

ON HER MAJESTY'S SUPERNATURAL SECRET SERVICE

THE ROOK

A NOVEL



DANIEL O'MALLEY

THE
ROOK

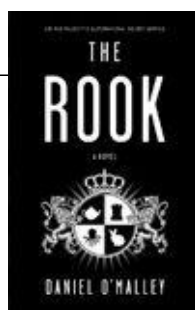
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DANIEL O'MALLEY



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For my father, Bill O'Malley, who read to me at bedtime,
and my mother, Jeanne O'Malley, who read to me the rest of the time.

Dear You,

The body you are wearing used to be mine. The scar on the inner left thigh is there because I fell out of a tree and impaled my leg at the age of nine. The filling in the far left tooth on the top is a result of my avoiding the dentist for four years. But you probably care little about this body's past. After all, I'm writing this letter for you to read in the future. Perhaps you are wondering why anyone would do such a thing. The answer is both simple and complicated. The simple answer is because I knew it would be necessary.

The complicated answer could take a little more time.

Do you know the name of the body you are in? It's Myfanwy. Myfanwy Alice Thomas. I would say that it's my name, but you've got the body now, so I suppose you'll be using it. People tend to mangle its pronunciation, but I would like it if you at least knew how to say it. I don't embrace the traditional Welsh pronunciation, so for me the w is silent and the f is hard. Thus, Miff-un-ee. Simple. In fact, not that I think about it, it rhymes with Tiffany.

Before I give you the story, there are a few things you should be aware of. First, you are deathly allergic to bee stings. If you get stung and do not take quick action, you will die. I keep those little epinephrine-injector-pen thingies around me, so find one before you need it. There should be one in my purse, one in the glove compartment of the car, and one in pretty much every jacket that you own. If you get stung, slip the lid off the thing, jam it into your thigh, and inject. You should be fine. I mean, you'll feel like absolute shit, but you won't die.

Apart from that, you have no dietary restrictions, no allergies, and you're in pretty good shape. There is a tradition of colon cancer in the family, so you should get regular checkups, but nothing has appeared yet. Oh, and you have a terrible head for alcohol. But you probably don't need to know that yet. You've got more important things to worry about.

Hopefully, you will have my wallet, and along with it all the little plastic cards that are so vital for surviving in today's electronic world. Driver's license, credit cards, National Health Service card, library card, and all of them belonging to Myfanwy Thomas. Except for three. And those three are, at the moment, the most important. Tucked away in there you will find an ATM card, a credit card, and a driver's license in the name of Anne Ryan, a name that will not be linked to you. The personal identification number for all of them is 230500. That's my birthday, followed by how old you are. You're a newborn! I would suggest that you withdraw some money from Anne Ryan's account immediately, go to a hotel, and check in as her.

You are probably aware of this next part already, since if you are reading this then you have survived several immediate threats, but you are in danger. Just because you are not me does not make you safe. Along with this body, you have inherited certain problems and responsibilities. Go find a safe place, and then open the second letter.

Sincerely,

Me

She stood shivering in the rain, watching the words on the letter dissolve under the downpour. H

hair was dripping, her lips tasted salty, and everything ached. Under the dim light of a nearby lamppost, she had scabbled through the pockets of her jacket, looking for some sort of clue to who she was, where she was, what was going on. She had found two letters in the inside pocket. The first envelope had been addressed simply *To You*. The second envelope just had the number 2 written on it.

She shook her head angrily and stared up at the storm, watching the lightning fork across the sky. She fumbled in another pocket, and her fingers closed on a bulky shape. She pulled it out and looked at a long thin cardboard box that was getting all soggy and losing its shape. Typed on a prescription label was some long chemical term and the name Myfanwy Thomas. She clenched her fingers and felt the firm plastic of the epi-pen, then put the box back in her pocket.

This is who I am, she thought bitterly. *I don't even get the luxury of not knowing what my name is. I don't get a chance to start a life. Whoever this Myfanwy Thomas was, she managed to get me into a whole lot of trouble.* She sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. She looked around at the place she was in. Some sort of park. Willows drooped their long tendrils down around the clearing, and she was standing on what used to be a lawn but was rapidly becoming a mud hole. She came to a decision, pulled her feet out of the mire, and stepped carefully over the ring of bodies that were scattered around her. They were all motionless, and all of them were wearing latex gloves.

She was hugging herself and completely soaked by the time she made it out of the park. Recalling the letter's warning, she had been wary, scanning her surroundings for any attackers hidden among the trees. Thunder crashed above her, and she flinched away from it. The path brought her out of the park and she stared at the scene before her. Clearly, the park was in the middle of some sort of residential area—there was a row of Victorian-style houses before her. They were no doubt pretty, she thought grimly, but she wasn't in the mood to appreciate them as they deserved. There were no lights on in any of the windows, and a cold wind had started blowing. Still, she squinted down to the end of the road and could make out the distant neon glow that promised some sort of business emporium. Sighing, she began to walk that way, shoving her hands into her armpits to stop their shaking.

An ATM visit and a phone call made from a rather battered phone box later, and she was sitting in the back of a cab being ferried to a five-star hotel. Several times, she looked back, checking to see if any cars were following, and once she asked the cabdriver to make two U-turns. Nothing suspicious happened, although the cabbie gave her some funny looks in the mirror. When they finally arrived at the hotel, she muttered something about a stalker boyfriend, and the driver nodded knowledgeably, his eyes lingering on her face. The hotel-management students who had been saddled with doorman duties on the graveyard shift lived up to their training and didn't bat an eyelid as they swung open the door for a soaking-wet woman. She walked through the glorious foyer, leaving a dripping trail on the tiles.

The impeccably dressed and coiffed desk clerk (at three in the morning! What kind of monstrous automaton was this woman?) politely stifled a yawn and barely widened her eyes when the person who hesitantly identified herself as Anne Ryan checked in without a reservation or luggage. A bellboy did a poor job of appearing awake, but he managed to guide her to her room and work the key-card thing for her. She neglected to tip him but assumed that her shattered appearance might earn her some forgiveness on that score.

She stripped and rejected a bath on the rationale that she might fall asleep in the water and drown in some flower-scented oblivion. Instead, she showered. She saw massive bruises blossoming on her body. She gasped in pain when she crouched down to pick up the soap, then finished the shower, wrapped herself in a big fluffy robe, and staggered out into the bedroom. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and she stared at the stranger in the mirror.

She looked automatically at the face, which was dominated by two nasty black eyes. *Bloody hell*, she thought. ~~*No wonder the cabdriver bought my story about an abusive boyfriend.*~~ It looked as if she had taken two hard blows to the eyes, and the whites were bloodshot from tears. Her lips were raw red and burned roughly when she licked them. "Someone tried to kick the living shit out of you," she said to the girl in the mirror. The face that looked back was narrow, and although it was not beautiful, it was not ugly. *I am nondescript*, she thought. *Nondescript features with shoulder-length dark hair.* *Hmm.* She opened the robe and looked critically at her body.

Lots of adjectives beginning with the letter S are appropriate here, she thought grimly. *Short. Scrawny. Small breasts. Skinned knees* (although presumably those were only temporary). She remembered something from the letter and felt along the inside of her left thigh. A small hard scar. *From falling out of a tree and impaling this leg at the age of nine*, she thought. Her body was not particularly fit-looking but seemed blessedly free of cellulite. Shaved legs. A conservative and recent bikini wax. More bruises had risen to the surface, but they didn't conceal the fact that she was not possessed of an especially sexy body. *I think I could do better*, she thought. *I won't be able to hit the level of Hot, but I might be able to manage Cute. If I have a big enough budget. Or at least some makeup to work with.*

Her gaze moved from her body to the reflection of the room behind her. There it was, a huge bed with big fluffy pillows, a very soft-looking blanket, and white sheets so crisp they could be used to sculpt something. It was almost exactly what she needed. If only there was a... there was! A welcome mint on the pillow! Well, if there was a welcome mint, then the bed was probably worth staggering across that massively wide carpet to get to. The carpet was soft, and she could have collapsed on it easily, but the thought of the welcome mint was enough to impel her forward. Dragging her feet, she hobbled over and managed to fall asleep without choking to death on her mint.

She had confusing dreams, although later, when she woke up, she wondered if they were confusing simply because the people she'd dreamed about were from pre-amnesia times. But even while she was in the dreams, she was confused. She was kissing someone, but she couldn't see him. All she could do was feel him, and shiver. And when his tongue stretched down her throat, she didn't panic.

Then she was sitting down to afternoon tea in a room full of ferns with a black-and-white-tile floor. The air was hot and wet, and an elderly lady dressed in Victorian clothes sat across from her. The lady sipped thoughtfully from her teacup and stared at her with cool chocolate eyes.

"Good evening, Myfanwy. I apologize for disturbing your sleep, but I felt obliged to thank you."

"Thank me?"

"Myfanwy, don't think I don't understand what you have done for me," the lady said coldly. "I dislike being in your debt, but thanks to you, a threat to me and my family has been disposed of. If it should happen that I can ever return the favor, I suppose I am obliged to do so, tiresome as that may be. Tea?" She poured Myfanwy a cup, and drank from her own cup. Myfanwy hesitantly tried a sip and found herself enjoying it.

"It's delicious," she said politely.

"Thank you" came the distracted reply. The woman was looking around her curiously. "Are you all right? There's something strange..." She trailed off and peered at Myfanwy thoughtfully. "Your mind is different. Something has happened to you; it's almost as if—" She stood up abruptly, knocking over her chair, which dissolved into vapor, and backed away from the table. The plants writhed, drawing in around her. "Who are you? I can't understand it. You are not Rook Thomas, and yet you are!"

"Myfanwy Thomas lost her memory," the younger woman said levelly with that strange

detachment that comes in dreams. "I'm what woke up."

"You're in her body," said the lady slowly.

"Yes," Myfanwy said reluctantly.

"How inconvenient," said the old lady with a sigh. "A rook with no memory of who she is." There was a pause. "Bugger."

"Sorry," Myfanwy said, then felt ridiculous for apologizing.

"Yes, well. Give me a moment. I need to think." The older woman paced for a few minutes, pausing periodically to smell the flowers. "Unfortunately, young lady, I don't have time to ponder all the factors here. I have problems of my own, and I can't actively help you, here or in the waking world. Any unusual movements on my part would put us both in danger."

"Don't you owe me a debt?" asked Myfanwy. "Thomas helped you."

"You are not Thomas!" the lady snapped in irritation.

"I don't think she's going to be coming around to collect," Myfanwy said dryly. The elderly lady's anger subsided.

"A good point. But the best I can do is keep your secret. I will not move against you nor tell anyone what has happened to you. Everything else will be up to you."

"That's it?" Myfanwy asked incredulously.

"It's more than you realize, and it could make all the difference. Now, I must go, and you had better wake up." The plants around them writhed again, and began to withdraw. Darkness flowed down from the glass ceiling above them.

"Now, wait a just second," said Myfanwy, and the lady looked startled. She raised an eyebrow, and the spreading darkness paused above their heads. "You're not going to be any more helpful?"

"No," the elderly lady said with some surprise. Once again, she was sitting at the table. "You are very definitely not Myfanwy Thomas," she remarked as she poured herself a fresh cup of tea. "Good evening."

"Good evening," said Myfanwy. The lady raised an eyebrow again, and Myfanwy felt herself blushing. Clearly she was supposed to say something else, and a vague recollection floated up—a tiny scrap of dying memory. "Good evening... my lady?" The lady nodded approvingly.

"Well, apparently you have not forgotten *everything*."

She woke up and fumbled by the side of the bed for the light switch. The clock told her that it was seven in the morning. Though she was exhausted, there was no chance she would be getting back to sleep. There were simply too many questions rushing through her head. What was the deal with the dreams? Should she be taking them seriously?

It seemed a trifle unfair to place any more importance on the conversational dream than she did on the tongue-kissing dream. However, the conversational dream had been incredibly vivid. Did she believe that the dreams were subconscious messages? She was vaguely inclined to dismiss them as her brain's sieving through the garbage of her thoughts while she slept, but she wasn't really sure.

And who was this Myfanwy Thomas person anyway? A rook? Wasn't that some kind of bird? Clearly the dream could be discounted, since she was not a bird. The lack of feathers, she thought wryly, was just one indicator. As it was, she had no idea about anything. How old was she? Was she married? No rings on any fingers; no incriminating tan lines. Was she employed? She hadn't thought to check the balance in the accounts earlier. She'd been too occupied with not freezing to death. Did she have family? Friends? With a sigh and then a few grunts of pain, she rolled out of her comfy bed and trudged gingerly over to the table where she'd thrown her jacket. Her scabbed knees hurt when she

bent down, and her chest ached if she breathed too deeply. She was about to empty the pockets when her eye fell on the phone and the menu.

“Hello, this is room five-five-three.”

“Yes, good morning, Ms. Ryan,” said a polished and mercifully nonperky voice. “What can I do for you?”

“Ooh, I would like to order some breakfast. Could I get a pot of coffee, some blueberry pancakes, some orange juice, some wheat toast, some marmalade, and two raw steaks?”

Astonishingly, there was no stunned pause; the voice on the other end cheerfully agreed to send all up.

“I need the steaks for my eyes; I had an accident,” she felt the need to explain.

“Of course, Ms. Ryan, we’ll be up soon.”

She also asked if the hotel could quickly launder her only set of clothes, and the voice on the phone promised to dispatch a person immediately to pick them up.

“Thank you,” she said as she looked out the window. The storm had passed overnight, and the sky was now cloudless. After a few minutes she wandered over to the doors that led to the balcony. She was about to open them when there was a discreet knock at the door. *Remember*, she thought, *someone beat the hell out of you, and someone is still after you*. She peeked through the peephole and saw that it was a diffident young fellow in a hotel uniform with an empty laundry bag. She eyed the crumpled and damp trail of clothing leading to the bathroom and dismissed her paranoia. *I’m willing to risk for the sake of clean clothes*. She opened the door, thanked the young man, and, flushing, hurriedly gathered up her bedraggled garments and dropped them into the waiting bag. Then, feeling guilty about the porter she hadn’t tipped the previous night, she lavishly overtipped him.

She was watching the morning news and marveling at the lack of items about corpses in a park when breakfast arrived and was laid out carefully for her, prompting another disproportionate tip. She sat down, fished in the jacket pockets, and pulled out the envelope neatly labeled 2. Just looking at it made her feel mildly irritated with the woman who’d written it, the woman who’d put her in this situation. *I’ll look at it in a sec*, she decided. *Once I’ve had some coffee*. She set it to one side, took out her wallet, and nibbled some toast as she looked through the cards. There were two driver’s licenses, one of which confirmed that she was indeed Myfanwy Alice Thomas. The address given triggered no memories at all, although she was intrigued to note that it appeared to be a house rather than a flat. She identified her hair as brown, her eyes as blue, and her age as thirty-one. She looked at her picture with disfavor. Ordinary features, pale, with independent-minded eyebrows.

The wallet also contained several credit and ATM cards and a little hand-scribbled note that said *appreciate what you’re trying to do, but you’re not really the kind of person who wears your heart in your wallet*.

“Very funny,” she said to herself. “It looks like I thought I was quite amusing before I lost my memory.” Sifting through the rest of the pockets produced a packet of tissues, a mobile phone with a dead battery, and a pass card on a clip. She spent some minutes fruitlessly examining this last item, which was as thick as four credit cards and featured only a sulky-looking photo and a bar code. Finally, she put aside her jacket and took a long drink of very good coffee. There was no time like the present for reading a letter from herself. She could only hope that this letter was more illuminating than the last. Well, at least this one was typed, rather than handwritten.

Dear You,

Have you noticed that I’m not calling you Myfanwy? This is for two reasons. First, I feel that it would be somehow rude to foist my name on you, and second, well, it’s just too strange. Speaking of

strange, I suppose you're wondering how I came to write these letters, how I knew they would be necessary.

You're wondering how I know the future.

Well, I have bad news for you. I'm not psychic. I can't see what's coming. I can't predict the lottery numbers for tonight, which is a real pity because it would be exceptionally useful. But over the past year, I've been approached by several people who claimed they could see my future. Random strangers. Some of them knew they occasionally had flashes of precognition, while others couldn't even explain why they'd come up to me on the street. They'd experienced dreams, visions, hunches. At first I assumed they were nothing but random crazies, but when it kept happening, it became harder to dismiss.

So I've known for some time that you would find yourself standing in the rain without any memory of who you were. I knew that you would come to be surrounded by dead people wearing gloves. I knew that they would be lying on the ground having been "taken down hardcore," in the words of one particularly batty old woman who spoke to me on the street in Liverpool.

I wonder, are you made up of parts of me? Or are you a completely new person? You don't know who you are, that much I can be certain of, but what else is gone? I suppose you couldn't know that *Jane Eyre* is my least favorite book in the world. Or that anything by Georgette Heyer is my favorite. I like oranges. I like pastries.

"Do you like pancakes?" wondered the girl in the hotel room, taking a bite of blueberry-filled deliciousness. "I certainly like them. You should have said."

To tell the truth, I find this whole thing alarming. I have a tidy, comfortable life. It's a trifle unorthodox, but I have managed to make it work. And now all I can do is piece things together from what I've been told.

1. I know that I will lose my memory. I have no idea why, but I will try and be prepared and make this as easy for you as it can be.

2. I know that I or you will be attacked, will fight, and will win. I'm laying odds that the last part is you. I organize very well, but I don't fight. The black eyes are probably mine, though. That sort of thing seems to happen to me.

3. I know that the men who attack me are all wearing latex gloves, which is very important. I know it sounds like nothing, maybe an incidental perversion. You don't understand the significance, but I will do, and I will explain it to you, if you want. All you need to know immediately is that someone I should be able to trust has decided that I need to be removed. I don't know exactly who. I don't know why. I may be for something I haven't even done yet.

I can't be certain that you'll read this letter; I can't even be certain that you'll read the first letter. I've just put copies of them in every coat and jacket I own to make sure they'll be available to you when you need them. I can only hope that my limited knowledge of the future will be of use to you, and that you will gain some additional insights of your own.

And that I'll be wearing a coat when it happens.

In any case, we must face facts. There is a choice you must make, because I will not make it for you. You can walk away from my life and go create a new one. If that's what you choose, then you will need to leave the country, but this body comes with a large amount of money—more than enough to buy you a comfortable life. I have left instructions on how to build yourself a new identity, and lists of names and facts that you can use to protect yourself. It would never be a completely safe life, but it would be as safe as I, a person who knows how to prepare, can make it for you.

Or you can choose to adopt my life as your own. You can find out why you have been betrayed. I said before that mine is a good life, and that is true. The body you are in has been privileged enough to have wealth, power, and knowledge beyond the dreams of normal people. You can have those things as well, but this choice will be dangerous. For whatever reason, an injustice has been committed against both of us. An injustice against you because you did not do anything, and an injustice against me because I cannot believe that I will do anything to deserve it.

So, that's the choice you have to make. Unfair? Absolutely. But you still have to make it. There are two keys in the envelope, and both are to lockboxes at the Mansel Bank on Bassingthwaighte Street in the City; 1011-A contains all the materials you need to go away and 1011-B puts you back into my life. I would not blame you for making either choice.

I wish you nothing but the best. Whatever you do, be careful until you have opened the box. Remember, they want you dead.

Sincerely,

Myfanwy Thomas

She put the letter down on the table, picked up her coffee, and walked over to the balcony door. She hesitated, but then dismissed her fears. *No one followed me*, she thought. *There aren't going to be snipers waiting for me to come outside. Get a grip.* She opened the door and went out into the morning. It was a nice day. All around her were hotel rooms in which people were eating much the same food as she was, and balconies where they were enjoying the same late-winter sunshine and looking down on the same steam coming off the heated (and completely deserted) pool. But she imagined that she was probably the only person about to decide who she was going to be.

Well, Ms. Thomas, your story is very compelling, she mused. *You have deliberately tried to tantalize me into some sort of pursuit of justice. You give me no details of the life I would be inheriting. You want me to be curious. And although I still have no idea who I am, it seems that I do have a penchant for intrigue.*

I don't know whether I get this from you, she thought, *but I have enough sense to realize that your little mission would be a fool's errand. And I'm not even vaguely intrigued by your promise of "wealth, power, and knowledge beyond the dreams of normal people."* *Can you hear me somewhere in the back of this brain? If so, then hear this: Don't flatter yourself, darling. Your life holds absolutely no appeal for me.*

She stared up at the clouds, which she couldn't remember ever staring at before. She drank the coffee, and although she knew it was good, and that she liked it with milk and sugar, she couldn't remember ever drinking coffee before. She could recall the movements needed to swim the butterfly stroke, although she couldn't remember ever entering a pool. There were so many memories to build and experiences she knew she would enjoy.

If people are going to be trying to kill me, then I want to be somewhere far away, and I want to be spending as much money as you have bequeathed me. Whatever you lacked in courage, I am going to make up for in common sense. She went back in the room, picked up a pen, and firmly circled 1011-A

She lay on the bed with a steak draped over each eye, thinking about what she would do next. There were a few issues that needed to be addressed. First, how was she to get to the bank without catching the attention (and, subsequently, the fist) of some psycho with a fetish for surgical gloves? Second, where did she want to go once she opened the door to her new life? The first problem seemed relatively simple. In her panic the previous night, she'd extracted a rather large quantity of cash. Certainly enough to hire a car and driver to take her to the bank. As to the second, well, for all her obvious faults, Miss Myfanwy Thomas as was did not strike her as a liar. She expected to find everything she would need in box 1011-A. Thomas had said there would be instructions and advice on how to build a new life. Of course, there remained the question as to why Myfanwy Thomas had elected to take this wealth she claimed to possess and flee the country herself before she lost her memory. She could have precluded the amnesia and been sunning herself on some balcony in Borneo if she'd had the nerve. So what had stopped her?

Perhaps, she thought, it was the number of predictions she received. But what kind of person believes random "psychics" off the street? And if Thomas was certain the attack would happen, she was equally certain that I could escape her life. Thomas was too timid to change her fate, but I will not be!

Filled with a sudden certainty, she carefully peeled the steaks off her eyes and examined the result in the mirror. The swelling had gone down, but the bruising was dark and thorough. It would be days before all signs vanished, and the aching continued to be a problem. She headed to the bathroom to wash the meat juice off her face and out of her hair, pausing only to fetch a Toblerone from the minibar.

Forty-five minutes later, she stepped into a waiting car and was ferried away in comfort into the City. Her clothes were clean, her hair smelled of flowers rather than steak tartare, and her mind was intent on how she was to go about living. Clearly, she and Thomas were different people. Well, she would be grateful for what had been left to her, and the girl who used to live inside her body could rest in peace.

Taken by a sudden whim, she asked the driver to go by some of the main sights of London. As she drove through Trafalgar Square and cruised past St. Paul's Cathedral, she looked out with narrowed eyes. She knew these places, but only as if she'd read about them or seen pictures of them.

The long black car glided to a stop in front of the bank, and the driver nodded agreeably when asked to wait. *I wonder if Thomas had this same taste for luxury? If not, it's a pity, since she could afford it.* After breakfast, she'd checked the account balances for all her cards at an ATM in the hotel and had been thrilled with the number of zeros that appeared. If this was the wealth Thomas had spoken of in her letter, then she was going to live quite comfortably. If there was more, then it was going to be an excessively good life. She disembarked from the car and walked up the steps, looking subtly around her for the slightest sign that someone was watching her. Not seeing a hint of a glove or anyone staring in her direction, she relaxed and walked in.

I'll have to come up with a name, I suppose. I certainly can't go about being Myfanwy Thomas, not if I'm trying to escape the past. And I'm not particularly wild about Anne Ryan. Probably dangerous to make any decisions before I know what Thomas had planned. There may be a passport or something. Although I've always liked the name Jeanne.

At least, I think I've always liked it.

Still musing, she followed the signs, took the lift down to the lockbox area, pushed open the thick wooden doors, and walked over to the receptionist.

"Good morning, I'm Anne Ryan," she said, producing the driver's license.

The receptionist stood up, nodding. She was wearing latex gloves. And before the woman former

known as Myfanwy Thomas could say a word, the receptionist wound up and punched her in the face. She flew backward, the pain in her eyes flaring, and shrieked like a train whistle. Through the stars floating in her vision, she could see three men entering the room and shutting the doors behind them. They surrounded her, and one of the men leaned over her with a hypodermic needle in one hand. Filled with a sudden rage, she swung her leg up and kicked him hard between the legs. Squealing, he doubled over, and she lashed out with a fist, catching him hard on the chin. He staggered back onto one of the other men, and she swung herself up, teeth bared, panic rising as she realized that she had no idea how to fight. Still, certain things were obvious. She shoved the man she'd kicked hard, sending him and his friend against the wall. The remaining man and the woman stood back, seeming almost hesitant to touch her. She noticed that the men were also wearing latex gloves. The woman flicked a questioning look to the standing man.

Taking advantage of this, she leaped toward the woman, reasoning that she would be the easiest target. They didn't appear to have any weapons, and so far it was only the woman who'd seemed willing to hit her. Instead of slamming her target, however, she found herself quickly slung around and placed in some sort of painful armlock. She was being taken down by experts. *Sorry, Thomas. It looks as if you overestimated me.* One of the men stepped in and slapped her hard. The pain rocked her, and she reeled in the woman's grasp. The bitch shoved slightly against her arm, and it felt as if several bones were being pushed to their breaking point. Then the man punched her.

"Bastards!" she shrieked. The first man limped toward her, holding the syringe. The pain was rising within her, and when the woman jerked at her arm again, the agony exploded. She closed her eyes and screamed. There was nothing in the world but that scream, drowning out everything else, even the pain. All the air was pushed out of her lungs, and she felt and heard nothing but her voice. When she opened her eyes and took a breath, she realized that there was no one holding her. Instead, the four people were lying on the ground, twitching uncontrollably.

What the hell just happened? What did I do?

She staggered, panting, but refused to keel over. She looked around, waiting for more people to come in, but no one appeared. *Not even the bank staff?* she thought vaguely, but the doors were apparently thick enough to muffle any sounds of fighting. Her first instinct was flight, but then she was seized with a terrible resolve. Her existence up to this point had been bizarre, admittedly, but she'd made decisions based on the facts she'd collected. Now, nothing she'd thought she understood could be trusted. Any vague suppositions she had had about who Myfanwy Thomas was or what had happened to her were clearly deeply flawed. There was far more to the world than she'd supposed, and she wanted to know everything.

Carefully, she searched the receptionist's pockets, doing her best to ignore the increasingly feeble twitches. Nothing. A cursory examination of the desk revealed a drawer of numbered keys, each in its own little compartment. She found the appropriate keys to match the ones she already had, and, stepping over the people lying on the floor, she walked into the room in which the boxes were kept. With a gasp, she found an unconscious woman with an ID badge indicating that she was the receptionist. *I suppose they knocked her out,* thought Myfanwy weakly. *How could they have found me? And gotten in place so fast?*

She stepped over the bank employee, scanned the rows of enormous drawers until she found the right ones, and matched the keys to the two locks. For a moment, she was tempted to change her mind, but a glance over her shoulder at the bodies on the floor decided her. She set her jaw and opened box 1011-B.

Inside were two suitcases. She opened the first and saw a number of objects wrapped in bubble wrap. She turned to the second suitcase, opened it, and took a step back in surprise. The case was filled with stacks of envelopes, all numbered in the unmistakable handwriting of Myfanwy Thomas.

Her initial disappointment at finding a suitcase full of paperwork rather than high-tech gadgets and gold coins gave way to intrigue. She hadn't been certain what she would find, and she supposed the letters made about as much sense as anything else. Hopefully, Myfanwy Thomas had left instructions for a situation such as this. But was there time to peruse them? She risked a look over her shoulder and saw that the four figures had not roused themselves and were not headed toward her but in fact had ceased their twitching and were lying still. The receptionist did not seem to be in any danger of waking up. She sucked her teeth for a moment, weighing possibilities in her mind, and then reason won out over curiosity. *Fuck it, I'll read in the car.*

She tucked the first envelope, labeled 3, in her back pocket, then hefted the two suitcases, which were much heavier than she had anticipated, out of the drawer and onto the floor, and then precariously wheeled them out of the vault. She maneuvered carefully around the bodies and found the lift, which whisked her up to the lobby.

Be calm, she said to herself. Be calm. Not everyone in the bank is going to be wearing latex gloves. In fact, nobody was wearing gloves, and nobody appeared to pay her a blind bit of attention. *Well, that will last right until someone goes to check his lockbox,* she thought, and hurried outside. The stairway down from the bank presented some problems, but the driver noticed her struggling and obligingly toted her luggage to the car. Myfanwy thanked him and slid into the backseat.

"Just drive," she said. "Just go, please." She leaned back weakly and focused on controlling her breathing and not having a heart attack.

Okay, you're safe, she told herself. *Well, what's next?* She took the envelope from her pocket and tore it open.

Dear You,

The odds of your reading this are slim to none. Who would choose uncertainty and vaguely worded warnings over a new life of wealth and luxury? I can only assume that you were put under a massive amount of stress, touched someone's skin, and they were paralyzed. Or blinded. Or lost the ability to speak. Or befouled themselves. Or one of several other effects that I won't outline right now. In any case, I know what it's like the first time it happens. It's like a door opening up inside of you, isn't it? Like you've been hit by a truck. It can't be ignored. So even if you would have preferred to open up the other box (which, by the way, would have had you living out the rest of your life as Jeanne Citeaux) I'm glad you made this choice.

Take both suitcases with you and go to the address below. The key in this envelope will get you in and you should be safe there. It has no connection to me, officially. Open the next envelope when you are established. Try not to be followed.

This note was unsigned, and the key she fished out of the envelope bore no identifying marks. The address given was not the one on either of her driver's licenses and appeared to be some sort of flat. The letter and key were put into a pocket, and she gave the next destination to the driver with the message that he should try not to be followed. The driver nodded and began to follow a course with many doublings-back and abrupt changes in direction that she was certain nobody could pursue the

without being noticed. When she commented on this, he smiled slightly.

~~“I’m used to it, miss. Many of our clients have the paparazzi after them.”~~ Nodding her head thoughtfully, Myfanwy took out the key and turned it over and over in her hands as she looked out the windows. They had by now moved out of the City. At points, they drove along the Thames, which was very pretty, with tour boats cruising along. Then they would curve away, switching lanes and twisting through residential districts. As the car meandered east, to the Docklands, she began to digest the events in the bank.

Eventually the car stopped in front of an apartment building. The driver carried her suitcases into the lobby for her. She gave him a generous bonus for his excellent driving, then dragged the suitcases into the lift. On the ninth floor, she found the appropriate apartment and opened the door.

It was clear that the apartment had been empty for weeks, if not months. A little light trickled in but the curtains were drawn. She flicked on the light. The entire place smelled of abandonment. It was eerily quiet. She hesitantly took a few steps, feeling as if she were intruding or had broken in on someone’s house.

Before her, the living room opened up, with some pieces of furniture sitting solidly under dust sheets. There were no pictures on the walls. To her right was a kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and found some six-packs of bottled water and cans of soft drinks. The freezer held a variety of Le Cuisines and some plastic-covered trays of frozen meat. There was cutlery in one of the drawers, and crockery in a cupboard. She moved into the living room and dragged the sheets off the furniture, revealing some big, squashy-looking couches and chairs of a dark burgundy color. There was a large TV hanging on the wall.

“How minimalist,” she remarked to herself. The bedroom was similarly devoid of character, with a large bed under yet another dust sheet. She peeled back the sheet and saw that the bed was already made up with some soft-looking blankets. A surprising waft of scent rose up when she uncovered the bed, and under the blankets she found a few sachets of lavender. There were soap, shampoo, and towels in the bathroom. A few fresh toothbrushes in their boxes, with toothpaste and mouthwash in the cupboard above the sink. No makeup, but there was a hairbrush and, surprisingly, a few bottles of hair dye.

Don’t tell me I’m going gray at thirty-one! she thought in horror, but she noticed that none of the colors were her own. *Probably in case I need to disguise myself,* she concluded. There was also a large first aid kit on a shelf.

The other bedroom had been made into a sort of office, with a large computer and a complicated-looking printer under more plastic. There was a low bookshelf with some folders on it, and she pulled one out and opened it at random. It appeared to hold the details of the rental of the flat she was standing in. Struck by a sudden thought, she went back into the main bedroom and opened the wardrobe.

There were a few exceptionally bland garments, mostly black and gray. Some white blouses, a couple of suits, a skirt, and two pairs of jeans. All had been carefully hung up and all appeared designed to encourage people not to look at the person wearing them.

Well, apparently I had absolutely no taste, she thought, bemused by the plainness of the range offered. She shuddered, because there was something unsettling about the thought of those clothes on her body without her mind being present. However, as she fingered the clothes, she found that all of them still bore price tags. She carefully closed the doors and went out into the living room, where she pulled back the curtain and let in all the sunlight.

The windows were huge and looked out on the river, with all its traffic. The furniture seemed much more cozy suddenly, and she could see that everything had been carefully positioned in the very best spots. *Thomas put some thought into this place,* she reflected. *This wasn’t just a bolt-hole but*

~~somehow to be comfortable. She felt a little pang of fondness for the woman who'd lived in her body. You couldn't help liking someone who put all this effort into making you feel welcome.~~

Besides, she's the only person I know, she thought, a little ridiculously. She dragged the suitcase into the living room and opened the one that had no letters but was instead filled with objects packaged in bubble wrap. She plucked one out and weighed it in her hands. It was heavy, and a label reading JUST IN CASE had been stuck on. She carefully unwound the tape and wrappings, and then sucked in a breath of surprise. In her hand she held a small but evil-looking submachine gun. She eyed the suitcase warily, lest it suddenly eject more weapons, and then gingerly rewrapped the gun before putting it back in the case and shutting the lid.

She turned her attention to the other suitcase and plucked out the next letter. It was much thicker than all the others had been, and written in a cheerful violet ink. She kicked off her shoes and sat on the couch, which was extremely comfortable, just perfect for napping.

Dear You,

I am just going to have to assume that you are where you're supposed to be and stop making all sorts of vague conjectures as to where you might be. That said, you'd better be in the apartment I set up for you because it's taken me ages to prepare it. There were all sorts of things I wanted there waiting for you, and it's been exceedingly difficult to get all this done without being noticed. I (and now you, I suppose) exist under a certain amount of surveillance. And so the establishment of this secret hideaway, where I sit on the right-hand side of the couch writing to you, was quite a accomplishment.

She looked over at the other side of the couch, where her old self had sat. It was kind of companionable, despite the lack of a companion.

There are all sorts of things I must explain to you, but I will have to prioritize carefully. Before I can tell you all about who I am, what I do, and so on, there are a few more immediate things you should know. I assumed in my last letter that you touched someone and disrupted their control of their own body. I'll keep on assuming that, since it's the only reason I can think of why you would have picked the box you did. As an aside, I'll tell you that I feel really bad for you—it takes quite a large amount of pain to trigger your gift unconsciously. Hopefully, nothing has been broken or ruptured inside of you, since that would be really inconvenient. But no, I resolved I wouldn't go down all the avenues of "what might be." You're in the apartment, and safe.

The first time it happened to me, I was nine years old and had climbed a tree. Somehow, I managed to fall and get a sharp branch jammed into my leg. Shrieking with pain, I was bundled into the car by my parents and driven to the hospital. I was wearing a tracksuit at the time, and so I must assume that's how my parents managed not to touch my skin during this whole thing. Anyway, the ride was dreadful for everyone concerned, for me because I was bleeding and am a terrible coward when it comes to pain, and for my parents because I didn't stop wailing.

Finally, we arrived at the hospital, and either there weren't many people waiting or my shrieking prompted some sort of queue-jumping privileges, because I was quickly taken in to the doctor, who gently cut off my track bottoms (they'd glued themselves to my leg). When he brushed his hand against my skin, he immediately fell over and started screaming. It turned out that he'd lost control of his leg. Some other hospital person rushed in and tried to tend to both me and the doctor. When she touched my bare skin, she lost her sight.

~~So now we had three people shrieking and flailing about, although I was so thrown by the whole thing that I was getting much quieter by this time and gave out only the occasional whimper when remembered to. The third medical person had the good sense (or perhaps it was just good luck) to tend to the others first. And the next person to touch me had the even better sense to be wearing gloves, and so my leg was stitched up and bandaged, and when I woke up, it was safe for people to touch me again.~~

But I knew that I had caused the chaos, and I knew I could do it again if I wanted to. Search your mind, think back, and you'll see that you know how to do it too. If you haven't done it yet (I can't avoid this conjecture, because it's too important), then you're going to have to jump-start your powers. There's a red folder in one of the cases that you can consult for suggestions.

She's got to be kidding, the woman on the couch thought incredulously, but she put the letter aside for a moment and sifted through the case until she found the red folder. Inside, there were detailed descriptions on how best to push her own arm or leg to the near breaking point (without actually breaking it) and how to induce a number of other ghastly sounding but nonpermanent types of damage. "Unbelievable," she murmured. The incident at the bank hadn't been pretty, but at least she hadn't had to do anything like this.

At first it seemed that the bizarre afternoon had passed without consequence. There were no lawsuits, and my parents never spoke to me about it. But somebody somewhere must have mentioned it, and the talk must have eventually made its way to an exceedingly interested party. I found out later that three months after my visit to hospital, my father received a letter from an obscure branch of the government. I like to think that he and my mother talked it over, but the end result was that my father and I were driven to an old stone building in the City, and I was introduced to Lady Linda Farrier and Sir Henry Wattleman of the Checquy Group.

My father and I were led into a sort of drawing room lined with books and prints. We sat down carefully in armchairs and were brought tea and biscuits, and then Sir Wattleman and Lady Farrier proceeded to explain to my father why it was both necessary and legal that I be taken away from my family and placed in the care of the Checquy Group. I was not really paying attention to all of that because I was only nine and a half and because I could not stop staring at Lady Farrier, who was strangely familiar.

She was not young, but she was very thin, with hair that had been drawn back and up. Her eyes were a dark, dark brown and she spoke in a very calm manner. Nothing seemed to shake or surprise her, even when I managed to drop my teacup onto the floor, where it shattered into a million pieces and splashed tea everywhere. She didn't even blink, although Sir Wattleman's head whipped around in alarm and I half thought he was going to punch someone.

I do remember my father objecting to my being taken, but in a sort of halfhearted manner, as if he already knew he would lose. Lady Farrier very patiently repeated some lines of the law she'd quoted earlier, and there was not the slightest bit of mercy in her voice, but Sir Wattleman seemed to have a bit more pity in him. This is ironic, since I later learned he was one of the most dangerous men in the country and had been responsible for a great many assassinations—most of which he had carried out himself. Nevertheless, at that time he was by far the more human of the two and was doing his best to console my father. He even patted him on the shoulder.

I was finding it increasingly difficult to pay attention to this conversation because of my fascination with Lady Farrier, who ignored me completely. Just as my father finally bowed his head and agreed that he would be leaving without me, I recalled where I knew her from. My mind was

whirling as I submitted to a final kiss and hug from my father, and I honestly cannot recall what our parting words were. He left with Sir Wattleman, and I stood, absentmindedly wiping my father's tears off my cheek, staring at the woman whom, impossibly, I recognized.

Do I sound like a terrible child for ignoring my father as he walked out of my life? Looking back, I cringe and am amazed. I was not normally self-centered. I adored my family and had a little sister and an older brother who were my favorite people in the world. In the days to come, I would dissolve in tears at the thought of them. But at that moment, there was nothing but her.

Every night for the previous two months I had dreamed of her. I'd sat with this woman in a room with black-and-white tiles and told her everything. She was stiff and formal, but I had found myself adoring her. Food would appear on the tables, and she would patiently extract every detail of my life from me. She was especially interested in my day at the hospital but endured my descriptions of all my possessions and the minutiae of my day. I think it was her patience that endeared her to me. How often does a nine-year-old child have such a fascinated audience? In any case, she had listened, and now I found myself face-to-face with her.

In the apartment, she put down the letter for a moment and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. The woman, Farrier, sounded eerily like the woman from her own dream. And the room Thomas described was exactly the same. Even the name the Checquy Group stirred the hairs at the back of her neck and along her arms. Was her memory returning? Even a little? She turned back to the letter.

"Well, Miss Myfanwy," Lady Farrier said thoughtfully. "Here we are again." Numbly, I nodded in agreement, too filled with amazement to say anything. "And now it seems you are going to come and live with us," she added, staring at me meaningfully. It was then that the realization hit me, and I began to sniffle. Perhaps I expected that, like a kindly aunt, she would hasten to comfort me, but all she did was take another sip from her teacup. As I broke down into sobs, she simply nibbled her crumpets and waited for me to finish. When Sir Henry came in and sat down in his own chair, he did not do anything either. Though he had been moved by the distress of a grown man, he did not react to the weeping of a little girl. Eventually I managed to get hold of myself, and, wiping my nose on my sleeve, I began thoughtfully eyeing the tray of biscuits. Lady Farrier nodded slightly, and I made a grab for something intriguing and chocolate.

And that was the beginning of my association with the Checquy Group, which has continued since that day. They wanted me because of what I could do—what you can do. Hopefully some of my training has remained with you, because it took me years to attain this level of mastery. Now, with a touch, I can seize control of someone's physical system. I can take away any or all of their senses, paralyze them, make them feel anything I want.

The Checquy Group thought I could be some sort of ultra spy, traveling the world and, I don't know, making people throw themselves in front of cars or something. Unfortunately, at least for the Checquy Group, I am not the spy type. I'm not an aggressive person, I get violently ill in planes, and I'm really quite shy. The Court was disappointed, but I was too valuable an asset for them to simply drop. Instead, I have become an in-house operative. It turns out that I am an extremely capable administrator and have a very good head for numbers. I use my powers only rarely. Thus, while other members of the organization attain high positions through their remarkable accomplishments in the field, I became a member of the Court simply through my work in the bureaucracy.

Does that sound lame? I'm very, very good. There's not a formal timeline for ascending to the Court. In fact, most people never get in. I am the youngest person in the current Court. I got there

after ten years of working in administration. The next-youngest got in after sixteen years of high dangerous fieldwork. That's how good an administrator I am.

“What a geek,” she sighed. Shaking her head, she put down the letter and went into the kitchen where she pulled a bottle of water from the fridge. She gulped it all down and reached for another. A thousand questions were whirling through her head. What was this power over others that she had inherited? Thomas claimed that it required skin-to-skin contact, but back in the bank, she had managed to take out four people, all of whom were wearing gloves and three of whom hadn't even been touching her. And what was this Checquy Group? They sought out people with powers. They were led by a woman who could enter dreams. They were empowered by the law to take a child away from her family. And Thomas was a part of it. Slowly, she walked back to the couch.

So, I suppose you're wondering all about the Checquy Group. Oh, and please note that it is pronounced Sheck-Eh. French influences, I think. Or possibly just warped by generations of employees mispronouncing it. Don't worry if the name means nothing to you. Most people never hear of it at all, but it has been in existence for centuries. It worked closely with the House of York, tended to ignore the Tudors, and endured the House of Stuart. However, it does not really matter who is ruling—from the earliest days, the organization's loyalty has been to Britain rather than to any particular ruler. When Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector, the four leaders of the Checquy Brotherhood (a pompous and inaccurate early name for the organization) were waiting to offer their services to him. You might think that Cromwell, a dedicated Puritan (indeed, the dedicated Puritan) would not have suffered such a group to live, let alone employed them. The records I saw describe the exhibition the leaders gave the Lord Protector, and as a result of that demonstration, the Brotherhood continued its existence. We weather the vagaries of history, welcoming new rulers and bending knees to those in power, whoever they may be. We are a tool of the nation, an asset of the British Isles. Those who work within the Checquy can accomplish what no one else can, and so they are the secret arm of the kingdom.

If I sound like I'm proud to be one of them, that's because I am. Threats arise every day, threats that normal people cannot be made aware of. It is the Checquy Group that protects them, though it goes largely unrecognized. Although I don't go out into the field, I know that I play an integral part in defending normal people. I love my job, and that's why those random psychics' predictions have hurt me so badly. I don't know which member of the Court will turn against me, but if one does, it means there is something rotten at its core, which means that everyone is in danger.

The Checquy Group is composed of hundreds of individuals. Some are like me—they possess powers beyond the normal population. The non-powered members are simply the cream of the respective occupational crops. This shouldn't be taken as meaning that I don't admire them. Unlike most other members of the Court, I do not regard the non-powered as being lesser. Perhaps it is because I lack the courage to go out and face what they do, but in any case I know they are just as good as me. Still, by long-standing tradition and policy, non-powered individuals cannot become members of the Court—the ruling circle. The Court answers to the highest individuals in the land only and not always to them.

Those of us with powers are sought out by the Checquy through a variety of means, and the group has long ago granted the authority to claim any citizens it wanted. Parents are coerced or duped into releasing their children, sometimes with massive payoffs. Adults are lured in with promises of power and wealth, and the opportunity to serve their nation. The initiation is a mixture of ancient oaths and

modern contracts under both the official and unofficial secrecy acts of the government. By the time a individual has become a full member, he is bound by a million different ties. Do you realize now what your leaving would have meant?

I've only ever heard of three people who tried to leave the Checquy, and I know the history inside and out. Of those three, the first was a powered individual called Brennan the Intransigent who made a break for it in 1679. He was about to step across the English Channel to France, where he had been lured by the promises of the French government, when he was taken into custody. He was crucified on the cliffs of Dover.

The second was a soldier in 1802 who was driven insane by something he saw in a burrow at John o'Groats and who fled to his parents' home. He was carefully brought back to the Checquy stronghold and then buried alive in his village's graveyard.

The third was a woman who could grow tentacles out of her back and exuded some sort of alarming toxin through her fingertips. In 1875, she fled to Buenos Aires and managed to live there for three months before the hand of the Checquy caught up with her. Her stuffed body is currently displayed above the mantelpiece in one of the London offices. The little bronze plaque indicates that she lived for six months after they caught her.

See how the Checquy Group deals with those who try to leave? They like to make examples of them and they tend to be creative about how they do it. And did I mention that none of those who tried to escape were members of the Court? Can you imagine how much more creative they would be if you had fled and they caught you? Don't worry, you would have escaped safely. As soon as I accepted what was going to happen to me, I began to consolidate all my resources and knowledge into designing a means of protecting you.

You don't need to know all the details, but suffice it to say that I created a series of contingencies that if activated would have simultaneously crippled the Checquy's ability to pursue you and disrupted the daily functioning of the organization in such a way that they could not have spared the staff or their resources to pursue a Myfanwy Thomas—especially a Myfanwy Thomas who had had plastic surgery and drastically corrupted the records that contained her personal details.

How? I can almost hear you ask. Well, it involved a few things.

1. Lots and lots of research, which started as an attempt to figure out who would have a reason to attack me and ended up giving me a far better understanding of the organization and how to evade it. It also allowed me to build up some rather detailed dossiers on the various Court members. Some of those dossiers describe—well, let's call them indiscretions. They're not crimes on the level of a bring-down-the-government scandal, but they're grave enough that if certain highly placed officials found out about them, it would prompt some inconvenient investigations that would take up an enormous amount of the Court's time.

2. The systematic alteration of most of the files that describe me, including fingerprints and DNA details. The hard copies, anyway. I've used my rank and a few little computing skills to write a program that will corrupt the electronic copies.

3. The insertion of a virus into the computer systems that will, if put into motion, hamper even the most mundane work. The Checquy would still be able to carry out its day-to-day activities, but with far less efficiency than usual. The resulting confusion would give you ample time to get out of the country, get a new face, and attend to a few other things.

If you had elected to leave, I would have had you stop by an unmanned Checquy outpost office at Waterloo Station, log onto the terminal, and e-mail keywords to some accounts in the Checquy mainframe. Once you'd activated these contingency plans, you would technically have been guilty of committing treason against the nation by (temporarily) weakening its defenses. So in some way, staying and assuming my life is safer. It's a very complicated business, I'll admit.

If it's any consolation, I'm really glad you made this decision.

So, while I don't know exactly who is currently trying to kill you, there are seven candidates—the other members of the Court. One of the psychics confirmed that.

Oh, but before I give you any more details, check your watch and see what day of the week it is. If it's a weekday, well, I suppose it's fairly obvious that you've missed work. Is it too late to call in sick?

Automatically, she checked her watch and saw it was Saturday. Then she did a double take.

Yes, you're going in to work. Yes, you're going in to an office where someone is trying to kill you. You chose not to leave, and this is the only way you can stay. There's a purple binder in the suitcase with the letters. It's thick. That's because it describes the Checquy and what you do for them. You'll probably need to consult it a lot. If it's a workday today, then you should call in sick. Instructions on how to do so are at the top of page 1. Otherwise, you'll want to pick out a businesslike outfit for your first day at work. If it's a weekend, read on.

When last we left our heroine (us), she was nine years old and about to stuff her gob with chocolate digestive. As I recall, we had all finished our tea, but neither Lady Farrier nor Sir Wattleman spoke directly to me. I remember feeling somewhat irritated by this but not so irritated that I didn't start wolfing down everything on the pastry tray. And then Lady Farrier sent me away to the Estate.

The letter continued, but she was too tired to read further. The pages fell back into her lap, and soon she was asleep on the couch, a couch that had been chosen for its extreme coziness.

If she had any dreams, she did not remember them.

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