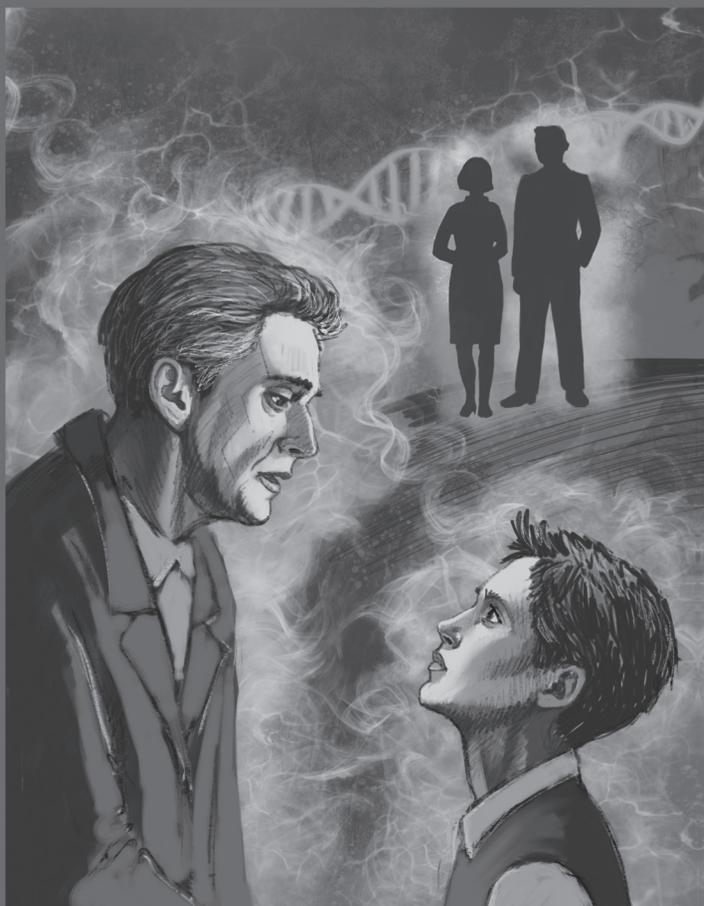


THE SIGHT *of* DEMONS

The Master of Perceptions
• Book One •



DARIN C BROWN

 BEAVER'S POND
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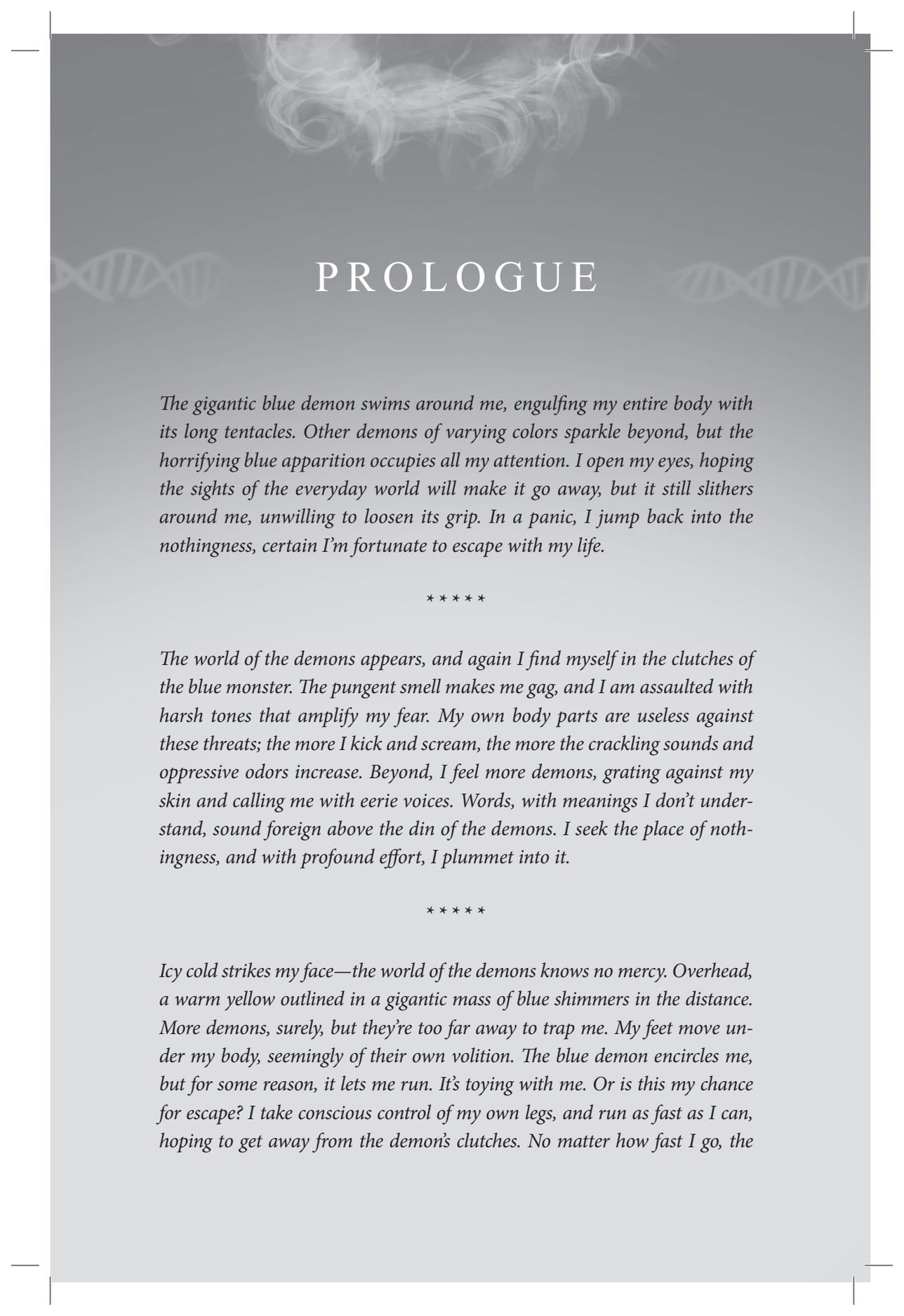
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To my father, Dana S. Brown,
who told me I could do anything I put my mind to,
and then made me believe it.





PROLOGUE

The gigantic blue demon swims around me, engulfing my entire body with its long tentacles. Other demons of varying colors sparkle beyond, but the horrifying blue apparition occupies all my attention. I open my eyes, hoping the sights of the everyday world will make it go away, but it still slithers around me, unwilling to loosen its grip. In a panic, I jump back into the nothingness, certain I'm fortunate to escape with my life.

* * * * *

The world of the demons appears, and again I find myself in the clutches of the blue monster. The pungent smell makes me gag, and I am assaulted with harsh tones that amplify my fear. My own body parts are useless against these threats; the more I kick and scream, the more the crackling sounds and oppressive odors increase. Beyond, I feel more demons, grating against my skin and calling me with eerie voices. Words, with meanings I don't understand, sound foreign above the din of the demons. I seek the place of nothingness, and with profound effort, I plummet into it.

* * * * *

Icy cold strikes my face—the world of the demons knows no mercy. Overhead, a warm yellow outlined in a gigantic mass of blue shimmers in the distance. More demons, surely, but they're too far away to trap me. My feet move under my body, seemingly of their own volition. The blue demon encircles me, but for some reason, it lets me run. It's toying with me. Or is this my chance for escape? I take conscious control of my own legs, and run as fast as I can, hoping to get away from the demon's clutches. No matter how fast I go, the

blue shadow glides easily, never once breaking contact. I head off onto uneven ground, feeling the other specters chasing behind, coming for me, trying to catch me. My anklebone snaps as I lose my balance and trip over something, and my face smashes into the rocky terrain. Blood-red demons erupt from the ground, grasping my leg and my face, producing an avalanche of stale odors, raucous noises, and pinprick sensations. Without control of my legs, I take the only pathway available; I fall back into the emptiness.

* * * * *

I awake to find the blue demon throttling me with its mere presence. While sitting at a table, I spot an object whose sharpened end catches my eye. A weapon. It lies just within reach, unguarded by demons. Although my relentless companion bathes my arms and hands in its blueness, it doesn't stop me from slowly moving my hands toward the item on the table. I can't outrun the beast, but maybe I can kill it. The demon always seems to know what I'm thinking, so I'll have to be very fast. With blinding speed I steal the pointed object off the table and thrust the tapered end through the demon's tentacle, puncturing my own hand in the process. The demon shrieks, losing the blue color at the point of impact, but another, angrier, red-hot demon fills in the space, adding a painful peppery taste to the sensory assault. A purple demon engulfs me, calling out words laced with thrumming pulsations and a dank odor. Unable to withstand the three demons at once, I cascade into the oblivion beyond this world.

* * * * *

During every waking moment, I feel the blue demon. I can't escape it. The purple one visits often too, but never alone. Another presence, not a demon, appears trapped by the purple hue, much as I am by the blue. The entity shrouded in purple brings warmth and calming sensations, and makes me wonder if the demons aren't all out to harm me. Although I rarely stay in this world long enough to give them a chance, I know that with one brief constricting motion, they could strangle me. It is better to escape to emptiness

than die of suffocation. Still, they haven't managed to kill me so far, and I am getting bigger. Perhaps it's time to find a way to defeat the demons.

I tried to eliminate the blue one by stabbing it, but that didn't work. Instead of dying, it morphed into a more dangerous and frightening menace. What if cutting off its air supply would destroy it? It might be vulnerable through the air I breathe. If I could block off my nose and keep my mouth closed, it might die. Then I would be able to stay present in this world, rather than being continually forced to retreat into the nothingness. I need to be in control. If this doesn't work, I don't know what else to do. Today is the day.

Before the purple demon can react, I grab two small spherical objects and shove one up each of my nostrils. I clamp my mouth shut, making sure no air can get through.

"Hunter, NO!" yells the individual with the purple demon, and they both rush to protect the blue demon. They carry me, thrashing wildly, to the place where I always go after trying to destroy the demons. I lost again. The emptiness takes me without remorse.





CHAPTER 1

I keep my eyes closed, but it doesn't help. They're here. I still see the sparkling colors. My empty hands feel textures. I smell odors and taste flavors even though my mouth is empty. I can't stop any of it. If I open my eyes, the sensations superimpose themselves on the sights all around me. The demons. They're out to get me. But I never let them; as soon as they get close enough, I retreat inside myself, where they can't follow. Safety awaits me in the emptiness, and I go there whenever the fear grips me. I visit this world—the one outside myself—infrequently, because the demons are always there, ready to pounce. They bombard me with their myriad of unwanted sensations. Falling off into my own private universe happens automatically.

* * * * *

Today I stayed in the world of the demons.

“Are you his mother?” asked the voice with the orange radiance seated behind the protective window.

“Yes,” the one with purple answered.

“Fill out these forms and wait over there.”

“Yes, certainly. Thank you.”

My mother emitted a harsh sound that made my skin tingle, spoiling the warm purple glow. The demon around me, mostly its normal cool blue, contained an additional spicy, blurry red splotch near my wrist, which hung at a strange angle in relationship to the arm above it. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't remember what happened or why it looked like that now. Thoughts of any kind barely registered amid the uproar of activity that attacked my senses. The pandemonium only wors-

ened when a woman dressed in loose-fitting pajamas approached. She brought warm demons of white and orange. When she called, “Hunter Miller,” my mother responded with a wave.

We walked away from the dozen or so demon-infested people to another room, which made it slightly easier to think. The shock of surviving in this chaotic world so long rattled through me just like the demons themselves. I rarely lasted more than a few moments in this terrifying universe, and it felt like hours already.

The woman looked at me. “Hi, Hunter. How old are you?”

I didn’t look at her. I didn’t answer. I couldn’t speak.

“He’s nine,” my mother said.

“What brings you into the Emergency Department?” the woman asked as she turned toward my mother.

“Hunter is a special-needs child, and he fell off the bed, landing on his hand. Like this,” my mother said, as she held her arm out in front of her, miming a fall onto her outstretched hand.

“Right.” The woman looked down at the deformity that once was my wrist, and frowned. “Yes, I see from his chart that he has been here several times for a variety of injuries. Let’s see, fell down the stairs, put a pencil through his hand, had a couple of head lacerations, bilateral nasal foreign bodies—nice one—and an ankle fracture. Wow, poor kid! But he’s taking it rather well! If my wrist looked like that I’d be bawling my eyes out!” Her white-orange warmth, which had been melodic, turned sour, which frightened me. I thought I would leave this world, but I remained.

My mother’s demon cooled and produced a banging sensation that increased throughout the other woman’s speech. “Yes,” she answered curtly, “he’s a special young man.”

“Yes, severe autism, it says here. Wow, so sorry. The record says Hunter’s pediatrician is Dr. Stonington?”

“Yes, he’s been seeing Dr. Stonington since he was born.”

“OK. Let me order an X-ray so the doctor can see what’s wrong,” the woman concluded, as she wrote something on the paper in front of her. “I have a few more questions about his medical history. Usually I’d get the doctor to order pain medication, but it doesn’t look like he needs anything. Did you give him something before he came in?”

“No,” my mother answered.

“Well, let me get the tech in here, and I can ask you the rest of the questions while he gets his films.”

She spoke to someone I couldn’t see outside the room. Moments later, another person in pajamas arrived. A brownish orange surrounded her and coldly scratched my skin. I couldn’t bear the combination of the banging from my mother, the sour smell, the irritation on my skin, and the rainbow of colors. I didn’t like the world of the demons, and I had very much overstayed this visit. I melted away into safety.

* * * * *

When I opened my eyes, I recognized the familiar surroundings of home. My long-standing battle with the demons resumed the moment I regained awareness. Alone in my room with just the single blue one, I maintained consciousness much longer than when I was faced with a crowd of them. When my mother or father forced me to eat, go to the bathroom, or bathe, the demons constantly tortured me until I drifted away. I kept hoping, against all odds, that the demons would just leave me alone, but they never did.

My mother disrupted the painful monotony as she entered my room. She spoke to me in a slow voice, using a high pitch that probably made dogs squirm. “Sweetie, we’re going to school today! Won’t that be wonderful?”

I certainly didn’t think “wonderful” would ever describe any part of my life. On days when I was forced to interact with other people, the demons overwhelmed me entirely. I either lapsed away, or I got sick—dizzy, nauseated, and . . . I couldn’t even define the other feelings I experienced. I knew what the word “enjoyment” was supposed to mean, but I never felt that way.

I closed my eyes and hugged my own feet, making myself as small as possible. Despite my lack of cooperation, my mother packaged me into the back of her car, strapping me firmly into place with a specially designed double seat belt, and we headed off to the school. The car ride wasn’t that bad, but when we arrived, unpacked, and walked toward the

building, a variety of demons assaulted me in full force. The commotion sent some of my breakfast back to my mouth, but I swallowed it down again. A déjà vu sensation nagged at my subconscious, though I didn't recognize any part of my surroundings. I only knew I wasn't at home. Dozens of sensations clawed at me, and I couldn't stop any of them. The purple warmth of my mother interacted with the soothing white of a tall woman who approached as we entered the largest building. I had no idea why I didn't leave this world.

"Hello, Hunter!" she yelled—or rather, she spoke loudly and slowly. The woman waited patiently for me to respond, while I tried my best not to vomit as the demons assaulted me from all directions. Closer now, I felt the properties of the white demon: smooth, warm, clear, and partially orange. I made no reply, which didn't surprise her. Perhaps my mother warned her in advance not to expect much conversation from me. The white-and-orange-shaded woman spoke primarily to my mother, discussing the expectations and the duration of this experiment, but I didn't register much of it. I closed my eyes, hoping to evade the nausea, and curled into a ball, trying to get as far away as possible.

As a pounding sensation thumped at my skin, I wondered how much longer I would be forced to endure this new torment. Although physically incapacitated by the extremity of the moment, I felt a gnawing urgency to escape from this place. I longed for home, where I didn't suffer any variation of my routine. Everything stayed in the same place. I found asylum in my room, where my most stressful activity was counting the marks on the walls and ceiling. My bed rested at the far end, a dresser sat on the right side, and next to that, a beanbag chair invited me to sink in and fall away to the safety of nothingness. We had no pets and very few visitors, and I seldom left my room, except for the necessities of life—including doctor visits.

My pediatrician, Dr. Stonington, always smiled when I went to see him. I had dozens of appointments, mostly for what they called "failure to thrive." Although he always had a primarily blue-colored demon with him that I found oddly reassuring, my visits inevitably left me feeling sicker. My mother told me the doctor helped people, but that didn't make any sense. Whenever I went there, I was touched, poked, prodded, and attacked by both demons and people, none of whom helped me in any

way. Their depressing conclusion, that my autism was permanent and incurable, pulverized any fleeting thoughts of happiness I might ever have. The “treatments” only exacerbated my situation. The major goal focused on making me interact. Right. Interacting in any way with anything in my environment, always made it worse. Nobody understood.

Today’s foray felt different than a doctor’s appointment. There were too many children, and too many parents. Curiosity enticed me to listen to my mother as she talked to the other adults. It helped to keep my eyes closed and to stay as far away from everyone as possible.

“Yes, Hunter never liked to be held. He never cried much, but we could tell something was wrong from an early age. He didn’t gain weight, we had to force him to eat, and he hasn’t really spoken at all, other than a few vocalizations,” she said.

“Yes, just like my Ray-Ray,” another parent answered.

“He wouldn’t play games like peekaboo as a baby, and even now he panics at any changes in his routine. He doesn’t like being out in public, or in any crowd of people. He totally withdraws when confronted by more than two or three people. He’s never had friends; whenever we attempted to introduce him to other children, he ignored them.”

“That’s not uncommon, Mrs. Miller,” a woman responded. “Our new small class size should help severely affected students like Hunter. The latest research suggests that a larger class size doesn’t help the children interact, so we are working with a new concept: six students only.”

My mother nodded as a tall, bearded man approached. He was surrounded by a gold color and light pink, both of which I found vaguely familiar. She continued, “He rarely makes eye contact with anyone, myself included, and he doesn’t even open his eyes, even when he’s wide awake. It’s more than just closing his eyes—he squeezes them tightly shut as if to keep out additional information. It’s been that way his whole life. The doctors are sure it’s autism; we had him checked for all the conditions that mimic autism, and all the tests were negative. We tried some antidepressant medications, appetite stimulants, and physical and speech therapy, but nothing has improved his condition at all. He’s most comfortable when he’s wrapped up in a tight little ball, like that.” She pointed at me.

That sounded right. I wanted to say, “Tell me something I don’t know.” Too bad I couldn’t speak.

“It definitely sounds like autism to me, Mrs. Miller, or, I should say, autism spectrum disorder. It’s not a surprise that he’s curled up like that today, because autistic children don’t like any change in routine. With one in sixty-eight kids affected in some fashion along the spectrum, we see many children like Hunter here. Lots of them fall into the ‘high-functioning’ category. It looks like Hunter is still struggling to—”

I couldn’t listen to any more. I had no idea when I’d be let out of here, and I assumed this experience would be as useless as all the others. The room contained several bland and sour-smelling brown demons, all of them thin and frail. The wispy ones weren’t quite as frightening as the thicker ones, but there were so many, and the sensations; I just couldn’t cope. My last thought as the demons overwhelmed me was *I can’t wait to get home*.

But when I woke up again, I was still there. I teetered in and out of awareness until finally, above the harsh whirs of the demons, I heard my mother saying it was time to go home. She asked in her usual singsong voice if I’d had a good day. I didn’t remember anything about the day, other than the struggle to keep the demons out. It was the same as every other time in the demon world, except today the battle lasted considerably longer.

After being packaged up, driven home, and released into my room, I basked in its relative sanctuary. The beanbag chair encompassed my body, much like the big, blue demon that always stayed with me. But unlike the demon, the chair remained on the ground when I stood up and moved away. I felt a great relief that no other demons accompanied me here, because I was just learning to tolerate this world without others nearby. I hoped that, like my doctor appointments, I wouldn’t have to go back to that place again for a long while.

* * * * *

The next day, I was horrified to discover my mother’s intention. “Time to get ready for school,” she said in the high-pitched voice she reserved for me.

Getting ready to go was miserable enough, and I attributed this to my autism. According to the teacher, autistic children don't like changes in routine. Mine has always been limited to simple activities of daily living, like eating, using the bathroom, and sleeping. I couldn't remember doing much of anything else.

The second day of school passed much as the first. After the tumult of getting into the car, driving to school, unpacking, and flopping in place amid several others, I mentally bolted to my safe place. Later my mother wrestled me from the car, and relief flooded me as I made it home. A stray thought bubbled up, unbidden. I didn't know exactly where home was. I only knew it as the place where I spent my time. It didn't matter. I was safe here. I lapsed into my routine: eat, go to the bathroom, get ready for bed, and go to sleep. As I reluctantly remained cognizant of the world around me, ideas began to pierce my shield of monotony. I kept thinking about how time passed me by without my knowledge. In the comfort of my beanbag chair, with only my blue cohort, I didn't care, as long as I didn't have to battle more demons.

Rudely awakened to the specter of another day at school, I struggled mightily to avoid going. My mother forcibly dressed, fed, and delivered me again. I had no choice in the matter. During school on the third day, I hesitantly noticed activity happening around me. I sat in a circle. Six other children and six demons, all brown, lifeless, and brutally sour, hovered around them. Although it was agony to remain, for some reason I didn't escape to my usual place of nothingness. The teacher and the orange-white demon that surrounded her touched me, and formed my hands into shapes. I violently convulsed as the demon invaded my personal space, and she momentarily relaxed, only to grasp my hands once again after my shuddering eased. Two of the other children were making similar formations, as the teacher gently touched my hands again. I didn't understand what was going on, and I wanted no part of it. It was too much. I sought the deliverance of my vacuum, but after only moments, I found myself back in this miserable reality, sitting in a circle of horror. The oppression grew quickly this time. Panic overtook me, and I plunged even more forcefully into the void, my personal safety zone against the demons.

* * * * *

I woke up, disappointed to discover that it was time to prepare for school again. My mother's demon hissed loudly as she forced me into the vehicle and we headed in for the fourth day in a row. An icy rain pelted the windshield as we drove, and cold water drenched my clothes as we made our way to the building. My mother didn't drop me off like she had the day before, but instead carried me into what appeared to be a private office.

"Good morning, Mrs. Miller. Hello, Hunter!" the teacher said, raising the pitch of her voice as she turned to address me. I hated when people did that. "You both look like drowned rats," she added, in a bizarrely upbeat tone.

The demons continued to hum noisily, while my mother mumbled a greeting to the other woman above the din.

"Hello, Ms. Caldwell."

That must be the teacher's name. My mother settled me into a chair. She bore little resemblance to her usual, calm self. The way the purple and green rattled and buzzed unsettled me.

My mother blurted, "It's been eight weeks in this new classroom, and I can't see any difference in Hunter. He's entirely withdrawn, hasn't spoken a word, doesn't perform a single action for himself, and most of the time I don't even think he's aware of what goes on around him. Isn't there anything more that can be done for him?"

My mother sounded quite distressed. The demons were practically throttling me, and the purple color I associated with her was almost completely drained, revealing a blue and silver demon I'd never seen before. Reds and greens forced my nose to involuntarily wrinkle and created a tense feeling on my skin. I lost the conversation at that point—not because of the demons, which were fewer here today in this closed room, but because of the comment about it being eight weeks. I knew how to count, and I knew how long a day was. One sunrise to the next. Twenty-four hours, my mother said. A week was longer than a day, much longer. But it had only been three or four days, not . . . however many days there were in eight weeks. Something was very wrong here.

Perhaps that's why my mother was so upset. *She* had no idea how to count. She was practically crying as she continued her conversation with

Ms. Caldwell and the orange demon that buzzed with a gray color. She tried to comfort my mother, who appeared more agitated than I'd ever seen before. She needed to know that it had only been three days. . . . I had to tell her.

"Fwee!" I said. I sounded like an idiot. No wonder I never said anything. Immediately, I knew it was a mistake to use my voice. Both Ms. Caldwell and my mother approached me with an overwhelming . . .

* * * * *

I woke the next morning already dressed for school and in the car. I wondered idly how I got ready without noticing. I shared the ride to school with my mother and the purple and blue demons. Although I didn't like being strapped into the seat, I preferred that to being tortured by the parade of demons at school.

"Good morning, Hunter," said Ms. Caldwell. The haze around her had changed—the orange-white morphed into a somewhat purple hue that sparkled and frizzled. The demons everywhere else in the room were the same as they had been. As she welcomed the rest of the students by name, I wondered if she knew about the captivating purple color.

"Frizzy!" I interrupted, hoping to get my point across. Despite my abysmal conversational skills, I clearly made an impact because she looked back at me and answered, "Thank you, Hunter!" in a voice less singsong than usual.

"Do you know what today is, Hunter?" she continued.

I had no idea.

"Today is Monday, it's show-and-tell day! Do you have anything you want to show the class today?"

Why would I want to show anything to that band of demon-infested rabble? What a strange request. Had this happened before? This was weird. I noticed that the other children were all holding things. They all knew about this practice of showing off their prized possessions.

Ms. Caldwell took my lack of response in stride and looked toward the next child in the circle. "How about you, Billy?"

Billy's awkward pride over the rock he was holding felt quite misplaced to me. A rock. The kid had a rock. Wow. The demon near him didn't help his image. The smell, extremely tart, made my mouth pucker. Except for a streak of pink, the only color around Billy was a bleak, grayish-brown quagmire that evoked a sense of depression. It lacked the sparkling nature of the demon near Ms. Caldwell. A malodorous fog consumed most of the air around Billy. The only reason I could tolerate it at all without vomiting was that it had very little substance.

I watched disinterestedly as the children around the circle presented small objects of questionable worth.

Billy held up his rock while ducking his head down, forming his body into the same balled pose I favored.

"Thank you, Billy," Ms. Caldwell said.

Billy maintained his posture and smiled awkwardly into the ground.

"Very good, Billy. It's such a wonderful specimen."

Billy appeared capable of holding the rock aloft for hours, but after another minute or two, the teacher moved on, and Billy let the rock fall to the floor with a loud clunk.

Around the next girl, I saw demons that were slightly thicker, but similarly colored and rather unpleasant. They smelled a little fishy. She emerged briefly from her cocoon and displayed a blanket penetrated by innumerable holes.

"Your blanket is beautiful, Tori," the teacher said. "It's so nice of you to bring it again." I noted that Ms. Caldwell had seen the blanket before, but since I never had, she must have brought it before I started going to school here. Either that, or I had a very bad memory.

Tori muttered something, which I found surprising, since I hadn't heard any of the others speak before. It didn't sound much like speech, though. I felt my face flush at the knowledge that I'd only been heard to say "fwee and frizzy," so I probably shouldn't judge. Perhaps Tori knew lots of words and just couldn't say them.

A boy named Justin showed an animal part.

"Your lucky rabbit's foot! We love your rabbit's foot, don't we?" Ms. Caldwell prompted the class. She looked around at each of the kids in

turn, and they nodded or otherwise affirmed their agreement with her assessment. She looked at me. “You liked it last week, Hunter. Isn’t it nice?”

The demon nearest me flashed a green color. I shuddered at the thought of a three-footed rabbit. Who in their right mind would dissect an animal and walk around with one of the parts? How barbaric! Moreover, why would she think I liked it too, when I’d never seen it before? My inward struggle with the demons, especially the acrid smell, plagued my mood, and I sought asylum in the empty place. Before I jumped, a thought barred my exit. I didn’t remember how I ended up in the car this morning. How many other things happened during the times I lived in the void? Was it possible I’d seen the rabbit’s foot last week, and didn’t even realize it? An even scarier thought hit me like a brick—perhaps my mother counted properly after all. Maybe my lack of awareness kept me from appreciating all the events that transpired around me.

I recognized the truth of the matter at once. Time passed without my knowledge daily. I thought my clash with the demons ended in a draw—but really, I lost the battle most of the time. I didn’t have a bad memory; I just couldn’t record events I didn’t experience. Half my life—no, *most* of my life—occurred without my input. This couldn’t continue. To stop this from happening, though, I needed to control the demons. How could I possibly do that? They were everywhere! They took on so many colors, with flashes, vibrations, dullness, buzzing, scraping, and many other indescribable combinations. Nonetheless, I had no choice. If I didn’t exert my will over them, my entire life would pass me by.

In frustration, I cried out. “Eiyee nee cutroul deemuns!”

Four of the children didn’t even notice, but Ms. Caldwell looked at me, and I looked back. “Very good, Hunter. Would you like to share some more with the class?” Something about the way she looked captured my attention.

The purple and frizzy demons around her turned greenish yellow and sweeter as I watched. My eyes darted around her, surveying the pattern of the ghosts, but staring made it harder to see. I closed my eyes to adjust to this odd reality, and the demons became clearer, but the green—which had burst so heavily when I blurted out my useless noise—had faded. Unlike the unsavory aroma of the other demons, the warm, comforting, fragrant smell persisted near the teacher. I identified her as a nice per-

son. Perhaps demons associated themselves with people, much like dust mites collected on my feet when I wore my special socks. I felt the truth of that notion as I studied the space around Ms. Caldwell. While not always identical, the demons retained most of the same characteristics on a day-to-day basis, just like ones I saw around my mother and father. The cool blue demon around me remained ever-present and nearly identical, except when I hurt myself. Sometimes other colors, vibrations, or sounds changed a bit, but they inevitably returned to their original state. Every person kept the same set of demons around them.

Having realized the similarity, the new exception confused me. Of all the times I'd observed Ms. Caldwell's demons before, never had they been purple or frizzy like they were today. They didn't melt back to orange and white. The more I pondered, the more certain I became: today her demons were unlike ever before. That must mean something. Why else would I be allowed to pay attention today? She wanted to help me, I knew it. I felt sure she could help me understand the mysterious oddities around each of us. She had her own demons, and they were frizzy today. I needed to know why.

"Deemuns frizzy!" I said, much too loudly, as I pointed to her.

"Why, thank you, Hunter," she said. Amazing! She got the point. Maybe she knew what frizzy demons meant. It would be great if she could explain it. I expended most of my energy starting this conversation, but if she knew *why* her demons were sparkly and purple today, it would be very useful information.

"Why?" I implored.

"Why what, dear?"

"Why deemuns frizzy?" I asked, pointing at her again.

"I don't know why, Hunter, but I'm very much enjoying our conversation!"

I withdrew into myself immediately, wondering how she didn't know why her very own demons were frizzy. Perhaps she knew, but didn't want to tell me. Maybe I wasn't using the right words. After all, talking wasn't my strongest suit.

* * * * *

From the deep recesses of my imagination, I hear my father telling me stories. He tells me wonderful tales with detailed descriptions of times long since gone, or times that never existed. While he speaks, I struggle against the demons, overwhelmed by my internal battle. His words are interesting and powerful, but eventually, like most of my life so far, the memories fade into the abyss.

* * * * *

The thought, or dream, of my father telling me stories breathed life into my consciousness as I awoke in my bed. My mother came in, and appeared surprised to find me awake.

“It’s time to get up, Hunter,” she said, only slightly higher-pitched than a normal-sounding person.

“Up!” I said, deciding to practice the concept of speech.

“Yes, dear!” she exclaimed, and she engulfed me with a giant embrace, as though I’d discovered the cure to my illness. Her arms and surrounding melodic purple demon enveloped me as I struggled, this time successfully, to keep myself in the present. The sparkling, colorful, oppressive sensations, my constant companions, never physically harmed me, yet they universally frightened me. Today, though, I felt reassured even with her demon so close. I’d been clouded by my autism, unable to cope with the constant rigors of life. One such demand was dealing with the demons, which were part of every person.

I accepted the demons and resolved to keep myself from running away to the place where time didn’t exist. I had to stay focused, because I needed to accomplish several tasks, including learning how to express my thoughts in words.

I couldn’t remember much about the years of being put through a routine—getting up, eating, going to the bathroom, and fighting the demons—but I understood that all of this must have happened. Somehow, that knowledge made it easier for me to perform these basic actions with less assistance now. So as my mother picked out my clothes and helped me get dressed, I started participating in the process. I watched my parents

eat, and I decided to mimic them. I noticed new textures and sounds emanating from the air around my mother.

“Hunter said ‘get up’ this morning,” boasted my mother to my father, who already sat at the table eating his breakfast. My father’s sharp and shimmering blue-and-gold demon evoked a sweet taste. But in stark contrast to my mother’s, his made my skin shiver with its cold and dark shades. Absent also were warm purple hues that virtually defined my mother. His also had a noticeable salty smell and a vague pink tone that seemed somehow familiar.

“Wow, well done, Hunter!” replied my father enthusiastically. I remembered his voice sounding this way in my dream, for that’s what it must have been. He hadn’t read to me or told me any kind of stories in years. I decided that hearing those stories again would really help me.

With surprising effort, I mustered another request, this time of my father. “Story!” I blurted.

My father turned toward me as his demon became melodic and vibrant, shooting with green and yellow, like my mother’s had earlier. “Hunter! Wow!” He was truly excited about something. Maybe he liked telling me stories as much as I liked hearing them. “Do you want to tell me a story?”

What kind of story could I tell? I have a nine-word vocabulary! What a stupid thing to say. Perhaps I overestimated my father’s intelligence.

“I have to go to work, but if you want to tell me a story tonight after school, I’d love to hear it!” he announced as he gathered his things to leave.

My irritation at this extreme effort yielding nothing sapped the remainder of my patience. I slipped back into my private place, where neither the demons nor the humans could reach.

* * * * *

The following day, I woke up and got out of bed all by myself, dug through my drawer to find some clothes, and put them on. I’d never done that before, even though it didn’t present much of a challenge.

When my mother came in to wake me, she bubbled with amazement. “What did *you* do?” A yellow color vibrated through her purple, so much that I could hear it as well as feel it.

I wanted to say, *I got dressed. You do it every day. What's the big deal?* Unfortunately, I couldn't figure out how to formulate those words, so I didn't say anything. I continued with my daily routine, which included going to the bathroom and heading to the kitchen for breakfast. My mother heaped on words of encouragement, with her demons dancing yellow and green. I found it unusual and interesting, although I had no idea what it meant.

When I got to school, my mother positioned me into a familiar circle with all the other students in my little group. "Have a great day, Hunter," she said on her way out.

We listened unresponsively as Ms. Caldwell read a poem. The sparkling purple that I noticed yesterday kept me from slipping away immediately. While I contemplated her color, she asked everyone to perform several mindless gestures, including clapping our hands, moving them forward, or raising them over our heads. Of the six of us, only Tori and Justin made any effort to comply. The rest of us just sat there, generally oblivious. I wondered how long it had been like this. What a gigantic waste of time.

I studiously ignored the teacher's words, which made no difference to anyone as far as I could tell. I looked at the clouds surrounding the other students, and I compared them to the intense purplish frizzy demons that exuded from Ms. Caldwell. When I focused on the children, I tasted a profoundly rancid sensation—so intense that I reflexively recoiled. All of them evoked the same mouth-puckering response, although to varying degrees. The closer I moved to any of them, the worse it became. The dominant color, a sickly pale brown, had virtually no activity, sound, or vibration. The kids' demons had nothing in common at all with my demons—or the teacher's or my parents'—with one exception, a pink hue that nearly all of them shared. Very little mitigated the bitter taste, except for the fishy smell around Tori, the girl with the blanket. She occasionally followed instructions from the teacher, and when she did, the horrid taste ebbed. I didn't know much about my fellow students, but the demons made them highly unpleasant to be near.

I kept trying to rid myself of the demons by closing my eyes, but that backfired—it made them easier to observe. I tried to focus on one of them at a time, hoping to abolish the others, but this failed also. I couldn't get

away from them while in this world. Moments later a large, warm, dense purple demon with a hint of blue and silver approached me from the doorway. It washed the horrible sour taste out of my mouth, replacing it with a sweet taste, like candy. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Time to go home, Hunter,” said my mother, who had materialized out of thin air.

No, I didn’t think she could do that. Time must have passed, right? I argued with myself silently. Did I eat lunch? I must have, because I saw empty containers in my lunch box. I realized very suddenly that I didn’t know much about time at all. I knew about seconds, minutes, hours, days, nights, weeks, months, and years—but . . . time didn’t pass evenly for me. Sometimes, I didn’t remember doing anything at all, although I could usually tell a day had passed when I woke up in bed. Today, it seemed only a few minutes since my mother dropped me off, yet many hours had obviously elapsed. Gaps kept occurring. I had to figure out why. To control the demons, I merely needed to discover the true nature of time, and then articulate my thoughts. Should be easy enough.

As I felt myself being packaged up again for the drive home, I struggled unsuccessfully to keep my wits about me. Suddenly I found myself along with my mother and father, sitting at a table set for three. I must have eaten dinner at this table hundreds of times, but at that moment, I couldn’t remember a single episode. The demons flittered about. The ones around my parents were vibrating and aromatic, with blue-gold and purple colors and a subjectively pleasant flavor.

I tried to remember times in the past when my father had told me stories. The memories tickled tantalizingly at the corners of my consciousness. It was always dark when he spoke to me, usually in my bed. The words didn’t much matter, but the way he delivered a story kept me interested, even if I didn’t know the meaning. He would always put me to sleep with stories about places he’d been or people he’d met. Why had he stopped?

The smell of red sauce brought me back to the present. After a meal of pasta, I recoiled slightly as my mother placed a cake in the shape of a huge monster with a giant mouth in front of me on the table. Strategically placed candles burned on top, giving it an even more threatening appear-

ance. What on earth would prompt a parent to threaten her child with a cake that looked like it could eat back?

My parents sang to me, and the lyrics of the song included the words “happy birthday to you,” so I assumed it was my birthday.

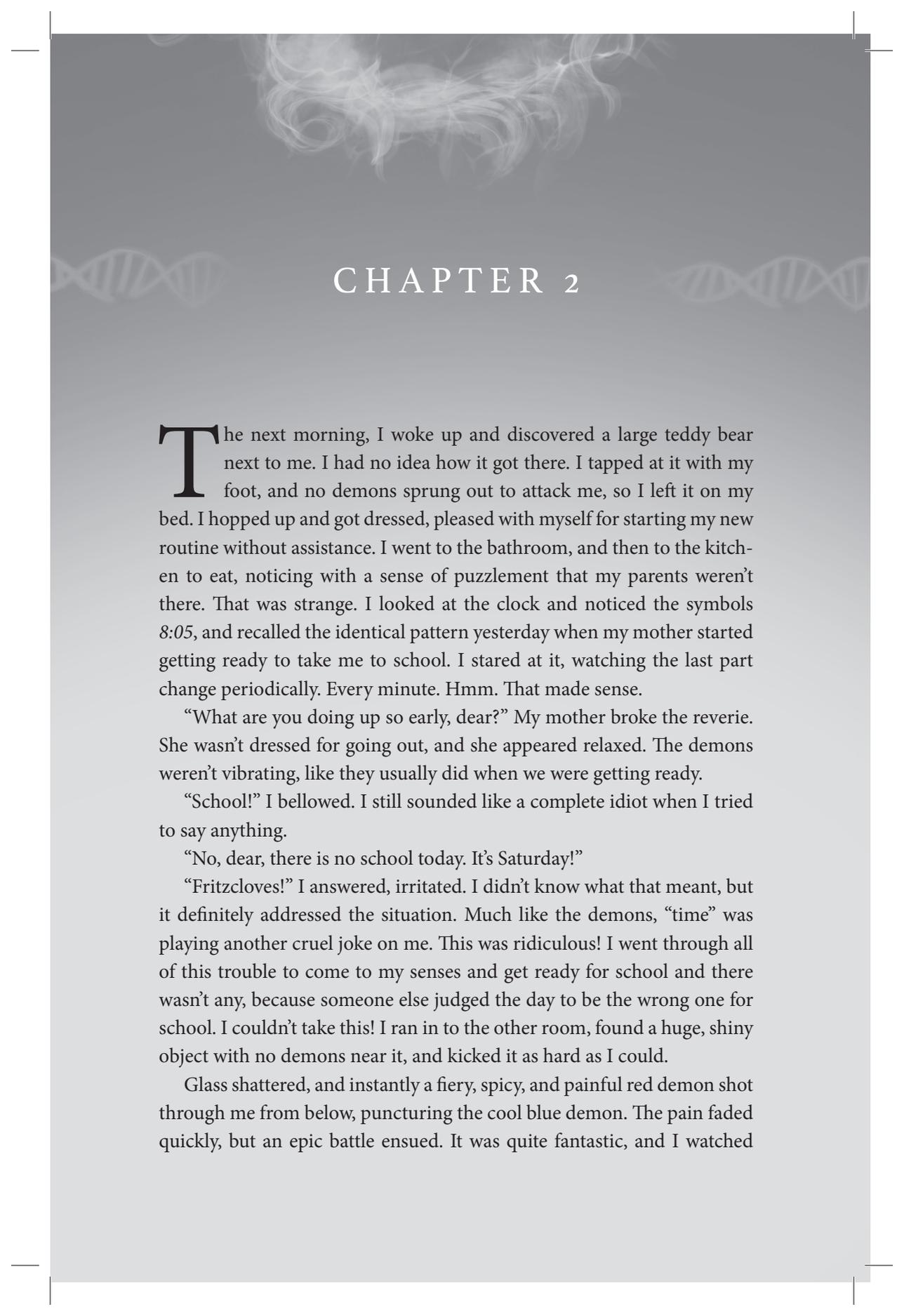
“Ten years ago today, you were born!” my mother said, at the conclusion of their ditty. One problem: I didn’t know the date. I certainly should know my birthday.

“What is today?” I managed.

My parents, including their demons, glistened with excitement and frivolity. They replied in unison, “It’s your birthday, honey!”

I shook my head at their absurdity and withdrew.





CHAPTER 2

The next morning, I woke up and discovered a large teddy bear next to me. I had no idea how it got there. I tapped at it with my foot, and no demons sprung out to attack me, so I left it on my bed. I hopped up and got dressed, pleased with myself for starting my new routine without assistance. I went to the bathroom, and then to the kitchen to eat, noticing with a sense of puzzlement that my parents weren't there. That was strange. I looked at the clock and noticed the symbols 8:05, and recalled the identical pattern yesterday when my mother started getting ready to take me to school. I stared at it, watching the last part change periodically. Every minute. Hmm. That made sense.

"What are you doing up so early, dear?" My mother broke the reverie. She wasn't dressed for going out, and she appeared relaxed. The demons weren't vibrating, like they usually did when we were getting ready.

"School!" I bellowed. I still sounded like a complete idiot when I tried to say anything.

"No, dear, there is no school today. It's Saturday!"

"Fritzcloves!" I answered, irritated. I didn't know what that meant, but it definitely addressed the situation. Much like the demons, "time" was playing another cruel joke on me. This was ridiculous! I went through all of this trouble to come to my senses and get ready for school and there wasn't any, because someone else judged the day to be the wrong one for school. I couldn't take this! I ran in to the other room, found a huge, shiny object with no demons near it, and kicked it as hard as I could.

Glass shattered, and instantly a fiery, spicy, and painful red demon shot through me from below, puncturing the cool blue demon. The pain faded quickly, but an epic battle ensued. It was quite fantastic, and I watched

with grand amazement as the demons attacked each other wildly. With my eyes open, I had trouble focusing on the battle, so I closed them. The red demon hummed and grabbed at my skin, while the blue demon tried to cool the heat and dampen the sharp taste. I got the feeling that something profoundly bad was happening, although I could not sense why. That feeling grew stronger as more demons appeared. My mother's purple and my father's colder blue-gold clouds both buzzed and emitted musty-tasting blasts of gray and darker red.

Perhaps the demons were unhappy about not having school today, like I was. I ignored the others again, and watched my demons struggle. I heard screaming, uncharacteristic of the demons. Confusion robbed me of the capacity to think as the red demon grasped the upper hand in the battle, and I felt the searing pain again as the blue faded dramatically. My mother's demon gyrated with green and red, and it smelled of old, sweaty clothes. My head hit the floor, as I hadn't bothered to remain standing. I felt stupid; at my age, I should be able to keep myself upright. Then pain suddenly ripped through me like I had lopped off my entire leg, and I saw the blood pooling on the ground. I couldn't take it, so I dove away into the empty place.

* * * * *

I woke up to the sensation of a fiery red pinprick, which immediately resolved. New demons stalked me. My mother and father were there, but their demons had morphed considerably. The purple color paled to dark gray, and the blue-gold faded as well, accentuating the underlying pink and black. Green and red twisted and pulsed between both people, while a foul, sweaty smell permeated the room.

Two other demons prowled. One was a clear, placid, bluish white with a pink hue surrounding it, and the other was a warmer, sweet-smelling orange-white. The latter reminded me of Ms. Caldwell. I felt quite sure that these demons belonged to people, so I imagined what sort of person might possess these apparitions. They were certainly not children, because the demons were full, strong, and dense—traits I associated with the demons that surrounded adults. The one with blue felt very close, and

he affected my red, buzzing, and throbbing demon. I opened my eyes to see a man and woman focusing intently on my injured leg. The only other demons in the room were ones not associated with people, harmless tiny ones on the ceiling. I recognized this place from some earlier time.

The man stuck a needle into the exposed fleshy pieces of my mangled right leg. Around the wound, the same fiery red color from before replaced a large section of blue, buzzing and blurring the border. I jumped a bit.

“It’s going to be OK,” he reassured. “I’m just putting some anesthetic into your leg so I can fix it. Once I get this numbed up, you won’t feel a thing.”

I didn’t feel a thing now. Like everyone else, he had no idea what was going on in my head.

“How did this happen?” the woman asked.

“He got mad and kicked through a large mirror,” my mother answered. “He’s autistic. Sometimes we lose him for days at a time, but he was particularly alert this morning. He was disappointed that he didn’t get to go to school today, because it’s Saturday. I think he was missing his friends, and really wanted to see them.

“It was his birthday yesterday,” she continued, “and we celebrated with cake and presents. He was with us for a little while, but then he withdrew into himself. Once he does that, we simply can’t reach him.”

My mother’s demons thumped with a cool, blurred dullness and odor of dirty laundry that made me cringe. The striking contrast from her usual state distressed me as much as the smells themselves. The combination nearly pushed me into the void. However, the flesh hanging out of my leg was very interesting. I’d never seen anything like it, so I remained in the demon world instead of drifting off.

“Is he up-to-date on his tetanus?” the man asked.

“Yes, Dr. Collins, we take him for regular checkups with Dr. Stonington, and he just had his tetanus last year,” my mother replied.

Of course. I was in the hospital again, and it was a doctor who had the blue-and-white demon.

“He’s being very good,” the doctor commented. “Often we have to restrain kids like this.”

“Yes,” my mother answered. “He’s usually very even-keeled. Every once in a while, though, he lashes out.”

I closed my eyes to get a better look at the demons. The fiery red demon and the cool blue demon were swirling and dancing together, and I noticed the red part getting weaker and weaker. I opened my eyes to find the doctor had stopped the bleeding by sewing together some of the pieces of meat that were sticking apart at awkward angles. He noticed my gaze.

He smiled at me, looked over at my mother, and said, “I’m sewing up the muscle layer with some deep stitches. These will dissolve on their own. The ones just under the skin will dissolve on their own too. And on the outside, there will be some stitches that will have to come out in ten to fourteen days. He won’t be able to walk for a while, but because he’s young and physically healthy, he should heal up just fine after a few weeks.”

Dr. Collins repeatedly glanced at me as I watched him work. “I can’t believe he can just sit there and watch this,” he said, with considerable amazement in his voice. He looked at me and said in a singsong voice, “You’re a really good patient!”

His relatively warm, smooth, blue demon had a clean smell and pink streaks. And even though I didn’t like his tone, I felt better anyway as he continued putting the pieces back together. After he finished, the nurse put some antibiotic ointment on top of the stitches, along with a bandage.

I looked at my leg. The repair had done more than just put the tissue and skin back together, it destroyed the red demon almost completely. The haziness overlying the area cleared somewhat too, but it was still slightly muddled compared to the other leg. My mother’s demon had gone quiet, although not back to its vibrant self. The purple color returned as well.

With the repair over, my mind wandered back to something my mother said—“sometimes we lose him for days.” No wonder I was so confused about time. I missed most of it. Where was I? I still did things, so I wasn’t unconscious, but I wasn’t aware either; I was closer to asleep. Maybe somewhere in between. I felt an urgency to become more aware of time.

The first step was to know the actual time of day. Some people carried devices or wore items, like the one my father wore on his wrist. Something that told the days of the week would be useful. Perhaps my mother could help.

“Watch!” I said.

“Watch what, honey?” answered my mother.

“Need watch!” I said, pointing at my wrist. *Need learn speak*, I thought, feeling amusement at my own expense.

“You are in no position to be making demands, little man!” Some red fired from her purple.

Fritzcloves! I thought, still not knowing what it meant. I drifted off.

* * * * *

I woke up and got out of bed. My mother must have heard me rustling around, and she came in the room and said, “Today is Sunday, dear. There is no school.”

Hmm. OK, Saturday and Sunday there is no school. *What am I supposed to do then*, I wondered.

“You don’t have to do anything today. You can go outside and play, or you can look at books, or whatever you like,” she said.

That was a little spooky. How did she know what I was thinking?

She flowed with her usual vibrant purple, clear and warm. “Your father and I decided that you could have a watch for a birthday present. But if you break it, we won’t get you another one.”

My own clear blue demon flashed a bright yellow, and it helped me accept the present.

“See, here is the time. Right now it’s eight o’clock, just like it says on your clock over there.” She pointed to the desk. “This is the date. Today is Sunday, March sixteenth. On Saturday and Sunday, there is no school. See that curvy letter there? That’s the letter S. That’s the first letter of both Saturday and Sunday. If you look at your watch when you wake up, and that curvy letter is the first one, then it’s either Saturday or Sunday, and you don’t have to get up and get ready for school.”

Finally, the first useful thing my mother ever said to me.

I needed more information, though. What about time? What about other days? I remembered something my father said to me when he used to tell me the stories: “Thirty days hath September, April, June, and No-

vember; all the rest have thirty-one, except February, which has twenty-eight.” I didn’t know what that meant, but it seemed relevant.

My mother looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to say something. My first thought was, *it’s about time you did something useful*, but I didn’t think I could say all of that. Besides, I still needed to know a lot more. She said today was the sixteenth of March. I looked at the watch, but none of it meant anything. I didn’t know how to read the numbers and other letters. My demons burst green with some gray. Then a shuddering red, different from the tangy red that grabbed my leg before, gurgled up from nowhere. I was about to chuck the watch into the wall, but my mother waggled her finger at me.

“Remember what I said, Hunter. If you break it, we won’t buy you another one.”

She read my thoughts again. But why didn’t she tell me how it worked? That’s what I really needed to know.

“Oh, I see,” she said. “Hold on one second,” and she left.

I stewed.

When she returned, she brought with her a paper and pencil, and she wrote as she spoke.

“These are the numbers: zero, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. When you get more than nine, you start with ten, which is written like *10*. Then, normally, you count through again, eleven, twelve, thirteen . . . up to nineteen, and after that it starts again with twenty, which is *20*. That cycles through again to thirty, forty, fifty, and all the way up to one hundred. You can think of it as a line that resets and then the process repeats. Do you understand?”

I did. I felt my mouth gaping open and I reminded myself to close it. She went on.

“When you’re telling time, you start counting the hours with one (the first hour after midnight) and then it goes all the way to twelve, which we call *noon*. Then you start over again with one. That’s why you don’t hear people say, ‘thirteen o’clock.’ When you look at the hour spot, right here, it tells you what the hour is. The minute side, there, counts only up to sixty. Each minute you add one to the count, until it gets to sixty, then it starts over at zero again, and that’s when an hour has gone by.

“So when you look at the watch, you can say, ‘It’s eight thirty-five,’ because the hour here is eight, and the minute box says thirty-five. Does that make sense?”

I nodded. She smiled, turned yellow and clear, and my skin hummed gently from her demon.

“Same thing with the days and months. The days of the week are Sunday (today), then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. You go to school on Monday through Friday, but it’s not open on Saturday or Sunday. And this one here shows the month. The months are January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, and December. There is a special pattern for the number of days to each month; they’re thirty, thirty-one, or even twenty-eight days long. When you get older I’ll tell you a way to remember that,” she said.

That must be what my father had been talking about. It all made sense. I used my father’s rule of thumb and what my mother told me about today being the sixteenth of March. That meant there would be two more Saturdays and Sundays in this month, but eleven more school days. Got it. I couldn’t really read the letters, but the numbers made perfect sense.

This was really cool stuff. I looked up and saw my mother still looking at me, green swirls winding around her purple. It would be great if I knew how to speak, but I couldn’t form any words. Eventually she patted me on the head lightly and walked out. I put the watch on and decided I’d never take it off. I’d make sure I didn’t lose any more time from now on.

When I tried to stand up, my leg pulled at me with a blast of the sharp red I tasted before. Yesterday’s events came flooding back. As I watched, the angry red demon, which I thought had gone away thanks to Dr. Collins, started puffing about, crawling around my leg. The blue demon, the cool, soft one I fondly considered my own, blocked the red as it wiggled around. Another round of fascinating interplay mesmerized me as it had before. Eventually, I shook off the weird sensations and struggled to the bathroom, and then downstairs for breakfast. Even though it was Sunday and I didn’t have school, I figured I could practice telling time, or playing with the watch to see what else it could do. My father saw me looking at the watch, and ventured over.

“Mom said she showed you how to tell time,” he started. I didn’t know what to say, and I probably couldn’t have said it anyway.

“Let me show you something,” he went on. He played with the watch a little, and then showed me the watch face. “See, look here,” he said. “This is the place where the day of the week shows up. Today is Sunday, right?” he paused briefly and looked at me, and clicked a button on the side of the watch. “Tomorrow, it will say this: Monday.” He showed me the watch again and I remembered my mother telling me the names of the days of the week.

“Then the following day will be Tuesday,” he said as he pressed the button again and showed me. “Then Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and back to Sunday,” he concluded, showing me each of the days in turn. I stared back at the watch, and he tousled my hair and walked out with a sigh.

For the rest of the morning, I ignored my parents, who amused themselves with their busywork. While pushing the buttons on the watch, I caught the swirling red demon out of the corner of my eye. It doubled in size, and continued growing and started making my skin tingle. I stared at it, intoxicated. After several hours, the red viper flourished to the point where it had completely displaced the blue on my leg. I knew it had been hours because my watch read *11:45*. During the battle, the blue demon thinned while the red annexed the vacated territory, causing a raucous thumping and humming. I found myself rooting for the blue demon to reassert itself; I really disliked the red one.

This continued through the afternoon. My parents periodically poked their heads in, but they didn’t appreciate the progress the red demon enjoyed, and I didn’t know how to tell them about it.

“We’ve lost him again,” said my father. “I guess this period of lucidity was just a brief phase, and we’re back to the same old Hunter.”

“Now, Jim. He’s our son.”

“I don’t know which was worse, growing up without a mother or father, or watching Hunter behave as though he doesn’t have either. It’s so frustrating! Besides, you know people like me shouldn’t even . . .” his voice trailed off as they walked back to the kitchen.

They went back to their routine, and just left me alone. I was surprised they didn't spend more time with me. My demons were very, very interesting. I wished I hadn't let my prior fears stop me from watching. With only just the one or two demons in the room, I felt I could stare endlessly. My own demons possessed color and vibrancy as powerful as any of the rest, so I gazed at them into the evening until I fell asleep.

* * * * *

My mother came in to wake me up. I looked at my watch, and it said 8:00 a.m., the time I started getting ready. Since it read Monday, I knew it was a school day. I didn't have to worry about making that mistake again. I opened my mouth to tell my mother about school, but I stopped when I noticed the fire entirely enveloping my leg. The evil demon punched a giant hole in the blue, which in turn had vanished from my leg. I felt a clenching sensation on my skin, with harsh buzzing and a sweaty and bitter taste. Pain added to the conglomerate of discomfoting sensations. I tried to get up, but standing made me quite dizzy, and I fell back. I stared back at the demonic mass, on the verge of panic. It was going to eat me. I couldn't believe my mother wasn't worried about it, but she ignored it and picked me up to carry me toward the bathroom.

"Red demon!" I yelled. Hysteria gripped me in earnest and I flailed to get away. After years of being terrorized by demons, this episode eclipsed the rest.

"There aren't any demons in here," my mother soothed. "You're just fine." She touched my forehead, and added to herself, "But you are a bit warm."

I stopped struggling at the sound of her words, although I maintained my vigilance of the monster slithering around my leg. My mother set me on the toilet and we continued our morning routine. Perhaps I was overreacting. The demons were just a normal part of life, and I've been afraid of them for too long. My mother wasn't worried, so I should just go ahead and get ready for school. Today might be a good day to learn my native language.

While getting ready, I couldn't ignore the harsh-sounding, swirling, angry demon as it practically strangled me while devouring my leg. My mother's purple returned back to normal, along with the silver-blue high-lights I noticed before. I wondered idly if there might be a connection between what someone was doing and the character of the demon surrounding them, but before I could reach a conclusion, I found myself drifting back into the emptiness. I mentally shook myself, trying very hard *not* to slip back into the void. I rarely won this battle, but I vowed to fight harder to stay in the moment. I had to stop missing the events of my own life. The blood-red demon persevered, though. Before I finished getting ready, pain shot through me, and I felt its redness, panic, and sickness engulfing my entire body, pulsing and pounding me into submission. The angriest part originally concentrated around my leg, but it expanded everywhere now, wracking me with pain. I screamed and dove headlong into the void.

* * * * *

I woke up in a foreign bed, drenched. Nothing about this place reminded me of home. I felt for my watch, annoyed by its absence because I knew I hadn't taken it off. I couldn't tell if it was time to get up for school. That might be the least of my troubles, though, because I had no idea where I'd ended up. It reminded me of the emergency room, but this was . . . no, it wasn't the same. The fiery red demon was smaller now. The cool blue demon resumed swimming lovingly around my leg, and it smelled good, in stark contrast to the distressing sensation with which the red demon had oppressed me only moments before. The pounding vibration and gripping sensation ebbed, to my great relief.

A purple color stalked nearby, very distressed—buzzing, squawking, and trembling with blasts of red that smelled like my father's unwashed workout clothes. The demons reminded me of the ones my mother had last time I went to the ER. I opened my eyes, and saw my mother in a chair, staring at the ground. I found it very comforting to realize that I could recognize a person by the demons that surrounded them.

My mother noticed that I'd opened my eyes and rushed over to the side of the bed to embrace me. I felt another demon—in shades of or-

ange, blue, and white—coming to the door. My mother’s purple demon had stopped screeching and buzzing, and the return of its warmth felt good in many ways.

“He’s awake!” my mother exclaimed, as if this fact affected the world at large.

“Great news, Mrs. Miller!” answered the woman bringing in the other demon. It glowed warmly with blue and orange, and I found her white component reassuring. She had a lemony smell.

“I know it was a bit scary for a while, but his temperature is coming back down, and his blood pressure has stabilized. We’ve stopped the other drips, but we’ll keep him on the IV antibiotics for now. If all goes well, we can put him on oral antibiotics tomorrow and maybe get you out of here.”

Out of where?

My mother used her uncanny ability to read my thoughts, and answered.

“You’re in the hospital, dear. You got sick from an infection in your leg. Remember, the one you cut? Some bad germs infected you and went into your bloodstream. But they put you on antibiotics, and you’re going to be fine!”

I didn’t feel fine. It took a profound effort just to glance at my wrist. My mother saw me looking, and produced my watch from her bag.

“Here you are, sweetie,” she said, and she helped me put it back on. “We took it off because you were very sick,” she added, apologetically.

The watch said it was Friday, but that couldn’t be right; it was just Monday a few minutes ago. I briefly smiled and silently thanked my father for his lesson. Then reality set in, and I realized I felt terrible. I could hardly move. I didn’t see the point of enduring this situation, so I thought about lapsing into the void voluntarily. I closed my eyes, but I didn’t slip away immediately.

My mother took a washcloth from the sideboard table and sponged off my face. Her demons stopped strumming and tingling, on their way back to normal.

“He doesn’t say much, does he?” the woman asked.

“No, Dr. Evanish. He’s autistic. He just started speaking a few months ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We get a few autistic patients in pediatric intensive care. They’re very challenging. You’re so good with him. It must take so much out of you, giving all that love and attention and getting very little back in terms of feedback and emotion.”

“Yes, he can be very trying at times, but he’s our little boy, and we love him.”

Trying? *I* can be trying? It’s not my fault I’m autistic! I vaulted angrily into the void to escape this nonsense.



CHAPTER 3

I woke up and checked my watch. It read 9:30 *a.m.*, *Tuesday*—I lost more time. Instead of the antiseptic taint of the hospital ward, I encountered the fresh smell of my own sheets. Assuming I hadn't miraculously teleported home, I must have been released at some point over the last four days. Despite this being a school day, my mother let me sleep, so I didn't bother to start my morning routine. Instead, I simply lounged in bed, taking inventory of my current state.

I felt much better. I wiggled around, flexing all the muscles of my leg, one at a time. They all worked normally. The fiery red demon abandoned the battle, leaving the blue demon as the unchallenged owner of the leg. I studied the blue carefully, with my eyes closed, and made several observations. Even with the red mostly gone, there remained a vague pink color, just like the one I noticed around my father, several of my classmates, and Dr. Collins. Right now, the blue color was more dense and clear than the last time I checked, but it remained less robust than last week, before my illness. When the red demon reigned, all other colors were cloudy and muddled, and the acrid taste increased the disharmony. As I studied the demon, a green shoot wafted around its blue color, and I wondered what that meant. A newly visible brown color bothered me, because I remembered seeing the same color around most of the kids at school, and I didn't like their demons at all. I didn't consider brown a dangerous color, like the red, but I still didn't like it.

Musing led me to a critical realization. I could barely utter a single word, which made it impossible to tell anyone about the monsters. I couldn't call them demons, if I could believe my mother. She stood right next to me and assured me there were no demons around, even as a huge

something surrounded me, while another one attacked my leg. She told me I needed to be hospitalized because of an infection in my leg. Maybe the demon caused the infection. I needed to sort this out, but I had to ask someone about it. Learning to speak, therefore, moved right to the top of my priority list.

Another observation involved how people talked about me. They offered far more information when they thought I couldn't hear them. My father's comment, "we've lost him again," illustrated not only that point, but it also emphasized the larger problem. I had almost no memory of my four days in the hospital. I spent more time "lost" than I did "found." Neither of my parents voiced any concern about my recurrent absence, so they must think of this as normal for me, probably because of my autism. To train myself to communicate properly, among many other things, I needed to stop losing so much time. I had to fight better against my autism. I decided it was time to work on my new goals.

When I thought again about my father's words, I recalled a brief flash about the times when he used to lecture me, many years ago. I must have been young, because his hand dwarfed mine when he held it. None of his words came back with the vision this time, but his face and his smile helped me feel less afraid. I had to regain some of that fearlessness today.

I rose from my bed, steeled with new resolve, and started down the hall. Walking presented a challenge, as residual weakness from the infection left me dizzy. I made it to the bathroom and back to my room to get dressed, stopping periodically to rest. I wasn't hungry, but I knew eating was an important part of my daily routine, like sleeping, getting dressed, and going to the bathroom, so I slowly headed downstairs to the kitchen to get some food. I needed to support myself by hanging onto the railing with every step. When I got to the kitchen, I heard my mother talking to someone in the living room.

"I need you back on the project. Maybe if we got you a nanny or something so you don't have to be watching him twenty-four seven and doing every little thing for him, you could start back to work under the university's auspices. I mean, I know he's got autism and all, but you have your own life to live. You have other responsibilities. And we wouldn't want word of your, shall we say, *prior experimentation*, to get out." The female

voice had a harsh-sounding, predominantly silver-colored demon with gold, blue, and orange accents, and it shimmered with a smell I couldn't place, something like old meat. Although the silver color shined brightly, the demon's icy tendrils unnerved me. I stopped as the chills ran up my spine, and listened to the conversation.

"Ginny! You wouldn't!" said my mother. Greens and reds exploded through her silver, blue, and purple, unleashing the strong odor of unwashed underwear.

"No, of course not," replied Ginny. Waves permeated her icy silver. "Don't do it for us, do it for yourself! I mean, how rewarding can it be to have someone with your brilliant mind stuck here at home, babysitting a locked-in child? You must want to get out of the house and back to work!"

"It's not all bad," my mother answered. "He has some good days. He started saying a few words recently, and he even got himself out of bed and ready for school once. But then after his birthday party, he had a temper tantrum and kicked the mirror, which cut up his leg. Then it got infected, and he nearly died. It's that kind of thing that scares me. If I hadn't been here to take him to the hospital, he might not have made it. And that was just from a simple wound infection. I don't know. . . . I'd love to get back to the real world, but I'm not sure I can leave Hunter on his own. He's just so frail and defenseless."

Frail? I didn't feel frail. A wave of dizziness hit me, and I almost fell over. OK, frail may not be so far off the mark.

"You can get a caretaker from the agency to check in on him whenever you aren't going to be around for an extended period. I have someone in mind, she's really good. Older, hardworking, and good with kids. I'll send you her contact information. Give her a try. Until then, maybe after you drop him off at that institution, you can buzz over to the lab for a few hours, you know, get your feet wet again. Those genes aren't going to splice themselves, you know!"

My mother chuckled. "Well, Ginny, I'll think about it and let you know."

"I bet that's the first time you've laughed in weeks. Do take the suggestion seriously, we really need you back." Ginny started to get up to leave, and I still didn't want to make my presence known, so I waited for the mystery woman to exit before opening the refrigerator door loudly.

“Oh, hello, Hunter. How’re you feeling?” asked my mother, as she entered the kitchen, presumably checking on the noise.

Better, I thought. My watch said ten forty-five; I guess I’d missed breakfast. Still, I should eat.

“I bet you want something to eat,” she said. My blue sizzled briefly with a green blast. How did she *do* that?

“I was thinking of going back to the university,” she said, while fixing me some cereal. “I used to work in a lab, before you came along. I took a sabbatical when you were born, and it’s lasted much longer than I expected, with your autism.”

She placed the bowl on the table, added milk, and put both items away. I ate the flakes obediently and stared at her between bites.

“Anyway, Dr. Goodreau used to be my boss, and she wants me to come back to work there. I’m thinking about doing it. But that might mean some changes. I might not always be around like I have been so far. Sometimes there might be a helper here instead of me, in case you aren’t feeling good and can’t go to the cent—uh, school. She could take you to your doctor appointments. I still haven’t decided, but don’t you think it would be a good idea?”

How should I know? I hadn’t the faintest idea what happened at the university. I knew my father worked there, very long hours. Sometimes he stayed away for weeks on end. What he did was a complete mystery to me. I couldn’t remember him talking about it . . . ever. That thought tugged at my brain for a while, because I remember him telling me a great many things. We used to have “lessons” of sorts when I was younger. He would define words, teach me arithmetic, tell me stories; I vaguely recall some of them. I didn’t know when or why he stopped, but memories of time spent with my father skulked in the recesses of my brain. He might have told me what he did at work, and I just didn’t remember. I probably slipped off into the void during his discourses, and he lost interest in talking to someone not paying attention. Who could blame him?

My mother stood up to leave, taking my silence as a response. While I didn’t have any idea what the correct answer for her was, I appreciated being asked the question. I wanted to help her if I could. Unfortunately, I had my own issues, with my inability to communicate chief among them.

How does one learn how to speak? Most of the kids at school had the same trouble. Other than a few meaningless syllables, I never heard them say anything. Might that be because I wasn't present? Darned autism. And what about these demons? I really needed to address them. Especially if they were trying to hurt me after all, like the red demon that caused my infection and put me in the hospital. According to my mother, I almost died from that infection. How long had the red demon been planning that? I never liked that one anyway—whenever it came around, something was wrong. I felt better now, but that demon must be hiding in the shadows somewhere, waiting to pounce. And what about all the other ones? I wasn't as frightened by the small ones I noticed occasionally on the ceiling, because they had virtually no substance, made no sound, and had no distinguishing characteristics. But every person I'd ever met had them. Thoughts about demons evoked another memory from my father, who told me a story about exorcising demons. Maybe it was as simple as that. Send the demons out for a bike ride to keep them busy, so they stop bothering me. I shook my head. That didn't make sense. None of it did.

Why is everything so confusing?

After breakfast, I wandered into the living room and plopped myself down on the couch. While I sat alone, contemplating what type of exercise the demons might like, my mother returned. My own cool blue color flashed a hint of silver as I considered making a demon treadmill.

"Why are you staring at the TV?" she said. "You know the doctors said your autism could get worse if you watch TV. How about looking at some picture books?"

It made no sense that staring at a blank object without demons could make my autism worse, but I heeded her warning. Instead, I rummaged through our collection of books, looking for interesting ones. A giant cat stood tall on the cover of one. He was wearing a hat. We didn't have any cats, but the lady across the street had some, and they tended not to dress in human clothes. Perhaps the cat ate a person wearing a hat, and then kept the headgear as a trophy. Yep, that made sense. Next.

This one featured a giant beast with bull horns, bear claws, a furry body, and human feet. He stood on a tropical island, as if he owned it. I remembered my mother reading this one aloud; the boy ordered the

monsters around. I doubted a huge beast like this would listen to a small boy. And why didn't he have demons? Who was supposed to believe the stuff that was in these books? They were insane, nothing like real life.

I tossed that one aside and picked up the next in the stack. The female on the cover either wore a frilly dress made of fur, or she had a furry body containing frills; I couldn't tell which. Either way, something about her was horribly wrong. She wore a hat just like the cat, and glared menacingly at some food on a platter, meat with eggs. The eggs looked green—probably spoiled. She contemplated eating them. Gross. And how come they didn't draw her with some color surrounding her? Every person had some demons around them!

I flipped through the books, but I didn't know any of the words. Maybe the stories answered all my questions, but absent the ability to read, I grew frustrated and threw them across the room. Another item for my growing list of glaring ineptitudes. I wondered if they taught that at school. I never saw any of the other kids reading, but given my lack of attention, perhaps I missed it. With the stack of books distributed evenly about the living room, I left in search of a new task.

For about twenty minutes, I wandered around the house aimlessly. How did normal people spend their time? My mother was doing the laundry. Not what I had in mind. I wanted to ask her what to do, but I couldn't formulate the words, so I just watched as she carefully folded the clothes and put them into the hamper.

“Are you looking for something to do, honey?”

Irritation and amazement, in roughly equal parts, washed over me as she read my thoughts. What a very cool skill. Reading minds—another item for my rapidly expanding list.

“Why don't we go out to the park?”

OK, why not.

My mother selected a heavy coat, gloves, a hat, and warm boots for me to wear for our trek. The chilling breeze sent shivers down my spine as we walked hand in hand, in what I assumed was the direction of the park. As we traveled, I looked around in wonder, seeing the other houses, cars, mailboxes, lawns, and signs on the corners with cryptic writing. I noted

miniscule demons, like the ceiling ones I had observed in the past, flowing through the grass and trees. We spent about fifteen minutes walking, according to my watch, which I checked by pushing away the sleeve part of my glove. The deserted park had no buildings for cover, and the wind whipped at my uncovered face, making me bury it in my gloved hands.

“Are you OK, sweetie?” My mother asked. “I guess it is a bit chilly out. Let’s head back and get some hot chocolate.”

We started back, reversing our previous direction. A dog with a small, pink-and-yellow demon trotted in front of us, presumably toward its home. I looked around again, and I realized I had no idea where we were, where I lived, or even why it was so cold. Last time I went outside, I hadn’t needed a heavy coat. Even more frustrating, I had no means of conveying my questions. Speaking suddenly became an urgent priority. I needed answers. I had to try. *What’s the worst that can happen?*

“Whuff?” I said. What was my problem? I guess I knew now the worst that could happen: I might sound like a complete idiot. Mission accomplished.

“Doggie?” answered my mother. I slumped my head back into my hands in frustration. What happened to her ability to read my mind? I saw another green sign on the side of the road with writing on it. The others posted along the roads between our house and the park had different words, possibly markers of their location. I pointed to the sign as we walked.

“Wair?”

“Where is the doggie?” she said.

Enough with the doggie already. I pointed to a house and then the street sign. “Live wair?”

“Oh, yes, this is the street where we live! Very good, Hunter!” She was genuinely proud. Her demons blazed with soothing yellow. I, on the other hand, felt genuinely perturbed. A small red demon bearing an itchy sensation and smoky smell nearly made me flop onto the ground or lapse into the void. Before I had a chance to do either, she continued.

“We live at 3804 Weckwerth Terrace, Seattle, Washington. That’s in the United States, on the continent of North America.”

I calmed down, staring up at her face with a look of interest. My red demon vanished, replaced with yellow and green. Encouraged, she continued again.

“You’ve lived in Seattle all your life, and your father and I lived here for three years before that. We both came here after graduate school so that we could work in research at the University of Washington, which is about three miles from here, just north of the water. They have a very nice genetics program, and a medical school with all kinds of promising young students to teach. I was a professor of genetics as part of my position.

“Then about ten years ago, my life changed a lot! I’ve spent those years raising you. When we made the decision to have you, I knew I was going to be making a serious long-term commitment, and my career and other things would have to be put on hold. However, because of you,” she paused, “condition, this lasted much longer than I had expected. I’ve had to take care of you, and I haven’t had a chance to do anything for mys—. Well, it’s been a huge challenge. Of course I love you and I wouldn’t have it any other way, but recently I’ve been thinking about maybe getting back to my career.” She paused again, looked around, and then back at me. We continued to walk along as she resumed.

“Anyway, I’ve been asked to go back to work at the university. I was a leader in the field of genetics, and I wrote several important papers for prominent journals before I stopped working. I’ve missed it a lot. Now, they want me to take my old position back, starting this week.

“To do that, I need to hire a nanny, someone who can handle all the daily chores of your life, like getting you out of bed, taking you to school, making sure you have food, etc. This will mean that I can go off, like your father, to work every day. You’ll be in school most of the time, so it won’t affect you all that much, but I won’t be there to pick you up or drop you off, and sometimes I might be home late and miss dinner. But I’ll try to be there to tuck you into bed every night, and I promise I’ll be there if you ever need anything.

“The university recommended someone, and she’s coming over tomorrow to meet you.” She finished as we reached our house, and she opened and held the door for me to enter.

“Oohh kaaay,” I answered, as I walked under her arms into the foyer. *Not too poorly, either.* I heard most of this earlier, so I felt I knew what she was thinking, for a change.

“Oh, Hunter! What is OK?” she said, far too loudly, as her demons exploded with a rainbow of color.

Duh! It’s OK with me if you go back to your old job and leave me here with a hired hand. No problem. I’ve amassed quite a list of tasks for my immediate future, one of which—learning how to speak—would come in handy right about now.

“Yugowork,” I spluttered. All things considered, it sounded fairly reasonable.

“*Oh!* You understand? Very good! This is great progress for you!” She burst out in clear yellow, as her demon vibrated noisily.

I didn’t see how this was progress for *me*, in that *she* was the one going back to work. But, she exuded happiness, and her purple color positively glistened with the gyrating yellow, so I didn’t try to add to the conversation. She grabbed me and squeezed, inexplicably attempting to force my insides to the outside. I suppressed the urge to go to the bathroom even as some gas escaped despite my efforts. I tried to understand how crushing the life out of me demonstrated her happiness, but like so many other concepts in this world, it remained a mystery. While she ran off to make phone calls, I considered my next course of action. Perhaps I could figure out how water came out of the faucet.





CHAPTER 4

I woke up the next morning ready to face the day, until a strange woman entered my bedroom unbidden, souring my mood. I didn't know how to defend myself. Who was this woman? She brought warm, calm orange demons, with less substance to them than the ones around most adults. In addition to having frail demons, she had a pale, wrinkled face, confirming her advanced years. My fear abated, as I didn't think any serious assassination plan would involve this elderly female. *However, she may plan to tie me up and breathe on me . . . yuck!*

"You must be wondering who I am, Hunter."

Ah . . . she's good! She reads minds like my mother. Another argument against her being evil. I nodded my head rather than further embarrass myself by demonstrating my virtual inability to speak.

"Aha . . . so you're a man of few words. That's OK. My name is Rose. I'm going to help take care of you. Not that you can't do it yourself, but I'm here in case you need anything.

"Today is Thursday, so we're going to get ready for school. Do you know what you need to do to get ready for school?"

Yes, I did. I needed to do all the usual things. I nodded again.

Rose answered, "Well, go ahead then. And I'll be downstairs getting you some breakfast. There's cereal down there. Is that what you want today?"

I nodded again. Maybe talking was overrated. She left my room, and I started getting ready.

After the usual morning routine, Rose drove me to school uneventfully, and brought me to the room where my group met. The kids hadn't changed one iota; they absently formed a circle, with their abysmal col-

lection of sour demons. Ms. Caldwell, however, had nearly doubled in size. She must have been eating nonstop since our last class. I clutched my lunch bag reflexively. It might not be safe from this glutton. Her demon had now turned so heavily purple that it reminded me of my mother's. The soothing warmth remained, but in addition to its massive enlargement, another difference lurked, slightly outside my capacity to identify.

Rose noticed my gaping mouth. She touched my shoulder and said, "Now, Hunter, it's not polite to stare."

But Ms. Caldwell was huge. She looked like she ate one of the kids. *Three, four, five . . . No, they're all here. Wait . . . I see something.* Faint, but clearly defined, about her midsection—another demon. And not just a demon from the ceiling, this was another person-type demon; a real demon. It was small, thin, a bit brownish, and had an indescribably bad taste, making my lips purse involuntarily. Although it was neither spicy nor red, it reminded me of the fiery demon that ate my leg. *Oh, no! Something is very wrong! She needs the hospital!*

"Hospital!" I yelled, with astounding clarity, given my profoundly limited vocabulary.

"Easy, now, Hunter. Ms. Caldwell doesn't need to go to the hospital yet, the baby isn't due for another few weeks. She's going to be just fine!"

Baby? What baby? This was very confusing. *She ate a baby?* I had to admit, I had no idea what was going on. Ms. Caldwell came to my rescue.

"Hunter, dear, it's so good to have you back. Won't you join the circle? You missed so much. Tori got a new blanket—"

Rose interrupted. "I'm sorry, Hunter, I have some errands to run for your mother. I'm going to go, but I'll be back to pick you up when school is over." She waved. "Go ahead and join the circle!"

I sat down among the others in my usual place across from Ms. Caldwell, who began the session with a spider poem. The overwhelming sights, sounds, and smells made it nearly impossible to stay present. My own demons emitted a sweaty odor, which made the unpleasant aroma from the other kids far worse. I feared for Ms. Caldwell's safety, but neither she nor Rose voiced any concern. I recalled how my mother missed the red demon, which nearly killed me by infecting my leg. Now a malodorous demon threatened to . . . to . . . I don't know what. I fidgeted anxiously

while the teacher began the session. I didn't want to make the same mistake, underestimating the devilish monsters. However, I remained powerless to convey my concerns adequately, and nobody believed me anyway. I struggled to regain my focus. The list. Getting back to the items on my laundry list of essential skills. That took precedence. I didn't really have much choice; I was lucky to get one word out earlier without sounding like a fool.

In our circle, we sang, made motions with our hands, and read a story. More accurately, Ms. Caldwell performed those actions while the kids watched absently, with the exception of an occasional coerced hand wave. I resisted falling into my private abyss. Instead, I listened carefully to her words. I knew all their meanings, even ones that she stopped to define. I imagined myself saying each of them. I formed my mouth as though making the sounds, but only when Ms. Caldwell's attention was directed at another child.

After nearly two hours, I glanced at my watch. Ms. Caldwell noticed, and her demon flashed a green blip. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I refrained from checking the time again. Her demon frightened me enough already. It would be unwise to aggravate it further. Instead, I kept focusing on her words, gaining confidence that I could speak some of them.

When Ms. Caldwell asked a question, she didn't wait for an answer, except when she called on me. Her piercing gaze suggested that she knew I could provide one. I never did.

For some strange reason, I refused to talk in front of these kids, or my teacher. It took an hour of internal debate to define my rationale. I knew that people treated me differently if they didn't think I could hear them. I suspected that the same would hold true if they didn't think I could answer. I argued to myself that if I could quietly learn everything I needed to know without giving away my progress, people would continue to leave me alone, rather than engage me into *doing* things. So I pretended I couldn't speak, and only listened. All day long, I continued secretly practicing the words Ms. Caldwell said. I smiled inwardly. Soon I'd be able to tell my mother about the demons.

When Rose came to pick me up, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. Today marked the first day I'd ever done anything meaningful. I noticed

that the school day lasted a lot longer than I expected. Between the opening poem, handwork exercises, songs, the brief walk outside, lunch, stories, and the time for peaceful reflection, I had my hands full remaining present throughout the course of the day. Fighting the boredom and monotony meant thinking of ways to occupy my mind, instead of jumping into the void, like I always had before. However, despite the taxing fatigue, I successfully completed the day, and relief flooded me as I leapt to my feet and ran over to the doorway where Rose waited.

Rose challenged me with her opening remark, “Hi, Hunter! What did you do in school today?”

I didn’t know if I should reveal the truth, say something noncommittal, or simply remain silent. As far as Rose knew, I didn’t speak, and much like earlier, I didn’t suspect that changing her perspective would help me any. Even so . . .

“Let’s go. Get your jacket,” Rose went on, resolving my dilemma. We got into the car and she drove toward home. Despite my huge success during the day, exhaustion caught up to me and I drifted away and missed the ride. My father’s deep voice stunned me back to consciousness.

“So, Hunter, how was your first day back at school? Anything new with your friends?” He paused and looked at me expectantly. While his demon primarily contained gold and blue, the pink color in it nagged at me, as though I should know what it meant. The demon was cold (even colder than mine), and it tasted very sweet, something that always made me feel somewhat close to my father. The smooth, full, and clear nature, and the shroud of purple made me want to impress him. I decided it was time. I shook off the surprise at finding myself on the couch in the living room, without my coat, and the brief sense of disappointment I felt toward myself about lapsing into the void.

“Tori got blanket, and Ms. Caldwell ate a baby,” I proclaimed. My father’s demons vibrated with a green and yellow musical quality starting with my first words and crescendoing the more I spoke. I felt a soothing sensation and more warmth than I’d ever felt around him before.

“Marissa, come in here! Hunter just told me that Ms. Caldwell ate a baby!”

My mother ran in, doubling the sounds and colors displayed by my father. "Hunter! I don't think Ms. Caldwell actually ate a baby. She's pregnant!"

I didn't know what she meant, exactly, but my mother read my mind and said, "She's going to have a baby. You know, a new child, like when you were a baby."

"Oh. How babies made?"

Both of my parents became quiet and the demons started to pulsate in waves. I got the feeling they wished I hadn't started talking yet.

Rose bustled in carrying some packages. "I've got the groceries," she started, and, registering the awkward energy of the family, she hurried along. "I'll just put them into the kitchen."

"We'll give you a hand. Come on, Hunter, let's go help Rose carry the groceries in from the car."

And so ended my first conversation.

I brought two bags from the car while my mother and Rose chatted about what to make for dinner. I ignored them, still passively curious about babies. Why couldn't they answer one simple question? Anger, accompanied by the color red, brewed ominously around my brain, and I noticed myself drifting away. I had to wrench myself back to consciousness. My father dropped his grocery bags onto the counter in the kitchen with a loud clunk, interrupting my trance.

"So, Hunter, tell me about Tori's blanket," he said. He directed me into the living room to sit down.

"Pink! Has frills. Old one very dirty; not sure ever wash. Had many holes in it." I stopped, somewhat fatigued, after giving my longest speech ever.

My father was nodding his head as though paying attention to every detail. It wasn't all that interesting a story. *Story . . . yes, story.* I drifted away to a previous time when my father would talk about kingdoms and princes, magical fantasies, and mystical realms. He spoke of foreign lands, dictators, revolution, politics, great men and women of history, inventions, science, numbers and mathematics, technology, languages and culture, wealth and poverty, economics . . . so many things, every night. I remember being mesmerized; my father was a great wealth of information.

In addition to telling me the meanings of words, he emphasized where they came from—Greek and Latin roots. “You can decipher the meaning of many words if you know their roots,” he’d told me. He spoke as though expecting me to understand everything, but I didn’t. His voice was comforting; a security blanket.

Eventually, though, the demons would always come, and I’d have to run away in fear, but there was nowhere to go! My terror grew exponentially as the demons changed—developing more flashes, smells, and pounding sounds. I had no choice but to escape them. When I found the empty place, I found true safety. There were no demons in the void. Unfortunately, my father couldn’t reach me there either. Eventually, he stopped trying.

* * * * *

Rose woke me up.

Fritzcloves! I missed the whole rest of the day. I went to the void before getting the chance to tell my father about the demons. *Uggghh! I can’t let that happen again!* Autism could be decidedly inconvenient sometimes.

Prompted by Rose, I started my morning routine. Once ready for school, I jumped into the front seat of the car, and fastened the belt all by myself. I hated the special car seat my mother always stuffed me into, and I wanted to take another step toward living like a normal person. Rose checked the belt, smiled, and we drove to the school. She brought me into the building and left me at the door to my classroom.

“Are you going to be OK going in by yourself?”

I nodded, and she smiled. I turned and entered the room, found my place in the circle, and waited for the teacher to start. Now that I knew I could make it through an entire day, I planned on making good use of the time. Right from the beginning of the session, I studied Ms. Caldwell’s voice, listening for word pronunciations, voice inflections, and tone. To speak properly, I had to understand more than the meanings of words. Forming proper sentences and making sense of each phrase took effort. Ms. Caldwell’s calm demeanor and controlled diction helped me learn. Nobody else in the class said anything at all, but that didn’t matter because my skills continued to grow. As the day went on, I gained confidence, but

I still didn't want to say anything aloud. Eventually, despite my intentions to stay present, I succumbed to boredom and drifted off.

* * * * *

I regained consciousness at home. Red anger boiled around my head as I cursed my inattention. The lure of the void defeated me again, even though I fought with all my might to remain present during school. Time elapsed during my absence, and I lost the opportunity to learn while languishing in the void. I bet the demons forced me away. They knew I wanted to regain control, and they were worried I'd win. They must be the reason I routinely turned into a pool of useless goo. I had to stop them, but I clearly couldn't do it alone. I needed someone very smart to help me defeat the demons once and for all. My father! My father would know what to do about the demons. I had to tell him immediately.

As I started to yell out for him, I realized with a sickening suddenness that I didn't know how. Do I call him *Father*? I guess. I'd heard people use the word *Dad* to refer to their male parent, but I didn't know if that would be right. I never learned his real name, either. I heard Dr. Goodreau call my mother Marissa, so at least I knew that. Frustration bit through me as I pondered the depths of my ignorance, and the reason for it. This *had* to stop.

My mother interrupted my surge of self-pity with her warm purple shadows. I absolutely needed to get rid of the demons, and I needed her help.

"Mom!" I started. Calling her that felt right. She flinched in surprise, showering me again with more demonic activity.

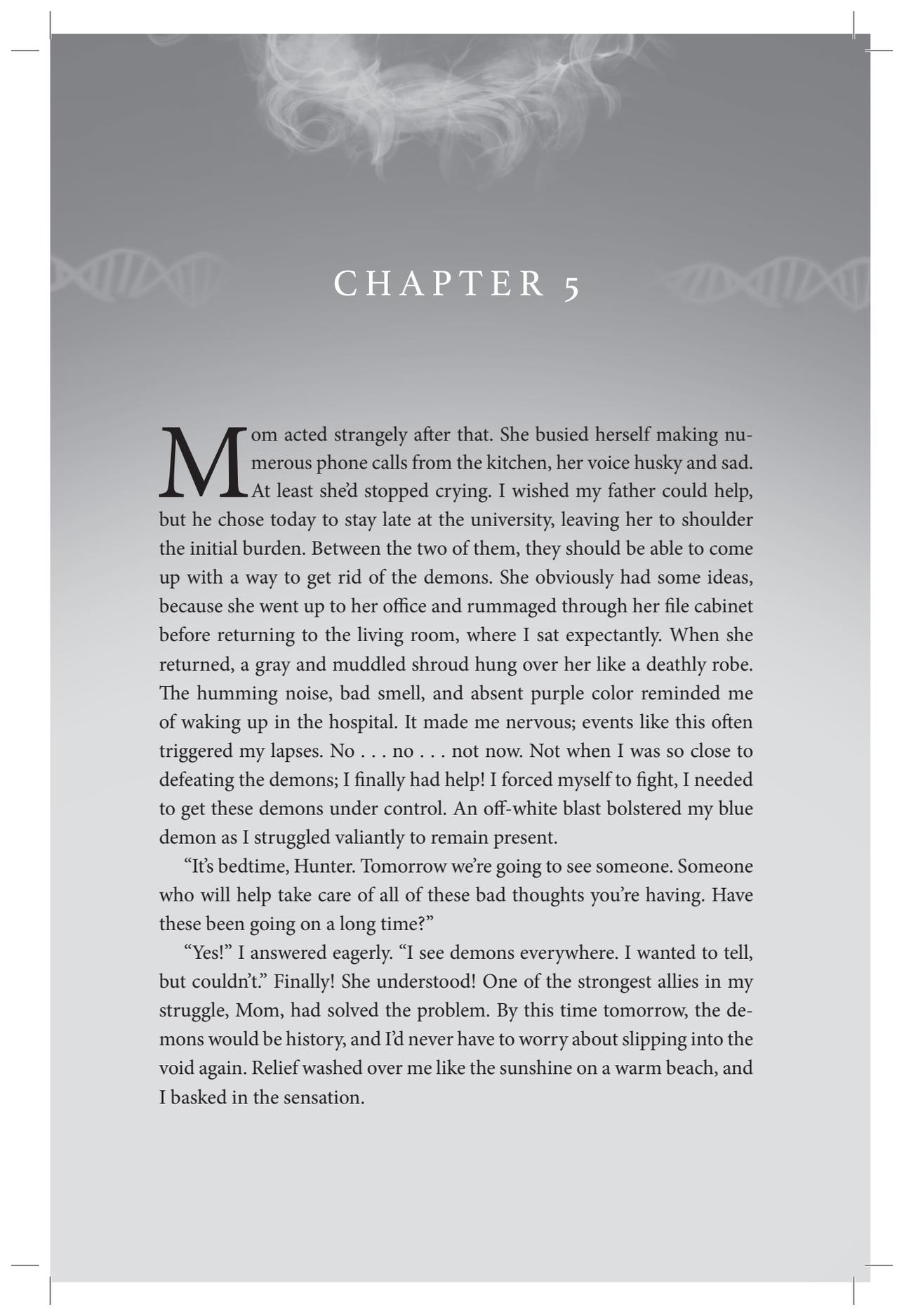
"Yes, dear?"

"I see demons. They scare me. Make me go away, and hurt me sometimes!" I added the last part while thinking of the red demon that almost killed me. My grammar clearly needed work, but the way she studied me suggested she understood. It felt as though a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I no longer had to fight my war against the monsters alone.

THE SIGHT *of* DEMONS

I pointed at her. “Purple demon!” I pointed to the space around me. “Blue!” Then I pointed at the spot where the infection raged. “Red demon tried to eat leg!” I finished with my emphatic plea, “Need get rid of them!”

Mom sat down on the chair and started crying as her demons turned gray.



CHAPTER 5

Mom acted strangely after that. She busied herself making numerous phone calls from the kitchen, her voice husky and sad. At least she'd stopped crying. I wished my father could help, but he chose today to stay late at the university, leaving her to shoulder the initial burden. Between the two of them, they should be able to come up with a way to get rid of the demons. She obviously had some ideas, because she went up to her office and rummaged through her file cabinet before returning to the living room, where I sat expectantly. When she returned, a gray and muddled shroud hung over her like a deathly robe. The humming noise, bad smell, and absent purple color reminded me of waking up in the hospital. It made me nervous; events like this often triggered my lapses. No . . . no . . . not now. Not when I was so close to defeating the demons; I finally had help! I forced myself to fight, I needed to get these demons under control. An off-white blast bolstered my blue demon as I struggled valiantly to remain present.

"It's bedtime, Hunter. Tomorrow we're going to see someone. Someone who will help take care of all of these bad thoughts you're having. Have these been going on a long time?"

"Yes!" I answered eagerly. "I see demons everywhere. I wanted to tell, but couldn't." Finally! She understood! One of the strongest allies in my struggle, Mom, had solved the problem. By this time tomorrow, the demons would be history, and I'd never have to worry about slipping into the void again. Relief washed over me like the sunshine on a warm beach, and I basked in the sensation.

Mom shook her head slightly. The sunshine rapidly dispersed behind a vast cloud cover, as I began to wonder if she really knew what to do about the demons.

“Everything is going to be just fine. I called Dr. Stonington. He made a referral, and we got an emergency appointment with Dr. Eisenberg, the one who recommended the antidepressants two years ago. She knows you, and she’ll be able to help. Now, it’s time for bed, so go get ready. I’ll tuck you in later.”

I ran up to my room, brushed my teeth, changed my clothes for bed, and hopped in, while my mind raced. Would I finally be rid of the demons? Was it going to be that easy? Why hadn’t I done this before? These demons had been driving me crazy for years. It would be so nice to be normal. I wondered how it would feel—I never knew anything except this demon-infested world and the void. My demons energetically raced through my thoughts, while my heart pounded. I could barely lie still because of my surging excitement.

When Mom appeared to tuck me in, I calmed down. It took several hours of tossing and turning to settle my nerves, but after picturing the myriad ways my life would improve without the demons, exhaustion finally took its toll and I fell asleep.

I woke in the morning, half expecting to see Rose, but Mom touched me on the shoulder with a soft, “Time to get up.” Another surge of anticipation raced through me as I recalled the conversation from the night before, and I jerked awake, staring up at her.

“Go ahead and get ready, Hunter, but we’re not going to school today. We’re going to see Dr. Eisenberg instead.”

The moment she left, I bolted out of bed, dressed in an instant, went to the bathroom, and raced downstairs for breakfast. The long-awaited prospect of eliminating the evil in my life tantalized me with its proximity, merely a car ride away. Before Mom had even finished her coffee, I jumped into the front seat of the car and strapped myself in, waiting for her to bring me to the promised appointment. She drove interminably slowly to the doctor’s office. We entered the building, our progress impeded by an old secretary and her porous orange-and-brown veil who forced Mom to fill out a few reams of paperwork while we waited. A younger, smiling

woman, whose bright demons exuded a soft, comfortable warmth, beckoned to us from the back.

“The doctor will see you now,” she said, and we followed her gesturing fingers into the exam room. A diploma hung on the back wall, and photos of dozens of children adorned the remainder of the wall space. A small window let in light, giving the whole room a sense of warmth that distinguished it from the waiting room.

“Hello, Hunter and Dr. Miller. I’m Dr. Eisenberg,” the tall, dark-haired woman said as she arose from behind her desk and extended her hand. Following Mom’s lead, I shook hands with Dr. Eisenberg, despite how awkward this felt. As I contacted her demons, which were bright blue, warm, and vibrant, I smiled. They reminded me of the blue that helped me fight the infection. Mom’s plan to enlist the services of a strong blue demon for this confrontation made perfect sense to me. My smile melted when I realized that the plan hinged on one of the demons betraying its kindred spirits.

Before I had more time to consider that thought, Dr. Eisenberg demanded my attention. “How are you feeling today, Hunter?” she asked. She spoke with a singsong voice, while a yellow-and-green wisp ran around her blue.

“I am fine,” I answered. Anxiety and anticipation thrummed from my blue demon, so I decided to just come out with it. “Mom said you get rid demons.”

Her posture changed perceptibly, as did the blue color surrounding her. The smooth and relaxing sensation gave way to a grating, pulsating wave train.

“Tell me about the demons,” she said, leaning more forward in her chair and staring intently at me, as if we alone populated the universe.

I rehearsed most of my answer last night during my period of insomnia. “I sees demons everywhere. I thought everyone did, but I am the one who see them. They have many colors and textures and smells and tastes. They change. Most times they don’t come after me, except fiery red one; it attacked me, so don’t like that one.”

I felt on a roll, so I added, “The blue one is good one, and there is blue one here, you is probably OK.”

Dr. Eisenberg took a moment to compose herself, and then asked us a series of questions that didn't have anything to do with the demons. Had I hit my head, did my mother take any medications when she was pregnant, was there a family history of psychosis, did I eat anything toxic, such as plants or chemicals from the garage, did I eat regularly, had I been sleeping, did I get a full medical exam recently, did I act aloof much of the time, had I been having other bizarre thoughts, did I listen to the voices, had they been telling me to hurt myself or others, and was I allergic to any medications? I started to get the feeling she wouldn't be able to do anything for me, and that she'd never heard of anyone who saw demons before. She made me look at a series of flash cards, asked a few more questions, and someone came in and took my pulse, blood pressure, and some blood from my arm. She left me in the room and spoke at great length with Mom, just outside the range of my hearing. My dismay mounted while the time ticked away, until I became so discouraged that I nearly slipped into the void. All was lost. She didn't know how to eliminate the demons, or she would have said how already. I held on to the faintest glimmer of hope. Finally, Dr. Eisenberg returned, with Mom.

"I'm going to start you on Prolixin, Hunter. Here are some samples," the doctor said as she handed Mom a small bag. "We'll try this, and I'll see you again in two weeks to evaluate your progress. The possible side effects are listed here, Dr. Miller. Most of them you don't have to worry about because Hunter's young and healthy, but if you notice any side effects, we may have to stop this medication. I think I can help you. Just take the medication as prescribed, and you'll hopefully stop seeing these hallucinations."

As we left Dr. Eisenberg's office, my excitement returned in full force. For the first time in my life, I would be free of the demons. Every few minutes during the car ride home, I asked Mom if I could have a pill.

"Wait until we get home, dear," she said every time.

I didn't want to wait. I wanted the demons gone. Now.

"You need to have a glass of water to take the pills." That seemed like a credible reason.

The moment we got home, I tore into the kitchen and got myself a glass of water. Mom gave me one of the pills from the sample pack. Nothing

happened. I felt like a monster truck after someone let the air out of its tires. I plopped onto the couch in the living room, disappointment overtaking me and nearly pushing me into the void.

“Dr. Eisenberg said it’s going to take a while for the pills to start working. You have to build up a concentration in your blood. So don’t get too discouraged if nothing happens right away,” Mom said.

She’d read my mind again, which I found reassuring. I relaxed a little. Her purple color was back in full force, which also made me feel better.

There was enough time in the day for me to go back to school, but Mom didn’t take me.

“Let’s take the rest of the day off, shall we? Perhaps you should just stay home and rest.”

I took a nap because I had nothing better to do.

At dinner, my father asked, “How was the doctor visit?”

“Hunter started on a new medication today, Prolixin. The doctor said it’s going to take some time for the medication to work, but she thinks it’s really going to help.”

“Well, Hunter,” he said, “it looks like you’ll be getting the help you need. That’s great news!”

They continued the conversation by talking about something else, but I stopped listening. I hoped my father would help get rid of the demons, but since he thought the medicine would work, I saw no reason to pursue the matter with him.

I spent the rest of the day trying to see if the demons would go away. My mother’s soft purple ones, and the gold and blue ones that favored my father, and even the tiny ones on the ceiling all persisted throughout the evening and into bedtime. I practiced speaking while nobody listened, because I could tell I still had a lot to learn. Watching TV and mimicking the voices on the screen helped improve my developing skills. Although I didn’t think the people on TV were real because they had no demons, they still spoke properly and the exercise helped.

By nine o’clock I nearly collapsed from exhaustion. Who knew that paying attention and staying alert for almost an entire day could be so taxing! I dragged myself into bed and fell asleep before my head hit the pillow.

* * * * *

Rose woke me in the morning by knocking on my bedroom door. “Time to get up!” she sang.

When I came fully to my senses, I noticed with bitter disappointment that the orange and white colors around her hadn’t diminished. I dressed quickly and ran downstairs, hoping to discover some change, but everything remained as it had been. Mom left my pill on the counter in the kitchen. As I took it, I remembered what she’d said about building up a concentration inside me. I looked around for the rest of the pills, but I couldn’t find them. If I took a few extra, the concentration would build up more quickly. I couldn’t find the stash, though, so I’d just have to endure. Perhaps the second pill would be enough.

As I got ready for school, I wondered how many other people saw demons. I should’ve asked Dr. Eisenberg more questions too, such as how long will it take to work, how many other people with my problem have taken this medicine, and did they all get better after taking it? Would I have to stay on it forever, or would I be healed once the demons left? I assumed she knew the right thing for me, being a doctor—but so far, nothing. My father agreed with the plan, which also gave me hope. I’d see Dr. Eisenberg in two weeks. By then I should be better, and I could ask her the rest of my questions. I continued privately practicing speaking so I could communicate better. I’d made progress, but I still had a long way to go.

Rose spurred me along, as I contemplated my psychiatrist while my cereal turned soggy from the milk. “It’s time to go, Hunter. Eat your breakfast and get into the car!”

Appropriately motivated, I finished my morning routine and jumped into the car, and we drove to school without incident.

“Have a good day!” chimed Rose, as she dropped me off. She no longer walked me into my classroom after the second day, apparently satisfied that I no longer required a chaperone.

Instead of going directly to my own room, though, I poked around several others. I didn’t quite know what to expect, never having seen other classes, but I wondered if any of the other children saw demons too. I

kept a healthy distance between myself and the concentration of demons in each of the rooms, in case they decided to gang up on me. Although I remained very intent on not losing control, I wasn't sure I could withstand a coordinated attack from a dozen different monsters all at once. The first room reminded me of my own classroom, but the kids were physically much smaller. The frail, bland, sour demons, generally colorless except some pink in half of them, matched the motionless children. The teacher's warm demon, orange and white, rivaled the density and substance of Ms. Caldwell's—before she ate the baby.

The room across the hallway contained many small demons, but unlike the ones belonging to the children of the other rooms, these varied in color and other characteristics. The teacher stood at the head of the class, with a warm, large, and strong, blue-orange specter. The size of the children in this room correlated closely with the previous room, but none of the demons looked frail or sickly. One demon displayed a burst of brilliant silver, encompassed by an icy brown hue. Another shone with deep blue, but a combination of sourness, cloudiness, and heavy vibration ruined the otherwise spectacular demon. Another boasted a bizarre combination of sweetness and decay. At the far corner, a light-colored shade of blue housed a smell so sharp and painful that I didn't know how anyone could get close to its human owner. Indeed, the other kids gave that poor chap a wide berth.

Exploring some of the other classrooms, I found the same curious displays. Each teacher possessed a large, warm, and colorful demon, and then a marvelous array of crazed noises and smells surrounded a gaggle of bright and strong demons. Nothing like my classroom at all, where all the demons looked like they were about to implode from lack of substance. Why wasn't I in one of these classes? Realization of my tardiness roused me to return to my own room, where a surprise waited.

Ms. Caldwell appeared ready to pop, both with her physical size, and her demons, which were much larger than any I'd seen around a person before. The frizzy purple demon whirred, covering the smaller brown one, which had grown and firmed over the last few weeks. Another woman with a large, somewhat warm, orange-and-cream-colored demon stood

near the front of the classroom. I held my head down as I crept in, and they looked at me and nodded. Ms. Caldwell spoke to the class.

“As I was saying, this will be my last week for a while. I’m going on maternity leave starting Monday. Mrs. Greene has agreed to be the substitute teacher for the rest of the year. I asked her to come to class today to observe how we do things, and hopefully she’ll get to know you a little bit before she takes over next week. Now circle up, everyone!”

Even though I had only one real day of experience in this class, yesterday, I felt I’d already caught up to everyone else. Mrs. Greene listened to Ms. Caldwell’s routine of reading, handclapping, storytelling, music, and silly games. Occasionally, Ms. Caldwell invited the students to participate in various ways, but nobody ever did. Sometimes, when certain “interesting” items were involved, such as Tori’s blanket, the demons around her displayed a subtle, yet noticeable change. Otherwise, they reminded me of larger versions of the inconsequential ones on the ceiling. I lost interest, and my mind wandered to the topic of expelling the demons more quickly so I could become a normal person. I was still focused on the notion that if I took extra pills, they’d work faster. An idea tickled my brain, and over the course of the school morning, it formed into a plan. We had lunch, trekked briefly outside into the cold, and resumed our indoor activities with little change from yesterday, other than the presence of Mrs. Greene.

I ignored everyone and everything until Rose arrived to collect me. My mood brightened for three reasons. First, I remained alert through the entire school day, although admittedly, I didn’t pay any attention to the class. I felt guilty, until I realized that nobody else did either, nor did they ever, as far as I could tell. The general inattention didn’t stop Ms. Caldwell from continuing with her routine. Second, I devised a solid plan. Because of my autism, I lacked the ability to focus long enough to create any type of conceptualized strategy, until today. I felt this was a giant step in my personal development. Finally, and most importantly, if my plan succeeded, I’d be rid of the demons forever. I could attend classes with the kids who had colorful demons, instead of the drab, frail ones that plagued my current schoolmates. With the prospect of normalcy suddenly feasible, I could hardly contain myself. The moment we were released, I bolted to

the car, ripped open the door and hopped inside, while Rose trotted along behind me, trying to keep up.

“Slow down there, big guy,” she said.

The car ride took forever, as Rose stopped carefully at every stop sign, increasing my restlessness. “Do you need to use the bathroom?” Rose queried when my fidgeting drew her attention. I didn’t answer, and she dropped the matter.

We finally arrived at home, and I jumped out and checked the garage to find both cars missing, freeing me to begin my plan. I doubted either of my parents were home, but I needed to be sure for the first step of my scheme to work. I entered through the garage door, waiting as patiently as possible in the kitchen for Rose, who eventually found her way inside.

“Are my parents here? I need to take my medicine,” I said, matter-of-factly. Both of Rose’s eyebrows touched her hair as she processed my nearly perfect diction. Practice paid off!

“OK, dear. Your mother said you started a new medication. Where is it?”

“I don’t know, she usually gets it for me.”

“Let me check the cabinets in the kitchen,” Rose replied, and off she went. I followed at a distance. I figured she’d lead me to the medication. Once I knew its location, I could sneak back later, take extra, and make it work faster. Dr. Eisenberg mentioned side effects, but I didn’t experience anything at all. Waiting another day to take more didn’t make any sense, since the pills weren’t hurting me in any way.

She found them in the upstairs bathroom, while I spied from the hallway. My reconnaissance complete, I bounded back down the stairs to the kitchen, and I waited for her to bring me one. As she met me in the kitchen, I hastily grabbed a glass of water to wash down the medicine. She gave me the pill, and I greedily accepted it and swallowed it in one swift motion.

“Careful,” she said. “You’ll choke on it taking it like that!”

I barely acknowledged her with a brief nod, before bouncing into the living room to await the second part of my enterprise.

I busied myself with nothing until I heard Rose banging several pots and pans, presumably preparing dinner. With the path to the stairway no longer under observation, I cautiously crept up to the bathroom, seeking

the pills in the cabinet. I found them easily enough, but I encountered a problem. The cap didn't come off. I twisted every which way, but it remained steadfast. I hadn't seen how Rose opened it, and it clearly didn't work like any other jar or bottle I'd encountered. I tried smacking it on the corner of the sink, but that made a loud noise, rattling all the pills inside, and still didn't work. I paused, hoping Rose hadn't heard, and then stared at the bottle.

Fritzcloves! If I stepped on or smashed the bottle with something heavy, I might break the pills, effectively ruining my strategy. Thwarted by a simple pill bottle! I guess I needed a backup plan. I replaced the unyielding container back into the cabinet, and stewed angrily in my bedroom, contemplating my options, until I heard the sound of the garage door opening.

I waited for Rose to leave, and embarked on my secondary idea as my mother entered the house.

"I need to take my medication!" I bellowed from the kitchen.

"Uh, yes, dear, of course. I'll get it for you." She went to the stairs as I trailed behind, but she read my mind again. "You go get yourself a glass of water, and I'll bring it down. You don't have to follow me upstairs."

Without seeing how she opened the bottle, I couldn't take more; I had to wait for her to administer each one. At least I could get Rose to give me an extra one, anyway.

We ate dinner, and I played with a few previously untouched toys. The stuffed animals made noises when squeezed or pressed, and I bopped them into one another to hear them. My parents ignored me as usual, and when nine o'clock rolled around, I went to bed willingly. I fell asleep immediately, grateful for the opportunity to rest. I found all this thinking and planning exhausting.

* * * * *

I awoke Saturday morning to sunlight streaking through my bedroom window, challenging me to arise and do something. However, with no school, no responsibilities, and no motivation to do anything other than take my medication, I sat in bed instead. Upon a second round of prod-

ding, I got up, dressed, and went downstairs. After a light breakfast, Mom forced me to go outside and play, and I grudgingly acquiesced. I spent more time getting ready than actually playing outside, but the effort satisfied Mom.

Without Rose, I couldn't score any extra pills, but I did get two doses on Saturday, and I would get two more on Sunday. I didn't want to go to the void, but I also didn't want Mom to make me do anything else, so I pretended to be absent by staring out the window. This worked surprisingly well. I passed the time trying to concoct a method of safely opening the troublesome bottle, but without knowing the key to removing the cap, I couldn't come up with anything. Sunday copied Saturday, the doldrums only punctuated by meals and another lame attempt to play outside. I flipped through the picture books and tried unsuccessfully to stack them up in the shape of a giant box, but the structure kept falling down whenever I added more than three books. Giving up, I went to my room and collapsed into my beanbag chair.

I resisted the urge to drift away, even though it would be a lot easier to pass the time. I considered what life might be like without demons. Would I miss them when they were gone? Perhaps the blue one, which remained steadfastly by my side, but definitely not the red one. However, even the blue one represented my abnormality, making it unwelcome too. Whether it was seeing demons, or autism, or any other peculiarity, I wanted no part of anything remotely unique. I wanted to be like everyone else. I fell asleep Sunday night dreaming of a demonless world.

Monday morning, I noticed no significant change in the demons, and I sleepily dragged myself out of bed. Feeling slightly awry, I suspiciously checked my watch to make sure I hadn't lost any more time, but my watch confirmed the expected date—Monday, March 31. After shaking myself fully awake, I performed my morning routine as quickly as possible, and Rose brought me my pill and then drove me to school. I had no energy to check the other classrooms, so I plopped into my spot in the circle and waited. Once class started, the day became so monotonous that I drifted off to semiconsciousness very quickly. Mrs. Greene took no notice, and she continued with her boring and senseless monologue. My active participation or presence was neither required nor expected, but I main-

tained enough awareness to eat, go to the bathroom once, and stand up to leave when Rose showed up to take me home. As I stood up, I belatedly noticed that Justin missed school. I recalled the days I'd been out, and wondered if the other kids noticed when I hadn't shown up. I doubted it.

Rose drove me home in silence, and upon entering the kitchen, I asked her for my medication, which she provided while I obtained a glass of water from the tap. Afterward, at Rose's insistence, I went outside, passing the time by wandering in circles around the house until Mom got home. My single-minded goal of obtaining the next dose of medication drove me to run back inside as Mom opened the garage door, but once inside, I disconcertedly realized I had to wait for Rose to leave to get the next dose. A short while later, Mom cheerfully handed over my coveted prize, and I swallowed it hastily, this time choking on the water as some of it went down the wrong pipe. Mom pummeled me on the back until the coughing fit abated—alternately asking if I was all right and chastising me for taking the medication too rapidly.

Dinner with Mom included reheated frozen chicken and leftover vegetables. My father's conspicuous absence for the fifth day in a row stirred my otherwise disengaged consciousness.

"Where's Dad?"

"He's working, honey. He may be gone for a while, but he'll be back when he's done," she said. Her nonchalance calmed me, and I let the matter drop. Fatigue kept me from thinking straight anyway, and I even forgot to brush my teeth before crawling under my inviting sheets.

Tuesday morning I struggled, barely able to muster the motivation to stand. The unsteadiness worsened as I started my routine, but I couldn't identify the exact reason. I might be getting sick. I vaguely recalled Mrs. Greene mentioning something about a spring virus. My blue color had faded some, although no red demon had taken its place, which I found reassuring.

I didn't remember getting ready for school or going, but I found myself in the circle. I checked my watch as a torrent of disappointment flooded over me. Despite my gargantuan efforts to remain present, I lost another six hours of time. The only silver lining appeared as I recognized the end of class. At least I didn't have to sit through another boring day.

After returning home with Rose, and asking for and receiving my next dose of medication, I lost more time. When dinner ended, I asked Mom for my evening dose. I took my third pill of the day while Mom's purple demon mocked me. It showed no signs whatsoever of getting smaller or going away. My initial excitement over eradicating the demons had noticeably withered. I began to doubt if the medicine would work at all. The only consequences included more lost time, and the increasing weakness of my own blue demon, the only one I really liked. By bedtime, exhaustion engulfed me. I fell asleep before I could even put on my pajamas.

I woke up the next morning with Rose physically attacking me.

"Aaahhh!" I yelled, and she stopped.

"It's time to get up, Hunter," she said, as though nothing was wrong. "You're a big sleepyhead today. You weren't waking up!"

Well, maybe so, but that didn't give her the right to shake me by the shoulders. A startling discovery washed away my irritation. The demons on the ceiling, usually very small to begin with, faded into the painted swirls, now virtually invisible. I chastised myself briefly for not looking at Rose's demons, but I hurriedly dressed and went downstairs for breakfast, and I noticed more changes. Indeed, Rose's colors had lightened considerably as well. The medication worked! I rushed to get ready, including taking my morning dose, suddenly ecstatic. Time flew by, and when I sat in the circle across from Mrs. Greene, I felt another surge of progress. Most of the other kids' demons had lapsed into indistinguishable clouds, and Mrs. Greene's demon had thinned to the point of being barely recognizable.

After a brief celebratory phase, exhaustion dragged at my body and mind. I felt completely drained. Eventually I gave in and lost time. As I returned to awareness near the end of the school day, I realized that the medication worked, but the demons persisted. They fought back. Instead of just leaving, they pulled me even more ferociously toward the void. As Rose drove me home from school, I decided the time had come to be rid of them completely. After she gave me my regular dose, I waited in the living room for her to resume her work in the kitchen. When the coast cleared, I went to the garage, where my parents kept the tools. Poking around among the boxes, I found a sharp-ended device that appeared

suitable for my task. I could use it to pry the top off the bottle, take the pills I needed, and squeeze the top back on so nobody would notice.

I stumbled up the stairs and found the bottle in the bathroom. I grabbed it in my left hand, and holding the tool in my right, I attempted to pry off the top. Instead, the sharp end pierced my left palm, poking through to the other side. The red demon snarled and spit its spicy taste, and the pain made me cry out briefly. It took several moments to recognize that I'd just put a sharp object through my hand again. The last time, with the pencil, Mom took me to the hospital right away. But right now I was so close to accomplishing my goal. I needed to finish off the demons once and for all, so I pulled out the tool to try the lid again. Blood splattered all over, including onto the bottle, which slipped from my grasp and landed on the floor. The red demon mocked me as it sucked the blood from my hand, which didn't function properly at all. I heard Rose coming, forcing me to abandon my quest. I grabbed a towel, cleaned off the pill bottle and stuffed it back into the cabinet, closing it quickly.

The blood covered everything, so I started mopping it up with the towel. Rose came in, her eyes transfixed on the bloody towel.

"Hunter! What happened?" she shrieked.

I didn't think she saw me replace the pill bottle, so I didn't know why she sounded so upset. It was my hand, not hers. My demons, led by the angry red one, thrummed and vibrated in waves as I answered, "I cut it by accident."

She grabbed me forcibly, gazing at my hand. The puncture hole in my palm didn't look terrible, but when she turned my hand over and saw the blood coming from the other side, and the bloody tool, she surmised the situation correctly.

"You poked a screwdriver through your hand? What were you thinking?" she yelled.

She whisked me toward the car, pausing only to grab her bag and car keys, and soon we were racing toward the hospital, a path I remembered. Along the way, she phoned Mom, who didn't answer. Rose left a voice message, "Hunter cut his hand, so we're going up to the hospital. It's not bad, but he may need some stitches."

While we sat in the waiting room, fatigue gripped at me as my demons

fought for control of my injured hand. The demons around the other patients and families blurred into a quagmire of slush, indistinct and confusing.

I must have drifted away, because I woke up as a man surrounded by blue with pink highlights finished putting a very large bandage all over my hand and wrist.

Mom appeared and spoke to the doctor at the doorway of my exam room. "So you're sure there won't be long-term damage?"

"Yes, Mrs. Miller, he managed to miss all the major structures in the hand, which is quite an impressive feat, given that it was a through-and-through laceration. However, just to be on the safe side, we're going to put him on some antibiotics. I washed it out thoroughly, but these types of cuts are more prone to infection than regular wounds. Now, you said he's up-to-date on his tetanus?"

"Yes, he just had a shot last time."

"Mrs. Miller, is there any reason why he might want to hurt himself? Is he prone to this type of self-destructive behavior?"

"Dr. D'Allesandro, I'm sure this was just an accident. Hunter does take Prolixin, but he's never tried to hurt himself before. Did he tell you what happened?" she glanced my way as she said this, and noticed me looking back.

"He hasn't said anything. He's autistic, right?"

Mom ignored him and rushed over to my bed. "How are you feeling, dear?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry I cut myself. I know I shouldn't have been playing with the screwdriver, but I was bored. I looked for something to play with in the garage. I won't play with that any more. Maybe we can get some new picture books?"

She hugged me, and gave the doctor a stern look.

"Let me fill out the paperwork so you can get home, Mrs. Miller," he said. Soon after, we left.

When we got home, Mom appeared more frustrated than ever. I supposed that she wanted me to be normal as much as I did. My father returned home, and after some quiet conversation, I heard the two of them arguing loudly.

“The Agency needs me for this,” he said.

“Your son needs you! He’s making progress!”

“What, he said a few words? So he’s what, eight or nine years behind a normal child? And he still can’t get past this self-mutilating behavior?”

“You of all people should know that a child needs a father! You have to give him a chance!”

“I gave him a chance. Every night for two years. He just drifted away every time. Maybe you can get him admitted to the hospital again.”

“No!” Mom said emphatically, and that ended it.

I resolved to try even harder to stop behaving so badly.



CHAPTER 6

I woke the next morning even more sluggish than usual. I slowly dressed, bumping into the bureau several times, and nearly losing my balance in the process. My bandaged hand didn't help matters. After a bathroom stop, I descended the stairs on my way to the kitchen and ate the cereal Rose prepared for me. She left out two pills, one an antibiotic, the other my regular medicine. I took them both. The fog never lifted, and when Rose dropped me off at school, I still felt engulfed in a haze.

Once in my classroom, I didn't even try to stay present. As I slipped into the void, I kept a connection to the outside world, so I knew when to eat lunch, when to go outside for our special break, or when Rose came to pick me up. I didn't have to maintain awareness of the class, but I could easily return to alertness with the proper stimulation. This technique allowed me to get through the entire school day without the torture of listening to Mrs. Greene for any length of time. Since there weren't any expectations of me during class, this worked wonderfully. I fit in perfectly with the other children, who had long since mastered this very same tactic. When school ended, I felt my adrenaline kick in, because I knew today would be the day I eliminated the demons. Just as soon as I got home.

Rose picked me up at the usual time. She stopped at the grocery store prior to her arrival at the school, and at her behest I carried one of the bags into the house. I grew impatient, but after yesterday's disaster, I knew I had to be more careful. After she put away the groceries, I waited while she tidied up in the kitchen. After several minutes, I shuffled off to the garage to get the screwdriver. Surprise and panic inundated me when I discovered that Mom or Dad had removed all the tools. Everything. There wasn't so much as a paper clip within reach. I stared at the shelves that

used to hold the toolboxes, at a complete loss. How on earth was I supposed to get that bottle open?

I sought a replacement strategy, but my ability to concentrate abandoned me. I struggled to calm my nerves. I needed an object with a sharp tip—something I could use to pry open the top of the bottle. After an eternity of internal strife, I considered a table knife. Of course . . . that would do it. We had plenty of knives in the kitchen, so I headed that way from the garage. As I arrived in the doorway, I saw Rose in the kitchen making dinner. Under no circumstances would she let me take a knife if she saw me trying, so I detoured into the living room.

I landed on the couch and dropped my head into my hands, fighting despair. Although my brain ached from this incessant plotting, another idea grazed my consciousness. If I made Rose leave the kitchen, I could get a knife from the drawer. Such a simple concept, yet I could barely fathom it. I needed a distraction—something to occupy her time and attention long enough for me to obtain my tool, get upstairs to the bathroom, unroof the bottle, and take an extra pill. An old lamp sat on a high pedestal next to the couch, and it had multiple interconnected panes of glass that allowed the light through. Perfect, I thought. I knocked it over, creating a clamorous explosion of shattering glass, and scattering shards everywhere.

“Rose!” I yelled. “I’m sorry, I accidentally hit the lamp, and it broke!”

Rose appeared, red-faced and muttering.

“I’m really sorry, I’ll clean it up!”

“No, dear, I’ll take care of it. Just please be more careful!”

While she retrieved a vacuum from the closet, I dashed as quickly as I could into the kitchen and grabbed one of the sharp knives from the drawer. I thought I would wait to go upstairs, but Rose began picking up the large pieces of glass and vacuuming the entire living room floor, which provided ample time to get to the bathroom and pry open the pill bottle. Even though I felt considerable time pressure, I moved slowly and methodically, making sure not to repeat the disastrous results of the previous venture. My bandaged hand supplied a constant reminder of the botched attempt. Carefully positioning the knife underneath the top, so as to avoid sticking it through some part of my own body, I lifted with a

slow pressure. It didn't budge. *Arrrghh!* This tiny plastic bottle held the key to my salvation, and even with a sharp knife, it remained unyielding. I refused to give up. As I persevered, I noticed shards of plastic detached from the top as a result of the pressure I applied with the knife. At first, I panicked. Mom would see this for sure. She would know what happened. On the other hand, the frayed plastic spurred another idea. Instead of trying to pry off the cover, I repeatedly dragged the sharp, serrated knife in a sawing motion across the neck of the bottle. As the plastic splinters rained down into the sink, a small hole opened up in the bottle, even though the cap remained fully attached.

At that instant, I heard the vacuum turn off. I thought Rose might be coming up the stairs, so I quickly put the medication back and ran toward my bedroom. Moments later, I heard the loud clink of glass hitting the trash can in the garage, and then Rose's footfalls heading back toward the kitchen. False alarm. I rushed back to the bathroom and begin sawing again in earnest, enlarging the hole to the point where I could extract one of the pills.

I upended the bottle and wiggled it, spilling more plastic fragments all over the sink, and then I used the knife to tease three pills into my uninjured hand. I grabbed the cup adjacent to the toothbrushes and filled it half full with water from the tap. I popped all three into my mouth, washing them down with the water. I wasn't sure how many pills it would take to expunge the demons, but I randomly selected three. My blue demon, thin after a week of Prolixin, remained unchanged despite the triple dose. I left the bathroom and went to the top of the stairs, to check the effect on Rose's orange color, but that, too, stubbornly glowed.

I waited about ten minutes, and to my great horror, nothing happened. Three proved inadequate, so I returned to the bathroom, shook the container again to draw out five more. Pausing briefly, I stuffed all five into my mouth and swallowed them with more water. A wave of nausea ensued, along with a brief bout of crampy belly pain, but after a few minutes, the discomfort passed. An obvious change in the density of my blue demon stoked renewed excitement, along with new confidence in the power of the medication.

After another ten minutes, I started feeling very sleepy. Although the

demon faded considerably, it persisted, along with a thumping percussion and sourness that wrinkled my nose and reminded me of the kids from my class. Encouraged by the partial success, I decided to destroy the demons forever with one more dose. Ten. A nice, round number. Ten pills. That would do it for sure.

It took me a while to get the pills out of the makeshift hole. I kept fumbling them, and I had to keep picking the fallen ones off the floor. Instead of trying to hold them in my hand, I put the recently extracted ones on the counter while I wiggled the bottle to get more. I lost count twice. I thought about just cutting the whole top off, but I couldn't remember what happened to the knife. Once I got out the full ten, I start taking them two at a time. Five at a time made me sick, so I went with two. I had no doubt whatsoever that ten would work, so I put the bottle back. I had nearly emptied it anyway.

As I walked to my room, I started feeling speeling. The ceiling feeling, wheeling and dealing, senses reeling, not healing, unappealing. The pasty tasty of dry spacey in my facey spread like dread as fire on a wire grew higher on my entire body. Losing and woozing felt like snoozing but using the dance to combat the imbalance. I shook book look mistook the bed head dread fled sled dogs hogs. Slip, trip, flip, corn chip with dip, a strip on the lip left for us to quip. Interrupt the corrupt's sup, but must trust not to bust on the dust. Fall in the hall into the wall, no longer tall but bawl, like a brawl; must crawl. Voices with choices, rejoices in the noises. Screams, dreams, teams of greens, inside beams and in between. Sirens and firens up higher on the cot where the rot fought and fought but for naught, the lights went out and darkness replaced the din.

* * * * *

I couldn't move. I didn't feel right. My head pounded. My blue demon looked sickly pale. I opened my eyes to emptiness. The room, devoid of furniture except the bed, spun while I regained my senses. My field of view included thick, padded walls, a door with a tiny window, and a light fixture impossibly high overhead. I wriggled and found my movement restricted. My wrists and ankles bore soft restraints, attaching me to the

bed. What on earth was going on? A brief inventory revealed my clothes, including my watch, had been taken. Instead, I wore a blue garment with the texture of newspaper. Without my watch, I had no idea how long I'd been out, but I felt like I had been sleeping for a week. I struggled to make a noise, and eventually I managed a stifled groan. As I pondered my condition, I heard the door rattle and someone came into the room, with demons in tow. Recall descended into my brain, and I felt panic rise in my throat as I realized I'd lost the battle with the demons. And now I found myself trapped and unable to move. I nearly screamed as a husky woman entered.

"How are you feeling?" She struck me as a nurse because of the warm, white and orange colors around her.

"They're still not gone," I said in a hoarse whisper, and then instantly regretted it. For all I knew, the demons recruited her to make sure I didn't eliminate them entirely, and I just gave away a critical piece of information.

"Who?"

Or she had no idea about the demons.

"Oh, um, the ropes. Why am I being held prisoner?" My voice returned to normal as I finished the sentence.

"Dr. Eisenberg thought you were a danger to yourself, so she ordered restraints. Let me get the doctor and you can talk, now that you've calmed down."

Obviously she was lying. They'd imprisoned me, and they made up the story about my psychiatrist to trick me. I needed to find a way out of here. I hated being tied up. My mind raced as another wave of paranoid panic brought my body to a convulsing fit. I tried to calm down, but rage over my failure only fueled my panic. As the spasms abated, my head cleared enough to think. First things first, I had to get free from these shackles. Then I had to get someone to let me out of this room. I had no idea where they'd taken me, probably some secret place, and I had no clue how I'd ever get out of here. Maybe Mom could help. I needed to send a message to her, although how I could possibly accomplish this task in my current state remained a mystery.

Amazingly reading my mind again, Mom appeared at the tiny window, causing a wave of relief to pour over me. I heard a loud clanking while

someone attempted to circumvent the locking mechanism on the door, which held stubbornly for an eternity. When it finally gave way, I noticed Mom's profoundly agitated purple color, bearing nearly the same ghastly smell I'd had when I took the Prolixin earlier, along with a clanging noise that I may have confused with the sound of the lock. Another person, dressed nicely like a doctor, trailed behind while Mom rushed to my side, engulfing me with the best hug possible given my restraints. She brushed back my hair and stared into my face.

"Are you OK?"

"I'm so happy to see you!" I breathed. She smiled and hugged me again. A calm yellow interspersed with her purple.

"How are you feeling, Hunter?" the doctor asked.

I'd already forgotten about him. I noticed very little blue around him. His demons glowed with a mix of brown, orange, and pink. Although he had a badge like other doctors, it made little sense that a man without any blue could be a physician.

"Can you take those things off now?" Mom asked impatiently.

He looked at me and explained, "Dr. Eisenberg—you remember her, right?—is concerned that you're a danger to yourself. Between this and your highly erratic behavior, we all agreed that restraints were necessary."

The blue-less doctor needed to believe I didn't represent a danger to myself, and I had to remain calm. Although my rage over being captured and held hostage boiled, I controlled it, and said simply, "I'm not going to hurt myself."

Mom looked angrily to the doctor, who folded under her brutal gaze. "OK, yes, we can take off the restraints. Shelly?" The nurse came in and released the Velcro straps. He continued. "So, Hunter, what happened?"

"What do you mean?" I answered, not willing to make another mistake.

"You took an overdose, and then tried to beat up your poor babysitter."

Lying again. I had no idea how to answer. Obviously he had his own version of events. Since I hadn't remained present, I couldn't dispute them, so I didn't say anything. Whatever I said, he surely would use it against me to keep me locked up.

"So what's your side of the story?" he asked.

“Can I hear your side of the story first?” I replied, stalling for time. I had no idea why this interrogation was necessary. I could tell I’d already lost the battle.

“Well, young man, your mother was worried because she thought you were trying to kill yourself. And then they thought you might be trying to hurt your babysitter for stopping you from finishing yourself off. You’re a young man, but you still caused her significant pain; she came into the ER for evaluation. You hit her several times before the ambulance crew got there, and they had to sedate you to bring you to the hospital. We found the broken pill bottle, with twenty-two pills missing. Everyone is just concerned for your safety, you know.”

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself, I was trying to kill the demons!” I blurted. I berated myself immediately, shocked at my lack of self-control. The only people who knew about the demons were Mom and Dr. Eisenberg. She tried to help me get rid of the demons. I needed to speak with her, she would understand. I took a deep breath and tried to stop my heart from pounding outside of my chest. As the phony doctor started scribbling something on his note pad, I managed to say more calmly, “Can I speak with Dr. Eisenberg?”

“She’s in the office today instead of the hospital, but I’ll report to her. She makes rounds in the morning. You can see her then,” he answered.

“I have to stay here until morning?” I asked, unable to keep the rising panic out of my voice.

“Probably a lot longer than that,” said the man, and he chuckled a bit under his breath. I wanted to hit him, but he left.

Mom came over and hugged me again. My fate sealed, I lapsed back into the void.

* * * * *

Dr. Eisenberg appeared before my eyes, and I wondered what she was doing in my bedroom. I felt her warm, blue, quiet, and supportive presence, and she paused, noticing my confusion.

After a few moments, she spoke softly, “Good morning, Hunter.”

When I regained my bearings, I felt my temper rising over my continued imprisonment. With Herculean effort, I quashed the sense of indignation and responded, equally calmly, “Hello, Dr. Eisenberg.”

“So what happened?”

I wished I had time to work on my answer to that question. I should’ve expected it, but alas, I had nothing. I needed time to think, since I’d stupidly wasted the last several hours by dropping off into the abyss.

“I’m sorry. I just woke up.”

“Take your time, Hunter. They said you overdosed on the pills I prescribed. What made you do that?”

I took comfort that she didn’t lie to me, unlike the other guy. Maybe she’d let me out of here after all if I just told the truth.

“I didn’t overdose, I just took ten to try to get rid of the demons. You said that the medication wouldn’t work until it got to a high enough level in my blood, and I wanted the demons gone. I tried three, and that didn’t work. So, I tried five, and that didn’t work either. I took ten, and I really don’t remember what happened after that.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “Well, they said you tried to hurt Rose, your caretaker. She came into the ER with some minor abrasions and contusions, or scratches and bruises. You hit her several times, Hunter. Do you remember that?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “I wouldn’t hurt Rose!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you say that. It must have been a result of the medication overdose. You can’t take more than one of those at a time, Hunter, or it will have side effects. One of the possible side effects is suicidality, or wanting to hurt yourself. In this case, taking so many pills made you hurt Rose. Do you understand?”

I understood. The demons didn’t want to go down without a fight. They made me attack Rose so I wouldn’t be able to get rid of them completely, once and for all. And now they were back, and punishing me for trying to get rid of them at all. I needed a different strategy. The idea came to me in a flash, and sounded very plausible. I knew how to get out of here.

“Yes, Dr. Eisenberg. But it worked! I got rid of the demons! I’m very sorry I hurt Rose, but I feel so much better now that the demons have left!

You fixed me!”

Dr. Eisenberg leaned back and frowned. Her demons flashed from brilliant blue to green with some pulsating waves. She didn’t believe me. Even so, she held her tongue and stared at me contemplatively for a long while. I hoped she’d let me leave, but I’d failed to convince her of my safety so far. I tried another tack.

“I know what I did was wrong, but there’s no reason for me to take the pills anymore. The only reason I did the bad things in the first place was because of the demons. With the demons gone, I don’t need the pills, and the pills are why I hurt Rose. I am *sooo* sorry I hurt Rose. I didn’t mean to, I promise! But I won’t be hurting anybody ever again!”

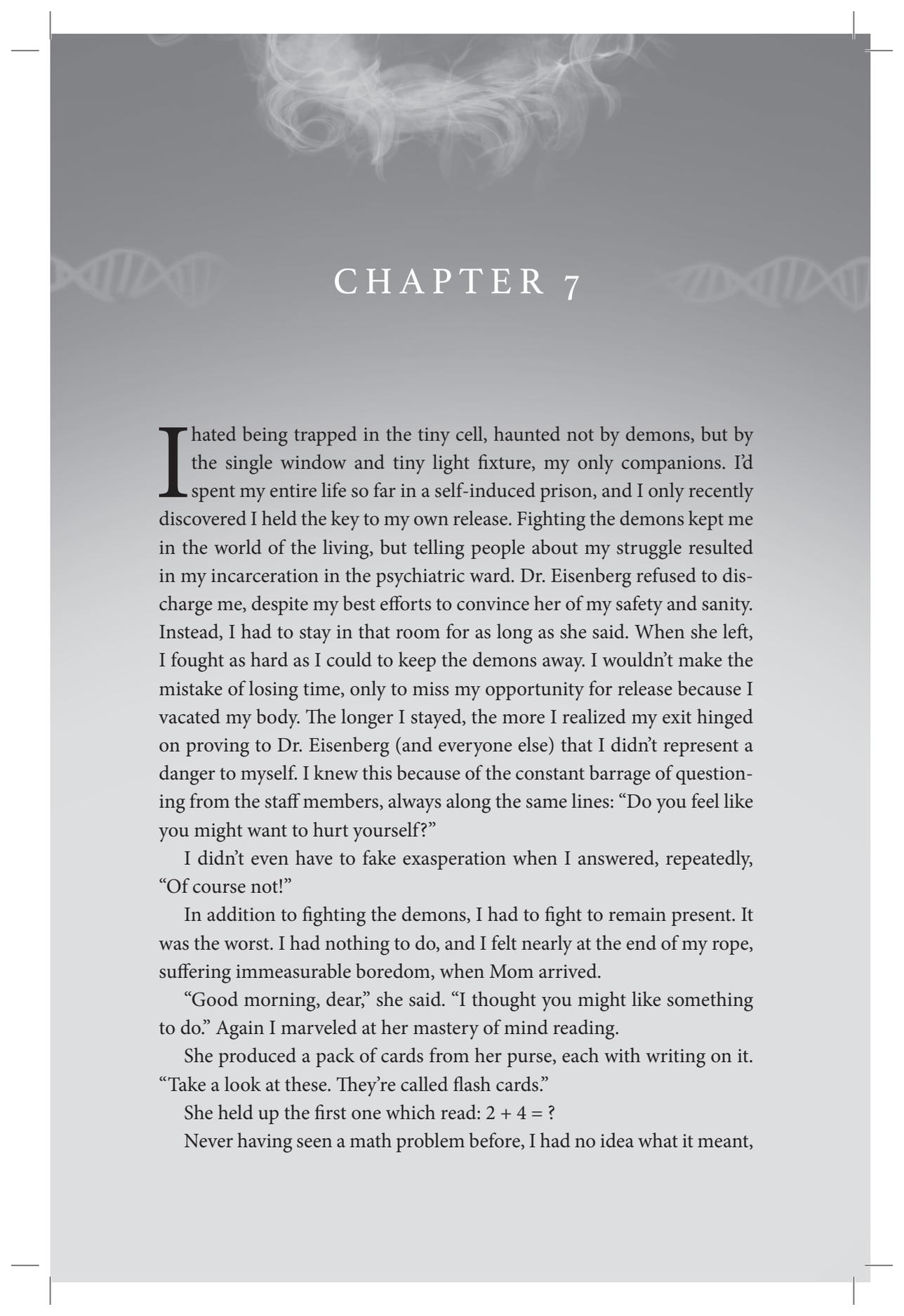
“We’ll have to see about that, Hunter,” said Dr. Eisenberg in a cautious tone. She packed up her notebook and knocked on the door to leave.

“Can I please just go home?” I implored.

“Let’s give it a little more time,” she said, as the door opened.

Fritzcloves! I stormed off to the void to escape the horrible prison.



The page features a dark grey background with decorative elements. At the top, there are wispy, smoke-like patterns in a lighter shade. On either side of the chapter title, there are faint, stylized DNA double helix structures. The chapter title 'CHAPTER 7' is centered in a white, serif font.

CHAPTER 7

I hated being trapped in the tiny cell, haunted not by demons, but by the single window and tiny light fixture, my only companions. I'd spent my entire life so far in a self-induced prison, and I only recently discovered I held the key to my own release. Fighting the demons kept me in the world of the living, but telling people about my struggle resulted in my incarceration in the psychiatric ward. Dr. Eisenberg refused to discharge me, despite my best efforts to convince her of my safety and sanity. Instead, I had to stay in that room for as long as she said. When she left, I fought as hard as I could to keep the demons away. I wouldn't make the mistake of losing time, only to miss my opportunity for release because I vacated my body. The longer I stayed, the more I realized my exit hinged on proving to Dr. Eisenberg (and everyone else) that I didn't represent a danger to myself. I knew this because of the constant barrage of questioning from the staff members, always along the same lines: "Do you feel like you might want to hurt yourself?"

I didn't even have to fake exasperation when I answered, repeatedly, "Of course not!"

In addition to fighting the demons, I had to fight to remain present. It was the worst. I had nothing to do, and I felt nearly at the end of my rope, suffering immeasurable boredom, when Mom arrived.

"Good morning, dear," she said. "I thought you might like something to do." Again I marveled at her mastery of mind reading.

She produced a pack of cards from her purse, each with writing on it. "Take a look at these. They're called flash cards."

She held up the first one which read: $2 + 4 = ?$

Never having seen a math problem before, I had no idea what it meant,

but Mom read it off to me. “What is two plus four?”

I didn’t know. I should know, but I didn’t. I just stared at the card. Another reminder of the scores of skills I lacked, as a result of hiding from the demons.

Mom went on. “OK, do you remember the numbers? We went over them when you got your watch. They are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten.” She counted them out on her fingers as she went through the numbers. “Oh, and if you don’t have any, that’s zero.”

Of course, I thought. I’d already learned to tell time, but I never thought about using the numbers for much else, other than counting.

She went on. “If you have two fingers,” she held up two fingers to demonstrate, “and add four fingers,” she continued to mime, “then how many fingers do you have?”

I mentally pictured a line of numbers, and saw the answer. “Six,” I said. Now that I understood the question, I knew the answer easily.

Her demons overpowered my ability to hold them out, as they swirled and glistened with warm yellow and purple. Although these demons felt good, I tried to keep them out anyway. I had lost too much to the demons already, and I made up my mind to stop giving in to them.

“Yes! Very good!”

The strain of suppressing the demons must have shown on my face, because Mom drew back some, and said, “I guess that’s enough for today, you look tired. We can do more tomorrow if you want.”

“That would be great,” I said. I had so many holes in my knowledge base. I should start filling them in while I was stuck in the hospital. With just Mom here, I thought I could focus on learning, because her demons never attacked me—and, judging by their warmth and soothing character, I doubted they ever would. I felt safe. Besides, neither Ms. Caldwell nor Mrs. Greene ever taught anything anyway, so this might be my only chance to learn math.

I ate my tasteless dinner—the staff guy called it “swill”—and went to sleep, without incident. I dreamed of numbers, initially all in a line. I remembered what Mom told me before, when she taught me how to read my watch. After nine, it went ten, then eleven, and then the numbers cycled over. This pattern repeated, so that after ninety-nine, the next num-

ber in line rolled over to one hundred. I thought about how to combine numbers, and if I thought of each individual number as a line, combining the lines in my head resulted in a very easy way to see the answer to any addition problem immediately. That could be a useful talent.

When I woke in the morning, I wondered if the demons taught me how to do math while I slept. I suppressed them immediately when the nurse's aide brought my breakfast.

Dr. Eisenberg came in shortly after. "How are you today, Hunter?"

Despite struggling to fight away the demons, I tried to answer as calmly and simply as I could. "Fine."

"Have you seen any demons today?" she asked, looking carefully into my eyes as if she were trying to read my mind, like my mother.

"No," I said, unable to keep still while speaking the lie.

"Do you think about hurting yourself, or anyone else?" she asked, again watching me like a hawk.

It took much less effort to blurt, "*No!*" Instantly, I regretted the slight outburst, but her brief smile conveyed that she clearly believed me.

How does she know my thoughts? I wish I could ask her to teach me to read minds. That seems like a valuable skill that I must learn.

"Very good, Hunter. I have to see my other patients, but I'll try to come back to see you later."

Depressed that she didn't release me, and bored with nothing to do, I whined to Taryn, the aide, when she came to clear away the plastic dishes and check on my suicidality.

"What do you like to do?" she asked, her perky smile quite out of place with this morose environment. I couldn't think of anything. Up to this point, pleasurable activities for me involved dodging demons or escaping to the void. Neither answer appeared likely to reduce my sentence here.

"I don't know. What do other kids my age like?"

"Some like to draw pictures. Would you like to try that?"

"OK."

She brought me a sketch pad and some crayons. I noticed she didn't bring anything sharp, like colored pencils, because I represented "a danger to myself" in the eyes of the doctor and the hospital. Given my history with sharp objects finding their way into my flesh, I couldn't blame her.

The wound from the most recent screwdriver episode still loomed on my left palm.

Never having drawn before, I had trouble getting started. Noticing my struggle, she said, "I think I have an idea. Wait right here!"

I put my hand to my face to hide the irritation. As if I was going anywhere.

She came back about thirty minutes later with a "coloring book." The pages bore pictures, like my books at home, but instead of vivid, colorful representations, this book contained only blank outlines. It reminded me of the colorless shells of the children in my class.

"You pick which color to put into all the animals and stuff," she explained.

That made sense. I selected a red crayon, got the shivers, and replaced it for a blue one. The path to normalcy was going to be a long one.

Mom came to see me that evening, and I showed her my coloring book. I colored several pictures, and, although my initial exploits left a lot to be desired, I finally started getting the hang of it. It took me a few tries to learn how to handle the crayon and try to keep within the lines. I hadn't mastered it, but Mom showered me with praise over the drawings. "Wonderful work!"

After carefully looking at each of my creations, she pulled out the flash cards. "Do you want to practice some addition?"

"Sure."

She flashed the first one: $5 + 2 = ?$

"Seven," I announced quickly.

$6 + 3 = ?$

"Nine."

We did a bunch of them, and I answered them all correctly immediately.

"Wow! You really have a knack for math!" Mom's smile not only spread across her face, but permeated her entire being. For the first time, I displayed a talent for something other than seeing demons, and her genuine happiness spread to me. She smiled brightly, and her demons radiated a bright yellow through my blockade. I smiled back, a rarity for me, and at that moment I really didn't care that I couldn't control the demons.

Mom went home for the evening, and I slept, dreaming not of demons, but of going home.

Apparently, coloring and doing math problems went a long way toward convincing Dr. Eisenberg of my sanity, because the very next morning her tone changed dramatically.

“Good morning, Hunter,” she said, arriving very early.

“Can I go home?”

“It appears you’ve made tremendous progress. Are you hearing any voices?”

“Yes, yours,” I said, confused.

She shook her head and chuckled. “No, I mean any voices from people who aren’t there?”

“No, of course not.”

“How about seeing things that aren’t there? Are the hallucinations bothering you?”

“No, I stopped seeing the demons. I told you that before. I think the medication worked somehow, even if I took it wrong.”

“So you don’t feel like you’re a danger to yourself?”

“I never did. It was all a mistake. I won’t make that mistake again, because I don’t need the medication.”

“And the demons are gone?”

“Yes, they are. No more demons. I really appreciate your help.” And I meant it. By taking the medication, I learned that the demons were vulnerable. I didn’t have to spend my entire existence in fear, hiding in the void.

“Then I suppose we should let you get home. I called your mother, and she said she could pick you up this morning.”

I celebrated internally. “Thank you,” I said calmly.

“I’d like to see you again next week. I’ll have your mother make arrangements. If you have any more episodes, I want you to call my office, before they escalate. We don’t want a repeat of this situation.”

Although I’d been working hard at blocking the demons, I couldn’t help noticing that during her discharge speech, Dr. Eisenberg’s blue demon shimmered with orange. I doubted that she believed my repeated denial of seeing “hallucinations,” but she let me go anyway. I rejoiced in

the fact that she elected not to prescribe any new medication, but I suspect that my prior overdose played a primary role in that decision.

I made great progress in the hospital. I interacted, remained present, and started doing math problems and drawing pictures with crayons. My vocabulary and speech capacity improved too. In the past, I spent most of my time in the void, barely communicating with others. By blocking out the demons, I allowed myself the opportunity to experience life as a normal person would. Even the autism didn't affect me as much while I kept the demons at bay. I felt like a whole new person.

Mom signed the release papers, and the orderly returned my clothes so I didn't have to wear blue paper on the way home. From this moment forward, I resolved to keep the demons under my control, and not the other way around.

Within moments of leaving the hospital, I felt oppressive heat from a giant yellow demon. Despite my best efforts, I simply couldn't block it out. I shuddered with abject failure.

"Isn't the sun bright today, Hunter?" said Mom, again reading my thoughts.

The sun! Of course! Not a demon! My spirits soared.

"It's going to be a beautiful day," she continued.

"What day is it?" I asked. Since my watch was taken, I lost track of the date, and I really wanted it back.

"It is April fourteenth. Oh, by the way, I have this for you," she said, as she handed me back my watch. I was definitely, *definitely* going to learn how to read minds.

We got into the car and she started driving slowly out of parking lot. As we departed, Mom said, "Listen, I know you had a tough time these last few days, but I'm needed at work. And Rose isn't coming back because—well, she just isn't. Anyway, I have to drop you off at school. It's only a few minutes from here, and it's right on the way to the university. I need you to promise me something. You remember Dr. Goodreau, right? She and I will be working on a very important project, and I won't have much free time once we get going. I won't be able to leave if anything goes wrong, so can you please, please promise me that you'll be good and stay out of trouble?"

I was already planning on being good, and learning lots of new stuff at school, so this was an easy promise to make. “Yes, Mom,” I said earnestly. She flooded me again with a warm purple color as she stopped the car.

“Good. We’re here.”

And indeed, we’d arrived at my school.

A thought occurred to me. I didn’t know the name of my school. “Mom?”

“Yes, dear?”

“What’s the name of my school?”

“Well, technically, it’s not a school, per se. It’s called the UW Autism Center. UW stands for University of Washington, the same place where I work. That’s why it’s right here, on the campus.”

We got out and headed into the school, or the center.

“So, are all of the kids here autistic?”

“Yes, dear, they’re all special, like you.”

That didn’t make any sense. Most of these kids weren’t anything like me. The ones in my class had the combined personality of a layer of sludge left on the floor after my dinner of sloppy joes. I could never eat sloppy joes without spilling meat and sauce everywhere.

“Good-bye! I’ll pick you up after school!” she said, as she jumped back into the car and took off, zooming away at a much higher rate of speed than we’d been traveling earlier.

Too stunned to move, I remained rooted to the spot in the parking lot. When I finally noticed other kids and their parents staring, I bolted for the building.

Wait a minute! It hit me like when the hot water ran out while I was in the shower. Void or no, I remembered that experience! This realization felt the same. *If this isn’t really a school, what chance do I have to learn anything?* It certainly explained why Ms. Caldwell never taught math, reading, or writing. Mrs. Greene wasn’t any better. Admittedly, I made no attempt to participate. I guess I had no choice at this point but to pay attention, however painful that might be.

Class, or “session,” or whatever they called it, started with all the kids sitting in a circle holding hands. Mrs. Greene recited a rhyme, one I rec-

ognized.

The itsy-bitsy spider went up the waterspout.
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

She made a point of rotating her fingers as though to demonstrate the climb and fall. I didn't really see the point of a story that limited itself to a spider going up and down a waterspout, but I joined in nonetheless.

Out came the sun and dried up all the rain,
and the itsy-bitsy spider went up the spout again.

I belatedly added the hand gestures, and Mrs. Greene stopped. I blocked the demons vibrating on my skin. She looked at me peculiarly and gave me a small round of applause. I stared back. Weird. None of the other kids noticed. They were all in their own personal voids. I briefly longed for my own private abyss, but I couldn't go back. I needed to learn.

Mrs. Greene broke the silence with her singsong voice, "OK, kids, today is show-and-tell day, so let's see what you all have for me."

Tori reacted for the first time. She held up her now filthy blanket, prompting me to turn my head away to avoid the smell. Not all the offending odor emanated from the blanket—some came from Tori too. I blocked out what I could, and that made it tolerable. Mrs. Greene fawned over the blanket, saying how lovely it was, and thanking Tori for bringing such a beautiful item. She spoke slowly and clearly, using the same vocal quality most people used with me.

After that painful episode, Mrs. Greene prompted, "Who's next?" She looked at me expectantly.

I didn't bring anything. I thought about voicing this objection, when Mrs. Greene added, "If you don't have an object, perhaps you can tell a story about something in your life."

I stared blankly. *Her too? Who else knows how to read minds?* She looked at me for another second, and then gave up, clearly disappointed. "Scottie? How about you?"

I sighed loudly in relief, and Scottie pulled out a balloon of some sort.

My skin crackled violently as Mrs. Greene's demons pushed effortlessly through my block. I fought back and suppressed the sensations and focused on remaining present.

"Oh, dear, where did you get that?" said Mrs. Greene, her speech, like her demons, clearly agitated.

"Flobdobit," Scottie slurped. He'd never said anything before, as far as I knew, and I don't think Mrs. Greene ever heard him speak either. That probably didn't count as speech. He held up the flesh-colored balloon and waved it about. Again, a pulse of vibration from Mrs. Greene's demons broke through my mental wall, and Mrs. Greene's composure wavered even further. The balloon, which looked as if it was covered in spit, both on it and in it, dripped as he wagged it about.

"That's not something you should—" Mrs. Greene uncharacteristically snatched the balloon, leapt out of the circle, and darted toward the bathroom. "Stay right here, everyone, I'll be right back," she called over her shoulder, as she abandoned the group to dispose of the item.

I sat there, boredom now overtaking the fear of the demons as my largest opponent. I repressed the desire to slip away, but the challenge kept increasing. I needed to start learning stuff. Unfortunately, I didn't even know what I needed to learn. What do normal kids do in school? Maybe that was the key. I bet I could learn more at a regular school.

When Mrs. Greene got back, slightly pale and out of breath, she looked directly at me and said, "Anyone else have something to share?"

There could be no mistake. She wanted me to interact. A regular person would answer a direct question, not simply stare back. My opportunity to appear normal hinged upon my response. I took a deep breath.

"Yes, I have a story, if I may tell it," I started. The corners of Mrs. Greene's mouth came up a little, and she nodded for me to continue.

"My autism got real bad, and I got so sick I had to go to the hospital. I was in there for a few days, and my doctor, Dr. Eisenberg, got me a lot better. I think I have it under much better control, and I want to learn stuff like a regular kid now," I finished. Despite the brevity of the speech, I felt I'd conveyed my point. Mrs. Greene appeared to agree, judging by the surprised look on her face. She paused, but then recovered.

"Very good, Hunter. Let me talk to your mother and see what she has

to say.”

Wow. I’d taken a strong first step, with just three sentences. Excitement over this success made it easy for me to keep the momentum going.

Mrs. Greene distributed lumps of clay. I eagerly formed a giant flat slab of clay from my pile, while the others expended minimal energy making nondescript lumpy piles. After an hour of this, Mrs. Greene, who’d been reading quietly behind her desk, returned to comment on our work. Even though the kids’ best efforts involving pushing the clay around or creating smaller piles by picking pieces apart, she gave them all lavish praise. Ray-Ray had only drooled on his clay, but nonetheless she offered, “Great job, Ray-Ray,” and he smiled a bit.

“Well, well,” she said at my work. “What have we here, Hunter?” I noticed her voice had a much more natural quality when she spoke to me this time. I didn’t miss the high-pitched singsong one iota. She looked at me, again expecting conversation.

“A plate, I suppose. I’m not very good at molding clay.”

Instead of giving me robust praise, she offered, “If you want to round the edges, go like this.” She picked up my plate, and smoothed around the edge, giving it a rounded appearance much more consistent with usable dishware.

“Wow,” I said, genuinely impressed. “Thanks!”

“You’re very welcome, Hunter.”

Learning what happened during the course of a typical day made the experience bearable. I rapidly lost interest in my classmates, who all looked as if they went into the void. They only showed signs of life when Mrs. Greene (or one of the other staff members) forced them into speaking, eating, or going to the bathroom. On rare occasions, Tori or Justin might clap their hands or hold a crayon for a drawing, but essentially they all remained as still as bumps on logs. When Mrs. Greene took the clay from Ray-Ray, he suffered a complete meltdown, with full-blown fits of kicking and screaming. One of the male staff members extracted him before the fit became contagious.

Mrs. Greene, however, noticed my change, and realized I no longer belonged with the other kids. By the end of the day, she started giving me

special lessons, relegating the remainder of the class to one of the staff members.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“This is the alphabet. All of these letters are used to make up the words we use to communicate with one another. Each letter, or combinations of letters, corresponds to a different sound when we speak them. Once you master the different letter combinations and words, you can understand what they mean when you see them written down.”

Oh! She’s teaching me how to read! My intensity of effort multiplied.

“See here, this is *A*, which is the first letter. It makes a sound like ‘ay’ or ‘ahh,’ depending on the context. It can even be a word in itself. . . . Do you understand what a word is?”

Hmm. When we speak, we don’t speak letters, we speak words. The letters must make up the words. “Yes, I think so,” I answered. “A word is a collection of letters that we speak or write to make it known what we’re thinking.”

She vibrated and cleared, with a blue shimmer, the glow of which I basked in briefly before remembering to suppress it. I didn’t hate all the demons.

“You’re going to do fine.”

While she showed me more letters, a man whom I’d never seen before came into the classroom. “What have we here, Mrs. Greene?”

“This is Hunter. He hasn’t said a word in all the time he has been here, but today, he recited an opening rhyme by himself, told a story about his recent stay in the hospital and how much better he was feeling since then, made a plate out of clay, and started working on reading.”

“Well, well, very impressive. I’m Mr. Wales. It’s nice to see you again, Hunter.”

I stared at his outstretched hand for a moment, and he moved it up and down slightly. I’d seen this type of gesture before, so I grabbed his hand. “Hello, Mr. Wales,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

That was enough. He smiled and pulsed a brief green-and-yellow puff. I saw blue, gold, pink, brown, and smelled the odor of bad breath before I

remembered to block it all out.

“I remember when your mother brought you in, and I thought to myself, ‘now here’s a young man we can really help.’ Carry on, Mrs. Greene. Congratulations on your excellent work,” Mr. Wales said as he turned to leave. I must have been in the void, because I didn’t remember him at all. That wouldn’t happen again.

We went back to work on other letters, until Mom came to pick me up, much later than usual. Mrs. Greene showed no signs of being irritated at having to stay late. As I left, she took my hand and said earnestly, “Good luck, young man. I wish you the best in all things.”

It felt like a permanent good-bye. I nodded and turned to see Mom approaching rapidly and purposefully.

“Hi, Mom!” I said brightly. She smiled briefly, but not with her clear and friendly purple demon. She displayed a blurry reddish hue, a sharp contrast to her normal color. Perhaps she had a bad day at work, and it affected her demons. I chose to ignore the changes and block it all out.

“Hello, Hunter. Come on, let’s get going. We have some things to talk about.”

We walked to the car in silence. I really wanted to tell her about my day, and how I wanted to go to a regular school, but something about her bearing suggested I shouldn’t open my mouth right then.

On the way home from the center, my mother still didn’t speak and she swerved to avoid oncoming cars on more than one occasion, obviously distracted. I didn’t know what to do. I tried to suppress her demons, but a harsh noise broke through and made my skin tingle. As we pulled up to a stop sign, she turned and acknowledged my presence, just as I summoned the courage to speak.

“I want—” I started, but she cut me off firmly.

“Hunter, I had a long conversation with people from your school today. Apparently, they feel quite strongly that you’d benefit from integration into the public classroom immediately. There are other classes at the autism center for more highly functioning children, but your teacher thinks you’re overqualified for any of those. I guess your stay at the hospital really did you some good after all. Mr. Wales, the director, made some phone calls, and you’ll be starting at Madrona on Monday. That’s where

all the norm—. Uh, that's where most of the kids that live around here go to school.

"Hunter, this is going to be a big change. I can't bring you to and from school every day, because I have to go to work. Rose left because of the . . . well, you know. Your father won't be around, he's off on assignment. . . . Anyway, from now on, you're going to have to take the bus to school. Also, from what Mrs. Greene told me at lunch today, we really don't know the proper grade, so I expect you'll have to take some type of test to help them decide."

"Mom—" I tried, but she cut me off again.

"I know this is going to be something of a change, and you're going to be behind, but you've made such progress since the hospitalization. I'm sure you'll be just fine in the public school. Mr. Wales suggested you start there next week.

"That means you're going to have to start reading. Other ten-year-olds have all been reading for a long time, but I think you'll surprise yourself at how quickly you can catch up. Some of the things you've been saying show that you're a very intelligent young man, Hunter Elijah Miller. Don't be afraid. We'll get through this."

Only at that moment did I realize Mom couldn't really read my mind. I hoped nobody else could either.

During the trip home, Mom explained how the bus worked. I'd have to wait outside for it, and if I didn't stand right on the side of the road, it wouldn't stop.

After we arrived at home, we talked about reading for several hours, right through dinnertime. She made macaroni and cheese out of a box, which tasted fine to me. By nine o'clock, exhaustion overtook me. Despite the success of our marathon session and how much I still needed to learn, I had to go to sleep. Tomorrow would be a busy day.





CHAPTER 8

Enthused about starting my new life, I set the alarm on my watch for seven o'clock, even though I didn't have to be at the bus stop until eight fifty-five. I jumped out of bed upon hearing my alarm, and raced through my daily routine. Mom called the transportation people twice to ensure the driver would stop, but I still wasn't confident. So as the giant yellow beast approached, I waved wildly to get the driver's attention. I relaxed only when I saw the flashing yellow and red lights as he pulled up to the curb. The driver opened the door and I hopped up the steps, still very excited about the prospects of a new day. I turned past the driver, an elderly man with a very large frame and demon to match, toward a sea of demons, surrounding an ocean of children. I stopped cold.

"You need to go sit down, son," came the driver's gentle encouragement. I froze completely, my initial consternation turning to full-blown horror. Chatter started among the students. The kids' murmurs of "special ed" and "freak" were interspersed with giggling. They were all laughing at me. Their demons overwhelmed me, with countless shapes, sizes, colors, flavors, textures, smells, and sensations. To my surprise and dismay, a very small girl from the second seat on the left grabbed my hand, and pulled me into the seat next to her. I closed my eyes and tried to block out the noise, but the derision heightened at this new development. Unequipped to deal with this, I reverted to my old friend, the void.

* * * * *

I woke up in an office containing a cot and medical supplies, but it wasn't like my other medical visits. It was very unfamiliar. The odor remind-

ed me of school, quite unlike Dr. Stonington's building or the emergency room. As I stood up, a squat woman with a smooth, blue-white demon opened the door, and I felt instant relief. I found people who associated with blue demons to be most helpful and friendly, especially those dealing with the sick or injured.

"How are you feeling, Hunter?"

"I'm doing better now, ma'am," I answered as politely as I could muster.

"That's good to hear. Apparently, you passed out on the bus, and the driver had to bring you in. Have you been feeling well? Eating and drinking OK?"

"Um, yes, but, uh . . ." I stammered. Her clear, warm demon and her disarming smile reassured me, so I continued. "That was my first time ever on a bus, and I kinda freaked out."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I see! I had no idea. And you say you're feeling better now? Do you want me to call you mother to pick you up?"

That wouldn't do. After the huge discussion from last night, I knew Mom would be furious at me for making her leave work. Moreover, I needed to take that test so I could start regular classes and learn to read.

"No!" I burst out, a little too emphatically. "I mean, no, ma'am, I'd like to go to class. I'm supposed to take a test today, and I really don't want to miss it." I checked my watch, and found that it was only nine twenty, so I hadn't lost much time.

"All right. But I should just give your mother a call and let her know that you were here."

I panicked. "Just tell her I got scared because of all the people on the bus, but I'm fine now!"

"OK, I'll tell her you're just fine, and not to worry. Just a bit of anxiety but now you're ready for class," she said, escorting me to the door.

As I walked out, I realized that the classroom would be just like the bus—dozens of kids and their demons floating all around me. How could I deal with that?

"The guidance office is down there on the left," she said. "If today is your first day, you need to check in there."

I paused.

When I didn't immediately head off in the proper direction, she en-

couraged, “Go ahead.” I took another moment to collect myself, and then nodded and trotted to where she indicated. Ready or not, I had to take this step or I’d never learn to read. Then I’d remain a slave to the demons forever.

The woman in the outer room of the guidance office sported an orange demon, cold, abrasive and pungent, reminding me of a wild cat. I felt an instant dislike for her, even though I had no real reason to feel that way. She clacked away at her computer keyboard for nearly a minute, oblivious to my presence. Completing her computer task, she glanced up momentarily and then stood as though to leave.

Without looking in my direction, she said, “Oh hello, Hunter, we expected you earlier. Did you have trouble finding the office? Anyway, give us a minute, and we’ll see if Mrs. Bonefant is ready to administer your aptitude test.”

I waited while the wild-cat lady walked into the main office, made the necessary arrangements, and returned to escort me to a classroom. Mrs. Bonefant, an older woman with a blue-brown demon, waited with a frown.

She motioned to the first chair in the row, indicating for me to sit. She looked briefly at the orange lady and said, “Thank you, Gladys, that will be all.” Gladys turned on her heel and stalked back to her cubicle.

As I settled myself into the chair, I noticed her bland, acidic taste, a grating quality, and a bronze hue. The numerous qualities reminded me how badly I failed at suppressing the demons. I internally chastised myself to work harder so as to avoid another episode like earlier this morning.

“Hello, Hunter, I’m Mrs. Bonefant. Mr. Wales, who has a great deal of influence with the school board, has ‘asked’ me to consider taking you into my class.” She made a gesture holding up and wagging the first two fingers on each hand on the word “asked” as though to give it emphasis. “With only a few weeks to go in the term, I found this request highly unusual, and I refuse to—” she stopped herself. “Be that as it may, you’re coming from the autism center, where they haven’t been covering the same, shall we say, *curriculum* as we have, so you’ll be significantly behind. I want to make sure you’ll be able to function in our class, and that

your presence won't be so time-consuming for me that I can't exercise my responsibilities toward the other students."

That made sense. I had a lot more to learn to catch up, and she didn't want to waste her time repeating earlier lessons. My mother asked me to be very nice, and help myself by convincing Mrs. Bonefant to let me into the class, so I gave it my best shot.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Mrs. Bonefant. I know you don't want to have to teach me all the stuff you already spent time teaching the other kids, so I'll work very hard to catch up as quickly as possible. My mother said she'll help me with the reading. And I promise to be well behaved and not make you spend extra time with me."

Her frown lessened, reducing the number of wrinkles covering her aged face. Her demons changed too, losing the acidic taste, and turning warmer with a yellow tint. I shook myself mentally and blocked it all out.

"OK, then, I have some questions for you. Do you know the letters of the alphabet?"

My mother prepared me for this question, and I sang the song she gave me the day before. As I sang, Mrs. Bonefant unconsciously nodded along with the tune.

"Can you tell me what two plus two is?"

"Four!" I said, far too loudly, excited by the ease of the question.

"How about six plus seven?"

"Thirteen!" I could do this all day.

"If a man asks you to get into his car, what would you say?"

"I'm not supposed to get into the car with strangers!" Who knew a television ad I saw last month could ever have relevance.

"When is it OK to hit another child?"

"You should never have to hit anyone, just use your words!"

Mrs. Bonefant smiled at that. I didn't know why—that answer came literally word for word from my mother.

She leaned back in her chair. "OK, Mr. Miller, I think this may work out after all. You're nothing like what I expected. For today, you can come in and observe, and I'll give you some reading materials the rest of the class has already completed. You can catch up for the next few days, and

if you appear able to handle it, you can work on the new material we're covering. Congratulations, and welcome to third grade!"

She handed me a pile of books and papers, and escorted me back to her classroom. The sights of the new school blurred by as I floated behind Mrs. Bonefant toward my new classroom. I had done it! Now I could start learning to read. And soon, adults would stop talking to me in the slow, high-pitched tone that drove me crazy.

When I walked in, dozens of demons slammed through my unprepared defenses, again emphasizing the need to keep them at bay. Most of them felt muddled, cloudy, and colorless. Not blue, white, orange, gold, or silver, but ghastly drab. As I blocked them out, I felt bewildered by the similarity to the demons at the center. Why didn't the kids here have bright-colored demons like the teachers? Were all kid demons tasteless and colorless? Of course not. I only had to look to my own blue color to discount that possibility. Plus, dozens of children at the autism center, in the other classrooms, had bright demons, even if they had trouble expressing themselves. And the demons on the bus bombarded me with a variety of colorful and sparkling activity. Again I found myself standing agape in front of a bunch of staring people, trying to sort out my confusion. Mrs. Bonefant continued toward her desk, and when I stopped, she made a noise like *ahem!* and pointed to a small desk at the back with no current occupant. I took the hint and walked to it and sat down, while the rest of the class turned toward Mrs. Bonefant.

"OK, class, we have a new student. His name is Hunter. Say hello, class."

"Hellooooo, Hunter," came a chorus of monotones, as they followed Mrs. Bonefant's hand gesture toward my desk. Even though they all beheld my unceremonious entrance, many of them looked at me like they hadn't seen me before. Odd. Something about these children worried me.

"Uh, hello," I replied. They turned their heads to the front in unison, and Mrs. Bonefant picked up a book off her desk and held it aloft. Good, I thought, here we go.

"Everyone get out your copy of *The Little Red Hen*, and let's resume where we left off yesterday." She said. The students mechanically placed their books on the top of their desks. To my surprise, I found a copy in the packet she had given me in the guidance office, so I retrieved it. I knew I

couldn't read yet, but maybe I'd get some insight from the class discussion.

"Now, can someone name the characters again for us? Kevin?" she said, as she pointed at a boy in the front row.

"There's the red hen."

"Yes, any others?"

"Um," he stalled, and he looked at the cover of the book. There was a cat and a dog on the cover. The cat was looking at a newspaper. "Oh . . . the cat."

"Yes," Mrs. Bonefant encouraged.

Kevin looked entirely spent.

"Steve?" She pointed to another boy in the front.

"The hen, the dog, the cat, and the mouse."

"Very good!" Mrs. Bonefant answered. Her tone reminded me of Mrs. Greene.

"And what happened in the story? Cathy?"

Another girl from the second row piped up, "The little red hen made a cake."

Checking the cover of the book, I saw a picture of a hen putting a cake into the oven. The class continued on in this way, the teacher asking questions and the students providing somewhat uninspiring answers. The regular kids didn't impress me with their level of intellect. I saw them as scarcely a step above the autistic children I'd grown up ignoring. However, they could all read . . . or, could they? As the queries continued, I noticed that many of the answers the students provided could be deduced rather easily by looking at the pictures. When I studied the book for the next few minutes, I realized I could've answered all of those questions without reading at all. Although disheartening, I decided that it didn't matter whether the others could read well or not, I needed to learn, and I could do that here.

We finished with the book, and Mrs. Bonefant looked at the clock and said, "Recess time!" Suddenly the relatively subdued nature of the kids gave way to a pell-mell dash toward the door. After a nod from the teacher, I followed along as the kids stormed outside and found myself in the school playground.

Although we hadn't done anything mentally taxing, the other kids relished this break and eagerly exploited the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful spring day. In the playground, I saw dozens of kids playing games, swinging on swings, climbing on a jungle gym, and exchanging stories about TV programs. I overheard some, but when the kids saw me listening, they always moved away. That didn't bother me much, because I found it easier to suppress the demons when the kids weren't close by.

I spent the thirty-minute break looking around and marveling at the vast number of children occupying the grounds. Multiple classes came out simultaneously, and the range of ages included kindergarten through eighth grade. Even the little ones steered clear of me though. They also avoided my classmates, who all stayed together in a tiny mob. They didn't take part in any of the games, nor did they have much interest in the other playground activities. The others in my group took turns riding a small hobbyhorse that was designed for much smaller kids.

Recess ended just as quickly as it began, and we resumed a classroom discussion of basic grammar. Mrs. Bonefant gave a short writing assignment and then a few easy math problems. We finished up the day with a story. As the school day drew to a close, I felt dread emerge at the prospect of riding the bus home again. I steeled myself for a repeat of my earlier experience, and focused on blocking everything out so that I wouldn't freeze up again. An elderly gentleman with a flashy neon vest informed me which bus went to my stop, and despite the delay, I still managed to embark before most of the other kids. I took a seat near the front. I kept my head down, and nobody tried to sit with me, which I appreciated. Before long, the driver pulled out into a long line of buses on the main road. I focused on suppressing the demons without going into the void, and when we arrived at my stop, I stepped out of the open door without anyone talking to me. *A rousing success!*

My mother arrived home well after dark, and in a very grumpy mood. I wanted to tell her about my success at school, but bragging about being able to suppress demons without going unconscious would either make her angry, or force her to send me back to the psychiatric facility. Her irritability had increased, and with Dad apparently out of the picture indefinitely, I wondered if I might starve waiting for her to get home. It would've

been nice to have someone to talk to, though. Mom didn't ask about my day, so I didn't offer any information. Instead, we quietly ate leftovers, after which she went right up to her office, leaving me to clean up the dishes.

The next day, I woke up much later, but still with plenty of time to get ready and arrive at the bus stop. The driver nodded cordially, and I ducked quickly into the nearest open seat, allowing nothing to pass through my defenses. Upon arriving at my classroom, Mrs. Bonenfant motioned me again to my seat, and we proceeded with a carbon copy of the day before. The excitement of joining the regular school kids wore off rapidly, and I fell into a routine only slightly less boring than going to the autism center.

The daily lesson plan consisted of such topics as number problems; artwork, like painting a picture of a thin, reedy plant; geography, including states and their capitals; and reading. I still didn't know how to read, but while Mrs. Bonenfant asked questions, I flipped through and found the answers simply by looking at the pictures. I wondered idly if I'd ever learn to read. At recess, I continued to avoid everyone, which made suppressing the demons much easier. Proximity played a much larger factor in suppressing the demons than I expected—and, unfortunately, I spent most of my time in class surrounded by the worst-smelling demons. Every once in a while, when the stench broke through, I gagged for no apparent reason, sometimes evoking stares from the others.

I persevered, even though I wasn't getting much direction from Mrs. Bonenfant. She kept me on "observation" duty, but as we discussed the books, and as I watched the other students write short passages, I began to figure out how the different letters formed words. Vocabulary exercises helped considerably, because she would spell out each word before giving its meaning. Despite the obstacles and slow pace, I made progress.

A few weeks into my new routine, we started another book, and Mrs. Bonenfant read from it at the beginning of class. My well-worn copy had dog-eared pages, doodles throughout, and a few rips, but the text remained legible. I followed along carefully as she read, and I matched the writing to the words she spoke. Confidence and excitement welled up inside me; soon my days of being illiterate would be behind me. Unfortunately, when the day ended, Mrs. Bonenfant made an announcement.

"As you all know, today is the last school day of the year."

The class cheered wildly.

“I wish you all the best for summer, and I’m assigning you two books to read.”

The masses let out a resounding “Boo!”

“Now, now, class, behave. You aren’t dismissed yet. Anyway, please read these books so you’ll be ready for Mrs. Collins’s fourth-grade class next year. That’s it! Have a great summer vacation!”

And with that, the mob ran for the buses, unencumbered by scholastic responsibility until September.

I stealthily boarded my bus, avoiding the cheering and happy children, all of whom felt great joy at not having to return for the next two months. I was disappointed, because I had no idea how I’d progress without even the minimal help of a teacher.

When I got home, I started for my room as usual, but Mom appeared, surprised to see me.

“Oh, Hunter. How was school?”

“Today was my last day.”

“What? What did you do?” she said, angrily.

“Nothing,” I said, defensively. “Apparently they don’t have classes over the summer at regular school.”

“Oh, right,” she said, trailing off. “What am I going to do with you?” she asked, mostly to herself.

We continued on with our nighttime routine, which now consisted of me sitting on the couch watching TV, while she disappeared into her office upstairs, not coming out until morning.

She never answered the question of “what to do with me,” so the next morning, I treated it like a weekend and slept in late. When I woke up and went downstairs to get breakfast, I encountered a young woman sitting carelessly on the couch.

“Hello, Hunter,” she said, in that singsong voice that I associated with communication with very young or autistic children. My suspicion aroused, I said nothing. What possessed this stranger to enter my house?

“I’m Amanda Wagstaff, from . . . well, your mother has hired me to teach you some things this summer,” she said.

I remained mute, rooted to my spot at the bottom of the staircase, staring.

“Your mother tells me you’re in the special-needs class at Madrona. She said you’re just learning to read. She’s going to be very busy at work for the next two months, and I’m supposed to help you catch up with the other students, some of whom can already read a bit. We can work on other stuff too, like math, or maybe some basic science, or history if you want. I know a lot of things!”

She spoke with confidence. I relaxed and checked her demons, hoping to find a blue one, the only color I really trusted. Instead, I found primarily a white color, with spots of orange. Even though it wasn’t blue, I did like its warm, minty flavor, and the calming effect it had on me. Most important, she didn’t smell like the kids at school. The pleasant fragrance reminded me instead of my old teacher, Ms. Caldwell. Even though her demons didn’t frighten me, I remembered my promise to myself to try to become normal, so I suppressed them again.

“I see you just woke up,” she said, noticing my pajamas. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“Yes,” I said, since I’d come down to the kitchen with that very thought in mind.

“OK, come on in, I have some pancake mix ready. I’d like it if you called me Miss Amanda. I’m too old for just Amanda, and much too young for Miss Wagstaff!” she said, chuckling a little.

I liked her. After breakfast, she asked me about books, and I ran up to my room to get the ones Mrs. Bonefant let me bring home. One, called *Blueberries for Sal*, had a picture of a girl eating berries on the cover, along with a bear cub. I sat in a chair and she stood behind me, reading aloud while I followed along. I stopped her when I didn’t understand one of the words, although that didn’t happen often. Miss Amanda didn’t expect me to know as many words as I did, and she kept checking to see if I had any questions.

The day resembled a regular school day, except without all the smelly kids around. She created designated lunch and recess times, and she took me to the park to run around and play during the breaks. I never used the equipment at school, so I happily rode the swing set in the deserted playground. I particularly enjoyed making the swing go really fast, like the bigger kids.

We concluded our session in the afternoon, and Miss Amanda said I could watch TV if I wanted. She intended to stay until Mom got home, which turned out to be well after dinnertime. The two of them talked briefly before Mom returned to the living room.

“So, do you like Miss Amanda?”

“She’s very nice,” I said truthfully.

“She’s going to be tutoring you this summer. I’m going to be very busy, so I can’t teach you to read, but she’s a professional tutor, and she came highly recommended. You may be able to read and write some by the end of the summer.”

“OK.”

“Well, I’m going to grab some dinner, and then I have some more work to do before going to bed myself. I’ll probably leave early in the morning before Ms. Wagstaff comes, but I gave her the key so she can check in on you every day. And hopefully you’ll learn enough so they’ll let you keep going to school.”

Miss Amanda taught me to read. In two days I learned more from her than in the entire three weeks I spent with Mrs. Bonefant. She showed me how to create each letter of the alphabet, and I started writing. She introduced more challenging books, and we discussed geography, history, math, and science. I preferred math, even though I liked all the topics. Mom left out the flash cards showing basic operations—addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division—and I raced through them in one session. I had such a knack for math problems that Miss Amanda added some extra ones, like how to square a number, by multiplying it by itself, and how to do longer problems, involving several operations on a string of numbers. She praised me for doing so well, and compared me to Alan Turing, a mathematician who created code-breaking machines in World War II that preceded modern computers.

I rarely saw my mother, and my father didn’t come home at all during the summer. Still, I felt proud of my progress, both with tutoring and with blocking the demons and staying out of the void. I went through the entire months of July and August without a single negative event.





CHAPTER 9

On the first day of September, I observed my eleventh birthday with little fanfare. Miss Amanda helped me celebrate, as Mom either forgot, or was too busy to make it home before bedtime. Miss Amanda sang the birthday song almost apologetically. She bought me gluten-free cupcakes because they were on sale, lighting a single candle on one to commemorate the event.

After the miniature party, she informed me that once school started again, she could still work with me on weekends, but developing my reading and other skills would be in the hands of the teachers at Madrona. The news saddened me for two reasons. In addition to teaching me far more than I ever would learn at school, Miss Amanda treated me like a normal kid, and I didn't want that to end. The prospect of sitting with the malodorous kids from Mrs. Bonefant's class only made matters worse. On the upside, at least I'd be off observation and a full member of the class. The fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Collins, might be considerably better. Or not. The last night before school started, I couldn't fall asleep, anxiety about the upcoming year weighing on me like an albatross. When I finally did manage to doze, I dreamed about demons ripping me apart limb from limb.

Waking to the sound of my watch alarm in a cold sweat, I stayed in bed for a few moments before starting my morning regimen. Mom left early, and Dad still hadn't returned, so without Miss Amanda, I readied myself entirely alone. Fortunately I had no issues, and I made it to the bus stop with plenty of time to spare. Mentally prepared, I hopped onto the bus, suppressed everything around me, and found an empty space next to a rather large teenage boy.

“Beat it, retard,” said the bulky occupant.

“What?” I stared blankly, not understanding the reference.

“I’m gonna kick your ass! Now go find a seat with them other retards in the back,” he said menacingly.

This time I got the point, and moved away. Unnerved, I found another seat further back. My control slipped momentarily, but I regained my focus, put my head down, and rode the rest of the way in silence.

When the bus pulled into the line of other buses and the driver set the brake with a loud squawking noise, everyone stood up to leave. Over the crowd, the offensive goon bellowed in my direction. “Hey, retard, I’ll see *you* at recess!”

Several other kids gathered around him and laughed in my general direction while I feebly grabbed my bag and skulked off the bus. Although the year hadn’t started well, at least demons weren’t actually ripping me apart. I smiled wryly as I entered the building.

I double-checked my summer packet, and found my assigned room, A106. To my chagrin, the occupants included the same unimpressive kids from Mrs. Bonefant’s class, with perhaps one addition. While suppressing their horrid odor helped, I nonetheless sank deeper into despair. The likelihood of learning much while in the company of this particular group seemed remote at best.

My new teacher, Mrs. Collins, looked barely alive. Although not an expert on age, I figured her to be at least one hundred years old. Her wrinkled skin hung from her face, she could hardly stand under her own power, and she moved at a glacial pace. Her raspy voice sounded like an owl that had been shot by a BB gun. Shocked by her appearance, I accidentally lowered my shields enough to visualize a thin wisp surrounding her, lightly silver with a trace of white and residual blue. Like Mrs. Collins herself, the demon appeared remarkably weak, more sparse than any other I’d ever seen, except perhaps Ray-Ray or Billy. I wondered if she might be related to Dr. Collins; maybe his great-great-grandmother.

“All right, children,” she drawled, the moment the bell rang. “I’m Mrs. Collins. This is fourth grade, special needs. Find your seats, and I’ll take attendance. After I read off your name, please say ‘here’ if you’re present.”

She read off the names in a list. The owner of each replied with a mur-

mured cry of “here.”

“Jane.”

“Here.”

“Joan.”

“Here.”

“Stony.”

“Here.”

“Corrinne.”

“Here.”

“Hunter.”

“Uh, here!” I said. Nobody cared, and the litany went on.

“Marissa.”

“Here.”

“Kevin.”

“Here.”

They continued as Mark, Paula, Harold, Stan, and Rick all admitted to being in the room.

I recognized ten of the eleven students from last year, but Harold hadn’t been here before. Someone also had left, although I couldn’t recall who. It made little difference to me. I rarely interacted with any of them last year, and judging by their lifeless affects, this year was likely to be the same.

Since everyone except Harold knew each other, she skipped introductions, and went right to a writing exercise. And just like that, I began the fourth grade.

It only took fifteen minutes before complete and utter boredom nearly dragged me into the void. The exercises Mrs. Collins assigned took only a few moments each to finish, and yet she spent generations discussing such exhilarating topics as the many uses for capital letters and how to draw an apostrophe. The lack of utility of the lessons only exacerbated the constant effort required to keep the demons suppressed and avoid slipping into unconsciousness. Even though I remained committed to learning, my resolve weakened. I tried scribbling random letters and numbers on the sides of my notebook as a way to stay engaged.

After an hour, one of the girls asked successfully to go to the bathroom. Colossal apathy clawed at my consciousness, tempting me farther and far-

ther into the abyss. My head bobbed as I watched Mrs. Collins shuffle around the room, describing the answers to the exercises in inconceivable detail. Joan returned, dropping the hall pass on the teacher's desk as she passed. The clunk not only ripped me from near slumber, but suggested an alternative to this tedium. The bathroom provided an excellent means of escape.

"Mrs. Collins, can I go to the bathroom?" I blurted.

"Raise your hand to speak please, Hunter."

I raised my hand. An eternity later, she acknowledged the waving hand.

"Yes, Hunter?"

"Mrs. Collins, can I go to the bathroom?"

"Manners, Hunter."

I was at a complete loss. Thankfully, I didn't actually have to go to the bathroom, or I would've had an accident.

"We say 'please' and 'thank you' in my classroom," she offered.

"Please, Mrs. Collins, can I go to the bathroom? Thank you!" I said, my confusion evident.

"Yes, you *may* go. Take the hall pass from my desk where Joan left it."

I darted out of the room, making a convincing show that I really needed to go. For a minute I forgot how to get to the bathroom. But after a few wrong turns, I found the place of refuge, and I went in and sat down in a stall for a while. I relaxed briefly, and with no other person-sized demons around, I didn't need to suppress anything. The palpable relief from the drudgery of keeping the demons out reminded me how challenging this year would be, but as long as I continued to avoid any major controversy, Mom would be happy and let me go to school here.

Ultimately, I returned to class to await our next break. Lunchtime passed without incident, as I wolfed down my food alone at a table in the cafeteria. My hunger momentarily appeased, I returned to class only to find my stomach rumbling again. I wished I had brought a second sandwich. I grew several inches over the summer, and despite eating nearly twice as much as last year, I remained very thin. Something about school increased my appetite exponentially. I must be burning more energy, or maybe I was about to have a growth spurt.

During the next part of the afternoon, I teetered on the edge of the void, just barely making it to recess. When we got outside, I noticed the thick buffoon who'd threatened me this morning on the bus. He put his index finger to his neck and pulled it across in a menacing gesture. I ignored him and sat by myself, watching everyone else play. When we got back inside, Mrs. Collins began more boring instruction. The afternoon math lesson took seconds to master, and I straddled the void for the rest of the day, until the bell rang for dismissal and I hurriedly followed the rest of the class out to the bus.

The days that followed tried my patience—I learned almost nothing, and I seldom interacted with anyone. Because my priority was to suppress the demons, the decision to keep my distance from people was straightforward. Watching the kids play at recess, though, made me jealous. They looked like they were having fun.

One day, a few kids who were playing dodgeball came over to my obscure corner.

“Hey, kid, what’s your name?” said one of them.

“Hunter,” I answered.

“He *can* talk!” said another. “That’s five bucks you owe me,” he added. I didn’t know what that meant. The others mumbled and shoved each other.

“Ask him,” one said.

“OK. Hey, Hunter, do you want to play dodgeball with us?”

“Sure!” I answered, betraying my enthusiasm.

“OK,” he said. “Come on, and I’ll tell you the rules.” We jogged over to the wall, behind the school. No teachers could see us.

“OK,” he said again. “You stand here, and hold your arms over your head, like this.” He demonstrated. “You can’t move at all, until it’s your turn. So for now, you just stand here. We throw the balls at you until the end of the turn. Got it?”

“OK.” I said. This wasn’t how I thought dodgeball was played, but I was happy to be involved.

They threw balls at me for several minutes, striking every part of my exposed body. The balls bounced off. Each time, they laughed. I didn’t care much that I kept getting pegged, although I noticed my skin turning red.

“Is it my turn yet?” I asked, evoking a chorus of laughter.

“No, not yet,” they all answered. They threw the balls at me for a while longer. A skinny boy with thick glasses glanced behind the wall, saw me, and immediately disappeared again. As the balls continued to hit me, I began to doubt whether I’d ever get a turn.

A teacher I didn’t recognize appeared from around the corner, led by the other student.

“What’s going on here!” she yelled.

“Nothing.”

“We were just playing.”

“Yeah . . . He wanted to play.”

“Principal’s office, all four of you!” she demanded.

“Yes, Mrs. Weiss,” they all said, morosely. They walked off.

“Are you OK, young man?”

“Yes, fine.” I said. A wayward purple swirl came through my mental barricade.

“Do you need to see the nurse?”

“No. Why?”

“You have bruises everywhere. How long were they throwing those balls at you?”

“I don’t know, a few minutes. It didn’t hurt.”

“Well, if they tease or bully you again, let me know. I won’t let them get away with it. Let’s go back inside now, recess is over.” She directed me back toward the school with her outstretched hand.

The kid with glasses appeared at my other side.

“Hey, I’m Rob. What’s your name?” the kid said. I looked at Mrs. Weiss, who smiled and nodded.

“Hunter. I’m new here.”

“You probably shouldn’t be playing dodgeball. I can teach you another game. It’s called chess. I sometimes play at recess, and I play at home whenever I can. My dad is really good. He’s been teaching me how to play since I was really little. Do you want to play?”

“Sure!” I said, again giving away the fact that I wanted to be part of the normal crowd.

“Cool. I’ll bring my set in and we can play during recess tomorrow!”

The rest of the day breezed by, and I endured my usual nightly routine,

consisting of a brief dinner, reading a book or watching TV when Mom went off to her office, and going to sleep.

The next day, my spirits rose as I considered the prospect of playing a game that didn't involve me acting as a human punching bag. I dodged the bully on the bus by sitting in the seat right behind the driver, and I made it to class unscathed. Immediately after Mrs. Collins called my name for attendance, I ignored everything she said. The most interesting topic she covered over the prior three weeks involved the menu at the school cafeteria. I waited impatiently for recess so I could play chess with Rob.

When the bell rang, I tore outside with the rest of the mob and found Rob waiting for me near the door. He led me over to a secluded corner where two brick walls met, affording shelter from the stiff breeze. He carried a small case, the contents of which he spilled onto the ground when we settled into our protected cove. The set contained many pieces, half the pieces were black, half white, and each small enough to fit easily inside my hand. In the relative isolation, I released my barrier against the demons, granting me a look at his. I understood why I liked him the moment I saw the blue color. The other colors, orange, pink, and brown, and the cool, sweet, sharp, and porous qualities offered little to fear. I quietly watched while he unpacked the cargo.

The carrying case doubled as a board, so when he unfolded it, the top had a checkerboard pattern of brown and black squares. As he carefully placed the pieces onto the board in a premeditated fashion, he began telling me about each of them.

"There are six different kinds of pieces, the same for each player. The biggest one is called the king, and it starts here," he placed it on the board in the middle, one on my side, one on his, both directly across from each other. "This one is the queen, and she goes here," he put each down next to their respective kings. "These are bishops, these are knights, and these are rooks," he said, as he put the pieces in their correct starting squares, moving outward from the middle, but all in the back row. "Lastly, these are the pawns." He put all of the pawns out in the row in front of the other pieces.

"The object of the game is to put the opponent's king into *checkmate*, which means that he's attacked and has no place to move to get free. In order to attack the other guy's king, you have to move your own pieces

around on the board and either attack and get rid of the other guy's stuff, or trap the king by some means. We'll get to the tactics later. For the moment, you have to know how each piece moves. The pawns can generally only go forward one square. The three exceptions are when they're at their starting location, when they can go forward two squares if you choose to move them two instead of one, when they're taking someone else's pieces, at which time they go diagonally, and a special rule called *en passant*, which is something that almost never happens, and we'll go over that the first time it does."

He continued on, showing me the knight's L-shaped moves, the rook's straight line moves, the bishop's diagonal moves, the queen's combination of rook and bishop, and the king's single-move capability. Then he told me how the board was broken down by letters and numbers: the white king started on e1, and the black king was e8. All the other positions had corresponding letters, and you denoted moves by the name of the piece and then its new location (or, if a pawn, then just the new location). He showed me examples of starting moves and how each individual piece could be moved (provided it was either a knight, or if the pawn in front of it was out of the way). He gave me some ideas about which moves made for better starting moves because they allowed better positions. I started getting a handle on the basics of the game when recess abruptly ended, and the other kids ran back inside.

"Can you meet me after school? We can actually play a game!"

I wasn't sure how I'd get home if I missed the bus, and I had no way of reaching my mother to see if she could pick me up.

"I can't today, but I'll check with my mother and see if I can do it tomorrow."

"Cool. Here, you should read this." He handed me a book that had a picture of a chessboard on the front. I hated to admit that I could barely read, so I took it.

"See you tomorrow!" he said as he darted back inside.

The day flew by, and Miss Amanda surprised me by welcoming me home. She made me dinner—lasagna—which tasted much better than the frozen meals Mom reheated every night. She asked about the bruises, and I said, "dodgeball." She nodded and left it at that. I showed her the book

Rob had given me. She helped me read it, and I was disappointed to discover that the contents only included the basics, most of which Rob had already told me. It delineated the names of the pieces, how they moved, and how to win by putting the king in checkmate. The first step generally involved *check*, which meant that your opponent had to protect their king by either moving it, taking the piece causing the check, or blocking it. The book assigned values to the pieces, and discussed draws, stalemate, and castling, plus it explained the *en passant* rule, regarding a two-square pawn move made to avoid an encroaching opponent's pawn. It covered only minimal strategy: protect your king, control the center, and don't give away your pieces. Despite my limited exposure, I found the game fascinating. Armed with the rules, I eagerly awaited my first match!

Mom didn't come home, as far as I knew, and Miss Amanda helped me get to bed. She made sure we had cereal and milk for breakfast, and bread, peanut butter, and jelly to make sandwiches for tomorrow's lunch, and said good night. I went to sleep happy.

The next day, time stood still until I met Rob at recess. When finally we arrived at our alcove, he readied the board in mere moments. Before we began, he held the two kings, one in each hand, behind his back, and asked me to pick one. I chose the left hand, which turned out to be black. He arranged the board for me to control the black pieces, and I placed my king onto the board in its proper location.

"Since I have the white pieces, I go first," he said, and he moved the pawn in front of his king up two squares. Even though I knew the rules, I discovered immediately that I had no idea what to do, so I did the same move back. He moved his light square bishop forward a few spots. Still not seeing anything better, I moved my bishop to c5, right in front of his.

"You may not want to do exactly the same thing I do," he said, as he moved his queen out to the far edge. I could see why, because if I moved my queen to the edge next to his, he would take it, and I'd be in big trouble.

"Can I move this?" I asked, picking up a knight.

"Sure you can. See, it can move over the other pieces. As long as it does that L move, up two, over one, then it's legal."

I moved my knight up two, over one.

He jumped up, captured one of my pawns and yelled, "*Checkmate!*"

“What?” I said, aghast. I’d only been playing for a few seconds and I’d lost already.

“See,” he said, “your king can’t take my queen because the bishop is guarding it. And there’s no place else the king can move without my queen covering the square, so that’s checkmate!”

“Don’t you have to put me in check first?”

“No, that’s not a rule. You can put someone right into checkmate if they leave it open.”

I glared at him, unamused. He noticed my displeasure, because he added, “Look, it’s OK, everyone loses their first few games. You need to learn how to play. I’ve been playing for years! Let’s set it up again, and I’ll show you some concepts.”

After we’d reset the board, Rob began, “When you start the game as white, my favorite move is to put the king’s pawn forward two squares. This gains control of the central squares, d5 and f5, here,” he pointed, “And that allows you to move the bishop and queen out from the back row. The next good move might be to move the queen’s pawn forward two squares also, which controls the two central black squares, here.” He pointed at c5 and e5. “If you have those two pawns out front like that, you can then build your minor pieces (bishops and knights) behind. You generally want to develop your pieces as quickly as possible, so the next move might be, depending on what black does, knight to f3, knight to c3, or bishop to c4 or f4, maybe. Then those minor pieces are ready to start an attack.

“Also, once you clean out the pieces between the king and the rook, you can castle.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” I saw that term in the book he lent me, but didn’t quite understand it.

“That’s the only move in the game where you get to simultaneously move two pieces. It’s legal. You take your king and put it here, and on the same move, you take your rook and put it here,” he said, showing me where the pieces went. “If you do it on the other side, you have to get the queen out of the way as well. Then the king goes to c1, and the rook goes to b1. As you can see, now there’s nothing defending the pawn over here,” he pointed to the pawn at a2. “I like to castle on the king side for that reason.”

“Is there—” I started.

“Oh, yeah,” he interrupted. “If you’re in check, or if you moved your king or rook, or if there’s a piece attacking the squares involved in the castling move, then you can’t castle. That’s important, because if you don’t castle, your king gets stuck in the center of the board, where it’s more likely to get assaulted by the opponent’s queen, which also starts in the center. My dad always told me to castle as soon as you can to help protect your king. Then you can spend more time on offense, trying to get your pieces to the other side of the board where they can do more damage.”

“OK.”

“Let me show you the strategy I use a lot when I play as white against my dad.”

“OK,” I repeated, fascinated.

“Here,” he said, and reset the board. “Just watch. I start with the king pawn—moving it up two, like I said. Then suppose you move the same, king pawn to e5. That means I can’t just move the queen’s pawn out, or you’ll just take it. So instead, I move the knight out to f3. This threatens your pawn, so you have to do something to defend it. You can sort of mimic me and move your knight to c6, which protects the pawn and also helps you develop your pieces. They call it *develop* when you put a piece closer to my stuff and away from your back line, where it can’t do anything.

“Well, suppose then I attack the knight with this bishop.” He moved his light square bishop to b5, diagonally attacking the black knight at c6. “Now, if black moves the knight, it opens up this pawn to my knight. And if you don’t move the knight, I can take it next turn. I’ll lose my bishop, but you won’t have anything protecting that pawn, so I’ll be able to take it next turn. Meanwhile, see back here?” He pointed to his king-side back row. “Now I can castle next turn, because I moved out all the pieces in the way. Once I do that, I can continue attacking, with my king safely tucked out of sight.” He finally took a breath. “Come on, let’s try another game!”

We played again. He played white, and I played black. I did the same moves that he showed me, this time moving a pawn up to defend my pawn after he moved up his bishop to attack my knight. After he took it, I had two pawns in a row. He pointed to that.

“See, when you have doubled pawns like that, it makes your position weaker.”

I frowned. “So you talked me into a bad move?”

“No, you can still win like that, but I’m just showing you how I like to play.”

He castled like he’d showed me. I tried to move my knight like he had, but my pawn was now in the way, so I moved it in front of my king. But then when I tried to move my bishop out of the way, the knight was in the way, so I had to move my pawn to let the bishop out. By the time I was able to castle, he’d already moved both of his knights and his last bishop out from the back row. I moved my knight forward, but didn’t see that he could just take it with his pawn, which he did. At least I was able to take his pawn back with mine. After a few more moves, he took my rook with his bishop, but I took back his bishop with mine.

“I won the exchange,” he said, in reference to that move. “See, the bishop is worth three, and the rook is worth five, so when I take the rook and lose the bishop, I get ahead by two points,” he explained. I wasn’t sure why the rook was worth more than the bishop, but I nodded.

We kept going, and he attacked my queen with a knight. I moved it out of the way. He attacked it with his other knight, and I didn’t know what to do. I asked.

“Well, you can take my knight here,” he said. “I’ll take your queen but then you can take mine back with your bishop.”

So I did what he suggested.

We traded some pieces, but after every move, I didn’t know what to do next. So I asked him, and he gave me some ideas. I didn’t know which of the moves would be best, so I just picked one at random.

Recess ended only a few moments after we started, so we didn’t finish the game. Although he hadn’t put me in checkmate, he’d taken a lot of my pieces and surely would’ve won. The next day, we returned to our spot, set up the pieces, and played another game. This time, he started differently, moving his b-pawn up, and then putting the bishop into the spot vacated by the pawn. I played the king pawn forward, and he took it. I continued, still pretty much using the moves he’d shown me, including the castle, but I really had no idea how to proceed. He offered advice, and I took it.

Eventually, he moved his queen next to my king, and he showed me my only legal move, putting my king in the corner. He moved his queen to the back row, allowing me to take it with my rook. I thought I had him for a change, until he moved his knight to where the queen had been the turn before, at f7, attacking my king.

“Checkmate!” he said. I had no moves. Even though he gave away his queen, the sacrifice trapped my king on the corner of the board, surrounded by other pieces so that it couldn’t move. Using the knight, which exerted its influence over the other pieces, he won the game. Intriguing.

We reset the pieces and played until we had to go back inside. And so began our daily ritual. Every recess, and sometimes after school, I played chess with Rob. I never won. He always figured out some way to take most of my pieces or trap my king. He put me in “mate” with his queen and a rook, with two rooks, with a knight and a bishop, a queen and a knight, and two pawns and a rook. He took all my king-side pieces, then advanced two pawns to the end of the board, promoting them to queens, and put me in checkmate with those. He did the “four-move checkmate” on me again, and this time I almost threw the board at him. After a couple of weeks, I realized something about myself. I hated losing.





CHAPTER 10

Despite my lack of chess success, Rob Friendly made my life bearable. I had little to look forward to except our matches. I learned next to nothing in class, because by the time Mrs. Collins explained the lesson plan for the day, I understood it all. Then I'd spend the rest of class trying not to slip into the void. I used the bathroom excessively and demonstrated the same vigor as the other students upon being dismissed for lunch, recess, or the end of the day. My home life offered little solace during the week. Mom rarely returned from work before bedtime, and she started leaving me instructions for warming up frozen dinners on my own. When she did appear, she looked like she hadn't slept in weeks, and she barely spoke a word. On the upside, she let me go to Rob's house whenever I wanted, so I spent most of my time there.

Rob's father engineered aircraft engines for a company called Boeing. Rob boasted that his father won several awards for his designs, and after I met him, I could see why. His knowledge base extended to all manners of topics, including math, science, religion, politics, and, of course, chess. He had an answer for every question I asked. I regarded him as brilliant.

After Rob started inviting me over, I stayed longer and longer, often through dinner, so I learned how a regular family lived. Rob's mother volunteered for a local foundation, but she also managed the household. Always hospitable, she made sure I had plenty of lemonade on warm afternoons—and occasional cookies when she thought it wouldn't spoil our appetites for dinner. She complimented me on simple things, like eating all of my vegetables. Rob hated vegetables, and it irritated him that I kept "showing off" for his mother, but he didn't hold a grudge. He, like me, had

no other friends, so we spent most of our time together playing chess. We played a *lot* of chess.

On a Friday in October, after obtaining the proper permissions slips, I took the afternoon bus directly to Rob's, and we played a couple of games until Rob's father came home.

"Say, Hunter, you're really getting the hang of this," he commented, watching our positions develop. "Rob taught you to get your minor pieces out quickly, minimize early pawn moves, protect your king by castling, and avoid early traps."

"Thanks, Mr. Friendly," I said. I let down my guard a little, and noticed his soothing deep blue demon. Because of the blue color, I found myself drawn to it, and I explored it further. The dense, strong demon contained some silver, white, and pink, along with an odd combination of a sweet taste and a musky odor. Unlike Rob's and mine, Mr. Friendly's demon felt warmer, which added to the enticement. I liked it. Certainly I didn't fear it.

"Mr. Friendly?"

"Yes, Hunter?"

"Rob told me that you taught him to play chess, and he's really good. Does that mean you're really good too?"

Mr. Friendly laughed. "I'm a hobbyist, but I am ranked 1560. That means I can probably hold my own against anyone who isn't a master or grand master."

"So you can beat Rob?"

"We used to play all the time, but we haven't played much since you started coming around," he answered.

"Well, then you're due for a game! Can I watch?" I found myself excited at the prospect of watching them play. For some inexplicable reason, I wanted Rob to lose, even though I liked him a lot. Perhaps the frustration of not being able to beat him myself clouded my judgment.

"Rob?" Mr. Friendly asked.

"Well, I don't know," Rob said.

"Aw, come on," I encouraged. "You beat me every game! I want to see you play someone who knows what he's doing!"

Apparently Rob didn't like losing either. He knew his father would probably win, but he grudgingly agreed to play the next game with him.

Then, to emphasize his displeasure at being railroaded into playing his father, he unleashed a devastating attack against my queenside, taking all my pieces and forcing me to resign.

“He hasn’t quite taught you any tactics,” Mr. Friendly commented, when I tipped my king to confirm the loss. “You have to learn how to see combinations, sacrifices, and forced moves. See, look here,” he said, replacing some of the pieces on the board.

“When you have your king and queen along the same line of site as your opponent’s protected piece, you’re going to lose your queen. I mean, you can’t move the queen out of the way if it’s in front. And if you’re in check and forced to move your king out of the way, your queen is vulnerable. If your queen is in *front* of the king along the line of site, it’s called a pin,” he said. He emphasized the location by wiggling the queen as he demonstrated. “And if your queen is *behind* the king, it’s called an X-ray.”

I was familiar with the X-ray machine from my many hospital visits.

“Either way, you’ll lose your queen. So when Rob put his knight here,” he aligned the board as it appeared during the game, “and you take it with your queen, thinking you captured his knight for nothing, he’ll put his protected bishop here,” he played the move, “and now your king and queen are both in the same diagonal line controlled by that bishop.”

I saw exactly what he meant. That’s why I kept losing my queen. He kept tricking me into these combination moves—he’d give up a knight or something, and I’d lose my queen. Then he brought his queen down and captured all of my weaker pieces, and won every time.

“If you ignored the feint, and instead captured this weakened pawn,” he went on, replacing the pieces and moving the queen in a different location, “then you threaten his rook, forcing him to move it. This gives you a *tempo*, which is like a beat of time. You have the advantage because he can’t do anything other than protect against the loss. And you not only stole a pawn, but you moved your queen to a square where it’s capable of doing severe damage. From here, Rob’s only sensible move is the rook. After that, you bring your bishop up and then threaten that knight. He’s no longer protected because of where you moved the queen, so he’ll have to move that now too. When he moves that away, you can bring *your* knight into this square, threatening checkmate. Rob is forced to defend, moving

his queen over in an attempt to get you to trade queens. See, you only try to trade down when you're losing based on position, and Rob is now losing here." He continued playing both black and white turns, showing what I should have done to win the game.

"Finally," he concluded, "you bring your rook to the middle, and he has no choice but to block the check with his queen, putting *his* queen and king along the same line, and you capture his queen instead."

I found his discourse amazing. Mr. Friendly moved the pieces like he knew the outcome of the next ten moves, even before any of them happened.

Rob and his dad reset the pieces and played while I watched. After the first few moves, which Mr. Friendly called "the opening," they spent several minutes thinking about each move before making one. They calculated several moves in advance before taking a turn, each trying to make sure he'd gain the advantage. It never occurred to me before to plan out many moves in advance. I looked to see what piece I could threaten or take, without regard to the later effect. Obviously, that never led to victory. Top players, like Rob's dad, focused on the big picture, planning attacks while securing a solid defense.

As the game proceeded, they traded down a few pawns and minor pieces. Then Mr. Friendly took a pawn, and Rob groaned as though he'd lost the game.

"It's just a pawn," I said.

"No, it's not," Rob answered.

"No, it's not," Mr. Friendly agreed. "Show him."

Rob showed me. "It's a trap. See how he's threatening my rook? If I move that out of the way, he'll move here, which threatens checkmate. Then it's pretty much over, because I'll have to give away at least a bishop when I move my king out of the way, and he'll have a winning position. I could instead sacrifice my rook and protect the interior of my lineup by bringing the queen out here so he can't get in, but that isn't any better. No matter what, I'll fall behind by either a bishop or a rook, so I have no chance. It's over."

I played the moves over again in my mind. I pictured what he described. I saw no way to save both the rook and the bishop, so Rob had

no chance. However, something about the way they arrived at the current position nagged at my brain.

“Let’s go back a couple of moves and see what you could have done differently,” I suggested.

They agreed, and Mr. Friendly pointed out how he’d set up the trap, innocuously enough, offering a trade of knights and setting up the capture of the pawn.

“Suppose you took this pawn instead?” I offered when we’d moved the position back.

“Well, that would be silly,” Rob said. “I’d just be giving away my bishop.”

“Hmm . . .” Mr. Friendly mused quietly. “Go ahead, Hunter, what next?”

“Well, yeah, suppose he does take the bishop. Then you move this pawn here.”

“And then he just moves that knight out of the way,” Rob answered immediately.

“Yeah. And you move your queen here.”

Rob looked thunderstruck.

Mr. Friendly nodded. “That’s a brilliant fork. You exposed the rook and king by sacrificing the bishop. I’d have to move my king, you take the rook—and not only that, you’ve weakened the protection on this knight so it’s not an exchange anymore. That forces me to move that, and you gain a tempo in the process. At which point you . . .” He looked up at me expectantly.

“Move my queen back to here, putting you in check,” I finished.

Mr. Friendly nodded even faster, and then shook his head. He stopped talking for a bit, and simply studied the board. “How did you do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s just plain brilliant. Rob said you were in the special-ed class, and you just started playing chess last month. There’s no counter for that move that I can see. It’s . . . amazing. You’re a very gifted chess player, Mr. Miller!”

Mr. Friendly’s lavish praise left me speechless. In my entire life, not once had anyone ever complimented me in such a fashion. The source made it even more special—Mr. Friendly demonstrated his own brilliance in the previous game. I smiled, still dumbfounded, until Rob broke the spell.

“Come on, let me play you again!” he said.

We played another game, but this time, I calculated every move out a few turns before making my choice. Unfortunately, the hours passed rapidly, and at ten o'clock Mr. Friendly interrupted the game to take me home. I asked if I could come back tomorrow so we could finish.

“You'd better!” Rob said.

* * * * *

A warm front drove up the normally chilly fall temperatures throughout the Pacific Northwest, so Rob's parents and my mother insisted we spend time outside in the beautiful sunshine. We planned a trip to the park on Saturday to finish our latest game, and at least one more. Since Rob could walk to the park from his house, Mom dropped me off there, and she planned to pick me up before dinner.

We wrote down the positions of the pieces prior to packing up the board. On the walk over to the park, Rob explained that in tournament games, most of the time they played with a clock, so you had to make your moves within a certain time frame. That sped the game along, and also put pressure on the players who couldn't calculate moves as quickly.

We set up our board and pieces in a nice, soft spot near a large oak tree that protected us from the breeze that threatened to dislodge the pieces from their proper squares. We just finished resetting the pieces when a couple of kids from our school came sauntering up beside us.

“What do we have here?” one asked sarcastically.

I ignored them, but Rob wasn't able to resist a jab. “It's chess, a game of intellect. Therefore, I'm sure you have no interest.”

“You mean a game for geeks!” taunted another.

“I bet I know how the pieces move,” boasted the largest of the trio.

“Go away,” said Rob, now a bit more frightened than irritated.

“See, watch this!” said the big one, as he picked up several of the pieces and started throwing them around the park. “They can fly!”

“Cut it out!” Rob appealed.

“Or what, shrimp? You and the retard gonna do something about it?”

He paused for a second, and added, “I thought so.” Then he proceeded

to throw the chess pieces all over the place. For good measure, he kicked the board up into the air, putting a dent into it.

“Have fun with your game!” he added, as he and his buddies walked away snickering.

We spent the next hour trying to retrieve the pieces from their various locations, but even after all that time, a black bishop still eluded our search. We ended up leaving without it.

When we got back to Rob’s house, his mother asked us if we had enjoyed the game.

“Not really,” Rob said. “Some boys came and threw the pieces all around the park, and we couldn’t find one of the bishops. We didn’t actually get to play at all.”

“Oh, that’s terrible, dear,” said his mother, whose purpleness suddenly blasted through my usual defensive wall. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. We just spent an hour trying to find the pieces.”

“Did you know any of the boys?”

“They were just some kids from school. It’s no big deal. Bruce Davis was trying to show off for his friends. I’ll just stay away from him,” Rob concluded.

We used Rob’s other set. We’d lost the paper with the positions from our current game, so we started another one, which Rob won. We played two more games, and Rob got rather upset when I won the second one. We were both still a little angry at those bullies, but there wasn’t really anything we could do. I tried hard to forget about it, and discovered I couldn’t. I found it ironic that I lost nearly every memory of the last ten years to the void, but this one event continued to haunt me no matter how hard I tried to suppress it.

The next day at recess, we hurriedly started a game, knowing that we didn’t have much time. We completed our first several moves, choosing our favorite opening line, and we were in the middle game. Neither one of us were paying attention to anything but our next move, when Bruce Davis, who had apparently sought us out, found us in our secluded corner. He unceremoniously kicked our board, sending the pieces flying.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Rob said angrily, standing up.

“Oops!” Bruce replied. “It was an accident. Sorry.”

Rob went right to Mrs. Frechette, the principal, and told her what Bruce had done. She assured Rob that she'd investigate. I tried to locate the strewn pieces so we could continue playing, but even if I'd found them all in time, we didn't remember all the board positions. We resolved to start writing down the moves so we could reproduce the game.

"We might as well learn to do that as we play anyway. That's what all the grand masters do at regular tournaments," Rob informed me.

Writing down the moves turned out to be a very good idea. Whenever Bruce or his buddies found us playing a game, they somehow managed to disrupt it. Their inventive methods included crashing a soccer ball through the pieces, tossing a shoe into the game, and the old favorite, falling next to us and "accidentally" upending the board. We tried different spots outside, staying inside, and telling the principal again, but no matter what we did, they continually managed to disturb the game. We finally gave up and stopped playing during recess.

The torment only worsened. No longer having a game to wreck, they started to get more physical. They would push us into walls, trip us, and laugh while we fell down, or call us derogatory names to the amusement of their friends. Anger dissolved my defensive shield, and the black, acrid, and cold sensations coming from Bruce, the biggest bully, frightened me as much as the giant oaf himself. A blurring red haziness distorted my normal blue demon in Bruce's presence, adding to my discomfort. Not wanting to lose control completely, I doubled my efforts at suppression and tried my best to simply stay away from them.

Bitterness welled in me whenever they victimized me. In addition to destroying my only source of enjoyment, they could tell how much each encounter upset me, so they maintained their unrelenting attacks to watch my anger and frustration grow. They enjoyed getting a rise out of me. I didn't see what else I could do about it though. As the holidays approached, I finally relaxed, because I knew I'd at least enjoy some respite over the winter break.

On the second-to-last day of class, four of them caught us outside during recess time, with no teachers around.

"Hey, Bruce," said Arias, the second biggest bully. "The geek and the retard are over there by themselves—and look at that!"

A pile of dog poop on top of the snow caught his attention. I understood his plan immediately. I lunged to my feet, bolting full speed toward the door to the school. I made it two steps before Bruce and Arias simultaneously lifted me from my feet like a doll. My legs continued churning briefly, gaining no purchase because my body remained suspended in the air. The bullies laughed at the comical sight. The other two captured Rob, although he remained much less animated.

“Well, how about this. You sure need to be careful out here. Who knows, you might slip and fall and get covered in—” With that he dropped me, face first, into the smelly pile. I flailed mightily, but my scrawny frame provided little resistance to their massive muscles. They covered my face and chest in the stuff, and then ceremoniously repeated the process on a desperately struggling Rob.

I had enough. As soon as they let me up, I ran right at Bruce and took a huge swing at his face with my balled fist. Instead of dropping to the ground under the force of my blow, he laughed as though touched by a butterfly.

“Nice shot, kid,” he said. “But you really need to get your weight behind it. Like this!”

* * * * *

I woke up in the emergency room. Because of my frequent visits, I knew exactly where I'd ended up, but it took considerably longer for me to recall the reason. During that time I thought I smelled one of my former classmates, but I opened my eyes to find the room otherwise unoccupied. The smell slowly dissipated. I felt pain in my face from the punch, but that quickly disappeared as my senses returned, and I recalled the events leading up to my trip to the hospital. Bruce had knocked me unconscious.

The doctor came in, bringing with him demons that had a strong, sugary energy and were orange, white, pink, and gold. I shook myself a bit and made them go away.

“So, you're awake! Your mother will be here soon, but I can tell you that your CT results are good, you have no bleeding or fractures, probably just a concussion. You may still be a bit confused for a while, but you

should be fine. The report says you bumped heads with another student, and landed in a pile of dog poop. Bad luck!”

“That’s not what happened! It was Bruce Davis and some other kids from school! They pushed us into the poop and then punched me in the face!”

I omitted that I took the first swing, but given the lack of impact, that hardly seemed relevant.

“That sure sounds more likely, but there are four kids all telling the same story, so it’s going to be hard to refute. Oh, here comes . . . Is that your—”

“Hunter!” came a familiar voice. “Ugh! What’s that smell?”

Miss Amanda.

“—mother?” continued the doctor weakly, after seeing the young woman.

“No, I’m Amanda Wagstaff. I have power of attorney for Hunter right now. How is he? I mean, besides very smelly?”

“CT results are normal, so it’s just a concussion. I’ll be able to discharge him shortly after we do a repeat neurological exam. He was unconscious when he got here, but he’s recovered completely.”

We did grip strength and “follow the finger” exercises and such until I satisfied the doctor. He let me wash up in the sink. I didn’t smell it myself any more, but given the way that both Amanda and the doctor wrinkled their noses at me, I probably reeked.

“What happened to Rob?” I inquired.

“Oh, you mean the other boy covered in . . . right. Um, he’s not my patient, but I can check on him for you.”

The doctor never came back to tell me anything about Rob. A nurse returned with my discharge papers and explained them to Miss Amanda, who took me home and sent me right to the shower.

I found the entire situation extremely exasperating. They covered us in dog poop—and, unless a miracle occurred, they were going to get away with it. I didn’t relish a future of being repeatedly humiliated by beasts much larger than me, but I had no recourse. At least Bruce and his friends were in eighth grade, so after this year, they’d all be moving on from Madrona to Garfield High School, and I wouldn’t have to deal with them

anymore. But I still had the entire spring term to live through. If I made it that long, I didn't know how much of this abuse I could take.

I kept trying to get in touch with Rob, but a week went by before I heard from him. His father transferred to a town in New York. I'd lost my only friend. Rob's bitterness over the transfer rivaled my own—but the upside, not having to deal with Bruce and his friends, made me slightly jealous. He entered a new school for gifted individuals, and there were plenty of chess players in his new class. Good for him, at least. Not so good for me.

I skipped the final day of the term, choosing to recover from my injuries rather than face a new humiliation by going back to school. Mom agreed because Miss Amanda could stay with me. She tried her best to cheer me up, but I remained mired in depression.

The weather on Christmas Day mirrored my misery, cold and blustery. Mom stayed up almost all night working on Christmas Eve, so she slept most of the following morning, leaving me alone until noon. We had brunch, consisting of waffles and bacon, and she gave me a nice present—a beautiful hardwood chessboard with mahogany pieces and a stand. Happiness and disappointment accompanied the gift, because awesome though it was, my only opponent was three thousand miles away. I tried playing chess against myself, which I found profoundly unsatisfying. I always managed to outthink myself. In the end, it made me even more depressed. On one of my rare trips out of the house, I went to the library and found a few books that looked interesting, and read those. Rob had helped me learn to read, and between his and Amanda's tutelage, I felt increasingly proficient. Still, life had turned very sour. I didn't look forward to school starting again, because my classes were useless and I had nobody to spend recess with. Plus, I still had to face those bullies. I gave in and started spending more and more time in the void.





CHAPTER 11

I wasted the days between Christmas and New Year's Day. While all the other kids played with their new toys, I spent my time experimenting with the void. I developed a practice akin to setting an alarm: I could deliberately avoid spending time in this useless universe until I had pressing matters, such as eating or going to the bathroom. Mom continued to spend all her time at work, and Miss Amanda came over daily to ensure I didn't starve. She noticed my trips and tried to entice me back with new books from the library, but I remained despondent. I mastered the art of maintaining just enough awareness of the passage of time to reanimate my lifeless body at will, without requiring any conscious thought or interaction in the meanwhile. My new routine involved eating breakfast, seeking my unique vegetative state until Miss Amanda arrived for her daily visit, and then slipping back the moment she left. During my moments of clarity, I wondered what Mom could possibly be doing for eighteen hours a day as a university professor. I didn't understand why she needed to be gone so much. I asked her about it on the one day she came home for dinner.

"You're a little too young to understand, dear, but someday I hope to explain it all to you."

My father proved equally mysterious, or worse. Why did he leave for weeks or even months at a time? Mom didn't talk about him during the long absence, and while I questioned the eighteen-hour days of Mom's schedule, my father's twenty-four-seven abandonment perplexed me even more. Having nobody to talk to during the day helped expand my capacity to control my visits to the void, but after I successfully mastered that important time-wasting skill, I tired of nothingness.

On New Year's Day, Miss Amanda arrived as usual and made me breakfast. She looked as if she'd been out all night and didn't get any sleep. Her orange, gold, silver, and blue demons felt stunted, and a tartness tinged her normal sweet, minty taste. Although it would have been easy to do so, I didn't bother to block them out.

"Why is my mother gone all day, every day?" I asked. She jumped, buzzing green as she looked at me with obvious surprise. I realized I hadn't said a word to her in almost a week, since the day I came home from the hospital.

"Oh, Hunter," she said, regaining her composure. My gaze locked on to her as she fumbled with her shoulder-length blond hair.

"I, uh—" she started again, not getting any further. After a few seconds, she tried a third time, waves pulsing from her as she spoke. "She works at the university doing research. I guess the project she's working on is taking a lot of time. I really don't know what she does. I guess it's pretty important, though." The pulsations beat over my lowered defenses like a metronome, rather uncomfortable on my skin. I didn't care for the sensations, so I blocked them out.

"What about my dad?" I couldn't explain the reason for the sudden interest in my family, other than the loss of my only friend.

"Um, I don't really know him, but I think he does remote projects. Like going out in, um, other places and stuff. I don't know. You'll have to ask your mother when she gets back." She hurried off to the kitchen to fix lunch and wash up the breakfast dishes from earlier.

Useless. Why wouldn't anyone tell me what my parents did all day? Anger overcame me again, and I recoiled into the void, barely hearing her say, "You have school tomorrow, make sure you're ready to go by the time the bus gets here!"

* * * * *

I timed the end of my stay in the void to correspond to dinnertime. After eating the microwaved leftover beef and pea pods that Miss Amanda left in the front of the refrigerator for me, I finished up my nightly routine and

went to sleep, dreaming of eight-foot bullies with six arms, all throwing dog feces at my face. I couldn't avoid misery even in my sleep.

Going back to school added brief variety to a life spent otherwise in darkness. Unfortunately, the effect waned by the second day, as Mrs. Collins's droning spurred me back to my old habit of visiting the void shortly after attendance. Occasionally I'd last a few moments into the daily main lesson, but not very often. My reading skills advanced well beyond anything she discussed in class, thanks to Rob, Miss Amanda, and my own library time. I loathed recess, when the bullies roamed completely unchecked. They pelted me with snowballs, called me *retard*, and laughed at me because I had no friends. The reality of their gibes about my friendless condition made the sting even worse. My status as a complete social outcast ensured I'd never collect another chess partner. Even more embarrassing, my own classmates, who took their own fair share of taunting and verbal abuse, avoided me as though I had the plague.

During class, I endeavored to maximize time in the void, emerging only for recess, lunch, and dismissal, avoiding the entire rest of the day. When I accidentally emerged prematurely, I'd go to the bathroom. Mrs. Collins didn't notice my avoidance tactics, nor did any of the other kids.

Because I dreaded going outside at recess, I dawdled through most of the break time, managing to get to the playground just before everyone else started coming back inside. This strategy lasted only a few days because Mrs. Collins noticed and started cajoling me out the door. For safety, I stayed right near the front of the building, with the teachers. I didn't play during recess anyway, so it didn't matter to me where I stood. None of the teachers talked to me, as long as I made it out the door to satisfy Mrs. Collins. From my perch near the entrance, I could see Bruce Davis and his buddies point at me and laugh occasionally. For some reason, that made me angry. I had no recourse, though, so I just tried my best to ignore them.

Unfortunately, they didn't feel the same urge. Unable to catch me far enough away from any teachers during recess, they focused instead on arrival and dismissal times. On a cold Monday morning in February, I nearly missed the bus because I couldn't find any clean clothes to wear. While worrying about my dirty clothes, my attention lapsed as I walked from the

parking area into the school yard. They trapped me in a four-person box, surrounding me like guards around a condemned prisoner.

“Where’s your geeky friend, retard?” Bruce asked, in a falsetto voice presumably intended to irritate me, but it just sounded weird. I lurched forward, seeking a sliver of daylight between the four giant trolls guarding my path, but they blocked my escape. When I didn’t answer, Bruce tried to bait me. “Come on, don’t you want to try to punch me again? You hit like a girl. Actually, no! Girls hit much harder than you. You hit like a baby. A baby girl. That’s what we should call you from now on—*baby girl!*”

His buddies laughed and whooped as they made ample use of my new moniker. One of the teachers came by and broke it up with, “Don’t you kids have homeroom to get to?”

Once they figured out that the best place to pester me without getting caught was the parking lot, I had to pay particular attention and choose my path carefully every day. I tried to use the cover of other kids to shield myself from them on the way in. But they knew which bus I took, so on the way out they were able to predict my actions. I felt like a defenseless pawn facing a queen, two rooks, and a bishop.

On Tuesday, I spent my typical school day in the void, but on the way to the bus, the four of them surprised me and formed a human barricade, escorting me forcibly to the side of the building.

“Well, what do we have here?” said Bruce.

“Looks like a lost retard,” said a rook.

“Hmm, lost retard, you’re going to miss your bus if you don’t find your way,” said Bruce. The others all laughed and nodded. I waited for them to let me go, but they apparently had their own rides home, so they weren’t concerned about missing the bus. I tried to make a break for the parking lot, but they grabbed me and kept me there.

I got ready to yell, but Arias clamped his beefy hand over my mouth. “No, no, no! We can’t have any girly screams.”

“Mmffmfff!” I huffed.

“Now, just settle down and relax. Your retard mommy will just have to come and pick you up from school today, because you were too stupid to find your way to the bus.”

The thought of Mom leaving work to get me scared me more than these bullies. She didn't even have time to do laundry, let alone pick me up from school. And after the incident with Rose, I knew she'd be furious if I missed my bus. Armed with righteous indignation, I struggled desperately against the grips of the big kids, but only succeeded in making them all laugh. I weighed almost nothing compared to them, and even if I broke free and ran toward the parking lot, they'd catch me within two steps.

The sounds of the buses leaving the grounds left me utterly deflated. The boys relaxed and let me go, walking away laughing and giving each other high-fives. I had to go to the guidance office and tell Gladys the wild-cat lady I'd missed my bus. Miss Amanda showed up, an hour and a half later, stirring me from the void. I felt great relief when I discovered she didn't call Mom, who would've given me a tongue-lashing for sure. Miss Amanda kindly avoided discussing the incident, but I think she knew instinctively what had happened.

I endured school through March and into April. I spent my days dodging the bullies on the bus, practically running from the drop-off area to my classroom, mumbling "here," for attendance, and going to the void. At the end of the day, I checked the laces on my sneakers and did my best impression of a sprinter taking off from starting blocks, getting to the bus line before anyone could derail my quest. If I didn't make it out the door first, I kept very close to a teacher at all times, limiting my exposure. I managed to avoid any major trouble by clinging to this routine.

One day, Mrs. Collins didn't arrive for class, and we had a substitute. Miss Barrett, the new teacher, introduced herself and regretfully informed us that Mrs. Collins had the flu and would be gone for a few days.

"So, what have you been working on?" she asked.

I hadn't the slightest idea. Nobody else knew either.

"How about some simple math?" she said, to nobody in particular. "Maybe some times tables?" A dropping pin would have been deafening compared to the silence.

"What is two times two?"

What the hell. I stopped my typical journey to the void, because something about Miss Barrett intrigued me. "Four," I answered. The quiet whis-

pers among the others quickly died away. Miss Barrett looked at me quizzically, and smiled a little.

“How about four times four?”

“Sixteen,” I answered instantly.

Her smile brightened. “Sixteen times sixteen?”

“Two hundred fifty-six,” I answered immediately again.

She paused, her demon flashing a green and yellow that took a moment for me to block. “OK, two hundred fifty-six times two hundred fifty-six?”

After a moment, I said, “Sixty-five thousand five hundred thirty-six.”

She frowned, reached into the desk drawer and pulled out a calculator. After she clicked some buttons, she looked back at me with a stunned expression on her face. “Four hundred seventeen times two hundred thirty-one?” and simultaneously punched the numbers into the machine. She looked up as I answered.

“Ninety-six thousand three hundred twenty-seven.”

“Is this fourth-grade special ed?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yeah, but I never quite understood why I got put here. I haven’t learned a thing since day one,” I said, not even remotely hiding my disgust.

Another pulse of vibrant green from Miss Barrett got past my defenses. After a brief pause, she said, “OK, class, could you please take out your latest book and read quietly to yourselves for a few minutes? I’ll be right back.”

I pulled the book out of the desk and got ready to go into the void.

“Not you, Mr. . . .?”

“Miller. Hunter Miller.”

“Mr. Miller, come with me please.”

She took me down to the principal’s office.

“Wait here a moment,” she said, as she went in to talk to Principal Frechette. I regretted my little outburst, but the time for caution had long since passed. *Of course nobody learned anything in school. My anger just got the better of me because of the constant threat of torment, and because my only friend moved to New York.* As I wallowed in self-pity, Mrs. Frechette and Miss Barrett appeared side by side in the doorway.

“Could you come in here, please, Hunter?” the principal said.

“Yes, Mrs. Frechette,” I said balefully, hanging my head as I walked into her office.

She sat down behind her desk. “Miss Barrett says you don’t feel you’re learning anything in class. Is that true?”

I knew it. I should’ve kept my mouth shut. I was in trouble. It wasn’t fair. The bullies get to do whatever they want, and I get stuck in that smelly class and get in trouble for answering easy math problems.

“I’m sorry I said that, Mrs. Frechette. I’ll keep quiet from now on,” I mumbled, hoping to minimize my punishment.

She laughed. “Oh no, Hunter, you aren’t in trouble. Miss Barrett said you did well on some math problems. Very well. Perhaps you should be in a different class. Can you answer some questions for me?”

“Sure,” I said, sighing loudly with relief.

“What’s fifteen times eighty-one?”

“One thousand two hundred fifteen.” *Easy.*

“Wow. Um, how about three hundred sixty-five times one hundred twenty-nine?”

That took a second. “Forty-seven thousand eighty-five.”

“Well now,” she said, clearly impressed. “Can you do division as well?”

“I don’t see why not.” I understood the concept from Mom’s flash cards, and I really liked playing with numbers.

She paused a second, checking something on her calculator, and asked, “What is six thousand seven hundred thirty-two divided by eighteen?”

My eyes widened as I accepted the challenge, taking the problem in steps. Six thousand seven hundred thirty-two divided by two is three thousand three hundred sixty-six, which divided by three is one thousand one hundred twenty-two and then divided by three again is . . . “Three hundred seventy-four.”

“How do you do that?”

“What?” I answered, perplexed.

“Those are challenging math problems. Most adults can’t do those in their head.”

“Oh, I’m good with numbers. I think of them as a series of lines. My mother taught me about a number line when she showed me the flash cards. For the bigger multiplication, I wrap the lines around themselves

and adjust the location of the subsequent line based on the second factor. Then it lands me in the correct place on the original line, which gives me the answer. For the division problems, I break them down into factors when I can, and use multiple lines to take down the factors to get to the answer.”

She stared at me just like Miss Barrett had done ten minutes earlier. “Could you wait right here a minute?”

“OK.”

“Miss Barrett, thank you. Please go back to your class now. I’ll take it from here.” My substitute teacher nodded and left. Then the principal went to the outer office and started talking to someone about the “gifted” section for sixth grade. I waited patiently as she shut the door so I couldn’t hear the rest of the conversation.

When she returned, she smiled broadly. “I just went through your file, Hunter. It seems when you matriculated from the UW Autism Center, you didn’t take the proper placement exam. Instead Mrs. Bonefant administered an oral exam, which you passed. However, given this new information, I feel a true aptitude placement test is warranted—and, depending on the results, you might be better suited to a different class next year. If it’s all right with you, and your parents, I’d like to sign you up for the test, which, coincidentally, is only a few weeks away. Would you be interested in that?”

“Definitely! Thank you!”

“Then let’s get you back to class. I’ll talk to your parents today or tomorrow, and you’ll have to bring a permission slip for them to sign,” she said, handing me a packet.

With that, she sent me back to my class. Miss Barrett gave me a nod, and went on talking about colonial America. She made it all sound interesting. I had no trouble remaining present. At recess, I stayed inside, and instead of forcing me to go out, she kept on with her discourse. When the other kids returned, all oblivious to the topic, she continued, pausing only briefly to allow the din of creaking chairs to fade.

Miss Barrett asked us to open our history textbook and turn to page eighty-six, the section on the Revolutionary War. My previously unopened book glowed with a pristine buff white, but I could see doodles on

the other kids' books in the margins. Although we'd already covered this topic, I had no recollection of it. Mrs. Collins's monotone sent me to the void almost immediately. With the new teacher, I found the topic fascinating. I didn't realize the United States had been a colony of England, or that other countries, like France and Spain, had such a desire to "own" us too. No wonder we decided to revolt. I sympathized with the colonists. I felt oppressed. Unfortunately, for me *revolution* meant a trip to the emergency room. There had to be a better solution.

The next day, Miss Barrett returned, bringing a dynamic lesson plan that included math and history. We talked more about the Revolution. This time she added many details about events, like the Boston Tea Party, and why they were important. I guess British people really loved their tea, and Americans hated paying taxes. Since Britain defeated the French during the French and Indian War a few years before, the French helped us with our independence. What goes around comes around. I never really considered history to be of any value. But Miss Barrett drew many parallels to current events, and it became rapidly obvious that studies of the past held profound significance for the future.

Our lessons continued similarly for three days, and on the fourth, Mrs. Frechette appeared in our class shortly after school-wide announcements. She informed us that, sadly, Mrs. Collins had passed away. Miss Barrett had agreed to be our teacher for the rest of the school year.

"All right!" I said out loud. Some of the other kids looked at me funny, but I ignored them. Miss Barrett reminded me of Miss Amanda, who made reading fun and informative. Even though the school year only had a few more weeks, I expected I'd learn more in that time than I had during the first several months. While my decision to spend the entire year in the void severely hampered my education, I didn't think Mrs. Collins could have taught a moth to fly around a lightbulb, let alone US history, so it probably didn't matter all that much.

Over the ensuing weeks, my knowledge base improved dramatically—especially in language arts, history, and world cultures, as Miss Barrett favored discussions about those topics. Learning from a teacher who actually engaged the students made all the difference in the world. In this case, I should say *student*, because I alone listened to the long lectures.

Miss Barrett didn't mind. She kept on talking as though I was the only one there. My mood brightened, for even though I still had to dodge evil cretins on a daily basis, at least I no longer had to hide in the void out of sheer boredom.

I left out the permission slip for the placement test, and found it signed when I woke up the next morning. I brought it in to Mrs. Frechette's office and left it with the lady out front. A few days before the end of the school year, Mrs. Frechette came to my classroom and took me to her office. She explained the contents of the test packet on the desk. The placement exam consisted of ninety questions, covering a variety of topics, and I had ninety minutes to answer as many questions as possible. I wasn't to worry if I didn't answer all of the questions, and if I didn't know something, she recommended leaving it blank. Bundles of nerves tightened at the pit of my stomach as I listened to her explanation.

"All set?" she asked. I nodded, and she said, "OK, you may begin." She left, and another aged woman with a thin face and peppered hair wrote on the chalkboard at the front of the room, "Ninety minutes remaining," and sat at the teacher's desk.

I opened the packet to read the first question: $6 + 9 = \underline{\quad}$.

I chuckled to myself and I wrote down the answer quickly. The knot in my stomach eased considerably. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

The first fifteen questions were all math. They progressed in difficulty, but I still finished them all in under a minute. I relaxed, and forged ahead. Some questions about grammar, such as "which of the following is a pronoun?" and "which of the following words should start with a capital letter?" increased my confidence. I vaguely recalled Mrs. Collins droning about capital letters, and felt a brief pang of sadness, but I shook it off and returned to the test book. There were a few questions on history, including one about what country used to own the United States before the Revolution. I laughed as I answered, provoking a look from the principal's aide, who poked her head into the small room upon hearing the noise. I looked back at my paper and finished the test quietly. I stood up and handed the book to Mrs. Frechette's proxy, who smiled absently and told me I could go back to class. The test had taken less than twenty-five minutes.

A few days later, Mrs. Frechette sent her aide to pull me out of class and bring me back to her office again.

“Hello, Hunter,” she said, nodding toward the chair on the other side of her desk. “Please sit.”

I did so. I trembled slightly, and my nerves caused me to lose my grip on the demons. Mrs. Frechette beamed with a solid gold color that also had blue, white, and orange, and, a soft, sweet, and minty flavor that reminded me of Miss Amanda. I decided I liked Principal Frechette.

“You did very well on your placement test.”

I nodded slightly, but didn’t say anything.

“Blanche told me you finished it in under thirty minutes. Is that true?”

“Um, yeah. I probably could have gone faster, but I got hung up on the one question about the sizes of the oceans. I thought the largest is the Pacific, but I wasn’t sure.”

“Well, that’s correct. In fact, you got nearly all the questions correct, including all the math. You did very well indeed.”

Of course, they were easy questions. I stared at her.

She looked back at me, her complex demons now adding a green. I belatedly remembered to block them out.

“I’d like to put you in the HCC class, which is for advanced students. I also want you to move to sixth grade, instead of fifth, because I don’t think you’ll be challenged quite enough in fifth grade. I’d really like the opportunity to discuss this with your parents, but I’ve been unable to get in touch with them. Is there something going on at home that I should know about?”

“Like what?”

“Are your parents getting a divorce or something?”

I shook my head imperceptibly. “What do you mean?”

“Sometimes, when two parents don’t get along, they need to separate, so they can both be a better mom or dad. When that happens, sometimes the children feel guilty and don’t perform well in school. I just wonder if that’s why you spent the entire year in special-ed classes without anyone noticing.”

“My dad works for the university, but he’s away a lot. He hasn’t been back home for a while. My mom also works at the university, and she just

started back there a few months ago. She's been working very hard and doesn't come home much, but she set me up with Miss Amanda, who's very nice. She takes care of me. She smells minty like you," I said, and immediately regretted it. I'd relaxed just a bit too much.

Mrs. Frechette looked at me sideways for a moment, picked up a sheaf of papers, and answered, "Well, I really wanted to meet with your parents, but either way, we'll need your mother or father to sign these forms so that you can skip a grade and go into the HCC program. I included a packet that explains the expectations. It's actually quite an honor to be in this program, so I hope you'll take it seriously and continue to perform to the level at which you're capable."

"Is Miss Barrett going to be my teacher next year?" I asked, accepting the stack of papers.

"No, I'm sorry, but we do have some very good teachers, and I'm sure you'll like them. You'll be learning a great deal in the HCC class. Please take those to your parents—and have them call me if they have any questions, or if they just want to talk with me about the program."

She stood up and held out her hand, which I shook, and she added, "OK, back to class with you."

I took the cue and left for my classroom. Mrs. Frechette couldn't hide her disappointment over not being able to speak with my parents. Neither could I. I hadn't seen my father in months, and my mother remained so preoccupied with work that Miss Amanda had taken over full responsibility for all duties at home—cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, and laundry. I finally had clothes to wear again. I knew Mom wouldn't be able to meet with Mrs. Frechette, but at least I could start learning again with the HCC class. I wished Rob were here so I could tell him about it. *I'd love to play a nice game of chess!*



CHAPTER 12

My memories of chess with Rob lingered for a while, and then faded as classroom reality returned. However, upon reading the papers in my new packet, I discovered a shining pearl that brightened my gloom. HCC stood for “highly capable cohort,” a phrase with which I never dreamed I’d be associated. Imagine me, the “retard,” the social outcast, relocating to the realm of the highly capable. Perhaps I’d meet a new chess partner, or at least someone to talk to during recess.

Miss Barrett wished me well, and I told her I hoped to see her again next year. Only on my final bus ride home for the year did I realize I should’ve thanked her. If it hadn’t been for her, I’d be heading to fifth-grade special ed next year, instead of sixth-grade HCC. What a difference a teacher could make!

When I walked home from the bus stop, I encountered Miss Amanda waiting for me in the driveway.

“Welcome home,” she said.

I smiled.

“I’ve got some good news,” she continued. “Your mom has hired me to stay with you all summer.”

“That’s great. Did she tell you about the HCC program?”

“No, what’s that?”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” I said, running inside the house to the drawer where I left the packet. I showed it to her.

“Wait, this must be a mistake. It says sixth grade.”

“No, it’s true! I took this special test, which was actually really easy, and Mrs. Frechette, the principal, told me I did really well and that she wanted me to go into sixth grade instead of fifth. Plus this HCC,” I paused to show

her the document, “is for *highly capable* students. She thinks I should be with the smart kids!”

“That’s fantastic, Hunter,” she said. “I’m so happy for you! We should celebrate. What would you like to do?”

I had no idea. My goals in life included avoiding demons and staying out of the void. I tried to think of something I’d done before that had any relevance. I remembered my tenth birthday party.

“How about a cake?” I suggested.

“Done!” she said. And we went to the kitchen where she started looking around for ingredients and a cake pan. I left her to it and went to my room, where I dropped into my favorite beanbag chair.

We had cake after dinner, and Miss Amanda pulled out the packet again. “There are lots of books on this list. We should get started on this stuff right away. You have to catch up to all the other kids. I bet they’ve been on this HCC track for a while, because the material keeps saying ‘just like last year.’ We should find out what material they covered in prior years, and work on that as well.”

We talked for a while about school, and I went to bed, still excited about the prospect of spending the summer with Miss Amanda and then joining the HCC kids in the fall.

My mother made a rare appearance on the second day of summer.

“What are you doing home?” she demanded. Her tone shocked me so badly that I lost control of the demons. Even more surprising than her tone were her demons themselves. Instead of the usual sweet-tasting, brilliant purple and silver colors, I felt a sour, vibrating, grayish-brown demon that hummed with green and red.

The green and red spread to my demon, which cooled considerably. “School is over for the year,” I said.

“Oh, right. Well, where’s Miss Wagstaff? Shouldn’t she be keeping an eye on you? That’s what I hired her for!”

Miss Amanda, who’d been in the kitchen making breakfast, hurried into the room. “Here I am, Dr. Miller.” Her minty demons turned to a vibrating green that smelled of dirty laundry.

“Shouldn’t you be in here, taking care of Hunter? We can’t have him watching himself, now can we?”

“I was just making breakfast. He’s fine.”

My skin wrinkled a bit at the exchange.

Mom shook herself a little, and her demons warmed. “Of course he is. I’m sorry. I’m a bit frustrated by work. I keep tinkering with my receptor calculations but the results are still horribly wrong. I can’t figure out how to increase the receptor efficiency other than by adding more . . . Well, never mind. I’m sorry. Carry on. I just stopped in to get a paper I wrote before you were born. Maybe I can get some hints from that project. At least that one made it all the way to . . .” Her voice trailed off as she climbed the stairs leading to her office.

Amanda brought the eggs and toast into the dining area and the two of us ate. “Do you want some eggs, Dr. Miller?” she called up the stairs, to no response.

After we finished, Miss Amanda suggested I go out for a walk, theorizing that the fresh air would do me good. I didn’t really like going outside, because it reminded me of being subjected to the jerks at school who always managed to catch me during recess or in the parking lot. Inside, I felt rather safe. Still, she wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I went walking up and down the street.

I didn’t see my mother again for the rest of the week. Miss Amanda located some of the books from my list, and she brought them with her on Saturday. I surprised her by reading the first chapter quite easily. “I guess I can tidy up the house a bit while you work on this,” she said, and she let me continue reading.

I took to the rest of the new materials well, and we developed a routine like regular school—I would get up, eat breakfast, work on reading the next book in the packet, and go outside for a walk for recess. Fortunately, the conspicuous absence of bullies made this much more enjoyable. I didn’t have to ride the buses either. I liked it much better this way. I wished I could get all my schooling at home, but I’d never heard of such a thing.

On the second Saturday of summer vacation, during my requisite outdoor time, I stumbled across four bigger kids from my school. I didn’t know their names, but I recognized them from the parking lot. They lived close by and took my bus home on rare occasions. Most of the time, though, they rode their bikes to and from school, so I didn’t have to deal

with them. My walks had no defined route or destination, so I turned to go the other way when I saw them. The four changed their course to intercept me.

“Hey, kid,” said the nearest one, with a crooked smile. “Aren’t you in the, um, special class at Madrona?”

Well, here it comes. Normal kids at Madrona picking on the retard again. I never could completely escape dimwits like these guys. I didn’t really want to have anything to do with them, and I surely didn’t need another trip to the emergency room. So I ignored them, changed my course again, and kept walking on my way to nowhere.

“Wait, you’ve got it all wrong,” said the one with a crooked smile and a dimpled chin.

“Yeah,” said the fat one. “We want you to be part of our *ga—ooof!*”

“Club,” finished Dimples, as he delivered a brisk whack to the abdomen of the fat one, cutting him off.

“Yeah, yeah!” agreed the others, enthusiastically.

I’d been walking alone, so I’d let down my guard. The first sensation from their demons, the unpleasant odor, worsened as they moved closer to me. The leader smelled like a combination of acid and wild animal, and his demons, which I found myself temporarily unable to block, were primarily gold, black, cold, and shimmering. They made my skin crawl. The next one was nearly pure orange, like a mini sunset with few other distinguishing features. The fat one smelled peppery and his grating brown and orange demons were surprisingly thin for someone so fat. The tall, husky, dark-skinned boy frightened me just by his very presence. His dense, icy-cold, inky-black demon gripped at my skin, nearly taking my breath away. They were all wearing jeans, with matching T-shirts that said “33rd Street.” Although the four of them appeared diverse, their coordinated attire conferred a spooky sameness I found unnerving. The only similarity their demons shared was a pink hue, which oddly reminded me of the kids from the autism center. My instinct said to run away.

“Uh, no thanks,” I said quietly. I focused on ignoring the demons and continuing my trek. The four subtly adjusted their positions to block my path.

“Come on, it’ll be fun! We do all kinds of cool things, and all the other

kids want to be in our, uh, club, but we only allow the best kids in!”

They weren’t really bullying me. Usually, kids like this called me names, like retard, and made me feel terrible. Instead, they only asked me to join their group. I promised Miss Amanda I’d try to make friends, and here were four kids offering exactly that. It was possible I’d misjudged them based on the bad smells and pink coloring. Besides, I never before spent this long talking to a “normal” kid, other than Rob, so I already accomplished something new today. Perhaps my highly capable nature included my capacity to make friends. What better way to start than with four!

“OK, great!” I said, suddenly enthusiastic about the entire situation.

“Cool!” said Dimples. “Come on! We’ll go to the initiation center and we can show you what you get to do as part of the club!”

I didn’t know what he meant by “initiation center,” and the waves that came through my blocks made me slightly uncomfortable, but I followed along anyway.

As we started walking, Dimples introduced himself and his cohorts. “I’m Tommy, and this is Simon, Trigger, and Louie.” Simon and Trigger both simultaneously interjected the word “Fat” just before Tommy said “Louie,” but since I’d received my share of unpalatable nicknames, I decided to refrain from the derogatory term. Each of the boys waved as Tommy called them out, and I nodded back at them in turn.

“I’m Hunter.” They took turns shaking my hand and vigorously patting me on the back as we moved.

We walked for about fifteen minutes to the woods in Discovery Park. As we passed through the forested area, where the trees grew particularly tall, Tommy told me the plan.

“In order to be part of the club, you have to show that you really want it. Do you?”

“Yes!” I said, honestly. I’d never been part of anything. Among the cedar, hemlock, cherry, alder, and fir trees, we finally stopped at a huge, big-leaf maple that towered over the rest.

“Here it is,” said Tommy. “All the other club members had to climb this tree, if they wanted to be in the club,” he announced. Simon and Trigger agreed with cacophonous whoops. I wondered briefly if Fat Louie could’ve made it even two feet up that tree, but common sense didn’t come to my rescue.

“So if I climb this tree, I can be part of your club?” I asked.

“You got it,” Tommy said.

I looked around, considering the danger, but only for a few moments. I wanted to be in the club. After all, *highly capable* meant that I could do things like this. *What a wonderful turn of events! In addition to enrolling in advanced classes, I'll be part of a cool club when school started again! The bullies don't stand a chance against these four guys, so all the teasing will stop. The price for freedom? Climb this tree. No problem.* “OK,” I agreed.

My new friends helped me up the huge, expansive base, where there were no handholds or branches. They kept yelling words of encouragement as I ascended higher and higher.

After about ten feet, I started to struggle. Without branches, my climbing technique amounted to gripping the tree with my legs and shimmying, rather than grabbing for handholds or outgrowths and pulling. The smooth bark supplied limited purchase, and since I lacked any appreciable physical strength, I fatigued rapidly. The tree only minimally tapered, so even ten feet off the ground, I still couldn't encircle the entire trunk with my skinny arms. Branches emerged from the sides of the tree only a few feet higher, but my ragged breathing and rapidly weakening muscles kept me from moving any further.

“I don't think I can do it,” I called out.

“The other members of the club made it all the way up!” Simon yelled. “You can do it!”

Reassured, and feeling that I finally had an opportunity to fit in, I urged myself onward. I shimmied to the first of the low branches, and grabbed it, taking that opportunity to rest and recover a bit before pulling myself up and standing on the thick base of the branch. From there, the climb was easier since I could use the branches that grew at mixed intervals from all around the tree. Taking rests when necessary, I continued up more than twenty feet.

“I'm doing it!” I yelled, exhilarated by the climb and exulting over my new good fortune.

Suddenly, I completely lost my handholds and dropped like a rock to the ground, shattering my right ankle. I screamed with pain briefly, but the pain eased nearly as quickly as it had arrived. I looked around for

my new friends. For some reason, I couldn't find them. Disappointment washed over me. I failed to make the top, so I forfeited my entry into the club. But I *almost* made it! Maybe they'd give me another chance. I started yelling out for Tommy and the others, but my screams returned only silence. We had walked deep into the wooded area, and I hadn't seen any other people at all.

"*Fritzcloves!!*" I yelled, to nobody.

I'd never broken a bone in my leg before. None of my injuries to this point, lacerations, puncture wounds, burns, or even my badly sprained ankle, kept me from being able to walk. However, with half of my off-white bone piercing through the skin, I simply couldn't bear any weight on that side at all.

I redoubled my efforts to contact Tommy, but my "friends" were long gone. After their initial encouragement, they left, probably right when I started making progress using the branches. Realization hit me like a lightning bolt. They never intended to make me a member of their club. They lured me into the forest and duped me into climbing a huge tree so I'd fall and break my leg, or even kill myself. I couldn't believe kids could be evil enough to deliberately trick me into a near-death experience, but it had happened. Even Bruce Davis—who covered me in dog poop, punched me in the face, and knocked me out—paled in comparison.

As I sat in the woods and screamed for two hours, my mind wandered to what Mom and Miss Amanda were going to think, and how disappointed they'd be about taking me to the hospital again. Fortunately, the pain didn't bother me anymore, and I took the opportunity to study the fracture fragments that protruded through my leg. Obviously, this should hurt; why didn't it? Several of the books I'd read described various injuries, and pain featured prominently in the descriptions. I recalled a brief shock of pain, but then it resolved. Why? The bone still poked out. Come to think of it, why did nothing ever really hurt me for very long? Did it have something to do with my ability to slip into the void? After all, I never felt anything while in the void. What if I could control the pain, just like I controlled access to the void? I thought about it, and *wham!* The pain came crashing back upon me so severely that I nearly threw up on the spot. I reflexively blocked the pain again. After shuddering with

spasms for a few minutes, I recovered my bearings enough to conclude that I could block pain. This unique quality enabled me to walk around with my wrist bent at a forty-five degree angle, or poke a pencil through my hand, or slam my hand in the car door without really noticing, except for a brief instant.

Years of conditioning taught me that I had a mental handicap. Maybe all the doctors and therapists had it wrong. After all, both my parents were college professors at the University of Washington—brilliant, as far as I knew. I aced my recent placement test, and probably in record time. Although I demonstrated dim-witted naïveté by letting those smelly kids trick me into climbing that tree and breaking my leg, I doubted I had a handicap. The autism made my life difficult, but I learned how to control the demons and the void, and I would overcome this situation as well. It would *not* happen again. I would make sure of it. Autism or not, the time had come for me to fully take charge of my life.

I started to drag my broken body out of the forest. Despite their malevolent intentions, Tommy and his buddies had done me a huge favor. They wanted to hurt me. Instead, they galvanized my will. I spent the next hour on my hands and knees, slowly crawling toward the suburbs of Seattle. I left a trail of blood through the forest, as my leg continued to ooze through the open skin. The entire trip, I raged about how I would exact my revenge, knowing full well that a skinny nobody like me had no chance against those beasts.

When I finally made it to Emerson Avenue, the main street adjacent to the park entrance, I stumbled upon a kind, middle-aged soul driving a Hyundai who stopped and luckily had a cell phone. She dialed 911, and also let me call Miss Amanda, who answered in a panic. I told her the story, and she promised to meet me at the University of Washington Emergency Room.

I saw the ambulance approaching, using lights and sirens to get the other traffic to pull out of the way. The vehicle skidded to a halt, and two paramedics jumped out of the back, dragging a stretcher.

“Hello, young man. My name is Phil. What happened to you?”

“Some jerks tricked me into climbing a tree and breaking my leg,” I fumed.

“Well, you broke your leg all right, but we’ll get you to the hospital where the docs can put it back together. Does anything else hurt, or did you get knocked out?”

“No,” I said.

They loaded me up onto a stretcher, started an intravenous line and put some type of device on my leg to keep it in place while I told them the story about the club, the initiation, and the betrayal. I watched them work with detached fascination. They appeared equally fascinated because I didn’t scream in pain when they straightened out my ankle to fit it into the splint.

“We need to put this collar around your neck just in case you have any injury to your spine,” Phil said, while wrapping my neck in a hard plastic device that kept me from moving. They packaged me up like Mom used to do, except flat instead of sitting.

“What’s your pain on a scale from one to ten,” the other medic asked.

“I don’t really have any pain.”

He shook his head in amazement. He asked me some other questions about my health, and I told him I was autistic. He nodded his head as though that meant something to him.

Phil called in to the hospital to give a report to a nurse, summarizing very well. “This is Medic One, we’re inbound to your facility with an eleven-year-old autistic male, fall from height. He has an open tib-fib fracture with no loss of consciousness. He’s fully packaged. He’s not having pain. Vital signs are stable. ETA is about twelve minutes.”

On the ambulance ride in, I decided three things. First, I needed to behave like a normal person. No longer would I be judged as a mental patient, an idiot, or social outcast. Whether or not I suffered from autism shouldn’t matter to anyone else. Second, I had to learn more about my abilities. What about all those colors, smells, sounds, and other senses? Could they be more than just demons sent to torture me? And third, I planned to find a way to make those boys pay for what they did.





CHAPTER 13

We pulled up to the ambulance bay, and Don, the driver, helped Phil unload my stretcher from the vehicle. Both men winced as the portable bed hit the ground hard, and I bounced a couple of inches into the air. Stuck on a board with a collar around my neck and a splint on my leg, the trip hadn't been comfortable. They offered some pain medication, but I didn't allow the pain through, so I didn't need medication. A pillow would have been nice.

They parked me in a large room, with a gigantic overhead light, dozens of carts, trays, and machines, and I listened as Phil repeated his report to another staff member. Meanwhile, several people roamed around the bedside, lifting me off the cart and onto the slightly less uncomfortable hospital bed. Then they began checking me over, taking off my clothes, and attaching me to monitors. In order to suppress the many demons, I closed my eyes and concentrated, blocking out the din of the conversation of the medical people. A familiar voice broke through.

“What the hell happened? What were you doing out there climbing a stupid tree in the middle of the woods?” my mother yelled, as she burst into the room, livid.

Shocked by the outburst, the entire room fell silent.

Mom looked at Miss Amanda, who had trailed behind, clearly concerned. She appeared too stunned to speak. “And just where were you? You're supposed to be keeping an eye on him! You're fired!”

The doctor and nurses continued warily examining my leg and other body parts. They also started another IV while Phil distracted my mother. “Excuse me, ma'am, but is this your son?”

My mother nodded. “Yes.”

“He has a compound tib-fib fracture, and he’ll need surgery—”

“Obviously,” my mother said. “Any other injuries?”

“Well, ma’am, we’ve done a primary survey and everything else looks OK so far, but the doctor will do a complete exam and order the necessary tests. Would you mind signing these forms? Then they’ll want you at registration to—”

“Yes, yes, this is the hundredth time I’ve done this with him,” she answered, grabbing the pen. I’d never seen her so upset. Her face reddened and she shook with rage.

I needed to explain. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I said. “I was trying to make friends—”

“Listen here, young man,” she interrupted. “I’m working on a project of national importance, and I don’t have time to keep running to the ER every time you do something stupid. I need to get back to work and you need to *stay out of trouble!*” She ended on a shout. I felt horrible. Upon hearing the yelling, a nurse entered with a security guard, both of whom escorted my mother out to the front desk to fill out the papers.

The doctor finished up his exam, and looked at me with true puzzlement. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Well, it does, but I can sort of block it out,” I answered, and immediately decided that I shouldn’t have said that. “I mean, I have been hurt a few times, and I’m sort of used to taking a lot of pain,” I amended.

“Wow!” He said, clearly impressed. “I’m Dr. Burroughs, and I’m going to take care of you today. Can you tell me what happened?”

Since everyone else had left the room, I relaxed. I’d had a rough day and blocking the demons took effort, so I just let his percolate over me. I was encouraged by the blue, gold, orange, pink, and white colors. The cool, smooth, solid demons contained an odd, garlic smell, but I liked them just the same. Especially the blue one. I told him about the bullies, and how I tried to climb the tree, and fell. He asked me numerous other questions, and pushed again everywhere on my body, asking if any part hurt. It didn’t, of course. When Phil put the collar on my neck, I wondered exactly why, but Dr. Burroughs explained that they couldn’t be sure if I had a neck injury, because of the distracting injury in my leg. I understood what he meant—the bone poking out of the skin truly fascinated me. With some-

thing like that going on, who could pay attention to anything else?

He ordered CT scans of everything and X-rays of my leg, even though it didn't take a genius (or a test) to diagnose the injury. I would have thought a bone sticking out should be a dead giveaway. A thin, blond nurse, who identified herself as Wendy, helped Dr. Burroughs replace the splint before they carted me down to the familiar radiology suite for the studies. The cold IV fluids kept running directly into my arm, and when I returned twenty minutes later, I felt better. A fresh red stain grew around the splint, and the red demon that nearly killed me before had returned, possibly to finish the job. Because I came to the hospital immediately, though, I knew I'd be fine. The doctors would fix me up just like before.

After all the tests were done, a very tall man, with a deep voice and a warm, clear, bulky, blue, gold, and pink demon introduced himself.

"Hello, Hunter. I'm Dr. Tyler, from orthopedics. It appears you have need of my services."

As Dr. Tyler entered, several smaller mini doctors—all of whom vibrated with blue, white, and yellow—followed him like lost puppies. Some, like Dr. Tyler, shared the same pink as Dr. Burroughs. Dr. Tyler explained the surgery, which involved realigning my bones and affixing the parts with metal plates to keep them in place.

"Cool!" I said. "Can I watch?"

"Uh, no," he said. "We generally put patients to sleep with this type of injury. A lot of stuff happens when we operate, and even if you don't feel any pain right now, there may be some rather severe pain when we put it back into place. And then we affix some metal pieces, and—well, no, you can't watch. Sorry," he concluded lamely.

The gaggle of mini doctors didn't say a word, and they all left when he left. Their white and blue colors shimmered with excitement at the prospect of putting my leg parts back together. I was jealous.

Miss Amanda returned from the waiting room, where she'd been pacing since I went to radiology. She stayed with me, and tried to make me feel better. "I can't believe those kids tricked you like that. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have let you go off by yourself."

I completely let down my guard, so I expected Miss Amanda's smooth blue and orange colors and minty taste would help me feel better. Instead,

her demons vibrated with such harsh sounds and musty smells that I ended up feeling worse, so I tried to block them out.

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “I should have known they didn’t really want to be my friends. I wish I knew how to get back at them!”

She just smiled. “In a few years, when you grow up and become what I think you’re going to become, you won’t even need to spend a moment thinking about scum like those bullies. You’ll be so far above them that it won’t matter at all to you. You’re a great kid, Hunter, and don’t let anyone ever tell you differently!”

My ability to block her aura failed, and the severe pitching and vibrating made me feel sick to my stomach. My own cool blue color momentarily turned warmer and yellow with her words, but then I saw something frightening. The red demon attacking my leg grew, just like it had when I passed out from infection last year. The pain started to throb. The nausea worsened, and suddenly the red, spicy pain seared, causing me to scream. As I slipped into the void, I heard Miss Amanda yelling out, “Nurse! Help!”

* * * * *

I woke up in the recovery room to the sound of beeping monitors. A thin gown covered my torso, IV lines dripped fluid into my arm, and a huge cast covered my leg. The pain receded completely. Although back to my normal state, whatever that meant, I knew I’d lost time again. That disturbed me because I had no choice in the matter.

“Welcome back!” said the nurse who saw me stirring. Orange and white, and smelling of pine forest, she crossed the room to check the blood pressure cuff on my arm and used the monitor to inflate it.

“Uh, thanks,” I said, not exactly sure what she meant. My fingers turned red as the python attacked it.

“You gave us a bit of a scare. You passed out in the ER, and they had to rush you to the operating room to stop the bleeding. You tore an artery in your lower leg. It’s a miracle you didn’t bleed out in the field, or at the CT scanner. The artery started bleeding again here—where, fortu-

nately, we could stop it. Nobody can figure out why you aren't dead." She sounded almost disappointed.

I didn't know what to say. One of the mini doctors came in.

"How are you doing? Do you want something to eat?"

"Sure," I said. He wrote furiously on a clipboard as he looked at all the stuff around my bed, checked out my cast, and listened to my heart and lungs with a stethoscope. He made me wiggle my toes and checked to see if I could feel as he touched the exposed parts of my foot, which I could. Then he ran out, hopefully to get me food. Since he mentioned it, my stomach started gnawing at me. They did feed me, although the paltry portions did very little to calm my raging appetite. I had to ask them for another tray, the contents of which I also consumed ravenously. I spent the rest of the day watching TV, tolerating an occasional visit from a doctor or nurse. My mother didn't visit, but the nurse told me she'd called and checked with the doctor for a progress report. Dr. Tyler reassured her that I'd turned the corner and would be up and about soon.

The next morning, he brought his throng of minions into the room and told me I'd be able to go home later that day, after they taught me how to use crutches. My instructions included rest initially, but they didn't want me lying around in bed for too long, so I'd need to use the crutches for the next several weeks. I'd return to his office in fourteen days for a recheck, and, if everything went according to plan, I'd be completely better in about six to eight weeks. I loathed the idea of being stuck at home with Mom for the next six weeks, and since she unceremoniously fired Miss Amanda the day before, I knew I'd be entirely alone. At least it would be better than the hospital, where every few minutes, all day and all night, a beeping sound or a noisy staff member ensured that my sleep cycle remained completely ruined. Plus, I had several books at home that I needed to read to prepare for HCC next year.

Much to my delight, Miss Amanda arrived to pick me up, and they gave her the discharge paperwork.

"Your mother didn't have time to find a replacement, so you're stuck with me for a bit longer," she said.

"Cool!" I shared so few connections with people, and I really didn't want to lose Amanda.

We loaded up her vehicle with my crutches and supplies, and on the way home, she broke some additional news. “Your mother has decided to send you to live with your grandfather in Massachusetts for a while. She doesn’t think she’s going to have a lot of time to spend with you at home, because of work. But your grandfather is a doctor, and he’ll be able to keep an eye on you while you heal up.”

Grandfather? I didn’t even know I had grandparents. I supposed everyone did, but I never knew anything about them, or even if they still lived. Apparently I had at least one. And soon I’d be staying with him. An interesting twist for sure. I asked Miss Amanda if she could come with me, expecting her to say no. But she surprised me again.

“I’ll bring you to the airport and fly with you to Bradley, the airport nearest his home. Your grandfather is going to pick you up at there, and I’ll fly back here.”

Well, that was something. She gave me a cell phone programmed with her number, in case I needed “someone to talk to.”

I thanked her even as the dismay set in. “How long will I be there?”

“Your mother didn’t say. I think she just wants you to get your leg healed up, but you’ll need to be back before school starts in the fall.”

That reminded me of the HCC program, and my spirits lifted slightly. Maybe I could change the way I looked, so that when I arrived home again, nobody would recognize me. That would be awesome—a whole new identity and a new life. Too bad I had no clue how to accomplish such a task. Maybe my grandfather could help.

A few days later, I started packing two old suitcases, getting ready for a flight the next morning out of SeaTac, our local airport. Being on crutches made it miserable, but I slogged from my dresser to the floor, where I tried to fill the suitcases. Unexpectedly, Mom came home from the university to help.

“Listen, Hunter, I know I’ve been difficult recently. I’m sorry. I have a lot going on with this project. I can’t get it right. I just can’t formulate a connection between the test subject and the rest of the subjects, no matter how many animatron receptors I add—oh, listen to me talk about work while I’m sending you off!”

“Huh, my problem is that I get too much from the outside—you know, with the autism.”

“Yes, but you’re doing so much better. . . .” She trailed off. Suddenly, her silver aura ballooned so powerfully that it almost knocked me backward. “Of course! It’s not too few, it’s too many. *That’s* why you—. Of course! Why didn’t I think of . . . Hunter, you’re a genius! That’s it! I know what to do!”

She stood up and started to run out. When she got to the door, the purple color returned, although the silver still remained. She came back and rapidly threw various irrelevant items into my suitcases, all the while chirping about apples falling from trees. When she finished filling the cases, she hugged me.

“Good-bye, Hunter. I’ll see you when you get back. You’ll like your grandfather. I should have introduced the two of you sooner. Miss Wagstaff will take care of you on the airplane ride. And then your grandfather will drive you to Holyoke. Have a safe trip!”

She hugged me again and left, obviously heading back to the university to test out whatever theory I’d helped her concoct. I started removing the junk she’d packed and replacing it with the correct items. *Thanks, Mom*, I thought wryly.

The next day, Miss Amanda drove us to the airport, parked the car, boarded the plane with me and kept me company as we flew across the country. I didn’t care for being closed up in a small space with tons of people, and I grew somewhat fatigued keeping the demons at bay for hours on end. Miss Amanda bought me some food, which I enjoyed, although I remained in the minority on that count.

“This is really good!” I said, polishing off the snack box. The man on the other side of me took a few bites, wrinkled his nose, and offered his to me.

“Gee, thanks!” I said, genuinely grateful for the extra food. I guess all the stress of flying made me hungry.

Miss Amanda didn’t talk much, but as we got closer to landing, she gave me some advice.

“Keep up with your reading, and try to make a friend or two while you’re here. Your grandfather is a doctor, and I understand he’s a very

smart man. Perhaps you can pick his brain while you're here. Maybe you can even challenge him to a game of chess."

"Wow, you think he plays chess?"

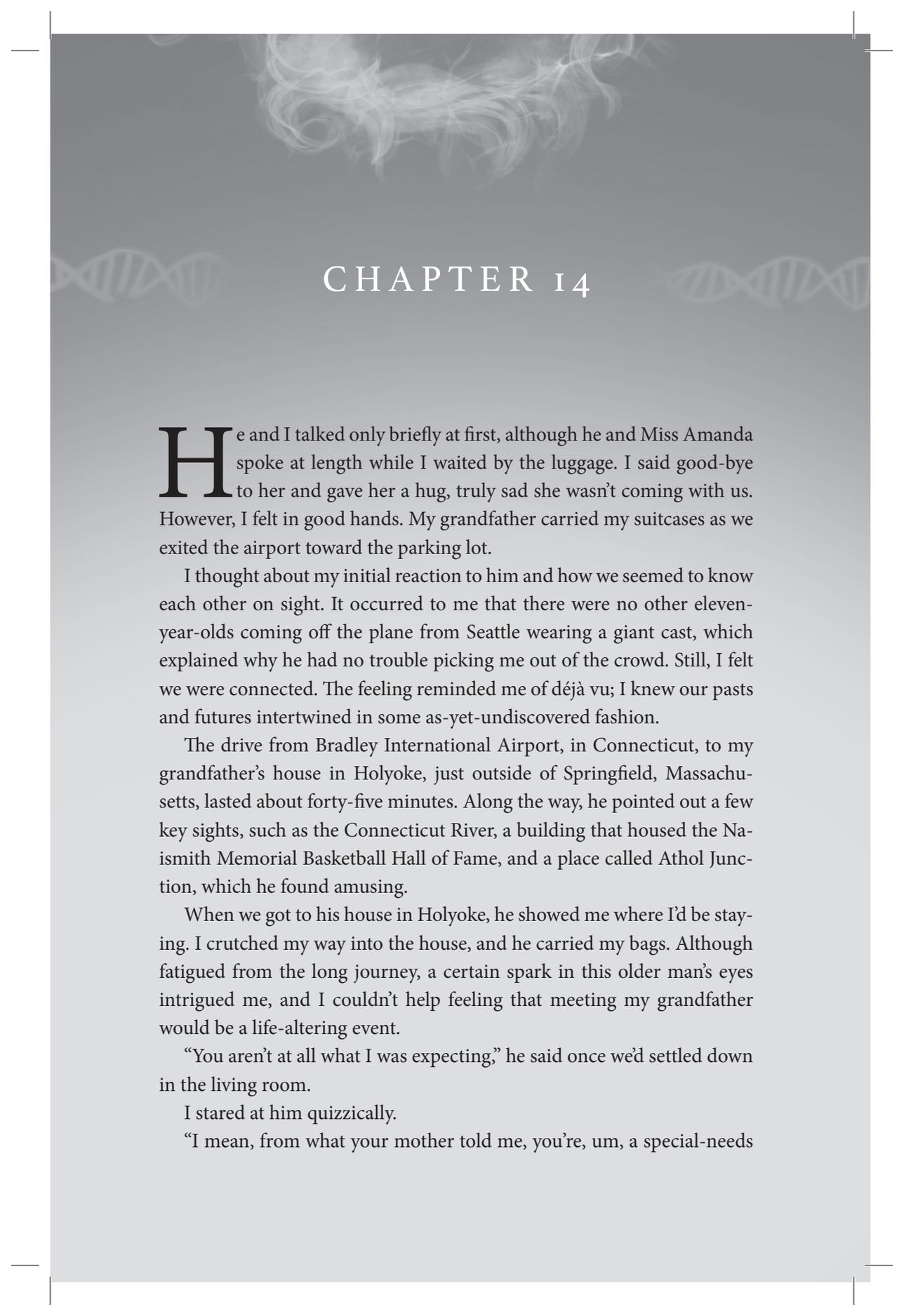
"I don't know. You'll find out soon! In the meantime, I hope your mother will forgive me over the next few weeks so I can be here when you return."

"That would be great." Mom hadn't been herself recently. Maybe she'd finish up her project at the university and we could return to our prior life.

After the plane landed, we sat on the tarmac for an hour or so, taxiing around until they finally let us disembark. Miss Amanda carried my backpack while I used the crutches to walk, a tedious process even though I'd been practicing for two days. At the gate, I saw a white-haired man so familiar I recognized him immediately, even though I'd never met him. He appeared to have identical thoughts, and he lumbered over to intercept me, dodging the line of exiting passengers.

"Hunter?" he asked.

"*You're* my grandfather?" I asked, amazed. Some unidentifiable quality, something I simply couldn't place, drew me inexorably toward him. I had no idea what came over me, but I hobbled right up to him and embraced him with a giant hug.



CHAPTER 14

He and I talked only briefly at first, although he and Miss Amanda spoke at length while I waited by the luggage. I said good-bye to her and gave her a hug, truly sad she wasn't coming with us. However, I felt in good hands. My grandfather carried my suitcases as we exited the airport toward the parking lot.

I thought about my initial reaction to him and how we seemed to know each other on sight. It occurred to me that there were no other eleven-year-olds coming off the plane from Seattle wearing a giant cast, which explained why he had no trouble picking me out of the crowd. Still, I felt we were connected. The feeling reminded me of *déjà vu*; I knew our pasts and futures intertwined in some as-yet-undiscovered fashion.

The drive from Bradley International Airport, in Connecticut, to my grandfather's house in Holyoke, just outside of Springfield, Massachusetts, lasted about forty-five minutes. Along the way, he pointed out a few key sights, such as the Connecticut River, a building that housed the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, and a place called Athol Junction, which he found amusing.

When we got to his house in Holyoke, he showed me where I'd be staying. I crutched my way into the house, and he carried my bags. Although fatigued from the long journey, a certain spark in this older man's eyes intrigued me, and I couldn't help feeling that meeting my grandfather would be a life-altering event.

"You aren't at all what I was expecting," he said once we'd settled down in the living room.

I stared at him quizzically.

"I mean, from what your mother told me, you're, um, a special-needs

child with some difficulties adjusting to elementary school.” He stammered a bit, discomfort evident in his posture and tone.

“How come I never met you before?” I blurted.

He chuckled. “You have met me before,” he said. “When you were much younger. I visited Seattle with your grandmother, before she passed away. Your mother was still very busy with her research, and we only stayed for a short time. You were too small to remember.”

“But I didn’t even know you existed,” I persisted.

“Well, ever since your mother took the job at the UW fourteen years ago, she essentially stopped visiting us here, and over the last few years, she only called to talk on holidays and special occasions. She did come out for Maddie’s—your grandpa’s—funeral, but that was the last time. She didn’t bring you because you were . . . how did she put it . . . a ‘handful,’ I think she said.”

“I had autism.”

“That’s what she said, yes.”

“I’m better now.”

“So it seems. Which is really unusual. And why I wasn’t expecting . . . well, you.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I changed the subject. “What should I call you?”

“How about Grandpa,” he suggested. “That’s what I called my grandfather.”

I couldn’t help wanting to talk about the sensation I’d experienced when I first saw him. I felt . . . *drawn*, I suppose would be the word. I’d never felt anything so powerful before. Not even with my parents. In fact, with most people, I felt exactly the opposite. Had he felt a similar connection to me? Why would I be so enthralled with someone I didn’t remember meeting? He interrupted my reverie.

“What happened with the leg?”

I told him the story of how I wanted to fit in, and how the bullies tricked me into climbing the tree. He listened patiently. “And then,” I concluded, “my mom thought I’d be better off out here, with you.” That reminded me. “You’re a doctor?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I thought it was really cool the way the bone was sticking out of my leg,” I said. He smiled. “Perhaps I might be a doctor someday.”

“You know what I find the most interesting part of your story,” he said. “You said that it hurt initially, but only for a second. Since then, it hasn’t hurt at all?”

“Well, that’s not exactly true,” I explained. “I thought about it and decided that it *should* hurt, and I wondered why it didn’t. I relaxed and then *whammo!* It really did hurt. But just like that, the pain went away again.” I hadn’t told anyone else this, and at that moment, I wondered why I told him, a near perfect stranger, but it felt right.

“So maybe you can control it?” he ventured.

“What do you mean?” I asked, despite having entertained the very same thought at the time of my injury.

“Well, some people are very good at controlling pain. They can get injured in one of many ways, and although normal people would feel severe pain, they can just control it. They have what we call a high pain tolerance. I had a patient once who walked around for three days with appendicitis, which would floor most anyone else. It ended up bursting, and he nearly died because he didn’t react to the pain the way everyone else does. I wonder if you’re like that,” he concluded.

I thought about it. My leg didn’t hurt at all right now since they fixed it with the surgery. The doctor had given me some pain medication to take, but I’d never taken any, because it never hurt. Grandpa, a doctor, would know if my leg should hurt, so I asked. “The surgeon gave me pain medication, but my leg doesn’t hurt at all. Should it still hurt after they fixed it?”

“Oh yes,” he answered. “It’s still a broken leg, even with that hardware in there to keep it in place. They put those metal pieces in to allow the bones to realign properly. That doesn’t actually fix the problem, it just gives your body the opportunity to repair the damage in the best possible way. They told you it would take six to eight weeks to get better, right?”

I nodded.

“Well, usually, it hurts like the dickens for at least the first week after the surgery, especially when you move it.”

“So maybe, if I’m like you said, then I’m controlling the pain right now?” I queried. Perhaps he could help me to understand more about my

ability, even without all the facts. I liked the way he explained everything, and I wanted him to continue, so I played along.

“That may be. Do other things hurt?”

I thought about it for a moment. I could count on one hand the number of times I felt pain. “No,” I said, “nothing ever hurts, really.”

“Well,” he started, “why don’t you see if you can let the leg hurt?”

“I, um,” I stuttered. I knew I could control it, but I didn’t really want to reveal that information. If I wanted him to continue, though, I had to keep going too.

“If you think hard about it, and focus on the leg, maybe you’ll feel the pain. If you’re just controlling the pain, maybe all the years of doing it has made it automatic. You may have to think about it in order to feel it.”

I thought about the demons. I controlled those for sure, even right now. Without suppressing them, I’d be constantly inundated with colors, sounds, tingling sensations, smells, and tastes. The smells were the worst. I remembered the red demon eating away at my leg when I had that infection, and when it tried again to kill me with the broken leg. Both times, I felt severe pain, along with the spicy taste. Why didn’t I block it out? The answer nagged at me. I always blocked pain except when near death, and I never had to think about it to make it happen. The more I thought about it, the more I realized Grandpa had it right—I’d mastered the art of stopping the pain automatically. When I recalled my dozen trips to the ER for various injuries, I recognized why having pain might be beneficial.

How could I now prove Grandpa correct? Only one way. I’d have to let the demons come.

I relaxed my mental grip. I’d been working so hard at suppression that it took effort to release it. As I expected, my cool blue demon shined brightly, along with some green and pink, and the spicy red demon appeared around my broken leg. Although not as powerful as it had been before, it remained sizeable. I noticed a blue color with a powerful, dense feel, and a sweet, aromatic scent coming from Grandpa. Something about his colors, textures, and flavor felt extremely familiar.

In order to test the theory, I had to relax all the way. No sooner did I have the thought than a sharp sense of pain struck me. I shuddered and nearly cried out.

“What is it?” Grandpa asked.

“You were *right!*” I breathed heavily. It took very little effort to suppress the pain. It felt more like a reversion to normal, rather than a voluntary act. My brain didn’t require my consent to eliminate it. After experiencing the pain, blocking it out again brought startling relief. The red demon’s sharp taste, which spiked as I completely relaxed, faded away completely. Obviously the red demon created the pain, and even without the horrible sensation, I could still clearly see its color, especially if I kept my eyes closed. I studied it. Although different, it existed as a component of the blue demon, rather than distinct from it. It represented an imperfection—a part of the blue that simply didn’t belong. Although I couldn’t explain it adequately, the red color felt wrong to me.

“Are you all right?” Grandpa said, possibly for the second time. I’d been lost in my thoughts.

I glanced his way and drew a long breath. His demon looked and felt very much like mine. The cool deep blue that I lived with for all these years stared back at me, almost a perfect replica. He did have other colors. The first, a purple, reminded me of my mother. The second, a gold, gave his demon a regal presence, and it highlighted the sweet-smelling sensation that contrasted with all the kids from the autism center and my classmates at Madrona. The third, a pink color, like the gold, reminded me of my father. Green vibrations increased as I stared at him through closed eyes.

“Hunter, are you OK?”

I mentally shook myself. “Yes . . .” I said, mesmerized by his demons.

“What happened? You’ve had your eyes closed for ten minutes!”

I lost time again? The main reason I fought so hard to suppress the demons in the first place was to stop losing time, and now I’d deliberately undermined the process by carefully inspecting them. But at least I understood the draw I’d felt the moment we first met. The demons—ours were nearly identical. It wasn’t just the colors, although the blue and pink were mirror images, differing only by trivial areas of red, gold, and purple. The taste, texture, sound and smell were carbon copies. I looked back up at Grandpa with my mouth agape.

“What have you discovered?”

I hesitated. The last person I told about the demons locked me up in a

psych ward. But the connection between us felt so powerful that I knew I could trust him. I needed to tell someone, I'd been carrying this around for a year. He wouldn't hurt me. I just knew it.

"I see demons," I blurted.

The green color around him vibrated and created a hazy cloud inside the blue.

"See, right now, you just turned green and started vibrating."

His blueness swelled, and the cloudiness lifted some. "And now your blue color increased, and you became less cloudy."

"And you see these colors around others?" he said, fascinated.

"Not just around others, but around myself too. When I took the pills Dr. Eisenberg gave me, they made it so I didn't see them anymore, and so I took a whole bunch to try to keep them away forever."

"Your suicide attempt," he whispered.

"My what?"

"Your mother said you tried to commit suicide, and they had to put you in the psych unit at Children's Hospital."

"Well, I wasn't trying to kill myself, I was trying to get rid of the demons," I said. The cloudiness and green color had almost completely left his blue demon, which had now turned the deepest blue I'd ever seen. The purple color swirled through, emphasizing one of the rare difference between the two of us.

"You said you see your own aura too," he said. "What's that like?"

"What do you mean, aura?" I asked.

"These aren't demons," he said. "You are seeing an *aura*. People with migraine headaches see stuff like that, and some others have claimed to see them too. But that's the word we use when you see colors around someone else, or yourself. I never met anyone who sees them all the time, though."

"So they aren't dangerous?"

"I don't think so. But you said you feel and smell the demons, or auras, too," he said. "I've never heard of that before."

I mentally applauded my decision to trust him. I felt a bit of yellow appear in my deep blue. The coolness ebbed slightly as well. I had no idea why I saw so many different colors. Perhaps he could help me with it.

“Why do I see different colors?”

“I have no idea, but maybe we can figure it out,” he said. “What about your leg? Does that have a different color than the rest of you?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, suddenly putting it together. “It’s red, with a hot, spicy taste, and there’s something about it that just isn’t . . . right. I felt the same sensations when I had an infection there after kicking a mirror when I was younger.”

“So the red is, uh, spicy, you say? Well, that may be the pain you’re blocking.”

Of course. Why hadn’t I noticed that before?

“What else do you see?”

“You know how I said you’re blue colored?”

He nodded and shrugged.

“Well, I’m the same deep blue color at my core. I mean, my aura is, anyway. We both have a pink color that I’ve seen before in lots of people. But you have some purple and gold that I don’t have, and I have this redness in my leg.”

He smiled. “We’re related. You’re my daughter’s son. There’s probably a genetic component to what you see. And by the way, you really look *exactly* like me when I was a kid!”

“What does *genetic* mean?” I asked. We were definitely on to something.

“Wow, that’s going to take a while to explain. Let me give you the basics. Do you know about cells?”

I didn’t.

“The body is comprised of cells, each one making up tissue, and tissues making up organs, and the organs make up organ systems. One system, the one that runs the show, so to speak, is your nervous system. The parts of that system include your brain, the spinal cord, and your nerves. Your nervous system controls all the others. A second one is your cardiovascular system. That includes your heart, arteries, veins, and capillaries. They bring blood throughout your body to and from all of the systems. Then there’s the pulmonary system—your lungs and all the muscles that help you breathe. That supplies oxygen, which you get from fresh air that you inhale. Are you with me so far?”

I nodded. This was fascinating.

He went on. “There’s also your gastrointestinal system, which has your mouth, stomach, intestines, and some other organs like the liver and pancreas that help with the digestion process. You break down the food you eat and it provides nutrients, just like the oxygen from the lungs. Then there are the immune and hematologic systems, which are related because both involve your bone marrow and blood stream. They also need the liver, which makes factors that help you stop bleeding, and lymph vessels throughout your body, which help you to fight infection. There’s the endocrine system, which controls hormones, and the genitourinary system, which controls reproduction and helps with elimination, like the colon does. And finally, there’s the musculoskeletal system, which includes your bones, joints, muscles, tendons, and ligaments—together they let you move around.”

“Right!” I said. That one I understood well.

He nodded. “Yes, that one’s pretty easy to see. Each of these systems, organs, and all the tissues are comprised of cells. That’s the smallest thing in your body that’s thought of as ‘alive.’ Each cell has a nucleus, sort of the ‘brain’ of the cell, and that’s the part that tells the rest what to do.

“The nucleus of the cell contains genetic material, called DNA, and the same DNA is spread all throughout your body. Your DNA is unique to you, and it controls every cell in your entire body. Your DNA is the blueprint, the plan, for how your body is supposed to function. All the information is there: how tall you are, what color your hair is, and how many freckles you have on your left toe. And every cell in your body has a copy of the program. Right there in the nucleus.”

“So how does DNA get there?”

“Good question! One of the properties of DNA is that it can self-replicate. That means one strand of DNA can make many copies of itself. And the first copy comes from your parents. Half your DNA comes from one parent and half from the other parent. So when a mom and dad get together to have a baby, the net result is half of the DNA from one, and half from the other—which makes a new DNA blueprint. That’s how a child gets traits from each parent.”

“Ah,” I said. “So because you’re my mother’s father, half of your DNA is

in my mother. With my mother, half of her DNA is in me, so that makes one-quarter of my DNA from you!”

“Almost,” he said. “You don’t know *exactly* which half will get passed along. Maybe more than 25 percent of my DNA got to you, or maybe some of the genes that your father has are the same as the genes that I have, and that’s why you look just like me when I was a kid. Either way, the family resemblance is there for sure!” His stomach growled loudly. “Um, perhaps we should get some dinner,” he said, laughing. Yellow beamed briefly from his blue aura. “I bet you haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

Food wasn’t my priority.

Noticing my chagrin, he added, “We can talk more after dinner.”

He made some spaghetti with meatballs, talking to me about the preparation process while he worked. When it was ready, I wolfed mine down and went right back to asking him about the auras.

“So why do you think I see these things?”

He slowly slurped noodles into his mouth, sending a tiny bit of red sauce onto the tablecloth. Between bites, he responded, “I have no idea, but it sure is interesting. I mean, imagine the possibilities.”

“What do you mean?”

“Salad first,” he said, and served me some Caesar salad with croutons and black olives. I ate quickly and held my tongue while he finished up.

He resumed the conversation while cleaning up the dinner dishes.

“Think about it. What you see clearly has some significance. I mean, the aura you see around me is like the one around you, but not identical. Perhaps there are details in the aura that are specific to the person who owns it. You don’t see auras around the table or chairs, right?”

“No,” I said. “But I do see very faint glows on the ceiling sometimes.”

“Hmm. That’s curious. Anything else? Maybe animals or plants?”

“Now that you mention it, I do see them outside, but only where the grass or trees are growing. Oh, yeah, and the dog had one too. But the demons around the plants are like the ones on the ceiling. I can ignore them without even trying.”

“So only around things that are alive?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But what about the ceiling?”

“Mold,” he said. I stared at him. “If buildings have excess moisture,

sometimes a fungus can grow on the wall or ceiling. The fungus is alive, and it, like the plants, trees, and people, has DNA. That must be what you're perceiving."

Wow. It made sense.

He went on. "Each aura tells you something. For mold and plants, the information is minimal, so let's focus on people. You and I have similar auras, probably because we're related. What about your mother? What's her aura like? It may be even more like yours than mine is."

I thought about it. Purple dominated her aura. Grandpa had some too, probably from their genetic similarity. But my teacher from the autism center had purple too. I remembered how I thought she ate a baby.

"She's mostly purple," I said. "Much more purple than you. I don't have any."

"There you go then; some genes get passed along, other genes don't. What about other people?"

"I don't really know. I suppose my classmates have only colorless or brown auras, Dr. Eisenberg has a bright blue one like ours, and lots of the nurses at the hospital have orange and white. The pink is pretty common too. The bullies all had it, as did most of the kids at the autism center, but you and I have it too. I never really paid that much attention. I usually just try to force them away."

"Hmmm. Interesting. We can get back to that. How do they change? You said mine had turned green and something."

"Yes. You're mostly deep blue, with some pink, gold, and purple, but a minute ago the green flashed through, over all of the other colors. What does that mean?"

"I don't know. Green is the opposite of red, though, and we decided that you saw red when you had pain. Maybe green is a good feeling?"

Oddly, we both flashed green for the briefest of instants. I indeed felt good with my grandfather, but his interpretation of that color didn't quite fit with my other observations.

Suddenly, the combination of the day's long journey, coupled with the time change, and the intense conversation produced a profound sense of fatigue, and Grandpa noticed. "It's getting late, and you and I have both had a long day. Let's pick this up in the morning when we're fresh."

“Sounds good.”

He helped me to my room down the hallway, and I rejoiced about not having to climb stairs with my crutches. He helped me settle in and unpack my most pressing items. Then he showed me where the bathroom and supplies were so that I could brush my teeth and wash up. I forgot to bring pajamas, a testament to Mom’s extremely disorganized packing method, so he gave me an old T-shirt to wear, which looked more like a nightgown on me.

“Good night,” he said, as I finished getting ready for bed.

“Good night, Grandpa.”

I’d learned a great deal this evening, but I had a long way to go. I smiled as I drifted off to sleep, reassured by the knowledge that breaking my leg and being forced out here might turn out to be the best mistake of my life.





CHAPTER 15

I slept well, and the next morning I awoke refreshed and excited. In half a day with Grandpa, I learned more about myself than I had in the past eleven years combined. I wouldn't be spending any more time in the void now—I had work to do. Understanding my abilities and myself represented a gateway to normal life, something I yearned for since I first encountered the demons. My grandfather might be a conduit to my dreams. I eagerly crutched my way to the kitchen, where I found Grandpa already making pancakes.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.”

I couldn't wait to get going, but he went through his entire routine of eating breakfast, clearing away the dishes, and feeding his cat, Julia Beast, before we settled into the comfortable couches in the living room.

“What are we going to talk about today?” I asked. I didn't try to hide my hunger for information.

He smiled. “Why don't we try to figure out how you stop pain,” he said. “You're going to need to access your aura, so don't block it out.”

I nodded.

“Remember we talked about different systems of the body? The one that controls pain is the nervous system—the brain, spinal cord, and nerves. Nerves are cells that carry information to and from all the different parts of the body. There are two main places that nerves send the information. One is, of course, the brain. However, I bet you didn't know that some of the nerves don't need to go to the brain at all—they go just to the spinal cord. Here, watch this. . . .”

He positioned me so my legs were hanging freely off the couch, and then he produced a small triangular hammer from his medical bag. When

he tapped my good leg just below the kneecap, my lower leg jerked forward spasmodically.

“Hey!”

“That’s called a reflex. It just happens. Most people can’t control it. The point of having a reflex is that it makes it so the brain doesn’t have to get involved with the action. Suppose you want to go for a walk. Imagine how hard it would be if every time you took a step, you had to think about it! Or, even more importantly, suppose you had to deliberately make yourself take a breath, or tell your heart to beat. Your brain would be so busy, you wouldn’t have time to think. In order to be efficient, the nervous system delegates these functions.

“In the case of sensation, there are specific sensors in the skin that send signals through nerve endings in what are called peripheral nerves, first to the spinal cord, for reflexes, or up to the brain, where we perceive them. Different kinds of nerves are specialized to carry different signals. Pain fibers are different from those nerves that transmit touch, position sense, or deep feeling. So today I thought we could try to figure out if you can discern the difference.”

He reached forward and touched my earlobe. I felt it as a light touch, and my aura didn’t change from its blue color. I felt some mild vibration from Grandpa’s blue aura, but nothing really changed with his either.

“It felt like a light touch,” I proclaimed.

“OK,” he said. “This time I am going to squeeze it a bit, enough that it should hurt a little.”

His blue color muddled a bit and twitched slightly, as he pinched my earlobe. A waft of spicy redness drifted into my aura but the blue immediately quenched it, and I didn’t feel any pain, just a dull sensation of someone holding my earlobe. I told him about it.

“Well, this time, try to let it through. See if you can feel the pain if you try,” he said. He repeated the squeeze, and this time, I tried to relax and let everything through. As soon as I started, my fractured leg hurt so much I had to stop, and I very nearly cried out in pain.

“I hardly even touched you,” he said, his blue aura vibrating with shafts of green.

“No, it wasn’t you,” I said. “My leg . . .”

“Ohhh. I see. Well, that means it worked! We figured out how to make you feel pain. Do you think you can turn it off and on by yourself?”

I didn’t want to. Pain hurt. However, my overriding desire to gain control spurred me forward, and I relaxed. I perceived the combination of spicy pain and dull redness around my leg, and, after a moment, I turned it off. I repeated the process several times, and after each episode, the painful sensation became more tolerable. Grandpa watched me patiently. After a few minutes, he said, “Well?”

I nodded. “I think I can stop it.”

Grandpa said, “It’s probably a good idea to let your body do it; you know, like a reflex. Instead of wasting energy thinking about stopping the pain, I bet your body developed this as a self-preservation mechanism. Heck, if I didn’t have to feel pain, I wouldn’t. It’s nice to help you learn stuff when you’re young, though, like don’t touch the hot stove,” he said.

“Or don’t poke a pencil through your hand,” I interjected.

“Oh, you’ve done that, huh?” I nodded, and he rolled his eyes. “Yeah, your mother said you were accident-prone. I guess it makes sense. If you never felt pain, you wouldn’t bother learning what *not* to do. But now you know you can control it, how cool is that?”

I admit, I never thought of this capability as a blessing. I always wanted to be normal. But there may be some advantages to not feeling pain. I wondered aloud, “What else do you think I can do?”

“Let’s see if you can control the pain in more than one place,” he said. “Let’s go back to the earlobe. Block the pain down in the leg, but see if you can let the earlobe pain through.”

After several tries, I could do it. We spent the rest of the morning working on controlling sensations from different parts of my body. Grandpa’s bright-blue aura shimmered and my little dots of redness were easily controlled as he flicked my wrist, scraped my foot, or stuck a small pin in the back of my neck. When I closed my eyes and focused on his aura, I could sense when he planned to inflict the pain, because his blue color briefly trembled. My skin started tingling, too, and I decided that my own aura interpreted the imminent danger and warned me. I told him about it.

“OK,” he said. “Let’s check your theory. This time, you tell me when I am about to prick you with the pin. Close your eyes, and say ‘now’ just as

you feel the tingling sensation on your skin.”

He paused for a bit, and then he started to tremble slightly, and the tingling sensation hit.

“Now!” I yelled.

He pulled the pin back from my neck.

“Yes!” he said. “This is unbelievable!” His blue aura perked up. The tingling sensation had gone, and instead, yellow vibrations and a smoothing sensation took its place. I had no idea there could be so many different parts to the same aura. I usually just shut them out. But there was so much going on, and I knew that each sensation, color, sound, smell, or taste must mean something.

We took a break, and Grandpa said he had to go into town to pick up a few items. Hampered by my broken leg, I told him I preferred to stay at home. I raided the fruit bowl on the table, consuming two apples and an orange, even though I hadn’t done anything other than sit on the couch and work with Grandpa.

He’d asked me about my own aura. I didn’t know much about it, so while he ran his errands, I spent the next few hours studying it. Like everyone else, my aura had a primary color, a deep blue. Other colors appeared faintly, including gold, silver, pink, and white. But everyone’s auras had tastes, smells, textures and sounds, and occasionally other qualities I found difficult to describe. Mine felt dense, calm, and quiet, and I didn’t notice my own smell or taste. I only experienced the spiciness if I let the pain from my leg through. Although it didn’t have any corners or points, my aura had a sharp feel to it. I tried to think how these characteristics compared to others, and my density reminded me of Mrs. Collins, whose aura literally paled in comparison. Since she must have been a million years old and died soon after I met her, perhaps the density of auras reflected age. But that couldn’t be right. Many of the kids from the UW Autism Center and several from the special-ed classroom had thin auras too. I needed to study more people before I could figure out what each of the different aspects meant.

The most curious feature of my aura involved the area around my broken leg. I could suppress the pain, but a nagging sensation of wrongness persisted even without the pain. The muddled, red cloudiness just didn’t

fit with the rest of my aura. For the next couple of hours, I just focused on the aberrancy. I didn't know what I would learn from this, but I kept at it until Grandpa returned.

Before he entered the room, his aura preceded him with a buzzing green vibrance and a sweaty smell.

"Hunter!" he yelled. "Are you OK?" A panicked look on his face snapped my attention away from the auras.

"I'm fine," I said. "I was just trying to—"

He dragged me to the bathroom mirror, where I saw red blotches everywhere on my skin. It looked like I'd been beaten with a hot poker. By concentrating so intently on the redness from my broken leg, I sent it everywhere. Once I saw my reflection, I took a mental view of my whole aura, and found it entirely red, blurred, and cloudy. I had spread my broken leg to my entire body.

"You look like you had an allergic reaction," he said. "Or got sprayed with hot oil. What happened?"

"I was just concentrating on my leg. It wasn't right. I was trying to figure out what wasn't right about it. I don't know what happened."

"So you've been just sitting here on the couch?"

"Yeah," I said. "Thinking."

"You thought yourself practically into anaphylaxis!"

"What's that?"

"Never mind. So your skin doesn't hurt?"

"Uh, no." I relaxed my grip on the pain, and it did burn a little, but it wasn't really painful.

"Can you make it go away again?"

"I don't even know how it got there! How am I supposed to make it go away?"

He put some cream on the welts, and although it didn't change anything, he obviously felt better. His aura stopped pounding and gripping at my skin, and the green faded back toward his normal blue.

"No more working on auras tonight," he proclaimed. "What else do you like to do?"

"I used to play chess with my friend."

"Really?" Grandpa said, and smiled slyly. "I played a bit when I was

younger. I undoubtedly have an old chessboard around here somewhere. Let's play some after dinner."

He put away the groceries, and we had dinner a short while later. He cooked fresh fish from the market, and I did my best to help in the kitchen. Afterward, we located the board and set it up for a game. He held a piece of each color behind his back and I chose the white one, so I went first.

I started with the move Rob Friendly used to put me in checkmate during our first game. Grandpa defended it without any thought. I wasn't sure what to do after that, so I just started moving pieces out.

"I don't recognize that opening," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a lot of times, people will do the same series of moves at the beginning of the game, called the opening. There are a bunch of common ones—they're often named after locations, like the French Defense or the Italian Game. Or they're named for the chess masters who made them famous, like Alekhine's Defense or Bird's Opening. It looks like you just moved a bunch of pawns and pieces."

Rob never told me much about the different types of openings, although I remember his father saying something about them.

"I never really learned about openings," I confessed.

"Well, that's a problem we'll have to fix," he said, as he set up a combination that was going to fork my king and rook. Even though I saw it coming, I didn't see anything I could do about it.

"You're going to take my rook."

"Yes."

"I don't have a chance, do I?"

"Not this game. But if you want to study some openings and then play again, we can do that."

The first opening he showed me started with the two king's pawns, then two knights attacking and defending the black pawn at e5, and then bishop to b5 to attack the black knight.

"Yes!" I said. "This is Rob's favorite. He said that if you took that knight, the pawn here would be undefended, and you could take it and get ahead early. Plus you could soon castle and protect your king."

“All correct. You can’t really take the pawn for free, though. Here, watch. Suppose we do all of that, and you take the knight, I take back with the pawn (always take from the outside in, by the way), leaving me with doubled pawns, which are slightly weaker. Then you take the pawn, which is what you spent all that time setting up. I just move my queen here, threatening your knight—and bam, you’re now behind instead of ahead.”

“Well, you can’t take my knight if I move my queen’s pawn forward two squares,” I said, and made the move.

He answered by pushing his queen’s pawn one, threatening my knight again.

“I can just move it out of the way again.”

He moved his bishop to threaten it again. I moved it to safety in front of my king at e3. “But now, you see, you can’t castle, because I have a bishop interfering with your line. And while you’ve been moving your knight all over the place, I’ve been developing pieces, getting ready for an attack—and I get the pawn back.” He brought his queen out and took the pawn at e4. “By the way, this opening is called the Ruy Lopez, or Spanish, Opening.”

“OK, show me another.”

We reset the board. “Here’s an easy one. Just start the same way, and instead of black moving the king’s pawn forward two squares, he moves it one.” We played those moves. “That’s the French Defense. A normal next move is the queen’s pawn, but as you can see, if black answers with a queen’s pawn move too, you have immediate conflict.

“If white takes the pawn instead of moving it forward, that’s called the exchange variation, because the immediate effect is an exchange of pawns.” He played out the scenario. “Alapin liked to instead move out his bishop to e3, so the French Defense, Alapin Variation, starts like this.” He moved the pawns back to the original French Defense and moved the bishop instead of the pawn.

“Holy crap!”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. Let’s say white wants to start with two central pawns, here and here.” He pointed to d4 and d5.

“Yeah, Rob showed me that.”

“Well, if instead, black moves the c-pawn, you have something called

the Sicilian Defense.” He showed me the Rossolimo variation of the Sicilian, the Indian, a transposition of the Spanish, and several other openings. I was awe-struck.

“How did you learn all of these?”

“Memorized them. It takes a long time, but once you have a whole bunch of them in memory, you learn what types of moves would be good later, because the goal is always the same. Mobilize your pieces and protect your king. Here, let me get you a book that shows some opening lines, and you can get started.”

So instead of trying to fix the redness I’d inflicted on myself, I looked at some of Grandpa’s chess books. He had at least ten different books, and I suspected he’d read them all and that’s why he beat me so easily. Even though I never played anyone but Rob, I thought of myself as a decent player. Apparently, I had quite a lot to learn. Not only about chess, but also about myself. I definitely came to the right place!



CHAPTER 16

We played a lot of chess. Grandpa proved to be both an excellent instructor, and a fantastic opponent. He spent hours teaching me more principles of the game. He showed me dozens of high-level games in books, and we went over moves the grand masters played, and why.

The depth of the grand masters' play dazzled my imagination. They used tremendous sacrifices to create amazing game-winning plays, all set up by seemingly unrelated moves from the opening line. Rob taught me that a queen was worth nine, rooks were worth five, bishops and knights were worth three, and pawns were worth one. However, you could put someone in checkmate with just your king and a couple of pawns, if you played it right. Also a passed pawn—one that had no other pawns stopping it from going to the other side of the board—was valued the same as a queen if it had a clear path to the end of the board. Bishops could be worth more than knights under the right circumstances, especially when using the queen as a battery, and doubled rooks were worth much more than twice the value of a single rook. Furthermore, Grandpa demonstrated how *threatening* a move could be worth just as much as *making* a move. Either way, your opponent had to protect against the outcome.

The game of chess was a fierce and unforgiving competition. It reminded me of the bullies back at school. How could I, a simple pawn, get revenge on those creeps?

I told Grandpa about Rob, and he deduced that Rob's departure from the area probably resulted from the beating, rather than his father's sudden need to relocate. I suspected the same, but hearing it from Grandpa tore the scab from my social wound. Those hoodlums cost me my only

friend in the world! Even without this motivation, I knew I had to get even. I had to find the right moves. However, I needed help—an army, of sorts. That meant friends. I had none, and no real capacity for making any. In addition to playing chess, and talking about auras, I gained new respect for my grandfather. He taught me about people.

“Listen, Hunter, most people aren’t like you. They don’t have the ability to shut off pain, or shut out emotion, or play chess like a master after only a few months of playing. You’re going into the HCC program when you get back; that alone shows you’re a smart individual. All the stuff with autism? Well, I bet that was just your reaction to seeing the auras. Maybe you’re somewhere on the spectrum, but I would call you gifted.

“Still, that means you’re different. Because you missed all the regular social interactions that occur during the critical period of communication development, you aren’t going to be able to relate to people very well, and you’ll have to work hard to make friends. When I was a kid, others called me names because I was intelligent. Most childhood bullies will never be successful later in life, so they exert their dominance at a young age, while they can, often physically. They don’t understand the world, and they won’t understand you. You probably won’t be able to make friends with them, but there are a lot of other people you *will* be able to make friends with, and you should start there. Find kids who play chess, or share other hobbies you like, and make friends that way. I used to play guitar, and I was in a band for a while. That was a lot of fun. I’m still in contact today with some of my old bandmates, even though I haven’t played in thirty years.” He paused briefly and smiled at the fond memories.

“It’s much worse for you than it was for me. Not only are you smart, but you also have this other ability. Unfortunately, I don’t think you can say anything about this to anyone for now. Even your closest friends in the world might turn on you if they find out just how different you are. Be careful. But in the meantime, you need to continue to learn about your gifts, and how you can use them to your advantage. Maybe you’ll become a profiler for the FBI, or something else great. Who knows?”

I sure didn’t know. But his advice made sense, and I promised myself I’d take it to heart. It took me a while to come to grips with his views on my autism, or lack thereof. He said he thought of me as gifted. I’ve always

viewed the “demons” as a curse, so it both challenged and relieved me to think of my situation in a positive way.

Grandpa resumed our dialogue about body systems. I could tell he liked to teach by the way his eyes lit up while he talked. Like Miss Barrett, he invested his heart and soul into the words and gestures he employed to make his points. He had such a vast knowledge base that he could support his arguments with examples from many other fields. Still, we spent most of our time discussing his favorite topic, medicine. He continued his discourse with a body system I hadn’t thought of before.

“Skin,” he announced. “You have it everywhere. You probably only ever thought of it as the thing that holds your insides in and keeps the outside out. It does that, for sure. The *integument*, as they call it in medicine, stops damaging radiation from the sun, for example, from getting through to your other cells. But the skin is an organ system, just like the nervous system. It helps prevent infection, it helps keep body temperature regulated, and it does a few other things like help synthesize vitamin D, which keeps your bones strong.”

He explained how blood vessels in skin were capable of increasing or decreasing diameter to help control body temperature. If you’re cold, the nerves in your skin reduce blood flow to preserve heat. Conversely, if you’re hot, increased blood flow and sweating cool you off. He explained convection and evaporation, the processes by which the cooling takes place. He told me about fevers, which are caused by the body’s response to a set point in your brain, and why the body uses fevers to help fight infection. Bacteria don’t reproduce as well at higher temperatures, and the immune response becomes more efficient. He frequently used words I didn’t understand, like *piloerection*, for goose bumps, or *antipyretic*, for fever-controlling medicine. I developed a habit of simply raising my hand whenever he did so, and he’d explain the individual word. My vocabulary grew astronomically because he didn’t speak down to me as if I had a mental deficiency. I loved that about him.

“The next question is, why did your skin turn all red and full of welts?”

I had no idea. The welts had faded on their own, or perhaps because Grandpa put that cream on me. Either way, I’d forgotten about them.

“As you now know, your skin protects you from things outside your

body. Forming hives is a reaction to histamine, like when someone has an allergy. An allergy is your body's response to non-self. It's part of the immune system, which we mentioned before. What was going through your brain when you made those hives form? Were you thinking about scratching your skin? Do you secrete a neurochemical when you focus? And, if so, are you allergic to it? Were the hives a stress reaction?"

My hand went up on *histamine* and *neurochemical*, forcing a brief period for defining more terms.

"More interestingly, can you do it again on command? And then could you stop it by just thinking about it? In chemistry, most reactions go 'both ways,' which is to say, if two things can combine to make another, then that substance can break down to form the two things back again, if the conditions are right. Since you can make this reaction happen by just thinking about it, I venture to guess that you can also stop the hives by just focusing on blocking them, like with the pain sensation."

Interesting indeed! "Let me try."

I immersed myself back into the thoughts from before, primarily the red "not right" sensation of my leg. Rather than thinking abstractly about it, I focused on the back of my left hand, hoping to raise a small welt only there, instead of everywhere. I closed my eyes, and imagined the redness as strongly as I could. Moments later, Grandpa started yelling.

"Stop! Stop!"

I opened my eyes. He grasped my hand, which spewed bright-red blood everywhere. He dragged me out of the living room into the kitchen, forcing me to hop without my crutches, and wrapped my hand with a dishrag.

"What did you *do*?" he implored.

"I was just thinking about how to make my hand red."

I had sliced deeply through the skin of my hand, causing a fountain of blood to erupt. The floor, the couch, and the table all looked like a scene from a slasher film. He clamped my other hand atop the injured one, and told me to hold pressure on it to slow the bleeding while he went for supplies. He came back with a medical bag containing suture thread and instruments. I removed my hand, and the bleeding had stopped. He studied the three-inch wound, and then cleaned up my hand with some

small gauze squares and sterile water. He unwrapped thread from the kit and prepared the other supplies.

“I usually numb people up to do this, but I think you have that covered. Do you feel this?” he asked, as he poked me with his suture needle on the skin near the cut.

“Not really,” I answered. I could see the needle go through my skin, but it didn’t feel like anything in particular.

He repaired the cut by placing six sutures, just like I’d seen the doctors in the ER in Seattle do several times. Then he went back to the living room and cleaned the blood off the couch with hydrogen peroxide.

“Next time we do this away from my good couch!” he lamented.

After he fixed my self-induced laceration, he suggested we go for a ride. He took me to a place called Van Horn Park in the Liberty Heights neighborhood of Springfield. The outdoor facility had several ball fields, a lake, and a wide expanse of forest. On the ride over, Grandpa told me about two kids who died there in 1920 and, apparently, still haunted the place. He said we’d never want to go there after dark, but in the afternoon we’d be fine. The seedier elements of the local population didn’t make use of the facility until evening.

We parked in the main lot, and following his lead, I crutch-walked my way to a bench where we could look across the reservoir formed by a dam that blocked the river. On this beautiful day, the park bustled with activity. Some were playing on the basketball court and soccer field, a few were out on the water, and others lounged on the benches and grass, lazily enjoying the early-summer sunshine.

Grandpa gave me the afternoon lesson plan. “Here’s what I want you to do. Look at these people and tell me what you see in their auras.”

It didn’t take long for me to recognize the futility of this plan. Our strong, vibrant auras eclipsed anything I could see from everyone else. They were both blue with streaks of pink, but mine had redness near my leg, while his had the purple hint that reminded me of my mother and the gold that I first saw in my father. The pleasant taste and smell, the one that initially created the powerful draw toward him, overwhelmed any other tastes or smells, and even though we both had quiet auras, the simple distance from everyone else made hearing anything impossible. I felt almost

nothing from the rest of the park's inhabitants.

"It's easier with only one person at a time, and I need to be pretty close to them for it to work well," I said.

"OK, why don't you just pick one person, and then walk over and ask something harmless—like 'do you know what time it is?'"

I hobbled over to a solitary man by the playground, only to have his wife and child join him seconds later.

"Uh, do you know what time it is?" I asked, stupidly.

"Sure, just a sec," he said. His aura, which was primarily silver along with pink similar to mine, streaked with green briefly while he pulled a watch out of his bag. "Yeah, it's one fifteen."

His wife had a heavy purple aura, yellow, warm, and calm. She, too, briefly streaked green. The baby smelled funny, but only in a nondescript way, providing limited information at best. "Thanks," I offered and then hobbled back to Grandpa on the bench.

Upon his prodding, I hunted around the park for others, and checked their auras. I saw gold, silver, blue, white, orange, pink, and a variety of other colors, smells, and sensations. One girl, sitting by herself, appeared to be crying. Her aura—brown, gray, and muddled—tasted like vinegar and repelled me, so I didn't approach her. After each encounter, I reported my findings back to Grandpa, who took mental notes and sent me out again for another victim. As long as there were only a couple of people together, I could easily relate each aura to its owner.

A group of five confused me, until I opened my eyes and made a huge discovery. All the men had the same pink color that Grandpa, my father, the first man on the beach, and I shared. None of the women had any pink at all. I ran through my memories to test my hypothesis. Ray-Ray, Billy, Justin, and Scottie all had pink, but Tori did not. All four of the 33rd Street Gang had pink. Dr. Collins, Dr. Burroughs, Dr. Tyler, Mr. Wales . . . yes. All men had pink. I thought about Mom, Dr. Eisenberg, Rose, Miss Barrett, Principal Frechette, and Miss Amanda and I was sure of it. No females had pink.

When I realized I was able to use pink to identify men, I found it much easier to assign auras to individuals in a group. I double-checked this on

subsequent endeavors, always confirming it to be true. After reporting this remarkable insight to Grandpa, I realized I was famished, so we went home to get some food.

On the way, Grandpa asked, “What did you learn?”

“I’m pretty sure each color, noise, or smell means something specific about the person who has it. I told you all the men had pink.” I stopped, momentarily confused. “But I didn’t find anything in common for the women. They had no pink, but they didn’t have any other color that was distinctive to them.”

“Well,” said Grandpa, “maybe it’s just like nature. In genetics, gender is determined by a special pair of chromosomes, one called X, and the other called Y. A female has two X chromosomes, and a male has one X and one Y. If the male passes on his Y to the offspring, it will be male. If not, the child has two Xs and is female. Maybe the pink you’re seeing simply indicates the presence of a Y chromosome.”

“So pink means male, and no pink means female?”

“It sure sounds that way to me,” replied Grandpa. “What else did you see?”

“The main colors were blue, white, orange, silver, gold, yellow, and green. When I saw red, there was something wrong, like with my leg. One guy had a limp and he had red near his leg too. The sad lady had brown and gray. I could feel that people had all kinds of different temperatures—ranging from cold to hot—but I don’t think that was related to any of the colors. Some people smelled good, and a few, especially the baby, smelled bad.” I paused for a breath. “Most of the colors were fairly solid, but the older a person was, the less dense the aura appeared. I remember my teacher, Mrs. Collins, was so decrepit that her aura had almost no color at all. She died pretty soon after I met her. I think the density is related to how healthy someone is.”

“Wow, good stuff! Let’s try again tomorrow.” We got home and ate dinner. I devoured two portions of the casserole he made, which surprised us both. Me, because I rarely ate that much food, and him, because he didn’t think any child would eat tuna casserole so voraciously.

After dinner, we took out the chessboard and played, with each of us taking pawns and pieces early and then moving around a lot without any

captures, in a very defensive struggle. The game ultimately ended in a stalemate because we traded pieces until neither of us had enough material to put the other into checkmate. Grandpa explained the idea of a draw, which was like a tie, in that neither player won. If both players were sure they were unable to win, they could agree to draw the game, ending it. That way, you can start a new game instead of just waiting for official stalemate criteria, which included times when one player had no legal move, when nobody had enough material to win (you needed more than just a knight or bishop to make checkmate), or when the players made moves that resulted in the board ending the same way three times. Also, if you moved fifty times with no exchange of material, that was also a stalemate by definition. Allowing a draw saved a lot of time, because both players could see it coming and quit.

I expected to learn that when high level grand masters played, draws were commonplace, because both players would avoid bad moves and often trade down their pieces, like we had. Ultimately, with not enough material, there would be no victor. I was surprised when Grandpa said draws were relatively rare. Chess players, like any other competitors, liked to win. I certainly felt that way about the bullies. I really wanted to find a way to defeat them!

The long game took the rest of my strength, and I went to bed, dreaming about chess moves, bullies, and purple auras.

The next morning before breakfast, I went outside and focused on my injured hand. Now it had an itchy red splotch marring the blue that belonged there. The sense that something was amiss paled in comparison to my leg, where the muddled crimson mutilated my otherwise pristine blue aura. This time, instead of thinking about the redness, I closed my eyes and recalled the blue from the day before. As I focused, the red slowly dissipated. When the entire area returned to its normal color, I opened my eyes to find stitches uselessly embedded in perfect skin.

“*Grandpa!*” I yelled. The smell of bacon and eggs cooking in the kitchen confirmed his whereabouts.

“What is it?” he asked, as he came running out.

“Look!” I exclaimed, as I showed him the hand.

“It’s . . . you—you fixed it!” he stammered, looking at me, vibrating

with greenish-yellow excitement.

“Yes. I just thought about what it *should* be like, and it—well, like you said, I fixed it!”

“This is amazing!” he said. I agreed. He gave me a huge hug, then ran inside and returned with some small scissors. He cut the stitches, and pulled them out, one at a time. With each pull, a tiny specter of red re-occurred at the site, but I sought the blue, and it immediately resolved.

He grasped my hand, and inspected it carefully as he turned it over and back repeatedly.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, this time calmly. A thought occurred to him. “What about your leg?”

I understood immediately. “Let me try it.”

I located the muddled red, and sought the blue that belonged there. It didn’t come. There must be more too it. I shook my head.

“That’s OK, maybe it’s too much for right now. Let’s get some breakfast, and then we can talk about bones.”

He cooked us half a package of bacon and six eggs, thinking to put the leftovers back in the refrigerator, but instead, I asked for more. Historically I never ate much, but over the past few days, I ravenously devoured everything on my plate. I was a skinny kid. I usually just ate because my routine dictated so. However, my food intake increased dramatically recently. Grandpa thought I might be having a growth spurt. I hoped so. My puny frame contained so little physical power that bullies found me an easy target. If I weighed more, I might be less easily victimized.

“Here, listen,” Grandpa started, as we sat back in the living room after he cleaned up the kitchen. “Your bones are the key to the musculoskeletal system. Everyone has more than two hundred bones, and they do everything from protect your head, heart, and spinal cord,” he pointed to his skull, ribs, and vertebrae as he said their names, “to allow you to hear. There are three small bones inside the eardrum that transmit sound. Mostly, though, the bones are there to allow you to move. The shoulder (scapula), upper arm (humerus) and lower arm (radius and ulna), and the pelvis, upper leg (femur), lower leg (tibia and fibula), and wrist and ankle bones allow for large-scale movements, and the phalanges, the bones in your fingers and toes, control your fine movements.” He pointed to each

of the bones as he named them off, so I didn't have to raise my hand.

"Yeah, I remember the 'tib-fib' from the orthopedic surgeon," I added.

"Right. You have a plate in there that could be making it harder to heal. I want you to try again, but this time, look at your good leg, and then see if you can make the bones of the bad leg look the same. Also, let yourself feel the pain. You can use that as a guide."

I relaxed and let the spicy sensation from the leg flow to my brain, and although it hurt considerably, I could tolerate it much better than the first time. I still didn't have enough experience with pain to know how it should feel, but it certainly was unpleasant. Using the blue aura from the left as a guide, I tried to sense how the bones should be, and I did my best to remove the "wrongness" from the right. I closed my eyes. I stopped listening and feeling everything around me and just concentrated on the leg. A few minutes went by, and I gave myself a mental shake. I knew I had finished—the blue had returned, the spicy taste vanished, and the redness and muddled quality dispersed nearly completely. I opened my eyes to see my grandfather asleep on his chair.

"Grandpa?" I said quietly.

He woke up with a start. "Aha, any luck? It's been," he looked at the clock, "two hours."

That shocked me, and I checked my watch to confirm. I thought it had been only moments, but my excitement overcame my astonishment. "Yes," I said. "I think I did it."

"Wow!" he said. "Let's see!"

He jumped up and encouraged me to test the leg by standing. "Take it slowly at first, but—"

I rose slowly at first, but felt absolutely nothing abnormal, so I jumped up and down wildly. The cloudiness persisted, but the rest of my aura consisted only of my normal blue with the pink streaks.

"Easy!" he yelled.

"Get this cast off," I said. I had no doubt that the bone was healed.

"Hold on, hold on. Maybe we should get an X-ray first. We can go up to my hospital, and—"

"And how would you explain it?" I burst in.

"Well, they don't know when you broke your leg," he countered. "I

could just say you broke it six weeks ago, and we're just making sure it's healed up. . . . But, that would leave a callus."

"A what?" I asked, raising my hand.

"When the bones heal up, scarring usually develops where the fracture was. If your bone is anything like your hand, there probably isn't any scarring there at all. Perhaps you're right. Let me get some tools. Are you *sure* you're fixed?"

"Yeah. Absolutely." I was sure. "The only thing I feel is a little cloudiness, and that has to be where the plates are. When I let the pain through now, it's completely gone."

"OK," he said. "Come with me," he added, and we went to the garage, where he produced a hacksaw and some pliers. He sawed sideways on the cast, and then used the pliers backwards to stretch the outer layer of the cast on either side until it popped off. He dug through some other layers of material and cut them down with scissors, until my bare leg popped out. I frolicked around, celebrating my leg's newly found freedom. I beamed with pride at the first significant accomplishment of my entire life.

"Wow," he marveled. "I guess it's only been a week, but usually when you take someone's leg out of a cast, it's all shriveled and small. I still can't believe it."

"What do you mean?" I asked, as I continued to dance about on my recently broken leg.

"You're a healer!" he said.

A healer! Well, I could heal myself, anyway. All of these colors, sounds, and textures must have a purpose. I thought the blue aura meant someone who could heal, probably because Grandpa, a doctor, and I—apparently a healer—had this color as our primary one. I leaped around, waving my arms in the air, excited about my discoveries.

"You were out of it for some time," he said, after my celebration petered out.

I must have slipped back into the void. The negative ramifications hit me. A big part of my early struggle to remain present involved mastering the void, which I thought I'd done. This episode brought that mastery into question.

"What is it?" Grandpa said.

"Huh?" I said, briefly confused.

“Your face—you looked disappointed, like you were thinking about something you don’t like.”

“When I thought I had autism, I lost a lot of time. I used to tune out everything. I went to another place. I call it ‘the void.’ If things happening around me were too much to handle, I simply slipped off, and I’d wake up hours or days later. Over time, I started to learn to control it. This past year, I really only went into it by choice. If the teacher was repeating the same thing we had done a zillion times, and I just couldn’t listen to it, I would go there.

“I slipped into it the first time I got on the school bus too. I was scared, and I guess I panicked and ended up in the nurse’s office. I think that was the last time I went there without planning on it.”

“So how do you make yourself go into the void?”

“I’m not exactly sure. I guess I just think about it. I got to the point where I could go there for just an hour or so, in order to be ready for recess,” I said.

“When you did it today, you looked like your eyes were glazed over and you were . . . not there. I was a little worried, and almost tried to bring you out of it, but I just waited. I think I fell asleep.”

“It felt like only five minutes to me,” I said. “That’s weird.”

“Well, do you think you can control it? Go in for a minute and bring yourself right back out?”

“I think so,” I said. “Let me try.” I went into the void, planning to come right back out in a minute. A minute later, I came right back out, like nothing had happened.

“Nicely done,” Grandpa said. “You know what? An area of the brain called the reticular activating system keeps you conscious. If that area gets suppressed, you’re still otherwise just fine, but you’re not aware of what’s going on around you. It would be interesting to see a PET scan of your brain when you do that. I bet you’re shutting that area down by your own volition.”

“Wow, that makes sense,” I said, impressed with the theory. I loved the way Grandpa had an answer for everything.

“So you can control pain, and it sounds like you may be able to control the part of the brain that keeps you conscious. *And*, you can suppress

the auras from everyone else, if you want to, including your own. The sensations you describe from the auras all originate from the same five senses everyone else has—sight, sound, smell, taste, and tactile perception. Right?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Perhaps they’re like ‘referred sensations.’ Those are sensations that feel like they’re coming from one place, but really are happening somewhere else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some people feel pain in their shoulder when their diaphragm is irritated. After laparoscopic surgery, for instance—that’s when they put a special camera inside your abdomen and inflate the belly with air, and use the endoscope to do some surgical procedure, like take out your gallbladder—air is left inside that rubs against your diaphragm. However, your diaphragm is innervated by the same nerves that report pain from your shoulder. If those nerves fire, the signal comes from the diaphragm, but your brain can erroneously interpret the signal as coming from the shoulder.

“The same thing can happen to people who have heart attacks. They might feel it in their jaw, for instance, because the same nerve supplies both places. You can have it with other sensations too, like taste. When people get IV contrast dye for CT or MRI scans, sometimes they taste metal in their mouth when the dye goes into their veins. That’s called synesthesia. Come to think of it, people with autism are known to experience that type of thing. I bet that’s what you have. It’s like referred sensation, in that the nervous system is reporting something not normally perceived in that same way, but it involves all five senses,” he concluded.

“Wait a minute. You’re saying little kids don’t all smell funny, it’s just my brain interpreting a signal it gets from their aura!”

“Maybe that’s not the best example, because most small kids do smell a little funny. But, yeah, the blue you see is probably not a real blue color. That would correspond to a certain wavelength of light. I don’t remember exactly what wavelength, but a few hundred nanometers is probably right. You see blue around me as well as yourself, right? But no shadow? No source for the light?” he wiggled around, moved behind objects and even

put a blanket over himself, but the blue color stayed right there, even if he was completely covered.

“You’re still blue,” I said blandly. He took off the blanket.

“Synesthesia.”

“But how does it work?”

“Not a clue,” he answered.

We looked at each other, pondering. The blue deepened a little, and there were green streaks darting around both of us at times. After a while, he broke the silence.

“Do you think you can control your aura?”

“What?”

“Hear me out. Suppose your aura is some type of electrical input to your brain. Just like regular nerves. It’s your ability to perceive this aura that makes you unique. We’ve established that, at least to some extent, you can control your own nervous system. You can clearly stop pain signals. You can definitely block out sensations from the auras. And it sounds like you can shut off your reticular activating system at will, which allows you to go into the void. These are things nobody else can do!

“You also healed your cut and your broken leg, just by thinking about it—I’ve never heard of anyone else capable of that. Wouldn’t it make sense that the two things are related? I mean, whatever nerves or pathway it takes to get this information into your head, maybe it works both ways. Except, in the case of healing, you tweak it, or something, to make the aura turn back to the normal blue color.”

That certainly made sense.

“You said it yourself: you could tell something ‘wasn’t right’ with your own aura. But after you healed your leg, the aura went back to normal, correct?”

“Yeah, except where the plates are.”

“Let’s try another experiment. Why don’t you, I don’t know, give yourself another cut just like the one you had on your hand. See if you can reproduce the change in the aura that you associated with that injury. And once you do that—”

“I heal it back up,” I finished for him.

“Exactly.”

“OK, let me try.” I closed my eyes, and remembered how my aura felt when I had that cut. I felt a brief tingling sensation all over as I prepared to alter my pristine blueness. I focused on the back of my hand and added the redness. I couldn’t match the earlier redness, but I created something similar. With my eyes still closed, I felt my grandfather’s blue approaching me. I looked at my hand and found a large bruise on the back of it.

“Are you all right?” he asked, voice high, aura pulsating a bit with agitation and the smell of dirty socks.

“Sure, why?”

“You didn’t *feel* that?” he asked, amazed.

“Well, yeah, I turned it to red.”

“You snapped the bone in your hand! I heard it pop!” he practically yelled.

I looked at my hand. It didn’t function properly. I couldn’t move my second, third, or fourth fingers at all. My hand was deformed, too. Even without looking at my aura, I could see the anomaly, but the superimposed redness, the grating sound, and spicy taste amplified my awareness.

“Your hand is broken! Just look at it!”

“Hang on.” I focused on it again and put the aura back how it had been a few minutes earlier. The redness didn’t quench immediately though, it sloshed around. I felt myself slipping away, and I tried at first to fight that, but I couldn’t simultaneously disburse the red and retain my hold of Grandpa’s blue. I gave up trying to do both, and simply finished eliminating the red. I knew I lost time again. Now that Grandpa had explained his theory, I recognized what happened when I went into the void.

When I came out, I opened my eyes and looked at Grandpa, who studied me. “How long was I out?” I asked.

“It was amazing!” he answered. “Um, just a minute or two. But the bone . . . it just . . . went right back into place. It waggled around, and the skin moved, and the deformity just, well, healed! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Hearing it described made me wish I could see it physically, but I couldn’t do both. While manipulating the aura, I didn’t feel any sensation from moving the bone around, or putting it together. I naturally blocked the pain, and that would probably be the main sensation I would expect

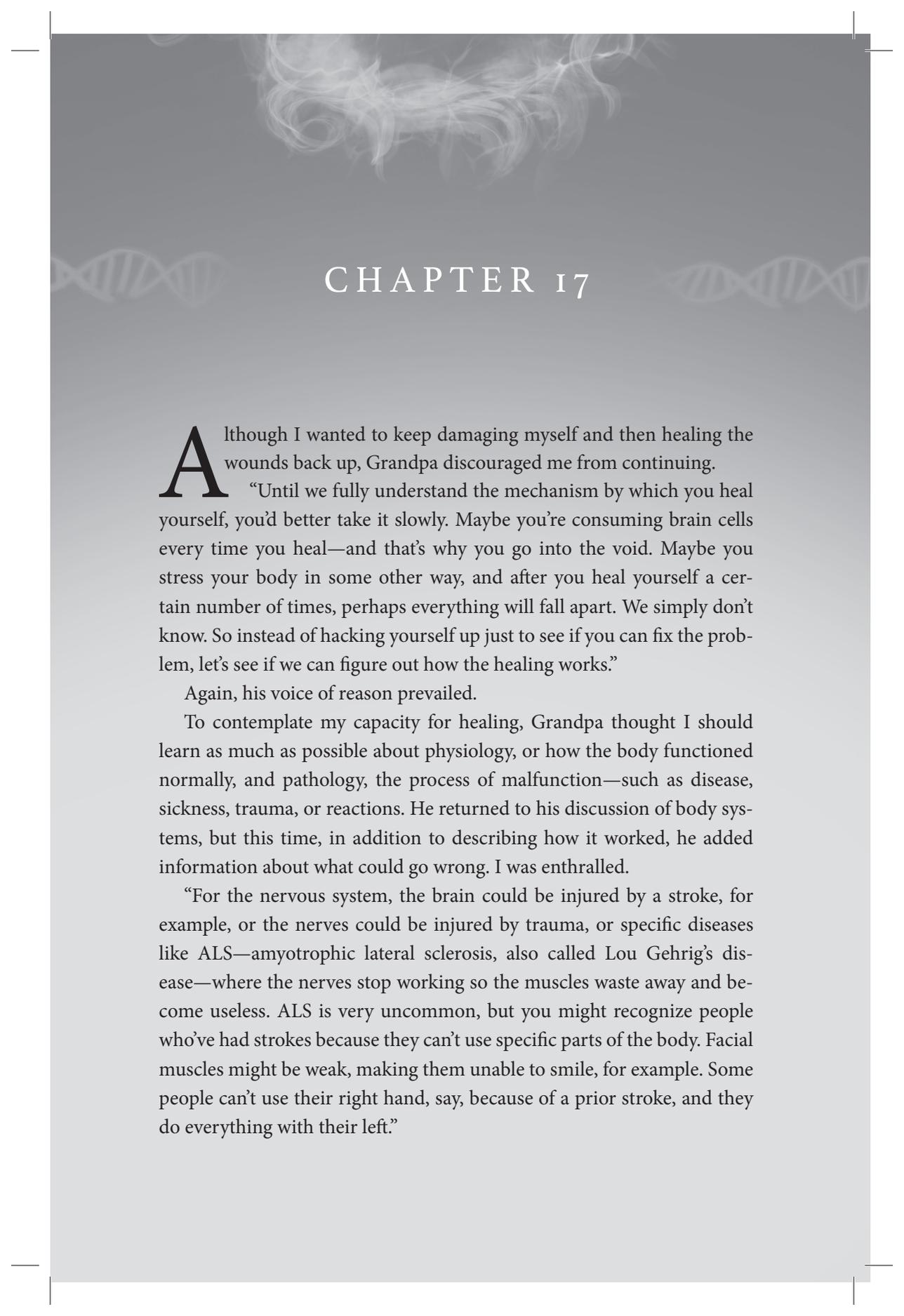
to feel. The healing process amounted to returning the aura to its original blue color, without any additional smells, sounds, or tastes. My capacity to perform this stunned Grandpa, who glistened with awe. I felt pretty good about myself too. I also felt quite hungry. The eggs from just two hours ago were only a distant memory to my stomach, which rumbled loudly.

“Hey, Grandpa?”

“What?”

“Would you mind if I had a sandwich or something? I’m suddenly starving.”

“Sure, no problem,” he chuckled. “I guess repairing that broken bone would take some energy! And maybe we’d better give it a rest for the day. Who knows what the side effects might be.”



CHAPTER 17

Although I wanted to keep damaging myself and then healing the wounds back up, Grandpa discouraged me from continuing. “Until we fully understand the mechanism by which you heal yourself, you’d better take it slowly. Maybe you’re consuming brain cells every time you heal—and that’s why you go into the void. Maybe you stress your body in some other way, and after you heal yourself a certain number of times, perhaps everything will fall apart. We simply don’t know. So instead of hacking yourself up just to see if you can fix the problem, let’s see if we can figure out how the healing works.”

Again, his voice of reason prevailed.

To contemplate my capacity for healing, Grandpa thought I should learn as much as possible about physiology, or how the body functioned normally, and pathology, the process of malfunction—such as disease, sickness, trauma, or reactions. He returned to his discussion of body systems, but this time, in addition to describing how it worked, he added information about what could go wrong. I was enthralled.

“For the nervous system, the brain could be injured by a stroke, for example, or the nerves could be injured by trauma, or specific diseases like ALS—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also called Lou Gehrig’s disease—where the nerves stop working so the muscles waste away and become useless. ALS is very uncommon, but you might recognize people who’ve had strokes because they can’t use specific parts of the body. Facial muscles might be weak, making them unable to smile, for example. Some people can’t use their right hand, say, because of a prior stroke, and they do everything with their left.”

Once he pointed it out, I recalled lots of people who had nervous system issues, including famous people on TV. I didn't need to see their auras to notice their deficits.

He went on.

"The cardiovascular system, as I said, transports blood to all areas of the body. The arteries or veins, tubes that carry blood away from or toward the heart, respectively, can tear or clot, causing injuries in the tissues supplied by those vessels. A heart attack results from a blockage of blood flow in the heart muscle, and a stroke occurs when this happens in the brain. This can take place anywhere in the body—and when it does, the cells that don't get blood will die. If you don't have enough blood because of bleeding or anemia, or if the heart is too weak to pump strongly enough, all tissues can be affected simultaneously. The electrical system that enables the heart to beat properly can also malfunction, resulting in the same effect. Severe electrical malfunction, like ventricular fibrillation, stops the heart completely, causing sudden death."

"So if you stick your tongue into an electrical outlet, you can die?"

"Probably not," Grandpa chuckled. "But I still wouldn't recommend it. The pulmonary system, mainly the lungs and tubes connecting them to the outside, works closely with the cardiovascular system to transport oxygen to the body. Cells everywhere utilize oxygen to fully metabolize sugar that you eat, and if the lungs don't work correctly—from infection, like pneumonia, or from breakdown, like chronic lung disease—the oxygen can't get there. Smoking really destroys your lungs, as well as parts of many other systems, so promise me you'll never smoke!"

I promised. The mention of sugar made me wonder why I felt hungry all the time since I'd been staying with him. So I asked him about it.

"I know the food I eat provides nutrition and energy for all the other systems."

He nodded.

"Why do you think I'm using it up so rapidly?"

"Well, let's go over it. In the gastrointestinal system, the major function is digestion, unlocking nutrients from the foods that you eat, like you said. The process starts right in the mouth. Your teeth crush food to expose more surface area, and enzymes like amylase start to break down the food.

Once it gets to the stomach, acid and more enzymes continue to digest the food, so that in your intestines, the nutrients get absorbed by specialized cells. Your blood then takes all the nutrients your body needs to the cells that use them. The process of digestion needs water, and once the nutrients get absorbed, the colon collects up the excess water and then you eliminate indigestible products as waste. If any part of this system doesn't work, your cells can't get the nutrition or water they need.

"In your case, the energy from the food is rapidly used up by your brain and nervous system when you heal yourself or interact with the auras. You've been doing that much more since you've been staying with me, so you have a much higher food requirement."

Another mystery solved. He went on with a related system, one I had never heard of, the endocrine system.

"Endocrine glands," he started, making my hand go right up. "Oh, *endocrine* is just a fancy word for signal carrier, and glands secrete chemicals known as hormones into the bloodstream; you can remember *endo* means *inside*. One of the most important of these substances is insulin, which comes from the pancreas. It helps the sugar from the food you eat enter cells so they can use it for fuel. If your pancreas doesn't make enough, or if the insulin doesn't function properly, it's called diabetes. In this disease, the sugar that you extract during digestion doesn't go into the cells where it is needed, causing several problems, including increased risk for heart attacks and strokes. Another issue stems from the backup energy pathway, burning fat instead of sugar. That's called ketoacidosis. Diabetics who experience that become quite sick with vomiting, confusion, and even syncope."

"Syncope?" I asked, putting my hand up again.

"Passing out. It would be like you going into the void. Except they can't control it."

The other systems had too many components for me to keep them all straight, even though Grandpa explained everything very carefully. I hoped I never got diabetes, because I had no idea how to fix that. At least not yet. Maybe if I went to medical school and learned all the things Grandpa knew, I'd be able to figure out how to address these complicated problems.

He left the biggest offender for last—cancer.

“Cancers start from cells that escape the regulatory processes the body uses to keep them in check. They proliferate and move outside their original location, killing normal cells by competing for nutrients. As the cancer cells grow and take over more of the body, people get very sick. Our treatments for cancer are usually pretty nasty, and they often make people feel even worse. Medicine’s greatest challenge is stopping cancer, because with few exceptions, there aren’t safe and effective treatments. Despite years of research.”

I raised my hand on *regulatory* and *proliferate*, but I understood everything else he said about this dreaded disease. I *really* hoped I never got cancer!

We spent the rest of the next six weeks discussing body systems, watching people, talking about what I saw in their auras, playing chess, and trying to figure out why I could heal myself. I also started preparing for the following year in the HCC program by reading the books I brought from Seattle. In the time between lectures, Grandpa taught me how to tie all kinds of knots, some of which he used on patients. Most were knots his father taught him when they’d gone sailing together.

“Did you sail a lot when you lived in Seattle?” I asked.

“What makes you think I lived there?”

“I just thought . . . well, that’s where Mom is from.”

A deep laugh touched his face and rattled his entire body. “Hunter, your mother grew up here, not the other way around,” he said. “I grew up on Cape Cod, so I used to sail in the Atlantic, not the Pacific.” I nodded my understanding, and he continued. “I went to the Naval Academy in Maryland, before medical school. I met your grandmother while skiing in town here, on Mount Tom, during a winter break from Harvard. Even though she was a black diamond-level skier, I ran into her on the bunny slope, because I’d never skied before. She taught me how, and we started talking back and forth while I finished school. We fell in love, and I moved back here into this house after I finished my residency. I practiced here for nearly my entire career. My wife’s mother, your great-grandma, was the dean of Smith College, in Northampton. That’s just fifteen minutes north of here. This was her home, and when she died from cancer, she left it to

Maddie. We moved in and this is where we raised Marissa. You've been staying in your mother's old room, although we took down her posters and redecorated it years ago. It wasn't until she met that fellow Jim, uh, your father, that she decided to move to the West Coast."

Just then, my cell phone rang, and Miss Amanda spoke on the other end.

"Hello, Hunter! I hope you're doing well! I just wanted to remind you about your flight tomorrow," she said. The time to return home had arrived.

The news left me profoundly distressed. The six weeks had flown by. Now, not only did I have to go back to school and deal with the bullies, I had to leave the only person in the world who knew my secret. I programmed Grandpa's number into the cell phone Miss Amanda had given me, and he assured me that I could call him any time I needed to talk. But I knew it wouldn't be the same. On the upside, Miss Amanda promised to pick me up at the airport, and she'd still be working for my mother. She also reminded me about the HCC program. Highly capable. For the first time, I felt like these words accurately described me.

Grandpa and I spent our last night together eating ice cream and chatting, mostly about his past and my future.

"What would you like to do when you get older?"

"I think I want to be a doctor, and learn to cure cancer!"

"You just might be able to do that. With your unique ability and intellect, I can't think of anyone else who'd be better suited for it than you."

I went to bed happy.

In the morning, I packed my two bags, and we loaded up the car for the trip to Bradley, again passing Athol Crossing. Grandpa looked at me expectantly, but I still didn't get the joke, and he didn't explain.

At the airport, I made the mistake of trying to look at all the other travelers' auras.

Grandpa stopped me. "Block them out!" he nearly shouted, above the din of the moving bodies and luggage. I looked at him and saw his aura vibrating.

"You nearly slipped away into the void," he said quietly, directly into my ear.

He was right. I had to take it slowly. All the progress I made learning about people and how their auras worked would be instantly undone if I ended up institutionalized again.

Grandpa walked me to the ticket area with my bags, and Miss Amanda appeared, having just flown in from Seattle. She lit up with yellow and ran over to me, engulfing me with a giant hug. My happiness showed in my face and my aura, which likewise emitted a strong yellow.

“What happened to the cast?” she asked, almost immediately. I’d forgotten about that, and I didn’t know what to say.

“The leg healed up, so I took it off,” Grandpa interjected.

The two of them exchanged greetings and discussed the return trip. After they were done chatting, Miss Amanda turned to me. “Are you ready to go home?”

“I guess so,” I said, not hiding the disappointment.

“I’ll see you again soon, Hunter,” Grandpa said. “Now give me a hug and get out of here!” He bubbled with yellow and some purple as I welcomed his giant hug. I felt so grateful, I wished there was something I could do to show him how much I appreciated all he’d done for me. I felt his deep blue aura and noticed a lingering area of redness in his knees. During the warm embrace, I tried to smooth the red away. I pulled him even tighter as I felt the redness dim considerably, although it didn’t entirely disappear. As I finally backed away, he twitched green and yellow, and his blue aura increased in clarity and looked sturdier.

“What did you do?” he gasped.

“What?” I replied.

“I have been fighting the arthritis in my knees for the last five years. And did—did you . . . ?” he stammered.

I nodded. He grabbed me again and whispered, “Do you know what this means?”

The implications started to hit me. I hugged him back.

“Be careful,” he admonished.

“Thanks, Grandpa.”

“Nice to see you again, Dr. Hayes,” said Miss Amanda. “We really must get going, Hunter, we don’t want to miss our flight.”

I waved good-bye one more time to Grandpa and went with Miss Amanda toward the gates.

I pondered the new development on the flight back to Seattle. I'd learned so much about myself, but I could hardly believe I could affect others. I had to block out the auras around me on the airplane to be able to concentrate. I also shut my eyes and covered my ears with headphones, pretending to listen to music, while I reviewed what Grandpa helped me discover.

First, the demons were auras that gave me remarkable insight into the person around whom they lived. Second, the color of auras changed with the type of person—the most obvious example being the pink hue that I associated with males. The healing blue, the happiness of yellow, and the pain and spicy taste of red also came to mind, but I had a lot left to learn. Third, I could deduce my own health from my aura, and if any red color blotted out the blue, I could heal my injury by reverting the aura back to its normal color. And finally—and this part I really needed to explore more carefully—I had the capacity to affect Grandpa's aura, changing his redness back to blue just like I'd done with my own.

The latter opened up so many possibilities, but also introduced just as many questions. Foremost among them—what else could I do, and could I do it to others? I also wondered why only I could see these auras. Perhaps others could as well, and I just hadn't met anyone who could. Maybe my parents could too, and they just never told me. How did the auras work? Although I had many questions, my primary one was: how could I use this ability to get back at the bullies?

I decided to start answering my questions through experimentation. I felt confident that I could heal any minor injury. Although I could create a cut on my own hand by turning my aura red, something I had done accidentally while trying to replicate the welts, I wasn't able to do it on command. I broke my hand instead of making a cut. So even though I *could* do it, I needed practice. Even though Grandpa wanted me to take it slowly, I decided to start creating small injuries and healing them up so I could learn better control, just like with the void. Perhaps I could initially use a sharp knife, and then once I figured out how to replicate the damage by adjusting the aura, I could improve my capabilities of injuring and healing myself.

The next phase involved checking the auras of others. I studied people in Springfield, but with so many combinations, I hadn't made much headway in determining what each individual characteristic meant. I needed to decipher the code. Maybe someone else had a similar experience, and wrote about it in a book. I doubted it, so I had to keep up my observations and deduce from circumstance what each color implied.

Finally, even if I could affect the bullies with my gift, how could I take on all of them at once? I had to treat it like a chess match, first split them up and then win the game with a well-planned attack. But any good assault required many pieces, so I had to acquire several of my own to counter Tommy's big ugly friends. A daunting task list for sure, but I felt I could accomplish it if I put my mind to it.

We changed planes in Chicago, because Miss Amanda couldn't schedule us on a direct flight. Even so, the six-and-a-half-hour trip went by quickly since I spent the time considering my future. When we arrived in Seattle, Miss Amanda reminded me to set my watch back to West Coast time. Although I never entered the void, the hours of concentration produced the same result; time had gone by without me. Miss Amanda accompanied me to baggage claim, where the sight of both of my parents caught me off guard.

"Welcome home, Hunter!" my father said.

Initially too stunned to speak, I only stared. I hadn't seen him in many months. With a gentle push in the back from Miss Amanda, I regained my bearings.

"Hi, Dad." I ran up to him and hugged him.

The aura around him, a very dense blue and gold with a hints of pink and black, first chilled me, but warmed at the sound of my voice. It flashed purple and green, and vibrated as I ran into his arms. I never paid much attention to his aura before, but that all changed now that I knew more about my gift. Still, I realized I couldn't discuss the "demons" with anyone but Grandpa, unless I wanted to go back to the psychiatrist.

"I haven't seen you in months! Where've you been?" I inquired.

"Well, listen to you!" he said. "The last time I saw you, you weren't even able to make a complete sentence, let alone demand an answer of your father!"

Of all I'd learned during his absence, speech ranked near the bottom, but he did have a point.

"I've been on assignment," he said. His aura pulsed in waves. "More of a sabbatical really," he corrected, as the twitching increased. "But I'm back now!"

"So how come you didn't call or anything?" I prodded.

"Well, I work in sociology for the university," he started. "I was in a foreign country doing research where I had no access to phones. Outside contact would have ruined the research. So I was unable to communicate. Your mother knew, but at the time, I wasn't able to explain it to you, because . . . well, you didn't understand too much at all."

I found it interesting that during his speech his aura pulsed in waves the entire time, but after he finished, it resumed its clear blue-gold that felt so strong.

Mom joined in with a giant hug. "I finished my latest project, so I'll be home a bit more from now on," she said, apologetically. She flashed heavily purple, but her aura vibrated with a gray and muddled buzzing. When it cleared a bit, I saw the same silver color that had nearly exploded when we last talked. Blue glistened inside the silver, and it heartened me to see the familiar blue color. I felt great complexity in their auras, and the smell and taste reminded me of home. The yellow coming from my own aura when I smiled added to theirs. It didn't take a genius to recognize the signs of happiness.

"Your leg has healed?" Mom asked.

I broke away from the hug and stared for a moment.

Miss Amanda broke the staring silence. "Yes, Dr. Hayes took the cast off. Will you be needing me for anything else?" she asked, her orange still prominent.

"Thank you, dear," Mom said. "We have it from here. I appreciate everything you've done, and I'll let the agency know that you can be re-assigned."

"Good night then," she said. She smiled and waved at me, also showing a mix of gray and yellow, and headed out. I ran after her and gave her a huge hug.

“Thanks for everything!” I said. Some of the gray streaks faded as she left.

“Are you hungry?” Mom asked. “You look like you’ve lost weight. Didn’t Dad feed you anything?”

“I think I might be hitting a growth spurt or something. I’m starving.”

On the trip home from the airport, our conversation continued.

“How’s your grandfather doing?” Mom asked.

“And how was your time with him?” Dad chimed.

“He’s great! I had a wonderful time. We spent a lot of time in the park, just talking. He can talk for hours about anything.”

“That he can,” agreed Mom.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to let him know you made it OK?” Dad reminded.

“Oh, yeah, right. I was going to call him,” I said, pulling out my phone.

“You have your own phone?” asked Dad.

“We figured he’d need a cell phone to get in touch with Miss Amanda or me in case of another emergency,” Mom interjected.

“I still can’t get over the fact that he’s conversing like a diplomat!” Dad said.

After briefly confirming my arrival in Seattle to Grandpa, I talked with my parents about the weather, Grandpa’s knees, the time in the park, how I ended up eating tons of food, and the location known as Athol Junction, which made both of them titter. I still didn’t get it. What we didn’t talk about included how I could see the green in their auras as they questioned me.

When we got home, Mom made a nice dinner of steak, rice, and broccoli, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I ate substantially more than I’d ever eaten before.

“Growth spurt indeed!” commented Mom.

We sat around the table enjoying Mom’s homemade pie for dessert, and I decided to pose a question of my own.

“What can you tell me about genetics?” I asked, turning to Mom. The surprise evident, her aura vibrated with more green inside the purple.

“I could probably fill a book with what I know about genetics. After all, I do have a PhD,” she added with a smile. “What do you want to know?”

“How does it work?”

Dad chuckled.

Mom looked at me curiously, and asked, “What *has* your grandfather been telling you?”

“He said all of our cells are controlled by DNA, and that my DNA is half from you and half from Dad. He said you knew a lot about genetics and would be able to tell me a lot more.”

Mom’s aura turned muddled and came in waves again. “Of course your DNA is half from me and half from your father. We’re your parents.”

“Perhaps this is a discussion for another time. You just had a long flight, and you’ll be going back to school in a couple of days. How about we pick this up tomorrow night at dinner so you can get to bed?” Dad offered.

I felt much better after eating, but fatigue dragged at my consciousness. “OK, sounds good,” I agreed. I grabbed my bags and headed up to my room. “Good night!” I bellowed, as I fished out my toothbrush and got ready for bed.

* * * * *

We celebrated my birthday on September 1 with a cake festooned with twelve candles. My parents bought me a new computer. Dad spent several hours showing me how to use this fantastic present. He showed me some previously installed games, but I asked him to get me a chess program so that I could play against the computer. Not only did I love the present, but the birthday party easily surpassed any previous one, although admittedly, I was only cognizant during the last one with Miss Amanda.

After the party, we slipped into a routine very quickly, having dinner together but not talking about anything important, like genetics. During the long holiday weekend, Mom prepared me for the start of school on Tuesday, the day after Labor Day. I had my room assignment, and I recognized the number so I knew where to go. I double-checked the book list, making sure I’d read all of them during my time at Grandpa’s. On Tuesday, I woke up early, got ready, and said good-bye as I went to the bus to begin a new phase of life.

I hated riding the bus, but it was easier if I blocked out the demons, or auras, as I now knew them to be, from all of the other kids. My own thumped and buzzed nervously when I saw the huge bully in the back, joking with some friends. Fortunately, he didn't bother me and I stayed well away from him.

I made it to the assigned classroom and found my name on a desk, so I sat down there. A tall, blond-haired, skinny kid sat down right next to me. I chanced a look at his aura, which contained blue and white with a bit of brown and pink. It glowed warmly and smelled better than any other classmate I ever had, which relieved me greatly, given the assigned seating.

"I'm Allan," he mumbled.

"Hunter," I answered, equally quietly.

The teacher, also tall and skinny like Allan and me, glowed orange, gold, pink, and white. He twittered some, and I noticed that I did too. Although he didn't have blue, I found his warmth encouraging, and I also appreciated his dull mint smell, a variant of Miss Amanda and Principal Frechette, and I wondered if the minty smell implied a teacher, like the blue color meant healer. I also realized that the rancid odors produced by some of the kids in the autism center and several of the special-needs class probably forced me into the void as much as anything else, and I felt quite relieved at their absence among these people. As I opened my senses to the sights, sounds and smells all around, I began to get overwhelmed. I started freaking out, and quietly battled the nearly two dozen demons in order to regain control. I succeeded just as the teacher started speaking.

"Hello, everyone, I'm Mr. Lajoie, and this is sixth grade, HC section. I wanted to spend the first few minutes performing introductions, because even though most of you know each other, I've never met any of you, so this is my opportunity to get to know a little about you. I put you in assigned seats by alphabetical order, and that's the way it's going to stay for now. That will help me memorize your names and hopefully remember some of the things you say today. Let's start here, with you," he pointed to a girl in the front row on his left. "Please tell me, and the class, your name, how long you have been in the HC track, and one thing about your-

self, such as, ‘I like to play basketball with the other teachers on Sundays,’ which is mine, so you can’t use it.”

Everyone chuckled nervously.

Anne Altavista introduced herself, and said she liked listening to music. When prompted, she admitted that she’d been in the HC program since kindergarten. Her desk partner, Eric Bartlett, liked football and had also been in the program for six years, and he looked shaky, even without looking at his aura.

I watched as everyone in turn stood up, gave their names, and reported that they had been in HC for all six years, with a couple of exceptions. They all liked music, reading or sports. When it came around to our desk, Allan stood up first.

“I’m Allan Marks. I’ve been with everyone for six years as well. I like karate.”

Suddenly, it was my turn. I felt the blood rush to my face and a light red color invade my aura. I fought the additional green and dirty-laundry smell, suppressing everything as I rose to the challenge, literally and figuratively. “I’m Hunter Miller. This is my first year in HC. I like—” and I stopped, as I didn’t like anything. I stood there, foolishly, for what seemed like an hour, before Allan saved me.

“He likes quiet,” he said.

Everyone laughed. I smiled with relief. The yellow that I recognized as happiness permeated my aura so strongly that I found I didn’t want to suppress it. I sat down and listened to the rest of the kids introduce themselves, secure in the realization that I’d found a friend.





CHAPTER 18

Mr. Lajoie spent the bulk of the first day of class talking about his lesson plan. We would be studying math, language arts, social studies, science, performing arts, gym, and French, the latter taught by Monsieur Poirier, the French teacher for the entire school. I never knew the school even had a French teacher, because the special-ed curriculum didn't include a foreign language. We barely learned English.

It didn't take me long to learn the names of my classmates. In addition to Anne, Eric, Allan, and me, the class included Davis Blovat, Bob Deluca, Elaine Farrar, Mike Giovanni, Christy Johnson, Glenn King, Amy Mullens, Mickey Murphy, Nicole Oliver, Patty Owens, Brady Patrick, Alan Paul, Charlie Ramsfield, Don Schmelling, Piotr Wasciewicz (who went by PJ), and Kirsten Worthy. Of the group, only Anne and I had just started with HCC. The others had all been together as a class for a long time, most of them since kindergarten. They all knew each other well, and had long-established groups of friends.

Davis, Bob, Mickey, Don, and Allan Marks were one such group. I found this out at recess, when I walked outside with Allan and the other four surrounded us immediately.

"Hey, Mr. Quiet," Davis said, smiling at me. I didn't know how to answer, so I said nothing.

"True to his calling," commented Mickey.

Allan saved me again. "So, Hunter, this is Davis, Bob, Mickey, and Don. Brady usually hangs out with us too, but for some reason he's trying to talk to Nicole. See, look!" He pointed to where the collective of Nicole, Patty, Amy, and Christy had gathered. Brady was standing outside the circle, looking for an entrance, but finding none. We all turned to look, then all

laughed as Brady gave an outlandish shrug of his shoulders in failure. He came jogging back toward us.

“No dice?” said Don.

“It’s like a bunch of sharks over there. I can’t even get close enough to say hello,” Brady said.

“Brady has a crush on Nicole,” Davis reported.

“Do *not!*” Brady said, smacking him on the arm.

“We bet that he couldn’t talk her in to going to PlayDate with us,” Davis said.

Seeing my look of confusion, Allan said, “PlayDate is a laser tag place. We went there a bunch in the summer, and we were going to try to go again this weekend. You should come!”

“Yeah, it’s really cool,” said Bob. “Have you played laser tag before?”

“No,” I said.

“He *speaks!*” said Davis, Mickey and Don, together, and they began some type of dance waving their arms over me.

Yellow demons started to crack my defenses, and I felt myself drifting toward the void.

Allan shoved the guys back. “Give him some space, it’s his first day!” His blue and white colors helped me focus, allowing me to suppress the demons. I shook myself. Auras. Not demons. Nothing to fear. No need to seek the void. In fact, I felt . . . happy!

The conversation progressed to television programs up until the bell rang, motivating the group to head back to class. I’d never experienced a more enjoyable recess. I interacted with other kids for the entire break without getting pegged by dodge balls or having any behemoth call me names. Playing chess with Rob had been fun, but this—being part of a group of compatible people—left me awestruck. This must be how it felt to be normal.

Allan poked me out of reverie. Everyone else had already started inside, and we joined the pack, landing back at our assigned desk.

It didn’t take long for my classmates to recognize that I excelled at math. The first afternoon, we played a game where each table got a buzzer, and Mr. Lajoie posted a series of math problems on the screen. Whoever buzzed first had a chance to answer, scoring a point for your table if cor-

rect, or losing a point if incorrect. You had to answer within two seconds, or your table lost a point.

The first few problems were very easy, and Bob and Davis got an early lead, scoring three points. Patty Owens scored one point, and nobody else had any.

I asked Allan quietly, “So if we know the answer, just click the button?”

“Yeah, but you better know it, you don’t have any time to think. As soon as he calls on you, you have to say it. And you can’t say it before he calls on you, that doesn’t count—so someone else will get it right because you told them the answer.”

“Got it,” I said.

Then, the screen flashed: $39 \times 18 = ?$

I immediately pounded the buzzer, sending it flying. Half the class chuckled. Davis yelled, “New guy!” and they guffawed.

“Mr. Miller?” said Mr. Lajoie.

“Seven hundred two.”

There were a few murmurs. “Correct, a point for Miller/Marks.” He recorded it on the board.

The next problem came up: $1/9 \times 1/4 = ?$

Davis buzzed and replied correctly, “One thirty-sixth.”

“How does that work?” I asked.

“Fractions. You multiply the top and the bottom separately,” Allan answered.

“OK, thanks,” I said.

$133 \div 7 = ?$

I buzzed. “Nineteen,” I said, without thinking.

Davis buzzed.

“Um, Mr. Blovat?” Mr. Lajoie said, pausing momentarily.

“Nineteen,” he said triumphantly.

“Dude, you have to wait for him to call on you!” Allan reminded, adding a quick painless smack to the back of my head.

“Correct,” said Mr. Lajoie, “point for Blovat/Deluca.”

$496 + 739 = ?$

I buzzed, almost blurted, and then stopped. Mr. Lajoie smiled. “Mr. Miller?”

“One thousand two hundred thirty-five,” I said, barely able to restrain myself any longer.

“Correct. That’s two for Miller/Marks.”

$$1/16 \div 1/4 = ?$$

Davis buzzed, and when called on, answered “One sixty-fourth.”

“No, I’m sorry,” the teacher said, and I buzzed, along with Patty Owens, cutting him off. “That’s minus a point for Blovat/Deluca,” he continued.

“Miss Owens?”

“One-fourth,” she said, securing the point.

“Aw, you had that first,” griped Allan quietly.

“Just five more,” said Mr. Lajoie. The class squirmed as the tension rose.

Convert to a percentage: $3/8$.

Several people buzzed, and he gave it to Mike Giovanni, who answered, “Thirty-seven point five percent,” for the point. I didn’t know how to do that one.

$$16 \times 3 \times 5 = ?$$

I was on it first. “Two hundred forty,” I said, after being called upon. *A point!*

$$2 \frac{7}{8} + 4 \frac{3}{16} = ?$$

Patty buzzed first. “Six and . . . no . . . wait, seven and one-sixteenth.”

Bob buzzed in. Mr. Lajoie said, “I’m sorry, ‘six and no wait seven and one-sixteenth’ is not correct. Mr. Deluca?” There were more snickers from the class at the humorous rebuke.

Bob said, “Seven and one-sixteenth.”

Now Bob and Davis had five, Allan and I had three, and there were only two problems left. Some of these problems were completely new, but I learned quickly. I found myself on the edge of my seat, really wanting to win.

He showed the next problem.

$$15^2 = ?$$

I buzzed. He called on me. “Two hundred twenty-five,” I said.

“Point for Miller/Marks!”

“Nice one!” whispered Allan.

I beamed. It all came down to the last problem. Unfortunately, the best we could do was tie. Unless one of them missed the answer and we got it,

which I didn't expect.

"Last one, unless there's a tie," said Mr. Lajoie.

$15/0 = ?$

Nobody buzzed right away. Then, Davis went for it. "Fifteen," he said.

"No, I'm sorry, that's minus a point for your team. Anyone else?"

I really wanted to buzz, but I had no idea. I looked at Allan, who shrugged.

"The answer is, undefined. You cannot divide by zero. So despite that last negative, the winners are Mr. Blovat and Mr. Deluca, with four points. They receive the mathlete cup for today." He brought over a coffee cup and placed it between them on the desk. "A round of applause for the winners!"

The class gave a hollow series of claps, along with a few less congratulatory sounds.

"Now, on to those problems you didn't all know how to solve," he said, and he proceeded with a math lecture. By the time he finished, I knew how to do every single problem perfectly. I listened intently because Mr. Lajoie had a way of making everything interesting, mostly because of his realistic examples. Plus, the other kids were all paying attention and some were learning. The contrast between this and my prior classes couldn't have been greater. The day continued with other lessons, all well planned and enjoyable. The HCC program turned school around entirely for me. I paid attention instead of wasting away in the void. I knew it would be a great year.

Upon dismissal, we went to the parking lot to catch our buses. I walked out with Allan.

Some bullies remembered me from last year, and they called out to me as I passed. "Hey, retard, who's your new boyfriend?" They degenerated into ludicrous laughter.

"Nice friends you have," said Allan.

"Gee, thanks."

We walked along quietly, without making eye contact. Curiosity then struck Allan and he broke the silence. "Where did you come from?" he asked. "This is your first year in HCC, and you weren't in the fifth grade with us at all."

“No, I was in the, um, special-needs class last year. And I was in fourth grade. I got to take the test and they put me in sixth grade.”

“Wow!” he said, smiling a bit. “So that’s why some of those kids call you ‘retard.’ They probably think you’re still in special ed, not HCC.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, morosely.

“Well, when I was younger, a bunch of them used to gang up on me and make me give them my lunch money.”

“Really?” Nobody bothered him much now. “How did you stop them?”

He turned away but kept talking as we walked. “I don’t know if you were here then, but a couple of years ago, there was this professional counselor who came in to the school and talked to everyone about bullying. That was my fault. My dad is on the school board, and I told him some of the kids were picking on me. He got real mad and made a bunch of phone calls, and the result was a shrink coming here. The good news was that they stopped bothering me at school, but if I ever saw them outside of school, they called me all kinds of names and threatened to kick my ass. I stayed away from them most of the time, but they did hit me hard once. After that, my dad enrolled me in karate classes.”

“And did you beat them up?”

“No,” he laughed. “I’m not that good yet. But I’m getting there. I have a brown belt right now, and I can break wood with my hands.” He looked particularly happy about that last part. Since we were walking alone, I chanced a small glance at his aura and saw the expected yellow. I also felt a soothing touch and noticed astounding clarity in his blue.

“We have sparring and there are tournaments for brown belts and up,” he continued. “I’m going to one in three weeks. Do you want to go?”

“Sure,” I said. I thought karate would be cool to watch. He gave me all the details. I’d have to check with Mom, but I hoped she’d let me go.

When we made it to my bus, he called out, “See you tomorrow!” as he headed off to his.

I got home, and Mom was there, doing chores.

“Hi, Mom.”

She smiled.

“The kid who sits next to me in class, Allan, is going to a karate tournament in late September and asked me to go. Can I? Please?”

“It’s nice that you made a friend,” she said, as we talked more about Allan.

She’d never met Rob, although she knew I’d been going over to his house, and she knew his family moved, leaving me without any real friends. She understood the significance of making a new one on the first day. However, she didn’t like the idea of me traveling away from the safety of either home or the school, especially since the events of the summer. She said she’d think about it. Despite my whining, she didn’t budge, so I left to play chess on my computer until she finished making dinner.

Starvation and exhaustion kept me from arguing further about the karate tournament, and instead I wolfed down my food and went to bed early. As I drifted off to sleep, I smiled to myself at the prospects for tomorrow. It felt wonderful to be accepted by a group of kids, rather than teased or humiliated.

The next day we discussed *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L’Engle, one of the books from the summer reading list. Mr. Lajoie asked us to briefly reread the first chapter, and then describe the characters.

I identified with the main character, Meg, an outcast whose mother is a brilliant scientist. But without any reference to the character’s auras, I didn’t know how to describe them. I suspected Meg’s mother would have a blue aura with maybe some white or orange, but I struggled to imagine what else she might have. Just like people on TV, where I couldn’t see any auras, I didn’t have any frame of reference.

Mr. Lajoie called on Amy Mullens first.

“Meg is horrible-looking,” Amy answered, “with braces, glasses, and mousy brown hair that’s cut short.”

“Good,” he said. “That is certainly how she sees herself. What about Mrs. Murry? Glenn?”

“Here,” he said, pointing to a passage in his book. “Mrs. Murry has ‘flaming red hair, creamy skin, and violet eyes with long dark lashes,’ and she looks ‘even more spectacular in comparison to’ Amy’s—I mean Meg’s—‘outrageous plainness.’”

“Creep!” shot Amy.

“Enough,” said Mr. Lajoie. “What about Charles Wallace? Hunter?”

I was thunderstruck. After a few moments, I said, “Uh, he’s a male, so

he probably looks pink,” I said. A few people turned and stared.

“Uh, maybe, but how about what the author says. How would you describe him physically?”

Completely dumbfounded, I remained silent.

Allan, who’d saved me several times already, chimed in. “He’s very small, but very smart. He knows what Meg and his mother are thinking, and yet when he sits in a chair, his feet swing several feet off the floor. He has blond hair too.”

I breathed again, and shot Allan a grateful look.

“Very good. How about Mrs. Whatsit? Christy?”

“She has a blue and green paisley scarf, with a red and yellow flowered print, a red and black bandanna, and grayish hair that is tied into a knot. She has bright eyes, and she describes her nose as a soft blob, and her mouth as a puckered apple.”

I never thought about someone’s hair color—or skin color, eyes, glasses, or braces. The type or color of someone’s outfit didn’t register either. The basic knowledge gap between others and myself could be better described as a chasm. I fervently paid attention to every moment of class from that moment onward. In addition to honing my math, science, and history skills, originally developed by Miss Amanda and Miss Barrett, I began learning how normal people thought. I couldn’t believe the difference. Normal people were weird.

French class proved even more challenging. The rest of the class spoke French every day for five years, and it showed. Amy and Glenn were nearly fluent. As for me, after tripping through “*Je m’appelle* Hunter,” I spent the rest of my time in French class saying “*comment dit-on*” for everything. But if I said “how do you say . . .” Monsieur Poirier cut me off immediately with “*En français s’il vous plaît!*” His dramatic way of accentuating every pronunciation annoyed me at first, until I realized the benefit. His slurring crescendos stuck in my brain.

We also had music class, where I discovered that Elaine, Nicole, and Alan (the other Alan) were all gifted vocalists. I refused to open my mouth to sing despite any manner of threats from the teacher, Mrs. Bastino. Nobody wanted to hear me croak, certainly. On the upside, the music students were dismissed during school hours to watch a show at the Par-

amount Theater. Allan told me that Elaine's mother, a board member of the Seattle Theater Group, donated a tidy sum to the school system, with the caveat that students could observe professional actors without cost. Even though I enjoyed classes, leaving during the school day created an infectious euphoria!

In addition to my regular studies, which progressed well, I had an entirely separate nonacademic agenda. I experimented primarily on myself. I knew my baseline blue aura, my healing color, changed with emotions or other stresses. Yellow represented happiness, and redness, especially with the spicy flavor, occurred along with injury. Green meant questions. Trying unsuccessfully to affect the red or blue sometimes created green, along with buzzing and generally unpleasant smells when the results were not what I expected.

I tried cutting myself with a knife. Always securely barricaded behind the locked doors of my bedroom, I initially made the cuts only superficial. I watched the red arise, both in the blood coming from the wound, and in the aura materializing from the previously pristine blue. I sliced, waited, and then sought the blue color. It came back perfectly, bringing with it uninjured skin. If I acted quickly, I could maintain all the blood inside the cut as I repaired it, which helped keep my room from looking like a horror movie, like Grandpa's living room after my earlier episode. Once the blood splashed onto my clothes or dripped on the floor, I couldn't assimilate it back inside my body. After receiving some questioning looks from my mother following the first few practice sessions, I made sure I left no blood stains while I trained.

The flip side of the experiment challenged me more vigorously. With just my mind, I tried to produce thin, straight lacerations, like the ones I made with a pocketknife. Although I created dozens of damaging wounds, and I broke another bone in my hand trying, I couldn't control the infliction of new wounds. To fix any wound, I forcibly replicated my original blue aura, and the skin or bone miraculously returned to its healthy baseline. But causing injury just didn't come naturally. After either type of session, I had to eat voraciously, and I remained skeletally thin. Marketing aura manipulation as a weight-loss plan crossed my mind; unfortunately, nobody else could do it.

After being at school for a few days, my comfort level with my classmates rose, and I avoided the nasty kids without much effort. My control of the auras expanded rapidly, to the point where I could suppress any signal at will. Armed with this new confidence, I started taking glimpses of auras, especially when isolated with one other person. My conclusion that all males had pink and no females had pink remained unchallenged, as every aura I saw complied with this rule.

Allan, my desk partner, spent most of the day right beside me, close enough to observe without interference. His solid, deep blue aura, contained threads of orange, brown, pink, and white, a sharp, sweet cinnamon flavor, and a temperature cooler than most. I wondered if I liked him because of the similarities that his aura shared with my own. Possibly, but I suspected that the biggest reason I liked him was the number of times he saved my butt.

Davis also had many of the same colors in his aura, but his had a warmer temperature, and more gold than blue. Bob's sharp, sweet, shimmering, and clean-smelling aura had a darker orange with some blue. Mickey's porous orange had even less blue, but he also had a cinnamon flavor like Allan. Sometimes he smelled minty or fishy too. Brady had a metallic warmth, sweet and shimmering, and a blue that somehow looked different from the others. Naturally, all the boys had some pink as well.

The rest of the class had blues, silvers, browns, whites, and golds that stayed with them all the time. In addition, the same types of reds, yellows, and greens I noticed in my own aura occurred in theirs when they were upset, happy, or confused, respectively. Nobody in my class had any purple at all. That baffled me, until I realized that I'd observed the strongest purple in my mother, Rob Friendly's mother, the woman at the park with the baby, and my first teacher, who was pregnant. Mothers must turn their aura to purple.

I confirmed that hypothesis easily at the mall. Once I accounted for babysitters and big sisters, I found every child's mother had purple. A few fathers did too. The theory didn't hold one hundred percent of the time, but it explained purple fairly accurately. Nonetheless, between the emotions, gender, and parenthood colors, and the baseline characteristics, my body of aura knowledge grew on a daily basis. I also learned from my

classmates that an individual was made up of more than just their insides—their external appearance also mattered. I endeavored to observe people's outward characteristics too, hoping to understand more about how they looked and behaved.

More than anything else, I wanted to learn how to affect others with my ability.

I had no practice partner, since Grandpa, the only person I trusted with the knowledge of my capability, lived three thousand miles away. At least, I had nobody upon whom I could practice with consent. Furthermore, the only reliable skill I possessed, healing, didn't apply to people who weren't injured. My conscience refused to let me try breaking bones or causing uncontrollable lacerations, although I considered it momentarily when I saw the bullies picking on the other kids. I needed to change aspects of the auras in a less-violent fashion. I decided to hold off on that type of practice until I went back to visit Grandpa. I didn't want to worry about being discovered and labeled a freak.

My social life improved dramatically. The guys from my class invited me to play laser tag, and I had a blast. We all went to PlayDate, a place designed for younger kids, but known also for hosting laser tag on Saturday nights. With all the people around, I spent the entire time blocking out auras. However, my efficacy at this improved to the point similar to blocking pain; I could do it without thinking. Every once in a while I'd relax a little, allowing colors and smells to invade my senses, but for the most part, I achieved relative normalcy with regards to the auras. I enjoyed the games without having to worry about being overwhelmed or going to the void. I lacked necessary skills for laser tag, including the ability to shoot, so I mostly hid from the others. I still enjoyed being part of the group without being teased or abused.

Allan, in addition to being a laser tag expert, excelled at karate. With three years of experience and a brown belt, one step away from black, he took great pride in his accomplishments. His team competed at a major tournament each year, and he kept asking me if I could attend, a request I continually passed on to my mother. Mom finally agreed to let me watch, but only if she and Dad came along. Mrs. Marks told Mom the details, and we planned to drive up separately so we didn't interfere with Allan's pre-event ritual.

On the day of the tournament, we woke early and drove along Route 5 to Everett. As we approached, I saw the arena rising from the ground like a huge tortoise. Admittedly I had no idea what to expect, but this venue dwarfed anything I'd ever seen, with thousands of people milling about even before the competition began. I had no choice but to suppress the auras or I would've been easily overwhelmed. Although I wavered briefly, weeks of practice kicked in, and I never once slipped into the void.

The tournament included three separate categories. *Katas*, or forms, consisted of fighters dancing around, performing a variety of moves against nobody—apparently mimicking combat with multiple opponents simultaneously. Sparring, Allan's event, involved two fighters attempting to accumulate points through certain legal strikes, the winner being the first to score three times. During weapons fighting, as the name implied, competitors displayed their competence with swords, knives, or other archaic implements of destruction.

Allan competed late in the afternoon with other kids his age and ability, so we had time to enjoy the show from the stands.

I watched the first parts of the tournament with true amazement. The forms started with young children throwing a few punches and blocks. Only imagining another opponent kept it from looking foolish. The younger kids punched and kicked at thin air. The older kids' *katas* involved flying around, swinging every part of their bodies in extremely complex patterns. What at first seemed a silly exercise blossomed into an impressive feat of athleticism and control.

Finally, it came time for the sparring rounds. Matches mirrored conventional fighting, except the goal, scoring points, didn't necessarily entail hurting or disabling the opponent. Individuals competed against others of their own age, belt, and weight class. Since Allan wore a brown belt, he paired with other ten- to twelve-year-old brown belts.

They were in the ring for three points per round. If either pugilist executed a solid enough punch or kick in the scoring zone (although not too forceful, for safety reasons), they received one point. The first to achieve three points won the round, with single elimination until only four competitors remained. The initial rounds included less experienced fighters with lower-level belts, and also younger children with belts all the way up

to black. Everything from skinny little girls to hulking young men competed in the sparring, and many of them were previously victorious in the *kata* rounds. Despite some fierce battles, the athletes all shook hands and demonstrated respect for each other, the referees, and, if they were members of a team, their teammates.

It took a long while for Allan's matches to begin. Anxiety and excitement washed over our small group of supporters—including me, both sets of our parents, and several of Allan's teammates—as the adrenaline rush from watching the earlier rounds combined with anticipation. Finally, he emerged onto the canvas floor, looking antsy but confident.

His first pairing against a shorter, stockier, brown-belted boy took place on the far side of the stadium, but we were able to look up on the main board where each match took place. The other boy adorned his uniform with several patches and markings, possibly from his own team. He, like Allan, wore headgear and pads on his feet and hands to mitigate the damage. As they approached the center of the ring, the referee reminded them about legal and illegal blows, and warned that dangerous strikes wouldn't be tolerated. Within thirty seconds, Allan struck twice, scoring on kicks to the chest. The other boy tried to land a strike, and the moment he moved, Allan responded with a sharp thrust of his foot. Behind two to zero and facing elimination, the stout boy unleashed a wild barrage of strikes, none of which connected. After his last attempted spin kick, he overbalanced and landed with his body awkwardly exposed. Allan finished the match with an easy punch in the scoring zone, moving on to the next round. I cheered for him like he won the medal round of the Olympic games. Several others clapped loudly, and commented about Allan's talent, saying they wanted to watch him fight again.

While waiting for the next match, we surveyed the competition. Among those still active, I thought Allan had an edge, because of his speed and quickness. Two fights ended faster than Allan's, though, which didn't bode well.

After all first-round bouts were over, officials posted the second-round matches and their locations. Our growing crew mobbed the next make-shift ring, awaiting our champion's second match. My parents watched as intently as I did. I saw Dad moving almost imperceptibly along with

some of the fighters as they battled. Perhaps the old professor viewed some karate movies as a kid. Even Mom bobbed and weaved slightly as she watched. I was relieved that they were interested in the fights and didn't spend much time fawning over me. I also felt confident I had the demons well in control, so I didn't fear any relapse of falling into the void.

Allan had no trouble at all with his first opponent; he hardly broke a sweat. In the second round, the action heated up. Both fighters dished out several strikes with varying body parts, most of which were dodged or blocked. Allan got on the board first with a combination. He feigned a kick to the head, and upon clearing the other boy, he rapidly brought his foot down onto his exposed chest in an axe-like fashion. We yelled our support and praise. The other boy, tall and thin like Allan, tried the same maneuver back, but Allan waited until the combo ended and struck with a fist to the abdomen. Our fan section leapt to our feet, screaming our appreciation and encouragement. It looked like Allan would cruise to victory, but the other kid caught him with a move I'd never seen. He kicked with his right leg, which Allan met with a forearm block, but then instead of waiting for his right leg to hit the ground, he jumped with his left leg, catching Allan in the head, and falling in the process. After nodding and conceding a well-earned point, Allan released a battery of strikes, ultimately connecting with a back fist after a spin kick, winning the match three to one.

The second-round winners moved on to the final four, all of whom won awards. The last two matches decided who won the largest trophy, and the title of best in class. In the third round, Allan continued to fight with the same overall strategy. He dodged away from all his opponents' strikes, and smoothly used counterattacks to try to score his points. Except for the last point of the second round, he rarely instigated the combat, choosing instead to respond to his opponents' jabs. I thought that strange, because in chess, you needed to attack to win. Sitting back and waiting inevitably equated to losing. However, Allan played defense brilliantly, and with three simple kicks punctuating flurries of his opponents' easily blocked fists, elbows, knees, and feet, he won three to zero. We screamed wildly again as the referee announced that Allan advanced to the championship match.

Instead of having the final two bouts simultaneously, they held the match for third place first. Allan's most-recent opponent lost, taking fourth overall. Then they announced the culminating pair with considerable fanfare. Allan Marks, the challenger, and two-time Z-Ultimate Champion Derek Seavey, from Fall River.

Derek, much bulkier than Allan, displayed his rippling muscles with a grandiose gesture before the match. Allan's tall and gangly frame looked like a crane standing over his toned but squat opponent. Even without seeing his aura, I could feel something I didn't like. I thought about checking anyway, but dismissed the idea, after noting the vast sea of aura-wielding souls who would certainly force me into the void if I let them.

When the fight started, my dislike grew. Derek went after Allan with a vengeance. He used illegal strikes deliberately, including kicking Allan in the legs. The referee stopped the contest and chastised the cheater for the low blow. Derek put his full strength into every swing, as though trying to hurt Allan rather than win the match. Derek wielded his powerful fists like miniature wrecking balls, but when he struck with too much force, instead of scoring, the referee warned him. Undeterred, he blasted Allan in the headgear, sending Allan staggering back.

"Too much force!" yelled the referee. "Point to Marks!"

Allan only achieved that single point. In addition to being very strong, the squat boy oozed talent. Allan's counter-strike technique failed miserably, and he lost three to one. Allan tried to hide his disappointment, and we all complimented him on his second-place finish, which, at this regional tournament, represented a major accomplishment. The awards ceremony commenced shortly after the last fight. When Allan received his trophy, his parents, teammates, and I vociferously expressed our approval. We tried not to groan too loudly when Derek collected the largest trophy. Afterward, the top four brown belts posed with their awards for photos on a raised platform. The third- and fourth-place boys shook hands, and smiled and joked with Allan, but the winner waggled his trophy at the others and went off by himself. It hit me as he trotted away: he reminded me of Tommy Lachance.

On the way home, the six of us stopped at a fast-food restaurant for dinner, as it was very late in the day.

Over chicken fingers and french fries, we talked about the tournament, school, and friendship.

“Thank you so much for inviting us,” Mom said.

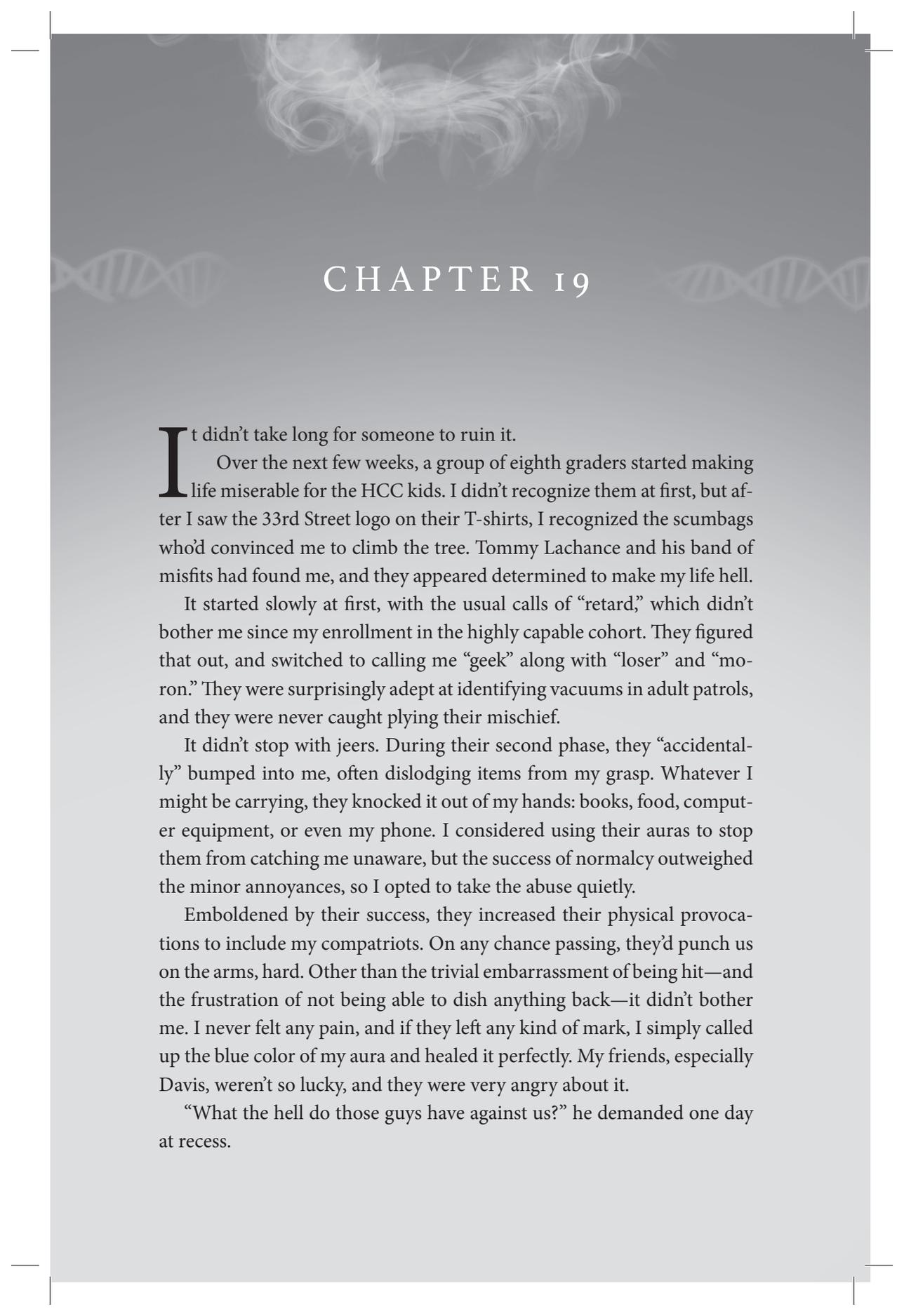
“It was our pleasure! We have heard so much about Hunter, and it was so nice to finally get us all together,” Mrs. Marks said.

“Allan is a wonderful young man and an amazing martial artist!” Mom said.

“And Hunter is such a bright and supportive friend. We’re so glad that the two of them ended up as desk partners.”

Although I knew my aura had probably turned yellow at the compliment, I continued to suppress it, along with the others. Keeping the auras away made me feel like a regular person. A happy, normal person with friends.

Life was good.



CHAPTER 19

It didn't take long for someone to ruin it.

Over the next few weeks, a group of eighth graders started making life miserable for the HCC kids. I didn't recognize them at first, but after I saw the 33rd Street logo on their T-shirts, I recognized the scumbags who'd convinced me to climb the tree. Tommy Lachance and his band of misfits had found me, and they appeared determined to make my life hell.

It started slowly at first, with the usual calls of "retard," which didn't bother me since my enrollment in the highly capable cohort. They figured that out, and switched to calling me "geek" along with "loser" and "moron." They were surprisingly adept at identifying vacuums in adult patrols, and they were never caught plying their mischief.

It didn't stop with jeers. During their second phase, they "accidentally" bumped into me, often dislodging items from my grasp. Whatever I might be carrying, they knocked it out of my hands: books, food, computer equipment, or even my phone. I considered using their auras to stop them from catching me unaware, but the success of normalcy outweighed the minor annoyances, so I opted to take the abuse quietly.

Emboldened by their success, they increased their physical provocations to include my compatriots. On any chance passing, they'd punch us on the arms, hard. Other than the trivial embarrassment of being hit—and the frustration of not being able to dish anything back—it didn't bother me. I never felt any pain, and if they left any kind of mark, I simply called up the blue color of my aura and healed it perfectly. My friends, especially Davis, weren't so lucky, and they were very angry about it.

"What the hell do those guys have against us?" he demanded one day at recess.

I told him the tale about climbing the tree, breaking my leg, and being banished to my grandfather's house for the summer.

"Holy cow," said Allan, who hadn't heard the story from me before. "The way I heard it, you begged to let them join their gang. Every day, you'd go up to them and ask if you could be part of the group, and they kept laughing and saying no, until you told them you'd do *anything*. They finally agreed to let you in if you climbed the tree, and you flunked."

"That's crap! I'd never heard of them," I protested. "My babysitter made me go out for a walk, and they showed up and told me I'd be allowed in if I passed the initiation rite."

"Yeah, we know," said Don, trying to calm me down. He'd taken a punch to the chest earlier and he rubbed the sore area.

"What can we *do* about it, though? Those guys are huge, especially Trigger. I would *not* want to mess with him," said Mickey.

"I sure wouldn't want to face him in the ring," said Allan, whom we all knew to be one of the best fighters around.

"It wouldn't be just him, either. We'd have to take all four of them at once," said Davis.

We tried telling Mr. Lajoie, who in turn told Principal Frechette, but she didn't do anything other than talk to the hoodlums. The next day, we all got a big dose of "Tattletales!" from the four of them, which continued into the next week. At least they stopped hitting us. However, they did continue to knock books out of our hands, hit us with spit wads at recess, and cough in our food at lunch. Their expertise at not getting caught would have been very impressive, had it not been so infuriating.

We weren't alone. Plenty of other kids feared and hated the 33rd Street Gang, as they called themselves. Stories leaked about them stealing lunch money from younger kids, pushing weaker students to the ground at recess, and threatening anyone who questioned their authority. Those who tried to stand up to them ended up absent for several days after experiencing some freak mishap outside of school. I couldn't believe the teachers didn't do anything, but their only response—dialogue—led nowhere. The administration could never prove any wrongdoing, because everyone, including us, feared the consequences of speaking out.

I asked Allan about karate.

“When I started, the first lesson we learned was never to use karate outside the dojo,” he said.

“That doesn’t make any sense. What’s the point of being able to break boards if you can’t break heads?”

“With great power comes great responsibility,” he said.

“Where did you hear that?”

“I think it’s from a TV commercial for beer. I guess we’re supposed to keep ourselves under control, otherwise we’ll get in trouble. Sometimes, though, I just want to pound them.”

I wanted to pound them too, but the last time I tried that, I wound up unconscious in the emergency room. Mom would totally freak if that happened again.

I wondered if my dad would be able to give any advice. Unfortunately, he’d been coming home later and later every day, apparently involved in some new research project at the university, and I didn’t have much of a chance to talk with him. On the weekend after a particularly upsetting Friday, during which Tommy knocked me down at recess and didn’t get caught, I sought my father’s counsel.

“Hey, Dad.”

“What is it, Hunter?”

“There are these kids at school that keep doing stuff to me and my friends, and no matter what we do, they don’t get in trouble and they don’t stop. What can we do to make them stop?”

At home alone, I didn’t bother suppressing the auras. His sparked a vibrating red color over his blue, pink, and gold.

“Do you know the kids doing it?”

“Yeah, it’s the same ones who tricked me into breaking my leg in the summer. What would you do?”

His aura flashed black and then produced waves. “Well, as long as you aren’t getting hurt, I don’t suppose there is much you can do. I don’t want you getting in fights.”

The black color frightened me a little. The useless advice only angered me more. I wished I could see Grandpa. I didn’t feel right asking him about this on the phone. The absence of proper counsel left me to solve this problem on my own.

Despite my overriding goal of normalcy, I realized the only effective way to fight back would involve using my talent against the bullies. Good idea, but I didn't even know how it worked. I could suppress an aura, but exactly *how* remained a mystery. I didn't feel pain, but again, I didn't know the mechanism by which I eliminated it. During off hours, I immersed myself in more experimentation. I tried various painful things, including smashing my finger with a hammer, cutting or stabbing myself in different ways, and punching a brick wall. I made sure to pay attention to my own aura the whole time, so I could appreciate the different effects on my blue coloring. Even so, I still couldn't reproduce the results.

The only accurate control I achieved pertained to the void. I perfected the ability to lose hours at a time with little to no effort, much like my natural pain avoidance. A useful skill in my old life, this talent had little relevance in my current affairs. Running away mentally didn't win battles.

The tormenting got worse into the winter months, with daily abuse heaped upon at least one of us.

"What are we gonna do?" Mickey said, after he lost his entire lunch tray to Trigger's beefy mitts.

"I'm sorry, guys. It's all my fault," I said. "They hate me the most for some reason, and I think they attack you just to hurt me."

"We could stop hanging out with you," said Allan. The words stung me so much I lost control of my suppression. His aura lashed in waves. When he saw my facial expression, he waved his hands. "No, man, I was just kidding," and the waves all stopped.

"Maybe that isn't such a bad idea," said Mickey. I noticed that his aura didn't show any evidence of waves.

"Come on, guys, we need to stick together," Allan said, seeing the others shaking their heads in agreement.

"All right," they agreed.

Nonetheless, they made a conscious effort to sit at a different table from Allan and me during recess and lunch, and they spent more time trying to assimilate into the group of girls. Oddly enough, it worked. The bullies stopped pestering them, instead focusing their brutality on me.

The last weekend before Christmas break, they appeared at my house, somehow picking the day when neither of my parents were home. I re-

trieved the mail from our mailbox, and sorted through it, excited to find a package Grandpa sent. As I walked back up the driveway, the four of them materialized right behind me.

“What do we have here?” Tommy said.

“Looks like a loser geek with no friends,” said Fat Louie.

“Just go away,” I said. “There’s nobody here for you guys to impress, and I don’t have any lunch money or anything for you.”

“Yeah, but you keep telling Mrs. Frechette about us,” said Trigger. “We told you not to do that again or something bad would happen. And here’s what it is.”

His huge fist crashed into my cheek, sending me flying backward and into the dirt next to the driveway. The mail littered the lawn like white leaves after a windstorm, and the package from Grandpa made a thumping sound as it landed.

“Did that *hurt*?” mocked Tommy.

Not really. But saying that or doing anything at all would only provoke more beating, so I just sat there.

“Oh, is he going to cry?” taunted Fat Louie.

“If you talk to the principal, or any of the teachers, we’ll make you regret it!” said Tommy.

They walked away, laughing as Tommy retold the story for the others, as if they hadn’t been right there seeing the whole event take place.

I healed my face easily. Replacing the blue color to any portion of my injured aura no longer took any time or effort, thanks to hours of intense practice. Unfortunately, my phone, which I had in my back pocket, didn’t fare as well. It was smashed beyond repair, but at least I could fix myself. I just wished my ability could help *stop* the attacks before they started. But even with my talent, I felt defenseless against those brutes.

At least, that’s what I thought until one day, on the bus ride in to school, I made a mistake. I spent so much time and effort avoiding Tommy and his lunatic friends that I forgot about Mark Gilbert, the huge seventh grader who harassed me on the first day of school. Unfortunately, he hadn’t forgotten about me. As I walked by him toward an open seat in the back, he tripped me, sending me flying toward the muddy floor.

Off balance, I dropped my books and lunch, and hit my head hard on the metal seat frame in my path.

I stood up quickly, but felt lightheaded and in a lot of pain. I collapsed into an occupied seat, my head landing in the lap of a skinny boy with a woody odor and a thin brown aura adorned with the usual male pink. The kid wiggled underneath me and yelled, “Hey, stop bleeding on me!”

Sure enough, blood poured from a cut to my head, and I felt the spicy red pain and the warm ooze drip down my face. The pain persisted for much longer than usual. As I started to stand, the world began to spin, and I nearly fell back down, landing again on the woody-smelling kid, who now buzzed red with irritation. Other auras blasted me as I slowly regained my bearings. I registered Mark’s husky voice making some type of comment about my clumsiness, and the skinny kid informing me of the cost of the shirt I needed to replace. He finally succeeded in shoving me off onto the floor, and searing red pain buffeted me from the wound on my head.

The moment I felt fully conscious again, the pain went away. I reached up and touched my forehead, feeling fresh blood continue to drain, so I reflexively healed the cut completely. When I felt the sticky blood all over my head, clothes, and floor, I realized I’d have to explain it somehow. I pictured the sensation of redness and spicy pain from moments before, toned down considerably, and focused on my forehead. Because it had only been a few seconds and the sensation remained fresh in my mind, I accomplished my task of opening the cut up a tiny sliver, rather than recreating the huge laceration. Surprisingly, I felt two small pink auras pulling at my arms, helping me to my feet.

“Are you OK?” the one with red hair asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, although *furios* described me better than *fine*. From the moment I felt the pain, I’d been unable to block the auras, which were disorienting. I sought out Mark’s aura, identified by the pungent black-red, pink, and slightly golden color. Despite the pink, white, blue, orange, and green adjacent to my own vibrating redness, I located Mark. I focused on his base colors, and poked them with a hot, acidic redness similar to what I endured moments before. He cried out in pain, and a green wave encompassed him as the spicy bitterness added a dank and

sweaty smell to his black-red and gold. Satisfied, I accepted my book bag from one of the helpful young boys and sat down.

By the time we got to school, I realized exactly what had happened. Just like with Grandpa over the summer, I rearranged someone else's aura. This time, rather than heal, I'd used my capacity to inflict pain. I chanced another look at Mark's aura before exiting the bus, and I didn't see any residual red spiciness. The pain I'd given him had resolved completely, and I didn't have to injure him in any way to make it happen.

I chuckled to myself. This might level the playing field.

After I got to our classroom, oblivious to the stares my bloody shirt invited, I told Allan about the event on the bus. He looked at my head.

"You're lucky you just got this tiny cut. It sounds like you hit pretty hard. Plus there's blood everywhere. Are you sure this is the only cut you have?"

I hesitated. I wanted to tell him what I could do, but I knew I couldn't tell anyone, even him.

"Yeah, lucky. But I'd really like to get back at those bullies."

"I thought you said it was just Gilbert."

"I mean, all the bullies."

"You mean like the 33rd Street Gang?"

"Yeah, I want to take them down."

"You know we have no chance at that, right?" Allan scoffed.

"Give me some time. I think there might be a way." The kernel of an idea grasped at my subconsciousness.

Mr. Lajoie came in, and seeing my shirt, approached our table.

"Hey, Muhammed Ali, what happened to your face?"

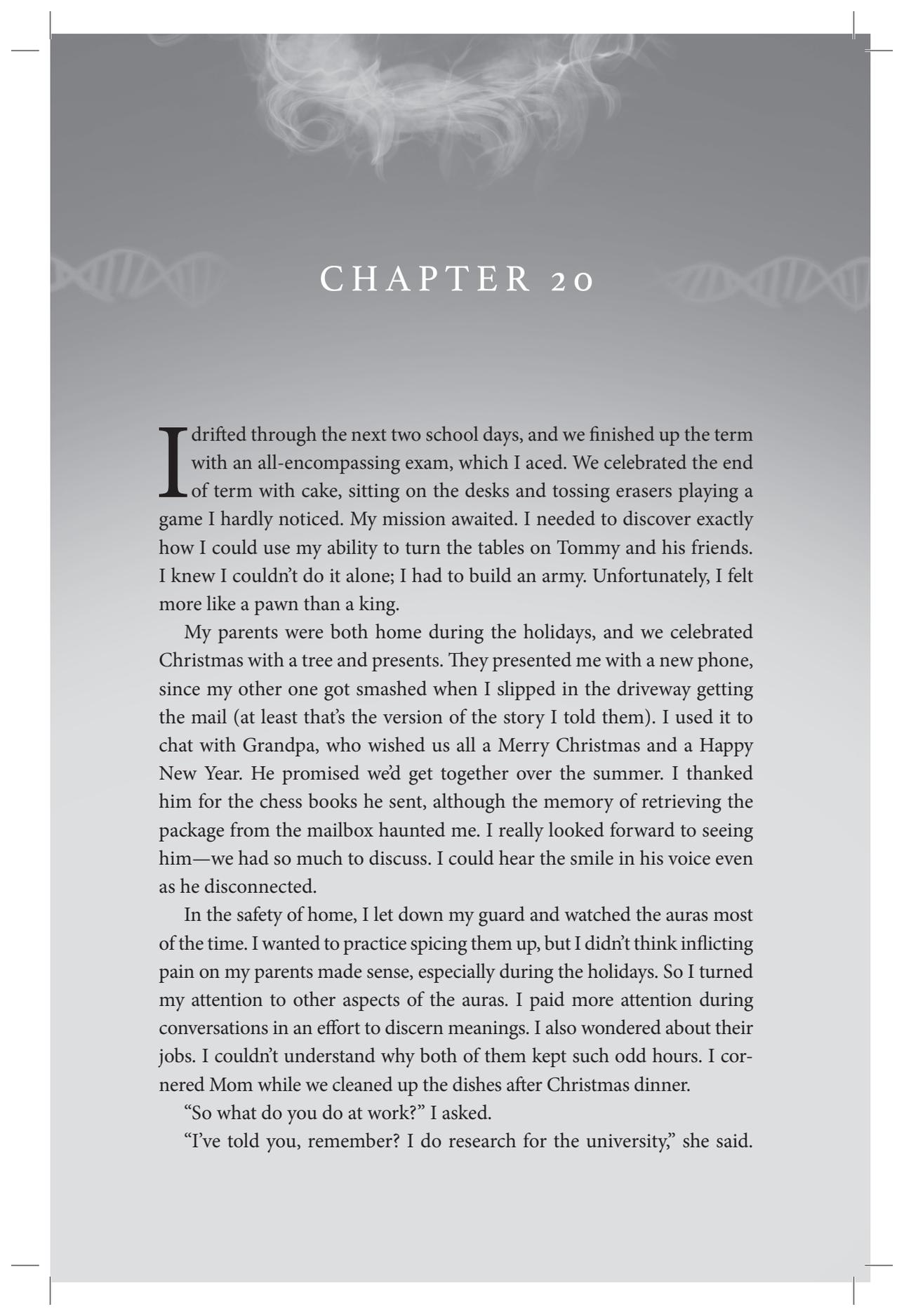
Knowing the futility of telling the truth, I said, "I fell and cut my head on the bus."

He rifled through his bag, pulled out a clean T-shirt, and tossed it to me. Then he gave me the bathroom pass and said, "You might want to go clean up."

Since classes had started, the hallways were empty. I went to the bathroom, washed off the blood, changed my clothes, and returned to a lecture on grammar. Unfortunately, I couldn't focus, having lost all interest in schoolwork.

THE SIGHT *of* DEMONS

Instead, I considered creating a new order in this school. I sensed a storm brewing inside me, and I needed to harness the lightning to unleash my inner rage. Tommy, Mark, and all the other bullies would soon feel my wrath.

The page features a dark grey background with decorative elements. At the top, there are wispy, smoke-like patterns in a lighter shade. Below these, two faint DNA double helix structures are positioned on either side of the chapter title. The chapter title, 'CHAPTER 20', is centered in a white, serif font.

CHAPTER 20

I drifted through the next two school days, and we finished up the term with an all-encompassing exam, which I aced. We celebrated the end of term with cake, sitting on the desks and tossing erasers playing a game I hardly noticed. My mission awaited. I needed to discover exactly how I could use my ability to turn the tables on Tommy and his friends. I knew I couldn't do it alone; I had to build an army. Unfortunately, I felt more like a pawn than a king.

My parents were both home during the holidays, and we celebrated Christmas with a tree and presents. They presented me with a new phone, since my other one got smashed when I slipped in the driveway getting the mail (at least that's the version of the story I told them). I used it to chat with Grandpa, who wished us all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. He promised we'd get together over the summer. I thanked him for the chess books he sent, although the memory of retrieving the package from the mailbox haunted me. I really looked forward to seeing him—we had so much to discuss. I could hear the smile in his voice even as he disconnected.

In the safety of home, I let down my guard and watched the auras most of the time. I wanted to practice spicing them up, but I didn't think inflicting pain on my parents made sense, especially during the holidays. So I turned my attention to other aspects of the auras. I paid more attention during conversations in an effort to discern meanings. I also wondered about their jobs. I couldn't understand why both of them kept such odd hours. I cornered Mom while we cleaned up the dishes after Christmas dinner.

"So what do you do at work?" I asked.

"I've told you, remember? I do research for the university," she said.

Her aura pulsed in waves the way it tended to when we discussed her employment.

“Yeah, but what kind of research? And why do you come home so late all the time?”

She paused, and her aura pulsed before she even started speaking. “I work on genetics. We talked about this before. You know, genes and chromosomes. DNA. Sometimes, when we get involved in a particular project, the experiments take longer. They’re often the kinds of experiments that you can’t leave halfway through, so I have to stay until they’re complete.”

She said a lot of words, but essentially avoided the questions. “What kind of experiments do you do?” I asked. I noticed my own aura showing green, which supported my belief that asking questions, or curiosity in general, resulted in that color change.

Reddish strands now flowed from Mom’s aura, but not spicy red, so she didn’t feel pain. Anger? The redness transposed back to purple, but waves developed in her aura as she spoke.

“It’s all pretty complicated. Maybe in a few years I can explain it all to you.”

I let it go. She wasn’t going to tell me about her work in genetics at the university, or why it took her away for so much of the time.

I tried to catch Dad with a similar question. “Tell me about your work,” I invited.

“Oh, you wouldn’t want to hear about sociology, it’s all pretty boring,” he said. “Why don’t you let me show you some of the features of your new phone?”

His blue and gold had waves in it as well, and I concluded that waves had something to do with work. I would have to try that out on my teacher, Mr. Lajoie. If the waves represented employment, then a question to him about teaching should produce the same response.

I dreaded the bus ride on the first day back after the holiday break, but Gilbert didn’t bother me. Perhaps he remembered the odd pain he received after our last confrontation, and he thought twice about showing me down again. I hoped so. I hustled from the parking lot into the building before Tommy or his cronies arrived. Mr. Lajoie stood behind his desk, welcoming the steady stream of students as we arrived.

“Hello, Hunter,” he said to me, as I crossed between his desk and mine.

“Hi, Mr. Lajoie. Do you like teaching?” I said.

He laughed. “Of course. Why do you ask?”

I noticed only yellow and green, no waves. He did like teaching, and he asked me a question back. That made perfect sense, but my deduction about waves must be wrong.

“I was just curious,” I said. “I thought I might want to be a teacher someday,” I added. Seeking waves in Mr. Lajoie’s aura, I shocked myself by discovering them instead in my own blue after this patently false statement.

“Oh yeah?” he said. “I bet you’d be great.”

When I talked about a career, I had waves, but when he talked about his career, he didn’t have waves. Hmmmm. One more question ought to confirm this.

“Either that, or maybe a doctor,” I said, expecting more waves. None came.

Mr. Lajoie laughed softly. “You’d make an excellent doctor, Hunter. And the pay is probably a lot better. Either way, you’d get to work with people!”

Aghast, I stood for a few moments with my mouth hanging open like an ape waiting for a banana. Finally recovering, I forced myself to smile and say, “Thanks, Mr. Lajoie.”

Allan already occupied his usual seat, and as I moved to sit down, he asked, “What was that all about?”

“Just trying to figure something out.”

We started the day with another mathlete competition. Allan and I had won the mathlete cup six times in a row, so all thoughts about auras were relegated to the background while I concentrated on defending our title. I knew the answer to every problem that appeared on the screen virtually instantaneously, and other students started buzzing immediately—realizing that if they didn’t, they’d never get an opportunity to answer. Even so, we easily won our seventh consecutive coffee cup trophy, much to the chagrin of Davis and Bob, the former champions who now reluctantly acquiesced that we were the best. They didn’t like it, but they respected us for it.

I hoped to use that respect to get back at the bullies. I needed help, and Davis and Bob would be great allies since both of them were very bright

and creative. Because of the physical abuse the gang dished out, Davis and Bob still shied away from Allan and me, the main targets of the gang's dubious attentions. I believed we just had to overcome their fears. If we could get Davis and Bob, many of the other boys in the class would join in.

I broached the subject with Allan. "If we're going to stand up to the bullies, we need help. We need Davis and Bob on board."

"Yeah, that's gonna happen," he said. I had relaxed my hold on the auras enough to see waves come through from him.

"What?" I said, referring in my mind to his aura, not his commentary.

"There's no way those guys are gonna help us with that. They're scared silly!" No waves.

I was dumbfounded. *The waves. Why hadn't I noticed before?* "Tell me I have three heads," I said.

"What? Why?"

"Just humor me."

"OK, you have three heads."

Waves. "Now tell me I have two heads."

Allan shook his head at me. "OK, you have two heads."

Waves again. "Now tell me I have one head."

"You have one heaaaaaad," he said, with his voice rising on the word *one* and falling and holding on the word *head*. His entire body gyrated and he wagged his arms as though was attempting to reason with an insane person.

No waves.

Of course. The waves were lies. When I told Mr. Lajoie I wanted to be a teacher, a lie, I emitted waves. When I said I wanted to be a doctor, the truth, no waves. It was so obvious I didn't understand how I hadn't seen it before. Perhaps because I didn't want to. Everything my parents told me about their jobs . . . all lies?

That didn't make any sense. They got up every day and went to the university to work, or did they? Actually, it did make sense. Why did a professor of sociology—essentially a teacher for older kids who covered specialized topics—leave for weeks or months at a time at the drop of a hat? What research project could be so critical that Mom couldn't make it home before midnight for weeks in a row? Professors taught students,

and the students went home at the end of the day. Sure, they might need time to make up new lesson plans, but why did Mom need to stay *so* late? And why wouldn't they tell me anything meaningful about what they did?

They're lying, that's why.

I stewed in my own juices, contemplating all the lies they'd told me. They erupted waves so frequently, nearly every important conversation I'd ever had with them contained some type of falsehood.

And then it hit me like a wrecking ball: *Of course your DNA is half from your father and half from me, we're your parents*, Mom had said.

And she was lying.

* * * * *

I woke in an ambulance, attached to a catheter that dripped cold fluid into a vein in my arm.

Fritzcloves! Not only had I just realized my parents were not my parents, but I must have gone into the void. So much for mastery. And I suppose in HCC you couldn't just gaze off into oblivion, unlike my prior classes, or else they called 911. And now here I was—*with Phil?*

I opened my eyes. "Oh. Hi, Phil."

"He awakens!" Phil the paramedic said.

"Yeah, sorry. I just found out some bad news and passed out, I guess. I used to be autistic." I noticed with some chagrin that I produced waves. I angrily suppressed the auras.

"Well, you look to be in much better shape than the last time we brought you in. Nothing is mangled, and you aren't bleeding. Your blood pressure and pulse are normal, your breathing and oxygen saturation are fine, and we did this EKG to look at your heart, which is good too. You probably just vagalled."

"Vagalled?" I asked. That didn't even sound like a word.

"Oh, yeah, when you see a dead person or something your body sort of panics, and you pass out. It happens because of the vagus nerve. It's called vasovagal syncope. Oh, here we are."

We pulled up into the familiar ambulance bay at the UW emergency department, and they proceeded to extract me from the ambulance and

bounce me through the entrance into one of the rooms.

I needed some time to compose myself. Mom would probably be there soon, if she wasn't already, and I had to get to the bottom of this. I thought about Mom's aura, a warm, sweet purple. A wonderful, soft purple that I *knew* meant motherhood. I found it unfathomable to consider that she might *not* be my mother. The only logical conclusion: Dad wasn't my father. Well, not my birth father anyway. That happened all the time, I rationalized. I didn't know their history, perhaps she became pregnant before they were married. I was overreacting. They probably didn't tell me because they didn't want to confuse me. Dad had raised me like a son. Even if fifty percent of my DNA didn't come from Dad, I thought of him as my father. Overreaction indeed—I sent myself to the emergency room.

I thought about Dad's aura, and the difference between his, Mom's and mine. I couldn't say exactly why, but I felt the dissimilarity. Now it made sense. Mom's and mine shared many characteristics, which I assumed resulted from genetics, because of what Grandpa said. *Grandpa*. All of the blood suddenly drained from my face, and nausea welled through my stomach, nearly causing me to spew my breakfast. His aura resembled mine even more closely than Mom's.

Was *Grandpa* really my father? Is that why they never spoke? Is that why Mom moved three thousand miles away? The nausea worsened. The world swam before my eyes as I lost control, and my aura started buzzing, vibrating, and quaking as the blue color rapidly faded. I tasted sour and felt myself slipping.

Nooooo! I yelled internally, aborting my plunge.

I pictured my cool blue aura and placed it back where it belonged. As quickly as the aberrant sensations came, they left again. I'd narrowly escaped the precipice of the void.

The void. The place where all of the color left the aura. All color . . . gone. That was it! The missing piece! The means to control the void. I forced all of my blue color back, just like I did when I healed my injuries. Except this time, instead of replacing red, I eliminated the "nothingness." I never understood *how* I entered or left the void, but now I realized it worked the same as pain control. I added spicy redness to create pain, and removed the red to alleviate the pain. By extension, if someone's aura

contained its regular color, they were “there,” but if the color left, so did they—into the void of unconsciousness.

I knew at once how I could apply this to others. But the bright purple ghost heading my way reminded me that I had a more pressing issue. My mother arrived, and I needed to know if . . . eww! The right question popped into my brain just as Mom made it to the side of the bed, with her heart racing and her breathing ragged. Her motherly purple vibrated with greenish worry.

Before she could speak, I said, “I’m fine, Mom. I passed out, probably vago-vasal. I’ll be fine.”

She laughed nervously as she pulled me into a giant embrace. “Vaso-vagal, dear,” she corrected. We hugged for a while. The vibrations slowed, her color returned, and she smiled with relief.

The doctor came in and administered my umpteenth exam, and after blood tests and another batch of forms, he came back and pronounced me fit to go home. Curiosity made me relax and check his aura as he spoke.

“All the tests are normal, Dr. Miller,” said the man. The warm, blue, pink, and white colors sparkled around him without any hint of waves. “He’s fine to go home. Just make sure he has plenty of fluids, and follow up with Dr. Stonington in the next few days.”

“Thanks, Dr. Eitel. Hopefully I won’t be seeing you again any time soon!” Mom said, as we collected our things to leave.

On the way home, I posed the question I’d spent hours formulating.

“Mom, does Grandpa have any other children?”

“Oh no, dear, I’m an only child.” There were no waves. *Phew!* The twisted thought of my grandfather also being my father made me physically ill. At least I didn’t have to worry about that. I didn’t know how to ask about my real father, so I decided to keep the pretense. They would tell me when they were ready, or I’d find some other way to figure it out.

Mom didn’t make me go back to school, but I knew I’d have to face my classmates tomorrow. They would demand justification for my ambulance episode. I called Grandpa, who explained the vasovagal concept. The vagus nerve affects the heart rate, slowing it when stimulated. If your rate drops too much, you pass out. That sounded reasonable. The others would buy it for sure, even though I knew what really happened. My brain lost

control and allowed my aura to turn colorless.

That knowledge spurred me back to experimentation, which I decided would start on the bus tomorrow. My plan involved pulling the kid in the seat next to me into the void, and then immediately pushing him right back out. I'd learn once and for all if my theory could produce real results.

When the bus arrived at my stop, I hopped on and sat down next to Jill Wilson, a small girl with a thin brown aura with a minty smell. As the bus started forward, I pulled all her color away, and she collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been abruptly cut. She dropped hard, striking her forehead on the seat in front of us. The effect stunned me, making me forget to bring her right back. She sat there, slumped forward like she'd been shot in the back of the head.

Spellbound, I tried to replace her aura, but I realized with rising panic that I didn't know exactly what it had looked like before. I hurried to start the experiment and forgot to memorize her original state. What if I couldn't replace her aura and she stayed comatose? Bad scenarios poured through my brain—this unfortunate nine-year-old stuck in the hospital on life support for the rest of her days, or worse, her frustrated parents pulling the plug. Then, the investigation into her death would start with me, the last person to see her alive. I had to try something! I hastily forced brown into her empty hull. She opened her eyes almost immediately, clearly confused, with most of the brown covered by a sickly shade of green. Her previously minty smell was musty and dirty.

I thought fast. "Are you OK? We went over a bump and you hit your head on the seat in front of us. It looked like you got knocked out!"

She pondered that for a bit.

"Yeah, I'm OK, just a bit woozy."

"Well, maybe you want to see the nurse when you get inside, if you aren't feeling better," I said, doing my best impression of a guiltless person trying to be helpful. Betraying the lack of honesty, my aura hammered out waves. I snapped off the auras, and decided I'd done enough damage for one day.

Within twenty-four hours, though, I resumed my quest. I sat next to Julie Wilcox on the bus the following morning. Julie, a pale, redheaded

eighth grader who usually interlocked with her boyfriend, Pierre Sandford, today sat alone. I tried very hard to target just her aura, doing my best to eliminate all others from my mind's eye. The dense, blue, white, and brown aura smelled like warm cinnamon toast. I felt reassured by the stronger aura, because after yesterday, I didn't want to risk sending another frail person into a permanent coma.

When I sat down, she streaked green, gray, and red. Apparently she was confused and annoyed by my presence, as there were other open seats and she didn't relish sitting next to a sixth grader. I carefully studied her original aura, ensuring that I'd be able to bring her back to normal after the trip to no man's land. It took some time, because the additional green, gray, and red confounded my efforts.

She almost spoke, but instead just turned her head to look out the window, and the colors fell slowly back to the blue, white, and brown. I closed my eyes and breathed in her aura. Confident that I knew it perfectly, I started to pull all of the colors away, this time, more slowly. I felt her anxiety rise as she moved unwillingly toward the void. She buzzed and vibrated, with the cinnamon smell turning to an unpleasant acrid, as I reduced the density toward the colorless nothing. As I pulled, she fought, and I found myself siphoning off the effects of the additional agitation along with her base colors. I brought her right to the edge of nothing, and held her there.

Suddenly I found myself being shaken.

"Wake up, son," said the bus driver. "You two need to get off now."

Everyone else had left the bus, and he had walked back to our seats. I released Julie completely, and she shoved me.

"What the hell!" she said, grabbing her bag.

"What?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"Get away from me, you freak!"

I disembarked from the bus, ignoring the strange look from the bus driver, and went to my homeroom.

* * * * *

Over the next couple of weeks, I kept practicing on unsuspecting people. The bus ride represented one captive audience, but all-school assembly

trapped the entire student body in the auditorium for my experimental pleasure. I used this opportunity to hone the skill of targeting a single aura. I blocked out the rest in the room, and then yanked or slowly dragged my target into the void. I discovered several levels of consciousness, and the aftereffects upon the individual varied depending on how deeply I took them. If I pulled hard, I could put someone out for an entire class period. Also, I found that proximity increased my control. I didn't touch anyone during my practice sessions, a move I assumed would arouse suspicion, but I felt certain direct contact would make it even easier.

I made some interesting observations during my practice. Physical appearance divulged very little about a person's underlying aura. Skin color or ethnicity made zero difference, as far as I could tell. Boys were pink; otherwise, they had the same base characteristics as girls. However, secondary colors, the ones that switched based on emotion, like yellow and gray, flitted back and forth more quickly in girls than in their masculine counterparts. Aura density didn't depend on physical size as much as it did maturity, so even husky kids under a certain age had somewhat frail auras. On the other hand, Denise Stahl, an eighth grader who suffered from anorexia and weighed about eighty pounds, had a very dense brown aura, but most of the time I found it gray. At the assembly, I noticed a gripping black color that made me nervous, so I avoided looking at her after that.

I wanted to practice dishing out pain—adding spicy redness to auras—but I had no control. After nearly killing Jill Wilson on the bus, I hesitated testing that skill at school. Instead, I decided to see if I could make use of trips to the park, library, or some other public outing to practice the dark arts.

My first attempt was a disaster. On Saturday, I took my bike to the river by Howell Park and sat on a bench watching the passing people, sampling their auras. An early-spring chill bit the air, reducing the number of potential participants, but a few hearty souls braved the cold. After letting the first two go by unscathed, I summoned the nerve to release a burst of spicy redness into a tall, dark-haired, unsuspecting man with a dull orange aura that smelled of bad breath. I expected him to cry *ow!* and move along, but instead he gripped his head, lost his balance and face-planted,

opening up a two-inch gash over his left eye that bled like a stuck pig. I stared from my perch, horrified and unable to move.

He grabbed a tissue from his pocket, soaked it instantly by pressing it to his forehead, and stumbled off toward his car while muttering incoherent profanities. A vibrating, buzzing, grayish guilt bubbled from my aura, and I realized belatedly that I should have at least fixed his laceration. That would have been easy enough. Some healer I was.

I exercised more caution on the next passerby, a young woman power walking. I tried to send a jolt of pain to her hand, but she reacted by smacking her left shoulder with her opposite hand. Satisfied that she'd killed the offending insect, she moved along. Smooth!

I kept on with this tactic, touching a dozen different people with small amounts of spicy red, never once having the exact intended effect. Each one felt something painful, and most looked around for the disturbance that surreptitiously invaded their personal space. I kept my eyes closed for two reasons. First, I could observe the auras more easily without confusing input from my optic nerves, and second, my prey tended to ignore the sleeping kid on the bench during their inevitable search for the source of their discomfort. The weekend practice sessions helped, but I still had very little command of my offensive weapon.

On Monday, Tommy, Trigger, Fat Louie, and Simon approached Allan and me as we waited in line at the cafeteria during lunch, reminding me of my goal. "Hey, douchebags, we're a little short of money. How about giving us some?" Tommy said.

Emboldened by my recent success, and somewhat comfortable with Allan and a large number of other students in the line, I tried to stand up to them.

"Go screw yourselves," I said.

Tommy came right up to me, towering nearly six inches over my head, and stared down at my face. I looked away at first, but with his hot breath basting my hair, I eventually looked up, exactly what he wanted.

"You've just made a grave mistake!" he said.

My heart raced, my breathing quickened, and I thought I'd wet my pants. I swallowed hard and just stood there, stock-still. Mrs. Bintz, a very

old first-grade teacher, hobbled in and inquired, "Everything OK, boys?" in her shrill and squeaky voice.

"We were just leaving," said Tommy, slowly backing away, eyes still transfixed on mine. I expected him to draw his finger across his throat, but instead he just kept staring, which had a profoundly menacing effect.

Mrs. Bintz walked away, and Allan shoved me and said, "Dude, what were you thinking?"

"Look," I started, "I've had enough of this. It's time we did something about all this crap. Nobody else is going to!"

"And you think pissing them off is the way to start?"

"No, but I wasn't going to give them any money!"

"You could've just ignored them. Why did you have to go and tell them to screw themselves! Now they're going to be after us!"

"We'll just have to think of something," I said. "Hey, why don't you come over to my house after school. I want to show you a trick I have been working on."

"All right. I don't have karate tonight. But promise me, no more antagonizing these guys!"

"Yeah, that was probably stupid." In fact, I should have poked him with a huge dose of red spicy pain. At the time, panic totally immobilized me. Standing up required mastery of my fears. Stunned inaction would cost me dearly in a real fight. Fortunately, we escaped any further torment throughout the rest of the day.

My run-in with Tommy reminded me that although I'd bolstered my skill set in the first six weeks of the new term, I had neither a team nor a viable plan to overthrow his gang. I hoped to convince Allan to help me by showing him what I could do with my new talents.

Inspired by Grandpa's books, I considered this situation a chess match. Tommy, the black king, had a very strong position. I needed to attack him, instead of letting his gang constantly persecute us without rebuttal. In order to win, I needed to study my opponent. I had to see how he deployed his pieces. I needed to understand his methods for disseminating terror and I had to see who experienced the brunt of it. Tommy's gang made many others miserable, and if I found some strong-willed folks able to join me, the quest would be much easier. The best allies would likely be

those students who took the most abuse. I hoped to turn them into white pieces, instead of black pawns. With my newly honed skills, I finally felt I had something to offer in the struggle.

I also had to learn Tommy's defenses, and how to trap his best pieces. It would be impossible to simultaneously confront the entire gang. Dividing and conquering might work, but I had no idea how to accomplish that. The bottom line: only a well-planned attack would give us a victory.

When Allan came over, I came right to the point.

"What can we do to Tommy's gang to make sure they stop bullying forever?"

Allan answered immediately. "The key to a gang is the leader. In order to destroy the gang, we need to humiliate Tommy in a very public way," he voiced. "But first, we need to break them up. You never see any of them alone, and as a unit they rule the school. But one on one we might stand a chance. . . ."

"What do you have in mind? You're pretty good at karate. If we could just get Tommy alone, do you think you could take him?"

"No, Hunter, you missed the point. Just beating him up isn't good enough. I think he should be tied to the flagpole in front of the school, completely naked. That would even things up pretty well. It would be nice if somehow we could make people believe his fellow gang members were behind it. I have no idea how to do it, though."

Allan's creativity impressed me. He must have been plotting how to get back at the 33rd Street Gang for a long time. Despite his obvious desire to physically smash Tommy, simply beating him up didn't accomplish our goal. We had to make the campus safe for all students. My respect for Allan multiplied exponentially. He would be quite a force in this battle, and I was glad he played on my side!

* * * * *

I knew a way to reach Allan's main objective. I could drag Tommy into the void, and then we'd take his clothes and tie him up. Getting him to the flagpole unseen, well, that might present a problem. However, the biggest challenge would be declawing the other beasts. In my chess match,

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we needed first to eliminate the king's defenders, and then put him into checkmate. But exactly how to accomplish all of this without being caught remained a mystery.



CHAPTER 21

I started focusing all my energy on developing our plan. Reconnaissance dominated phase one. Who were the key black pieces? Were there other pawns on their side? Where were the weaknesses in their structure? How would I eliminate the pieces so as to expose the king?

In phase two, I needed to collect additional pieces. However, as a sixth grader competing against eighth graders who dominated the school with fear, I had very little leverage. Who would follow me against the reigning gang of thugs? They were physically larger, older, and more experienced—and they knew how to avoid getting caught. They had all the advantages. Except one: I could manipulate auras.

I spent several weeks finding out everything I could about the gang. There were four main members, Tommy, Louis, Trigger, and Simon. I studied their auras during recess, trying not to get too close, for fear of getting beaten up needlessly. I watched them verbally and physically abuse smaller kids, which stoked my anger. The four of them shared classes, lunch blocks, and recess time, so I initially found no opportunity to observe any one of them alone, as Allan had said. They met in a hallway near the auditorium right at the beginning of school, and from that moment onward, they stayed together. I kept up with my surveillance, hoping to catch a break.

Tommy Lachance, the leader, had an aura that was primarily blue and gold—much to my dismay. I usually admired people with those colors. In addition to the usual male pink, however, he had an intermittent black coldness that deepened when he pushed kids into lockers, extorted money from them, or bossed people around. I associated the black color with evil, although I recalled my own father had some in his aura, so perhaps I

didn't have that exactly correct. Either way, if my plan worked, this black king would be removed from power by the end of the year.

Trigger towered over everyone, including Tommy. His real name was Maurice Trigo, but anyone who called him Maurice ended up eating through a straw for six to eight weeks. His aura oozed pitch black. It was very dense, ice cold, and varied little, only the occasional brown and pink showing through the inky black. My skin tingled when he approached, and his aura always produced a putrid taste. There were cloudy areas around him that reminded me of the hardware in my leg from the fracture repair. I assumed he'd endured repeated traumas as a youngster. Because of Trigger's massive bulk, Allan stood little chance in a fist fight, even with his cool karate moves. Of all of the gang members, he presented the biggest danger, not only because of his monstrous physical size, but also because of his explosive temper. The smallest irritations provoked him into massive fits of rage, and Tommy had to constantly mollify him to avert any bone-crushing attacks that would lead to his expulsion.

Louis Lipscomb, or Fat Louie, as the gang members called him, topped the scales at well over two hundred pounds, but not because of muscle. He was just plain fat. Unlike Trigger, whose massively dense black aura promoted fear, Louie's aura screamed helpless. Porously thin, pungent, cool, and grating, his baseline ugly orange color often appeared tainted with red, plus it had the requisite pink. He smelled peppery. When surrounded by his fellow gang members, he felt emboldened, and he tortured the little kids, emitting yellow in the process. Like Maurice, nobody called him "Fat Louie" except his closest buddies, for fear of a solid beating. If he fell onto me, he'd crush me like a pancake.

Finally, Simon Crabtree had a very unusual solid-orange aura. He didn't have any hint of blue, gold, brown, silver, black, or white that I saw in most other's auras, only a touch of pink. Otherwise, it was just plain orange. While he didn't strike fear or give out beatings, Simon's role in the gang as the boss's sidekick earned him loyalty from the group. He never strayed from Tommy's side. Removing this particular defender would be a consummate challenge.

While designing my revenge plan, I experimented tirelessly with the auras. I talked to Grandpa, and although we didn't discuss auras them-

selves, he dispensed his usual wisdom, telling me that the best solution to a problem often masqueraded as the simplest one. Since I couldn't control how I sent the spiciness into auras, I took his advice and started pushing only tiny amounts of redness into my test subjects. It turned into a game, and I had to admit, I enjoyed it. I laughed to myself as I watched people slap at invisible mosquitoes, fix their perfect hair after they thought it had been ruffled, or wipe perceived drops of imaginary sweat off their dry foreheads. Although I still rarely achieved the exact effect I planned, my tinkering developed slowly over time. Out of fear of being discovered, or perhaps guilt over assaulting my fellow students, I kept the school bus insults to a bare minimum. I knew I needed to advance my training, but my epic failure in the park weighed on my consciousness like an anchor. I had no qualms with taking revenge against the bullies, but if I used my ability to hurt innocent people, I was no better than a thug myself.

After my practice sessions, I felt like I was at the end of a forty-day Lenten fast, even though it had often only been a short time since breakfast. Munching granola bars or pieces of fruit helped appease my growling stomach as I walked from the bus into my classroom.

My efforts at lunchtime reconnaissance succeeded spectacularly. I knew from my own experience that when I ate food, my blue aura became slightly more dense, and I usually felt better. The more I practiced with aura manipulation, the hungrier I became, but eating always made me feel stronger. However, whenever Fat Louie ate sweets, his aura got weaker, sickly, and redder. Something about him wasn't right, and sugary foods made it worse. An idea how to capture my first chess piece in this epic battle crystallized in my brain.

I also developed a theory that orange implied a dedication, or duty. Simon never left Tommy's side, except to do him favors. "Bring me another milk," Tommy would say, and Simon would do it immediately. Anything he asked, Simon did it right away, and his aura turned a slight yellow in the process. He would have done anything for Tommy. I considered how I might use that too.

Although the most dangerous of the crew, Trigger was also the most predictable. If anyone pushed his buttons, he'd lose it. I needed to make

him lose it at just the right time—and make sure I didn't get pummeled too badly in the process.

Although I progressed with plans on how to potentially evade Tommy's gang members, I still had no workable plan for the ultimate victory, tying the king to the flagpole. However, when faculty posted sign-ups for the all-school assembly in June, a scheme formed in my head. When I watched videos of last year's end-of-year assembly, my confidence increased. But I needed help. I asked Allan to gather our group so I could enlist their assistance.

We met on Saturday at PlayDate, under the guise of another laser tag match. Weeks had passed since we'd all seen each other socially, and I wasn't sure if Allan could convince them to come, especially since the lunchtime incident. Tommy had yet to fulfill his threat. The danger of being observed hanging out with me, the primary object of the 33rd Street Gang's ire, contributed to the unease that Davis and the others clearly felt. To their credit, they showed up, and the seven of us chatted nervously as we huddled over our pizza.

After downing a slice of pepperoni, I let them have it. "We're going to take down the biggest school bullies."

"You've got to be kidding," said Brady, amid universal looks of disbelief. "All seven of us together don't have the same body mass as Trigger. And—they're eighth graders!"

"Yeah, Hunter, they're all really big, and they know everybody. We're all geeks. We'll get crushed if we tried to fight them, even seven against four," added Don.

The others chimed in with a raucous chorus of "forget it," "no way," and "I'm out." They all stood up to leave.

"Which is why we're not going to fight them. It's much better than fighting them, actually," I said, raising my voice above the din. That caught their interest, and they slowed their protests.

"But I'm going to need help. Since you guys have faced some of the worst of it, I thought you'd be interested in stopping them. I won't lie. It could be dangerous, and you might get in serious trouble if you are caught. I won't ask any of you to face Trigger or Tommy either. And if it works, Tommy will be exposed for what he really is!"

Allan smirked, and piped up. “You aren’t seriously going to try what I think you’re going to try, are you?”

“Exactly.”

Allan’s smile covered his entire face like the Cheshire cat. “Listen guys, you all remember what happened two years ago, right?” He paused as they looked away and nervously agreed that they did. “You guys all know that Hunter here is pretty bright. If he says he has a plan that will take these guys down, I for one am *in*. I mean, won’t it be worth it to finally put these guys on the other side of it for once? Let’s hear him out, and then see if we can make this happen.”

Davis and Bob, who’d been friends with Allan for years, were the first to come over. “Yeah, OK,” Bob said, looking at Davis who agreed with a nod. “Let’s hear the big idea.”

The others settled down and finally asked for details.

“Look, if I tell you guys, whether you’re in or out, you can’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”

After minimal mumbling, they murmured their agreement.

Then Allan dropped the bomb. “Hunter here thinks he can tie Tommy Lachance to the flagpole in front of school.”

They all broke out laughing.

“Naked,” he added. The laughter peaked.

“Hold on, hold on,” I said. It took a few moments for the uproar to abate. “Listen, I know it sounds impossible, but it’s not. It’s just like a chess game.”

“And how on earth do you intend to win this game?” Bob asked.

“With a sacrifice, a trap, a skewer, and a double attack,” I said confidently. Suddenly, the silence became palpable, as they looked at me, realizing as a group that I was totally serious.

“Oh, do tell,” said Allan, with his usual flair for the dramatic.

I laid out the framework of my plan, starting with the date—the end-of-year assembly on the last day of school. I explained why I needed to start getting ready so far in advance. I’d need people on the float and decorations committees, and some to watch for strays on the day of the coup. I explained all the details except one: exactly how I’d get Tommy naked and tied.

“Leave that to Allan and me,” I said. “So you all know what you have to do for the next few weeks?”

They all agreed that they did.

“And you’re in?”

I looked at each of them in turn as they agreed, checking their aura for the waves. None had any. They were telling the truth. With my new army, the time had come to set the plan in motion.

* * * * *

The weather turned warmer, and spring filled the school with a feeling of hope. Auras changed from gray to yellow and red to clear as the students, faculty and staff all enjoyed the new season. I was pleased with our progress as the details of my plan solidified.

Brady finally established inroads with Nicole, a member of the Float Committee. He talked the group into commissioning the creation of a giant panther, the school’s mascot, for the big celebration in June. In addition, artists would fashion two smaller ones for the eighth graders to sign, a gift for the posterity cabinet near the gym. The outdoor assembly would take place conveniently in front of the new flagpole behind the school, near the soccer fields and the playground. Davis spent a week on his computer generating an awesome 3-D reconstruction of a wild panther. It impressed the faculty enough that they agreed to oversee its construction for the big day. Bob and Davis had no trouble getting on the decorations committee, a generally eschewed position, and they recruited Don and Mickey to assist in placing our “special” decorations just before the event.

I practiced knot tying, a skill Grandpa taught me last summer. Allan planned to test for black belt, a development both exciting and possibly relevant. We might be forced to call upon his advanced karate skills if events unfolded unexpectedly. I kept checking to ensure that none of my compatriots leaked our plan. If word got out, it would be impossible. Too many intricacies could be easily disrupted if any teachers or students lingered by the flagpole, for example, the day of the assembly. Fortunately, my fellow coconspirators experienced enough torment throughout their years at Madrona to maintain their discipline. All eyes remained focused

on the prize of dethroning the biggest bullies around, so they kept the plan super secret.

Excitement grew as the school year drew toward a close. We halfheartedly studied for our end-of-term tests, focusing our attention instead on our true confrontation. We met on alternate Saturdays at PlayDate for status updates and laser tag. Given all our time-consuming efforts, we deserved a break for fun.

The day before the assembly, we went over every detail again, one final time. The weather was expected to cooperate, so the venue remained outside. Indoors, it would have been impossible because of space concerns (not to mention no flagpole), so we were lucky. At home, I robotically ate dinner, and pretended to be feeling poorly to avoid speaking to my parents. Unable to sleep because my demons kept vibrating and stirring, I instead pulled myself into the void and let myself drift.

In the morning, we got rides into school early so we could oversee initial preparations. The decoration committee members placed the two small panthers, two black drapes, and a portable stretcher adjacent to the hallway that served as the gang's daily meeting place. I hid four pliant ropes near the flotilla behind the parking lot, and then I checked to ensure that the hulking mass of the giant panther completely obscured the flagpole. When the float procession, powered by Mrs. Frechette's old station wagon, advanced into the parking lot, the term "student body" would take on a whole new meaning. I made sure Davis and Bob had finished up their assigned tasks and were ready for Fat Louie to arrive. I gave them a nod as I went to meet Trigger by the guidance office, along his usual shortcut to Tommy's hallway, the site of the gang's morning meetings.

The guidance office had a glass window in which Miss Tilton, the head counselor, reliably perched, bright and early as always. Relief flooded me, because she was an integral part of the plan. Trigger approached alone. As usual, everyone afforded him a wide berth. I watched carefully until Miss Tilton's attention turned to her file cabinet before I called out to Trigger.

"Hey, Maurice! You're looking mighty soft today. Were you playing with Barbie Dolls this morning? It's amazing how—"

Although I'd prepared several more taunts, I didn't need them. From the moment I said "Maurice," his aura exploded red, and the jet black

of his baseline aura exerted a powerful gripping sensation on my skin that intensified as he rapidly closed on me. I stood with my back against the guidance window, and I rapped loudly on it to catch Miss Tilton's attention. I felt the anger and discord build in Trigger's aura with a putrid buzzing. The crazed look in his face said it all—he'd lost it completely. His clenched hand flew like a guided missile toward my head. I ducked as quickly as I could, simultaneously reaching out to remove all color from his aura as he struck. I went down, momentarily stunned as his giant fist glanced off the top of my head. It continued on, impacting the window and shattering the glass into a thousand pieces.

Miss Tilton, no stranger to violence, already had security on the phone. Trigger's blood spewed from a broken vessel in his hand, and I seized on the spicy pain and tripled it, hoping to incapacitate the lug before he got another shot at me. Unfazed, he picked me up by the throat with his good hand.

My own aura reeked with sweat, the smell of fear. I didn't expect him to be able to endure the pain from a broken hand, especially with me augmenting it. He hesitated, though, because as he held me with his left hand and drew back his right arm to punch, he noticed his mangled fingers and their profuse bleeding. His brief confusion allowed me time for a counterstrike, and I reached into his aura again to eliminate all color. I expected him to go limp, but he stalwartly maintained his powerful grip, leaving me immobilized and helpless. Bewildered by my failure, I felt my own panic rise, but quelled it, refocusing my efforts. Why didn't he drop? I kept pulling all the color out . . . Suddenly I realized the difference between black, his natural aura, and colorless. My attempt to push him into the void actually helped maintain his black aura of pure evil. I stopped my aura manipulation, and instead kicked at his injured hand, which he pulled out of the way.

My face started swelling and my breathing turned ragged as Trigger's hand slowly crushed my windpipe. In complete desperation, I focused on the spicy redness of his right hand—and with as much force as I could muster, sent it into his left.

Crying out with pain and rage, he let go with his left hand, dropping me to my feet. Only then did I realize he'd been levitating me with only

one hand. I took a couple of breaths and massaged my neck, feeling relief as the oxygen and blood poured back into my previously restricted brain.

Trigger recovered just as quickly, and he cocked his left arm to incapacitate me once and for all. Having lost contact, my ability to inflict pain lessened substantially, so I reached out to grab him again as he swung. At that instant, a Taser bullet hit him in the back, sending a huge jolt of electricity through both of us. I tried to let go, but I couldn't. The Taser paralyzed me just as it did Trigger. Every muscle in my body seized uncontrollably, until I quelled the spasms by replacing the vibrating redness with my normal blue. Trigger couldn't do that, of course, so he continued writhing on the floor.

"Are you all right, son?" one security guard asked as he approached. A second officer wearing purple gloves put Trigger in handcuffs. Noticing the profuse bleeding, he used Trigger's T-shirt to compress the hand wound. Unable to control his body, Trigger couldn't protest.

I could barely speak. I'd read about Tasers, but I'd never seen—or felt—one in action. I tried to recall exactly what it did to my aura, hoping to be able to reproduce this highly effective technique.

"Y-y-y-yeah," I finally stammered.

"He must have let go before the Taser hit, or he'd be just as bad off as this guy," said his partner. "Those things hurt like the dickens!"

"Yeah, I got tased during training too. Cried like a baby," said the first.

"You sure you're OK?"

After checking that my aura had returned completely to normal, I answered. "Yes, I'm fine, just a little shaken up. I thought he was going to kill me. Miss Tilton saw the whole thing. She'll tell you about it. I need to go to the rest room."

"Yeah, OK, kid, we'll talk to her."

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief as I walked toward the bathroom near Tommy's hallway. My opening gambit, the sacrifice, had succeeded!

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Davis and Bob had purchased a dozen candy bars, and they were waiting in the hallway for Fat Louie to appear. When he did, Allan,

the spotter, raced in from the parking lot and gave the others a thumbs-up signal to start the argument. Just as the guest of honor arrived for the show, Davis and Bob engaged in a pitched verbal battle about who could eat the most candy, while flagrantly waving the chocolate around.

“I bet I can eat six!” yelled Davis.

“Oh yeah? Well, I can eat seven!” escalated Bob.

“I can eat ten!”

“Yeah, well—I’m going to eat all twelve!” cried Bob, grabbing the first wrapper and tearing it off.

Fat Louie took the bait. He pushed both of them into a nearby locker.

“*You’re* not going to eat *any*,” he said. “Give ‘em to me, or Tommy’s gonna pound you to a pulp!”

He took all twelve and started eating the unwrapped one right in front of Davis and Bob, who pretended to be upset. Enthralled by the anguish displayed by Davis and Bob, Fat Louie consumed five more bars, exhaling his chocolaty breath in their direction to humiliate them further. Louie started to walk away, but they goaded him perfectly.

“You only ate six—not all twelve!”

“Yeah, even *you* can’t eat all twelve!”

Louie proceeded to eat the other six in dramatic fashion, bringing the chocolates carefully to his lips and making satisfied *aaah* sounds after devouring each one. When he’d finished, he looked at Davis and Bob, who skulked away, secretly celebrating the successful completion of their assignment.

From my prearranged location, I watched as Louie, already teetering on his feet, approached. His aura, ordinarily thin and frail, appeared even more feeble and debilitated. He leaked sweat, and he puffed heavily, as if he’d just completed the Boston Marathon. I closed the gap between us, adding more sickly red color to his pale shadow, forcing him to make an unsuccessful break toward the bathroom. He vomited all twelve candy bars, as well as his breakfast, all over the hall floor. I caught up to him as he bent forward, retching. Touching the back of his neck, I pushed even harder, augmenting the grating sounds, rancid taste, and ashen redness, and he toppled unconsciously to the ground with a giant splat. Mr. Janack, the teacher supervising Trigger’s arrest, emerged from the guidance hall-

way just in time to watch the overweight boy smack the tile. He ran up to Fat Louie, checked for a pulse, and, seeing him take a breath, shook his head and ran back to the office to call for help.

Paramedics dispatched for the initial 911 call came wheeling around the corner with their equipment. They rolled their eyes at the size of their quarry, and lowered the stretcher all the way to the ground, using a slider mat to get Fat Louie's massive bulk onto the gurney. They saw the vomit pile and the chocolate stains on his shirt, and one said, "Whatcha think, ketoacidosis?"

The other smelled Louie's breath. "Yep, fruity. Let's call it in and get out of here before someone else drops. We can check blood sugar and get a line in the truck." They loaded him up and pushed the heavy stretcher out toward their ambulance.

Gambit number two, the trap, complete! Time for the skewer.

* * * * *

I took my time getting to the last rendezvous point. As I went around the corner, I heard Simon updating Tommy, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Although we needed to catch Trigger and Fat Louie by themselves, this part of the plan required the other two boys to be together.

"Yeah, Trigger punched the glass in the guidance office, so the cops took him. Then the ambulance came and took Fat Louie to the hospital. They said his blood sugar went out of control."

Don and Mickey saw me coming, and I gave them a nod. They each held one of the small panthers built by the art class for the assembly. They approached Tommy, whose blood boiled at the news of his gang's misfortune.

"Hey, Tommy, can you sign these panthers?" Don asked. "We're getting all the eighth graders to sign them to commemorate this year's assembly."

"Go away, you dweebs."

He turned to walk away. Although nearly thirty meters away, I pulsed my best possible blast of spicy red pain into the dead center of Tommy's aura.

Mickey persisted. "Come on, all the eighth graders are signing!"

“Yeah,” said Don. “We have to get everyone to sign!” They held the panthers out for Tommy.

Between the news that his two confidants had been carried out of the building, and my mental shove, his anger and frustration erupted. He whipped around, teeth clenching and unclenching in obvious internal turmoil, and then he paused. He needed one more boost to shove him over the edge, so with supreme effort, I jolted him again.

It worked. “This is what I think of your damn panthers,” he yelled, as he ripped the head off the first one and smashed it into the second one.

I gave a nod to Brady, who waited at the other end of the hall. He grabbed Mr. Peck, a seventh-grade teacher, and dragged him over, complaining about the kids vandalizing the assembly panthers that he and his art group had spent months creating.

Mr. Peck, an ancient, grizzled, cantankerous old goat, followed Brady toward us. His spindly orange-and-white aura glistened with red irritation.

“All right, what’s going on here?” he croaked.

“He vandalized the panthers!” cried Don and Mickey, together, pointing at both Simon and Tommy.

“Mmm hmm,” Mr. Peck said. He knew who was responsible. “OK, Mr. Crabtree,” he said, looking at Simon. “There’s no reason for both of you to get suspended for vandalism, just tell me *who* did this,” he craned his neck at Tommy and waggled his head, “and the innocent party can be on his way.”

“Yeah, just tell him, Simon,” said Tommy. Simon’s eyes widened to the size of silver dollars while he stared at Tommy, and his orange color lit up.

Simon turned to the teacher. “I’m sorry, Mr. Peck. I did it. I just lost my cool and ripped this one apart and used its head to smash the other one.”

“Yeah,” said Tommy. “I tried to stop him, cuz I knew he’d get into trouble, but he just went and did it.”

Mr. Peck frowned. He looked at Don and Mickey, who just shrugged. “OK,” he said, resignedly. “You two clean up this mess and get ready for the assembly. I’ll make sure you get a pass after I get him to the office. And *you*,” he looked at Tommy, “get to your classroom!”

“Come on, Mr. Crabtree,” Mr. Peck added, as he led the forlorn youth toward the main office to process him for suspension.

The skewer on Simon worked fabulously! With the black king now completely exposed, it was time for the end game.

* * * * *

Tommy steamed, punched the wall furiously, and started toward his classroom. I bolted into the nearby bathroom and extinguished the lights, setting the stage for the final attack. Meanwhile, Allan approached from the other direction just as Don and Mickey signaled and then went off to serve as lookouts.

Allan advanced on the disheveled and distraught Tommy, who looked ready to blow a gasket. “Hey, Tommy.”

“What do you want, punk?” A trace of fear crept into his voice, as he recognized his vulnerability without the hulking protection of Trigger and the others. Still, he outweighed Allan by fifty pounds, so he postured strength. “Need another beating, like the one I gave you a couple years ago?”

“The guy who’s responsible for taking down your minions is waiting for you in the bathroom,” Allan said calmly, ignoring the bait.

“What?”

“You know, Trigger getting taken away, Fat Louie going to the hospital, and Simon getting served up for suspension by you. The guy who planned it all is waiting for you. Right in there,” he pointed.

“*What?*”

Allan pointed again and wiggled his finger. “In there,” he repeated.

I could feel Tommy’s aura seething with anger as he stormed into the darkened bathroom, with Allan following at a distance. The moment Tommy entered, as he groped blindly for the light switch, I grabbed his neck from behind and yanked him into the void as hard as I could mentally pull. I took care to remove all the black as well as the blue, gold, and pink, having learned that particular lesson while battling Trigger.

He went right to the ground, completely unconscious. Allan came in, and looked at me, his aura turning a stunned green. “What did you *do?*”

“I’ll tell you later.” And it occurred to me that I probably would. Allan deserved to know. “But first, let’s get him out to the pole.”

For the last part of the plan, we retrieved our hidden portable stretcher and put Tommy’s weighty body onto it. We covered him with black drapes and the ruined panthers, and lifted. The two of us huffed and puffed as we carried his motionless body toward the doorway. We negotiated our way outside, with Don and Mickey running interference and clearing our path. Brady waited by the flagpole, ostensibly working on the giant panther, and when he saw us, he gave us the nod to bring Tommy underneath the canopy.

“You *did* it?” Brady gasped.

“Oh ye of little faith,” said Allan.

“Come on, guys, let’s get him under here,” I urged. Simultaneously carrying Tommy and maintaining my hold on his aura took tremendous effort, and sweat dripped from my brow like it had with Fat Louie earlier. I was getting tired. Fortunately, Allan’s training made him surprisingly strong, and he carried the lion’s share of the dead weight.

I looked at Brady, and reminded him, “Make sure nobody comes out here!”

Brady went back to his lookout post, joined now by Don and Mickey. Allan and I dragged the corpse-like Tommy to the flagpole. We quickly positioned him in a seated fashion, and I affixed his arms over his head around the pole, using my knot-tying skills and the pre-planted rope. I duct taped his mouth closed, so he wouldn’t disturb the assembly before the proper moment, and we checked the pegs we planted into the ground the day before to make sure they would hold. Although buried deeply, they might still loosen during Tommy’s struggling. Leaving nothing to chance, I tied his feet to the posts as tightly as I could.

Allan located the hidden knife, and he used it to cut off all of Tommy’s clothes. While he did, I ate one of my granola bars. My energy supply rapidly dwindling, I knew I’d soon lose control without additional nutrition. I also put my free hand directly on Tommy’s head, making the control considerably easier.

Allan gaped at me, puzzled. “You’re eating *now*?”

“Yeah. Got to. I’ll explain later.”

Allan finished the disrobing, and I gave one last strong pull to Tommy's aura to remove any remaining color. I didn't want him to see us or wake up prematurely.

We crept from the cover of the canopy, and slipped quietly back into the school, nodding to Brady when we were clear. He and the others continued to work on the giant panther, and Bob and Davis joined them shortly after, along with Nicole, Patty, and a bunch of older kids who were all tasked with the final preparations for the assembly. Allan and I went to our classroom, joining the others who weren't working on the float. As we sat down, we both nodded silently, mentally congratulating ourselves on a job well done.

* * * * *

I could hardly wait for the assembly. The school buzzed with the news about Trigger. Word was he'd deliberately smashed the guidance office window in a mad attempt to attack Miss Tilton. For her part, she'd heroically maced and subdued Trigger until the police arrived. The actual events, including our involvement, were conveniently left out of our carefully planted rumors. Trigger probably went to the juvenile detention center. Good riddance.

Fat Louie required admission to the hospital, with severely elevated blood sugar. I deduced he had diabetes, and from what Grandpa told me about diabetics, when their blood-sugar levels spike, they often vomit and pass out from a process called ketoacidosis. I forced it along. I inadvertently did him a huge favor, because now he'd get appropriate medical treatment for his previously undiagnosed condition.

Simon was unceremoniously suspended and forgotten.

Everyone assumed Tommy ignored Principal Frechette's stern warning about leaving before the assembly and ditched school entirely. In prior years, lesser-caliber students frequently used assembly day as a personal holiday, despite the consequences. Since Tommy disappeared before homeroom, they thought skipping explained his absence.

They delayed the rally while the art students rebuilt the two small panthers, to the best of their ability. The students repaired the badly smashed

cardboard heads with duct tape and crepe paper, their only option on such short notice. During the hour it took to complete the repairs, the rest of the students remained in homeroom, passing the time by talking about the upcoming year.

When Principal Frechette's voice boomed over the loudspeakers for the start of the assembly, the students poured from the open doors like ants at a picnic. The ceremony began with teachers reading a list of the top academic, athletic, and artistic student accomplishments for the year. They formally recognized the group who created the giant panther on wheels, and mentioned the remake of the smaller panthers due to "unforeseen circumstances." They talked about the hard work and planning that went into the event, primarily crediting members of the float committee and the decorations committee, including my friends. The speeches by Principal Frechette, Miss Tilton, and the other guidance counselors targeted the eighth graders moving on to Garfield. They also reminded the eldest students to re-sign the newly repaired panthers, to ensure their legacy for future classes.

I waited anxiously through all of the tributes and lectures. After forty-five minutes of useless drivel, Mrs. Frechette returned to the podium and ended the monologues with a few closing remarks. Then she signaled for the car containing the float committee to drive the massive panther around the parking lot. As the vehicle pulled away, the canopy came with it, revealing a struggling, naked, and angry Tommy Lachance, in full view of the entire student population. Hysterical laughter permeated the crowd. Years of repressed rage at countless indignities fostered such hatred, that nobody felt an ounce of pity. I smiled broadly and didn't even consider suppressing the yellow satisfaction in my aura.

Checkmate!

* * * * *

The teachers covered up Tommy and cut him loose. He yelled violently about the revenge he'd have, but it didn't matter, his spell was broken. The fear that dominated Madrona vanished the moment we exposed Tommy's vulnerability. Relief and a new confidence spread through the students

like a wildfire. Almost immediately, dozens of younger kids, led by my brave group of friends, approached teachers and counselors to tell how Tommy and his cronies tortured them for years. With one fell swoop, the multitude reclaimed their dignity from the oppression of the 33rd Street Gang. The immediacy of the change astounded even me.

Nobody knew how Tommy ended up attached to the flagpole, but everyone—except of course Simon, Trigger, and Fat Louie—celebrated his misfortune. Some kids thought Allan did it, but nobody could prove it. To us, credit didn't matter. We sent our message. No more bullying in our school!

I smiled to myself. Life would be different now that I could control the demons.



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