

A VENTURE SAGA NOVEL

UNTRAINED MAGIC



BY
WESTON GILL

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By Weston Gill

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Version 1.5

This is a special edition copy of a prequel novel and introduction to the Venture Saga universe. A story universe that I've spent decades creating on paper and in my imagination. Because I loathe prequel media of all kinds, I decided to take on a book writing thirty day challenge and allow it to act as my prequel novel. I'd simply use material that isn't main story material, so smart. So I set out to accomplish in thirty days, a task that had defeated me for two decades prior. Write and publish (yes, I did self publish, but I'm counting it) a novel(la).

At the end of the thirty days I can say definitively, like I have never said before;

1. I absolutely love writing, I will continue to dedicate myself to it if only for my enjoyment.
2. I can't fathom how people without all of my modern day advantages, including but not limited to, free time, the internet, a public education, and free document programs,

ever finished and published a novel. I am both surprised and amazed to have made it this far.

3. I can't wait to explore 10,000 Worlds (My first official Novel.) Which is already well underway and includes plans for professional artwork, edits, and even distribution. Dreaming bigger than I've ever dared before.

In the interest of full disclosure, if you possess this copy of my first novel, it is only the work of my own hands in the writing and editing! 32 days of intense but limited effort. Likely there are grammar errors, spelling errors, improper words, and formatting issues the likes of which you are not used to seeing. Fear not, for this will be a collectors item to someone. This is not a promise that it is or will be worth money, or of any value beyond the words within. It is my simple excuse for the errors and mistakes you find along the way. I apologize. However, if this is what I accomplished in thirty days, imagine what I'll accomplish when I have the time I need to deliver a book that is amazing!

The new and amazing cover artwork was done by my long time friend and amazing human being Daniel Martin. He is not only a fantastic human, but clearly an amazing artist. I have been a fan of his style and work since the day I first set eyes on it and I do hope you love it almost as much as I do. If you are looking to commission a fine artist for

yourself, he does RPG Parties and specializes mostly in fantasy and sci-fi artwork. You may contact him at:

WondrousWorksArt@gmail.com

I do hope you enjoy this writing. Thank you for your support and feedback. It does mean the world to me. To keep in touch, you can follow me on social media as WestGoesWandering - IG, FB, TT, YT. You can also find a rarely glanced at blog on WestGoesWandering.com

Dedication

This, my very first published work, is dedicated to YOU. You who have touched my life in the most major and minor of ways. You who have given me hope when it was hard to find. You who may not even know who I am or I who may not know you. I can say definitively that all of the relationships in my life, be they small or astronomical in their impact have helped turn me into a person who I am proud of. A person who finished some minor work of fantasy that I hope will help shape the rest of my life. I wouldn't have accomplished this without the myriad of co-workers, baristas, fast food employees, bartenders, slick talkers, shy glancers, friends, enemies and frenemies. Thank you for being a part of the journey, if not for me then for those you love who inevitably touch the lives of those I love.

P.S. Yes, I think the most fun part of this process was telling literally anyone who asked about my work that it was dedicated to them. While true, it may have skirted their beliefs in such a way that it implied more or less than was entirely fair. Thank YOU all.

Prologue

The empty corridors of stone and mortar caused every quiet footfall to echo in the long halls. A man dressed in dark grays and black tried tirelessly to sneak with as little noise as possible between rooms and alcoves. The approaching echoes of synced footsteps, his only warning of regular patrols. With some effort he slipped behind closed doors or hanging curtains to avoid notice. The sound of his padded footsteps still hung in the air painfully as he forced himself further into the catacombs. He rushed into a too shallow alcove as the steps of ten men came nearer. Pressing himself against the wall closest to the sounds he hoped it would be enough cover to avoid notice. He held his breath as ten men draped in red robes and loose white cloth wrapping any exposed skin marched past. Once they were beyond his view and their echoing paces died to a dull resonance he drew a long relieved breath.

The minutes it took to get this far into the facility felt like hours. Eventually he came upon a locked ornate red door. It took him uncomfortable seconds to produce a circular pad of embroidered fabric and press it to the lock of the door, waiting several more seconds for a loud click to inform him the lock had been opened. He scurried into the room beyond. Shelves of books lined the walls and a simple but elegant stained wood desk sat in the center of the room. It had only one drawer which he sifted through rapidly.

Not finding what he sought he swore under his breath. As he moved to escape the room the door swung open. A woman in black robe stood flanked by two of the red robed patrol who had passed him without notice before. He tried to appear casual as he retreated to lean back sitting against the desk as she entered. Her face was uncovered, unlike the robed men behind her.

“Rylan.” She stated blatantly. “You came to steal from us?”

Rylan scoffed. Hoping his awkward retreat to appear casual didn’t impact his presence. “I think you mean that you have something of mine.” He grinned at her.

“Someone once told me that, if you can’t keep track of your things, they aren’t really your things?” She answered, a smirk teasing at the corners of her lips.

“Sounds like an asshole,” Rylan moved away from the desk, pretending to look over the endless volumes of books. “I’m here for what is mine.”

“You should come back to the shapers then.” She watched him carefully. She didn’t want to fight with him here and she was confident he couldn’t escape. She’d designed some of the new warding herself, but she and Rylan had trained together. He was one of her only peers in talent, at least in her mind. The thugs behind her would be of little use, despite their superior skill in the outside world.

“Ha,” Rylan said sarcastically. “How you can’t see the corruption of your institution will always be beyond me.” He kept his back turned to her as he appeared to casually peruse the books.

“I am the institution!” She bit back. “That is why you’re not dead.”

“That and charm, looks, talent, aptitude, ten times the skill of any of your thugs in my fingernail,” he turned and grinned widely. “Plus, you couldn’t kill me on your best day.”

“Don’t test my mercy Rylan.” She moved into the room, her posture tense, ready for anything.

“Give her back to me and I’ll tell you what you did wrong in your wards.” His grin didn’t fade in the least.

“I did the wards myself.” She stood straight, her shoulders back. If she did think he could break her wards, she didn’t show it. “They’re unbreakable.”

“She’s a mildly pivotal point to my future plans, so I shouldn’t leave yet.” His grin did fade now. “I don’t want to go find another one. It’s a lot of effort.” Frustration speckling his tone.

The woman held out a small round metallic object and grinned. “A shame to lose such small trinkets,” she mocked.

Rylan didn’t reach for the object, but his eyes fixed on it. “What do you want then?”

“Come home Ry.” Her voice was almost pleading.

“The shapers aren’t my home, Moor.” He took a slow careful circling step, starting to position himself between her and the henchmen.

“And you are going to fight us all?” The bitterness in her tone was mocking.

“I’m not going to fight the shapers.” He took another step. “I will fight you if I must.”

“I told you before, I am the shapers.” She tried to remain casual and lean on the desk as Rylan had when she entered. Her tense posture only made her appear awkward.

Rylan gave an honest laugh. “Then give her to me and I’ll go. We don’t need to fight. If you are the Shapers, you’ll answer to no one.”

She winced. “You know I can’t.” Internally she berated herself for attempting to appear casual, that had always been his forte.

“Time to admit that your organization and you have irreconcilable differences and come with me then.” Rylan took the last careful step into her trap. Flanked between Moora and her thugs.

Watching him take the last step into a clearly disadvantageous position she threw him the metallic object.

“Don’t kill them.” Her tone wasn’t pleading. She didn’t beg, it was merely a request.

“I wouldn’t have.” Rylan smiled, he caught the object, which vanished immediately when it touched his hand.

Moora was clearly shocked, the wards should have prevented spacial and dimensional manipulation. “Why the show, why sneak in here?” She asked.

“I wanted to see you.” He grinned, but it was a tired sad grin. He knew she wouldn’t leave. “I like my chances better when I’m with you.” His voice sounded defeated.

Something in him he previously didn’t want to admit to himself, but now, seeing her, it could no longer be denied.

The red robed men mistook the trap Rylan had stepped into for one of their own design. With an unspoken signal, they simultaneously dashed forward to seize the intruder.

“No!” Moora shouted at them, raising a hand to warn them off.

It was too late. Before they finished taking a step, each vanished. No tense confrontation of abilities, no physical alteration, in one moment they existed and the next they were plucked from the universe, vanishing from all but memory.

“Sorry Moora, I really am.” Rylan frowned sadly before he too vanished.

Alone in the room Moora spoke with the same quiet defeat Rylan had, “Me too old friend.”

Chapter 1 - The BBC

“Oh come on, it’s the best thing that could have happened to you,” James grinned broadly while standing at the bar with Aaron.

James was the good looking friend among a group of better than average looking people. Almost six feet tall with a slightly more than stylish short cropped haircut. He loved two things and working out was clearly one of the things he loved. He also had a habit of dressing like all his idols and peers, clean suits that belonged on Wall Street and in law offices. Which was the next thing he loved. He’d spent every morning from 5:00am to 11:00 conducting some form of financial dealing or another. Though he spent that time in his boxers and a stained tank top, which he said was lucky,

outside of those hours he wore threads that were fit for pharaohs or nylon shorts and too tight t-shirts.

Aaron was much more average, still appealing but average, brown hair that was always two weeks past its latest cut. A medium build not quite on the edge of a dad bod but only for the lack of any signs of aging. He looked even younger than his twenty four years would indicate. More often than not he kept a remnant of light blonde hairs poking around his chin and lip, but it only served to make him appear younger than he was. He wore a t-shirt with a bad math joke about Pi on it and jeans that weren't loose but didn't hug either. His bright red skater shoes were a sharp contrast to the black shirt and denim pants. He tried to smile, but clearly he had things on his mind to match the circles under his eyes.

“Yeah, well no one can fire you,” Aaron replied. “I still can't believe they put me on leave.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Without pay.”

“Beers are on me dude,” James put cash on the bar. “You'll be fine. And, this is the first we've seen you in over a month.” He put his hand on Aaron's shoulder, “it'll be good to hang out again.” They paused briefly. “If only while you're on mandatory unpaid vacation.” He smiled brightly again. The pair collected the four drinks from the bar, one for each hand and walked toward a table with their friends. Owen was as lanky as a human could be, just over six feet tall but barely a hundred pounds. He wore jeans and a gaudy tie dye t-shirt with some local bands logo printed on it more

than slightly crooked. He had dark hair that he would occasionally mention cutting himself and it appeared exactly as if he cut it himself without a mirror. He was a joker too, first to laugh or say something that made everyone else laugh. It was a rare and dire moment when a smile was away from his face. He always seemed to be at the peak of his game, but no one knew exactly what that game was, including himself.

Nick was their country friend, plaid button down shirt, jeans, and boots included. Today he wore a baseball cap with some embroidered logo on it. He did have his ‘shit kickin’ boots on, traditional western boots with a short heel, dusty as the rest of the barn and good bits scraped clean of any previous coloring from years of wear. He swore the most, chewed the most tobacco, drank the most, and was the center of most every party the group ever attended. He had a short well kept beard, despite any length of time away from a razor. They would all also admit that he was the guy that they wanted with them in the event of zombies or some other apocalypse.

“Dude, Aaron,” Owen waved his hands enthusiastically. “The office is still closed, they can’t get the power back on.” Owen was the only one who worked with Aaron and the one who told the rest of the group what happened and why they had to go out on the town this fine Saturday morning. He’d picked the favorite out of the way quiet bar, open by 10 am so they could have their fun before the college crowds turned up.

“The detective called me a terrorist.” Aaron frowned too seriously to fit in with his smiling friends.

“I heard that you blew up the transformer for the building?” Nick turned his joking statement to a question halfway through, saying it with slightly more excitement than was appropriate as well.

“That is what he told me he did,” James offered. “That’s also what I told the detective that came by.”

Owen, James, and Nick laughed and grinned. They’d been friends for a long time and couldn’t realistically picture the idea of Aaron the terrorist.

“That isn’t funny.” Aaron couldn’t help but smile. “He interviewed me for an hour.”

Owen collected himself more quickly than the other two, “Careful Aaron, the FBI is listening to us right now, James is wearing a wire.”

“James is the most likely to wear a wire,” Aaron gave into a smile.

It felt good to be out with his friends. It had been too long since he had anything resembling free time. He’d played some video games for all too brief a period with Owen a couple nights, but James and Nick didn’t have the inclination game. Even in the brief escape of an hours worth of gaming all Aaron could think about was the looming project deadlines that he was way behind on. For the last two months he’d been in the office by 7:00 am and was lucky to leave twelve hours later with only a quick trip to the in office cafe for some food or coffee to distract from

work. The overtime had added up and the projects seemed to multiply even before he finished them. Forced or not, this was something he needed.

The friends shared beers, jokes, some laughter, and a great morning for several hours before Nick broke the unspoken rule. “How’s your sister,” he said too casually. “Shut up, Nick,” Aaron replied. “She’s fine.” He admitted moments later.

Nick had harbored feelings for Emily, Aaron’s sister, for a long time. They’d known each other since childhood, and as children are will to do, a one sided, unending, and unrequited crush was born. Aaron was confident that while it was no secret within the group of friends, Emily herself, was blissfully unaware of its severity. Sure she knew the jokes young men make. She knew she’d come up in conversation from time to time, but she treated it like the children’s story she had come to accept it as.

The morning passed quickly. The company was a soothing balm for a sour spirit. An intimidating future looming in uncertainty. As Aaron’s mood improved he found himself at another bar being coerced, without subtlety, into a date cute meetup with Emily and her friends. He was very close with Emily. She was almost four years older than him, and it had caused some tension in high school but once college came, their friendship developed. They even lived together briefly when Aaron was looking for work after he graduated. Now, as often as two or three times a month they would find themselves together out on the town. Somehow

Nick found himself out at least half of those times as well. Plans were made by the brief exchange of text messages, and a party of sorts was formed at the local outdoor farmers market.

James had taken to calling this large event the “Honey Market”, because of the frequency he used it to “pick up honey”. Everyone else called it the BBC or Bountiful Bar Crawl. Each Saturday throughout the summer, several city blocks around an open area of field in a downtown park came to life with drink stations, local farmers, crafters, and food trucks. It provided everything any group of day drinkers, socialites, and fun enthusiasts could ask for. According to the local paper the city had only realized the unfortunate connotations of the unintended acronym well after the first events and merchandise were created. Now, the joke of that too helped to amplify the atmosphere of the event.

“I need to get that shirt,” Nick tipsily reminded himself. “Before it gets canceled.”

The shirt in question was a most unfortunate combination of huge bold *BBC* lettering on top of a flesh colored cornucopia filled with little dancing hops that made a perfect abstract phallic joke. No city had ever previously made so much on t-shirt sales for a public event. To call the shirt a city uniform would not be inaccurate. The humor of it was lost on older generations of city loving church goers and completely accepted by a younger generation of dirty minded college kids. The unspoken rule was that you didn't

explain why you loved the shirt, you just explained that you were supporting the farmers market. While the older generation were arguably aware, the younger generation would deny it.

Emily, Rachel, and Steph were standing together at a food truck that specialized in salads, patiently awaiting the arrival of Aaron, and friends as well as their lunches. Two college kids, too deep into their cups, decided to wait with them offering commentary. The trio often put up with these sort of approaches and knew how to handle it. This interaction wore a timer that would expire once more pleasant company arrived or Steph's patience wore out.

"C'mon girls, how about those numbers?" The taller of the college kids chirped again.

The trio could only collectively sigh and roll their eyes so much before some new form of the word "no" would have to be invented, likely in the form of expletives and the sort of diatribe a disappointed mother was likely to employ.

"How do you say no in Spanish," Emily asked sarcastically to her friends. "Isn't it still just no?" She finished only glancing at the boys in line behind them.

"I don't speak Spanish," the shorter of the two replied. A trio of eyes rolled in response again.

"Let us get you all drinks then, and we'll talk about getting numbers later." The tall guy offered, trudging bravely or stupidly forward.

“We’re meeting people,” Emily, still feeling merciful, replied.

“It’s just you here now though,” the shorter guy looked around them and must have thought that the lack of people directly in line meant they were being blown off because not thirty feet away were other lines and vendors and crowds of people all going about their business.

“How about we keep you company until they get here then?” The taller guy put in before the trio could respond. Steph shook her head in dumbfounded awe of the pair. The duo looked to each other for any other way to approach the situation they hadn’t already tried twice. Emily pulled out her phone to send a quick text.

Rachel made another attempt, “We’re really not interested,” her tone more pleading than a statement.

“You might be after those beers though.” The tall guy just grinned.

Had it not been for the tall guy's pleasant demeanor, this situation would have passed from the uncomfortable to the downright offensive. He even seemed mildly aware, which was a sharp contrast to the complete lack of any social, verbal, or intellectual awareness of ‘short guy’.

“Emily, texted, we’re late.” Aaron told his friends while they walked. “They got creepers again.”

The friends didn’t run, but they increased their pace. It was a usual thing for them to bail the girls out.

“Is Rachel with them?” Nick took a skip step to get to the front of the group and walk backwards before they entered the market.

“Yeah.” Aaron nodded to him.

Rachel was what James described as a house fire, she’d keep you warm a little while but in the end you’d be left with regrets and much less than you started with. She was a girl who did damage to boys. James knew that twice over as he was a boy who did damage to girls and got caught with feelings for Rachel. It was hard to keep the two of them in the same place very long because though they could see into the other, they didn’t see themselves in the other. Rachel and Emily had been close for a long time. Aaron liked most of Emily’s friends, he harbored a secret crush on Rachel as almost any man with eyes and a pulse did but Emily had bluntly, blatantly, and boldly told them both they were under no circumstances to see each other with views beyond friendship.

Emily had a way of being clear and understood when she really wanted something. Some of her other friends had taken a few swings at Aaron’s group or Aaron himself and in the end those friends found themselves not coming around much anymore. It wasn’t maliciously done. Aaron respected the artful level Emily took to cutting off those old friendships that simply didn’t work anymore. He had never had a gift for that and kept just about anyone he could around. They varied in closeness and longevity, but they existed in his life on some level. The girls that swung and

missed on Aaron or his friends vanished like ghosts once they proved they couldn't work out.

"Who else is coming out?" Owen asked as they entered the gated southern entrance of the BBC.

"Just Steph," Aaron replied.

"Cool." Owen was the most guilty of taking swings in the friend group. He was slow to swing and quiet, but swing he did. Five out of six girls, ghosted from the pool of Emily friends, could be laid to rest on the astonishingly accurate and deadly approaches of seemingly awkward Owen.

"They're at Big Bad Ceasar Truck," Aaron turned the group slightly. It was the long way but it wouldn't have the swarms of people standing around the various shops and vendors.

"Of course they are," Nick's smile went mostly unnoticed. "They love the BBC! Ohhhh." He drug out the 'oh' needlessly and the non humor of it was what made the others laugh.

James caught a glimpse of someone he knew and turned off, "I'll catch up in a minute."

"Alright, don't you dare ditch us though," Aaron knew he'd try and get out of seeing Rachel and he'd use any and all excuses imaginable to do it.

When Aaron, Owen and Nick found Emily and her friends they were sitting quietly alone near the food truck. Each eating a salad and sipping a drink. Clearly moving on from their uncomfortable experience. Nick and Owen grabbed a spot in line while Aaron sat with the girls to

cultivate a plan. This was the most frustrating part of every meetup they had. They both knew they would argue about where to go, having wildly different tastes in bars. The girls preferred some club with flashing lights, too expensive beer, people dancing shoulder to shoulder, and crowds. While the guys preferred to go to one of two bars in town. First Base, the bar just outside the local AAA baseball team stadium. It could barely draw a crowd on gameday and outside of that, they almost always owned the place. They knew all the bartenders too, and it typically resulted in tabs at half the price of any other place around town. There was also a place about a mile from downtown that was just classy enough to bring the girls to. They had thirty beers on tap, offered some better than decent bar food, and it was clean and well lit. The siblings launched into their arguments for their choices while Rachel and Steph discussed some drama always going on at Steph's office. They were caught deeply in their own little conversations when Emily's eyes widened in shock as the short guy from earlier threw a punch that caught Aaron in the back of the head. He spun to guard against another attack but caught his leg and was stopped short. It left him open to a second punch which flooded his vision with black.

Chapter 2 - Dreams

Aaron found himself in a formless place made of colorful cloud like nebulas. He felt the ground under his palms as he stood. The cool semi damp of earth he felt against his skin eluded his eyes obscured by flowing dimly lit colors. There were no trees or plants or horizons of any kind in any direction. Without any guide or landmark he found himself walking. A peace of mind fell over him. A comfort of safety radiated from this place dispelling the mild menace of something so unfamiliar.

A silver can light burned his eyes and he blinked, turning his head to avoid staring directly at it. The overly clean smell of antiseptic hung in the air with a numbing repetitive beep. Blue curtains hung from a metal pole on his right and left blocking his view of anything but a clean off white brick wall. There was an IV stand on his right and he was

suddenly aware of a soft pinch in his hand. Upon looking a bright sliver inserted itself into the back of his hand followed by a tube filled with clear liquid. He shut his eyes to ward off the oppressive fluorescent lights.

He was appallingly aware of firm crunchy hospital bed in which he laid. The distant sound of nurses rushing to their next patients. He took a long deep breath, even the simple action of breathing causing him unrecognized pain. A groan escaped him involuntarily.

“Aaron?” a soft friendly voice near him said quietly.

“Em, is that you?” Aaron was shocked at the hoarse gravelly voice that barely escaped his throat.

“It’s me Aaron.” Emily’s relief was a tangible note.

“Are you okay,” Aaron choked out.

“I’m okay,” Emily intoned a ‘but’, but neglected to say it. “We’re all okay.” There was a thickness to the ‘okay’, like it was offensive in some way.

“We’re all?” Aaron asked, realizing his raw voice was accompanied by some pain through his chest. Even his head hurt. A slow thump, thump, thumping through his mind and into the backs of his eyes. He held his eyes shut a moment and upon reopening them a nurse was standing beside his bed. A curtain was pulled halfway back exposing more of the wall than was previously visible. Having not heard the curtain move or seen the nurse approach indicating another spell of involuntary unconsciousness. He closed his eyes again.

His feet drew him further into the soothing radiant mists which slowly coalesced into a faint outline in darker grays and blacks. The outline simultaneously far off in the distance and so close he could reach out and touch it. Without any thought as to why, his arm stretched out in front of him to try and grasp the intangible thing. It only revealed just how far out of reach it was. Suddenly aware of the stagnant air, the very passing of his hand and arm pushed the mist back from a stranger standing in the night.

The masked nurse noticed Aaron's eyes open but dismissed them, having seen him slip in and out of consciousness for some time now. Rechecking her machines and monitors before hurriedly scribbling on a clipboard. She glanced at him again before putting the clipboard away at the foot of his bed and walking to the next curtain sheltered patient. Aaron's eyes closed again. He heard the faint sounds of conversation somewhere far off in the room.

The stranger was draped only in the shadow of clothing, something worn but unseen. His face was slightly unclear through the thick air between them and his overall size was difficult to define as well. The vision of the stranger was menacing, but something gave off an overwhelming feeling of security. Aaron looked at the vague figure and found himself filled with the sensation of seeing an old friend for the first time in years. The stranger didn't speak but hummed peacefully to himself. A song of some unknown

language which had a clear tempo and rhythm which brought with its tones in calm welcoming warmth. The shape seemed to move closer, but as the rest of the strange place it remained endlessly far away. Each step it took towards Aaron carrying it deeper into the unknown around them. With the movement the friendly melodic language seemed to take on the slightest edge of frustration. The figure held out it's hand to Aaron, the mists swirling wildly away as if tempests of air were driven by the motion. In its hand it held out a small egg shaped semi-opaque silver orb.

“He’s woken up a couple of times and muttered but the nurses aren’t sure he’s really conscious yet.” A familiar feminine voice said in an audible whisper. “He even said a few things to me, but fell asleep mid conversation.”

“That was crazy though right?” It was a man’s voice painted in hues of anxious exasperation.

The feminine voice hushed him before whispering, “it really was.” There was a pause before it continued. “They brought thirty of us to the hospital but I heard there aren’t any casualties.”

“That’s hard to believe,” the excited voice carried in again, too loud for this sanitary place. “There were giant blue balls of electricity floating around. One guy looked them up and said it was ball lightning!”

“I guess.” The feminine voice replied. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

There was an indistinct reply but as Aaron focused trying to listen his vision was filled with the strange dream world

and only the sounds of faintly moving air. In sharp contrast to everything else in this space the metallic sphere appeared in a vibrant clarity and seemed to burst with its own mild light. The impression it gave him to look at the object implied that somewhere, off in the endless distance must rest thousands or millions of these little orbs. Clear now only from some ceremonial offering.

Aaron woke again in a new room, the same sanitary smells and white bricks all around him. A curtain covered a wall with a blue door shut next to it. Another blue door was cracked open on the opposite side of the room. A small TV sat with a black screen and solid red light in the bottom right corner. His head was no longer pounding with drum beats of pain but his mind seemed to be moving slowly, submerged entirely in a fog. Trying to think through the haze clouding his mind. He could remember the landscape of his dream. He could recall the oddly bright metallic sphere and he he could remember the feel of it so clearly it was like he was holding it in his hand. When he looked down there was nothing. Desiring to stay awake and speak to Emily, or a nurse, or his parents, or really anyone who could tell him what happened, his eyes shut and sleep took him once again. Unlike before he gripped the object in his hand and could feel the tiniest imperfections swirling in his palm. It felt alive with movement and as soon as he grasped the egg it hummed a pleasant chirping that gave him the feeling of a hug. The sensation ran into his hand, up his arm, vibrating within his neck, and eventually resonated just behind his

eyes. Looking up again, Aaron saw the entire otherworldly sight before him fading as if into sunlight itself. Blinding white filled his vision, offending his senses and driving all these beautiful peaceful feelings from his mind.

“Hey Aaron,” said a masked nurse. Her green eyes staring down at him. “Just want to check up with you.” He looked at her for a long moment but his mouth refused to form words.

“You’ve been asleep for almost two days.” She continued on, clearly not expecting a response. “Can you feel this?” She took his hand in hers and squeezed it gently.

Aaron nodded, unable to find his voice.

The nurse’s eyes visibly widened, “Good, good, that’s good.” She said a little hurried. She moved to the bottom of his bed and gripped his foot. “And this, do you feel this?” Again Aaron nodded.

“Can you wiggle your toes for me?” The nurse asked kindly.

Aaron did. His toes responded easily. His tongue still refused.

“That’s really great Aaron.” Her smile showed in her eyes. She lifted his arm slightly, “And your fingers?”

Aaron’s fingers moved, waving weakly.

“That’s really good.” She set his arm down. “I’m going to leave you some water here.” She pulled a tray into view with a pale pink cup on it. “You drink this when you can.” She positioned it next to his right arm and stepped back from his bed. “There are some people who really want to

visit you. I'm going to send them in. They know you're having trouble with your voice, so don't worry too much about talking." She turned and moved toward the door. Before leaving she added, "I'll come check on you again in a few hours." With that, she pulled the door open and left. It swung shut behind her.

Aaron could hear muffled voices outside. He recognized Emily's voice and waited staring at the door for her to enter. It was less than a minute before she came in. Her worry was clear on her face. Aaron still found himself unable to reply. Emily quickly explained that almost everyone had been released except him and a few others, including the short guy who had sucker punched him.

Apparently at some point early in the fight, lightning had struck an overhead powerline and the resulting explosion caused the rare phenomena of ball lightning. The huge balls of electricity caused some extreme panic and even arced into Aaron and his attacker. While Aaron had woken up his attacker hadn't shown a sign of waking and was placed into a medically necessary coma. Apparently the real miracle of the whole event was that only the two of them were hurt severely. While thirty people had been brought in, each was released after minor treatment. One had a broken leg that seemed unrelated to anything but taking a bad step while running from the scene. The whole town would talk about this for years to come. James had never turned up, but Aaron's phone had several missed calls from him checking in. Owen and Nick had originally come to the hospital to be

checked for any injuries, they were released with minor scratches. Emily and Aaron's parents had been at the hospital the majority of the time but as it became more and more clear that Aaron was slipping in and out, they left earlier that afternoon. Emily, already popular, had fielded over a thousand texts and calls about the BBC and lightning. She seemed to enjoy talking about it, but said multiple times that it was starting to bother her. Aaron was certain that it would be something she excitedly spoke about until far into the future. It was one of the most dramatic and exciting events of their lives. They'd both talk about it for years. Aaron couldn't find his voice before Emily wished him well and said she'd be back tomorrow morning. She left after telling him to get some more rest. After the excitement of being awake for just over an hour, Aaron did exactly that, falling peacefully to sleep once more.

Chapter 3 - We'll be in Touch

Knock, knock, knock!

The abrasive sound couldn't be ignored in Aaron's small apartment. He got up from his table to answer the door. Before he made the seven strides to his front door, knock, knock, knock, sounded even more aggressively.

"I'm coming," Aaron said as he finished the steps it took to get from his kitchen.

He pulled open the door to a man in a navy suit. He had his thumb under a leather case on his belt with a silver star held in clear view. His jacket was unbuttoned and his gun was poorly concealed on a shoulder holster. The aviator's he wore were probably a prop from a bad cop movie and reflected Aaron's whole apartment within them. He had short brown hair and a five o'clock shadow barely on the clean side of shaggy.

“Mr. Peterson?” The man had a deep voice that didn’t exactly match his rigid posture. “I’m detective Ghent. Do you mind if I come in?”

Aaron had seen a cop movie or two before. It was also his social media guilty pleasure, so he stepped out of his apartment and closed the door behind him before answering. “I’d prefer to talk out here.” He knew he shouldn’t talk to the police without a lawyer, but he didn’t have it in him to be as rude as those law enforcement auditors he followed.

“That’s fine, Mr Peterson.” Detective Ghent pulled out a wallet sized notepad and pen. “I just wanted to follow up with you about the eighth.”

“I’ve already answered a thousand questions from another guy who came to the hospital.” Aaron had started off calm, but that hospital interview lasted several hours while he and Emily answered some of the stupidest questions asked throughout the history of the human race.

“Oh no.” Ghent shook his head. “Nothing but a simple follow up,” he put a little mark in his book. “I just need to confirm your employment at Quality Dynamics and that you were in the office April twenty-ninth.” He grinned as he looked up from his notepad. It was an oddly menacing look.

“Yes and yes.” Aaron answered quickly, remembering the day of the blackout and the meeting in which he thought he might be fired. Instead he was put on administrative leave following a building wide black out that lasted the rest of the day. He’d known he wasn’t responsible for the power failure, but two hours with a lady from HR had made him

feel as though he was a terrorist. Three people were put on leave with him, ‘under suspicion’.

“And you’re sure you were in the office that day?” Ghent made another mark in his book.

“Yes, it was the sort of day you remember.” Aaron didn’t know where this was going, but it gave him that hollow feeling in his stomach which seemed to signal oncoming guilt. “Building lost power and I was put on a leave,” his mouth ran away from him and he wasn’t entirely certain why he’d offered that information.

“Leave, and what was that for?” Ghent put another mark in his book.

“It was because of a project delay, not because of the black out.” Aaron’s voice was full of frustration now. “This is all in my other report.”

“Of Course Mr. Peterson, I’ll give that another look then.” Ghent offered up that malicious grin again. “You have a good day Mr Peterson.” Without any reply he turned and headed down the apartment hallway.

Aaron watched him retreat before opening the door and going inside. He briefly felt a shiver crawl down his spine as the door closed. He glanced a silver opaque egg shape on his counter as he turned into his kitchen which doubled as his office. When he looked back for it though it wasn’t there. He’d been seeing the thing since he had those odd dreams in the hospital weeks ago. It would appear on the edges of his vision but as soon as he looked for it, it just vanished. He’d dismissed it as some form of trauma delusion, and fairly

harmless. He also didn't love the idea of being an insane person, so he tried to push it from his mind.

Knock, knock, knock, the detective would barely have had the time he need to walk down the hall again. He must have turned immediately around when Aaron came back inside. He moved to the door pulling it open, hoping to muster the courage to tell the man off. But it was a woman in a casual business suit, who didn't look like a cop. She had a blonde fade on her puffy pixie cut hair and the smile on her lips that touched her green eyes making them appear to dance. Without saying a thing she stepped into Aaron's apartment and he took a step back to allow her in.

"Hey Aaron." Her voice was pleasant as if she was talking to an old friend.

Aaron again unable to find words stared at her confused.

"It is Aaron isn't it?" She asked.

"Yeah," he managed.

"It's great to meet you!" She offered her hand to him as he stood holding the door open.

They shook hands quickly and she spun taking in the several hundred square feet of sparling apartment that Aaron called home.

"I just needed to catch you before." Her smile stuttered slightly. "Well before anything happened."

"Before something happened?" His confusion must have manifested in his expression.

"I know something you need to know." She turned into his apartment and moved to take a seat at the table.

Aaron just followed, still not understanding the situation.

“Are you still on painkillers?” She asked as she sat.

“Uh,” Aaron stuttered. “No.”

“That’s good,” she grinned, a warm comfortable grin.

“I’m going to say something that sounds.”

“-Who are you?” Aaron interjected.

“Oh, sorry,” she let out a little giggle. “I’m Elizabeth, Liz to my friends. I’m going to.”

“-Okay, but who are you?” Aaron interrupted her again, confusion and curiosity carrying his tongue.

She paused and looked at Aaron with concern a moment before repeating, “I’m Elizabeth,” another pause. “Liz to my friends.” The concerned expression remained on her face. When Aaron didn’t say anything she pushed on again, “I’m going to.”

“-Okay, but who are you with?” Aaron tried again.

“I’m single.” She tilted her head to and looked Aaron over from head to toe. “Bold of you to ask.” She giggled again. It was a friendly inviting sound.

“What? No.” Aaron shook his head. “I mean,” he paused and then repeated dumbly, “who are you?”

“Well, we aren’t going to do this all day.” She smiled again. “No time for that. Not at all.”

“Okay Liz,” Aaron tried once more. The lengthy pause after his words continued to expand into an uncomfortable silence.

“Alright, hear me out here.” Liz finally pushed on. “I’m going to say something.” Her eager confidence faded as she

pushed on. She hesitated “You’re going to notice things.” She shifted her gaze from Aaron’s face to the table. Her fingers clenched and unclenched on the surface. “There are going to be strange things. They’re going to affect you.” She trailed off again staring down at her hand.

“Stranger than ball lighting, a week in the hospital, and regular visits from the police?” Aaron found his voice.

Liz looked up into Aaron’s eyes again. A sad smile slowly bloomed on her face. “Yes,” she nodded slightly with the affirmation.

“Well, I think I’m done.” Aaron stood up. “Liz, thanks for coming by.” He finished with a gesture towards the door.

Liz stood as well. The cool confidence she had in the beginning boiled away. “Here,” she put a business card with only a number on it on the table. “For when it gets weird.” She turned to the door and let herself out. She waved timidly as the door shut behind her seemingly unaffected by the abrupt dismissal.

Aaron looked between the door and the card left on his table. “Things are already as weird as they can get,” he whispered to himself in the empty apartment.

Aaron got the news that he would be keeping his job later that day. It hit him very strangely when it came. He felt like he should be happy. He felt like it was the thing he’d wanted to hear for days. When he read the line in the email he was consumed with sadness. Overwhelmed with a sense of loss. He sat and thought about his job. The hours, the

money, the office friends. He didn't hang out with office friends. They just took up space in his life while he was there. Sharing silly quips about work, management, and other dramas. He loved the money, but who didn't love money? It was the thing that allowed people to do things. His job paid fairly well and Aaron lived within his means. He didn't have any real safety net, but he knew he would likely be okay. The hours, well nobody liked the hours. It was at least half of office gossip, *did you hear about* and *oh my god if I work one more hour this week*. That is what work was. Why was he so thrown off for having the luxury of not having to look for another job? Why wasn't he thrilled?

At length he sent a text to Emily to let her know the good news. When she didn't immediately reply he put on a show to ignore. He flicked through his social media. His friends were already moving on from lighting in the park to the newest happenings of the day. Owen was out hiking again. It looked like Steph was on a business trip somewhere back east. Another thirty so and sos were out in the world doing the things that people did. He scrolled. When a moment failed to capture his attention online he'd watch the clips of the show endlessly streaming in the background. If they failed to entertain, he put on another show. And he scrolled.

The light outside faded quickly to darkness, summoning the complex parking lights which offered faint but glaring luminescence through all of the two windows. Eventually when exhaustion caught up with him, and even endless scrolling of nothing at all lost its grip on his attention, he

threw himself into his bed and just stared at the ceiling. Eventually whatever emotions boiled within him quieted just enough for him to fall asleep.

In sleep he vividly dreamed. The image of the strange metallic egg floating within his mind. Turning itself around and around until he memorized every tiny line and shadow of the thing. Light shifted around it, illuminating it brightly and falling into darker shades like evening shadows. The soft, mostly pleasant humming of the thing seemed to be saying it was looking, searching, trying to find. It was calling out to him and showing him how to find it. When he woke the instructions were unclear and the ability to look seemed beyond impossible. He spent the next day trying to drive it from his mind.

Chapter 4 - Manifestation

“Is this the last weekend we’ll get you then?” Nick asked. “You’re back to work on Monday?”

“Yeah,” Aaron didn’t seem thrilled. It wasn’t just going back to work either. The hallucinations had been getting worse. Not just the strange metal orb but now strange hazy lines in his vision. They weren’t something that was well defined, it was long blurs through walls, across floors and ceilings. He could still see things clearly, but something caused a distortion just beneath the surface. When he admitted this to his doctor on a return check up he had a full eye exam, physical, and answered a lot of questions. The answers that came back were that nothing was wrong with him. His eyes seemed to work fine, and if it persisted to make another appointment. It made him feel crazy.

“Never heard someone so excited to keep a job they loved.” Owen was being flippant. He knew it wasn’t that simple.

“No, I’m glad.” Aaron replied simply. “Might not be looking forward to returning to sixty hour weeks.” He grinned.

“You could probably get a doctor’s note for light duty,” Owen suggested.

“You did spend half your vacation in the hospital.” Nick added before taking a drink.

“Yeah, tell them you’re feeling faint, having trouble sleeping, and seeing things.” Nick’s grin was wide and mocking.

Aaron jumped slightly when Nick mentioned hallucinations. That was a bridge too far for him to share with anyone besides the doctors yet. All the rest of this was weird enough. He shook his head, “no, I’m fine physically.”

“And you’ve never been fine mentally, so things are entirely back to normal.” Owen said it, but everyone enjoyed a small laugh.

“I don’t know,” Aaron admitted to himself that it was getting worse. Every day he was more aware of it, not less. How did you tell someone you were hallucinating? How did you tell them you could feel things changing? How did you explain that you weren’t okay? He couldn’t even believe it and it was happening himself. He took another sip of his drink.

“Don’t worry so much,” Nick took out his phone, trying to turn it on. It flashed briefly and died. “You’re back to work and we’ll see you on your next vacation, maybe you

can take it intentionally this time!” He put his phone back in his pocket.

James walked out with a beer in hand. It was warm enough that he’d abandoned his suit jacket, wearing only the tucked in white dress shirt with the top two buttons undone. “Hey guys,” he said as he pulled up a chair.

“What’s your phone battery at?” Nick asked.

James didn’t even glance before responding, “full, car charger.” After he took a sip of his beer he added, “you forget we live in the modern world again?” The smile on his face conveyed his jovial dismissal perfectly.

“Ha, ha.” Nick replied. “I need to make a call.” He stood up and reached out towards James.

“I think there’s an old pay phone up the street.” James remembered out loud making no move to take out his phone.

“Yeah, it’s right next to Shea’s,” Owen offered in an overly friendly tone.

“C’mon,” Nick said blandly.

James took out his phone and Nick walked out the back door with it.

“When is your next vacation Aaron,” James asked.

“We’ll plan a big party for the next weekend you have off.” His grin threatened to split his chin from the rest of his face.

“Around next Smarch,” Aaron joked. “I’ll take off the 4th.”

“Of July?” Owen’s voice was shocked and appalled.

“You know that’s months away, right?”

“I’ll try and make it out some weekend.” Aaron took a drink considering what his schedule would allow once he was back at work. His frown was the only indication he was unhappy with the speculation.

“Well Cheers,” Owen raised his glass. “To the last time we see Aaron for half a year.”

“He was a good friend,” James added.

“He will be missed!” Nick called out loudly as he returned.

“See you all in the next life,” Aaron added before cheering his friends and taking a drink.

“By the way,” Nick said after he took his drink. “You need a new car charger,” he set James’ phone on the table. “You’re at ten percent.”

“What?” James checked his phone screen. “Rest in Peace my phone battery I guess.”

Aaron was a few drinks deep in the late afternoon when his rideshare dropped him off. Stomach on empty, he headed immediately for his freezer, pulled a larger than needed bag of pizza rolls, dumped them in a stack at least two deep on his largest plate. He pulled open the microwave and slammed them inside with all the grace of an impatient drunk. As he punched the keypad to set the time, he felt a shock and saw a small flash. There was a single dramatic pop that left the digital board dead. No lights, no pulsing and surging energy, the life had left it. He stood stupidly staring at the lifeless machine.

“Okay,” he said to himself. “Okay. You win this round.”

He pulled open the oven door and quickly swapped the still frozen pizza rolls. He touched the bake button. Reflexively he flinched back as arcing electrical energy surged out of his finger to the keys. Several light pops were audible as the display flickered and died. He tried to punch the buttons again, but the display remained dark.

“Okay, oven, okay.” he said aloud. “Oven, okay.” He paused to take a breath. It did nothing to ease his increasing frustrations. He touched the display and buttons again with no effect. “Okay, cold food it is then.” He moved towards his refrigerator and pulled the door open.

Several frustrating minutes later he sat with a fork and a half eaten jar of pickles next to a nearly empty jar of peanut butter. He spiked a cold pickle slice with his fork and shoved it into his mouth. Leaving the fork in the pickle jar, he picked up the peanut butter and ran his finger along the inside, collecting as much as he could. Pickle half chewed in his mouth, he fingered in the peanut butter, scraping it off on his lower teeth before continuing to chew.

Not wanting to eat a meal of cold pickles and peanut butter he had taken the phone out of his pocket to order out. The screen remained dark and lifeless. A minor setback, he plugged his phone into his kitchen charger where it sat completely dead. Pressing his finger to the screen of the phone every fifteen to thirty seconds for the last half hour accomplished less than nothing. Eventually, after eating one

frozen pizza roll, he pulled out the pickles and peanut butter once more. Giving up on ordering food he turned on his TV and selected a show. He was asleep before the opening credits had finished playing.

Chapter 5 - No Help From Your Friends

It had been three days. It was already bad in the first few hours and when the minutes kept spinning forward into the infinite from them, he was fairly certain total insanity would follow. Each minute without power in his apartment he grew more and more convinced that he was responsible for the outage. It started the night he got drunk. The microwave and oven. His TV had been off in the morning. It didn't come back on, nor did his phone. He went to work, but between the hangover and the oddness of being back he didn't even power up his computer before he went home sick, 'still not feeling well after being struck by lightning.' It was a better excuse than most of his sick days. He had been able to use his laptop for a whole ten minutes before it too betrayed him. Screen slipping to the dead black of all his other electronics.

“What did people do before the internet?” Aaron asked himself for the hundredth time. He’d picked up an old book for a couple of hours, but when that wasn’t as distracting as his usual time killers he gave up. He took a three hour walk around the neighborhood and found himself in a local park playing on a children's climbing wall that was almost six feet high. Then children had come and he immediately felt the deep down guilt and shame of adults acting below their age. He left as quickly as he could. All of that got him a quarter of the way into his first day without power. Every single electrical device in his house was shut down entirely. He had resolved to call that strange Elizabeth girl, but despite sitting on it’s charger for days, his phone too was dark and dead.

Luckily, he told his neighbor that some power surge had ruined everything in his apartment, laptop, phone, and microwave included, so she called his work and informed them he wasn’t going to make it for a couple of days. A week off, right after his weeks off due to an investigation about his productivity would surely look great to his bosses. He was certain the landlord would love that all the electronics in his apartment were burned out too. The icing on the cake was not having power to distract himself with anything at all while he spiraled uncontrollably into stressful anxiety over his life collapsing around him. Luckily, his saintly neighbor had spent fifteen minutes with him ordering a new ‘shockproof’ cell phone by some weird tractor company. He’d just awkwardly explained that he didn’t

want to burn out another cell phone with power issues while he stood ten feet away from her. He wasn't trying to be weird, but even that close he worried her electronics might fail too.

He'd decided the ultimate low point was when in a hazy attempt to get his life back he'd drive around the town until he found a psychic or voodoo practitioner to try some magic. At this point if what was happening to him was real and not in fact a very strange mental breakdown, maybe some fringe practitioner of the arts could help. He turned the key in his ignition and realized that every light was out. No bump, no grind, no start. He'd wrecked his car too. It was one too many pieces of evidence to continue believing it was a coincidence. So he retreated into his apartment, waiting and waiting and waiting for a new, 'Aaron proof', cell phone to arrive. His meals had been dry ramen noodles and cold cans of whatever soup he had until he legged it to the corner gas station for snacks and switched to a diet of chips and beef jerky. To ensure that he remained on the edge of a mental breakdown he also purchased ten energy drinks with two hundred times the daily limit of suggested caffeine. Three a day to combat his coffee addiction seemed about right.

So for three days he sat, heart racing, mind spinning, and worries piling up. Completely alone. It wasn't as relaxing as those self help people claimed. The very afternoon he was certain that he would completely lose it, the cell phone came. It was a weird flip open model with neon yellow

plastic encasing the screen and keypad. It looked like an artifact from some ancient time before cell phones were tiny little pocket computers. After opening the box and considering his situation for a moment, he put on his rubber cleaning gloves. The bright yellow material came all the way up to the middle of his forearms. Luckily, it wasn't touch screen, he punched in the number left on the business card over a week ago.

It rang for what seemed like a minute before, "Hello?" Elizabeth's voice sounded like holy deliverance.

"Elizabeth, it's Aaron, you um left your card and I need your help," his voice had a fast desperate pacing that was on the verge of manic.

"Hey Aaron," Liz was intentionally soothing like she was speaking to a wounded animal. "Calm down, I'll come pick you up."

"Okay, okay, I'll meet you outside, and leave your car running. Don't turn it off." He rushed through the words quickly getting to the bad side of hysterical.

"Okay. See you in twenty minutes." She hesitated before adding, "stay calm."

Twenty of the longest minutes of Aaron's life passed standing in the parking lot of his apartment complex. He stared desperately at every neighbor who dared pull in to park somewhere. Eventually though, an early 2000's pearl white honda civic pulled up in front of him with Elizabeth

driving. He grabbed the passenger handle and prayed her car would keep running when he got in.

“That’s weird, I couldn’t roll my window down.” Liz said with a smile as he climbed in.

“Yeah, weird.” Aaron said. “Can we go somewhere?” He nearly begged.

“Of course Aaron, it’s going to be okay.” Liz smiled at him and started to drive. “We’ve got a pretty cool spot where we’re hanging out.” She looked over, clearly concerned. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron didn’t know where to begin.

“Take your time.” Liz grinned. “It’s probably been very strange.”

“Strange doesn’t really cover it,” Aaron admitted.

“Magic?” Liz asked, some hesitation in her voice.

Aaron saw her eyes, they were filled to brimming with curiosity. She had a hunger to know what was happening to him, a hunger she couldn’t hide. He laughed, uncomfortable for the insanity of it all. He sat considering, he hadn’t been able to tell his friends, his sister, his doctor, no one. Now, he sat considering dishing it all to a perfect stranger.

“You don’t have to,” Liz said finally.

“Thank you,” Aaron replied.

“You want to listen to some music?” Liz asked.

“Sure,” Aaron said. “Can you put it on?”

“Okay,” Liz reached for the radio. “What do you like to listen to?” A radio jockey began talking about something over the speakers.

Aaron closed his eyes and took a calming breath. Just listening to the radio felt like a slice of the normal he had desperately missed. “Anything,” he said after a moment. “I’ll be happy to listen to anything at all.”

Liz didn’t change the station as the latest pop hit started and they got on the freeway.

“Where are we headed anyway?” Aaron asked as they drove away from town.

“Oh, you’ll love it.” Liz smiled honestly. “There’s this new real estate project on the edge of town, one of the people like us, has the keys to a model home, so we all hang there. It won’t be open for a few months anyway and it is fully furnished too.”

“Like us?” A hint of worry returned as Aaron wondered exactly what she meant.

“Five now,” Liz was excited. Sort of like the kids who came up with a new club most other people couldn’t join in grade school excitedly. “It’s me, Hank, Jerome, Lilly,” after a brief pause adding, “and now you.”

“What can they do?” Aaron was hesitant.

“Hank is sort of a fun loving hippy guy,” Liz’s smile might have been something more than fondness. “He basically talks to plants. Jerome can mess with light a little bit. And Lilly does some crazy stuff with sound.”

“What do you do?”

“Oh I’m a shadowcat kind of person.” She grinned over at him.

“What’s a shadowcat?” Aaron asked.

“You know, Shadowcat, from the X-men?”

“No, not really my thing.” Aaron slouched down in the passenger seat.

“Well, I can move through stuff, and if I’m touching something I can move it through stuff.” Liz pulled off the highway on nearly the last exit out of town.

She pressed her right hand through the steering wheel. Holding her arm level she moved it left and right. When it should have been stopped by the wheel, it just passed right through.

“That’s amazing,” Aaron admitted.

“I can’t do people yet though.” Liz smiled. “Only objects.”

“That sounds a lot cooler than ruining electronics,” Aaron admitted.

“Ruining electronics?” Liz asked.

“Yeah, anything electronic I touch dies instantly.”

“How did you call me then?” She sounded more curious than accusatory.

“Shockproof phone and rubber gloves.” Aaron admitted, producing the gloves from his pocket.

“You’re not kidding?” She didn’t try to hide her surprise.

“Not kidding.” Aaron shook his head. “Every electronic I’ve touched for the past few days dies entirely. Not just drained, completely dead.”

Liz looked sympathetically at Aaron. “I know it probably seems like a curse now, but you’ll get it under control.”

Aaron said nothing. After the pause stretched on too long for her comfort, she added, “It takes time.” Offering a sympathetic grin.

Only a few quiet minutes later they pulled along a gravel road into a the driveway of a huge model home. The giant two story home might have fit ten of Aaron’s apartments inside of it. Windows as big as parking spaces consumed the front two sections that weren’t the three car garage. The front entry door was ten or more feet high and two or three people could casually walk side by side through it. To call the home impressive would be doing it a disservice.

“What does a place like this run?” Aaron asked as they walked inside.

“Around three million,” a girl's voice called from the kitchen, having overheard.

“That’s Lilly,” Liz said as they walked into the giant space.

The island earned its name, with space enough to easily fit ten or more people. Five bar stools sat on the outside end of the granite top, with some room to spare. The oven looked like it had been taken from a professional kitchen where they prepped food for a busy restaurant.

“Wow,” Aaron managed, looking around at the space.

The living room had a U shaped couch that couldn’t fit in Aaron’s apartment if he moved everything else out. In front of the couch was the largest TV he’d seen outside of sports bars.

On the couch he saw a very relaxed man, more horizontal than vertical, the couch spanned from the back of his knees to his neck. He wore the deepest v-neck t-shirt imaginable with a thick twist of hemp cord around his neck with a silvery white shell that looked like an egg for just a moment. He had a mess of long tangled hair spilled around his shoulders and was playing with something in his hands. Twisting the green strands together and weaving them.

He looked up briefly with a nod saying, “Hey, I’m Hank.”

Another man in gray board shorts and an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt over a plain black t-shirt came in from the hallway behind Hank. He had much darker skin and one of the worst beards Aaron had seen in recent memory. Patches of short dark hair scattered with empty blotches of clear skin. It was the kind of beard some of the boys tried to grow in early middle school, but he looked like he was nearly thirty. He nodded but didn’t offer his name.

“That’s Jerome,” Liz offered.

“So this is the new guy?” Hank asked, still playing with the green cord. “What can he do?”

“I don’t know if we want him to demonstrate,” Liz had a worried look.

“It’ll be fine,” Lilly said. The house gets vandalized once a week by high school kids.

“He does something with electricity,” Liz hesitated. “Sort of kills power to things.”

“Whoa,” Hank and Jerome were both suddenly more interested and looked up.

“Show us,” Jerome was excited. “Sounds cool.”

“I don’t think I should.” Aaron didn’t want to ruin this place for the group. Every wall, the floor, the ceiling, all humming with the strange hazy visual. After three days of self reflection he decided that he could see electricity, and even to him it sounded bizarre. Something easy to ignore, sometimes difficult to see even when he was looking at it. Where his eyes failed him, he could feel it. Almost like it was a part of him, but outside of his body. He knew that was strange, and he knew it was probably bordering on delusions, but that was how it felt.

“This is the place to try things out.” Hank stood up and walked over to the kitchen. The group stood in a sloppy lopsided circle by the island, every eye looking at Aaron.

Aaron just stood staring back. It was outrageous. The last seventy-two hours were spent in a dark powerless primitive wasteland away from the rest of the modern world. They wanted him to repeat that? Insane. “Uh, it’s really not a good idea.” Aaron offered when the eyes didn’t stop watching him.

“Do you even know what you can do?” Liz asked.

“No, not really.” he hung his head. He had no idea what was happening to him, why, how, if he was hit by a car and this was some fever dream while he lay comatose in recovery. As the day twisted forward, he became more certain that it wasn’t something he’d just wake up from, but

that didn't stop him hoping. "I'm pretty sure I could kill the power to the whole house though."

"No way," Jerome's excitement was clear from his tone.

"Do it," Hank said simultaneously.

"The whole house?" Lilly asked. More quietly she said, "I'd like to see that."

"Slow down," Liz said. "I don't think he's kidding. We were all pretty impressed by each other's powers, but it sounds like Aaron might be on another level."

"He has my permission, and I'm the one providing the keys," Lilly said. "Besides, any damage will be fixed in a few days when I do the next official showing."

"It's up to you," Liz nudged Aaron as he stood staring at the ground.

He would admit to being curious. So far every use of his power was accidental. He had no idea what he could do, or if he could do anything intentionally. All he'd ever tried to do was stop it from happening. What if he gave into the power for a minute. What was he capable of?

"Okay," Aaron said after a minute. "Stand back, closer to the hallway." He indicated an area that seemed relatively quiet to his new senses.

The group moved to where he had shown them. Aaron felt for the natural pull of the energy where it was in the walls, floor, and ceiling. He imagined pulling on it. Instantly lightning jumped from every socket in the surrounding rooms and flowed directly into him. The shock of it tensed every muscle in his body. His back arched, arms stretched

out to his sides, legs tensed. He almost hovered over the floor a moment before every circuit in the house was blown out and the rush of electricity stopped. He dropped painfully to the floor, his muscles still constricted and painful. Distantly he thought someone was yelling, but it felt soft and quiet like it came from a long way off.

The house was astonishingly dark after the blinding white energy died. Each pair of eyes had to readjust to the natural light. Faint white echoes of the surging electricity still crossed their vision.

When Liz could see around the white cracks in her vision she hurried to Aaron's side. "Aaron, are you okay?" Her worry was thick in her voice. "Aaron, Aaron, are you okay?"

Aaron clutched himself painfully and rolled on the floor only able to groan.

"Aaron, we'll get help." Liz stood up and pulled her phone from her pocket. The screen stayed black. She touched the side button, the screen, held the side button. Nothing, just black.

Aaron groaned loudly again.

"Liz, don't!" Jerome had mostly recovered and sounded adamant. "You can't."

She turned on him, obviously angry. "I can," she snapped. "Did you see what happened to him?"

"And how do we explain what happened?" Jerome was pleading. "That detective has been sniffing around. You know what happened to Adam."

“How could he possibly know where we are or that we’re responsible?” Liz’s voice held faint worry..

“Because he probably already knows.” Lilly offered, putting a hand on Jerome’s arm. “You know that.”

Aaron groaned loudly again as he rocked side to side, periodically shuttering as if cold.

“We have to do something.” Liz’s tone was less angry and more pleading.

“We will.” Jerome and Lilly agreed nodding.

“We should get him out of here,” Hank finally recovered enough to participate. He moved toward the front door.

“We’ll put him in my car, I’ll take him to the hospital.”

Liz moved to Aaron’s side again and pressed her hand onto his shoulder gently. “You’ll be okay.” She said, pleading to the universe more than convincing anyone, including herself.

Chapter 6 - Lost Hope

Lilly and Jerome had come together, and confirmed twice that their car was also dead. Hank had been the first to realize that it wasn't just the power to the house that had been blown out. Liz's honda sat dead after several minutes of her twisting the key in the ignition.

“Well fuck,” Hank yelled. “If detective dipshit didn't know before, he sure as shit is going to know now. Finding us all together here, any hesitation will be gone from his mind.” He strode angrily near his car, three steps forward, three steps back.

“I know,” Liz tried pointlessly to twist the keys in her ignition again. “I know.”

“Alright, well lets stay calm.” Lilly's voice was a good distance from calm. Pretty far down a country lane from calm in fact.

“Yeah,” Jerome laughed. “Calm.”

Aaron had been left on the ground near Hank's car. He wasn't groaning so much anymore and his rocking back and forth had almost stopped. He was still taking in giant heaving breaths.

"What are we supposed to do?" Hank was still pacing. "Phones are dead, cars are dead, and I bet we're dead." He moved to stand ominously between the open door and driver's seat of Liz's Honda. "Well?" His voice was loud, angry, and threatening.

"That's not fair Hank," Lilly yelled at him. "We all told him to go for it."

"It might not be fair, but we have to figure this out." Hank yelled back, not moving and still staring at Liz. "You remember what he did right? You remember? You were there."

"That doesn't mean that it will happen to us." Liz, still beyond frustration, slammed her hand against the horn, but there wasn't even a faint beep.

"We need to go," Jerome was looking up and down the street.

Each of them was getting closer to panicking in their own way. They never imagined that Aaron would be able to do half of what he did. Each of their powers had started off nearly imperceptible, like living on the edge of a dream. After weeks and then months of effort, and some guidance from one another, they had grown to something that common slight of hand magicians would mock as useless.

Then Aaron showed up one time and blacked out an entire house.

“Uh, stop yelling,” Aaron sounded hoarse like he’d been screaming all afternoon the day before.

“Aaron,” Liz pushed past Hank and knelt over Aaron who tried to sit up. “Aaron, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he nodded weakly. “I’m recovering.” He finished with a dry cough.

“Let me help you,” Liz grabbed Aaron’s shoulder and hand and tried to pull him up without success.

“Let me,” Hank said begrudgingly.

Jerome and Hank moved to stand on either side of Aaron and took a hand each, pulling him abruptly to his feet. Aaron stumbled briefly but maintained a dizzy balance. After a few long seconds he took a shattering step. He felt like the world was moving below him. The hostile conversation was more subdued once it was clear that Aaron was recovering.

“I’m really sorry guys,” Aaron looked at Liz when he spoke. “Really sorry,” he muttered.

“No, it’s okay.” Lilly said, putting her hand on his shoulder. “We were all excited to see what you could do.”

“Guys,” Jerome said more excitedly. “Guys, my cousin is a tow truck driver, all we need is a phone and we can get him out here to move our cars.”

“Where are we going to get a phone?” Hank asked, clearly still angry.

Aaron pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the screen to ensure it still had power. “Here,” he held the phone out to Jerome.

“How does that work?” Hank sounded accusatory.

“When all this started,” Aaron coughed and took a breath. “I killed all the electronics in my house.” Another few short breaths. “I had my neighbor find me a shockproof phone. It’s for construction sites and the military.”

Jerome was punching in numbers as he yelled, “fuck yeah!”

“I’m going to take a little walk around the block,” Aaron rolled his head around on his shoulders to loosen up the muscles a bit. “Get some air back in lungs.” He started walking slowly down the driveway.

The others looked briefly at each other before Lilly nodded to Liz.

“I’ll come with you,” Liz said, turning to follow Aaron.

Fifteen quiet minutes later Aaron and Liz found themselves about a half mile away. It was clear that Aaron was recovering more quickly and his steps quickened dramatically each minute. Still walking slower than any average person, he stopped every house to stretch briefly before continuing.

“You seem a lot better,” Liz dared to break the silence.

“I’m better,” Aaron replied.

“I,” Liz paused, “we, really thought you might die.” She shook her head looking at the ground and kicked a pebble maintaining her stride.

“Glad I didn’t,” Aaron stretched again, holding his hands above his head and moving them right and left slowly. “I’m really sorry to cause so much trouble.” He managed to not cough, but he was still horse.

“It’s not your fault.” Liz turned to look at Aaron. She saw him staring at the ground as he shuffled. “We couldn’t have known,” she put her hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. “You couldn’t have known.” They stopped walking. “I’m easily the most powerful of us. And, if I’m honest, I can only control what I do half the time. It still gets away from me. I’ve been practicing for years.” She let her hand drop and turned to walk again. “I started a website. Just a little private site, but I put in the right keywords and told my story and left an email. They all found it while they were trying to figure out what was happening to them.”

“Everyone feels like they’re going insane then?” Aaron walked a step behind.

“I don’t know,” Liz glanced back. “Your powers seem more,” she paused. “Intense?”

“What am I supposed to tell my family?” Aaron stopped walking again and put his face in his hands. “I’m clearly dangerous. How can I tell them when...” He trailed off taking a deep breath.

“I think you can figure this out.” Liz offered hopefully.

“I can’t even practice if it nearly kills me to try.” Aaron looked up at Liz, hoping for answers that weren’t there. “Not to mention work. I work with computers, but every electronic I touch dies immediately. How am I going to make that work?”

Liz only offered a half hearted smile. “I can help with one thing. My family has a cabin in the middle of nowhere.”

“A place to practice,” Aaron guessed.

“Yeah,” Liz’s smile became more genuine. “Honestly, it has some solar, but if that goes out, they’ll just replace it and you can’t shut down a whole city block that way.” She started walking again. “I’ll help you figure it out. I’ll take you out there as soon as my car is fixed.”

“Thanks Liz,” Aaron tried to smile, but wasn’t sure if he managed. That gave him some small hope, but truthfully the new reality of being some sort of fantasy hero prodigy was soul crushing.

After another minute of silence Liz spoke again, “we should get back, I know a shortcut.”

The pair walked quietly back through the empty dirt backyards of houses in various stages of completion. When they rounded a corner and caught sight of the backyard of the model home, Liz froze. Aaron looked up to see two men in suits dragging the body of Lilly into an empty garden bed. They dropped her carelessly next to Hank and Jerome in a space just below a window. Out of sight from anywhere within the house.

“You keep an eye out for anyone else,” the voice was Detective Ghent. “Three people and four cars doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

“Yes sir,” one of the suited men replied. His voice was as deep and foreboding as Ghent’s had been.

“Call me if anyone else shows up” They couldn’t see the detective, but his voice was memorable. “And get rid of these cars.” The voice was muffled by the sliding door closing.

Aaron grabbed Liz’s shirt and pulled her around the corner of the house, hoping they hadn’t looked back in their direction.

“Are they dead?” Liz asked after even the muffled voice died down.

“Shh.” Aaron thought he heard a car start, but this far away it was hard to tell. He stood listening carefully for a long minute. “I don’t know,” he said finally. He debated telling her the truth, they looked dead. The suited men treated Lilly’s body like a toy, if she wasn’t dead he would be surprised.

“We should go look.” Liz’s quiet voice cracked slightly.

“No Liz,” Aaron grabbed her shoulder and squeezed it, trying to be reassuring. “We can’t.” He sounded insistent and worried.

Liz heaved a breath, a heavy sob catching in her throat. “No.”

Aaron said nothing else, pulling Liz by her shoulder and moving into one of the homes across the street without any

windows or doors. Once they were clearly out of view of the street Aaron grabbed Liz in a firm comforting hug. He didn't know what to do or say, but he knew that he wanted to live. He was more than confident that the detective had killed her friends and was planning on killing them. As he held her he told himself that he had to be wrong. There had to be some logical explanation. His mind raced as he felt her sob against him. He didn't know when it happened, but she had simply folded into herself and they sat together on the hard plywood floor of an empty house completely lost and terrified.

Chapter 7 - Making It Up As I Go

Hours had passed, the sun was setting. Turning the light clouds covering the sky deep reds, oranges, and yellows. Aaron and Liz had sat hugging each other for long minutes before Liz had fallen asleep. Clearly exhausted by the events of the day and the trauma. Aaron was beyond exhausted but something in him kept him awake, perhaps anxiety. He considered that he might be in shock, but he raced for some explanation to his situation. Something to explain what was happening. After an hour of discovering little or nothing at all, he set his mind to finding a solution. Even after hours of planning the solution he'd come up with was simple. Wait for dark, walk back into town. The closest public area was a small hotel restaurant about three miles up the only street entering the neighborhood. He decided the risk was too high for the two of them to walk that direction. He thought he remembered a small trailer with some trucks and heavy

equipment outside of it on the way in. They would still have to cross the main street into the neighborhood, but it was a better option than putting themselves on the only path detective Ghent or his henchmen would use to come and go from the area.

Once there, he hoped they would find a key for one of the service trucks. If not that then a phone. He debated nearly endlessly who he would call. Now he flipped back and forth between one of his friends or a cab. He knew the cab would look strange, coming into the area that didn't have any residence yet, but he also didn't want to bring all this insanity down on any of his friends. Once he decided that, he ruled out calling Emily immediately. She would do nearly anything for him, but he didn't want her to get caught up in this disaster. He desperately hoped to find keys.

Sun nearly set, Liz finally stirred, her head rolling down and shocking her awake after several hours resting. She pushed Aaron's arms away and slowly stood up.

"I can't believe I fell asleep, she said." Her hair stood strangely lopsided, one half in a funny half formed mickey mouse ear.

"You are in shock." Aaron replied as he stood. The hard floor had put his left foot to sleep and hopped once awkwardly to shake some blood back into it.

"What time is it?" She trailed off as she realized he probably didn't have any way to tell.

"About seven", Aaron looked up at the fading light. "I think sundown is around seven."

“What are we going to do?” Liz dusted herself off brushing light sawdust from the front of her pants.

“I have a plan,” Aaron smiled. This was the first time he felt like he was contributing. “Did I see a construction office on the way in?”

“Yeah, the company that does the homes keeps all their tractors over there.” Liz looked curious, “why?”

“I think I saw some work trucks, we’re going to find the keys.” Aaron moved toward the back of the house, still thinking of the best way to cross the main street and stay out of sight on the way to the office.

“And if we can’t find keys?” Liz asked, following him.

“Then we’ll have to figure something else out.” Aaron admitted.

Aaron moved to head the direction he thought would be best but Liz stopped him, “this way,” she said. “There’s a giant storm drain that runs under the road. They won’t be able to see us if we use it.” She moved off in the opposite direction Aaron was headed.

The pair walked quietly through the dirt lots and construction materials until they came to a steep hill made of huge white boulders. Liz immediately began hopping and lowering herself down into the ravine. Aaron followed slowly, every muscle still tender and sore from his experience. At the bottom of the ravine they took large careful steps to a huge circular corrugated tube that went under the road. Liz stood at her full height walking through easily. Aaron had to slouch slightly to fit. The soreness in

his back screamed at him as he moved like a hunchback. When they got to the other side, they could see the construction office only about a hundred yards away. They would be clearly seen from the road by anyone coming or going due to the sparse trees, open dirt and few obstacles.

“Wait,” Aaron said and he grabbed Liz’s wrist. He turned and scrambled up the side to get a view of the street quickly. He didn’t see anyone and looked back with a whispered shout, “I think it’s clear.”

Liz didn’t say anything and began to move hastily towards the office. Moments later they stood out of view of the neighborhood at the door to a single wide mobile office. The construction company’s logo printed in huge lettering on the windowless wall. Aaron tried the door, but it was locked.

“Fuck,” he said softly.

“Don’t worry yet,” Liz replied. She paused for a moment then stepped through the door inside. Moments later she opened the door. “We’re magic, remember.”

“Yeah, I remember,” his voice somber.

Liz turned on the lights to the office, but Aaron rushed over and flicked them off again. He was almost certain that anyone with a view of the office saw the light flash on and off again and kicked himself for moving so quickly. “Look for any keys,” he said as he stepped out of the trailer.

Aaron moved to the two white pickup trucks parked outside and tried the first door. It opened with a squeak and a grating noise that shot a chilling horror down his spine. He

knew that it would be hard for anyone to hear it, but he was on edge. He glanced at the ignition and saw the keys inside.

“What luck,” he said to himself. He left the door of the truck open and moved towards the trailer to get Liz. She was still rifling around in one of the two desks inside when he peeked in.

“Liz, keys are in it,” he whispered.

Liz’s head shot up at the sound and she held something up in her hand. It was too dark to see, but her whispered reply told him, “found a flashlight and a phone.”

Liz opened the passenger side door with a similar squeaking sound and hopped in. Aaron pulled the driver side door shut shuttering again at the noise.

“Can we go to your cabin?” Aaron asked as he put his hands on the keys.

“Yeah, but can you take me to my house first so I can grab a few things?” Liz asked.

“That’s not a good idea,” Aaron said after some hesitation.

“The detective doesn’t know me,” Liz started.

Aaron cut her off, “he’ll have run your car by now though.”

“Oh shit.” She looked worried for a moment, “You’re right, go west on the highway then. We’ll be there in less than two hours.”

Aaron turned the keys in the ignition. Nothing, no growling life. How could he have forgotten that he was the death of all electronics by his touch? He’d gotten excited

and just wanted to go. He noticed now that the faint blurred visual hum he knew he saw moments ago was gone. As soon as his finger touched the key he guessed. He growled and pulled his body forward and back from the steering wheel aggressively.

After a moment of panic he shut his eyes tightly and spoke, "Liz, would you please check the other truck." His voice was the brittle calm of fury and exhaustion.

Liz had been looking at him in shock for a moment but replied quickly, "Yeah, I'll check." She pulled her door open and moved to the other truck.

Aaron knew before she started it. He saw the electrical haze in the engine compartment spread rapidly through the cab. The dome light flared on and Liz looked relieved.

Aaron moved over to the truck and pulled the passenger door open. "You don't mind driving, do you?" He asked.

"Of course not," she replied quickly. "You should sleep if you can. I'll wake you up when we get there."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep," but he was already yawning and before the five minute drive to the freeway was over, he succumbed to the trials of the day. Falling deeply asleep.

Chapter 8 - Sanctuary

Aaron woke up with the first light of the day beaming through the tops of trees. He was in the passenger seat of the truck. Parked on the back of a small log cabin that, even in daylight, looked like it was the set of a horror movie. Tall yellowing weeds crept up the walls and around the small porch with a crooked door that looked like it would remain closed as the wooden porch blocked the outside corner. He couldn't make anything out through the two small windows that looked into the cabin. They were quartered by wooden trim that was cracked and black in areas. It was amazing they held the glass in them at all. The gravel driveway was also overgrown, tall individual blades of grass poked up above the gray rocks.

The truck was empty except for a thick white binder on the floor full of white paper. Aaron pushed the door open and stood to stretch. He wasn't sure if the tightness in his

muscles was from the cramped sleeping position or his electrocution and he only questioned it a moment while he stretched, letting out a deep yawn. He moved to the back door and looked around, to call this the perfect hideout might be a stretch, but it was definitely good. The gravel drive curved around in front of the house and nothing would be visible from anywhere but the woods directly behind them. He pulled on the door and found that while it was unlocked, the outside corner of the door snagged firmly on the warped wooden deck. He pulled it against the wooden porch a second time to be absolutely sure it couldn't open before walking to the front of the cabin.

For all the clear ware on the building it made up for it by being comfortably large. There were three small windows along the side leading to the front and Aaron estimated that it would easily fit four or five of his apartment. The front porch consisted of cracked lumber and a very loose railing, but the door itself was cracked very slightly and he pushed it open easily.

“Liz?” He called out, but only quietly. If she felt half as tired as he had, she could use another hour or two of sleep. He moved into the cabin's front room. A comfortable looking, if old, couch dominated the space. Its blue fuzzy fabric caught the light very reflectively and appeared white in places. He allowed his hand to drag on the fabric, turning the fibers so the faded dark blue appeared more clearly and lost its reflective whites. A clear tracing of his hand followed him as he stepped into a small kitchen. There was

a small wood stove and a basin, but no faucet. Two large buckets sat on the counter near the sink. Four small cupboards above the buckets were made from darkly stained wood. The inside was a bit dusty, but much cleaner and well kept compared to what the outside had suggested. The floor was lighter hardwood and he realized that while there was a small TV hanging on the wall, there was no power in the front rooms. Several tall white candles sat on the kitchen counter in silver holders.

A hallway extended from the front of the cabin towards the back and he could clearly see three shut doors, one on each side of the hall, and one in the far back. He didn't move down the hallway and turned to inspect the living area more closely. The walls were sparsely decorated with some woven cloth hangings in forest colors but not having any particular imagery. Like picture sized blankets hanging just to add color to the space. A few small shelves with books surrounded the TV and something else caught his eye. A small oval silvery metal egg held up five books on a shelf. It looked exactly like the metallic orb from his dream. Normally when he caught sight of the elusive thing it vanished, but there it sat. Motionless. Tempting him. He moved slowly toward the shelf and extended his hand as if coaxing a skittish animal to come to him. The egg didn't escape, so he reached to touch it.

“Aaron?” Liz's voice called from down the hallway.

“I'm here,” he replied. He heard the soft sound of a door pulling open and bare feet padding towards him.

“Hey,” Liz smiled.

She looked like a completely different person. She’d washed her hair, which rested still damp but catching the light. Somehow even wet her hair spiked up on the sides and in the back as she’d had it styled when she first walked into his apartment. The suit she had worn then was replaced by a shirt that would easily have fit a large lumberjack and it hung down to her mid thigh. She took only a second to pull and knot the shirt at her back quickly which pulled the fabric tight around her.

“I tried to wake you up,” she said as she dropped into the huge blue couch comfortably. “You were completely out.”

“Where did you get a shower,” Aaron couldn’t help but ask. Cleaning up would probably feel like heaven.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, “let me show you.” She shot up from the couch and walked quickly down the hallway. Aaron followed, glancing at the silver orb before leaving. The back room of the cabin was amazing. It held an unmade queen sized bed with huge wooden posts on the corners and lacey white fabric gathered and tied to each post overhanging the bed. Only feet away was a huge clawfoot tub, filled with water. A dying fire was under and behind the tub.

“This tub is magic.” Liz stated boldly. “Trust me.”

“It looks like it,” Aaron took in the rest of the room, but found only a large wooden chest at the foot of the bed. A green towel had been thrown on it.

Liz pulled open the chest and threw Aaron a matching green towel. He wasn't fast enough to catch it, but it rested over his head briefly before he pulled it into his arms. Liz moved to the tub and put her hand in the water.

"Still hot," she said. "Just come back up front when you're done." She walked out of the room and pulled the door shut behind her.

Aaron tested the water and found it was hot. A nice hot tub, hot. Even hotter than the public one at his apartment complex. Which he only used a couple of times in the two years he lived there. There was a bar of soap on part of the tub that had been carved out to hold a few items and a used wash cloth at the end of the tub. As soon as he got his clothes off he lowered himself in and felt his body relax. This was better than a full night's sleep for sure.

Nearly an hour later and wearing the same clothes he wore the night before he emerged from the heavenly experience. Liz was reading on the couch when she looked up. Her eyes shot open, "Oh no, same clothes?" She jumped up, dropping her book onto the small coffee table. "There's clean clothes that might fit."

She walked past Aaron and opened the door on the right side of the hall. The room held another less comfortable looking couch, a floor rug and two small dressers. She pulled open a drawer and began sorting through t-shirts. Eventually she pulled out a black shirt with a local bar's logo on the left breast.

“What about this?” She asked, throwing the shirt to Aaron.

He pulled off his shirt and pulled on the new one, “this is great.”

“Here,” she tossed over a pair of jeans and pulled a belt out of the drawer. “They’re going to be a size or two big, but it’s better than wearing the dirty stuff.” She handed him the belt and turned and opened a top drawer. “Underwear and sox in here, just take what you need.”

“Thanks Liz,” Aaron moved to the drawer and picked the first pair of boxers he grabbed. Once he got them on, he was pleasantly surprised that the fit was pretty good. Slightly loose, but he had pants this size. He walked back out to the front room and moved to the bookshelf to see if the metal orb was there.

“You okay?” Liz asked, she watched his face drop when he saw the bookshelf.

“I’m alright, I thought.” He paused. “Doesn’t matter.” He moved to join her on the couch.

She was relaxing with her feet up, so he sat on the opposite end and let himself sink into the soft cushions as much as he could. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw that she had the weird orb in her hand. She was spinning it around her palm casually.

“What’s that?” He asked, voice alive with curiosity and excitement.

She looked at him and then at her hand. “Oh, I don’t know.” She spun it once more and tossed it to him. “Feels weird though.”

Aaron caught the orb and it was soft. It felt like a tiny smooth steel wool. There were very small edges that he couldn’t see on the outside, but he could clearly feel them. They felt sharp, but too fine to cut. It was lighter than he expected too, definitely not solid metal.

“Whoa, this isn’t what I expected.” He said after considering the orb for a moment. When he tightened his grip it felt like the orb had give, but it didn’t look like it lost its perfect shape. “Weird.”

“Yeah, it feels crazy.” Liz set her book down on the table and watched Aaron play with the orb. For a second she thought she saw tiny sparks. “Is it electric?” she wondered aloud.

“No, I don’t think so,” Aaron responded without thinking.

“Can you see electricity?” She asked, more excited. “Yeah, I thought I told you.” He replied, tumbling the egg around in his hand.

“You might have, it’s been a lot,” She took in a long breath. “We should talk about our plan.” After hesitating, “we can’t just live here forever.”

Aaron grunted an, “uh huh,” but was clearly distracted. As he looked closer he could see the surface did change slightly, but it didn’t have anything to do with his grip. It rotated slowly, almost hypnotically.

“Aaron,” Liz sat forward. “Are you listening?”

Aaron looked up, free from the hypnotic movement.

“Yes, we should come up with a plan.”

After an hour of talking they agreed that they simply didn't know what to do next. Aaron was less than useless with no control of his abilities. Liz was scared, deep in a pit of fear. She had been very close with Lilly, Jerome, and Hank. They became fast friends and explored a new world, previously invisible, for months, and they did it together. Learning, laughing, fighting. She mentioned them and brought up stories every few minutes, each time nearly descending into tears. There were a few smiles too, but the feelings around this were fresh and the trauma wasn't far enough behind her to simply let them go. Not yet.

She told Aaron that they had all been interviewed by the detective at various times about very arbitrary and disparate things. Traffic violations, loud neighbors, shoplifting in a store they had visited, even once just asking Hank about his garden. Multiple short interviews spanning months, all about nothing. They had another friend too. A less lucky friend, Liz didn't or couldn't say his name. He'd agreed to meet Detective Ghent to discuss something at the station. He'd told them all the morning of and texted them each as well. Until the texts stopped. Just gone. He was gone too. They each did a sort of search for him, but none could find anything and through an unspoken agreement decided not to mention, speak of, or ask about him with the police or Detective Ghent. They assumed the worst, but knew

nothing. Maybe he was still out there. It seemed unlikely, but possible.

Aaron thought often of the two suited men dragging Lilly to the yard and dropping her carelessly into the dirt. The vision of the event burned into his mind clearly. He was certain that Liz would have the same vision with even more emotion. The entire situation was pushed directly past crazy to completely unbelievable so quickly Aaron listened to Liz and wondered how he had gotten here. How must she feel having gotten here herself and found others experiencing the same thing but not having even a single answer as to what was happening in their lives or how to control their powers. By early afternoon the stories came more slowly and each wondered in the quiet moments how they would find a way to carry on. Detective Ghent clearly knew who he was looking for, and they knew only that they were being looked for with nothing else to guide them.

Aaron finally asked the inevitable question, “will he be able to find us here?”

Liz knew it was coming, “No, this is an Ex’s cabin.” She hesitated. “He doesn’t come here.”

Aaron heard that there was something else there, something important, but he wouldn’t press not now. In honesty both had laid their lives bare for the other in the course of the past hours. They worried about their families, friends, and lives. In divulging those worries, they told their stories, if only in broad strokes. Each, in these moments, was glad for the other. A grasping hand holding them from

the verge of slipping into a darker, less friendly place. If they must be in hell, they were glad of company.

Chapter 9 - Ideas

After a mostly restful day Aaron and Liz got to work. They discussed what the lore around magic was and started the day with some light exercise, something Aaron was familiar with. After a run, he trained with some light free weights they found in the cabin. They made crude burritos with the canned foods available. They sorted what was left to see how long they could stay without going into town. Water came from an outside hand pump. They brought in a few buckets to have on hand. Then Liz led Aaron through his first meditation, which he found frustrating and useless but wasn't willing to throw any idea out if it allowed him to control his powers. He didn't see how sitting quietly and trying to think of nothing would allow him to control his abilities, but didn't say it outright.

Liz told Aaron how she used her powers. It was a sort of feeling of flexing a muscle that wasn't directly a part of her

body but was within her. She showed him how she could phase her hand, arm, legs, and entire body. She could also phase anything she touched, so her clothes and jewelry would go with her. She explained that wasn't the case at first and initially any material touching her would just drop from her onto the floor. She hadn't been able to phase any living material yet, but she tried with the group on multiple occasions. She still didn't know if it was possible, or if that was some limiting factor for her powers.

Aaron was beyond impressed. It was like watching an impromptu magic show. She walked through walls, doors, trees, she could pass through anything, it seemed. He watched and wished his powers were half so useful. She could go anywhere and do anything with this magic. All he could do was completely destroy any modern technology, and as a bonus he didn't seem to be able to turn it off. A bud of jealousy grew within him as she explained her powers and demonstrated them for the better part of an afternoon.

"That's incredible," Aaron offered after she sunk halfway into the ground and lifted herself out again, like she was swimming in the earth. "None of what you're describing sounds like my power at all though." Another small defeated anxious feeling was growing in his heart.

"Well, it's easy out here with no pressure," Liz was trying to be patient, trying to remember back to when her ability was harder to use and more wild. "When I really need to do something though, it's harder to feel my way

through it. It's all intuition though, something inside of you probably knows."

"I wish it would say something I could understand," Aaron hung his head and threw a small rock he'd been holding in his hand.

"Well," Liz was out of ideas, she'd said everything she could put into words. "Can you feel any electricity out here?" She tried to sound hopeful.

"Yeah, I can always see and feel it if it's strong enough or if I concentrate." Aaron picked up another rock and looked around. "I can see the solar panels and batteries in the back of the cabin. They're faint from here." He thought for a minute and threw the rock up and caught it again. "I can see small electronics too, but only when I concentrate. Cell phones are hard to see, I don't think I can see watches at all. I did see the power in my TV remote I think. I was holding it in my hand, right before I drained it"

"That's great," Liz smiled at him. "That is something that you can work on without access to power." She jogged towards the cabin, shouting back before she entered, "Keep looking at it, see if you can see anything else." She disappeared inside.

A few seconds later she came out of the door again with a couple of things in her hands. She stood roughly twenty yards away. Aaron couldn't make out what she was holding clearly, but he understood the idea. He stared at the objects for a long moment. Soon Liz took a step closer. He concentrated more, still not seeing anything. He moved a

few steps closer. Maybe seeing or feeling a faint hum, but not sure. Another step and he was fairly certain that one of the items, a small disk of some kind, had the tell tale signs of power within. More clear visually, than by feel.

“Is that a clock?” He asked, taking another step.

“Yeah,” Liz took a little bouncing step with excitement. “You can see it from there?”

“Only faintly.” Aaron took another step and thought he saw something in her hand, completely obscured. “What’s in your hand?”

She took another excited step, “it’s a flashlight!” She set down the clock and flashlight in the tall grass. “One more,” she challenged.

Aaron took a step forward, but couldn’t see any other faint blur or feel the hum. He took another step. Unsure what he was looking for, he looked her over more carefully. Not seeing or feeling anything, he took another step. Barely five yards away from her he still couldn’t see anything. He took another step and looked her over again.

“Do you have something else?” He asked aloud.

“Yeah?” She turned the word up at the end making it a question.

He moved another few steps, “I’m not seeing it,” he admitted when she was in arms reach.

“I wasn’t sure you would,” She grinned and pulled something tiny from her pocket.

“What is that?” Aaron asked, still not seeing any electric hum from it.

“It’s an SD card.” She offered it to him.

“Ahh,” he held the tiny plastic thing in his hand and looked at it carefully. “Might have killed it by touching it, but it doesn’t look like it holds any power.” He turned it over in his hand.

“I wasn’t sure, but now we have a better idea of what you can see and how far away.”

Aaron admitted to himself that it was something to work on. Anything that would help him get some kind of skill with this had to be useful. He spent the next hours having Liz move the clock and flashlight around in the grass around the cabin and searching for them. The odd game of hide and seek was soothing somehow, if only by giving them both something to focus on aside from their situation.

As the hours spanned into days, the silly game of finding things in the grass and meditating wore down into things best avoided. Soon games turned to chores and chores into toil. The cold canned meals, originally welcomed, were also losing any appeal. Liz and Aaron decided that in a few days they would go into town together in the truck. Pooling the cash they had, seventy four dollars and forty seven cents, they would buy another few days of food while they tried to figure out what they would do next. They knew it was a risk to drive a stolen truck into town, but couldn’t think of any alternative. A small shed on the property had one bike in rough shape, but when Liz told Aaron it was easily thirty miles into town, they gave up repairing it.

Mornings developed a rhythm, light workouts followed by meditation and then breakfast. Then Liz would trot around the fields and forest hiding the clock and flashlight and Aaron would search for them. Careful not to touch them when he found them. This lasted for as much of an hour as the pair could stand. Liz was confident that Aaron was improving, but Aaron chalked any improvement up to knowing what he was looking for. A faint blur in a vastness of clear nature wasn't going to impress him.

In the afternoons, they discussed what, when, why, where, and how they might have a future in the world. A future where Detective Ghent didn't turn them into fertilizer would be best. In hours and hours of discussion, the pair coming up with ideas and trying to find holes in them were very successful in finding the flaws in their plans and quite unsuccessful in coming up with any plan outside of some magical intervention that could deliver them back to their real lives.

Ultimately, they decided that once they were out of resources they had two options. Option one, figuring out how to live off the land and running away together into the woods never to return. Option two, quite possibly the worst option but much more appealing was to trust that Detective Ghent was some unhinged radical and they would turn themselves into the police who would protect them from the maniac. Liz and Aaron only approached either plan with a level of dread akin to speaking at a funeral. Eventually they even stopped mentioning those plans while spending their

time brainstorming others. Each new idea more ridiculous than the last.

A nervous tension grew in each of them as the day of their trip into town to resupply approached. Liz had pitched the idea of her going alone, because she had a better chance of escape, after all no handcuffs or police car could hold her if she could concentrate for a minute. Aaron had shot the idea down more than once, as a thirty mile walk back to the cabin would likely take several days and he would be almost entirely out of food by then in any case.

They agreed they would work out, meditate, and head to town. It was the only plan left that made any sense at all. Aaron's mind swam from the moment he woke up. Too early even for the sun. Days ago they saw people murdered. The only reason they knew for it was because they had powers. Magic seemed to be real. For Aaron it was an unmitigated disaster throwing his life into chaos. Looking back, he realized that it was very likely his heightened stress at work led to him shorting the power for his office building. At the time it felt like something he was fantasizing about. Something he was dreaming in his own head to get out of work. The only logical conclusion was to chalk it up to a happy coincidence and move on. How could he have the power to black out a building with a thought? From there it was a quick plunge into oppressive dread looking into the future. A whirlpool of thoughts, being a wanted fugitive, unable to use electronics, always running and hiding, avoiding friends, never seeing family. Wasn't it supposed to

be more like the stories? Grand schools hidden from the world, secret powers that made life more amazing than ever before? It wasn't supposed to be this.

Aaron would be a burden on everyone around him from this point forward. In the best case, a casual friend who swings through. The worst case, a technological nightmare, hurling into lives like a tornado and leaving as much emotional and physical devastation in its wake. Even Liz, who was in a situation similar to his own, was someone who could be, likely would be better off without him. She had abilities that she could use to get by. Powers that would benefit her. Aaron had a curse, one that would ensure that the best thing he could do would be to run on his own. He wouldn't give up trying to learn how to use his powers. He had to learn, otherwise he would be a burden to complete strangers. They were stuck out here because he couldn't go anywhere safely. He couldn't drive, he couldn't use any modern technology. He even had to be careful getting into vehicles. He was fairly certain if he adjusted the radio or lost his concentration the car he was riding in would just lose power like everything else around him. He was a dead battery that needed other people's attention and energy to charge. Sometimes more than they wanted to give.

"Are you okay," Liz's voice asked, interrupting his swirling thoughts.

"Yeah," he replied mechanically. He didn't know when it happened, but wet tears dripped down his cheeks to the

corners of his mouth. He wiped his hand over his face to clear them. "I'm alright."

"We should go then," Liz's tone was still soft and worried.

"I think you should go," Aaron choked out the words. He knew it would be best. "You were right, you should go." He would leave while she was gone and find his way on his own. Liz could figure it out. It would be easier without him.

Liz was careful in her reply, part of her wanted it this way, another part wanted someone on her team. She wasn't sure which was the best. "You're sure," she said finally.

"I'm sure," new tears came down his cheeks.

"Okay," Liz said after a long pause. "You'll be here when I get back tonight?" She asked following an inkling of intuition that had built up from the moment she saw Aaron crying.

"Where else would I go," Aaron's voice was weak. He didn't want to lie, but he could skirt the truth. They both knew the truth anyway.

"Okay," she paused. "Okay, well, I'll see you tonight then." she finally agreed.

"See you tonight," Aaron said with a weak smile. Behind his eyes he already planned his escape.

Chapter 10 - Real Magic

Jake was a not so average high school kid. In his last year of middle school the resident bullies arranged to film him receiving a swirly, dunked in a flushing toilet, and then begging for them to stop. The incident was recorded on four phones from one angle, looking into a cramped stall with three masked kids dunking him over and over. The longest video, one minute and forty seconds, had barely gotten any attention online. Two of the three shorter videos made a few rounds through the class, but didn't go much further. The last video though, had found its way to deep lost corners of the internet. Downloaded and shared, and shared and downloaded again and again. Everyone remotely interested in that sort of content had seen it in full or parts and mashed up with other videos like it. Jake had thought it would be the worst thing in his life. Likely it was.

Jake was not so average though. Since early in his childhood he'd discovered that any image of him, photographic, drawn, or even a stick figure given his name was special. He didn't understand how or why, but he did understand that he saw through their eyes as if they were his own. At first, this was a gimmick. A mostly boring special secret power. He saw through family photos and videos as people watched them. A few scattered handfuls online would look. The overlaying imagery he received was fairly easy to sort though, just focusing briefly on something or someone would scatter and blur the background layers, bringing just what he wanted to see to the front. Smiling family and friends enjoying memories through photographs. Digital and printed, it didn't matter. He could see briefly into their lives while they looked at him.

For the first many years, this meant he saw images of his mother smiling. His sister made faces. His father beamed with pride. Quiet secret moments they thought they had to themselves. Jake tried to tell his family he could do this, but they were as dismissive as parents can be speaking with a toddler. So it quickly became his little secret. He loved it.

Once the video clip from his bathroom encounter gained traction though, he saw laughter and smiles from strangers. At first they seemed to mock him, but in the end, once the discomfort of the scenario wore off, all he saw was mild happiness and moments of joy with the occasional upset viewer, disgusted over his plight. It was hard for him to stay angry when at any moment he could witness a thousand

strangers with varying degrees of grins and grimaces watching him.

More surprising was that once he got used to it, he worried about the video losing momentum. The peace of mind it gave him through boring classes, harsh words from strangers, and any other turmoil in his life was amazing. When it was home photos his parents had taken, he could tune into this only a few times a day. With his shame cast so far and wide on the internet though, he could watch this private show at any moment of the day or night.

Having grown up with this power he accepted the strangeness of it as easily as breathing. Of course like any child, he shared his secret with a select few friends who dismissed him out of hand or mentioned that it was cool, but largely moved on with their lives. This tiny fact just sort of became a facet of Jake's personality. Anyone he got reasonable close with knew he claimed he could see through photos of himself, but none of them believed him. None of them asked him to prove it. They accepted the nerdy boy's desire to be more than human and assumed he'd grow up from the lie eventually. Except for one boy.

Sam and Jake had been friends since grade school and like any close friend Sam had made Jake prove that he had this ability more than a thousand times. He swore he would keep it secret as well, but as boys tend to do, he found himself bragging about knowing someone with magical powers online. Anonymous chat rooms, forums, anywhere

he was reasonably sure would listen to him, but not know who he was.

It was through Sam that Detective Ghent had tracked down Jake. He came to have a pretty strong understanding of how the powers supposedly worked as well. Ghent suspected that the boy wasn't even close to using the full potential of his ability, but he also didn't have time to deal with the frustrations of learning a new magic from scratch. So Ghent waited as patiently as he could in the office of the Weller High School for Jake's teacher to send him in. He looked casually around at the underpaid and apathetic staff. They hadn't questioned for a second why a detective wanted to speak to a student. Some naturally assumed it was about some bullying the boy experienced. Other's who didn't know Jake, assumed he'd done something wrong. Ultimately, if they cared about the reasons, they didn't show it. So Ghent waited, arms folded in front of him dismissively looking around the office.

Jake was caught off guard when his teacher wrote him a hall pass and said he was needed in the office. The teacher, not knowing or caring why couldn't tell Jake the reason if he wanted to. He just sent him on his way. As Jake walked the few hallways towards the office he tried to think what this could be about. He couldn't come up with anything. When he met the Detective, a sharply dressed man in a suit, he was shocked. Detective Ghent's thunderously deep voice asked Jake to come with him to answer some questions about a

case he was working on. Not having any reason to say no, he accompanied the Detective off school grounds.

Detective Ghent was losing his patience and the time he could hold the boy with any legal pretext. He explained again that a girl was missing and her friends and family needed his help to find her. Jake had given up denying he had an ability once Detective Ghent had clearly outlined how he had tracked him down and that he was a part of a special task force that used magic to help people. Jake hadn't given up explaining to the detective that his power only worked on images of himself. After the Detective drew a stick figure with the name Jake crudely scrawled over it and asked if he could see through that image, Jake realized that he could. He always sort of knew that, but now he was having trouble rationalizing why he couldn't just look through nothing at all. The stick figure had taken Detective Ghent less than a second to draw. He'd waited a few long minutes before labeling the figure to confirm if Jake could use just the image after being told it was him.

Ghent knew that scrying powers were tricky. Any skilled scry wouldn't need the crutch of video or photo imagery. Jake was much more skilled than he knew, having dedicated more hours to his craft than many with better training. Scrying was something Ghent found very useful, but anyone who could see him coming could avoid him. So their art remained a secret he was yet to unlock. He didn't want to work with a child either, especially not for this. The

situation was too perfect to pass up. He knew of a scry in the city he was working in, who was young, naive, and fairly easy to manipulate. That wasn't a situation you just happened upon. In fact Ghent had intended to go another direction entirely, but he was rushed. He really wanted the girl and her new friend. The others had only minimally useful abilities. Which they neither understood or wielded with skill. Jake however had been practicing since he was a child. His limitation was in not understanding how his power actually worked. He would eventually find the limitations perhaps, but Ghent didn't have until eventually.

“Just try focusing on the girl, relax and imagine you can see her.” He said again, moving one of the five images he'd brought of Elizabeth in front of the boy.

“I've tried that,” Jake protested again. “I really don't think that is how it works.” He finished more quietly.

“Just give it a few minutes, I'll grab you another soda.” Ghent stood up from the metal chair and left the room. Two uniformed police stood outside. The boy was a minor and it was rare to use kids for investigations. Ghent had done all the paperwork and dotted i's and crossed t's as well. He wondered again if it would have been easier to learn the magic himself. He reminded himself that the kid had years of practice and experience, all he needed was a little training.

Jake sat staring at the photos, more wondering if what the Detective said was true than trying to focus on the girl.

He'd try again, after all he was helping the police find a missing girl. He might be the hero for once. He stared. Her name was Elizabeth. Cute older girl, dyed her hair blond, wore it short. Her outfits were varied in three photos, the other two were just her face. She had a crooked smile in one of them. It suited her. It was mischievous. Jake wondered more about her life, and what might have happened to her. If she was in trouble Jake would need to find her. He sat, trying to focus, just looking at her face. It was too quiet in this little room with no windows. Jake could faintly hear the officers outside talking, occasionally their radios would bleep and sound static. He wondered how they ever understood them. It was worse than a bad phone call.

"Focus," he said to himself.

He stared and tried to think of where she might be in the world. How he could help her. The running images he kept in the back of his mind filled with the faces of the people watching him grew blurry. Temporarily ignored. He just looked at her face.

"Where are you Elizabeth?" He asked the empty room.

Ten minutes later Ghent was back, bag of chips in one hand, cola in the other. He entered the room, he was releasing the boy to Officer Michaels to take home. He'd been at the station for hours now. His parents had been informed, but they wouldn't just let him sit here all night. Ghent knew his time was up.

“Brought you a snack,” Ghent said, opening the door.
“I’ll have Officer Michaels take you home.”

Jake was beaming as he replied, “I found her.” His smile stretched across his face and into the room threatening to burst his cheeks. “I know where she is!”

Chapter 11 - Everything Goes According to Plan

The nearly three hour drive to the nearest grocery store had blunted Liz's disappointment and sadness with Aaron's choice to stay. She had suggested this herself a dozen times in the past days. It was the best choice. She had a way to escape. They were probably wanted as a pair, police and concerned citizens looking for a man and a woman. By splitting up they were giving themselves the best chance they possibly could. Liz didn't let herself consider the truth that she somehow knew, Aaron wasn't going to be there when she got back. She told herself that she would get this done and be back to training with him that night. All she had to do was make it through a long tense day. She checked to make sure she had the grocery list they'd planned again. The paper was in her pocket, just where it had been the previous twenty times she checked.

As she parked the truck at the grocery store amid a hundred other cars she told herself she would joke and laugh about this excursion with Aaron in just a few hours. She collected the keys and walked into the grocery store. She told herself that no one would recognise her and she was fine as she stared at the list and went about her shopping. Soon she found herself in the same isles she previously passed down collecting items she'd missed. A silly mistake, lots of shoppers walked down the isles more than once. That wasn't something that would make her look suspicious.

She tried to shut out the voice in her head that kept telling her that every passing shopper knew she was some kind of criminal. She wouldn't listen as it convinced her that someone was looking at her a little too curiously. People had stared before. She was a good looking girl and that is why they're staring, not because she looked like a wanted criminal on the run. The lady she passed four times wasn't looking at her like she'd seen her face before, maybe in the paper earlier that week, it was because they had unintentionally stalked each other through the store. There couldn't be any other reason.

Liz found herself looking at each passing shopper as if they were one of the Detective's men. Agents who would deliver her to Ghent who would kill her immediately. With only a few items left on the list, none of them life changing, she made her way to the self checkout. As much as she told herself that a cashier wouldn't recognise her, she simply wouldn't add to the risks she was already juggling. She

scanned as quickly as she could. The voice in her head grew louder each minute. As she scanned a loaf of bread, the treacherous machine read an error and turned the white light above the checkout red. Nervous and not wanting to draw attention Liz tapped at the screen to remove the item.

She jumped very nearly out of her own skin when a friendly voice sounded directly behind her, “Oh, let me help you with that.”

She turned to see a middle aged clerk taking her employee badge in hand to check the bread. Only moments later it was done, the clerk having never guessed Liz’s reasons for jumping. With a brief apology she moved off to help someone else nearby. Liz scolded herself briefly and finished checking out her items without issue. That persistent guilty voice echoed endlessly in her mind as she attempted with her whole will to walk casually back to the truck and get back on the road. It took her only minutes, but they seemed like hours, to load the groceries, slam the cart on a nearby curb and get in the truck.

“Hey,” an unfriendly man’s voice called out to her.

She shut her eyes tightly as if that would make him go away.

“Put your cart away Karen.” His voice said as he slapped the hood of her truck loudly.

She jumped again at the aggression. He seemed to notice her nervousness and awkwardly looked around before moving away. She put the truck in reverse and pulled out of the grocery store as quickly as she dared.

Her nerves turned against her quickly. She told herself it was fine, but her mind reminded her she was driving a stolen truck. She told herself it was fine, but her mind told her she was a witness to a murder. She told herself it was fine but she remembered she forgot to pick up a paper. They sort of needed that paper. They didn't have any cell phones, computers, or any way to check the news. It wasn't local but maybe just maybe the paper would tell them something. She cursed her rush, and wondered if it was worth going back. It wasn't and she knew it. She caught a speed limit sign for twenty five miles an hour and glanced down to see she was over forty.

“Take a breath,” she said aloud trying to calm herself. Her foot pressed on the break lightly to slow down. “Take a breath,” she repeated. As if punctuating her thought she saw the pair of motorcycle cops just out of sight behind the corner of a business complex sign. She knew before they moved that she was caught.

Her panicked thoughts ran away from her. She wondered if she could escape. She wondered if it was worth a police chase. She wondered how she would get out of this. She carefully put on the right turn signal and changed lanes. The motorcycle cop pulled out behind her, his lights flaring to life. She continued to slow. *At least I can get away.* She pulled in the next parking lot entrance and took the first spot easily as it was less than half filled and the first spots were well away from the building. She noted the many bags of groceries next to her. Too many to carry thirty miles. Maybe

twenty eight miles now. Still too many to take with her. She saw the cop dismounting his bike in her side mirror. She took a long steadying breath.

She concentrated, she couldn't let this cop catch her. She phased, trying to fall lightly to the ground beneath the truck. She sank into the seat, but couldn't get through. Maybe her mind played tricks on her. Maybe her nerves wouldn't let her use her powers. Maybe she was caught.

The knocking on the window seemed thunderous. Three knocks. She looked directly at the cop and slowly rolled down the window.

“Hi Officer,” she said embarrassed.

Chapter 12 - Escape

Aaron waited until Liz had turned out of sight just down the road. He waited ten long intentional breaths after. When he did move, he moved quickly. He gathered his few stolen clothes, a day pack, a can of chili, a can of beans, the only small water bottle with a lid, a jacket, and a pancho. He set the strange metallic orb from his dream on the table, unsure if it was truly his to take or another delusion. He'd love to have a sleeping pad, a sleeping bag, more food, more water, some comfortable shoes for the end of a hard day's walk, and about a hundred other items, but it just wasn't available. He even left the old toothbrush he and Liz had shared the past few days out of necessity. The list they made was tight, they had a budget, they both knew they couldn't use their own credit cards. That would be the first thing the police looked for to track them down. Even the movies got that right. After consideration, he took the egg in hand and threw

it in the backpack. Liz had never seemed overly interested in the object aside from mild curiosity.

He looked around the cabin once more before setting out. Liz's notebook, diary, was sitting on the coffee table with an old bic pen. He should leave a note. Something to tell her his intentions. Otherwise she might assume that Detective Ghent found him.

Liz,

Thank you for everything. I can't be the reason you get caught. I'm going to figure this out. Hopefully before anything horrible happens. Please take care of yourself.

Aaron.

He didn't know what else to say. He knew she wouldn't be happy no matter how he approached it, so this was the best he could do. The pack on his back, he headed out the door and down the road. He started at a fast walk, but once he put a mile behind him, his determination flagged. He began to jog to prevent himself from turning back. He told himself that this was what he needed to do. He pressed on, upping his pace. Soon he was miles down the road and deep enough on his journey the road back was less an option. He allowed himself to walk again. Drinking as he needed at first left him with very little water and the sun still high in the afternoon sky. He kept telling himself that this is what he had to do.

The gradual descent had turned into brief climbs up and down the valley. The dirt road was deeply rutted in places and had large rocks in others. He wondered how he'd slept

through the drive, knowing now the flatter clear road near the cabin was a poor representation of the overall trail. The trees had become a thick canopy all around him for most of the road past the clearing of grass the cabin sat at the edge of. The shade of the trees offered welcome relief from the hot sun during his jog. The day wasn't oppressively hot, but a comfortable warm that only turned hot with his excursion. As he crested another hill the sun shone down on another meadow. He could see the road cross between tree littered hills on either side. He slowed to a walk trying to enjoy the sun.

Only a few yards into the clearing Aaron noticed something was off. The hairs on his neck stood on end. The grass stood stiffly, unbending and unmoving. There was a deep quiet, no birds sang, no bugs buzzed about, the air itself was still as a grave. The only sound was his deep breathing, even that seemed softer than was natural. He looked around for any signs that anything was living here besides the plants. In only a moment the sun was snuffed from the sky, a cold wind blew at him from every direction and his vision was filled with nothing but black. He felt like he was in the cold vacuum of space. An endless nothing stretching in every direction. Fear flooded into his mind and he began to panic. Heaving breath which seemed frigid as deep winter air drew into his lungs. The sharp contrast to the mild spring day was harsh, serving to shock him more.

"I have the girl," a deep resonating voice seemed to echo from everywhere. "Come home boy," Detective Ghent's

voice thundered around him, through him. “Come home and she lives.” Aaron could still hear the softening echoes of his first words rumbling under each new sentence. “You have three days.”

And then the field was surrounding him. Bugs, soft breeze, a cawing black bird on the horizon, the soft sounds of grass brushing against itself by whirling currents of air. It was warm again. The sun shone down just as if nothing at all had happened. Aaron’s breath was heaving. Shivers ran up and down his spine, out over his arms, down his thighs, into his hands and feet. Despite the comfortable temperature goosebumps prickled on his skin. The first true warmth he noticed was in the seat of his pants and running down his leg to pool in his shoe. Maybe ten seconds had passed, but Aaron had never experienced anything so horrifying. He stumbled backwards and fell hard, not even putting his hands out to catch himself. He sat in the spring meadow, slowly breathing normally again after long minutes. Listening and looking for anything out of the ordinary. Birds called to one another. Bees danced between the flowers. The world was unchanged, normal, even beautiful.

Eventually, Aaron sat up. Shook his head to clear the lingering fear. Stood after another long moment. Each step forward a photo still from the movie of his life, the memories between photos dark menacing feelings from the overwhelming terror.

“What the fuck.” Aaron said aloud to himself as he walked.

Chapter 13 - New Eyes

Jake had a revelation. The detective had taught him something that would change him forever. Containing his excitement was difficult but unnecessary as Officer Micheals drove him home. Apparently the officer didn't have much to say to a kid, and that was just fine. Jake sat in the back of the patrol car, thinking about what this meant. His mind raced excited about the new possibilities. He nearly didn't remember to pull out his phone and put his earbuds in, adults, and even kids, found it suspicious when you made any sort of face and stared at nothing at all.

Jake tilted the phone towards him as if watching a movie. Then he let his mind search for Elizabeth again. It was as easy as it always had been. He still had to use a camera or lens of some kind it seemed. He couldn't just view people anywhere. The detective thought he could, but he just didn't understand how it worked. He had been right

about the photo thing. And the photos around his house didn't have a camera in them. It was just a point of focus. Something he was familiar with, seeing it every day. Knowing what things looked like around it. Maybe the detective was right about everything. Jake focused, he dismissed the streams of people always in his mind, the familiar feed of imagery easy to ignore, like a show he'd put on the background and seen a hundred times before. He just thought of her face. It was already getting easier. She just came to mind and he could see exactly where she was.

Something wasn't right though. She was handcuffed near two motorcycle cops. Tears were streaming down her face and her chest heaving. Her mouth moved and one of the cops replied. It was clear that he was angry. He wondered what reason two police would have to put the innocent girl in handcuffs. He wondered if maybe he hadn't been told the real story. The two cops stood talking while Elizabeth cried. They seemed to be casual about it. Nonchalant, standing around while someone was in distress was just something they did apparently. Jake wished he could hear. Then her quiet choked sobs were audible. Each shuttered breath was in his ears.

"Ten four," one of the cops said into his radio.

Jake heard the static following, and the cars rolling by on the street not twenty feet away. He could almost feel the sun and shade and air. He wondered if he was actually there for a moment. He looked down as if he might see his own body

standing there. There was nothing. Still just an invisible point, everyone unaware of him. Just like before.

“It’s okay,” he said aloud.

“What’s okay?” Officer Michaels asked from the front seat of the cruiser.

Jake jumped, he’d forgotten where he was a moment. “Just singing, sorry,” he stammered.

“No problem,” Officer Michaels replied, eyes never leaving the road. Falling happily into silence again.

Jake refocused, searching for Elizabeth again. He needed to know what was happening with her. He was already getting worried about helping Detective Ghent. He told himself that he simply misunderstood the situation. He only had a tiny part of the story, he would need more. He probably wasn’t going to get anymore from watching Elizabeth cry though. He let go of the mental image of her. He thought for a long moment.

Officer Michaels was escorting him to his front door before he could think of anything. He had moved the image of Elizabeth to the back of his mind, just watching helplessly for the long minutes it had taken them to get home. His mother waited in the open front door for him.

“Hey Sweetheart,” she smiled broadly.

“Hey Mom,” Jake replied.

“Let me talk with the officer for a minute and we’ll have dinner in an hour.” She let him pass and turned to talk to the officer. Before he got into the hallway toward his room she yelled, “Better start your homework.”

Jake didn't reply, but turned his fast walk to a jog as he threw himself onto his bed. He turned all of his attention back on Elizabeth. She was only gently weeping sitting in the cold plastic seat of a patrol car. The driver hadn't gotten back in yet, he stood just outside with the two other motorcycle cops. He tried to focus on what they said.

“Vehicle theft, leaving the scene, mostly she's wanted for questioning about that triple homicide over the hill in Culture County.” The officer's voice was even, calm, detached.

Jake recognized that county. He was in it. He remembered some kids at school talking about some people who had been murdered too. He considered Elizabeth for a moment, watching her cry quietly in the back of a squad car. It was very difficult to imagine her murdering someone. Maybe she knew them though, it still wasn't all the information he wanted. He searched for information about the murders on his phone. Dozens of intentionally vague articles, a couple of names, police requesting more information, two witnesses. Two witnesses? A second witness would have more information. The article provided a description of a man, roughly six feet, blond hair, blue eyes, no distinguishing marks. He was also wanted for questioning regarding domestic terrorism at a local tech company. Jake's mind filled in gaps, Elizabeth was a terrorist. She might be responsible for who knows what horrible things. It was comforting to know he hadn't been wrong in helping detective Ghent. He hadn't realized he'd

been so tense. A wave of relief washed through him, his shoulders and back relaxing. He'd helped the good guys. He could be proud. Elizabeth probably deserved to be sitting in the back of a police car.

Chapter 14 - Dread

Liz had tried a dozen times to use her power to at least get out of the cuffs. Ideally away. It simply wasn't working. She could grasp the edges of it, but in the midst of the stress and panic of the situation she remained entirely tangible. Once her mind was allowed to run away with exactly how bad this was for her, it locked her out of using her abilities entirely. Now she sat crying helplessly in the back of a police car on her way to certain death. It had been minutes since she tried to explain her situation to the officer. He wasn't listening and had said nothing to her at all. The motorcycle cops had read her rights to her before tossing her in the cold plastic back seat and going about his day. Maybe it was time to try one more time.

"Please," she tried to keep her voice as steady as possible. "He's trying to kill us." She choked down a sob.

“He’s going to kill me.” The sob escaped. The officer was no more moved than a stone.

He escorted her into the building roughly. Firm uncomfortable grip on the back of her left arm, pushing, pulling, and jostling her this way and that with no give or remorse. The metal cuffs dug uncomfortably into her wrists with every adjustment as well. No matter how she tried to twist within them. She set her mind to using her abilities. She’d done it ten thousand times before by now. Each time she thought she felt them, the officer would drive his thumb into her arm painfully.

“Ow,” she pleaded uselessly.

She thought she caught the officer grinning. *What an asshole*, she thought to herself. They came to a metal grate over plexiglass with a small hole in the bottom to slide items through. The officer gripped her arm and pushed and pulled her so her back ran up against the cold metal bars.

“Stay put,” his voice was firm. It softened dramatically as he spoke to someone beyond the glass. “Jane Doe, for transfer to Culture County.” He then rattled off a few terrifying sounding charges. Proceeded to tell a bad joke about criminals, unconvincingly laugh, and finally turn back to booking.

He collected a large clear plastic bag holding an orange jumpsuit from the slot at the bottom of the plexiglass. He regripped Liz’s arm painfully and pulled her around to a door that they were immediately buzzed into. At which

point she was handed off to a female officer with the bagged jumpsuit.

“Great,” Liz started to say, having another chance to plead her case.

“Save it,” the female officer cut her off. “Detective Ghent is already on his way over to collect you.”

“Please,” Liz found herself begging again. “That Detective is going to kill me.” She was ashamed at how weak her voice sounded in her own ears.

“I’m sure,” the female officer said in the same dismissive tone mothers used with toddlers after a long day.

“Fucking listen to me please,” Liz burst out.

“Take off your clothes, put this on.” The female officer’s voice was toneless. Simply reciting the same thing she’d said a million times before. “Use the underwear in the bag.”

Liz noticed her eyes were as dead as her voice and that took the fight out of her. She was certain that no amount of begging, pleading, arguing, or carefully crafted lies would get her out of this. She stripped down and pulled the jumpsuit out of the bag. She’d have to use her powers once she had a minute to calm down. Detective Ghent wasn’t here yet. She still had time.

Liz crossed her legs and sat on the floor of the holding cell taking deep intentional breaths. “Meditation isn’t pointless,” she muttered mockingly to herself as she tried to clear her mind. It was surprisingly easy to push everything out, clearing her head in the cold concrete room with only

the sound of her breathing. They'd taken the cuffs off of her, but now she wished they had left them on for practice. She had no idea where in the building she was or the fastest way out. She knew when she tried to leave she'd have to figure it out quickly though. She stood, faced the back wall of the cell and pushed herself through. It was as easy as it had ever been and she stood in an empty hallway. She paused briefly and thought she might hear footsteps down the hall on the right. She pushed forward. Again, just as easily she slipped through the wall into a packing lot. She dropped five feet to the ground and caught herself as gently as possible but tipped forward planting her palms onto the hood of a white car. The alarm immediately went off, blaring loudly a repeating four note siren alerting the world that she was there.

Liz wasn't going to let this happen all over again, she was determined to get away. She pushed forward through the car, across the few steps of pavement, between two more cars and before she could even think about it she jumped twisting with her back toward the car. She phased through the metal lid and into the trunk landing hard in the dark. She listened carefully for someone chasing her. She waited with the background car alarm blaring warning to everyone about her location. Eventually the alarm was silenced. She knew her chances of getting away were tiny. Bright orange jumpsuit in a police parking lot. This was her escaping a nightmare for another nightmare. She debated the merits of trying to run versus staying in the dark trunk until the owner

of the car helped her run, having already decided on the latter. She spent the time concentrating on her breathing. Keeping her mind calm. Pushing the knowledge of her situation out of her head.

Chapter 15 - A Long Hard Road

Aaron had three days. Detective Ghent had told him he had three days. There were still miles and miles ahead of him before he was in anything that remotely passed for civilization. Then he had to find a way to get back home. He tried to remember how long the car trip was before he remembered that he slept through the entire thing. He knew his very general location as he'd discussed it with Liz several times to ease his curiosity. She'd told him it was roughly thirty miles into the city for groceries, about an hour and half each way on rough roads. They gave her an hour to shop, four hours should be comfortable. It had only been three hours since she left. Ghent must have been waiting for her.

He pushed himself down the road. Starting all over again with a fast walk, after a few minutes a slow jog, and finally a steady run. He was quickly approaching tired. He had a

half hour run in the morning, a light workout immediately after, a short rest and then a three hour run. He couldn't remember ever having run for this long before. He loved sports, but he didn't participate in anything more seriously than a beer league and even that was years ago. Every other run he'd ever gone on was to keep in shape which was typically two or three times a week for a soft thirty minutes. He had less than no interest in doing marathons. Today would be a marathon, like it or not.

His muscles ached more with every step as he tread forward. The road had a few turnoffs, but they looked like long driveways, they definitely weren't a main road of any kind. He pushed the thought of following the wrong road miles out of his way from his head and told himself he was following the only real option. He tried to gauge how sure he was of that. Eighty percent. Seventy. No less than seventy. It was a solid road, if rough. There were ruts and rocks and dips, but it was the only solid road. That had to be worth seventy percent. Besides, it was too late to turn back now. He pressed on. Fatigue growing slowly, but much more certainly than seventy percent.

Hours later, drawing short heavy breath in panting gasps, muscles screaming in pain and frustration, Aaron began to see cabins dotting the road ahead. He hoped he'd find someone to take him into town at the first or second, he didn't know how much further his legs would take him beyond them. He couldn't remember having ever been so tired, so sore, and so exhausted. He was working without

sleep, on what was likely the longest day of his life both physically and emotionally, and he didn't have a plan. He couldn't even think clearly enough to loosely cobble one together. He just knew he had to get into town, then he'd figure it out from there. Seeing cabins again, he allowed himself to slow from his jog to a walk, a slow, painful walk. His legs seemed to scream at him more with every slow step.

It was late spring, but it was clear from a hundred yards away no one had been at this cabin since last year, perhaps even before that. Long weeds, dust, and general disregard gave the cabin a forbidding look. Still, he would knock on the door. The next cabin was another five minute walk up the road, and it felt like five minutes more walking might be enough to kill him. He knew well before he knocked that there was no one there. Still he knocked, and stood on the porch for longer than it took to confirm what he already knew. He knocked again anyway. After a long minute passed with no answer he tried the door. Locked. He shook his head in frustration. As he moved to walk again he noticed he had a limp. Not a painful hitch as with a sprained ankle, but simply muscles in his legs refusing to work as he instructed them. It was more a deep soreness, penetrating all the way through his muscles down into the bone. They were tight, near cramping. He collapsed on some tall grass not forty feet from the house. Fatigue consuming every bit of him. He was sure he would fall unconscious if not for the radiant pain he couldn't ignore. So he just lay there. He

closed and opened his eyes, trying to stretch his legs and arms without moving too much. He laid on the hard ground unable to force himself to do anything else.

The sun was low on the horizon when Aaron found the strength to stand and slowly walk. He wasn't certain that he could run, but his taut muscles gave under the movement slightly. Each step came with some minor relief that helped push him forward. The next cabin turned out to be a long fifteen minute walk over a winding road that he intermittently cut from when he could see the path winding needlessly out of the way of trees and other easily navigable obstacles for someone on foot. Three cars in front of the house made him all the more hopeful as he approached. The hope slowly dimmed as he realized he could neither see nor feel the electric hum of their batteries. Still as he drew closer and his muscles loosened the road lost some of its menace. He knocked, and waited briefly, when no answer was heard from within he pushed down the road once more.

Only a couple hundred yards more and he found relief and hope again. Music played just out of sight behind a wall of willows. The smell of something cooking served to revitalize him. As if his hibernating hunger woke from a long winter he felt his mouth moisten. No one answered the door to the cabin, but he wasn't deterred and walked around the back where music played and he heard voices. Three people stood on a large deck around a barbeque, happily talking and trading smiles. They looked his age, and seemed like they might be escaping the city for the weekend. It only

took a minute for them to notice him and quiet, turning their eyes and focus.

“Hey,” Aaron waved meekly.

“Aaron?” A man wearing a chef’s apron and board shorts asked.

“Yeah?” Aaron replied confused, not recognizing the man.

“We went to school together,” he replied more excitedly.

His friends, visibly relaxed a bit. A larger guy, wearing black cargo shorts, a bar t-shirt, flip flops, and an olive green baseball cap with indistinguishable words but a very distinguishable sweat line along the bill and a guy with what might be the thickest, longest beard he’d ever seen dressed overcasual in sweatshorts, an unbuttoned hawaiian shirt and a pair of sunglasses on his head holding back equally long and impressive hair shifted their body language from aware and aggressive to friendly.

The bearded guy offered his hand, “Ravi,” he smiled.

“Jesse,” the larger guy offered his hand next.

“Casper,” the sudo chef grinned. “Dude, we met a couple of times, but do you remember the night Adam threw up into the window of Bonner Brew?” He chuckled.

Aaron remembered vividly, he wasn’t doing too badly with a college crush he’d been working on for months and his group were the secondary victims of splash from the incident. “That was a huge cockblock,” he replied. “Huge,” he felt his cheeks pull into a smile.

“Yeah, sorry man,” Casper offered, though his cheeks were red with joy. “I think I sort of avoided your crew from then on. Though, I do hang out with Owen occasionally. I remember you mostly from his parties.”

“Crazy to meet you here.” Aaron said.

“Really crazy,” Casper picked up the hanging tongs and turned back to the barbeque. “What brings you so far from home?”

“That’s a long story,” Aaron ran over plausible excuses in head. Searching rapidly for words. The trio simply looked at him expectantly for a few seconds, so he continued hoping whatever came out would be good enough and not the insane ramblings of his actual experience. “My car broke down up the road at my uncle’s cabin. I had to hoof it all day to make it here.”

“Way out past the national forest land?” Ravi cut in.

“Yeah,” Aaron pointed towards the cabin.

“That’s twenty miles easily,” Casper was pretty familiar with the area. “You walked out today?”

“Jogged mostly.” Aaron offered a weak and tired smile. “And cried,” he joked.

“Well shit man,” Jesse said as he grabbed a beer out of the cooler and tossed it towards Aaron.

Aaron’s fatigue slowed his reaction and he almost missed a very easy catch.

“We’ve got enough food and can give you a ride out to jump your car tomorrow if you want to crash here?” Casper offered as he rolled some sausages across the grill.

“It’s going to take more than a jump,” Aaron couldn’t have them driving him out to a cabin with no car parked near it. “Any shot you’re headed back to town in the next day?”

“I actually live in Cedarville now,” Casper replied. “I’ll be up here fixing up this place to rent for a week or so, just having the boys up for the weekend.”

“I actually have work on Sunday, so I’m headed into town tomorrow.” Jesse offered a sympathetic smile. “I live in Rancho, but I’ll get you to Cedarville if you need me to.”

“Any shot you could get me all the way to Rancho?” Aaron was hopeful. A ride home would save him a lot of headaches.

“Sure,” Jesse grinned.

Problem seemingly solved a weight of exhaustion, fatigue, hunger, thirst, and anxiety he was concealing from himself, peeled from Aaron immediately. His shoulders relaxed, he stood a bit straighter, and he allowed himself to hope for a moment. The trio proved to be excellent company to distract him from his worries as well. They ate food, drank a few beers, told jokes, and complained about work for several hours. Casper eventually offering Aaron a real bed to crash in. He was asleep almost before he laid down. He would be headed home in the morning. Maybe he could even save Liz.

Chapter 16 - Visions

Jake had never in his life been less interested in school. The ability to tune into a thousand varied living photos had served to combat boredom since as long as he could remember. Now, it was free access to every channel the human race had to offer twenty four seven, three sixty five. All last night, this morning, during class, at lunch, and into the afternoon he'd surfed captively watched different people go about their days, having private moments, and enjoy or hate life in the widest variety of ways possible. It was the internet on steroids, and beaming directly into his brain. Now, he was having trouble finding his way back to a person he'd watched previously and wanted to check in on. Before that had never really been a concern, but some of the drama he found himself a part of was captivating. He was enthralled by watching people argue, make up, dance because no one was watching, fight with their family, their

friends, or simply go about their day. When a situation seemed to be at a pause in the action, he simply blinked new people into his mind. At first, it required some amount of focus. After a few hours, it was an automated response to any tiny moment of disinterest.

His subconscious also seemed to tune him into situations at peak levels of drama. He'd watch as a couple would be shouting and throwing things or people about to make love, in the midst of heavy petting and making out. He consumed it all. Sometimes watching and listening to multiple events at a time, tuning into only the highlights. He roamed through a hospital ward full of injured and crying people. Watched as parents cried over a grave of someone far too young to die. Was awed by the kindness, courage, and empathy of some. Dismayed by the anger, vitriol, and malice of others. He saw heroes, villains, and all walks of life in between. It seemed like there was no limit to his new sight.

Jake had been tuned into the reality of strangers since six this morning, roughly twelve seconds after he woke up, until now, five minutes to three o'clock in the afternoon. He found himself yawning as he watched firefighters pull three people from a horrible car wreck. Police, EMTs, and onlookers rushing around with no idea what to do or how to help. For the first moment since he woke, he blinked and shut out the visions. He took a minute to look around the room. Students all scribbling in their notebooks, or staring at the clock hoping time would pass a bit more quickly. Strangely the room he was in felt less real than watching the

drama of the world unfold within his mind. He was aware of a mild headache, that might have been there hours or had only just started. His eyes hurt as if he'd been staring at a computer screen all night long. He realized that his whole body was tense, muscles clenched with nervous anticipation of everything he'd been watching. He tried to relax and found it difficult. Another thing he'd need to pay attention to. He was very briefly curious what this power might do to his head. Only a moment's wonder was allowed as the bell ending the school day chimed loudly and the students all got up to go about their lives.

Jake stood and stretched, rolling his neck and flinging his arms above his head as his classmates swarmed out quickly around him. He made his way from his final class of the day slowly, the headache mild but building behind his eyes. A solemn march to his locker was followed by a relaxed languid walk home. He thought of all the people he'd watched. Their toils, arguments, fights, love, and friendship. He had friendships, but they were mild and casual things. There wasn't a group text. There weren't daily meetings. Occasionally minor events would spur the need to gather socially. Any emptiness he experienced was filled with watching others. Almost every moment until the last few days had been a quiet lonely moment. The watching of people when they knew no one around them cared what they were doing or even more likely the watching of people when no one was around. Today was so different. Everything he watched without exception was filled with friendship or

companionship of some kind. Charged fully with emotion, even if it came in the form of bubbling rage at some slight, real or imagined. Teams of people who interacted with others. Jake had never had that. Sure he had a few scattered friends who he would share a meal with, or catch a movie, sometimes they would go out into the world and explore. Unlike Jake, every single person he'd spent the hours of the morning watching was deeply, passionately engaged with another person.

At home, sitting quietly in his room, for reasons Jake couldn't fully understand, tears fell across his cheeks, brushing the corner of his mouth before falling from his chin onto his oldest most comfortable shirt. Logically, everything was fine. He had the same things in his life everyone else had. Family, school, television, a computer, a home, and meals. His mind couldn't wrap itself around the longing for something he'd never truly experienced until today. Even in their worst moments, the fury of a failing relationship, or a knock down drag out fight amongst friends, the deep passions that Jake had spent hours watching were something missing from his own life. He cursed himself quietly for crying. That wasn't something that you did without reason, and he could not or would not see that reason. To block out the emotions that threatened to disturb his tiny happy world, he tuned into the thousand tiny drama's of other people again. Alone in his room, he watched.

It proved every bit the distraction that he desired. As if in the room with them, he watched people fall in and out of

love. He watched old friendships and new. He watched as other people lived their lives. After watching a hundred private moments he saw a man he'd found several times before. It was beyond strange, even trying to find a previous person or group he'd watched before proved to be beyond him. It was like having only a next channel button. This man didn't seem special. He sat in the passenger seat of a pick up truck, more awkwardly passing time than anything else. At least three other times today he had seen him. He was a very normal looking thirty year old guy riding in the passenger seat next to a thicker pretty normal looking guy. When they did speak it was about the weather, or some class they had both taken, it was all very inconsequential, which made it stand out. Jake's tuner seemed to hone in on interesting things. It almost always switched to some dramatic event unfolding. But this was definitely the third, if not the fourth time he'd run across these two. Just driving. Listening to music and driving.

Jake tried to remember the last few interactions he watched, but he quickly realized that they blurred together in his mind. Each new interaction mattered less and less. They served to entertain him for a minute, sometimes five minutes, but then he'd move onto the next. He concentrated, trying to remember someone specific from earlier in the day. It was nearly impossible. Even when he could recall the people more clearly. A husband and wife, fighting about their kids earlier. He didn't know their names, but they had very unique facial features. He could see them in his

memories clearly, he could not find them with his sight even after minutes of trying. He found he could find this average guy and his friend on their road trip though. Something was odd about him, but Jake was not certain what that could be.

He started cruising through other lives again, determined to dismiss the road trip friends. Ten minutes later, they were back. Repeats. Shocked and curious, Jake tried to flip through the old channels. The quiet moments of people watching clips of his face. Easy as breathing, he saw those people like he was in the room with them. Ten thousand people he didn't know, couldn't really remember, who all just sat, surfing one app or another watching silly videos. He thought of Elizabeth, and found her in a minivan, no music playing, just driving. Her concentration on the road. He wondered what she had done and how she had been released so quickly but guessed it was all a misunderstanding of some kind. She never did seem like the type to be the bad guy. He was glad she was out. Relieved. She had been the start of knowing his powers much better after all. He hoped she was happy too, as he flipped through the endless parade of events in his mind again.

Before he went to bed for the night, he tried something he hadn't done yet. He tried concentrating on his favorite stars. He didn't know why it didn't occur to him sooner. What would they be doing? What did their lives look like? He thought of his favorite celebrities. Mr. Beast, Jessie Mei Li, Zendaya, The Rock, David Dobrick. One by one he found a window into their lives and spent only moments

watching. Each seemed more mundane than the last. Their exterior star persona, clearly the most interesting moments of their day to day lives. He wasn't overly enamored with celebrity culture anyway. He enjoyed them in their various roles, but he didn't care what they were doing, especially as none were as interesting as the random strangers he found at his whim. He may check in on them occasionally to get a sneak peek into the projects he really loved to watch. All in all, the endless rotation of private moments of normal people was the most interesting thing he found. So he let the next station play, run the programming of his ability until he fell asleep, completely exhausted.

Chapter 17 - Missed Reunions

Liz had spent six hours in the trunk of a strangers car with nothing to do except contemplate her life, the last few days, and all the mounting problems stacking up before her. Like high level tetris of stress and anxiety pieces. She was surely officially a fugitive. Escaped from the law. Her career, her life, her whole family, any remaining friends, all of it, would be gone. She tried to tell herself that she was lucky, no prison she was aware of could hold her. Eventually those watching would turn their backs and she would vanish. The greatest escape artist. Still, even with that victory, she was currently boiling in the trunk of a car waiting for the driver. Once it got dark she might risk peeking out and finding someone who was leaving, but sunlight still poured in through cracks in the trunk. It provided just enough light to confirm light was there, not enough light to have a look around. The police who checked

her in had taken everything she had on her. So she sat thinking about everything that led up to now and puzzled out any conceivable path to have any sort of life when all of this was over.

She worried about Aaron too. What was he doing, did he find out about her, had he assumed she just left? Would he be waiting at the cabin? Did he make the too long walk to get help? It wasn't worth dwelling on, but she would dwell on it anyway. The answers as hidden in darkness as she was at this moment.

Her unwitting rescue came late in the evening. The car rocked slightly as a driver got in. The engine roared to life. The car pulled away. The relief of it was amazing. She'd harbored the idea that someone would review some video of the parking area and they would open the truck and find her stashed within. She was lucky that wasn't the case. The car stopped twenty minutes later. It rocked slightly as the driver exited. Liz waited an uncomfortable sixty seconds before phasing herself under the vehicle. The effort and concentration of it took more than she liked to admit. She, like Aaron, needed a much better grasp of her powers. They would work on it together soon. They could figure this out. Until then though, she needed a car, some food, water, and she would probably want something to wear that didn't clash with her hair quite so much. Something less orange.

The sun had finally fallen below the horizon, but the day had some light left in it. She watched from below the car a moment, taking in a nice neighborhood with a thousand

places to hide. Another stroke of luck came after only a few moments when she watched a family load into an SUV loudly talking about visiting grandparents for a couple of days. Liz scrambled from below the car, across a wide stretch of front lawn, and hit the front door at nearly a sprint, phasing through without issue. In minutes she had found some more desirable clothes, a couple of sizes too large, but much more flattering. She found a couple hundred dollars too. And a set of keys. The SUV had pulled out from the driveway, there was still a garage. Checking, she found a minivan. Older, fit for a family road trip, comfortable, not ideal for a long winding off road experience, but it was wheels and a motor. She wasn't going to complain about that. She pillaged some food from the refrigerator and cupboard too. Plenty for a few days. Not having to risk another trip to the grocery store she was practically bouncing with luck. After a series of calming breaths, she started the van, opened the garage door, pulled out, shut the garage door and was on her way. Shaking with nervous excitement she drove out of the neighborhood looking for landmarks to point her in the right direction. In ten minutes she was on her way. It only took another ten minutes to get to the dirt road, which still slowed her down in the van.

Her trip turned uncomfortable once she passed the final few cabins before national forest land. It looked like one of them was enjoying a night of partying as she witnessed a large guy wearing cargo shorts peeing in the side yard of the house. Her high beams had only cut across his figure briefly

from a curve in the road and she pressed on without another thought. The next twenty four miles of rough dirt road were hell. She barely managed an average speed of three miles an hour, sometimes having to get out of the car to check where the low clearance vehicle would need to go to avoid ruts. The hour and forty minute drive was exhausting and painful. On top of an already exhausting day Liz was spent by the time she pulled up in front of the cabin.

She stumbled out of the minivan and yelled, still hoping. “Aaron! Are you there?”

No response came and the cabin was dark, it had been dark the entire time they had been here though. That wouldn't deter her. She went inside, checking the bedroom. In less than a minute she was pretty certain that Aaron wasn't there. She could figure it out tomorrow. She needed sleep, badly. The relief of being safe out here, in the middle of nowhere, was like wrapping up in a comfortable blanket. She fell onto the too soft bed and was asleep within minutes.

Chapter 18 - Home Again

Aaron shared an awkward, slightly hung over drive with a near stranger. They'd been friendly. Now, alone together they found little to discuss beyond the weather. Every five minutes or so one or the other would comment on the weather, traffic, or life in general to a subdued short reply. Always quickly devolving into the same uncomfortable quiet. The radio played songs from a playlist, each was lukewarm about listening too. This spurred an occasional comment as well. They struggled to find anything to really clique over though. The final hour was quiet with only Aaron offering the occasional direction to his apartment between or over songs.

“Thanks for the ride Jesse,” Aaron said, having waited an interminable amount of time to utter those words, the relief of arriving home filled him with joy.

“No problem Aaron, it was good to meet you.” Jesse tipped an imaginary cap and grinned before pulling away. Aaron turned towards his apartment. He wasn’t entirely sure what to expect. He beat the deadline though. Liz would be saved. He’d done his part, it was time to confront Ghent. Surrender to Ghent was probably more appropriate. His walk to his own front door felt more like a trudge to a certain defeat. He replayed the image of Ghent’s henchmen dropping Lilly’s body unceremoniously in a garden and conversing like nothing at all happened. In his mind, it was his body that fell into the dirt lifeless and alone. He hoped Liz would be okay. He took a long self assuring breath and pulled his front door open.

Daylight streamed in the windows, the room was too small for Ghent to be hiding anywhere. The absence of Ghent was a new relief. He walked in, looked back into the hallway to assure himself he was alone and closed the door behind him. Like before his apartment was a void of power. Anything that remotely used energy had been burned out and used up. Now though, he could feel the power flowing into and through the neighboring units. Almost as far away as the street. It felt like standing within a river. The energy seemed to pull towards him, but without any clear path it remained in the wiring and machines it was a part of. He stood in a tiny island of darkness while all around circling currents of power swelled, pushed, pulled, and flowed. He stood and watched it all for a long time.

He considered what he could or should do now. Wait here until tomorrow for Ghent to show up. Prepare his final meal and live the last day of his life. Soon he was sitting on the foot of his bed just glad to be home. Happy to have one moment free from the insanity of the previous days. Hours later he found himself determined if not to live himself, to ensure that Liz would. Ghent could have him, his life was falling apart more and more each passing second. Liz could go back to a normal life. She deserved to go back to a normal life. He'd find a way to give her that, even if he couldn't find it for himself. He just needed to think of a way.

Chapter 19 - Nightmares

“Owen Allen Vinter.” The detective’s voice resonated through the small home.

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement. He’d stood at the door while a young lady exited, and planted his right hand firmly on the door holding it open as Owen had moved to shut it. The young lady recognized the threat in the tone of the voice and glanced back only briefly before moving quickly across the street outside. She didn’t know what Owen might have done, ten hours ago she didn’t know Owen existed. She wouldn’t insert herself between him and this man.

“Yes?” Owen asked not recognizing the sharply dressed man with a neat intentionally trimmed five o’clock shadow, dark eyes, and a deep ominous voice.

“I wanted to ask you some questions,” the Detective said. “Do you mind if I come in?”

Owen paused briefly considering. “Sure,” he said as he stood out of the way.

The detective entered Owen’s home. A tiny one bedroom house in a cute corner of downtown. “Do you know where Aaron is?”

“No,” Owen shut the door.

“And do you know that you’re special Owen?” The Detective sounded hungry. It was a voice of thick passion. “Special,” Owen let out an uncomfortable laugh. “Uh, I don’t know.”

“Haven’t you noticed that people flock to you?” The detective grinned and the room grew visibly darker. “That people possess an unnatural fondness for you?”

Owen grimaced. “Do you have a badge number, officer?”

“You don’t even realize,” the detective took a step closer. “You don’t even know what you are?” The room seemed to be covered in a thick gloom, blotting out the furniture, the wall hangings, even the carpet just a stride past the detective.

“I think you should go.” Owen managed backing into the door grasping for the handle but finding it was just a cool smooth wall. Panic spread across his face and seized his heart. He wasn’t where he thought he was, only a dark blank wall and gloom in every direction. After glancing at the wall and back to where the detective once stood, he found the man had vanished. A cold pair of disembodied eyes hung in his place.

The solid white eyes bounced up and down and the deep voice resonated from everywhere. “You’re a charmer Owen.”

Owen tried to run. He tried to call out. He tried everything. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. The dark of the room consumed everything. Thick pitch blackness and two dancing eyes. He felt goosebumps covered him.

“I’ve wanted your powers for a long time Owen.” Too many shock white teeth formed a too wide smile. “I’m going to take them.” A haunting vile laugh echoed in the infinite darkness.

Owen felt freezing cold grip him from everywhere, as if cold coiled around him like a snake. It seemed to ooze in through his skin, down into his muscles, finally settling into his bones. It froze him to his core, so deeply he wasn’t sure that it was something outside of him. He seemed to be made of the cold. He managed a final choking breath before dying.

The light gradually returned to the room. The detective was standing several long paces from Owen’s collapsed body. The detective’s smile shrank from taking up the front half of his face to a normal human smile. A too long tongue licked his chin and traced up over his cheek until it licked over his nose and retreated back into the human face again. “I hope you’re not watching Jacob.” The detective spoke to the empty room. “I hope you’re minding your business.” He

took long casual strides to the front door, opened it, and retreated into the night.

Jake woke up, cold sweat on his brow. He tried to tell himself it was only a dream while he concentrated on detective Ghent trying to find the man and confirm it was just a dream. It only took a few seconds and he found him. He was sitting calmly at a computer in the police station. He told himself it was only a dream. He could still see Owen's lifeless face, and he focused on it. He searched for a man he'd never met with a face he'd never forget. For a split second he thought he wouldn't find him. He was very nearly convinced in that short time. Then the image of a familiar room in a house he recognized easily appeared in his mind. Sprawled on the floor was a lanky dead man. Alive, he looked like half a skeleton, now, in this vision, he seemed to have been dead for an age. Seeing the room was uncomfortable. It was the early morning hours, light just peeking up over the mountains, streaming in through the windows. It was too similar to the horrible nightmare he witnessed. He flashed the room away.

Ghent sat casually at his desk, smiling. His smile seemed just a bit too wide. His eyes reflected a malignant happiness. He tapped his cheap pen rhythmically on his desk while he rocked very gently back and forth. His demeanor made him appear more aberrant and horrible than Jake could take. He had to find a way to warn Elizabeth. He already knew Ghent was looking for her. He could find her first. He could warn her. Somehow, he'd find a way. He couldn't be responsible

for helping this nightmare. He wouldn't be responsible for another death.

He kept the uncomfortable image of Ghent in his mind, shifted his focus to Elizabeth and found her. The first rays of light coming in a small window in a wooden wall. She was comfortably asleep. It gave Jake time, he instinctively knew Ghent was far away. He could feel the distance. He had at least hours. He sat watching the pair for minutes. Shifting between them. Feeling more and more helpless. He could find a way though, and he would.

The minutes turned into the first hour. Still Jake hadn't found a way to contact her. He took slow bites of cereal, between mounting frustrations at his own inability. He knew where each was in relation to him. He thought of borrowing the car, he knew his mom wouldn't let him take it for six hours though. Definitely not highway driving to another city for a reason he couldn't or wouldn't provide. If he did that, he'd have to steal his family's car. It was a rough dirt road to the cabin with Elizabeth. He'd barely driven on pavement, it would be a long trip. A lot could go wrong. It was a plainly bad idea. He'd come up with something else. He'd find another way.

It took him hours to come up with anything that would remotely help. He was slightly ashamed it had taken him so long. It was the thing he'd been seeing in everything the last few days. Elizabeth probably had friends. Friends that wanted to help her. Friends that could help her. Jake could find them and make a case for their aid. Ghent and Elizabeth

had very monotonous mornings. For Ghents part, he sat comfortably at his desk, clicking the pen and grinning. Occasionally he'd look at the exact spot where Jake's point of view was located and smile his wide inhuman smile. Just his look made shivers run down Jake's spine.

Elizabeth had started crying early. She must know more, stressed to a breaking point. After a good long hour of tears, she paced around the house. Went for a short jog. Cried again. Was pacing and sitting for various times. It was not just boring but sad as well.

Jake was nearly ecstatic to have something else to work on. Concentrating, he thought mostly of Elizabeth, but tried to expand the scope beyond her. People associated with her. In less than a minute new images of people appeared in his mind. He flashed through them wondering who would be the best to approach. The stranger from yesterday appeared again. Jake focused on him.

He sat alone in his oddly dark apartment just staring into nothing. No lights were on, no music was playing, the only sounds were his quiet controlled breathing. He just stared at the wall, sitting on the foot of his bed. Unmoving, no expression on his face, quietly sitting alone. It was nearly as creepy to watch as Ghent. Jake only wondered briefly about him, before moving on.

After flashing through a half dozen images with little else to go on and no clues how they associated with Elizabeth, Jake came to another crashing halt. He kept them all in mind to see how far away they were. Three were miles

and miles away spread out into the country. Two were in Rancho, but a long drive away. The last was driving in a very nearby neighborhood. Jake focused on her. She was close, he could walk there. She just needed to stop. He threw some things in his backpack and was out the door in less than thirty seconds. At the same time the strange woman had parked in front of a house and was headed for the door. Jake could be there on foot in fifteen or twenty minutes. So close. He played some music on his phone and shifted through the various people as he walked.

Elizabeth.

Ghent.

The unknown friend.

Ghent.

Elizabeth and her friend.

Ghent.

Elizabeth.

He was only a block away. Struggling to think of something to say that wouldn't make him sound insane. He felt immediately awkward speaking to women. More awkward speaking to strangers. This was about to be quite an event. He was already at the door when he fully realized that he had no idea what to say. He stood at the door hand raised to knock and froze. What could a normal sane person say to another normal person about a completely insane thing happening to convince them to go on a six hour road trip with a stranger?

The door pulled open in front of him. Jake stood staring at a blonde girl roughly his own height of five foot five. She was cute, very disheveled, and had faint but definite dark circles under her eyes. Jake just stared at her, still not sure what to say.

“Yes?” The girl drug out the word, it sounded like a sarcastic question.

“Um,” Jake stuttered. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she said hesitantly. After a long moment of silence she continued, “Can I help you?” She said it slowly and raised her voice very slightly.

“Do you know Elizabeth?” Jake spat out.

“I know a few,” she was curious enough to not shut the door immediately at least. “Can you be more specific?”

“She’s, uh, five foot, dark hair,” he paused. He heard how it sounded. Weird. It sounded weird. “Cute,” he added belatedly.

The girl laughed honestly and just gave an odd head and shoulder roll that definitively said ‘*and*’ without words.

“And, she needs our help.” Jake felt his face flinch. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know how he could explain.

“Does she need me to buy some girl scout cookies?” the girl laughed again.

“Uhm,” Jake started. Paused for too long. “No.” He moved his hands in frustrated circles at his hips. “Start over,” he realized he said it outloud and shook his head.

“Start over, my name is Jake. I’m a friend of Elizabeth. She told me you could help.”

The girl smiled awkwardly. “My name’s Emily,” she pulled the door open and stepped back out of the way. “Why don’t you come inside and we’ll figure this out.” She offered Jake a tired, understanding smile.

Chapter 20 - Depression

It was only five minutes after Liz woke up that she found the note.

Liz,

Thank you for everything. I can't be the reason you get caught. I'm going to figure this out. Hopefully before anything else happens. Please take care of yourself.

Aaron.

He'd planned to leave the moment she was gone. She knew it and the events of the past few days had all been for nothing. She was a whirl of emotions; betrayal, anger, resentment, sadness, and a bit of depression. She spent the morning just wallowing in them, letting the tears flow. Eventually she got up and forced herself to take a run. She

would have shoved splinters under her fingernails to ignore the emotional flood crashing through her, this was much less extreme. She ran. After only a mile she walked back to the cabin.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do now Aaron!” she screamed from the porch into the quiet grassy valley. The trees, grass, animals and insects quieted for a few seconds upon hearing the scream. Her own personal moment of silence.

She found herself pacing around the house. Moving needlessly from room to room and wondering what to do. She had a stolen car, a long drive to anywhere, and enough food for a couple of weeks. She could just go. Just escape. Run. She knew there was nowhere really to run. If the crime wasn't severe before, her escape would make it clear now that she was a fugitive. So she paced aimlessly, occasionally crying, sitting and staring off into space, the day marching on. Morning turned to afternoon, and afternoon to night. The sunset came and went with a few more tears. She would leave tomorrow. She had friends in Seattle, Atlanta, and New York. She could figure it out from there. She'd leave her home and go. She had to leave her home and go, there was no other option. She'd take her stolen car and head east. The further from Rancho the better. Her friends would help her, even if they heard what was happening. Even if they heard what she had supposedly done?

She found herself pacing again. Just a loop of circle after circle within the living area of the cabin. She forced herself

to sit. She forced herself not to cry. She'd leave in the morning. She thought she heard the sound of a distant motor. She dismissed it until the sound was undeniable. A new worry bloomed in her heart. She moved to the front window and pulled the curtain aside. Clear headlights snapped back and forth across the meadow.

“It could be anyone, they might not be here for me.” She said out loud to herself. “They will probably just drive right by.” and she hoped.

The headlights landed on the cabin from thirty yards away and a yellow jeep pulled into the dirt driveway on the front of the house. All Liz could do was stare in horror. Who was here? Why were they here? No one came to this place. She watched a kid hop out of the passenger seat and say something to the driver, obscured by the dark and reflective windshield. She couldn't make out what he said. The terror released her from the spot she'd been rooted too and she ran for the back door. She didn't bother opening it, just forcing herself to phase through. The transition was rough and it slowed her like moving through a wall of thick syrup.

“Elizabeth,” a voice called from behind her near the cabin's back door. “Elizabeth, wait!” he yelled.

She turned to look at him. He was young. Maybe eighteen, just maybe. Clean face, messy hair, and even his semi-stylish outfit couldn't hide the fact that he probably spent more time behind a computer screen than with people. She cautiously approached him with slow careful steps.

“Elizabeth,” he tried more gently.

“Who are you,” she answered. She stopped moving towards him and readied herself to run. She felt cold, but she didn’t know if it was fear or the night.

“My name’s Jake.” He sounded mildly excited, like that should mean something to her.

“Well Jake, you should tell me what you’re doing here.” She was still ready to bolt. She could outrun this kid.

“Right,” Jake said. “This is going to sound a little crazy.”

Chapter 21 - A New Plan

Aaron had spent too many quiet hours in his room waiting for something to happen. The afternoon had taken the morning from him while he sat in contemplation and distress. It was past time to do something. Anything. He'd made himself a promise to enjoy his final day yesterday. Instead the oppressive dread of the future held him in the dark of his apartment. Simply feeling the time slip past and blocks of flowing energy calling to him. He didn't know what to do but he would do something.

He stood up, walked to the door, opened it and headed out into the hallway. Blake lived across town, Nick lived way outside of town, but Owen lived a ten minute walk away. He'd go talk to Owen. They had been friends for a long time. Even if he couldn't tell him what was happening he could say goodbye to his friend in his own way. He let his feet carry him quickly. The movement felt nearly

heavenly after a night and day without moving more than a step.

He arrived at Owen's house and found it dark. Maybe he was out with some girl, it didn't matter he knew where the spare key was. He picked up the spare key from beneath a potted plant on the porch rail. He twisted the key in the door and opened it. A putrid odor wafted out the door, too strong for Owen to have missed. Aaron returned the key before he went inside. It was only a few steps to the lightswitch which he flicked on trying to ignore the aroma.

Owen lay dead, collapsed to the floor, legs uncomfortably folded beneath his body. His open eyes stared up into Aaron's face hauntingly. Aaron was frozen. He forced himself to take a tentative step toward the body. Another few steps he could shake the corpse. See if he was alive. Aaron refused to believe his friend could be dead. He moved to his body, knelt, and placed his hand on the cold unmoving shoulder. He didn't need to shake it. He didn't need to say his name. He knew his friend was dead. It had to have been Ghent. The detective was looking for him and found his friend less than cooperative.

"He killed you to get to me," Aaron said simply. His voice is quiet. Still sounding of denial, loss, and defeat. Tears welled up in his eyes. They had known each other since as far back as memory. Further even than that. The very deepest parts of his mind thought briefly that this is what Liz must have felt seeing her friends killed. To him they were just people he'd only just met, still it was horrible.

Tragic. Difficult. He blinked his eyes against the pain and resolved to find a way to kill detective Ghent. He had between twelve and twenty hours until his own death sentence. He could figure out a way to use his powers, he just had to try.

He stood and moved deeper into Owen's small house, looking at the raw flowing energy coursing through the walls. Into various electronics. Pulling toward him like he was the moon and it was the tide. The last time he'd voluntarily drained electrical power from a house it nearly killed him. That was the ability he must harness now to defeat the detective. He was a monster and Aaron would put him down. One way or another, the detective didn't get to live past tomorrow.

Stealing his will he began to lightly pull at the flowing currents nearest him rushing through the walls. He reached further, into adjacent rooms. Then further into the houses next door. A box just beyond the houses held a vast energy he felt and he reached to take hold of the power. It felt as though hands outside himself gripped the ever flowing energy and were ready to pull when he willed it. He took a last deep breath to steel himself and pulled the energy towards him. Lightning jumped from the metal cables in the walls, television, microwave, the floor wiring, the neighboring houses. Each tiny arc of electricity a minor bolt flowing toward him. He felt the exterior junction boxes of three houses. The source of an entire homes power, and he gripped them all. The magnificent flowing wells of power.

He yanked harder with the intangible grip he had over the energy. It was reluctant, its power more like a raging river than the tiny jolts flowing into him now. It followed a determined path of ease, but he felt it move, if even only slightly. He pulled more. His muscles began to tense with the flow already coursing within him. Seizing and twitching until they were tight as steel cable. He stood in the middle of a storm of electricity. Hands spread out over his head, legs tight, toes the only part of him barely touching the ground. With a last effort he pulled on the power within the junction boxes once more. It moved, then arced up wildly into the air, dropping down toward the roof of the house, then through the wood barriers, burning and surging on a new path. Three huge lightning bolts pulsed into the house and shot into Aaron. It was too bright to see. The opposite of darkness, vibrant, radiant, white light was the only thing his eyes could make out. It hurt, it hurt a lot, but it wasn't nearly the pain he felt the first time. As the seconds passed, the houses weak wires flow of energy died, but the junction boxes flowing river of power surged through him.

Just as he felt as though he could harness the power, control it, bend it to his will, his mind and vision went black plunging him into the darkness of unconsciousness.

Chapter 22 - Strangers

“This is going to sound crazy,” the boy named Jake said. He was a child, probably in high school.

Liz was confident that she’d never seen or met this kid before in her life. She quickly considered how this might be some trap Ghent was responsible for. Perhaps they were a team.

“I’ll give you two minutes to explain,” Liz tried to relax, but she was poised to run if that is what it came to.

“Uh, two minutes, sure. Yeah. Uh.” Jake started off awkwardly, thinking out loud. “I have powers.” He paused for a moment. “Sort of like magical powers.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “Ah, they helped me find you with your friend Emily. Uh, she’s out front.” He thought for another long moment. “In the jeep.” His eyes rolled upward, searching for the next thing to say. “She doesn’t have magic

though.” He paused again, dragging out an, “ah,” as he searched for words.

“Stop.” Liz said. “How do you know me?”

“Oh!” Jake was excited by something he could easily answer. “Oh,” he said with much less excitement. “Long story?” His left eye nearly shut while his right eye opened wide, the confused look on his face straight from the pages of a comic book.

“Give me the T L D R.” Liz stated flatly, unamused.

“Right, well,” Jake didn’t know what the abridged story might sound like. “Right, detective Ghent had me help him find you.” He rushed the next words, knowing he needed to get them out quickly. “Before I knew he was the bad guy. Ghent, before I knew Ghent was the bad guy. Before I’d ever seen you. I didn’t know,” he trailed off.

“What is your power?” Liz asked, curiosity overwhelming her better judgment.

“I can see people.” Jake answered blatantly, without inflection.

“I don’t know if you know this Jake, but most people can see people.” Liz allowed the boy’s awkward demeanor to disarm her as she turned to sarcasm.

“Oh no. Like, I can see people anywhere, any time, like I’m there with them.” His head moved in an odd figure eight as he spoke. Clearly thinking of the best way to say what his ability was. “I get pictures in my head. Sort of like TV, I guess.” His face grew more and more puzzled as he continued. “I think the detective called it scrying. It’s like

having a little camera and microphone anywhere in the room with a person, just so long as I can think of that person for a bit.”

“Okay,” Liz said, intentionally cutting him off. “Okay, so you can see and hear people at a distance.”

“Yeah, exactly!” Jake was so pleased she got it. Other people had gotten it too, but they never seemed like they believed him.

“Alright, why come here though.” Before Jake could answer, Liz continued. “And who is Emily?”

“Emily’s your friend.” Jake said plainly like it was fact. “I thought of you and the people who had a connection to you, and she was the closest one to me.”

“Uh huh,” Liz narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know any Emily. Not well enough for them to come out here to find me with a stranger.” She looked over Jake’s shoulder toward the front of the cabin.

“No,” Jake said. “You have to. Why would she have agreed to help me if not?”

“Let’s go ask her.” Liz moved toward Jake, choosing to trust him for now.

Jake cocked his head and said, “shit. She’s listening to us, she is going to think I’m crazy.”

Liz turned and looked at Jake. “What do you mean?”

Jake yelled, “Please don’t run, we’ll be trapped out here.” Then turned toward the side of the cabin where Emily, who was crouching in the shadow of the cabin wall stood up.

“Who are you people?” Emily asked. She had thought it sounded insane having heard every word from her hiding spot.

“Why did you help me if you didn’t know Elizabeth?” Jake sounded very curious. “I found you because you knew Elizabeth.” He thought out loud.

“Just Liz, Jake. Just Liz.” Liz said.

“Well,” Emily started. Now the focus of attention from two people who seemed to be unhinged, struggled to find the words for her reason. “About a week ago my brother vanished. Just poof, he was gone.” She shrugged her shoulders and took a few steps away from the cabin, toward Liz and Jake. “The police wouldn’t let me file a missing persons case, and informed me that he was wanted for questioning about a murder. One of the detectives even came by to ask questions.” She paused and took a breath. “It really didn’t seem normal to me. He asked very strange questions. He was unsettling.” She shrugged again, “you seemed like my best chance to find him.”

“Who is your brother?” Liz asked.

“His name’s Aaron.” Emily replied.

“Oh shit.” Liz’s excitement was clear in her tone. “I can explain what happened.”

“You know my brother?” Emily asked hopefully.

“Yes.” Liz said simply. “Let’s go inside.”

Once inside each took the time to tell abridged versions of their story. It only took a few long minutes for Emily to

move on from denial to wonder when Liz displayed her abilities a couple of times.

“Wait, so you can find my brother?” Emily said to Jake, the explanation of his powers clicking in her head like puzzle pieces.

“Sure probably,” Jake said easily. “Just give me a second.”

Emily was already going through photos on her phone to show Jake. He’d found him before Emily turned the phone in his direction.

The house was destroyed. It was still burning in places with small fires dancing across the walls. Jake would never forget this house, or this room. The corpse of a man he’d never known lay in a heap on the floor. The body of the strange man he’d seen come up in his visions multiple times right next to it. Arcing electricity jumped from various places around the room into his body. He twitched whenever the electricity pulsed visibly. He didn’t look alive.

“What is it?” Liz and Emily said together. They watched Jake’s face turn sour with fear. The young boy’s features, once so vibrant and excited, were warped and afraid.

“Ah,” Jake just let the word hang like an uncomfortable musical note. “I think he’s dead.”

Chapter 23 - Rescue in the Dark

Aaron woke up slowly. At first only peripherally aware of his pains. They grew at first by inches, turning into dull throbbing aches. Then by miles, sending shooting white hot agony from his muscles into his bones and through his body. He naturally flinched away from the areas affected only to be punished by each movement with new shooting throbs. For a long few minutes he tried to remain still on the floor, clenching his eyes shut tight, afraid to look at the fall out from his latest attempt to use his ability. If the pain was any indication, his whole body was still in decent working order. At least well enough for lances of pain throbbing within him just about everywhere.

Eventually some seconds had passed without flinching spasms and he was able to lay flat on his back in the middle of the floor. He opened his eyes to see the darkness of the room and worried briefly that he might be blind. He caught

a slight glimpse of some light streaming in through a window barely illuminating the furniture within the space. He laid on the floor until the sound of distant sirens urged him into action. They served to remind him he was in the room with a dead body, in a house that just exploded, and still wanted for questioning. His quick movements to sit up and then stand were slowed dramatically by the pain in every muscle, joint, nerve, and everywhere he existed in the universe. Once gingerly on his feet he limped towards the front door several feet before realizing that he probably would be best off slipping out the back. He turned and limped toward the backdoor.

A faintly glowing light within the backpack he had brought here pulsed slowly and caught his eye. It didn't look like the faint heat haze blur of electricity he could see, and his curiosity compelled him to pick up the mostly ruined backpack on his way out. By the time he made it to the back door he had also reached into the back to retrieve the strange silvery egg. He'd thought he saw it glow faintly before when he held it, but that was in nearly full daylight and with everything else, he'd forgotten that he'd taken it with him. He held the strange object and dropped the backpack as he crossed the backyard of the house. He let himself out a gate into an alley that was host to several large trash cans, various filth, and little light. He knew the area but not where to go so he simply turned towards downtown and limped up the alley away from Owen's house.

Only three blocks up the alley streetlights unaffected by his violent display provided enough light to clearly see. His shorts and shoes were burned, ripped, stained, and looked exactly like props from a movie set explosion. His shirt showed several holes by displaying his light skin through the dark fabric. He couldn't see his face, but a long black burn covered the back of his upper left arm and darked his entire forearm to his left hand. It was highly unlikely that he would blend in with a crowd of party goers downtown. He sat heavily on two steps in the alley next to a garbage can and hoped whatever establishment's door at the top of the steps wouldn't decide that now was a good time to come outside.

He sat for long minutes undisturbed staring at the strange glowing orb in his hand. The streetlight illuminating enough for a mostly clear view of the alley he'd walked down. The sirens seemed like they had arrived at the house only a few blocks away and a street down. He contemplated if the firefighters, police, or EMTs might search the surrounding area and find him. He didn't know where he could go to avoid that at this moment. Two streets in any direction except back where he came from were well lit, probably full of young people out drinking for the night, or late night diners. He wondered what time it was. He considered that it might be late enough to avoid prying eyes but was unsure. Eventually he would have to chance a trip across a well lit street. Hopefully anyone seeing him would simply assume he was homeless wandering through the busy street.

He stood and made his way west, toward the darker neighborhoods. Hoping the maze of streets with only sporadic light would serve to hide him from curious onlookers and authorities. He walked along the side of a brick building, using as much shadow as he could find to keep out of eyesight. Once the street came into view he saw people at local bars and restaurants but they were at least several buildings away. The businesses closest had closed earlier in the evening. He waited in the shadow of the building until a car passed by and made the slowest imaginable dash for the other side of the street. His right leg refused to take his full weight and maintain a normal pace causing him to shuffle like the half dead he appeared to be.

He realized once in the dark of the neighborhood before him that he had been holding his breath and let out a long relieved sigh. He wandered into the darker neighborhood for several blocks until he found a mostly empty parking lot with only a few cars. He sat to give his aching muscles another break. Repeating this process two more times with longer and longer breaks he found himself in a local park. Although the pathways had decent lighting from public lamps, the areas immediately off the concrete walkways were thick with darkness and shadow that made it easy for him to find a semi-private grass patch between trees, some children's play area, and a garden. He lay in the soft comfortable grass to rest and come up with a plan.

One short, unintentional nap later, Aaron woke up in the dark, the cold of night seeping into him through the cool

earth, moist grass, and intermittent soft breeze. He forced himself to his feet with a shiver that turned aching muscles to fire. He took several long seconds to get his bearings and made a plan to get back to his house to change his clothes and get some sleep. He had sort of made this plan prior to his nap, taking a long circling route back to avoid well lit areas and traffic. Even later now, he was confident he could just make his way home. Which was good because the cold was making his aching muscles shiver, causing new shooting pains to radiate up his arms, legs, and spine.

He was getting close to a public parking area for the park when he shivered again. Despite a nearby streetlight, the darkness seemed like a force all its own. In a strange dizziness it seemed like the dark was casting waning shadows of dim light. He stumbled briefly and when he looked up he saw two glowing white eyes in the darkness which consumed everything around him.

Chapter 24 - A Sprint, Not A Marathon

Emily was driving, brights on, two small lights mounted to the hood shining out to either side of the road. The trip to the cabin was slow. Now headed back to Rancho, Emily drove like earth was crumbling behind her. Liz sat in the passenger seat, her right hand held a death grip on the oh shit handle and she bounced up and down in her seat. Jake was in the back trying to focus on his vision of Aaron, but for the first time finding it extremely difficult. He'd never been on a roller coaster half as rough as this drive.

“You should slow down,” Liz yelled. “If your Jeep breaks, it’ll make the trip a lot longer.”

It took five full seconds of contemplation for Emily to lightly tap the breaks. She knew Liz was right, but desperately wanted to get back. From the ramblings she'd just heard Aaron was in trouble. He might not have long to live. They had to get back to Rancho now. She glanced

down at the speedometer and told herself to keep it under thirty miles an hour.

“It’s made for this,” Emily yelled back as she swerved along the rocky road.

Jake tried to stretch his arms between the two straps attracted to the roll cage bar in the back of the jeep so he could concentrate. He quickly determined that it was futile. He couldn’t have said where or what he was doing at this moment, let alone focus on a stranger in his mind. He’d have to wait until they were back on paved roads.

“Can you still see him?” Emily shouted back.

“Not really.” Jake yelled his reply.

“What, why not?” Emily glanced over her shoulder into the back to see the boy desperately hanging onto while he bounced up, down, side to side, and everywhere in between.

“It’s like watching a movie, hard to watch a movie right now.” Jake’s voice was loud, but not quite yelling.

Emily did slow down then. But she warred internally with the benefits of going more quickly. After a few miles, she seemed to find her pace. Anything that was remotely straight she slammed on the gas, sometimes getting up almost to forty, when the road in the headlights vanished into the dark she slammed on the break dropping her speed to fifteen or ten miles an hour as she took a curve or rise that caused the road to disappear briefly. If anything, this made the ride even more like a rollercoaster.

Jake was fighting to hold in his lunch as they continued to bounce down the road. He noticed that Liz and Emily had

been oddly silent as well. Every time he tried to cast his vision to Aaron, Ghent, or outside his actual field of vision staring desperately in front of the jeep, he found focus impossible. He was blind to the outside world. Aside from voluntarily taking breaks, this was the first time he could remember not being able to use his ability, maybe ever. After mile five, he gave up entirely, at least until they were on a less bumpy road.

Liz held a firm death grip of the jeep and still felt the seatbelt pull against her every few seconds. Keeping her firmly in her seat and forming uncomfortable bruises after miles of rough fast road. Even when she drove this road in daylight, in a good vehicle she imagined her average speed was fifteen, maybe twenty miles an hour. She was certain that Emily was doubling that. She hoped that would make it quick. Every time she tried to glance over at the speedometer her head was jerked away by another bump or turn. Eventually she gave up and stared ahead. Desperately hoping Emily would keep the control she'd been demonstrating.

The miles passed both entirely too quickly and much too slowly. Eventually they found themselves on paved roads, breaking every speed limit to get back to the highway and then back to Rancho. All three were bundles of nervous anticipation. Liz, more familiar with the emotions burbling around inside, found herself wanting to vent through discussion. Jake was focused on Aaron, who had moved from the small house to an alleyway nearby. He was still

collapsed in a heap, smashed between garbage cans and mostly concealed in the dark. Emily, who went from a cold sorrow sinking in more assuredly every day to a world she didn't understand and found more frightening in almost every way, was quiet.

The highway passed beneath the wheels of the jeep with a dull rumbling while each did their best not to freak out any more than they already were. Jake periodically watched detective Ghent sit quietly in the dark of the police station, somehow still in the office doing and accomplishing nothing at all for hours into the night. Eventually, even leaving him playing in the background seemed beyond pointless. Each time he focused on the detective, he found himself more disturbed. Having been told who Aaron was and some loose idea of what he could do, he found himself just staring at him. Hoping he would be okay, but cursing him for bringing him into this dangerous disaster of a situation. The highway continued to roll by.

They were in the home stretch of the drive, from the top of the nearby mountain range into the valley when Jake's eyes went wide. He sat rigid as death itself in the backseat, his eyes rolled up into his head leaving only the whites exposed. His face appeared as though he might be screaming. Emily caught a glimpse of him in the rearview mirror and jumped letting out a shrill squeaking noise. Liz looked back to see him in horror.

“Jake, are you okay?” Liz asked as she pulled free of her seatbelt and scurried between the seats to get closer. “Jake,

are you okay?” she repeated when he didn’t respond. Her knee was painfully resting on the cup holder of the center console, so she pushed her way to the back seat and put her hand on the boy’s face tentatively. “Jake?” Worry was clear in her tone.

“Is this a magic thing?” Emily asked tentatively, feeling this strangeness pushing her closer to an edge.

“I don’t know,” Liz snapped. “I met him hours after you did.” She gripped Jake’s shoulder and shook him gently.

Jake didn’t move. He remained still with his eyes open but unseeing. Liz was almost painfully aware that Emily might panic at any moment. If she was honest, she was on the verge of panic. The cascading anxiety of the day, even weeks prior, was building. There had been very little time to relax fully without the weight of an uncertain and dark future on the horizon.

“Jake, buddy, can you hear me.” Liz shook the boy and used a quieter, hopefully more comforting voice. “I don’t think he’s breathing,” she looked up front at Emily in the driver’s seat.

“Should I pull over?” Emily asked, desperate not to stop.

Liz thought for a second before answering. “No, not yet.” She twisted around sitting on her knee next to him. She pressed her cheek as close to his nose and mouth as possible, but couldn’t be sure if she felt anything in the moving vehicle with the road noise roaring within the cab.

Jake had been adjusting his focus back and forth between Aaron and Ghent. Neither doing anything. Then the imagery in his mind blurred, fading into the background. Distorting like an old show with bad reception. The mild light of his visions dimmed and darkened. The ever present sound of the road faded from his perception. In the black, he saw what seemed like a mouth unzipping into a too wide grin of dazzling white teeth. Two white eyes opened above the malicious smile. He heard laughter, deep and resonant seemingly coming from everywhere around him.

He struggled to breath as the air turned frigid, suddenly plunging him into arctic temperatures. The eyes danced in merriment above the rows of teeth.

“Hello Jacob,” detective Ghent’s voice almost sang with glee. “I wasn’t sure this would be possible.”

Jake tried to reply, but the breath was out of him. He could only watch the cold visage of an inhuman face. Terror seized him. Preventing him from doing or saying anything at all.

“Is Elizabeth with you?” The detective’s deep voice rumbled through him like he stood near the speakers at the front row of a concert. “Are you bringing her to me?” The smile was vicious, mocking, and horrible. “Why don’t you stay here with me for a while Jacob. I can’t have you warning her.”

The darkness seemed to thicken around him, as if it was a solid force gripping him within it. The arctic cold pressed into his skin through his clothes, sinking into his muscles. It

was simultaneously frigid, but where the darkness gripped him felt like it was on fire. Sparks of pain erupting from within Jake's body in too many places all at once.

The detective began to hum, it was tuneless and without rhythm. Just the mad notes of power floating through Jake's mind. They seemed to be a promise of cold darkness for the rest of time. Still Jake couldn't move. He felt as if he'd been holding his breath for too long under swirling freezing water. He tried to suck in air, but found his lungs refusing. A tear froze on his cheek and he felt it.

Liz watched a tear drip from the corner of Jake's eye, freezing almost immediately. She wiped it away. "Oh god, he's cold Emily." She reached into the back of the jeep grabbing a blanket she'd seen earlier. She wrapped Jake with it hastily. "I think he's dying."

"Should I stop?" Emily sounded hysterical.

"No, there isn't anything we can do." Liz began rubbing at Jake's arms, desperately trying to warm him up. "He said Aaron was in an alley by his friend's house. Do you know where that is?"

"I think so." Emily managed.

"Go there," Liz was out of any other ideas. "Go fast."

Jake sat watching and listening to the vile tuneless hum of detective Ghent for what seemed like an eternity. He was cold, alone, and still unable to control his own body. As the time went on though, the cold terror of this place seemed to

lose its ever present menace. Eventually he found he could twist his head slightly. His perspective of Ghent's disembodied face altered, swinging him right and left in shallow arcs. Instead of seeming horrible he seemed humorous. Instead of paralyzing fear, Jake found himself contemplating the theatrical trick Ghent was playing. He willed a window of himself into this mind. He saw Liz and Emily, clearly panicking racing towards Owen's house. Liz was holding Jake within a blanket, rubbing his arms and calling his name. He could hear her, somewhere a long way off. Then he could hear the road sounds in the cab. Still Ghent's horrible darkness lingered in his senses, but he knew that it wasn't real. Not entirely. Realizing the trick of it seemed to shock him back to life slightly.

“He's breathing, he's breathing,” Liz panted in relief.

“Thank God,” Emily said. She pulled around another vehicle, only a few miles left until the downtown exit.

“He's still cold.” Liz put her hand against Jake's face, it felt like a cold mug. Too cold to be alive almost. “Turn on the heater.”

Emily reached for the heater and spun the fan to max. Engine already warm, the hot air flooded the cabin.

“Hang in there Jake,” Liz said and she rubbed the blanket against his arms. “Hang in there.”

Ghent's power over Jake seemed to crack, and then break all at once. The darkness was pushed back and the

first bits of heat seemed to touch his skin. Jake still watched his experience within his mind, his eyes and muscles still not responding. He saw himself shutter, clearly reacting to the cold he felt. It was beyond surreal watching himself this way, disembodied within the jeep, unable to use his body. Detective Ghent's dark humming seemed to come from a long way off. As if he didn't realize that Jake had regained control, or couldn't comprehend someone defying his magic. Either way, Jake brought to mind a vision of the detective.

He still sat in the police station office. The lights turned off and only illuminated by various LEDs and equipment. Something about the vision felt off. It seemed bizarre for a monster to sit, doing nothing for so long. Jake let go of the image. Trying to push it entirely from his mind. He watched Liz and Emily take the exit ramp from the freeway. Likely less than five minutes from where Aaron had been. He'd moved though. He couldn't worry about Aaron now, he pushed the man from his mind as well. He focused on what he knew of detective Ghent. He focused on the malicious face of the man who caused such panic and terror. He tried to find where he was.

It took a few long moments of concentration before Ghent appeared. He stalked through the streets near Owen's house swinging his head rapidly about looking for someone. He seemed almost human again watching him this way. He focused again on the Ghent in the police station and saw the

man standing up and rushing out of the office. It was also Ghent. The humming stopped.

Faintly in the far distance he heard Ghent speak again, watching the man stalking the streets and the copy fleeing from the office speak in unison. “You won’t save them boy.” The echoing voices snarled. Full of rage. “I’ll collect them and you.”

Jake pushed the image of them from his mind and he was free. Sitting in the back seat of a speeding Jeep rolling through downtown.

“Jake!” Liz was visibly relieved. “He’s okay,” she called up front. Turning back to Jake she asked quietly, “what happened?”

“I don’t know.” Jake shook his head contemplating it himself. “The detective trapped me.”

“Trapped you?” Liz asked.

“Sort of,” Jake replied, confused himself. Nothing remotely like that having ever happened to him before. “Aaron’s at a park, away from downtown, that direction.” He pointed, hoping Emily could see him in the rearview mirror. Emily cut across the next lane, the driver behind her honking as she turned squealing her tires.

“Yeah, only a few blocks away.” Jake thought for a second. “I don’t think he knows where Aaron is.”

“Does he know where we are?” Liz followed up.

“I don’t think so.” Jake thought back, Ghent had seemed frantic. “It really seemed like he was searching for him.” Jake paused briefly. “I think he’s searching for all of us.”

“Does he know Aaron is half dead?” Emily asked from the front.

“I don’t know,” Jake admitted.

“It’s okay, you’re okay.” Liz’s grin was half concerned still. “We’ll find Aaron and figure it out.”

“He told me to gather everyone.” Jake admitted. “He told me I’d bring you to him.”

“Alright, we’ll get Aaron and run.” Liz turned, facing the front and gripped the headrest, pulling herself to the front seat.

“Are we sure that’s the best idea?” Emily chimed in, sneaking a look at Liz.

“No, but I think I’d rather run than fight Ghent.” Liz pulled her seatbelt on.

“Fair,” Emily admitted. An involuntary shiver ran down her spine remembering the strange detective and his evil voice.

Chapter 25 - Heroes

Jake was focused, watching the two Ghent's, and Aaron. Listening to each, simultaneously as well. Ghent was getting farther and farther away. It gave Jake hope that they would be able to rescue Aaron. Distracted as he was sifting rapidly through the mental feeds, it took him a full minute to realize that one of the detective's had parked. A grin spread across his face as he pulled his phone out. Jake realized he was talking.

He repeated a number twice as he stood slowly from his car. A sudden and horrible suspicion dawned on Jake as he watched in mounting horror. This Ghent stood outside of Jake's home. He kept repeating the number as he stood and looked at the house. Jake scrambled to pull his phone from his pocket. He opened the maps application and tagged a point in it, copied the location and sent it to the number the

detective rattled off. He felt horrible, but he didn't know what to do. He stayed silent in the back seat.

“Good boy Jake.” The detectives cold voice stated as he climbed back into his car. He didn't move, just sitting in the dark. The other Ghent turned around and headed for the location Jake had sent. “I'll stay here and keep an eye out, just in case.”

Ghent's voice held the same frozen quality Jake experienced in his vision. The color drained from Jake's face as he watched.

Emily took the next exit and became clearly frustrated when she had to come to a full stop behind several other cars. She moved to honk the horn, but Liz grabbed her arm.

“Don't,” Liz looked exasperated. “We don't want any more attention, or a road rage incident slowing us down.”

Emily knew she was right, but didn't like waiting the twenty or thirty seconds it took for the light to change. They pulled around the car in front of them and moved quickly through downtown. Even managing to make the first four lights before being caught in traffic once more.

“Come on,” Emily groaned in frustration. “Come on.” She repeated.

Liz looked back to Jake who just shrugged and looked back hopelessly. They passed out of downtown and into a darker neighborhood. Emily was sure of her turns and familiar with the area from years at the college and many friends having lived in the area.

“Which parking lot?” Emily asked, glancing into the rearview mirror.

Jake focused a moment before saying, “South East.”

“Is that the one by the dog park?” Emily asked.

“It’s closer to the pool,” Jake said plainly.

“Got it.” Emily took the last turn into the parking lot only a minute later.

The area seemed unnaturally dark. Emily was jumping out of the car almost before it was fully stopped. Her seatbelt swung around harshly slapping the seat near where Jake had grabbed to pull himself to the front. He glanced at Emily, but she was already jogging around to the back of the car. Liz pulled the keys, got out and moved to the back of the vehicle opening the tailgate. Jake stretched quickly once he freed himself.

“Which way?” Emily shouted from the entrance to the walking path.

Jake simply pointed and watched her immediately vanish into the darkness.

“You okay Jake?” Liz asked, pulling something from the back of the vehicle.

Jake could only nod.

“C,mon then,” Liz said as she turned, moving into the park.

Jake hurried to catch up. “It’ll be faster to cut through up here,” he pointed to a line of trees for Liz to follow. They were out of time. Jake had done exactly as the detective had told him.

The darkness around them grew thicker like fog.

“Something is wrong,” Liz said, noticing the fading light.

“It feels cold,” Jake stated as they walked along the trees.

“Aaron!” Emily’s voice called out from a distance.
“Aaron!”

Liz took Jake’s hand and pulled him into a jog in the shade of the trees. “Are you sure about Ghent?” She asked as they approached the path again.

“I don’t know,” frustration was thick in Jake’s voice.

“Aaron!” Emily’s call was faint.

“Which way?” Liz asked as they came to a stop at the new path.

“Right,” Jake replied quickly.

Liz pulled Jake with her again. The darkness around them obscured everything past a distance of a few yards. The absence of light acting more like a thick fog, but no fog being visible as the lights all around them faded from the world. Moments later even the path under their feet was obscured and they moved slowly and carefully.

“Hello Elizabeth,” said a deep voice, seeming to come from the darkness all around them. Then white eyes appeared in the dark and the too wide brilliant smile. Jake gasped as Liz dropped his hand and vanished from his sight.

“Thank you Jacob,” the voice echoed around them. A horrifying laugh followed.

“Liz?!” Aaron’s voice called out from the dark. “Liz!” He called out louder.

“Aaron!” Emily’s voice was getting closer again.

“Who is that?” The deep voice echoed all around them. “Did you bring me more to snack on, Jacob?”

The bitter cold sank into Jake. He shivered and looked rapidly around for Liz but could only see the eyes. On the verge of panic, reliving a nightmare from only moments ago he drew short rapid breaths and spun searching for anything but the eyes.

“Hey asshole!” Liz yelled from somewhere obscured nearby.

Almost immediately the dark and cold vanished. Ghent stood in the soft light of an overhead lamp. He collapsed on one knee as Liz stood over him, having swung the short tire iron into his leg.

“Not nice,” Ghent grunted, clearly in pain. Liz swung the iron at his face but Ghent reached up to grab her wrist midswing.

“Not nice,” he said again. Then he twisted Liz’s wrist with little effort and Jake clearly heard a crunch and a snap before Liz shrieked and fell to the ground.

Jake saw Aaron staggering only ten or fifteen feet behind Ghent and Emily was running towards them roughly a hundred yards away. She was only a silhouette in the dark, but he was pretty certain it was her.

Aaron made a strange thrusting movement with his arm and yelled in anger. Electricity jumped from a nearby lamp

and shot into Ghent's back. He grunted again with the pain, but the burst of electricity died out almost immediately and Ghent turned and stalked toward Aaron. Jake watched, frozen in the moment. Fear held him in place as the scene before him and the humming detective sat in a car miles away. Liz looked at her hand and Jake noticed it was turned in the wrong direction. Ghent had cleared the distance to Aaron and grabbed him fully around his face. The detective's fingers stretched inhumanly long and wrapped around nearly encasing Aaron's whole head.

Aaron just smiled savagely.

Chapter 26 - Third Time's the Charm

Aaron had felt the detective approaching before he heard his sister's voice in the distance. The black of night seemed to be alive as it banished the light and warmth of the park. He knew Ghent was here, he knew his sister was close, and he knew that this was going to end now, or never at all. Even through the unnatural gloom surrounding him, he saw where the power of the park was running. He moved as quickly as he could toward the largest source nearby. Just beside the pool, roughly thirty or forty feet from him it hummed with the power of a dozen homes. Aaron gripped at the energy, even the ephemeral tendrils that gripped it felt weak. He waited, he knew he would probably only have one shot.

"Hello Elizabeth," said a deep voice, seeming to come from the darkness all around. "Thank you Jacob," the voice echoed around them. A horrifying laugh followed. "Liz?!" Aaron's called out. "Liz!" He yelled louder.

“Aaron!” Emily’s voice was still quite a ways off. He had time.

“Who is that?” The deep voice echoed all around them. “Did you bring me more snacks, Jacob?”

All the warmth vanished from the world and cold reached into Aaron’s body. Strangely, it was almost a relief to his bruised and battered muscles. He knew that wouldn’t last, so he searched for the detective in the dark.

“Hey asshole!” Liz yelled.

Light returned to the world in a blink. Ghent collapsed on one knee his back toward Aaron.

“Not nice,” Ghent grunted.

Liz swung at the detective’s head. He simply reached up, gripping her wrist with no effort.

“Not nice,” he said. Then he twisted.

Aaron didn’t have a clear view of the detective, but the pop he heard made him flinch. He lost his grip of the fountain of power nearby, but reflexively pulled power from the street lamps. Instead of pulling it into himself he thrust it at Ghent. It felt weaker somehow. Either his ability to control the energy was drained from his earlier efforts or the added effort of targeting somewhere outside himself diminished the effect.

Still Ghent turned on him, standing and striding toward him in fluid motion. The cold returned as Ghent gripped his face with his hand. He felt the cold fingers intertwine on the back of his head. He knew he should feel the cold terror as well. He only felt elation and victory. The energy from the

power conduit leaped toward him impacting Ghent in the spine. It coursed into the detective and pulled all of his muscles tight. Aaron only remained in the man's hand because he held it in place as he poured every bit of his focus into pulling the electricity into himself. It took many long seconds for the detective's body to begin smoking. When Aaron finally released the energy, the detective fell lifelessly to the ground. His clothes and skin smoked in places.

Aaron put two hands on his knee and stood up smiling.

Chapter 27 - And Into the Fire

Liz couldn't have been more relieved. Her arm throbbed with intense pain, her hand still turned the wrong way on her arm, but she was alive. Aaron had collapsed on his knees in front of her and she dropped next to him to throw her arms around him in a weak clutching embrace. Even that movement was a reminder of her broken wrist. Emily cautiously approached, not fully understanding what she just witnessed. It was one thing for magic to be minor visual illusions and claims from a child, it was another to see lightning arcing through the sky all but obliterating a man. Jake simply stood staring. The terror never left his face.

Eventually Emily broke the silence, "Aaron, are you okay." Her voice was cautious, hesitant.

"Yeah, sis." Aaron replied. "I'm okay."

Liz gingerly helped Aaron to his feet, standing herself and moving away to form a crude triangle with Emily. Jake

remained at a distance from the group, not knowing what to say or do.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Emily said, before gripping Aaron in a tight hug.

After several long seconds Jake uttered an undignified gasp of alarm. The clone of Ghent in front of his family home exited his cruiser. He walked slowly towards the boys front door. Towards his family, his brothers, his sister, his mother, his father. Everyone who Jake truly loved was a few seconds from Ghent and all Jake could do was watch helplessly. Ghent approached his front door. Menacing hum more a grumble of rage.

“You failed me Jacob,” the detective murmured.

Jake watched helplessly. As if he was right there next to him. There was no way for him to help. He could only stand and watch. Ghent walked up the three steps to the front door. His smile extended further and further across his face as he raised his hand to knock.

“Say your goodbyes Jacob,” the detective’s hand fell towards the door.

Another man appeared. From nowhere, instantaneously. He touched the detective’s shoulder and the detective vanished as if he’d never been there at all. The stranger turned, looking directly at Jake’s point of view. He grinned, a pleased human expression.

“Don’t worry Jake,” he said. He sounded friendly. Happy even. “Your family is okay.”

Then he too vanished. Jake searched around the front yard of his home. Even the detective's car was gone. He sniffed loudly, not able to understand what was happening.

"Jake, are you okay?" Liz asked. She approached him slowly. Aware he must be seeing something.

"Yeah," Jake choked out in a sobbing voice.

Then the man from his vision appeared behind Aaron and Emily. He was about six feet tall. Athletic build, clean shaved face, sharp features. His hair was blonde, cut in a stylish look that he must spend time maintaining. He wore black scrubs with too many pockets and straps. The aesthetic of a futuristic doctor. He wore the same stupid friendly grin. His eyes were mostly hidden behind reflective glasses.

"Jake?" Liz tried, seeing the boy's shock.

"Who are you?" Jake stammered.

"My name's Rylan, Jake." Rylan held his arms up in a gesture of surrender as the others turned to look at him. "Well done," he said after he'd gotten their attention. "Very well done."

Aaron, Emily, and Liz remained defensive. Each flinching away from the newcomer.

"He saved my family," Jake said quickly. "There was more than one Ghent."

"I know you have questions," Rylan's vibrant smile faded into a more serious visage. "I can answer all of them, but for now you should all come with me."

"Like hell," Emily retorted immediately.

“Now Emily, think about it.” Rylan’s serious face softened to match with his entreaty. “These two are wanted, there is a dead detective’s body at their feet. Authorities are already on their way. They received no less than a half dozen calls about this light show and they will arrive in force. Not two hours ago they found another corpse.” He paused and offered a wide eyed curious look to everyone. “At another call they received, much like this one.” He took a few cautious steps forward. “There is little to no chance of your brother or Liz returning to their normal lives. Not for some time. I think it’s more likely Aaron would end up the subject of experimentation than anything else.” He made comforting motions with his hands as he spoke, subtle, but effective. “I’m more than happy to take you with us as well, but you should know that if you come, there is no returning to the life you enjoy here.” He smiled sadly. “I will bring Aaron back.” He shrugged, “but that is going to take time. Liz and your brother have little choice now, and I really need Jake’s help as well, so I’ll be taking him too.”

“What?” Jake’s response was an automatic exclamation. “I can’t go.”

“You must go Jake,” Rylan vanished from his location, appearing directly behind Jake and setting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You are very important to this venture. I think in your heart you want to go. That’s not to say it won’t be hard, it will be. You will see and learn things that you couldn’t if you remained here. This is an opportunity,” he grinned again. “Perhaps disguised as a

hostage situation.” His friendly demeanor and smirk never wavering.

Rylan shut his eyes briefly and Jake vanished.

“What the fuck,” Aaron dashed toward Rylan.

Rylan held up a hand to stop him. “Aaron, I needed you and Liz to have this victory. It was important for you. You can’t defeat me.” He shook his head with frustration and sadness. “You could barely defeat the leech Ghent. The only person here who has a say is Emily. She must choose to stay or go.” He turned to look at Emily. “There are dangers along both roads, but one leads to a deeper understanding of the universe, the other to a normal life. The choice is yours.”

Emily looked at Aaron and then at Liz. The past half day of her life was more strange and extreme than all the other seconds, minutes, and hours combined. Her face was a torment of confusion. She preferred not to imagine life without her brother, she also preferred not to imagine life without her friends or family. She wore a panicked look when she spoke to Aaron. “What about mom and dad? What about our friends?”

Aaron just shook his head and shrugged. The feelings swirling within him, not unfamiliar. In one way or another he had been at the mercy of fate for the past week, at the minimum. In truth the strange emotional rollercoaster he had been on for the past few weeks never gave him an opportunity to truly work through how he felt about any of this. He didn’t have an answer for her. He barely had understanding enough for himself.

Rylan's voice was sympathetic, "Aaron staying here now, would offer all of you only torment." He turned to Emily with entreaty. "I will keep him as safe as I reasonably can. He won't be tortured, or experimented on. At some point in the future, he'll have the power to come back. If you stay you will see him again. If you join us, you will see your family and friends again, this is not an all or nothing endeavor."

Sirens in the near distance put a timer on Emily's decision. Liz glanced around nervously, already able to see flashing lights approaching a nearby park entrance. They likely only had a minute, perhaps less to decide.

Aaron looked to his sister. "You should stay. Tell my friends and mom and dad that I'm okay. I know some of them are worried."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Emily's voice betrayed how overwhelmed she felt in this moment. Sixty seconds or less was hardly enough time to make a decision that would change the rest of her life forever.

Liz groaned painfully, having moved her arm the wrong way slightly. Rylan reached into one of his many pockets and produced a thin metal bracelet. He approached Liz and took her arm in one hand, snapped the bracelet on her and in a swift movement gripped her hand rotating it back into place. Liz screamed horrifically. Her eyes welled with tears that ran down her face. She took short panicked breaths.

“Deep breaths.” Rylan said. “Deep breaths.” He shut his eyes for a moment and Liz was gone. Vanished just as Jake had.

“What did you do?” Aaron asked.

“The bracelet will heal her, that doesn’t mean she won’t feel the pain. She may faint even.” Rylan smiled casually and let out a small false laugh. “She’s tough.”

Emily and Aaron simply stared at Rylan.

“Thirty-ish seconds Emily,” Rylan reminded her, still smiling.

Emily looked back and forth between the strange Rylan and her brother. Seconds passed as thoughts swirled around her head.

Finally, Rylan spoke again, “Sometimes no decision is a decision itself.” He smiled sadly and shut his eyes briefly. Aaron vanished. “Goodbye, Emily.” Rylan closed his eyes again.

“Take me!” Emily shouted as Rylan vanished. Standing alone with a burned corpse she screamed to the air again. “Take me, I said, take me with you!” She sobbed out the last words.

She heard men shouting in the distance as they made their way towards her. Panicking, she looked around. “Take me, please.” She uttered a final time. Then vanished from the place she stood.

Jake appeared in what he assumed to be a huge warehouse sized room. The lighting barely caused shadows in the far away corners giving the room shape. Moments after he appeared the walls flooded with colors. Thick invisible brushstrokes gave the walls the appearance of his home. As if he was standing in the front yard on a summer day. The bright blue sky was dotted with light clouds. Jake found himself spinning around to see as much as he could. The image seemed ever so slightly rough, some of the colors too thick. A painting in perfect and exact details. Only the floor of the room remained white. A solid, strange material that did in fact span at least a football field, if not more.

A scream of pain broke the silence as Liz appeared only feet from Jake. She stared at her wrist, wailing agony born on her breath. Her hand was the right way around, she wore a simple silver charm bracelet that seemed to have threads extending from it into her arm and hand. Her eyes still wide with shock, she took a calming breath. Her screaming ended as she drew air in through her nose for several long seconds. Letting it out again through her mouth. All the while, staring at her hand.

“Are you okay?” Jake asked.

She pulled in more air, letting it out again audibly. “Getting there,” she said, her voice a grunt.

Aaron appeared in the room. The scene painted across the walls had blurred into a mesh of colors that seemed to sweep in wide arcs. Yellows flowing into blues forming purples. Reds and greens dancing in slowly twisting swirls

of color. Before any new image formed Rylan appeared. Jake and Aaron stared at the man, Liz still staring only at her hand taking in air. Rylan shut his eyes in concentration for a moment. When he opened his eyes again Emily stood in the room as well. The colored walls painting themselves into a meadow on the edge of a mountain lake. Wind soundlessly rustling the trees and grass.

Rylan clapped once and grinned at odd collection of people. “This is great. Better than I dared hope for even.”

Liz, Aaron, Jake, and Emily only looked on vainly attempting to deal with their shock.

“If I’m honest, I practiced my pitch to you all a hundred times, but I’m finding myself without the right words.” Rylan looked confused a moment before pressing on. “I guess the best thing to do is explain and let you ask your questions.”

He made some gestures and turned in a arc. The white floor raised up forming couches, chairs, and a small table. With another sweeping gesture, the walls returned to an off white. The floor changed to have the appearance of smooth wood lightly stained.

“Have a seat if you wish.” Rylan offered the stunned group. “I’m recruiting young mages,” he paused, narrowed his eyes and glanced around. “Well, I guess mages is what you all would call us.” He allowed himself to drop into a chair. “While technically correct, it’s a bit more complicated than that.” He made another gesture that caused glasses and a pitcher to grow up out of the table as if they were 3D

printed. The pitcher then filled with ice and water. “The truth is,” Rylan’s grin returned. “The truth is, you are all powerful novices with varying abilities that, for the sake of argument, are magic. I am a trained professional in the same field of study with a different expertise.” Rylan poured himself a glass of water. “Just water, help yourselves.” He gestured once he was done. “I find myself needing a team. I’ve worked with others before. Met them in different ways. Had friends, lovers, apprentices, all sorts really. Eventually we all go our separate ways. I anticipate the same time will come for us.”

Jake started to speak, but Rylan held up his hand. “Wait Jake, let me finish and then you can ask your questions.” He smiled at the boy. “So, what I’m offering you is training. Some of the best training you can get. What you’re offering me is assistance. No mage can do everything on their own. This specific project pits itself against many of my other companions’ interests. As you are all new to the world of magic, I anticipate that you won’t find yourself with the same objections to this work.” Rylan looked at Emily who seemed ready to speak until she caught his glare. “I think of myself as a morally decent person. I think you’ll find our interests align in more ways than they differ.” He allowed himself a more serious look. “Unfortunately, for at least thirty days, I will be keeping you here to train you. If, when the thirty days are up, you wish to return to your lives. Then, I will return you. No explanation required.”

Rylan stood and looked at each of the people he'd brought here. "This is the most important part." You should know that I have the power to return you home at any time. I am very intentionally keeping you here, in order to give myself the time I need to convince you that what we will do, will change your world and ten thousand more worlds like it. This is an important venture." His friendly smile returned. "Any questions?"

Afterword

Thank you again for supporting me in this endeavor. I can't wait to write another book with much more detailed plotting, narrative, structure, magic, villains, and heroes. My work continues on 10,000 Worlds - A Venture Saga Novel. If you'd like to follow the progress or the many other adventures of the author, you can find him on social media with the tag 'West Goes Wandering'.

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I endlessly appreciate you sharing this journey with me. I hope we share many more in the near and distant future.

If you would like to help support me in being a full time author, that would mean the world to me. You can find me on Patreon (WestGoesWandering). If a monthly commitment is too much but you want to buy me a coffee, I'd love that too, @West-Gill on Venmo and \$WestGill on CashApp.

If you love me but can't afford to help financially you can do me the honor of gifting my book to a fellow nerd, writing me a review, or even just recommending me to someone offhand. I promise that I value this engagement more than

you will ever fully understand. Without people like you who share my work with the world, it would never be seen or read. Thank you for finding me my next fan, friend, critic, lover, or just someone who I've touched in some minor way. I hope you enjoy the stories of the Venture Saga Universe for years to come.