,” Josh answered.

“After twelve days gone? At least? I don’t think they’re coming back.”

He shrugged.

Whatever happened to Adela’s parents might not be an accident, either. Most horror stories about the Basin might be invented to scare people out of crossing, but not all. They might be dead, or in a hospital. And even if the girl was safe—for how long?

Josh was lifting a suitcase out of the Solaire. Rena leaned into the truck, grabbed one of his boxes and started for the office.

He set the box down. “Hey, what—”

“Look, you seem nice and all,” she said over her shoulder, “but I don’t know you, and you could drive off with all my shit.”

“That box is worth more than all your shit.”

“Exactly. Ten minutes.”

The AutoMotel greeted her, cool as ever. “Welcome to the Rock Springs—”

“Hello,” Rena interrupted. For a second she felt like a kidnapper, ripping this child out of her home and away from her robot nanny. The door opened and closed behind her.

Roombo beeped and darted out, swirling around her feet until she almost tripped. Adela’s playmate. She picked him up, tucked him under her arm with Josh’s box. Small wheels rotated against her side, then stopped.

Get in, get the girl and her stuff, get out. She pushed the patio door. It didn’t open.

“Administrative password required,” said the AutoMotel.

“Bullshit,” Rena answered. That didn’t help, of course, and neither did pushing harder or kicking the door. “Adela,” she called.

The girl appeared on the other side of the glass: big-eyed, teary-cheeked. Her fists clenched and unclenched. “*Hola tía*,” she said. The AutoMotel answered her. But the door didn’t open.

“Listen,” Rena said. “I’m gonna take her to Tahoe. Maybe they can find her family there.”

“Please wait,” the AutoMotel answered. “An administrator will be with you shortly.”

“What? There isn’t anyone else *here*.”

Instead came a sound. A hiss, barely audible. A smell, too, barely above the edge of her awareness. When Rena sniffed deep to identify it, though, she felt that awareness slip down and away. Then she realized.

Of course the AutoMotel had security systems, ways of neutralizing thieves and intruders. Locking them in was only one. And here was some strange woman shooting a gun, damaging the locks, grabbing Roombo and trying to take Adela away. The AutoMotel had identified a threat. And now it was fucking gassing her.

Rena dropped Roombo and the box of tincture and rushed back to the front door. That was locked, too. Why hadn’t she blocked it? So stupid—

“Administrative password required.” Though its volume and intonation never changed, somehow the AutoMotel’s voice vibrated with righteous contempt.

Breathe shallow, breathe shallow and slow—but her mind felt shallow and slow already. What kind of gas? How long before she blacked out? Would Josh see? Could he even help?

“*Hola tía*,” she said. Maybe if she talked to the nanny function—if it was intelligent,

she could reason with it. If it was automated, though, she was screwed. "Please. How long have you been running? How long has she been alone?"

The pause felt like forever, but finally the AutoMotel answered: "Tía has been running for: twenty-nine days."

"That's . . . that's too long. You know it is. I'll take her to Tahoe, okay?" The room was slowly rotating, a dark cloud coalescing in the corners, creeping inward. "You can't take care of her forever. What if she gets sick?"

"Stand by for emergency services," said the AutoMotel.

Rena sat down, leaned against the wall and shut her eyes. "There aren't any. You know that. She could get hurt . . . Or somebody could . . . or . . . what if you run out of food? Let me . . . *tía* . . ."

"Please wait while we check our inventory," said the AutoMotel.

"*Por favor*," Rena tried to say, but she wasn't sure if the words made it out.

Then the cloud began dissolving. Air, good clear air. The door was open, Adela standing on the threshold. Rena gasped and pushed past the little girl to collapse on the patio. From outside the fence Josh yelled. She waved a reassuring hand and lay there breathing deep.

When she opened her eyes again, Adela was kneeling next to her. Rena took the girl's hand, squeezed it. "It's okay, *amiga*," she said.

A flood of Spanish came in reply; Rena let it wash over her.

"*Vamos*," she said when Adela paused. "*Tú, conmigo*. Okay?"

The AutoMotel began talking to Adela; the girl burst into tears.

After a moment Adela, still sniffing, opened the *Staff Only* door to her bedroom. Flowers were painted in a frieze across the walls, by hand, it looked like. Probably by Adela's mother or father. The room was surprisingly neat, with the small bed nicely made, clothes hanging and toys put away in a bin.

"Good job, *tía*," Rena said. "You did your best."

They packed Princesa and Teresa, Roombo, a few more toys, some clothes, a toothbrush, several paper books and a large child's reader into a pillowcase. There was another reader, smaller and plain—she packed that, too. Maybe it could help identify an adult owner.

Then Rena stuck Josh's box of tinctures under one arm, and felt for the girl's soft grip with her free hand. "Say adios to *tía*," she said.

"*Hasta luego, tía*," Adela said. Tears on her cheeks and a quiver in her voice, but the girl was being brave.

The AutoMotel answered. Adela nodded and gripped Rena's hand a little harder.

Josh was leaning on his truck, arms crossed over his chest, lit by the AutoMotel's sign. *SWIM*, it flashed, and *AC*, and *VACANCY*. As they watched the pool went dark, its light turned off; then the office light went out, too.

"*Hasta luego, right*," Rena said, lifting the girl into the truck. "I bet you'll be back someday."

Josh talked to Adela a bit, said something that made the girl smile, then started the truck. "Ready?"

Rena settled in the passenger seat. Less than two hours to the Refugee Center, and from there to cities, and food, and Jack. He was up ahead somewhere, she had to believe that. Just like Adela had to have family somewhere. The world behind them plunged into black, the AutoMotel's oasis vanishing in the night. In the backseat, Adela clutched a pink felt unicorn, watching Rena. Trusting her.

It was hard to leave a place, Rena knew that. Hard not knowing what the destination was like, or if she could ever go home—if home was something she would ever know again. Ahead of them the last sunlight tinted the sky green between the mountains' looming shadows. Rena watched the horizon dim, waiting for the lights of

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Tahoe to glitter there—in California, her new country. Leaving the desert, moving into her future. Trying to trust that, too.