

MINDFIELD

C.W. JAMES

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Insundry Productions Books

Gardnerville NV 89460

insundryproductions.com

Cover design by Mibllart.com

ISBN (ebook): 978-1-7368013-9-0

ISBN (paperback): 978-1-7368013-8-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023904820

Also by C.W. James

The Treasure of Peril Island
Brothers Three

Chapter One

... *LOOK AT THAT damn TSA line...*

... *Gate 15A? Where the hell is...*

... *what did she pack in this thing...*

Matt Storm stood at the airport, arms rigid by his sides, fists clenched, as swarms of people pushed past, their thoughts carpet-bombing him. His dad's voice cut through the cacophony, "Matt, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Matt's voice was a low monotone. He shuffled slightly to his left, creating an extra foot of distance between him and his parents to shield himself from the added burden of hearing their unspoken thoughts as he attempted to concentrate on his father's words only. He'd found that method kept things simple when dealing with them—or with anyone else, for that matter. Keep people a safe distance away. Unfortunately, in the crowded airport, the sheer number of folks rushing by forced an endless stream of their random thoughts into his brain like overstuffed passengers on a rush-hour bus.

"Are you feeling all right, dear?" his mother asked with concern.

"No worries." Matt managed a smile. *If these other people around me would either go away or stop thinking.*

"We could give Dr. Bradford a call..." she went on.

The last person Matt wanted to talk to... his former therapist. Correction: one of his former therapists. "I have his number on my phone. I'll call him if I think I'm going into crisis," Matt assured her. "You can trust me to do that."

Matt got along fine with his parents after he'd allowed himself to be 'cured' following years of therapy. They were relieved about that, of course, but still worried about him, appearing a little afraid of him. Sometimes their body language reflected this unease, turning slightly away from him as though ready to flee, or the expression in their eyes as they analyzed his every word and movement for signs of a relapse. Most of the time, he knew their anxiousness from their thoughts; waiting—expecting, perhaps—for some sign of a return trip to crazy town. Although Matt had long mastered the art of quickly adjusting to their thoughts to calm them down, it was getting old.

"Perhaps we have time to buy another ticket..." His mother turned to his father.

Matt rolled his eyes. He had been plagued for nine years with the unwanted ability to read the minds of complete strangers if they came within three feet of him. That was bad enough, but to be bombarded with thoughts in a language he couldn't understand would drive him out of his freaking skull. He had picked up from his mother's mind that she was hoping this trip would be like a 'second honeymoon' for his parents, so he'd casually suggested that they should go by themselves, hinting how much more romantic it would be without him tagging along—not to mention cheaper, which his father appreciated. "This cruise is all for you guys. I'll be fine on my own. I'm going out to backpack for a night. That's my vacation."

“He’s right, Laura, it’s you and me and the Greek Isles,” Dad put his arm around her, “And I’m sure Matt wants to be alone here so he can throw some wild parties, eh, Matt?” His father’s tone was light, but with more than a whisper of hope that his son would do something unexpected like that.

“I’ll never tell,” Matt responded with a grin.

“Come on, hon, the security line isn’t getting any shorter,” Dad urged. He shook Matt’s hand. “See you in two weeks, Matt.”

“Remember to do your mindfulness exercises,” his mother added, “and the mediation.”

“I will.” *Like never.* Matt turned his cheek to receive a kiss from his mother. “Bon voyage.”

The group exchanged waves, and Matt watched his parents disappear into the security area. When they were out of sight, he frantically dug out his ear buds and jammed them in.

... *why are we going...*

... *another gate change...*

... *I hope that screaming kid isn’t...*

Matt cranked up the volume on his phone, the music almost successful in drowning out the crowd’s thoughts. He pushed his way through them, intent on the single goal of getting out of that place as fast as he could. It was like he was maneuvering his way through a bizarre, backwards minefield, where he was a moving explosive that could blow up by colliding with an obstacle—another mind.

He picked up his pace, rapidly threading his way through the travelers dragging their suitcases behind them like petulant children. At last, stepping outside the terminal,

he realized he had held his breath as he made his way to the exit. Exhaling, he caught the traffic light and quickly reached his father's car. Pulling out the ear buds, he unlocked the door and climbed inside. After the airport chaos, the car interior was quiet. The 'thoughtscape,' as he referred to the random thoughts careening through his head, had taken on the welcomed, calm characteristics of a glassy, smooth pond.

The drive home from the airport sent Matt's stress levels down, though he still felt a tight knot lingering in his chest from the onslaught of thoughts he'd received at the terminal. A hike through the peace of the nearby national forest would help; it always did.

He placed a couple of cans of food on the kitchen counter, along with a note to the neighbor girl who was going to feed their family cat, Sushi, while he was gone overnight. Climbing into his old car, showing its age with its cracked windshield, bald tires, and 'watch out for falling parts' bumper sticker, he drove up the winding mountain pass, sighing with relief when his ancient vehicle reached the top. He snagged a place in the busy parking lot and patted his car's transmission tunnel like it was a faithful horse. He got out and put on his backpack. With a relieved sigh, savoring the solitude he was about to experience, he set off down the trail to one of his favorite spots to camp.

The next morning, Matt finished his breakfast as he sat by his tent. His campsite, a small clearing ringed by the thick forest, the mighty trees acting like guards, was located off a lightly used trail. The area was empty, save for his tent and small camp stove. A cool breeze rustled through the leaves, leaving him content.

He put down his mess kit, stood, and stretched. The woods had performed their wizardry again. The quiet and isolation had pushed all the tension from the onslaught of other people's thoughts from his mind, leaving a blissful calm. He strolled to the edge of the area with a smile. The still morning air was crisp with the sharp, almost antiseptic, odor of pine, and the scent of sap drying on sun-warmed wood wafting in. To the south and west, the jagged outline of the mountain ridges against a cloudless sky.

Nice morning, isn't it?

The thought rocketed into his mind from nowhere. Matt jumped, and his breathing became anxious and shallow. He cast a glance back to his tent and instinctively reached out to grab one of its metal support rods, as though he needed to ground himself. The voices left him alone out there. They'd never followed him so far out before. That was why he camped and hiked by himself as often as he could.

Sorry, dude, didn't mean to startle you.

Matt circled the campsite, his footsteps breaking the morning quiet around him. His eyes darted from tree to tree, hoping that he was wrong and that someone else was there. But with every passing minute, it became more and more clear: he was completely alone.

His brain filled with all the doubts and fears he had kept at bay for years. Could all of his head doctors be correct? Were the voices he heard in his mind figments of his imagination, the mark of a slow descent into insanity? Or were they the actual thoughts of other people he could pick up? He'd long believed that. No, that opened the possibility of error. He corrected himself: he long knew he could read

the thoughts of others. Problem was, there was no mind to read now because nobody was near him.

He felt a chill run down his spine as he circled back to the original question. Was he losing his grip on reality? He rejected that idea immediately.

No, there was some other explanation. There had to be. There must be.

“Who are you? Where are you?” he called.

Dense bushes and trees hemmed in this small pocket of space. Matt couldn’t see anything beyond the edge of his campsite. The undergrowth was so thick it could conceal an entire football team. He turned in a complete circle, his eyes moving from tree to tree, between them, along the ground, searching for the source of the invading thought.

The silence in his skull was total and unnerving. Matt stopped, shutting his eyes and tilting his head like a puzzled German Shepard, concentrating on locating the other voice again. His mind picked up nothing.

A hand dropped on his shoulder.

Matt cried out and spun around.

A guy, perhaps two or three years older than him, stood behind him. He smiled and stuck out his hand. “Trent Spencer.”

Matt hesitated a second, then warily shook. “Matt Storm.”

There was an awkward pause.

“I never expected to find another one out here, in the middle of the woods.” Trent jammed his hands into his jeans pockets as he took in the view.

“Another what?” Matt asked cautiously.

Trent nodded toward Matt and grinned. “Another telepath, of course.”

Chapter Two

MATT STAGGERED BACK A few steps, almost like he had been slugged. He checked Trent up and down. The two were six feet tall. The visitor had wavy blonde hair and a square jaw. In fact, his entire head consisted of distinct angles. He looked like a movie cowboy, wearing jeans, boots, and a black t-shirt snug against a muscular torso and arms. They were working muscles, not of a gym rat, a marked contrast to Matt's slender build.

Matt suddenly realized Trent's thoughts were a complete blank to him.

Trent must have noticed the confusion. He grinned as though at a private joke, then reached into one pocket. Rapidly, Trent's mind became clear, and Matt could read his thoughts.

"You're like me," Matt whispered in amazement. Waves of conflicting emotions smashed into him: relief, anxiety, fear, joy. The feelings swirled down to a single thought: Trent was another telepath. It was as if he had been an alien stranded in a strange world for seventeen years and had now encountered one of his own kind out of nowhere. At the same time, he felt naked, his mind exposed. He backed to three feet from Trent.

“Is that your distance, your limit? About three feet?” Trent didn’t wait for a response. “Mine’s five.”

Matt placed himself another two feet back.

Trent held up his hands and laughed. “Whoa, dude, whoa. I don’t want you to back into the next county. Do you really want to communicate this way? The OG way? I mean, actually talking? We don’t have to, you know.”

Matt nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I do. Call it a force of habit.”

“Fine by me.” Trent shrugged and pointed at the coffee pot resting on the camp stove. “May I? Smells great.”

Matt gestured *go ahead*.

The visitor slipped off his backpack, poured himself a cup of coffee, and sat down. “Go on, have a seat. This is your camp, after all. Don’t worry, my rabies shot is current.”

Matt sat cross-legged on the ground, four feet away. Trent appeared calm and affable, although some underlying tension existed, not only in his posture but flowing out from his body as well. Perhaps it was the way he clutched the tin cup, or that his eyes constantly darted around.

His visitor blew on the hot brew a couple of times and sipped. He took in the view approvingly. “I understand why you enjoy being out here. So peaceful, so quiet. No cars, no phones, no barking dogs ...”

“No other people’s thoughts,” Matt added.

The two locked eyes. Trent nodded after taking another drink. “No other people’s thoughts,” he responded evenly.

Matt gasped audibly and leaned forward as he noticed his Trent’s eyes. Matt’s eyes were a pale, almost colorless, blue. Trent’s were the same color as his, exactly. Trent gave a half-smile. Matt flushed with embarrassment as he straightened up. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to stare. I never have

seen that color of eyes on anybody else. Not my parents or even any other person in my family,” he explained lamely. “Nobody except you.”

“This may be a genetic marker,” Trent said as tapped an index finger under his left eye.

“A genetic marker?”

“Of our ... talent, shall we call it?” Trent smiled, a knowing grin between two people who shared an insider’s secret. “But I’m not sure. You’re the only other telepath I’ve run into.”

“You too,” Matt fumbled over his words as his thoughts jammed up. “I thought I was the only one—I mean, the only real one. Like, other than some in the movies, but that’s phony ... either I was the only true one, or I was ...” his voice trailed off.

“Crazy?” Trent finished. “I understand that feeling. Hearing people’s voices when they aren’t talking, and all that? Most people find that a little weird.”

“Man, if you only knew,” he paused, “Maybe you do.” Matt figured if anyone would understand him, it would be Trent. Finally, somebody he could confide in and stop pretending to be what he wasn’t. His words spurted out, his voice suddenly intense and edged with urgency. “I mean, I can see into people’s minds. Someone else’s thoughts pop up in my head, whether I want them to or not. I hear them like the birds singing or cars going by. I pick up my mom making up grocery lists. I answer questions before I’m asked.”

He leaned forward and stabbed his index finger in the dirt for emphasis. “The worst part is if I tell anybody else that I understand their thoughts, they stare like I have three

heads sprouting out of my neck and little green monsters are dancing in my hair. They looked at me like something was wrong with *my* mind, but what they have in *their* heads is what was wrong. People want me to understand that kind of thing isn't real because it doesn't make sense or because it makes them uncomfortable or because it means they have to change how they think. The truth is they exist, these voices, these thoughts in my head."

Matt tried to stop his words, but he might as well have tried to halt the ocean tide with his bare hands. "Hear talking in your head? I tell you I can read minds? Well, off to the neurologist I go. I could have a tumor or some other nasty thing growing in my skull. After all that checks out negative, next stop: the shrink. They perch in their fancy high-backed leather chairs, fingers tented together, like ... like some all-knowing god. Here, tell me, when did you first think when you started hearing these voices? Was it around puberty? What do they say to you? Are they speaking to you now? Are they giving you commands? Do you remember potty training? So, I tried to pretend I made the whole thing up as a joke. Somehow that makes everything worse. I mean, come on! I wouldn't make up something nutty like that unless I honestly had something seriously wrong upstairs."

Agitated now, Matt jumped to his feet. "First visit this shrink, then that one, and the other two floors up. No progress? There's always another one, the next flight up. Here, lie down, make yourself comfortable. Here, have some pills. These cute little blue ones will shut those unpleasant voices up. But they don't stop them because the voices I'm hearing in my head aren't fake, but real.

Theirs. Their thoughts. I don't want them, but there they are, sucking up space in my brain. My parents give each other worried looks about me, their nut-case kid. They didn't sign up for this. Skinned knees, a broken leg perhaps, but not this. Not a fruit-bat crazy child. A tumor would have been better. At least that could be cut out, a precise physical explanation, tying up everything in a sleek, tidy package."

"At last I figured out how to have some peace, get all these people away from me. I finally allowed myself to be cured." He threw his arms wide and shouted the word to the sky. "Hallelujah! The head doctors and the pills—which I flushed down the toilet or pocketed in my mouth—work. Ta-da! Look at me! I'm a success story in the world of modern mental health treatment." Matt sat again and released a lengthy breath. "Man, oh man. That was really, really excellent. I've never been able to tell that to anybody else. Ever." He flashed an embarrassed smile. "Sorry about the drama."

Trent shook his head and grinned. "No worries. It seemed like it needed to be aired out."

"The vintage has been bottled a long time." Matt shook his head and grinned back. "I guess you understand."

"I grew up on a cattle ranch in the high desert," Trent said. "Lots of, um, can we say, interesting people live out there. Get this." He smiled and counted off on his fingers. "Healing from crystals, getting a massage based on the polarities from the earth's magnetic field, folks building bunkers to survive the newest trendy mega-disaster leading to the utter breakdown of civilization. I mean, the couple on the next parcel to the north built a landing pad

for UFOs. Lights and everything. No joke. It wasn't unusual for me to say I was telepathic."

"I guess not."

They both laughed.

Trent gestured toward Matt. "So you're in high school? A, what ..."

Matt nodded. "Senior this coming year. I suppose you're in college."

"Was." Trent glanced behind Matt's shoulder for a second as if he saw something, or expected to, before returning his gaze to Matt. "Was in college."

"I guess you didn't like it."

"No, I liked it fine." Trent chuckled. "Pretty easy to uncover what the professors wanted. I simply sat in the front row and spat their thoughts back at them. They ate it up with a spoon. I just confirmed their high opinion of themselves. Of course, I also found out what they thought of the students. Really ugly."

Matt laughed as well. "I try to sit near the smart kids at school. Makes taking tests a cinch. I have a great GPA, no study or effort required. So why did you leave college?"

Trent shook his head. "I had reasons."

Matt waited for Trent to elaborate. He didn't. Questions tumbled into Matt's mind like clothes off a shelf, endless and overstuffed, overwhelming his ability to ask them. "I always wondered what I would say, or ask, if I met another ... telepath ... but now, I just can't think ..." He was silent for a second. "Hey, how many are there? Of us, I mean, our... kind, with our ... power," Matt groped for words. "Like, I thought I was some freak of nature. Instead, you're like me... or me like you. Our telepathy is only another part of

us. Like hands or thumbs or the facility to remember things that never happened or the thrill of seeing your name in print for the first time.” Matt burst out laughing. “I don’t even know what I’m talking about.”

Trent sat calmly, waiting in his own space, peering into Matt’s eyes and watching the young man’s excitement boil over.

Matt relaxed and finished, “Like, we can’t be the only ones out of billions on earth. There has to be more.”

“There must be. The probability is too large that there aren’t. But how many?” Trent spread his hands. “Tens? Hundreds? Who knows?”

“So I’m not alone,” Matt was as relaxed and happy as he had been for years. “There are others!” he shouted at his sudden outburst of happiness. He grinned broadly and giggled like a child.

“Trouble is, there isn’t any way to meet them,” Trent said. “You would only discover another telepath by walking past them. It’s random, like my running into you.”

“Hey, I got an idea!” Matt exclaimed. “Let’s hold a convention! We could post on the internet that all telepaths—”

“No!” Trent barked out as a command, cutting him off. He stiffened and leaned toward Matt, his eyes blazing. He emphasized his words, jabbing his finger. “No! Don’t let them find out!” After a second, he simmered down, collected himself, and sat back. “Not a good idea.”

“Okay, okay. Scratch the convention,” Matt said, a little surprised at the reaction to his joke. There was a moment of silence. “Hey, when did you notice you could do ... it?”

“Hmm?” Trent’s mind seemed to be elsewhere, as though Matt’s gag had pulled up terrible memories. “About seven or eight, I think.”

“Me too, me too,” Matt went on excitedly. “I couldn’t get a complete picture of what they were thinking. Then I got older, and I started hearing their actual words.”

Trent nodded. “Same here. Telepathy must be like language or motor skills. It develops as you grow up.”

A thought suddenly occurred to Matt. “Wait a minute. How did you sneak up on me? I mean, tough to do to a telepath. Can you do some kind of mind trick, like hypnosis or something, to make your mind blank?”

Trent shook his head and pulled a small instrument out of his right pocket. Not a great deal bigger than a deck of cards, it looked like a sophisticated piece of military espionage equipment, something Matt would see on a television show. It was made of a deep black plastic, with a switch on one side.

“I used this. A neuro-pulsamic-jammer.”

“A what?”

“Neuro-pulsamic-jammer,” Trent repeated. “The idea behind it is relatively simple. It broadcasts all the waves the human brain produces—alpha, beta, theta, delta, gamma, lambda. Think of it as a fan. When a fan is running, it creates white noise, it generates a bunch of sound frequencies that block out other noise. This does the same thing. Masks out all the neural noise. Telepaths can’t hack through the interference, either way.”

Matt got to his knees and pointed at the jammer. “Dude, I want that. I need that. To stop all those people’s thoughts from taking up my head space. Where can I get one?”

Trent stopped Matt with a raised hand. “This is it. The one and only.” He turned the device in his hand as he looked at it. “I don’t even understand how it works. I mean, I know the principle, but how it does what it does ...” He shook his head.

“How did you get it?”

“Well, it doesn’t, in fact, belong to me,” Trent admitted.

“Somebody gave it to you?”

Trent shook his head.

“In other words, you stole it.” Matt sat back.

“Let’s say I possess it through an extended, unauthorized loan.” Trent grinned, then drank some more coffee. “And I probably used it too long already,” he spoke quietly and rapidly as he pushed the button on the device and stuffed it into a pocket again, glancing around nervously.

In his eagerness to see the gear, Matt got up and moved towards Trent. “At least let me look at it before you put it away. Maybe I can work out—”

“No. Stay out of range. The jammer is turned off. I’ve thought of them. You can read my mind and find out.” He got up and stumbled into a tree. He held out his palms, shaking his head. “No, dude, no, seriously, back off.”

Matt stopped, then retreated backwards about six feet, hands up in surrender. “Okay, dude, chill, chill. Weren’t you all about not communicating the old-school way?” He pointed to Trent’s pocket where he put the jammer. “Why did you say you used it too long? Is it dangerous? Radioactivity or something?”

Trent shook his head, then anxiously looked behind himself, as though he caught a noise in the brush. “No, not radiation. They can trace it,” he said in a low voice.

He turned his attention back to Matt. “When I thought of them, they came to the top of my mind. If you get too close, you might read who they are. That may be ... may not be good for you to know.” Trent shrugged and sat. He picked up the coffee cup as if had nothing happened.

“Who are *they*?” Matt asked. “A rogue group in the government? The ever-popular evil multinational corporation?”

Trent said nothing.

Matt nodded and sat down again. “Okay,” he said, knowing he wouldn’t get a reply to any more questions.

A sharp noise rustled the trees to his left. Trent tensed, almost standing once more.

“Just a pine cone falling,” Matt said.

Trent gave an anxious smile. “Yeah, yeah, of course.”

Matt didn’t have to read Trent’s mind to see that he had abruptly become more skittish, like a young colt. He was trying to maintain a devil-may-care attitude while expecting Satan to jump out of the earth at any moment to demand his soul.

Trent drained his cup, put it down, and stood. He held out his hand. The suddenness of the move took Matt by surprise, and he climbed to his feet less than gracefully. He stepped forward and took Trent’s hand.

Squeezing Matt’s hand tightly, Trent stared into his eyes. Matt received a thought from Trent, aimed as if by a laser: *the key is under the bed liner.*

Matt frowned. “What? What—”

“Nice meeting you.” Trent released Matt’s hand and snatched up his backpack. He quickly backed a few feet and pointed at Matt. “Stay safe, dude, stay safe.” Trent

turned and plunged back into the forest like an airline passenger making a tight connection.

Matt stared after Trent until he couldn't follow his movement anymore. He stood mutely in the morning sun's warmth, then shivered as he recalled Trent's parting words.

Stay safe, dude, stay safe.