

Soft Reset — Part 9: Change the Signal

By Austen Tucker · 2026

The room held still a while. Outside the one window, the sim's idea of weather did something quiet and gray, unbothered, the way weather is when nobody built it to mean anything.

"I'm right here, Anabelle," she said, finally, and I understood it wasn't a correction. It was an offering, the kind you make when you already know it isn't going to be enough and you're making it anyway, because the alternative is not making it at all.

"Yes, Mom. You're right here."

"But."

"But you're not the mom whose hand I held on the last day I had one to hold. And that one — that's the one I miss. Not more. Not instead. Just — that one, specifically, is the one I miss."

I watched that land. It's strange, watching a face made of light take a hit; there's no wince, no color change, nothing a camera could catch. Just a very small stillness, the kind that means the words got where they were going.

"That's fair," she said.

"I didn't want it to be fair. I wanted you to argue with me."

"I know. I'm not going to."

"Why not."

"Because you're right, and because arguing with a grieving child about the shape of her grief is a thing a worse mother would do, and I have spent a very long time deciding what kind of mother I get to be now, given the constraints." A pause, the lag settling in again, deliberate this time, not a glitch. "Some of us don't get to fix the shape, Anabelle. We change the signal instead. I changed the signal. I did not become the thing you're grieving, because the thing you're grieving had a body, and I don't, anymore, and no amount of me sitting in this chair is going to make that not true. I'm not going to pretend otherwise to make you feel better tonight."

"That's not comforting."

"No. It's honest. You can have one or the other from me most nights. Tonight you get honest."

I laughed, which surprised both of us, a small wet thing that didn't have anywhere else to go.

"I gave you the sim so you'd have somewhere to rest," she said. "I did not give it to you so you could go looking for a version of me you could keep. I know the difference even if the sim, apparently, does not."

"It let me in."

"It shouldn't have."

"It did."

"Then I'll look at why," she said, and there was something under that — not anger, not quite, but something close enough to it that I understood, for the first time, that my mother could still be frightened of something, even now, even like this. "You are not to go back into that gap again. I mean that."

"Okay."

"I mean it, Anabelle."

"I said okay."

We sat with that a while. She did not ask me to promise, which I noticed, and was grateful for, because I don't know that I could have meant it yet.

"I miss having a body too, some days," she said, eventually, quieter, in a register I don't think she uses very often, not even with Jack, maybe not even with herself. "In case you were wondering whether that part was only yours to carry."

"I wasn't wondering. I guess I hoped."

"You can stop hoping alone. That's the offer. Not fixed. Not the same. Just not alone."

I didn't say anything to that. I don't think there was anything to say that wouldn't have made it smaller.

The room stayed quiet a long while, gray weather going through its unbothered motions outside the one window, my mother made of light and lag and decades of deliberate signal, sitting with me in the grief instead of trying to argue me out of it, which — I understood, finally, sitting there — was its own kind of hand to hold.