

## Chapter 1

Everyone has a book written just for them—the trick is finding it.

Derek Winnebaker found his book in the back corner of a supply closet, nestled between an ancient coffee pot and a stack of books about the future of US-Soviet relations. He'd been looking for chocolate syrup to make a mocha latte for a customer. He blew a puff of air on the cover and dust cascaded off, revealing a simple graphic: A man with a slight frame, large ears, and a tail, holding what looked to be a glowing red amulet in his hands. Above him, the name of the book and its author were printed in an ornate script: *The Strange Life and Times of Eldrid Babble* by Chester Felten.

Derek ran his fingers across the plastic dust jacket and thumbed through the mildewed pages, long ago damaged by a flood or leaky pipe. On the inside cover, he found a Pemberton Library borrowing card, suspiciously blank. Apparently, the book had never been checked out. He scanned the back cover, growing more and more curious. He

felt a pull to read the book, as if he'd been searching and scouring shelves just waiting to find Eldrid's story.

"Everything okay back there?" his boss, Sam, shouted, but for Derek, it felt near and distant at the same time. He fumbled nervously with the book and found himself once again fanning the pages, feeling the cool air on his face. Beneath the glare of the supply closet's lone overhanging bulb, its metal pull chain attached to a coffee cup pendant, he read the back cover:

*Dear Reader,*

*Welcome to Grimwell, a magical land of trolls, sorcerers, and of course, grimkins. Grimkins have managed to keep a low profile in the tales and yore of the past owing to their catlike agility and excellent sense of smell. In fact, only one mention of grimkins can be found in history, a brief sighting in the eighteenth century of a grimkin named Briggelbrog Bramble, whose tail was glimpsed at the military encampment of General George Washington.*

*But it's time for grimkins' long run of obscurity to end, for Mr. Eldrid Babble is about to embark on an adventure. An adventure quite out of character for the unsung grimkin, who prefers to be home building small-scale replicas of famous buildings or playing a solitary game of Fizzle, an even more complicated version of chess.*

*After being given a magical amulet that spreads darkness all throughout Grimwell, Eldrid Babble leaves the cozy little village of Crimpleton to break Lord Grittlebane's curse. Along the way, he'll meet Chester Felten, the author of this book who accidentally stumbles into the world of Grimwell during a fortuitous walk through the woods.*

*Located beneath a tree stump in the Ashton Town Forest, Grimwell is easy to trip over but almost impossible to leave. If you follow these pages to the end, you'll encounter giants, a ferocious beast called a brimble, and talking trees (if you cross a talking tree's path, please approach with caution—they're starved for company!). Maybe you'll even see yourself in one*

*of Grimwell's many colorful characters, including Eldrid Babble, his love interest Belinda Grabblebee, the wise and loquacious Grandfather Tree, or perhaps—there is a page for everyone, after all—a goblin or sorcerer.*

*Chester Felten is a World War II veteran, insurance salesman, and ambassador to the world of Grimwell. After telling Eldrid Babble's story to friends and family at the Ashton Town Picnic, he was encouraged to write the tale down so that others might learn of this remarkable land. This is his first novel.*

Sam was knocking at the door, giving Derek just enough time to stash the book behind his back, as if he'd uncovered something illicit.

"Just a second," Derek called out, grabbing the bottle of syrup, and opening the door.

"You've got a customer," Sam said.

"We're almost out of mocha," Derek said, still holding the book behind his back. He'd already started to feel an ownership over the strange title. *My book.*

"She's getting impatient," Sam said.

"Aren't they always?" Derek asked.

"We provide a service," Sam said.

"I'll be right there," Derek said.

Derek followed his manager and stashed the book beneath the till before making the impatient customer's drink.

This job was supposed to have been a brief detour after college until he went to grad school. He'd dreamed of many different lives for himself: a philosopher speculating on the nature of man, an archaeologist traversing the world in search of ancient treasures, a doctor treating and curing some of the world's worst diseases—Derek didn't know if doctors had groupies, though in his daydreams, they did—but in the end, there had simply been too many choices, and Derek had been unable to take that first step in the direction of a career. Career: the word sounded too final, a choice set in stone, a book already written.

Without a clear direction, or simply too many directions, he got a job at the Read and Bean Coffee Shop located right in the Pemberton Town Library. His ex, Janine, had called him “my little barista.”

“Did I order decaf?” the customer asked after Derek placed her drink on the bar.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t remember. He was usually on autopilot at the coffee shop. The same feeling as driving a car on a desolate stretch of highway only to realize twenty miles have passed without having bothered to take in the scenery.

Derek squinted at the customer. She had her hair pulled back in a bun, not a strand out of place. Lipstick perfectly applied, red and angry against her pale skin. Most likely an executive, making decisions in board rooms, firing people, taking long lunches before returning to the office.

“It should be on the cup,” Derek said, pointing at the side where he had written her name (Christina) and checked the decaf box for her triple almond milk one-hundred-eighty-degree no-foam mocha latte.

“I know, but did I *order* decaf?”

“If it’s on the cup...”

“No,” she said. “I don’t care if he’s on vacation with his family.”

It took Derek a minute to realize she had earbuds in. Dueling conversations.

“I’m sorry, I’m dealing with a situation.”

Derek smiled. “No worries.”

“The guy at the coffee shop is being dense.”

Derek’s smile disappeared.

“Could you make me a new one?”

She threw a quarter in the tip jar.

Derek sighed. He was finding it increasingly difficult to be polite to customers.

Still, despite the customer’s surly manner, Derek noticed the dark bags under her eyes. That singular look of stress and exhaustion that

accompanied the need for caffeine. Maybe she had been up late with a newborn, or fighting with a significant other, or maybe she was just battling insomnia. Or, Derek thought, as he steamed her milk, which Derek always thought sounded like a euphemism, maybe she worked in the FBI and was on the hunt for a serial killer who had left clues in coffee shops all across the country.

Derek often invented backstories for the customers to keep himself busy. And to tamp down the frustration. After all, it was hard to be mad at an FBI agent on the hunt for a serial killer.

In another world—another book, perhaps—Derek and the woman might even team up, traipsing through the pages as an unlikely pair, the barista and the agent, only he wouldn't be called "my little barista" in this version—take that, Janine—he'd be Special Agent Barista.

Too late he realized he'd already read a similar book, only instead of a barista it was a bartender named Jack and a CIA agent with the last name Coke. Located in the Thriller section. Derek couldn't remember the title.

"Hello?"

"Sorry," Derek said, once again coming back from autopilot and finishing her drink.

She grabbed the coffee and raised her eyebrows. Not bothering to say thanks.

"You're welcome," Derek couldn't help but call after her.

The library was located on Pemberton's main strip, and the coffee shop could be found on the ground floor facing the street. Floor-to-ceiling windows had been installed—to lure people away from Starbucks with its grand views of Elm Street—and so Derek often got the feeling that he was in a zoo, an oddity to be ogled at by passersby. From his spot at the till, he had a perfect view of the fiction section on the ground floor and the nonfiction section on the second floor, the shelves lined up like intricately etched dominoes. The ceiling sloped down over the coffee shop and a series of bright globes hung

from wooden rafters, as if replicating a solar system in a distant galaxy. The dividing line between art and commerce—or coffee and books—lines which often blurred in the course of a day—was the end of a blue nylon rug and the beginning of checkered red and white tile. The Bean's colors.

Since he first began working at the Bean, both the library and coffee shop had gone through some major renovations, which is why some of the old books had been haphazardly stored in the Bean's coffee closet. All things considered, it wasn't a terrible job, and because the store was part of the library, Derek had access to as many books as he wanted. A perfect excuse to explore the many different lives he wasn't living himself.

At first, he'd stuck to the Philosophy section, reading abstruse Kant and Nietzsche, the English philosophers with their rigid certainty, before finally finishing right in America with freewheeling William James. Still, his learning hadn't gotten him anything beyond a few interesting tidbits to share with customers during the morning rush. Nothing wakes people up like a walk through the history of nihilism. Next, he branched off into fiction, first focusing on the classics, then reading the Book of the Month Club picks, including the previously mentioned *Jack and Coke*. The title had come to him while watching the surly customer walk away. As of late, he'd been in the Home and Garden section, learning all about bulbs and seeds and the best climate to grow echinacea. He didn't think he'd ever actually grow echinacea but he liked knowing he could. He liked knowing things, period. So, when he found the old and tattered book about a strange creature called a grimkin, he happily stashed it in his backpack, looking forward to reading it when he returned home from his shift.

\* \* \*

Derek lived in a studio apartment right above a bar named McDowell's. "Studio" was a generous description for the ten-by-ten box Derek called home. Derek suspected the landlord had gotten away with renting out an old supply closet by making a few haphazard renovations and adding a small window. Still, the apartment was just barely affordable on Derek's hourly wages. It fit a couch that turned into a sleeper, a small flat-screen TV shoved up against the wall, and a coffee table that doubled as his kitchen table. Despite the size, he did have his own bathroom, which was more than Derek could say for some of the other apartments on the market. He also had room for not one, but two hot plates. He had yet to use either.

Derek thought living above a bar would make meeting people easier, as he hadn't really had much of a social life ever since Janine left. Janine had gotten the apartment (which Derek couldn't afford anyway), the dog (a Shi Tzu named Ron), and all of their friends. True, they had been Janine's friends from law school, but he had tricked himself into believing they'd become part of his life too.

As he usually did on Friday nights, Derek tucked a book into his jacket pocket—that night it was *The Strange Life and Times of Eldrid Babble*—and went down to McDowell's for dinner, where he dreamed of being greeted like a regular. "Derek!" they would all shout as he walked in. "Have you met Derek?" someone might say. "He's the lead geneticist on the human genome project." Derek didn't know where that last fantasy came from, most likely from a book (he'd worked through the General Science section about three years ago, just before the breakup, at which point he abruptly switched to Self-Help). Regardless, deep down he still believed he was destined for greatness. That beneath his average exterior lay the thumping heart of a hero.

Instead of shouts and accolades as he entered McDowell's, Derek found himself on the receiving end of a tepid wave from Julius, the

bartender, whose day job appeared to be bodybuilder. Derek's sitcom life wasn't materializing.

"You're too in your own head," Janine had told him.

"You have no motivation," she'd added.

"I'm just looking for someone with more of a sense of adventure."  
Maybe she was right.

The restaurant was busy, with each shiny lacquer table occupied. Derek spotted a lone stool at the bar, right beneath one of the overhanging lights—his favorite spot. While an Irish pub in name, McDowell's had undergone a fancy makeover, and so the Guinness sign was traded for modernist Rorschach-inspired artwork—is it a dolphin or a physical representation of unresolved issues with my dad? Derek had wondered—the old chalkboards were swapped out for mirrors, and the sticky floor had been replaced with a shiny reflective tile that made you feel like you were walking across thin ice. Luckily, the bar was still dingy and dim, somewhere between a cave and candle-lit.

Derek sat down at the bar and Julius slid a menu toward him, not bothering to say anything. Julius's bulging muscles pressed against his skin-tight black T-shirt, the fabric practically rippling. With a bald head and hoop earring, he seemed to be actively emulating Mr. Clean. At least in appearance. No way was Mr. Clean such a jerk.

"Hi, Julius."

Julius grunted in return.

On Derek's right, there was Boris, a retired "agent" (most likely real estate), and on his left sat Gerald, a semi-retired Town Works employee. They ate at the bar every night—usually on either side of him. For some reason, they needed a buffer seat in between, as if afraid to fully commit to their friendship. Both of their wives had died a few years ago and they'd been thrown unwillingly into bachelorhood again.

"What are you reading?" Boris asked, his mustache wiggling as he spoke. He had a habit of cupping his beer belly as if cradling a baby.



“*The Strange Life and Times of Eldrid Babble*,” Derek said nonchalantly, as if announcing the latest bestseller. He looked down at the cover, scrutinizing the strange creature holding a glowing red amulet. Derek had been thinking about the book ever since he left the Bean. Something strange about the cover and the fact that it had been hidden in the back of the supply closet as if forbidden. As he opened the book to the title page, crammed with rudimentary pencil sketches of grimkins and what appeared to be a talking tree, he noticed something he hadn’t seen while browsing the book in the Bean’s supply closet: A stamp that read *From the Personal Library of Jackson Wilfred*.

Jackson Wilfred had been the director of the library before Derek started working at the Bean. Known for turning Pemberton’s small-town library into a world-class institution, he had left his post just as the renovations began.

“Never heard of it,” Gerald said. While Boris was short and portly, Gerald was tall and lanky. Similar to an avatar in a video game, he appeared to only have one look: jeans and a tucked-in T-shirt about being a grandpa (today’s shirt featured the message *This Is What An Awesome Grandpa Looks Like*). “I’m more of an encyclopedia guy myself.”

“I don’t read,” Julius said, a hint of resignation in his voice.

“You need to read a real novelist,” Boris said, turning to Derek. “Dostoevsky. Chekov. Pushkin.”

“You’re making those names up,” Gerald said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Derek saw Kat, one of the waitresses, approach the bar. Kat was a big part of the reason why Derek ate dinner at McDowell’s so often, even when a frozen pizza would have been more economical. Whenever he saw her, he couldn’t help but think of his foray into the Romance section of the library. Lines describing the sultry sway of hips or the rolling hills of curves (both true in Kat’s case). The omnipresent description of hair falling,

flowing, or cascading down shoulders (although Kat usually had her curly brown hair tied in a ponytail, Derek imagined it would be a deluge if she let it down). And of course, the eyes: always batting, always shining, always deep as the ocean (McDowell's was dim, but Kat's brown eyes did seem to glow, cliché or not). For Derek, Kat made romance fiction seem realer—or if not realer, at least truer—than any other genre.

“What did we think of the special today?” Kat asked, sliding her tray on the bar. Although Kat was a waitress, the owner let her create a special during each shift she worked, which Derek always made sure to order and *mmm* loudly whenever she was nearby—his approach to flirting.

Boris kissed his fingers in a dramatic gesture.

Gerald showed his clean plate. “One of your best yet,” he said.

“I’ll take the special,” Derek said to Julius. “And a side of fries.”

“Already put your order in,” Julius said. “Mr. Special and a Side of Fries.”

“A bit of a departure for me,” Kat said. “Ceviche is an art and Julius didn’t think our clientele would go for fish.”

“It’s not even cooked,” Julius said defensively.

“It’s the citrus,” Kat said.

“Is my orange juice cooked?” Julius said. “Huh? Is it?”

“Ignore this heathen,” Boris said. “Any pictures of the little guy?” Kat had a son, around two years old, and from what Derek knew, no husband or boyfriend in the picture. Derek wished there was a formal application process for dating; he could really shine on a piece of paper.

Kat pulled out her phone and scrolled through her photos before showing one of a curly-headed boy going down a slide, smiling wide from ear to ear.

“Look at him,” Boris said. “He’s going to be an Olympian.”

“An athlete if I ever saw one,” Gerald said.

Boris and Gerald turned to Derek, awaiting a response.

“Look at those cheekbones,” Derek said, spitting out the first thing that came to him.

“Those he gets from his father,” Kat said. “His brute strength comes from me.” Kat curled her bicep. “Am I right, Julius?”

To which Julius pumped his pectorals. “Not bad,” he said.

“Show off,” Boris said.

“What are we reading tonight?” Kat asked Derek.

Derek held up *The Strange Life and Times of Eldrid Babble*. Still recovering from his cheekbone comment. Not quite ready to speak. No clever dialogue at the ready.

“Looks interesting,” Kat said.

“He needs to read the Russians,” Boris said.

“Did you know the Russian alphabet has twice as many vowels as English?” Gerald said.

“Is that true?”

“Yup. Saw it on my grandson’s internet.”

“And twice as many ways to say fuck you,” Boris said, laughing loudly at his own joke.

Kat drummed her fingers on the bar, waiting for her drinks. “And I’m sure you know them all.”

Derek got the sense that he was watching the scene from far away. He was tired of feeling like a side character in every facet of his life. Playing a secondary role at the coffee shop, at the bar, even in his own family, where his brother had somehow become the successful one.

He should’ve listened to his dad and become a lawyer. And not only because Janine had cheated on him with a lawyer in the laundry room of their apartment building (so many books in the Self-Help section, but nothing approaching how to scrub that particular memory). Maybe then he’d have more money. More prestige. More of a life. More Janine.

Silence settled over the bar. Derek didn’t know what to say to Kat. She probably had customers hit on her all the time. She was just trying

to make a living. But he could imagine a world where he asked her out. He could start with something simple like, “How about after work you let me buy you a drink.” Or he could offer to perform some sort of manual labor on her home, like installing a door or re-shingling her roof (he’d finished most of the books in the Home Improvement section just last week). Or maybe he should just go with his application idea and submit a resume detailing the reasons he’d make a good boyfriend.

No, none of those sounded right. He couldn’t even get it right in his fantasies. There were just too many possibilities. The world full of blank pages that couldn’t be rewritten. So, he didn’t say anything. Still waiting for his food to arrive, he cracked open his book and began reading.

\* \* \*

*Eldrid Babble was going on a mission to save the world, though he didn’t know it yet.*

*Eldrid lived in a large and rather fine hut in the small village of Crimpleton. Like all the huts in Crimpleton, it was made of stone and crowned with a thatched roof of shabberberry bush, one of the most versatile plants in Grimwell. His front window looked out on Crimpleton Common, a bustling area of town filled with stores, food, and games. Eldrid preferred to keep his window closed. He wasn’t very fond of noise. Or other grimkins, for that matter.*

*What’s a grimkin, you ask? Grimkins live just beyond the veil of our world, hidden from the prying eyes of humans in a land called Grimwell. It was a lucky accident that led me to find them myself (of course luck is in the eye of the beholder). But I digress. Because I’m part of this story too. However, I didn’t meet Eldrid until later, soon after his journey had begun.*

*Now, where were we?*

*Eldrid Babble, the hero of our tale, had large teeth, oversized ears—even by a grimkin’s standards—and stringy hair. He had on black trousers, a white linen shirt, and a maroon vest with a gold pocket*

*watch tucked in his breast pocket. He was sitting on a plush purple couch admiring his handiwork on a small-scale replica of the tallest building in Grimwell, a stone monolith that presided over the capital called the Summit. Only one piece remained: the spiral tip. Like most grimkins, Eldrid loved building miniature models—his way of bringing the world to him without all the hassle of venturing to distant lands and sleeping in inns on uncomfortable shabberberry beds.*

*As he crowned the Summit with the final piece, the doorbell rang.*

*He quickly got up, walking by the bookcase that featured his mother and father's many books about their adventures around Grimwell (their intrepid spirit had apparently skipped a generation). In his haste to answer the door, his tail clipped the framed photos on the hutch in the entryway, sending one of his grandfather in a soldier's uniform toppling over. Most grimkins are quick and catlike, but not Eldrid. His entire life he'd been called clumsy. Other names too: grumpy, cowardly, antisocial, even brimpled, which is a very common insult in the land of Grimwell that means "unsmiling."*

*Eldrid liked to stay at home where everything was just how he liked it. If that made him brimpled, so be it. Unlike the other neighboring huts, with their plain stone fronts and black shutters, Eldrid had added a splash of color and painted his door a bright purple, his favorite color, and his shutters a bright blue, his second favorite color. He didn't mind standing out, so long as he could stay in. Last year, after receiving one too many visitors, he'd enlisted Freegle, Crimpton's blacksmith, to forge a sign that read: Before you knock once, think twice. The six words made him smile each time he arrived home. In the front of his hut, he planted a garden with squash, tomatoes, and grimplehoot, a bitter herb that Eldrid liked to sprinkle on pretty much everything.*

*He opened the door and saw Mayor Frumple waiting on his stoop, hat in hand.*

*Mayor Frumple was on the larger side of a grimkin and was occasionally mistaken for a growler, a species of troll that inhabits the*

*northern edges of Grimwell. He always wore a suit, which isn't all that different from the type of suit worn by humans, with the exception of a wide tie that looks more like a bib, and, I'm told, fulfills the same function. Grimkins are notorious for their messy eating habits. His large, shifty eyes seemed to never blink, and his mouth only had two expressions: ecstatic and overjoyed. Rumor had it that no one had ever seen Mayor Frumple frown because he suffered from a rare birth defect that gave his lips a permanent curl. Gradually, at least according to gossip, Mayor Frumple had forgotten the difference between smiling and not smiling.*

*"Mr. Babble," Mayor Frumple said, his voice booming as if giving a speech in Crimpleton Common.*

*"Mayor Frumple," Eldrid said, peering nervously around his door as sunlight splashed his entryway—much to Eldrid's dismay. Eldrid wasn't all that crazy about sunlight—he sunburned very easily—and he was even less crazy about visitors.*

*"I'm just going door to door to speak to my constituents," Mayor Frumple said.*

*Of course, Eldrid thought, election season is on the horizon. "And you want to be assured you have my vote, am I correct?"*

*"Well, yes. But I also want to make sure I have your trust." His smile deepened, almost as if someone was turning an unseen fulcrum, stretching Mayor Frumple's skin taut. The election was, as grimkins said, in the hollyhoot (a type of bag worn by grimkins). The only issue to speak of was whether or not Crimpleton should strengthen their ties to the capital, Grim City. Mayor Frumple had outlined all the potential investment opportunities if they chose to align closer to the capital city, while his challenger, the blacksmith Freegle, had advocated for more independence, even sending around a pamphlet claiming Mayor Frumple was a puppet of Lord Grittlebane, who had recently become the mayor of Grim City. However, Mayor Frumple had much flashier buttons. And buttons mattered in Grimwell's elections. Sad, but true.*

*"I'd like to talk to you a little bit about my plans for the year. If I'm elected, of course."*

*"I really don't have time," Eldrid said. "I'm in the middle of something quite important."*

*That wasn't exactly true, then again, it all depended on your definition of "important." After all, he did have to find a place for the Summit and his shelves were already crowded with other builds, including the Golden Pyramid of Frimington, the Shrinking City of Bengaloo, and the Tree House (where the Council of Trees met each fall and embarked on three days of exhausting small talk). The entirety of Grimwell—at least the places worth seeing—all lay right there in Eldrid's hut.*

*"I'm quite familiar with your platform," Eldrid said, closing the door slightly, a not-so-subtle hint that he was ready to return to the comfort of his home.*

*Mayor Frumple stuck his foot in the door just as Eldrid was about to slam it shut.*

*"One last thing." Mayor Frumple leaned down so he was eye level with Eldrid. "I'm also warning everyone that a sorcerer carrying a staff was seen in the forest by a few of the neighborhood grimpledees" (grimkin slang for kids). "Probably just exaggerating or making up stories, but if you see anyone out of the ordinary, please alert me as soon as possible."*

*Eldrid felt a shiver run up and down his spine. Sorcerer? The word reminded Eldrid of the stories his grandfather used to tell when he was growing up. Tales about the First Grimkins, forced to leave their homes and fight in faraway, unrelenting lands to defeat dark magic. Eldrid was happy right at home. With his small-scale replicas that spoke of civilization. Of order. Of safe adventures of the mind that only cost a few hundred grimkies.*

*"Thank you, Mayor Frumple," Eldrid said.*

*As Eldrid closed his door, he made sure to double bolt the lock and place a chair in front of the knob for good measure.*

\* \* \*

“Then I say to him, either I plow your street or you shovel your entire neighborhood out,” Gerald said as Derek looked up from the book.

“Snow here is like dust. Growing up, it would sometimes be up to here.” Boris held his hand over his head. Boris had a way of exaggerating his past. Tall tales that often reached the ceiling. As to whether or not his stories were true, it all depended on your definition of truth.

“To be fair, his wife was pregnant. But it still doesn’t give him any right to honk his horn at me.”

“How’s the book?” Boris asked.

“Interesting,” Derek said.

Julius brought over Derek’s ceviche and a side of fries.

“Thanks, Julius.”

Julius solemnly slid over a napkin and carefully laid out a fork and knife, as if Derek’s first bite might be his last. “Good luck.”

While Derek wasn’t known for his spirit of culinary adventure, he always made a point to order anything Kat put on the menu, which had led him to try escargot (suspiciously labeled from farm to table), beets in a variety of guises, and nachos made with... wait for it... seaweed. All were delicious.

Kat returned for a moment and puffed a few loose strands of hair out of her eyes. Derek took a bite and *mmmed* loudly, pretending to be lost in the book.

“Good, right?”

Derek nodded, trying to think of something else to say besides *mmm*. “Mmm.”

Kat smiled, placed a glass of wine on her tray, and once again disappeared.

If he could just ask her out, maybe his life would be different. Maybe then he’d be the hero of his story. But for some reason, whenever he



thought about taking that step—taking any step at all—he felt his body tense, and the possibility of speaking became impossible, his voice locked in a cage, only able to rattle bars with a throat-clear or mumble.

He finished the ceviche, dipping the fries in the remaining herbs and spices, and then walked up the flight of steps to his apartment.

Derek was going on a mission to save the world. At least his world. He just didn't know it yet.

\* \* \*

Inside his apartment, he sat down on his couch, which also doubled as his bed. The walls were bare. No time to decorate. At least that's what he told guests. Or guest. That one time Janine had come over to drop off the rest of his stuff. The truth was, he had no reason to decorate. He had reached a point in his life where the need for survival had overtaken any other impulse. Life had been subsumed by an animal instinct, shorn of the usual frills and joys of existence. It was as if the future had receded when Janine left him. Now he was officially on his own. But it wasn't a liberating feeling. It was crushing. Like being lost at sea without a ship in sight.

Luckily, he still had the library. A steady source of ideas to consume on his lunch breaks, during lulls behind the register, while restocking shelves and creating mocha mix, or, if there was truly nothing to do, wiping down surfaces with a rag (he'd gotten very skilled at the one-handed book hold). Books were his escape and ideas were the currency he got paid in—the only problem was those ideas didn't really translate into an interesting life outside the pages.

They were just small-scale replicas of all the places he'd never get the chance to visit. All the lives he'd never get the chance to live.