

Carl Prescott and The Sleeping One

Book One of the Isle of Prophets Series

Chapter 1

Carl Prescott had few friends and only one who mattered. As he walked out of the school building, he could see her looking his way. He smiled and waved. She smiled but was unable to wave back because of the stack of books she carried clutched to her chest. Grace Mulligan had more friends, but Carl was her favorite. Each day, they sat together on the bus ride to and from Lincoln Middle School in Chula Vista, California, to their homes a few miles distant from the school. Even now, three of her girlfriends were chatting with her. As Carl approached, they said their goodbyes and scattered. He was bothered by their indifference to him, but Grace's smile washed all of his concerns away.

"Hi, Carl," she sang. "Don't mind them."

"I don't really. You're the only friend I need, Grace."

She smiled as they climbed aboard the bus and moved quickly down the aisle. They knew the drill. Long ago, they had been relegated to the back of the bus by the more popular students. Their presence in the company of the cool kids somehow diminished their sense of importance. Today was different. There was another boy Carl had not met before sitting on the back bench seat and looking out the window. As they approached, Grace said, "Hi, Burt, this is my best friend, Carl. Carl, Burt just started here today."

"Nice to meet you, Burt."

"You too, Carl. How come you weren't in our class today?"

Grace replied, "Carl is in the advanced class with all the other brainiacs."

"That's cool," Burt replied.

“Not really. They ignore me as much as the rest of the kids do, but I don’t care.” The bus began to pull away. “So, where are you from?”

“My mom was transferred here from St. Joe, Missouri. My dad died a few years ago. Losing him hasn’t been easy on her.”

“What have we got here, a new freak?” a male voice said. The three turned their attention to Mark Anderson, one of the coolest of the cool kids, who now stood facing them in the aisle.

“Leave us alone, Mark,” Grace said.

“Why do you hang out with the freaks, Grace? You can do better than them.”

“Just go away, already,” she replied. “They are my friends.”

Mark put his hand to his forehead to form an L, laughed, and then turned around. Suddenly, the bus driver slammed on the brakes, and Mark fell to the floorboards with a bang.

“Sorry,” the driver said, “but there was a cat running in front. You kids are supposed to stay in your seats!”

Mark stood uneasily and moved back to his seat.

Carl looked out the side window and saw the cat continuing to the other sidewalk. It stopped, turned to look at him, and winked. Carl thought about telling the others, but realized they would think he was imagining things.

All three exited at the same stop. Burt said he lived in an apartment building two blocks over and to the left, while Carl and Grace headed down the street to their homes, conveniently across the street from one another. He followed Grace to the door and waited while she unlocked it. “You didn’t have to walk me this far, Carl.”

He looked down for a second and replied, “I just wanted to thank you for standing up for me.”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re my best friend. How could I not?” She went inside and closed the door.

He could feel the flush of heat on his face after her kiss. Was today the first time she had kissed him?

He turned around to head home and stopped cold. A cat sat where the sidewalk met the path to her front door. It looked like the same cat he had seen earlier, but the incident had happened a few minutes ago and more than a mile away. He smiled at himself for the silly thought and headed toward it. When he reached the animal, it stood and rubbed itself against his legs. He reached down and petted it, and the cat began to purr. After a moment, it headed down the street. “That was freaky,” he said out loud. Then he looked both ways, crossed the street, and unlocked the front door. He stepped inside and locked the door behind him.

“Is that you, Carl?”

“Yes, Mom. I didn’t think you’d be home,” he replied.

“I’m in a little meeting in the dining room. Go start your homework, and we can talk later.”

“Okay.” He headed upstairs.

Once in his room, he sat on the window seat and looked at his tablet. He opened his assignment and started reading. After a few minutes, he heard the front door close and looked outside. A man and woman were walking toward a car two houses down the block. Both wore business suits. They got into a large Mercedes and drove away. He turned his attention back to his homework, until a memory arose. He had seen that same S series sedan before. Cars like that in this working class neighborhood were very uncommon. For a moment, he thought he had seen that car in front of Grace’s house a few days ago. He pushed that memory out and concentrated on his work.

Two hours later, he was called downstairs to dinner. Ginny Prescott was seated across from her son.

While they ate, she kept looking at ~~Carl, but~~Carl but then averted her gaze when he looked back at her. After several minutes, Carl said, “Something’s bothering you, Mom. What is it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Carl.”

After a few more bites, Carl asked, “Is Dad okay?”

Without looking up, she said, “Yes, he’s fine.”

“Mom, I know something is wrong. Please tell me.”

She looked up at her son, wiped her lips with her napkin, and sighed deeply. “We both know your father’s work is classified, but we hear from him every week, so he is okay. I know this situation has been very difficult for both of us.”

“I thought we were doing okay, Mom.”

“Those people here today were from Washington. Daddy’s assignment has been extended another two years. Before you came along, I used to work for the same agency. Now, they want me to come back.”

“So, we’re moving to Washington?”

She shook her head slowly. “My job wouldn’t be in the country either, but I won’t be with your father.”

“So, what happens to me?”

She smiled sweetly. “I haven’t taken the job, Carl. I told them I needed time. I can’t make this decision on my own, and I don’t want to abandon you either.”

“Have you talked to Dad about this?” She nodded. “What did he say?”

“He said he would support any decision I make, as long as you do too. What do you think?”

“Is this job important to you, Mom?”

She nodded. “But not as important as you, honey.”

“Do you think the Mulligans would let me stay there? Grace is my best friend.”

Ginny dropped her head and focused on her food. “I don’t know if that can happen.”

“Why Mom?”

“Let’s just drop the subject for tonight, okay?” She looked at him with pleading eyes. “Nothing has to be decided for either you or Grace. We can discuss the situation another day. We can talk to your dad about it the next time he calls.”

The entire conversation had Carl baffled. He might soon lose his family and his only friend. Today was not a good day.

Grace Mulligan was waiting at the bus stop the next morning as Carl approached. “How are you today, Grace?”

“I’m okay. How are you?”

“Good,” Carl answered. “I had a really weird conversation with Mom at dinner last night.”

“She wasn’t talking about me, was she?”

He was surprised by her words and tone of voice. Clearly, his friend was angry about something. “Not really. My mom has been offered a new job with the government, but I can’t go with her. I suggested that I could live with your family, and she said that might not be possible. But I don’t know what that meant.”

“My parents want to send me to some boarding school, that’s why?” She pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her watery eyes.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand either, Carl. I am so pissed!” More students arrived for the bus. “We can talk in private later, okay?”

After the bus was loaded, Burt arrived, pounded on the doors, and joined them. The bus drove away. Grace focused on her feet, Burt looked at his phone, and Carl looked out at the passing scenery. Most days, his attention was focused on his friend, but today he began to notice something else. All along the route, dogs and cats sat at the curb watching the bus go by. The overhead power lines were covered with birds, and a few more flew alongside the bus. Carl looked back and noticed the animals moved away after the bus passed. He wondered why he had never noticed that activity before. He glanced over at Grace and noticed she was drawing pictures of birds, dogs, and cats.

Carl sat in his second period English class listening to Mr. Robertson, the teacher, drone on about proper sentence structure and advanced verb tenses. Mr. Robertson was about to begin a discussion on Shakespeare’s sonnets when there was a knock on the door. The teacher went to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. Moments later, he opened the door and said, “Prescott, you’ve been summoned to the

principal's office. Take your stuff and get a move on." The other students chortled while they watched their classmate head to his doom.

Minutes later, Carl was seated in the reception area outside the office. The office door opened and a woman in a suit exited. She glanced at Carl and left. He was surprised to see she was the same woman who had been in his house yesterday when he came home from school. "Come in, Mr. Prescott," Principal Abernathy called out. Carl rose and stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. Rose Abernathy sat behind her large desk.

A man in a black suit with an ornate cape stood and extended his hand. "Carl, it's a pleasure to meet you," the man said as he shook the teenager's hand. "My name is Alexander Clement Nottingham Dorchester, Headmaster of the B.A. Thorndike Academic Institution. Please be seated."

"It's nice to meet you, sir," Carl replied as he sat down.

Principal Abernathy leafed through some papers on her desk, and then looked up at the others. "Prescott, the headmaster wants to ask you a few questions about Grace Mulligan. I expect you to be honest and forthright, understood?"

"Yes, Principal Abernathy."

Dorchester smiled at Abernathy. "I don't think we need to be so severe, Madam Principal. Let's just call this a chat among friends." He turned his attention to the young man. "Carl, let's pretend you and I are friends, and I asked you to describe the Mulligan girl to me. What would you say?"

"She's my best friend in the whole world. You know, I don't have many friends, but I can always count on her to be on my side. She told me this morning that her parents want to send her to some boarding school. Is that your school?"

"Yes, it is, Carl. Did she tell you how she felt about that?"

"She definitely wasn't happy."

Dorchester put his hand on Carl's shoulder, "And how did that make you feel?"

“Okay, I’m out,” Abernathy said as she stood. “You two have your chat. I’ve got better things to do. The Mulligan girl will be here in twenty minutes.” She walked out of the office and slammed the door behind her.

Carl had turned to the door and now sat with his mouth open.

Dorchester smiled and returned his hands to his lap. “Your principal has some anger issues, but back to my question. How did her potential move make you feel?”

“Lost and alone, Headmaster. Without her, I have no friends. My mom told me she might even take a government job soon, and then I’ll be by myself.”

“To be frank, I have some knowledge of that possibility. Did you see the woman who left when you were outside the door?” He nodded. “Do you know who she is?”

“No, sir.”

“She is a senior operative in the CIA, as is your father. Your mother used to be in the agency before you were born. Now, I haven’t read your transcripts, but it is possible that you could join your friend at the Thorndike Institution. I can consider that if you like.”

“Thank you, sir. If my mom decides to take the job, I don’t think I will have any other choices.”

Dorchester smiled again. “We’ll see what we can do, Carl. Back to Ms. Mulligan, is there anything else about her that you think is important for me to know?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Not that I know of.”

“Anything related to animals?” Carl’s eyes bugged out. “Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. Please tell me.”

“I don’t know if it had anything to do with her, but today I noticed a lot of dogs, cats, and birds watching the bus go by. Usually, I’m talking to her, so I hadn’t noticed before. It was probably the only time it happened.”

“That could well be true, Carl, and thanks for telling me. One last question, okay? Do you know where your father is?”

“No, sir. It’s classified, so I’m not allowed to know.”

“Guess.”

“What do you mean, Headmaster? I never really thought about it before.”

Dorchester stood, walked over to the windows, and looked outside. “Carl, close your eyes and imagine your father for a few moments.” Carl closed his eyes. “Now think only about your father.”

“Okay.”

“Now, open your eyes and tell me what you saw.” The headmaster was once again sitting next to him.

“Go on. Anything is good.”

“Well, I saw him smiling at me for a moment, but then I could only see three white letters on black. It was U, Z, and B. I have no idea what this means.”

Dorchester pulled a small pad of paper and wrote the letters down. “Interesting. Uzbekistan. I must share this with the others. Thank you for your time, Mr. Prescott.” He stood and Carl followed. They shook hands and Carl walked out of the office. The principal was sitting next to Grace Mulligan who looked surprised to see her friend here. Carl shrugged his shoulders and headed to his next class.

Carl ~~met-with~~met Grace and Burt in the cafeteria for lunch. They sat alone at a table in a quiet corner. The voices of the other children ~~droned-on~~droned around them. Grace sat next to Burt with Carl across the table. She put down her fork and said, “What did you tell that man about me, Carl?”

“I told him that you’re my best friend, and that if you get sent to his school, I’ll miss you and be all alone.”

She frowned. “What did you say about the animals?”

“I noticed a lot of cats, dogs, and birds watching our bus this morning, but I also said that was the first time I’d seen that.”

Grace turned her icy glare onto Burt. “And what did you say about me?”

He kept his eyes on his food. “Nothing. Frankly, you never came up.” He turned his head to face her. “You think all of this is about you?”

Carl asked, "Then why did that man want to see you, Burt?"

"For the same reason he wanted to see Grace. My mom is thinking about sending me there." He sighed.

"Ever since my dad passed, it's been real hard on her raising me and working long hours."

"I'm sorry, Burt."

"That's okay, Grace. You and I are going through the same thing right now. Mom has a new boyfriend, and I don't think he likes kids so much. I've heard him telling my mom that I scare him, but that doesn't make sense because I'm just a kid. I always feel like I'm in the way, so I just stay in my room most of the time."

"That's terrible," Carl noted. "He must be a real jerk."

The doors to the outdoor patio opened and the dozens of students who had been having lunch outside rushed inside. They were giggling and moving away from the doors. Principal Abernathy and Headmaster Dorchester came into the room. Abernathy spoke loudly. "Okay, children, let's everyone calm down. It's just a couple of skunks that wandered onto school grounds. Animal Control will arrive shortly to remove them. As soon as you're finished with lunch, please return to your classes." She spoke briefly with the headmaster and then left. He moved toward the table where Carl sat with his friends.

He stood at the end of the table and smiled at them. "Grace, Burt, and Carl, I hope you are enjoying your lunch. If you three are willing, I'd like to try a little experiment." They stared at him, but did not reply. "Okay, I'll take that as a maybe. The meal period will end soon, and the principal has graciously excused you from your next class on the condition that you help me with this experiment." He sat down and smiled at them again. "We'll begin in ten minutes."

After the other students had left, Dorchester spoke again. "Something Carl told me about animals this morning piqued my interest. Also, you should know that this school is quite far from where fauna such as those skunks would normally range. As well, Animal Control will probably put down those animals rather than risk them venturing back into the city again. How does that make you feel?"

“That would be terrible,” Carl replied.

“Yeah, I agree. They should let them go,” Burt added.

Grace smirked at her friends and then said, “Why do you always ask about how we feel, Headmaster?”

“That’s a very insightful response, Grace. We humans are emotional creatures, and emotions can be very powerful. When a person creates something new and valuable, we often say that person was passionate about the job. Of course, passion is an emotion. At the Thorndike Institution, we endeavor to nurture each student’s intellect, body, and emotions. When those three elements are properly developed and aligned, amazing things are possible.

“Earlier, Carl mentioned that a large number of animals seemed to be watching and following your bus to school. That could be a random happenstance or not. Our little experiment will have each of you venture out onto the patio. Then, we will see if or how those creatures react to you, and vice-versa. Most likely, the skunks will continue to forage for food. If they behave in some other fashion, we will learn. Now, Carl, since you mentioned the animals watching the bus, please go first.”

“What if they spray me?”

“Carl, skunks are not aggressive animals. If they are near the doors where you will exit, do not go. If they start to move toward you, just come back inside. Believe me, I do not want to explain to any of your parents how you got sprayed by a skunk.” He stood. “Let us all walk over to the doors so we can review the results.”

Soon, they were ready. Carl had his hand on the door handle. The two skunks were on the far side of the patio eating some potato chips that had fallen to the floor during the rapid exit by the students. “Okay, Carl,” Dorchester said.

Carl opened the door and stepped outside. The skunks did not notice him and kept eating. He took two steps toward them and cleared his throat. The skunks froze for a moment. “Hi,” Carl said softly. The animals turned to face him. “It’s not safe for you here.” The skunks stood up on their hind legs. Dorchester was about to open the door and call Carl back inside when the skunks bent over as though bowing to Carl. They stood

again. Not sure what else to do, Carl bowed to the skunks, who immediately started to forage again.

Bewildered and confused, Carl walked back into the cafeteria. “I’ve never seen anything like that in my life,” he gasped. “Did that really happen? Did any of you see that?”

“That sure was freaky!” Burt exclaimed. Grace had turned to face the other way.

Dorchester was busily writing down notes. Without looking up from his paper, he said, “Your turn, Burt.”

Burt stepped outside. The skunks immediately noticed him. He took two steps forward and then said, “What’s up, skunks?”

The two animals stared at him and then glanced at each other. Then they began to chase each other around in a tight circle. After a few seconds, they separated and ran around the perimeter of the patio. Finally, the two converged on Burt’s left and right sides. Both climbed up his trousers, shirt, and stopped on top of his head. After a couple of seconds, they raced back down his front and back and then fled back to the same pile of food they had been eating. Burt could feel Dorchester’s hand on his upper arm, pulling him back inside. The headmaster started writing again, while Grace and Carl stared at Burt.

“That was amazing!” Grace said with a laugh.

Burt was trembling. “I thought I’d pee my pants.”

“Those skunks must be from a circus,” Carl replied.

“It’s your turn, Grace.”

“I’m not sure I should, Headmaster. What if I’m the freak?”

Dorchester patted her shoulder. “My dear, you saw what happened with the others. None of that was normal. In fact, I’ve never seen what occurred with Burt here. It will be okay.”

She walked outside. The skunks noticed her and stood on their hind legs. Grace walked over to the nearest table and sat. Unsure what to do, she sighed heavily and looked down. The animals hurried over, jumped up onto the table, and sat facing her. One reached out a paw and touched her hand. Grace looked up and the skunk removed its paw. “Hi! You know, you two don’t smell very good.” The skunks looked at each

other and then shrugged their shoulders. Grace giggled. "I didn't mean to offend you." Each of the skunks smiled and nodded. "You know it's really dangerous for you here. Animal Control is coming, and they might kill you." The animals looked at each other again. "Do you know how to find your way home?" They nodded. "Please go there now before they come for you." Each of the animals stood on their hind legs and licked her cheek. Then the two hurried away.

The other three rushed out of the cafeteria. "Grace, that was so awesome." Carl exclaimed.

"Did they actually kiss you?" Burt asked.

She wiped some tears from her face and nodded. She turned to the headmaster and said, "Does this mean we're all crazy?"

He laughed. "Of course not. Each of you has some fabulous skills. I have seen others with the talents like you and Carl. I personally am still shocked at how those creatures reacted to Burt. I have only heard of one other with that talent, and he was the founder of the institution a very long time ago. You are all cordially invited to attend my school. I know it will be a wonderful experience for you all."

Carl asked, "What were you writing down about us?" Dorchester put his tablet on the table. The page was covered with undecipherable characters. "What does that mean?"

"Truth be told, this is a special shorthand I have been using most of my life. It allows me to write down my thoughts quickly before I forget any details. The first word is the classification of what I witnessed, and the rest is details of what happened. Carl, your classification is the Master, which is how the animals treated you. Grace, yours is obviously the Mother. And Burt, your classification is the Jokester. If you attend the institution, you will learn much more about the talents and their classification." He stuck out his hand, and each of the students shook it. "Now, I will take my leave of you, and you and thank you so much for your time."

To learn more, visit my website at www.karljmorgan.com

This book is available on www.amazon.com

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Chapter 2

The next day was a Saturday, and the three friends agreed to meet in a nearby city park after breakfast. It was a sunny day with the temperature headed for a high of seventy-five degrees. Carl and Grace were walking up the street from their homes. “Did your folks tell you anything about the institution, Grace?”

“No, but I think they’ll send me. Sometimes, I hear them talking in their room when I’m in bed. Do you remember how Burt said he thinks his mother’s boyfriend is afraid of him?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty lame if you ask me.”

She stopped suddenly, and Carl turned to face her. “I’m in the same boat. That thing with the skunks yesterday was not the first time something like that happened. My parents haven’t taken me to the zoo in years. The last time we went, they got freaked out.”

“What happened?”

“Normally, you go there to look at the animals, who basically ignore you. But whenever we went by an exhibit, the animals followed me around and stared at me. It was like I was the exhibit.”

Carl smiled. “I think it’s cool.”

She squeezed his hand. “Thanks, but soon a lot of people started following us too, so they could see the animals better. Oh God, I almost forgot!”

“What?”

She took his hand in hers and they began to walk again. “We went into that little aviary with all the hummingbirds. Have you been there?” He nodded. “All of them landed on my clothes and head. Random people were taking pictures of me. I couldn’t get the birds to leave me alone. Finally, a zookeeper came in and shooed them away. Then they asked us to leave the park. I was so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. It’s awesome that the animals love you. Those people were just jealous.”

She squeezed his hand. “Carl, you are an animal too. Do you love me?”

He stopped and took a deep breath. “Wow. I wasn’t expecting that question, Grace.”

“You don’t have to answer. It’s okay.”

“Of course I love you, Grace. You mean everything to me, and if you go to that school, I’m going with you. We’re a team.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thanks Carl. I love you too. Let’s go see Burt.”

As they walked hand-in-hand for the last few blocks, the weather changed. Dark clouds had moved in from behind them. The park was in front of them now, and they could see Burt sitting inside the gazebo located in the center of the grassy area. The wind speed was also increasing, and the boughs of the nearby trees were flexing in the stiffening breeze. Burt sat facing the opposite direction. His elbows were on his knees, and he held his head in his hands. A light sprinkling of rain began to fall as they walked across the grass. “I didn’t think there was any chance of rain today, Grace?”

“There wasn’t. This is strange.” They stepped up into the gazebo and approached their friend. “Are you okay, Burt?”

He sat up and turned to face them. It was clear he had been crying. “No, I’m not okay. Mom is sending me to that damned school. I’m just in her way. I want to be alone, okay?”

Grace sat and put her arm around his shoulders. “We are your friends, Burt. We want to help.”

A bolt of lightning slammed into the lightning rod on a nearby building, followed by the boom of thunder.

“I don’t want your help. Go away already.” He shrugged his shoulders, and she removed her arm.

“Burt, chances are that all three of us will be sent there. We’ll still be together,” Carl reasoned.

Burt stood. “Right now, I could not care less. Don’t you understand? My own mother is choosing her boyfriend over her son. If you won’t leave, I will.”

Another lightning strike hit one of the nearby trees. The boom of thunder was even louder.

“It’s not safe to be out in the open when there’s lightning. We have to wait here.”

“Screw you, Carl, and you too Grace.” He ran out of the gazebo.

“Come back, Burt!” Grace shouted.

A third bolt of lightning arched across the sky and stuck Burt on the top of the head. But rather than a single blast, the lightning bolt did not stop. After two seconds, Burt floated up into the air with his arms out to the side. Lightning shot out of his hands. One bolt struck the gazebo and set the roof ablaze. The bolt from the other hand struck a tree in the park and split it in two. The lightning stopped, and Burt fell to the grass. Almost immediately, the clouds seemed to evaporate. In less than thirty seconds, the sun was shining again as Carl and Grace raced over to their friend. They had expected him to be gravely injured or dead, but instead found him laughing. They stood over him.

“Was that cool or what?” he said and then started laughing again. He stuck out his arms and spread his fingers. Tiny sparks of electricity flashed through his hands. After a few more seconds, it stopped, and Burt stood.

“Are you okay?” Grace asked while staring at Burt’s hair which was still standing on end.

“I feel great! And I’m not mad anymore. I’m sorry for being such a jerk.”

Carl smiled. “You’re alive, and that’s all that matters. My mom gave me a twenty, so let’s all get ice cream sundaes.” They walked away, arm in arm.

Back at the Prescott house, Ginny was sitting at the dinette table with her phone pressed to her ear. “No, Carl isn’t here.”

Frank Prescott sighed. “That’s probably for the best, honey. Janet called me earlier.”

“I told the director and her Thursday that I needed time. My decision will have a major impact on our son’s life.”

“I know, but oddly enough, that’s not why she called. She had been to Carl’s school yesterday with Alexander Dorchester. Do you know who that is?”

“Barbara Mulligan mentioned him to me. He’s the headmaster of some school for advanced and unusual children. She considering sending Grace there. You’ve heard the stories about her, right?”

“Honey, I saw the video footage from their zoo visit three years ago. It was like Doctor Doolittle or something. I even had our lab check to see if it was a fake, but there was no evidence of any tampering, not to mention thousands of eye-witnesses.” After a brief pause, he continued, “Was there anything else?”

“Yes. She and I met outside while the kids were waiting for the bus yesterday. There were dogs and cats lined up the block. The animals didn’t move until the bus picked up the kids and drove away.”

He chuckled softly. “That is pretty unbelievable. Anyway, that Dorchester guy told Janet that Grace, Carl, and another child had some strange interactions with a couple skunks at school yesterday. He has offered full-ride scholarships to all three if they agree to attend his school.”

“I wonder why Carl didn’t mention any of that to me last night.”

“Now that you know, you should ask him. It could be nothing. After all, I’m hearing this third-hand.”

“Okay, that’s a good idea.”

“Ginny, I’m not going to be able to call again for a while. Things here are heating up, and we may have to evacuate.”

“You take care of yourself, Frank Prescott.”

“Thanks. Please apologize to Carl for missing him today. If you can, check out that school too. If it’s legitimate, it might be a good option. We both know how Carl feels about Grace. If she is sent there, he may want to go as well. Then, you can get back on the team. We really need your particular skillset in the Far East.”

“Understood. What’s the name of the school?”

“Hang on a second while I check my notes. Ah, here it is. Wow! That’s a long name. Let me text it to you. I don’t even know where it is located.”

“Okay, I’ll check it out. Be safe, darling. Always know that I love you.”

“I love you, Virginia Prescott. Goodbye.” The line disconnected. Ginny looked at her phone as the text came in. Then she stood and headed toward the office and her laptop.

Later that afternoon, Ginny Prescott returned from the grocery store with several bags. She opened the front door to find Carl and another boy playing video games on the television. Grace was sitting on another chair awaiting her turn. “Carl, please give me a hand. There are a few more bags in the trunk.”

As she stood, Grace replied, “I’ll do it, Mrs. Prescott. Carl has a chance to beat Burt, something he could never do with me.” She hurried outside.

A few minutes later, Ginny joined the others in the living room. “Carl, introduce me to your new friend.”

He pressed the pause button. “I’m sorry, Mom. This is Burt Jackson. His mom just moved here from the Midwest.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Prescott.”

“Were you the boy with Carl and Grace yesterday when you saw the skunks?” All three children stared at Ginny.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Carl, why didn’t you tell me about them and the headmaster?”

“I guess it was too weird. I didn’t know why that man wanted to talk to me. And then the thing with the skunks freaked me out. I’m sorry, Mom. Did he call you?”

“I was going to tell you later, but since it came up, your dad called while you were out with your friends. He apologized for missing you. He also said he won’t be able to call for a little while.” Carl sighed and looked down. “He’s okay. He has a lot of friends with him. Anyway, Janet told him the story.”

“Was that the woman who was here a couple days ago?”

Ginny looked puzzled. “Why do you ask that?”

“Yesterday, I was sent to the principal’s office to meet Headmaster Dorchester. While I was waiting outside, that woman came out of the office.”

“Yes, that was probably Janet. Now, who wants to tell me the story?”

Less than a minute later, Burt and Grace had fled for home, leaving Carl to face his mother alone. He told her everything that had happened at school, but decided to leave out the incident with Burt and the lightning. An hour later, Carl went to his room while his mother ordered a pizza. While she waited, she poured a glass of wine, sat in the living room, and tried to rationalize what she had heard.

After dinner, Carl was back in his room, searching for information on the Thorndike School on his tablet. Although the website was in English, the school was located on an island in the Azores, the small Portuguese archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The location seemed perfect for a collection of misfits with unnatural abilities. The school was isolated, far from prying eyes. A random image crossed his mind. He saw Grace riding a dolphin back to the United States. He smiled.

A dog barked, and Carl glanced outside. A lone animal sat under the streetlight nearest Grace's home. Then more dogs began to bark. Within a few minutes, it seemed like every dog in the neighborhood was barking. Carl looked outside again into the gathering darkness. Hundreds of dogs were moving into the area and sitting on the Mulligan's lawn, sidewalk, and driveway. The barking was becoming even louder.

His bedroom door opened and his mother stepped in. "What's going on out there, Carl?"

"I don't know, Mom. You'd better look."

She joined him at the window and gasped. "How many dogs are out there?"

"It has to be a hundred or more."

"That's dangerous. Don't even think about going outside, okay?"

The Mulligan front porch light came on and the door opened. Grace stepped out, while her parents stood behind, still inside.

"They shouldn't let her do that, Carl."

Grace raised her hands and the barking stopped. Carl opened his window so they could hear what was happening.

Grace noticed Carl and Ginny in the window and waved to them. All the dogs turned their heads to look in their direction. "It's okay, you guys," she said to the animals. "I apologize for worrying you all. You know, we all have to live in the world as it is. Know that I love each and every one of you. Now please go home before Animal Control shows up." She stepped back inside, and the door was closed. The dogs turned to Carl and bowed their heads. Then they began to move away.

"Wow! I don't know what to say. Why did they do that?"

"Grace's folks must be sending her to that school. She probably got upset, and that upset the dogs. They came to give her their support and let her know they care."

Ginny walked over to Carl's bed, sat, and sighed. "What about you? Do you want to go to that school?"

"In a way, yes, and in another way no. Grace and Bert are my only real friends, and they're both going. It would be nice to be with them. You saw what Grace can do, and Burt is just as amazing. It makes sense to have them away from normal people, at least until they can control their gifts."

"And the no part?"

"I don't want you to be in danger, Mom."

"What makes you think I'll be in danger? I haven't even decided if I want the job."

"I don't know how, but I think I know what the CIA wants you to do. If you don't take it, I don't want to leave you alone either."

She smirked. "Okay, let's play your game. I never said I worked for the CIA, but what do they want me to do?"

"Mom, first of all, these are just images that come to me. I have no way of knowing if they are real. The CIA has a big office in the Philippines, where they do a lot of spying on China and North Korea. They want you to help them infiltrate the Chinese military."

She chuckled. "That's quite a story. Why would that be so dangerous?"

"China is recruiting terrorists in the Philippines to eliminate the threat. They are planning to blow up the building. To make it worse, that building is next to a hospital."

“Is that it?”

“About that, yes. But I’ve seen something about Dad too.”

“Okay, let me have it.” She smiled and crossed her arms.

“He’s still in Uzbekistan, but no longer at the safe house. He and six others are in the back of a truck that’s heading for Afghanistan. A military helicopter is there waiting for them.”

Ginny shook her head and stood up. “Well, that was interesting, Son. Either you’re going to be a great novelist, or something really weird is going on. Have a good night.” She walked over and kissed his cheek, and Carl hugged her tightly. Then she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Carl woke hours later to a loud buzzing sound. Even through his eyelids, he could tell his room was brightly lit. He opened his eyes and noticed the overhead light fixture was turned off. He sat up and saw Burt and Grace in his room. She looked normal, but Burt was lit up like a Christmas tree, as though every pore in his skin was a tiny flashlight. His eyes glowed, and sparks moved around his body. “What the heck?”

“Pretty cool, huh?” Burt asked.

“Get up, Carl,” Grace said.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re going to check out that school.” Burt clapped his hands together and sparks shot around the room.

Grace turned her back to Carl. “Put on some street clothes.”

While he was changing, Carl asked, “We’re going there in the middle of the night? And how will we get there?”

“You’ll see,” Burt replied with a devious smile on his face.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Carl announced, and Grace turned around.

Burt said, “Stand next to me like Grace is.” When he was in place, Burt continued, “Just close your eyes and put out your open hand where I can hold it.”

“This is silly,” Carl said as he closed his eyes and stuck out his hand.

Burt grabbed their hands. There was an enormous crack of thunder and a shower of sparks. The room stood empty as the brightness faded into dark.

A bolt of lightning shot out of the open sky and slammed into the ground. Now, the three teenagers found themselves standing on in a grassy square that was situated in the open atrium of a large stone building. A large clock tower at one corner began to chime. The hands of the clock showed eleven o’clock. There were dozens of other young people seated at tables near the building. Most were now gawking at the magical visitors. Two adults hurried out of the building and headed toward them. Both wore long robes over their clothes. The approaching woman was quite pretty and seemed about thirty-five years old. The man following her seemed very old with a long white hair and beard.

“What’s the meaning of this?” the woman shouted as they arrived. “Who are you?”

Burt stuck out his hand, but the adults ignored it, so he dropped it to his side. “I’m Burt Jackson, and these are my friends, Grace Mulligan and Carl Prescott. Who are you?”

The woman looked down at their feet and noticed the grass near Burt was scorched. “You must be the Cloud-Seeder. You need to be more careful, young man. Imagine what would have happened if you landed on someone or something flammable. What institution trained you to be so reckless?”

“I’ve heard their names, Dean,” the older man said.

She turned to the man. “Oh, really? How is that?”

“They are the ones the headmaster interviewed on Friday.”

“That’s unbelievable?” She turned back to the teenagers. “How did you learn to transmute, Master Jackson? Certainly, the Headmaster would not do such a thing.”

Burt looked down. “I sort of figured it out on my own. My mother decided her boyfriend is more important to her and is sending me here. That made me angry, and I suddenly found myself flying through the air. I practiced a few times until it seemed to work right, and then, I thought we’d check the place out.”

“That’s really quite amazing,” the old man noted. “With a few hours of practice, you were able to transmute the three of you five thousand miles. Wow.”

“Professor Donnelly, you deal with these kids. I’m going to my office to contact the headmaster.” The dean turned and walked away.

“Of course, Dean Whitehall, it will be my pleasure.” He waited until she reentered the building. “Let’s go to the dining room for a bite.” He walked away, and they followed. They entered the dining room and sat. The professor ordered cake and ice cream for all. He also had a cup of coffee. “Burt said he is being sent here. What about you two?”

Grace sighed. “Yeah, me too. My parents are afraid of me, and after what happened last night, they’re terrified.”

“Whatever happened, Miss Mulligan?”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Grace, can I tell the story?” Carl asked. She did not respond and looked down. “Grace, it was so awesome. Well, professor, when Grace’s parents told her she was being sent here, she was very sad, and that upset the dogs.”

“Which dogs, yours or hers?”

“All the dogs in the town! Neither Grace nor I have any pets, but hundreds of dogs showed up and started barking.”

“I heard the commotion from our apartment,” Burt added.

“Anyway, when Grace came outside, the barking stopped. She told them it would be okay and that she loved them. Then they all went home. That made the thing with the skunks seems trivial.”

“Yes, the headmaster mentioned the skunks.” Donnelly smiled. “Grace, don’t be ashamed.” She raised her head. “Being the Mother is a very rare and powerful talent. I have some skill in that area, but as you’d expect, for me it is called the Master, like your friend, Carl Prescott. And you, Carl, are you attending Thorndike as well?”

“I don’t know. Burt is a good friend, and Grace is my girlfriend, so I’d like to be with them. But I’ve had some thoughts that my mother might be in danger if she rejoins the government.”

Donnelly stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Interesting. Headmaster Dorchester did not mention your talent as a Dreamer. I suppose they could just be random thoughts, but I would like to know for sure.”

“Should we wait until my mother is killed?”

Donnelly laughed. “Of course not, but there is another way. You see, my strongest talent is the Dreamer as well. Shall we try?” None of the three reacted. “I’ll take that as a yes. First, I do not want to offend any of you, but I know that one of you is adopted. Are any of you aware of that?” They all shook their heads. “Oh dear, I should not have spoken.” He turned to Carl. “Do you know?”

Carl nodded and dropped his head.

“Come with me, Carl,” the professor said while standing. He took Carl by the upper arm and led him out of the room. They moved to a small table with two chairs and sat. “Okay, let’s test your ability. Who is it?”

“Burt.”

“Since his mother is sending him away, that could be a guess. Tell me more.”

Carl looked up with sadness etched on his face. “His father was married before. Burt came from the first marriage. When he married Rachel, she adopted him. Then his father died in that auto accident.”

“I don’t believe it was an accident, Carl, but please go on.”

“Rachel has been despondent since his death. She came to California to get away from the memories, but realized that Burt was the biggest memory of all. The fact that he has strange abilities only makes it worse for her.”

“Excellent. Your abilities astound me since you’ve had no training. You are aware that Rachel changed Burt’s last name to her maiden name shortly after the death.” Carl shook his head. “Okay, last question, what was Burt’s birth name?”

Carl closed his eyes and thought for a moment. He wiped away a stray tear and replied, “Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike the tenth.”

“Amazing! Your talent is very strong. If you come here, we will teach you how to use it well. By the way, your father is safely back in Kabul now.”

“Thank you, professor.”

Two hours later, Carl was back in bed. They had been given a tour of the school grounds, including the dormitories where they would stay. Then Burt transmuted them back home. After sleeping more, Carl woke to the light of the sun pouring through his window. He stood, stretched, and walked over to the window. Three black SUVs and the Mercedes were parked out front. There were soldiers standing guard around the vehicles. When he stepped out of his room, he could hear several people talking downstairs. He went into the bathroom to get ready to face whatever came next. As he stood at the sink brushing his teeth, the faces of those downstairs appeared in the mirror in front of him. By the time he opened the door, he knew they were here for him. He stood at the top of the stairs and took a few deep breaths. Out of options, he headed down.

Halfway down the stairs, he could see two soldiers standing by the front door. Both wore black military uniforms, ballistic helmets, and carried automatic weapons. They noticed him, but said nothing. One of them motioned for him to go into the dining room. Carl smiled and headed that way. Two more soldiers stood in the dining room. Two men and one woman in business suits sat at the table with Ginny Prescott as they waited for him. “Good morning, Mom.” She did not reply.

“Have a seat, Carl,” the agent named Janet said. He sat on the only vacant chair. “Your mother has related to us what you told her yesterday. Please explain how you knew any of that.”

“It’s like I told her,” he began, “sometimes I get these images in my head. I don’t know if there right or real.” Carl looked at the faces of the others in the room. None looked too pleased by his answer. “Are you suggesting that I was correct?”

The man seated at the head of the table said, “We can neither confirm nor deny anything. By the way, my name is John Winston, and I’m the head of our little group. What else can you tell us?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid. I haven’t seen any other images recently.”

“Okay, that’s fine. I suppose it could be lucky guesses. You certainly do not fit the profile of a spy. How old are you?”

“I’m fourteen, sir.”

The agent named Janet said, “There is something else, Director. I’ve heard some interesting comments from Alex Dorchester.”

Carl raised his hand and looked at Janet. “Excuse me, but why did you bring the headmaster to my school?”

Winston replied, “He is loosely affiliated with our group, Carl.”

“Wow! Do you mean that school is part of the CIA?”

“Whoa there, young man. No one said anything about a specific agency. Where did you get that idea?”

“The headmaster told me, sir.”

Winston shook his head and looked down. After taking a deep breath, he looked up. “Agent Fredrickson, you need to take care of that.”

Janet stared back at him. “Sir, you know he is a foreign national. I’m not sure what jurisdiction we have.”

“I’m not suggesting we arrest him, Janet. Call him now, explain the sensitivity of that information, and ask him not to mention it again.” She stood and headed out of the room with her phone in her hand. Winston turned his attention back to Carl. “I read Dorchester’s report on his visit to your school. Most of the narrative talked about how the three of you felt. The last sentence concluded by saying two skunks behaved oddly around you. Now, your mother has given us the story you told her. I thought it strange that Dorchester left out all of the details.”

“Do you think he’s a double agent?”

“That’s enough, Carl,” his mother said.

Winston chuckled. “I think that’s unlikely. Do you have any idea why he is so focused on feelings?”

Carl nodded. “He told us that emotions have power.”

“That is somewhat true. Emotions can cause poor decision-making, which is dangerous in our business.

We are trained to push emotions aside and focus on the job at hand.”

“Mom, did you tell them about the dogs last night?”

“Yes I did, Son.”

Fredrickson walked back into the room as rain began to pound on the windows. “Sir, the headmaster did not answer, so I left a message for him to call me.”

“It wasn’t supposed to rain today,” the other male agent stated. Lightning struck nearby, and the lights dimmed.

Winston stood. “Okay, that’s enough. Carl, we need you and your friends to come with us. Right now, there are too many questions that need to be answered. I need your decision too, Ginny. Are you in or out?”

Ginny’s eyes opened wide, and she stared at her son. Carl said, “She’s in,” and then stood. “Mr. Director, you need to have your men move away from the vehicles out front.”

“Are you giving me orders?”

The rain turned to sleet and lightning struck over and again.

“It’s for their safety, sir,” Carl shouted over the deafening roar of the storm.

The Director motioned to one of the soldiers in the room, who then came forward and grabbed Carl by the arm. “Let’s go.” They headed for the door. As they approached, another bolt of lightning slammed down outside, causing all the nearby houses to lose power. One of the guards by the front door opened it, and the group headed outside. Ginny stopped to lock the door behind her. “What the heck?”

Crows were everywhere. They blanketed the Prescott and Mulligan lawns. Dozens more were sitting on top of the vehicles. To his right, Carl could see two soldiers pulling Burt toward him. The Mulligans’ front door opened, and two more led Grace out into the torrent. The soldiers guarding the vehicles were shooing the birds, but they did not move. Instead, they had turned to Grace and watched her. She shook her head and the mass of crows headed away. The rain increased with heavy drops already forming puddles in the street.

By the time the other two children had joined Carl, all were drenched. “Did you do this?” he whispered to Burt who shook his head. The rain suddenly stopped, and the clouds began to break. As the director led the group forward, three lightning bolts shot down from the sky and slammed into the roofs of the SUVs. The impact caused all of their windows to explode outward and shower everyone with shards of glass.

The agents moved forward to assist two who had been knocked to the ground by the blast. The director looked back at the children. Ginny Prescott had moved back to the porch and sat on the steps.

“Take my hands,” Burt said softly. When they had, another bolt of lightning struck Burt in the head and exploded into a shower of sparks.

The teenagers were gone.

Ginny Prescott screamed while the other agents rushed to the spot where the teenagers had been standing. There was no sign of the young people or any damage to the sidewalk.

Director Winston almost growled at Fredrickson. “Get me Dorchester now!”

Chapter 3

“I’m glad you all could make it.”

Carl opened his eyes, and released Burt’s hand. Headmaster Dorchester stood five feet away. “Welcome to Ponta Delgada. Our boat is over here.” Dorchester turned to his left and began to walk, and the others followed.

“Did you bring us here, Headmaster?”

“Not me, but Burt did have some assistance, Carl. As I anticipated, Director Winston is closed-minded. I was alerted that he was going to incarcerate you three, so I intervened.”

“Does that make us fugitives?” Grace asked.

He glanced back and smiled. “Of course not. You are not criminals, and as director of the CIA, he has no authority to act inside the United States. Of course, power oftentimes goes to a person’s head, and he thinks he’s above the law.”

“Who tipped you off? Was that Burt too?”

“No, Carl, it wasn’t one of you, but I would prefer to explain how we knew your situation once we reach the institution. Frankly, you would not believe me if I did.” He turned left and began to walk down a pier.

“Please keep up, or we won’t arrive in time for dinner.”

At the end of the pier, a large yacht was moored. The name on the stern was “Fiona V.” As they reached the gangway, Dorchester continued, “The Fiona is the school’s boat. We use it often for entertaining guests and for recognizing exceptional students. I have a feeling all three of you will come aboard often.” He walked up onto the boat and motioned for the others to follow.

A man in a white uniform came to greet them. “Headmaster, it’s good to see you again.”

“Captain Albright, it is my pleasure. These new students are Grace Mulligan, Burt Jackson, and Carl Prescott.”

“Welcome to the Fiona. I’m honored to meet you. Make yourself at home. It isn’t a long trip. I’ll be on the bridge.” He bowed slightly to Dorchester and hurried away.

The headmaster led them into the superstructure. They entered a large sitting room. Dorchester sat on a wing chair and motioned for the others to sit. When they had been seated, he said, “I was shocked to hear you visited the school this morning. Burt, you must be more careful. You three might have ended up in the ocean, a hundred miles or more away from land.”

Burt looked down. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, and does prove how powerful your talent is. I must strongly caution you now not to return to your homes or anywhere else in the States. Your sudden exit by sparking will certainly draw more attention from the government. At the school, you will be safe, and as long as a teacher is with you, there is no risk from anywhere else. Do you promise to comply?” All three nodded. “Good, we can drop that subject now.”

A crow flew into the room and landed on the wing of Dorchester’s chair. “Welcome back to you too, Alistair.” The bird nodded. “Now that the raven is here, as soon as we’re out of port, we can explain how we learned of your situation.”

“From a bird?” Burt asked.

Dorchester chuckled. “You never know.” The yacht began to move away from the pier. After a few minutes, the crow squawked and the headmaster turned to look at it. “Yes, I think it is safe now, Alistair.”

The bird jumped down onto the arm of the chair and then to the floor. It spread its wings and began to get larger and change shape. Within a few seconds, it had become Professor Donnelly. “Hello, my young friends.”

Burt gasped. “You brought the crows to Grace’s house and brought us here!”

“That is partially true, Burt; however, I had nothing to do with the crows. When I arrived in the area, I transformed to join them.”

“Can you teach us how to become animals, Professor?” Grace asked.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Dorchester replied. “Physical transfiguration is a very rare skill indeed. For example, Donnelly is one of only two at the school with that ability.”

“The headmaster is correct. And it is quite dangerous as well. While many predators avoid human contact, they view other animals as a food source only.”

While the others were speaking, Carl had stood and walked over to a window looking out at the water. “Wow! We’re going really fast.”

“Carl, this ship is a hydrofoil, so it can rise onto foils and travel at high speed,” the headmaster replied. “In fact, by now we should be approaching the school. Please go check with the captain, Alistair.” The other man nodded, moved over to a door, opened it, and headed up a short hall.

“Headmaster, what did you mean by sparking?”

“Well, Burt, there are two talents that involve traveling by lightning bolt. One is the Cloud-Seeder, who can create electrical storms at will and use the clouds to create the spark. A Sparker can create the bolt without a storm. In both cases, we call the transport mechanics sparking.”

“I’ve only done it with a storm.” Burt looked down.

Grace shook her head. “That’s not true, Burt. When you brought us here last night, there was no storm.”

Carl chuckled. “Yeah, I think I’d remember if it rained in my room.”

Dorchester stood. “Don’t worry about any of the details right now. After all, that is what you are here to learn. I can feel the ship slowing, so I think we should go on deck to watch the ship come into port. I am certain we will all find telephone messages to which we need to reply.”

Several minutes later, they disembarked and headed into the village of Santa Isabela, which hugged the rugged coastline. The headmaster explained that the eight hundred residents supported a small fleet of fishing boats and serviced the school. As they continued, a small bus turned a corner and headed toward them. It stopped along the curb, and the driver opened the door. A beautiful, teenaged, woman climbed out holding several mobile phones in a small bag.

“Hello Aida, I think I can guess what this is all about.”

“Welcome home, Headmaster,” she replied and flashed a sparkling smile. “Yes, you and these students have had calls, and the dean suggested I bring phones to you. They are all set. Just press the connect button, and you’ll return the call.” She pulled out the first and handed it to the headmaster.”

“Thank you, my dear. Students, let’s spend a few minutes now making our calls. It’s best not to postpone the inevitable. Excuse me.” He walked up the street as he pressed the phone to his ear.

Aida quickly handed out the other phones.

Grace frowned. “How did you know which phone was for whom? I know I’m the only girl, but what about them?”

Aida smiled. “You’re new here, I can see. The phone knows whom to call. Don’t worry. I’ll be waiting on the bus.” She climbed back on board.

Carl walked a few steps away, pressed connect, and put the phone to his ear. After three rings, his mother’s voice said, “Hello.”

“It’s me, Mom.”

“Thank God you’re okay, Carl. I was so scared. I thought you were all killed by the lightning. What happened? Where are you?”

“We’re at that Thorndike school.”

“What? That isn’t possible, Carl. That school is thousands of miles away from here.”

He sighed. “I can’t explain it, Mom. I don’t even understand what’s been happening, but I’m here. Now, you can take the job again.”

“Carl, I’m going to buy a plane ticket and come get you. This isn’t right. You should be at home with me.”

“Mom, you know that wasn’t going to happen. That director guy was about to lock us up somewhere because he doesn’t understand the things we could do either.”

“Was that another of your visions?”

“Mom, think about it. Why did he come to our house? And why did he have all those soldiers with rifles and the three SUVs? He didn’t come over to visit or have a chat.” Carl could hear her sniffing as though she was about to cry. “Don’t worry, Mom. It will be okay.”

Ginny sighed. “Please keep in touch, Carl, and try to come home soon. By the way, your dad sends his love.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you both very much.” The line disconnected, and Carl climbed onto the bus. Burt was already there sitting across the aisle from the teenager they had just met. Carl joined them and sat in the row behind Burt. “Hi, my name is Carl.”

She stuck out her hand, and he shook it. “I’m Aida, you know like the opera.”

“Opera?” Carl looked puzzled. “How old are you, and how long have you been here?”

“Well, I’m sixteen and have been here most of my life. The woman who gave birth to me turned me in at a fire station. I guess she couldn’t handle a baby. I was three when Dean Whitehall adopted me and brought me here.”

Burt turned to look out the window. “That professor said one of us was adopted too, but none of us knew who it was.”

Aida moved to the seat with Burt. “It’s okay. The fact that we’re adopted isn’t our fault. And don’t worry, we all take care of each other here. She kissed his cheek and moved back to the other seat. “Was it your mother who called for you?”

He nodded and looked down. “Yeah, but she only said she was sorry and cried. After about three minutes of that, she hung up.”

“That really sucks,” Carl noted.

“I wouldn’t go that far, Carl,” Aida replied. “It means that she loves him and likely regrets letting him come here.”

“She’s right,” Grace said as she joined them. “That’s pretty much what happened to me on the first call.”

“You had two calls?”

“That’s right, Carl. The second was from that FBI guy. His name was Winston, right?” Carl nodded.

“He told me that I was the level-headed one and should convince you all to come back.”

“That’s crazy,” Burt replied.

“I sort of started to laugh, and then he hung up.”

The headmaster climbed onto the bus and moved down the aisle to join them. When he sat, the driver closed the door and headed back to the Thorndike Institution. “Director Winston is an interesting man, I must say. He reminded me that I am legally bound to explain that you may leave Thorndike at any time and that your residence outside the United States gives him the authority to do whatever he deems fit.”

“You don’t think he’ll try to kidnap or kill us, do you?”

Dorchester smiled. “Well Grace, he is just brash and reckless enough to try anything, but there is no way he can succeed. Even the attempt would be foolhardy. He knows these islands are part of a member state of the European Union, which is America’s most important ally in the world. You’re not afraid of such an eventuality, are you, Aida?”

She shook her head and smiled. “No, Headmaster, not in the least.”

“Children, your talents are why the institution is here, but now is not the time to go into such details. I have assigned Aida to be your guardian here. After dinner, she will bring you to my office, and we can discuss the matter more fully.”

The bus drove out of the village and headed up a long slope toward a large forest. In minutes, they entered the woods. Tree branches reached out from both sides of the road and met in the middle, allowing only dappled sunlight to illuminate their path. The vehicle reached the top of the slope and continued forward on level ground. After a few minutes, the headmaster’s phone rang, and he moved to the front of the bus for privacy.

“The forest is my favorite part of the island,” Aida said with a sigh. “It’s so peaceful, and a person can really think out here.”

“What do you think about?” Grace asked.

“Mostly I think about my life and things like why my birth mother abandoned me. Also, what I’m going to do when I’m finished here. It’s a big world out there, and without Thorndike, I’m alone.”

“We’ll be your friends, Aida.”

“Thanks, Carl, I really appreciate it.” She smiled. “Most of the other students shy away from me. I think it’s because my new mom is the dean. It’s either that or some of my talents that frighten them.”

“What talents?”

“Carl, I’d rather not talk about that right now.”

“That’s okay, but all of us were outsiders too. None of the other kids wanted anything to do with us, and our parents are afraid of us.”

“Carl, that’s true for everybody here,” Aida replied. “But even here in a school of weirdoes, I’m still ignored.”

Grace sat next to Aida and held her hands. “Not anymore.”

The bus drove out of the forest and into the bright sunlight. One hundred yards ahead, a tall stone wall stretched across the meadow, with a large wood and steel gate blocking the entrance. “We’re here,” Aida sang.

As the bus approached, the gate opened, and they drove through. The land inside the walls was like a large park. There were several wooded areas near the walls, and flower gardens were placed about. The building they had visited was at the end of the road, and there were several similar but smaller buildings, as well as several other structures, including a stadium. The bus pulled up to the large building and stopped. The door opened, and the driver exited. Dorchester stood. “Let’s go. It will be dinner time soon. Aida, you’re in charge of them.” He exited and walked away.

As they walked toward one of the smaller buildings, Carl said, “Aida, I just realized we only have the clothes on our backs.”

Without turning, she replied, “Don’t worry about that. School uniforms and other essentials have been placed in your rooms. And Grace, I’m hoping you’ll share my room with me. Burt and Carl will share another room, and we’ll all be next door.”

“Sounds like fun,” Grace replied.

Aida led them up six steps to a large, ornately carved, wooden door. “You’ll like this, Grace.” She pointed up to a bronze plaque above the door. “This is Gratia Dei Hall. It’s almost like it’s named after you.”

“I don’t get it,” she replied.

“The name is Latin for the Grace of God.”

“That’s cool,” Grace replied.

“Now, each of the residence doors can recognize those who belong here.” She removed a small key from her pocket. “This key will enable your room doors to recognize you. After that, this door will know you too. Grace, put your hand on the knob.” She did, but nothing happened. “My turn.” Aida put her hand on the knob, and the door opened. “I’ll hold the door while you all go inside.”

The interior of the dormitory was fabulous. The entrance hallway had a fifteen-foot arched ceiling holding large, golden candelabra light fixtures. The walls were paneled and covered with large portraits of former faculty and students. They climbed two flights of stairs and entered another long hallway. They walked past archways leading to sitting areas and study cubicles and a small kitchenette that contained refrigerators filled with snacks and drinks.

Finally, they arrived at a door with the number 323 in gold leaf and stopped. Aida put the golden key into the lock. “Touch the doorknob, Burt.” He complied, and the door opened. She pulled it closed again, removed the key, and then reinserted it. “Your turn, Carl.” They repeated the process. Both Burt and Carl wanted Grace to be able to come inside, so they did the same with her. “Guys, my room is across the hall, number 324. We’ll see you a bit later.” Burt and Carl then went inside, and the door closed.

The main room was about fifteen feet square and included two desks with chairs, a small couch, two side chairs, and a television. Three other doors led to two bedrooms and a bathroom. Textbooks and other school supplies were on top of the desks.

Carl went into his bedroom and opened the closet door. Several school uniforms hung there. He went to the chest of drawers and found them well stocked. When he left the room to tell Burt, he noticed that Aida and Grace were waiting for them. "Is it time for dinner?"

Aida smiled at him. "Yes, but the headmaster wants all of us to sit at the faculty table tonight. Since you're starting part way through the year, he thought it could be an orientation. Let's go."

They left the room, went back to the staircase, and began to descend. They reached the ground floor and continued downward. "There are underground tunnels between all the dormitories and the main building. They come in handy when we have inclement weather." They reached the first landing and Aida led them away from the stairs.

"How deep is the basement? The steps went down a long way."

"Yes, Burt, and that is by design," Aida replied. "As you can imagine, with some of the talents of the students here, there are risks. There are also those who do not condone the existence of the Thorndike Institution, and, of course, there is the other school to deal with."

Grace appeared confused. "What other school, Aida?"

"Well, I probably shouldn't have mentioned it on your first day. I had better let the headmaster discuss that. Come along now, we don't want to keep the faculty waiting."

A few minutes later, they reached another staircase and began to walk up it. When they reached the main floor, Aida led them along a familiar hallway and into the same dining room where they had talked with Professor Donnelly the previous day. Tonight, all of the tables were filled with students wearing their school uniforms. When the strangers entered the room, all other conversation stopped, and most of the students gawked at them. Even the servers working the tables stopped where they were. "Why are they staring at us, Aida?" Grace asked.

“When you guys popped into the atrium, it was a shock. Generally, our cloud-seeders and sparkers learn about that talent here. I’m sure most thought you were from the other school and looking for trouble. Don’t worry. They’ll get used to you.”

She led them to an open archway leading to a private dining room. The table was massive. There were ten teachers seated on each side, with the headmaster at one end and the dean at the other. Five other seats sat empty, three near the headmaster, one next to the dean, and the last in the center of the far side of the table. Aida noticed the concerned expressions on her charges, so she smiled warmly. “It’s just dinner. It’ll be over before you know it. Take your seats and I take you back to our rooms later.” She walked to the far end of the table and sat next to the dean. The others took their seats as well.

Headmaster Dorchester stood. “My dear faculty friends, seated on my left are Carl Prescott and Burt Jackson. On my right is Ms. Grace Mulligan, and of course, you all know Aida.” He sat again. “So Carl, I trust your accommodations are acceptable?”

“Yes Headmaster. The rooms are real nice. Thanks again for taking us in.” A line of servers brought small bowls of soup on silver trays and began serving.

“Think nothing of it, Carl. I know the three of you will do much to improve our scholastic performance. While our standards are rigorous, I know you’ll be up to the challenge.”

Grace said, “Headmaster, I’m confused about that. Will we be taking normal classes, or is this only about our special abilities?”

Professor Donnelly sat on Grace’s right. “Let me answer that, Headmaster. We do both. Mornings are focused on traditional skills such as math, literature, and science. In the afternoon, we work on talents, which vary from student to student, depending on their skill level with both. Many of our students do not exhibit talents until after three years. Your level of talent is what drew us to the three of you.”

A very old man entered the dining room. He had a shock of white hair, a white beard, and wore long embroidered brown robes. Carrying a sheaf of papers under one arm, he hurried over to Dorchester and

bowed. "Please forgive my tardiness, Headmaster. I seem to have lost track of time, which occurs more regularly than I would like."

"Don't worry about it, Bertrand. As Headmaster Emeritus, we can never find fault with you. Please take your seat."

As the old man began to move, he noticed Burt and froze. He looked at the headmaster and back at the boy several times. Dorchester nodded slightly. Bertrand smiled and rushed over to his chair. He set the papers on the chair and then sat on them. Everyone began to eat. The conversation at dinner was lively for the teachers. Small groups spoke among themselves, and Dorchester spoke mostly to Donnelly and two other nearby teachers and Carl and the others let it wash over them.

When the meal concluded, the new students were invited to the headmaster's office along with the dean, Donnelly, and Bertrand. Aida and her charges sat on a long couch while the others sat on wing chairs across a large coffee table. The students were given cups of hot tea, while the adults had either whisky or brandy. Dorchester sipped his drink while studying the students carefully. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Alistair?"

Donnelly shook his head. "Not at all, Alex. However, I think it's too dangerous to keep hidden any longer."

"I don't like it either," Dean Whitehall concurred. "But I'm sure Bertrand is thrilled."

Bertrand shook his head. "That isn't true at all, Clarisse. I do agree with Alistair's risk assessment though."

Dorchester shook his head. "Okay, let's just get just get this out in the open so we can move on."

"Is the CIA coming after us already?" Carl asked.

The headmaster chuckled. "Oh Carl, if only it was that simple. Alistair, please explain."

Donnelly took a deep breath. "Very well. Do you remember what I mentioned to you three when you showed up yesterday?"

"You said one of us was adopted," Burt replied.

Donnelly turned to Carl. “Do you know what I’m going to say?”

“No sir, I don’t.”

“We all know that Clarisse adopted Aida. Now, as it turns out, three people in this room are related by blood.”

“What?” Whitehall exclaimed.

“Please Clarisse, let us hear him out,” Dorchester replied. “Just get this over with, Alistair.”

Donnelly wiped his brow with his handkerchief. “Aida and Burt are sister and brother, and Bertrand is their great grandfather.”

Chapter 4

The following morning, Carl knew everything that Professor Donnelly said was true. He had dreamed about Burt's birth parents. His mother had dated her high school sweetheart for years before becoming pregnant with Aida. Charlie Clark had disappeared shortly after learning the news, leaving Beatrice despondent and fearful of raising a child on her own. That led her to abandoning her baby, and Aida's eventual journey to the institution. A year later, she met and fell in love with Burt Thorndike. Within a year, baby Burt was born. Two weeks before his first birthday, Beatrice vanished. The police could never locate her, and so the case was closed. Three years later, Burt Sr. met and married Rachel. On his way home from work for his son's eighth birthday, Burt Sr. died in an auto accident.

When Carl arose, he found Burt was gone. He prepared for his day, donned a school uniform and headed downstairs for breakfast. He found Grace sitting alone at a table and joined her. Burt was not in the dining hall. Aida had been eating alone but left when she saw the others enter the room. After Carl told his friend about the dream, she stared back at him in disbelief. "You know, I'm not surprised that neither Aida nor Burt want to see or talk to us."

Grace nodded. "Yeah, I was shocked, but it really happened to them. Why do you think that Charlie guy and Beatrice ran away?"

"I don't think they did. I think they were kidnapped, and that makes me deathly afraid for our parents."

"How so? We're not related to them at all."

"Grace, why are we all here? It wasn't our grades. It was these weird things we can do, just like Burt and Aida. Something very sinister is going on, but I just can't figure out what it is."

Grace pointed toward the entrance. "Professor Donnelly just came in. Should we talk to him?"

Carl shook his head. "Not yet. At this point, we really don't know who the good or bad guys are."

A bell sounded, and a mechanical voice spoke over the speakers, "Students, first period begins in fifteen minutes."

Carl and Grace stood and headed for the doors. They turned left outside the door and moved toward their first class.

After four hours of classes in English, algebra, science, and world history, Carl met Grace in the open atrium at the center of the building. Neither had seen Burt or Aida all morning and now they were concerned. “They’ll be okay,” Grace said.

Carl smiled and took a bite of his sandwich. “I can’t imagine how I’d react to learning I had a sister. I’d probably freak out too.”

“I know, but they’ve probably just been talking it out.” A gust of cold air rushed through the opening. Grace pointed behind Carl, who turned in his seat. A small dust devil had appeared in the center of the atrium.

A bolt of lightning shot down out of the blue sky and stuck the dust devil. The whirlwind erupted into a fire tornado. Students were scrambling to get out of its way. Without warning, the tornado exploded into a ball of fire that rose into the air. A man was standing where the center of the storm had been. He wore a black tuxedo with matching shirt and a red bow-tie. He also wore a black cape that fluttered in the breeze. “Father, we must speak!”

A few seconds later, Professor Thorndike exited the building with Burt and Aida behind him. The professor told the students to leave him and join the others. The old man hurried toward the new arrival and stopped ten feet away. “What do you want, Son?” The headmaster and several teachers were also coming into the atrium to see what was happening.

“I want to see my grandson. I think I deserve that at least.”

“Junior, the boy just learned of this relationship last night. It’s going to take some time for him to accept us.”

Dorchester now stood next to the elder Thorndike. “You gave up your rights to be here when you went to Masterson, Eight.”

The younger Thorndike sneered at the headmaster. "This is a family matter, Alex. Just butt out."

"The headmaster is correct, Son. You cannot stay here even a minute longer."

The visitor waved them off and began to walk toward the table where Carl and his friends now sat. "Burt Jackson, come say hello to your grandfather. I just want to meet you."

Dorchester instantly appeared ten feet in front of the visitor. "Your silly games are beginning to annoy me, Alex."

Alex pushed Dorchester aside and continued forward. The four teenagers were now standing. Burt was looking to his friends for advice. The visitor was now fifteen feet away. Instantly, Aida moved and stood between Burt and his grandfather. "Child, move away now." She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. He continued forward. "You don't know who you're dealing with, young lady."

Aida pushed forward with both arms. The visitor was launched into the air and disappeared over the school walls. All the students began cheered and rushed forward to congratulate her.

Later, the three new students were in a classroom alone. Dean Whitehall walked in the door and headed to the desk at the front of the room. She sat on the desktop and smiled at them. "Thank you for attending this orientation class. Typically, we have larger, two-day orientations for new students, but since you three are starting mid-year, the headmaster and I thought it important for an abbreviated version, especially true after the little spectacle in the atrium earlier. I think our visitor is the perfect place to start. Do any of you recall the name of the other school that the headmaster mentioned?"

"It was Masterson, right?" Grace asked.

"Very good. That is correct. Now, the rest is a bit complicated."

Whitehall explained that the two schools were almost exactly on opposite sides of the Earth in order to avoid confrontations between them. While there were some differences in curriculum and methods, they were the only schools that worked to build on the natural talents of the students. People had been born with hidden talents since the beginning of time; however, for much of history, those abilities were either never

discovered or actively discouraged. In more ancient times, children with the talents were slaughtered before they could develop them. Even today, most countries had reeducation facilities to teach the children that their experiences had been dreams and to stop their development. After so many centuries, no one know whether these talents or the discouragement of them was the right choice.

Professor Thorndike was a descendant of the founder of the Thorndike Institution, as was the visitor from the Masterson Academy and Burt. The grandson of the first Bertrand, Aloysius Thorndike did not have a male heir. His eldest daughter, Cecilia, had married a graduate of Thorndike named Ezekiel Augustine Masterson. Shortly after their marriage, disagreements between the daughters of the third Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike erupted into a feud. Ezekiel and Cecilia left the school with about fifty classmates in order to create the Masterson Academy. The second daughter bore a male child out of wedlock and the naming tradition continued to this day.

Carl looked perplexed. “Dean Whitehall, so no one knows whether these things we do are good or bad?”

She nodded. “Carl, that makes them analogous to all of life. Whether good or bad, they are natural. We were all born with them. We here at Thorndike simply choose not to ignore the wonderful gifts we were given.”

Grace added, “So, it’s not our talents that are good or bad; it’s what we do with them.”

Whitehall tapped her index finger to her nose. “That is precisely right. People born with exceptional strength can choose to use it to bully or to help the people they meet. It’s all about our choices.”

“Dean Whitehall, do you think my grandfather wanted to kidnap me?”

She nodded. “Of course, Burt. There’s no other reason for his sudden appearance here. Eight has always been headstrong and reckless.”

“Eight?”

Whitehall smiled. “Grace, with so many generations of the same name, we find it simpler to use the number. Everyone knows what we mean. Any other questions?” With no responses, she continued. “Okay, now each of you will go with a separate teacher. We want to explore your individual abilities so we can

know how best to train you. Grace, you'll come with me. Burt, Professor Donnelly is waiting outside the door for you. And Carl, the headmaster wants to handle you personally. He is with Donnelly."

Once outside the classroom, Dorchester led Carl away in the opposite direction of the others. "Carl, I am aware of your talents as a Master and Dreamer, both of which we will improve, but there are several other possibilities, including the ones exhibited by your friends. I would like to share some of the others with you."

"Whatever you think best, Headmaster."

"Very well. Let us stop here. It's best not to be moving for this one." When they were standing next to each other, Dorchester grabbed Carl's elbow. Instantly, they were standing on the top of a hill looking down at the town of Santa Isabela. Dorchester dropped his hand to his side. "You have just witnessed the Teleport talent, which is similar to the Sparker, but without the flourish of lightning and explosions."

"That's really cool, Headmaster. Do you think I can do that?"

Dorchester smiled. "Possibly. I can sense tremendous power in you, possibly greater than my own. We can try Teleport later. I brought you here to test something else first."

"Whatever you think, Headmaster."

"One of the most useful and common talents is Floatation."

"Like in a swimming pool?"

The headmaster laughed. "Yes, something like that. Are you willing to try?" Carl nodded. "Okay. I want you to close your eyes and stretch out your arms." Carl complied. "Now imagine that you are as light as a feather, and the breeze is lifting you up into the air." Carl was standing on his tip-toes and gritting his teeth, but he remained anchored to the ground. Dorchester noticed his expression and began to laugh again.

Carl opened his eyes. "This is hard, Headmaster."

"You're taking this all too seriously, Carl. Try to relax. Let the feeling of weightlessness wash over you."

Carl closed his eyes again and took several deep breaths.

“That’s better Carl. Feel the wind under you, lifting you up into the air. Know that it is happening and accept the miracle of flight.”

A sudden gust of wind lifted Carl off the ground. “I’m doing it, Headmaster, I’m doing it!”

“Very well done, Carl. I’m proud of you!”

Carl opened his eyes, discovered he was three feet off the ground, panicked, and fell to the ground.

“Dang it!”

Dorchester pulled the teenager to his feet. “That was fantastic, Mr. Prescott! I really doubted you had the talent.”

“But I fell down, Headmaster.”

“Carl, the first time is always the hardest, but now you know that you have the ability. With practice and training, it will become second nature to you. For your first day, that was astounding.”

“Can I try to fly again, Headmaster?”

Dorchester shook his head. “Not today, Carl. This day is to inventory your talents that we can build upon.”

“What else can we try, Headmaster? This is fun!”

Dorchester grabbed Carl’s arm, and they were instantly back in his office. Carl’s knees wobbled from the sudden change, but the headmaster held him up. “My apologies. I should have told you we were going to teleport again. Please have a seat.” Carl walked over to a couch and sat. Dorchester filled a glass with water and offered it to the teenager. “This will help, but drink slowly.”

Dorchester sat on a wing chair across the coffee table. “I think it is clear that your talents are very significant, Carl.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“That was a statement of fact, not a compliment, but you are welcome.” He took a deep breath and released it slowly. “There is a very rare talent I have read about. Less than one in a million students has any trace of it. Now, I’m beginning to think you might possess it, and are not simply a Dreamer.” He raised one

eyebrow and studied Carl closely. “It is called the Visionary, and when combined with sparking or teleporting can be very powerful.”

“It sounds strange, Headmaster. What does it mean?”

“There is a closely related, but less powerful talent we call the Mentalist. When Eight appeared in the courtyard, he was using his Sparking and Mentalist abilities. It’s obvious that Eight is keeping track of his father’s thoughts, which is why he knew Burt was his grandson and here.”

Carl put his hands against both sides of his head. “So, he can read our minds?”

“Relax, Carl. The Mentalist can track the minds of only a few people, and they are usually relatives or close friends. If Eight wanted to read your mind, he would likely lose his ability to track someone else. You have nothing to worry about.” Carl put his hands back in his lap. “Now, the Visionary is different. Of course, it would be impossible to know everyone’s thoughts or actions, but if you have this talent and think of a certain person or place, you can see them or it and what they are doing or what is happening. You recall when we first met and I asked you to think about your father?”

“Yes, Headmaster. I saw the three letters.”

Dorchester smiled and nodded. “Exactly. Because it was your own father and you were concerned about him, you could have been using the Dreamer or Mentalist abilities. Let us try an experiment.” Carl nodded.

“First, close your eyes and think of your mother.”

After a second, Carl blushed and opened his eyes. “She was in the shower. I’m so embarrassed.”

“I apologize for suggesting her, but she will never know. Since she is family, let me suggest someone totally different.” He thought for a moment. “Think about Director Winston.”

Carl closed his eyes. Almost immediately, images poured into his mind. “He’s in the Cabinet Room at the White House with the Attorney General, who seems very angry. Winston has his head down, and the other man is shouting at him. Wait, he stopped. The President just walked in the door shaking his head.”

“That’s enough, Carl. We don’t want to be spies.”

Carl rubbed his eyes and then opened them. “Do you think that’s really happening, Headmaster?”

Dorchester took a deep breath and released it slowly. "It's not possible for me to know. Your recollection seemed very detailed, so it probably was." He pursed his lips and thought for a moment. "Okay, one last experiment. Think about Professor Donnelly."

Carl closed his eyes again. A second later, he opened his eyes and jumped to his feet. "He's hurt and Burt is gone!"

Dorchester hurried over and grabbed the teenager's arm. "Think about where they are," he said, and the two disappeared.

Seconds later, they appeared on a tropical beach. Donnelly lay in the sand ten feet away. Dorchester ran to him and fell to his knees. "Alistair, what happened? How do you feel?"

Donnelly tried to sit up but failed. The front of his suit was badly scorched. "He attacked me. I think my arm is broken. Then he hit me with a spark. My whole body aches. He tried to take Burt, but the boy ran into the trees."

The sound of thunder and explosions reached them from the distance. "I'll take care of Eight!" Dorchester exclaimed. Just then, Dean Whitehall and Grace appeared on the beach. "Clarisse, take Alistair and these students back to the school." Dorchester headed in the direction of the sound, and Carl and Grace followed him.

"You two get back here!" Whitehall shouted, but they ignored her. "Children, come back here now!" When it was clear they would not, she said, "Just relax, Alistair." She took his hand, and they disappeared.

Dorchester hurried up a low slope and emerged from the palm trees onto a large grass field. On the far side, several hotels rose into the sky. Fifty yards ahead, Eight and Burt stood twenty yards apart as bolts of lightning arced between them and met in the center in a growing fireball. Every ten seconds, the ball exploded, showering them and the ground with sparks.

Carl and Grace now stepped onto the grass with Dorchester ten yards ahead of them. He turned his head and shouted, "You two have to get out of here!"

Eight extended his other arm and launched a bolt toward Dorchester, who deflected it with a wave of his hand. The bolt stuck the top of a palm tree, setting it ablaze. “This is a family matter, Alex. Let me resolve this with my grandson.”

“You wounded Alistair, Eight. This is no longer a game.” Dorchester pushed his hands forward, but Eight deflected the energy pulse which then blew out several windows in the nearest hotel.

“You’re losing your touch, Alex,” Eight said with a laugh.

Large swarms of flying insects exited the trees and descended on Eight, who was trying to shoo them away while concentrating on Burt. Knowing what he had to do, Carl took a deep breath and moved forward. “Carl, come back here!” Dorchester ordered, but he did not stop.

A ball of fire erupted around Eight and the insects fled. Carl kept moving forward. Eight licked his lips. “Grandson, either stop your spark, or I will kill your friend.” Burt’s eyes widened, and he dropped his arm. Eight turned to face the approaching child. “Have you come to die, young man?”

Carl shook his head. “I think you’re wrong.” Bolts shot out of both of Eight’s arms, striking Carl in the chest. Still, he kept moving forward. Eight redoubled his attack. Carl stopped for a moment and then smiled. He continued walking as the lightning shot into him. After a minute, Carl grabbed the man’s hands and held them tightly. Eight struggled to release Carl’s grip, but he could not. “What kind of monster are you?” Eight’s eyes rolled up into his head, and he fell unconscious to the ground. His body disappeared.

Burt, Grace, and Dorchester started to move toward Carl, but stopped when his body started to grow. After a minute, he was twenty feet tall. He stuck his arms straight up into the air, and a pulse of power shot through the area. As the pulse dissipated, all of the scorched insect bodies came back to life and flew away. The scorched trees and smashed hotel windows were returned to normal, and Carl was now his normal size. He smiled as Grace ran into his arms, and Burt hugged him.

“I can honestly say that I’ve never seen anything like that,” Dorchester said. “We need to get back to the school now before the authorities arrive. We are on US soil, which is definitely not safe for any of us. I will work with the staff to determine exactly what we just experienced.”

The following morning, Aida and her charges sat together for breakfast. Aida looked around to see who might be listening and then spoke just above a whisper, “The stories about what happened yesterday are buzzing around the school, Carl. I think the other students are now more afraid of you than me, and that’s saying a lot.”

“I didn’t think the headmaster would go blabbing about it.”

Aida frowned. “Of course he didn’t, but quite a few of the older students are Mentalists. Some of them track the headmaster to find out if they’re in trouble. There are no secrets with mind-readers out there.”

“I thought it was awesome, Carl.”

“Thanks, Burt. Right now, I don’t know what made me do that. I mean how could I know what I did was even possible?”

Aida replied, “Mom always says that our minds know what we can do, and that we just have to listen to what they’re telling us.”

Burt cleared his throat. “Carl, I have to ask you something, but I don’t want you to take it wrong.”

“Go ahead.”

“Did you kill my grandfather?”

Carl’s eyes opened wide. “No, of course not. It looked like he wanted to kill me, but I would never do that. Just a second.” He closed his eyes, thought for a moment, and then reopened them. “He’s fine, mad as hell, but fine.”

“How do you know that?”

“The headmaster called it the Visionary talent.”

Aida smiled. “I have that too, Carl. Let me think about him.” When she opened her eyes, she was blushing. “Mom would wash out my mouth with soap if I used those words. He’s fine, Burt.”

Burt sighed and looked down. “Frankly, I’m not certain I don’t want him dead. He’s never been there for me, and now he wants to kidnap me.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

The students looked up to see Dean Whitehall standing at their table. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, honey. Carl, I need you to come to the headmaster’s office with me. The rest of you go to class when the alarm sounds.” Carl stood, the dean put her hand on his arm, and they left the room.

Chapter 5

Carl sat on a chair looking down at his feet. The headmaster, dean, and headmaster emeritus sat on wing chairs a few feet in front of him. Dorchester said, “Everything will be fine, Carl Prescott. It is always better to know than not. Yours is an intriguing case. What you did yesterday was unique, and none of us have ever witnessed the like.”

“Will I be expelled?” Carl asked without raising his head.

“Of course not, Carl,” Professor Thorndike exclaimed.

Dorchester stood, walked behind Carl’s chair, and put his hands on the student’s shoulders. “You leaving here would be the worst possible outcome. All of us have studied these talents our entire lives, but we had to go back to ancient texts to discover possible answers, of which there are four.”

“What are they?”

The headmaster moved back to his chair and sat with a grunt. “It is possible there are more answers since we’ve only had a few hours to study. Perhaps with more time, we might. . .”

“We have to act now, Headmaster,” Whitehall argued. “There is too much at stake if we avoid addressing his talents until some later date.”

“Clarisse is correct, Alex,” Thorndike replied.

Dorchester sighed, put his elbow on the arm of the chair, and thoughtfully rubbed his forehead. He looked up and examined the faces of the other faculty. He sighed again and stared at Carl. “Pending our further study, I can share some of what we’ve learned, but I need to ask a few questions first.”

“Of course, Headmaster.”

“Why did you ignore the dean’s order to return here?”

“Burt is my friend. If he was in danger, I couldn’t ignore it.”

Thorndike grinned. “That’s a good answer, Alex.”

Dorchester pursed his lips for a moment. “Perhaps, Bertrand, perhaps.” He returned his attention to the student. “Second question. Why did you ignore my order to leave the area?”

“I think it’s the same answer. I wanted to make sure Burt would be okay. That man wanted to kidnap him and almost killed the professor trying.”

“That makes sense, Alex,” Whitehall said.

Dorchester focused on the boy. “Next question. Why did you intervene, knowing Eight could have killed you?”

Carl shook his head. “I don’t really know. All of a sudden, I just knew I had to do something. I didn’t even realize I was walking until I passed you.”

Thorndike gasped. “The Invisible Hand.”

“That’s a guess, Bertrand,” Whitehall replied with a sneer.

Dorchester waved them both off and glowered at Carl. “Final question. Knowing Eight tried to kill you, why didn’t you kill him?”

Carl twitched from the thought. “I hope that was a joke.”

The three shook their heads. Dorchester said, “I don’t joke.”

Carl thought for a full minute, trying to imagine how it would feel to murder another person. “That never crossed my mind. I knew Burt and you were in trouble, and I wanted to end the threat. I know that his grandfather would not stop attacking, so I took his ability to fight. When I grabbed his hands, I could sense the terror he felt. That really shocked me. I mean, how could he be afraid of me? He was sure he was about to die, so I let go. That’s when he fell to the ground and disappeared.”

Thorndike moaned. “It’s the. . .”

Dorchester exclaimed, “Don’t you say that, Bertrand. Don’t you dare say that!”

Thorndike stood, smiled meekly at Carl, and hurriedly left the room.

Whitehall stood. “I’ll take care of the boy, Headmaster.” He motioned them away with his hand. She led Carl out of the office and closed the door behind her.

They entered her office, which was next door. "Sit there, Carl." She walked behind her desk and sat.

"That was quite a story, young man. The headmaster was obviously distraught, so I will continue for him."

"Yes, Dean."

"When it's just us, you can call me Clarisse."

"I prefer Dean. You deserve the respect of your office."

"Thank you, Carl. I want you to know that my daughter is very taken with you."

He looked shocked. "What?"

She smiled. "I'm not implying anything other than admiration, Carl. I know she is older than you and at this age, even two years seems vast. Aida is also very perceptive, and she may have felt the strength of your talents."

"Thank you, Dean."

"By now, you may have noticed that our talents are double-edged. They can be used for good or evil."

"Yes, ma'am, I noticed that yesterday."

Clarisse folded her hands on the desktop. "Please, let me clarify. I am not saying that either this school or the other is good or evil. It is the individuals who choose their paths." Carl nodded. "It is believed by some that the very highest echelons of talent are a bit different. There is no empirical proof, for these talents haven't been witnessed in at least two thousand years."

"Wow! That's a long time."

"Indeed it is, Carl. Because the records are so ancient, it was often assumed they were exaggerated to mesmerize and control the masses. Most of the ancient religious texts speak of miracle workers and magical events. Since they were not necessarily written contemporaneously, it's hard to say."

"Excuse me, Dean, but what does that mean?"

She smiled. "It means there were not written down at the same time as the events occurred."

"Thank you."

Whitehall stood, walked around the desk, and sat on a second side chair next to the teenager. “This is where it gets interesting. From what the headmaster reported, another such event occurred yesterday on that Hawaiian island. It was you, Carl.”

“Me?”

She nodded. “But it wasn’t what happened with Eight. It is what occurred after that. Do you remember?”

He sighed and looked down. “Sort of. I knew we’d be in trouble from all of the damage, and wished it would go away. After that, the next thing I remember was Grace and Burt grabbing me. Then, when we are ready to leave, I noticed the trees weren’t on fire, and the windows in the hotel were back.”

“And that’s all you remember?”

He nodded. After a few seconds, he added, “After the other man disappeared, I remember feeling warm, safe, and very happy. It was like I was being hugged by my mom. I felt totally protected. What did I miss?”

Whitehall took a deep breath and then released it slowly. “After Eight disappeared, you grew to twenty feet tall. A massive pulse of power shot from your body. That pulse repaired the windows, returned the palm trees to normal, and also resurrected several thousand insects that Eight had incinerated.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Yes, Dean, I did, but I just can’t believe that. How is that even possible?”

Whitehall stood and returned to her seat behind her desk. “The headmaster mentioned we had found four possible talents in the ancient texts.”

Carl nodded. “Yes, Dean, I remember that.”

“Well, those four talents fall into two categories which were called the Sage Hand and the Invisible Hand. As I mentioned earlier, in those ancient texts, it was believed that these talents were either inherently good or evil. For example, the two categories of the Sage Hand are the Redeemer and the Avenger, for good and evil, respectively.”

“What about the Invisible Hand, Dean?”

“That talent is pure fiction, Carl. It was spread among the ancient peoples to inspire awe and fear.

Therefore, it does not warrant mention.”

Carl smiled and nodded. “I understand.”

“Good. As I also mentioned before, every other talent can be used for harm or good, and I believe that the Sage Hand is the same. The subcategories simply recognize that fact. It is not the talent that defines the results. It is the person’s choices.”

“That makes perfect sense, Dean. Thank you for explaining it to me.”

“You’re welcome. Do you have any other questions?”

He nodded. “Does that mean I have that Sage Hand thing?”

“Perhaps, but that seems unlikely. That talent hasn’t been witnessed for thousands of years.”

Carl stood. “Good. I’ve never been very popular, and being an even bigger freak won’t help.”

Whitehall stood. “Carl, you are most certainly not a freak. You are a fine young man with some amazing skills. I can see what Aida and Grace see in you. Have a good day.”

Carl smiled again and then walked out of the office.

After the events of the prior day and due to Donnelly’s injury, Carl, Burt, and Grace were given the afternoon off. Aida went with them to explore the grounds away from the school buildings. They walked away from their dormitory toward the nearest woods. “Are there any dangerous animals in the woods, Aida?” Burt asked.

“Dangerous, no, but there are deer, rabbits, birds, and a few foxes.”

“Aren’t foxes dangerous?” Carl asked.

“To the rabbits, yes, but not to us. From what I hear about Grace’s Mother talent, I don’t think it would matter anyway. We also have a few flocks of sheep and goats wandering around.” Aida led them up a small rise. On the opposite side, a group of deer were munching the grass and flowers. “Let’s wait here. We don’t want to spook them.” The four sat on the grass and watched.

One by one, the animals noticed the students and began to walk up the hill towards them. When the deer were within fifty feet, the teenagers stood up. The animals stopped ten feet away. They all looked at Carl and bowed their heads. Carl returned the bow and opened his arms. The largest stag walked up to him, and Carl hugged him. Just then, a small flock of sheep approached from behind, completely surrounding the students. Carl and Aida stood back to back, not knowing what to do next.

A smaller stag walked up to Burt and bowed its head. Burt was about to return the gesture when the stag butted him in the chest. Burt fell backwards and landed on the back of a sheep. It reared up on its hind legs, so Burt grabbed its neck. The sheep ran, carrying Burt on its back. Soon all the sheep were following. Burt shouted for help, but soon began to laugh as the flock raced across the field with their new friend.

The other students stood together marveling at the show. "I've never seen anything like that," Aida said with a gasp.

Carl laughed at the shenanigans. "The headmaster called it the Jokester talent. He said the founder of this school was the last time anyone had it."

"Look at this!" Grace exclaimed. The others turned and saw that three stags were seated on the grass. The animals motioned them forward. "What do we do?"

"You're the one who can talk to them, Grace," Carl reminded her.

"Oh yeah." She put her forehead against the forehead of one of the stags. After a few seconds, she stood upright. "They want us to ride them." The others looked back at her with their mouths open. Grace smiled and then climbed onto the animal. She wrapped her arms around its neck, and the deer stood. "Come on, it's okay."

Carl and Aida got onto the other seated animals, which stood, and then the entire group began to accelerate toward the circling flock of sheep. They could see Burt was now sitting up and acting like a cowboy. The race was on!

Headmaster Dorchester stood in one of the corner towers watching the action through binoculars. The Dean stood next to him, watching as well. "That's the second most unusual thing I've ever seen, Alex."

“Yes, second only to what happened yesterday.” He let the binoculars hang on their strap. “We need to test Carl and the others more. Do you think my talent is enough to pass a suggestion to one of the animals?”

“I don’t know, but I’d love to see you try.”

The headmaster closed his eyes.

Moments later, Grace shouted, “Carl, this deer says they want to fly.”

“Deer can’t fly, Grace,” Aida called back over the noise of the pounding hooves.

As Carl considered the silliness of the idea, his attempt at the Floatation talent crossed his mind. “Do what I do!” He sat up on the deer’s back and stretched out his arms.

“Hold on, you’re going to fall!” Grace screamed.

“Just do it!”

“Carl, we don’t have the Floatation talent!” Aida cried.

“Just try!”

After running another twenty yards, the deer rose off the ground, their hooves beating against the breeze. Moments later, the sheep left the ground as well, while Burt screamed in terror. The groups circled the area once and then twice. Now birds were flying with them. The four students were laughing and cheering. After two more circuits around the area, the groups floated down to the ground, landed, and slowed to a stop. They climbed off the animals and hugged them. They waved and began to walk back toward the school.

When they were fifty feet away, all the sheep bleated in unison. They turned to see all the animals bowing to them. They returned the bow and walked away.

Dorchester turned to Whitehall. “I was not expecting that. How could anyone expect that?”

She sighed. “Bertrand was right.”

“Now let’s not jump to conclusions, Clarisse. Speculating about the Invisible Hand is a waste of time. Each of those students has advanced skills. It’s possible their powers worked together.”

She crossed her arms and smirked at him. “At least I think you need to mention this to Headmaster Greenleaf.”

“I dread that conversation.”

“We all do, Alex. We all do. How long has it been since the two headmasters spoke?”

“I think it was Bertrand in his first year. We need to gather the faculty at dinner. I need their input before we do something so rash.”

The four students were sitting at the table for dinner. Burt sat across the small table from Carl, with the girls on the other sides. Carl was about to put a forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth when Grace touched his other hand. “Carl, I forgot to thank you.”

“Thank me for what.”

“Saving those insects.”

“What insects?” Aida asked.

“On the tropical island,” Grace replied.

Carl looked down. “I don’t want to talk about that right now, if that’s okay.” Before anyone could respond, he pushed the potatoes into his mouth.

Some of the other students began to applaud. They looked up to see Professor Donnelly walk into the dining hall. He was limping, and one arm was in a sling. The four stood and began to applaud as well. Donnelly stopped and waved with his good arm. “Thank you all very much.” Then he continued to the faculty dining room, and the heavy curtains were drawn.

As they returned to their seats, Aida noted, “Something serious is going on. They closed the curtains.”

“What difference does that make?” Burt asked.

Aida smiled at him. “Those particular curtains work like a one-way mirror. They can hear us, but we can’t hear them.”

They all returned to their food, which made Carl glad. He did not want to talk about the resurrected bugs. He felt Grace’s knee against his and looked up to see her smiling sweetly at him. He smiled back. Then he felt Aida’s foot rubbing up against his other shin and turned to her. She smiled demurely, looked down,

and removed her foot. Carl realized that he was in real trouble now, and even the Invisible Hand would not solve it for him.

Carl hardly slept. He tossed and turned worrying about dealing with Aida and Grace. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed about flying with the deer. He felt happy and at peace. That dream ended, and another began. He dreamed Eight came into his bedroom with another. She was young and quite beautiful with long black hair and large eyes like coal embers. She wore a tight black outfit with a flowing red robe across her shoulders and back. The man stayed near the window, as if afraid of another attack. The woman stood over Carl, moving her hands over his body without actually touching him. Every few seconds, she would look at her companion with disgust. In his dream, Carl was so frightened that he begged his body to awaken, but to no avail. Finally the man whispered, "You have to do it."

She scowled at him. "Don't tell me how to do my job!" Now her hands touched Carl's body. Her touch seemed like an open flame licking his skin, but he was helpless to move. She knelt on the bed, pressed her lips to his, and pushed her tongue into his mouth. The sensation was erotic and terrifying at the same time. Her tongue was like a snake and a blowtorch combined.

Carl sat up in bed panting for air. His room was empty. He was drenched in sweat, and his heart pounded in his chest. The roar of blood in his ears was so overwhelming that he put his hands over them. Exhausted, he fell back onto his back, instantly asleep.

"What happened last night, Carl?"

He sat up again and saw Burt standing in the doorway. "Huh?"

"I heard voices coming from your room. I tried to get out of bed to see what was happening, but my body couldn't move."

Carl shook his head. "It was a dream, wasn't it?"

Burt sighed. "One of the voices was a woman, and I'm pretty sure the other was my grandfather."

“She kissed me, and I’ve been feeling strange ever since. We have to see the headmaster.” Carl climbed out of bed, but before he could take a step, his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell to the floor.

Carl woke sometime later in a hospital bed. Aida was sitting on a chair near the bed. “Who are you? What happened?”

“You don’t remember me?” He shook his head slowly. “You’ve been unconscious for two days, Carl. Two teachers from the other school attacked you during the night. Burt, Grace, and I have been taking shifts to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“I’m confused, Aida. Why am I in the hospital?”

“If you don’t remember me, how do you know my name?”

“Huh?”

“Carl, you just called me Aida.”

“I did?”

She stood. “Let me get the headmaster.” She walked out of the room.

“Who are you going to get?” he called out, but she was already gone.

A minute later, Dorchester entered the room. “Carl, how are you?”

Carl shrugged his shoulders. “I’m fine, but who are you? Can you get my mom or dad for me?”

“Hold that thought,” the headmaster said and walked over to the door and opened it. “Aida, get Professor Thorndike here now!”

Carl smiled. “I’ve heard that name before. Doesn’t he run a school or something?”

Dorchester stood next to the bed. “Carl, you are a student at the Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike Academic Institution. Don’t you remember? You’ve been here a week already.”

“No, sir, that doesn’t ring a bell. Can I give you my mom’s phone number so you can call her? If my phone is around, she’s speed dial number one.”

Professor Thorndike hurried into the room with Burt, Grace, and Aida behind him. “Yes, Headmaster?”

Carl waved. “Hi, Grace and Burt. Grace, please call my mom for me?”

Dorchester turned to the other teacher. “Bertrand, it would appear that Eight brought a teacher skilled in the Succubus talent. His memory is gone.”

Thorndike pursed his lips and thought for a moment. “No, that talent can only block off some memories so the victim seems to have forgotten.”

“My memory is fine,” Carl protested. “Call my mom, and she’ll tell you.”

“Just relax, Carl,” Dorchester suggested. “Let me discuss something with my colleague for a moment.”

Carl smiled and nodded. “Who can remove the block?”

“Besides the same person, I’m not sure. Carl could probably do it if he wasn’t the one affected.”

Aida dropped her head and sighed. “Pardon me, professors, but my mother says I have some talent in that area.”

“That’s better than anything else we have,” Dorchester replied. “Let’s all move away from the bed and let her try.”

Aida moved next to Carl and lowered the side rail. “Will you call my mother, Aida?”

“In just a minute, okay? Hold my hands.” She held his hands in hers and reached out to his mind. After a few seconds, her thoughts reached the cold stone walls blocking off his memories. She pounded and pushed, but the walls remained. Beads of sweat rose on both of their foreheads, and she began to shiver. A minute later, she released his hands and leaned on the bed, panting for air.

“What happened?” Grace asked.

“I couldn’t do it,” she gasped. “The walls were too strong. There’s something we’re missing.”

Burt said, “Carl told me she kissed him.”

“What?” Grace replied, her face painted with an angry scowl.

Dorchester put his arm around Grace’s shoulders. “We have no other options right now. We have to try.” Grace walked out of the room and Burt followed her. “Do what you have to do, Aida.” He and Thorndike left the room as well.

“You’re really pretty and all, but Grace is my girlfriend.”

She held his hand. “I know that, Carl, and I don’t want to steal you from her or anything, but I need to kiss you.”

“You want to kiss me?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point. Whether you believe it or not, a bad person had hidden some of your memories inside your brain. All of us here have some incredible talents, and you’re the best of the best. As long as your memories are locked away, you can’t accomplish what you must. I won’t tell Grace anything about our kiss, and you don’t even have to like me. Now, lie back down and pucker up.”

“You promise you won’t tell her.”

She crossed my heart. “I swear.”

He lay back down and closed his eyes. She bent over him and touched her lips to his. She pushed back the emotions welling up inside her and focused on his memories. When she pounded and pushed the walls, they moved slightly, but still wouldn’t budge. Out of options, she pushed her tongue into his mouth. For a moment he resisted, but then gave in. Both were swept up in their burning desire. She had forgotten about the walls completely. Finally, she pushed back, but he rose with her. She put her hands against his chest and pushed him away. Both were blushing and panting for air.

Carl jumped out of bed and shouted, “That bitch!” He pointed to a corner of the room, and the teacher who blocked his mind suddenly appeared. She was cowering and covering her head with her arms. As the others rushed back into the room, Carl pointed to an upper corner of the room, and Eight appeared there. Carl dropped his hand, and the man crashed to the floor in a heap.

Dorchester grabbed Carl and shouted, “Enough! That’s quite enough.” He released Carl and turned to the new arrivals. “If either of you show up here again, I’ll kill you myself.” He waved his arm and they disappeared again.

“It take it your memories have been restored?”

“Yes, Professor Thorndike. Thanks for your help.”

Dorchester smiled. "Well done, all of you. Aida, I will tell your mother what a vital role you played today. Don't you agree, Carl?"

He blushed again. "Thanks, Aida. I couldn't have done it without you."

"It was my pleasure." Realizing what she had said, she blushed and started to giggle.

"Students, it is almost noon, so please enjoy the rest of your day. Tomorrow starts the weekend, so we'll see you in class again Monday."

"Thank you, Headmaster," they said in unison and then left the room.

"Headmaster, I fear my conclusion may be accurate."

"Yes, Bertrand, that is somewhat likely now. We need to school that boy to protect his mind and harness his emotions. He could have easily killed Eight and the Succubus."

"Alex, I would like to take him under my wing. I think my breadth of experience will do him some good."

Dorchester nodded. "That seems reasonable, although I would like Alistair to assist you. It is critical that we ascertain the level of that boy's abilities as soon as we can."

"He's still laid up, isn't he?"

"That would be another good experiment. See what the boy can do for him. If he can cure as easily as he summons, that would help prove your point."

"Alex, I will leave the most delicate task to you."

"And what would that be?"

"I was almost overwhelmed by the emotions expressed by Aida, Grace, and Carl."

Dorchester rubbed his chin. "I didn't notice, but I was very preoccupied with Carl's memories. I suppose that is typical of teenagers at this age."

"True. However, with her Succubus talent, she might attempt to coerce the boy into choosing her."

"Bertrand, how old is Aida?"

"Sixteen, I believe."

Dorchester's eyebrows lifted. "That woman Carl summoned had to quite a bit older than her, yet Aida erased her work in mere seconds. Every day I'm more convinced that those four are among the most highly skilled to be seen in a thousand years or more. We must act deliberately and very carefully with each of them." He put his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Bertrand, I'll talk to Clarisse about this issue."

Chapter 6

The following morning, Carl stood at the mirror in the bathroom trying to arrange his hair. Burt stuck his head in the open doorway and said, “I’m going to meet up with Aida in the atrium. Then, we’re going to get the picnic basket.”

“Okay, I won’t be long.”

“Grace is in the other room. She said she needs to talk to you before we head out.” Carl turned to face him with a look of panic. “Don’t worry. What happened yesterday was no big deal.” Burt turned and walked away. Seconds later, Carl heard the front door open and then close.

He looked back at the mirror, gave up on his hair, and walked into the other room. She was seated on the couch, flipping through the pages of a book that had been on the coffee table. “Good morning, Grace.”

She closed the book and smiled at him. “Hi, Carl. We need to talk, and, no, I’m not mad at you.”

He walked over and sat next to her. “How did you know that I thought you were?”

She laughed. “Duh. It’s obvious, isn’t it? You’re my boyfriend, and she French-kissed you. We haven’t had our first kiss yet!”

“Did she tell you about the tongue thing?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s what you told us.”

“I never said that. I’m not going to deny it, but it was important.”

Grace patted him on the knee. “Because that’s what that other woman did.”

“How did you know that too? What’s going on? It’s like you’re reading my mind.”

“Am I? How is that possible?”

He took her hands in his, and she jumped from the surprise. Then she smiled. “Okay, I’m going to think of some things. You tell me what you see or hear.”

“Okay. . . Cantaloupe. . . Reindeer . . . Butterscotch.” Her face reddened and she looked down. “You French-kissing me.”

Rather than respond, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. His tongue met hers, and then their minds joined in a cosmic explosion of thought. All of her memories and thoughts poured into his head. She felt the sensation of the kisses from Aida and the stranger. His entire life flashed across her mind. Overwhelmed with the enormity, she pushed him away, and panted for air. “Wow! What just happened?”

“I . . . I don’t know, but your thoughts are already fading.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way.” She put her hands on his cheeks and smiled. Then she kissed him lightly. “I never knew how much you loved me, Carl. Thanks for that. I’m sure the others are waiting for us, so we should go.”

They found Burt and Aida in the atrium with Professor Thorndike. The professor mentioned a change of plans and led them to the front of the school where the minibus was waiting. Professor Donnelly was sitting inside. Thorndike stood by the open door and said, “Morning, Dixon.”

The driver nodded his head. “Morning, professor and students.” He was fairly short with wavy red hair and green eyes.

“Dixon Montague has been with us for a long time. He began as a student, but decided to stay on.” The driver boarded the bus. “We did not want to ruin your picnic plans, but decided it would be good to introduce you to the Sporting Lodge. The views there are spectacular, which should enhance your luncheon. Let us board.”

When they were all seated, the bus pulled away, but rather than the road that led to the port, they took a gravel road that led in the opposite direction. Carl asked, “How are you feeling today, Professor Donnelly?”

“Better, but far from fully mended. I was glad to hear that Aida was able to return your memories.”

“Me too. I still can’t believe those people came into my room at night.”

“I think you taught them a valuable lesson, Carl, but you need to learn to control your anger.”

“I wouldn’t have hurt them. At least, I don’t think I would.”

Donnelly smiled. “I think you’d agree it would be better to know than to assume.” Carl nodded.

Ten minutes later, the bus entered the woods where the trees were much denser. The driver turned on the headlights to help see the road ahead. The bus hopped as it crossed a wooden bridge over a fast-running stream. The road on the other side was quite bumpy, but still they continued. A few minutes later, they arrived at an iron gate in the wall. Dixon turned off the motor and exited. He used a key to remove the lock and pushed the door open. It creaked noisily on old hinges. He got back into his seat and drove the bus through. The woods ended at the wall, and they emerged on a large grassy plain. Dixon was about to relock the gate, but Thorndike suggested that Carl do it. He stepped off and pushed the gate closed. He put the lock in place and hurried back on board. Dixon smiled. "Thanks, sonny." Carl took his seat and the journey continued.

As the bus headed across the field, Thorndike asked, "Do you know why I asked you to do that task?"

"Because you wanted me to be helpful?"

"Let me answer that one, Bertrand," Donnelly suggested. "First of all, being helpful is a good answer. We should all be as helpful to others as we can. However, the real lesson is to be humble. All four of you students have talents far beyond what students your age generally possess. And those who are not students of the talents have none or don't know that they do. That makes you very powerful. But power is dangerous."

Thorndike interrupted, "Carl, the incident with Eight and the woman is a good example. You summoned them from the opposite side of the planet by simply pointing to places in the room. You could have sent them to the center of the earth or bottom of the ocean and killed them."

Donnelly continued, "Each of you needs to be cautious when using any of your talents." He looked at Aida. "You could have easily convinced Carl that he was love with you."

She shook her head. "I would never do such a thing, professor."

Donnelly turned his gaze on Grace. "You could have had wild animals attack those agents sent to take you." He looked at Burt. "You could have killed those same men with lightning. Do you understand how important this is?"

"Yes, professors," they replied together.

Thorndike smiled warmly. “Please know that we love you all very much, but we also know how difficult it is to be a teenager. It is a time of raw and almost uncontrollable emotions and insecurity. We are here to help you through it.”

Dixon said, “We’re almost there, professors.”

“Oh good,” Thorndike replied. “Students, this is the best part of the journey. Please enjoy the scenery.”

The bus rose up a long incline. The landscape was grassy with patches of trees and scrub brush. Soon, the bus reached the crest and headed downward. The edge of the island was a mile ahead. To their left, the decline was more severe, leading to a rocky beach a mile or two ahead. The island seemed to drop off in front and to the right of the bus. A large wooden structure was built near the land’s end. It looked like a three story hotel. There were more trees here, but they were twisted and bent by the frequent, strong breezes.

The bus pulled into the parking lot in front of the building and stopped. Dixon turned off the motor and opened the door. “Welcome to the Lodge. Can I do anything else for you gents?”

“Is the staff expecting us?”

“Of course, Professor Thorndike. Chef’s been to town twice to stock the kitchen.”

“I’ll see you inside,” Donnelly said as he faded away.

“That was cool,” Burt said.

“The professor is still healing from his encounter with Eight, I’m afraid,” Thorndike noted. “I want to talk to you later about him, Carl.”

“Yes, professor.”

Thorndike stood. “Let’s all go inside and get our rooms.”

“We’re staying?” Aida asked.

“For a while,” the professor replied. “The headmaster thought we should spend some time together here in light of recent events. Don’t worry, your rooms are well-stocked. Now, come along.”

A large porch wrapped around the western and southern sides of the building. Rattan seating groups were scattered about. As they approached the front door, a large man with a shaved head and handlebar

moustache stepped out and held the door open. “Professor, it’s good to see you again. You too, Aida. Students, my name is Chef Antoine Patron. My wife Yvette and I run the Lodge for the Thorndike Institution. Our home is your home.” As they entered, Antoine shook each of their hands. They were now in a large open room in which they saw a small desk for registration, two fireplaces, and several plush seating areas. A stunning woman stood behind the counter. She smiled at them.

Half an hour later, the four students left the hotel with their picnic basket. They walked in silence for some time, still not knowing why they were going to be staying here. They found a shady spot under a large tree that stood ten yards from the cliff. Carl and Burt walked over to the edge. The drop was at least one hundred feet to large rocks and a narrow beach below. Heavy waves pounded the beach and rolled up to the rocks. A bit nervous about the height, they returned to the girls. Aida was leaning against the tree with her hands behind her head and eyes closed. Grace was sipping a bottle of water while facing the other girl and sitting on a large blanket.

Carl sat on Grace’s left and Burt on her right. Burt rummaged through the basket and removed a sandwich. He opened the wrapper and took a bite. Grace put her hand on Carl’s knee, drawing his attention. “Why are we supposed to be staying here?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“I do,” Aida replied. “It’s because we’re too dangerous. The professors told us that on the bus.”

“Us?” Burt said with his mouth full of sandwich.

Carl shook his head. “I don’t think so, Aida.” Instantly, the four were back in the atrium at the school. Aida rolled onto her back since the tree supporting her was gone. When she sat up, they were back by the tree. “We could go back any time. It has to be something else.”

“How did you do that?” Burt asked.

He sighed. “It’s the teleport talent. The headmaster showed me. I guess I must have that too.”

Aida’s jaw slackened, and her eyes bugged out. “You are the Invisible Hand.”

“No, the professors tell me that’s just made up. They say I might have the Sage Hand talent, which is lots less.”

Grace patted his knee. “Whatever it is, it is super cool.”

Burt turned to Aida. “What’s the Invisible Hand?”

She looked around to make sure no one else was about. “The teachers never mention it. They say no one has had that level of skill for thousands of years, but according to the stories passed down from class to class, there actually is one alive right now. That person is held in a secret prison far beneath the Masterson Academy.”

Carl smirked. “If that person has so much power, how can she be held prisoner?”

“She’s being held in a state of suspended animation, so she cannot regain consciousness. Did you know there are always two people alive with the Invisible Hand?”

“Why two?” Grace asked.

“To save the world!” Aida replied while flourishing her arms. “The two are also known by other names, the Hand of God and the Hand of Satan. That’s why she’s sedated, don’t you see? If she was free and the Hand of Satan, she would enslave the world. No one and nothing could stop her.” She pointed at Carl. “Now, we’re all awaiting the Hand of God. When that person is alive, all of us will join one or the other and fight the epic battle that will determine the fate of all mankind.”

“Armageddon?” Burt suggested.

“Exactly right!” Aida exclaimed.

“What if she’s the good one, Aida?” Carl asked.

“Then you’re the Hand of Satan.”

“Stop including me in this story. I’m just a dopey teenager.” Carl stood. “I’m going back to the hotel to lie down.” He turned and walked away.

Aida motioned with her arm toward Carl. “Ignore him. The professors never mention the prisoner by name, but they have a code word so they all know who they’re referring to. They call her the Vizreaagh.”

Grace shuddered. "I hope Carl isn't that hand thing. I'm not ready to fight in some war."

When Carl walked into the hotel, he found Professor Thorndike waiting for him. He led him upstairs and into Donnelly's room. Donnelly was sitting up in bed reading a book. When the others came in, he closed the book and set it down on the nightstand. "Is this really necessary, Bertrand?"

"Headmaster's orders, Alistair. Come over here, Carl." They walked over to the bed and stood next to the other man. "Alistair, let's not let this drag out any longer."

Donnelly pulled the bed covers off. He was wearing only his underwear. His chest had a large scab where the lightning bolt had struck him. His entire torso was bruised. The bruises continued down his thighs and left shin. The left knee joint was oddly twisted. "It feels worse than it looks, Carl. I'm just grateful to be alive."

Carl turned to Thorndike. "Wasn't he taken to the hospital?"

"Of course, Carl, don't be ridiculous. However, this attack was different. First, no regular human could have survived the lightning strike near his heart. Alistair is also badly infected, which maintains the bruising, slows the healing, and twists his joints."

Donnelly touched Carl on the arm. "Don't ask about antibiotics. It's not that kind of infection."

Thorndike sighed. "It would seem that Eight has some improvised talents. It is as though he is still here, reinjuring the professor over and over again. It's a most heinous injury."

"Then why am I here, professors?"

Thorndike put his arm around Carl's shoulders. "The headmaster told us about the insects on that island. Those bugs had been incinerated by flames, yet, you brought them back to life. We would like you to attempt to heal the professor. Are you willing to try?"

"What if I fail?"

Thorndike smiled. "Then we will have learned."

"Of if I make him worse or cause him to die?"

“Again, we will have learned, but I am certain you would not willingly injure Alistair.”

Donnelly said, “If you do not want to try, I understand. We won’t judge you either way.”

“I have to try,” Carl said with tears welling in his eyes. “How could I live with myself if I did nothing?”

Thorndike stepped back. “It’s your choice.” He then walked to the other side of the bed to observe.

“But what do I do?”

Donnelly lay down flat. “The best thing to do is to relax and let the spirit come to you. It will not let you down, Carl.” Donnelly closed his eyes.

Carl wiped the moisture from his eyes with his sleeve. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. He took a deep breath and released it slowly. He took four more breaths and then seemed to freeze in place.

After five minutes of absolute quiet, Thorndike asked, “Are you okay, Carl?”

Carl’s eyes opened. They shone like spotlights. Thorndike had to close his eyes and turn around.

Blinding white light came from all of Carl’s pores, and the temperature in the room soared. The overbearing sound of orchestral music pounded into their ears. Donnelly’s body lifted off of the bed, floated in front of Carl, and turned until he was upright. Carl’s body floated up so that the two were aligned. Thorndike moved to the end of the bed and watched in amazement. Both floating men put their arms out to their sides. Lightning shot out of Carl’s fingertips and bounced around the walls of the room until they shot into Donnelly’s chest. White winged silhouettes came out of Carl’s body and flew and frolicked around the room.

Donnelly smiled and opened his eyes. He glanced down and saw small black specks moving out of his skin. The specks formed into a ball about one foot across and floated between them. Carl smiled and motioned with his hand, causing the black ball to float into a corner of the room. He turned and aimed both hands at the ball that was changing shape. After thirty seconds, it became a black, shriveled version of Eight. Bolts of fire shot from Carl’s hands and struck the blackened form. It screeched in pain as it burst into a searing fire that shot up the wall. The flames became a tornado and then quickly dissipated. Carl turned back to Donnelly who smiled at him. Carl smiled back and winked. Then, Carl moved forward and hugged the other man.

After thirty more seconds, Thorndike shouted “Carl, you have to stop!” Donnelly put his hands on Carl’s chest and pushed him away. Carl hit the wall and fell to the floor. Donnelly fell down onto the bed and began to laugh. The light and music faded away. The silhouettes disappeared through the walls. Thorndike pulled Carl to his feet. “That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen!” He pulled Carl into his arms and hugged him.

“Why did you tell me to stop, Professor?”

Before Thorndike could answer, Donnelly grabbed Carl and hugged him. “Thank you, Carl.” He turned to the other man. “Why did you want him to stop, Bertrand?”

“Go look in the mirror, Alistair.”

Donnelly looked confused and became more so when he noticed Carl’s stare. Donnelly walked to the mirror over the desk and looked. His hair and beard were dark brown with a few stray grays. Most of the lines on his face were gone. He looked back at Carl and then at his reflection. “I look younger!”

“At least thirty years I’d guess, Alistair,” Thorndike replied.

“This is impossible. Carl, what did you do? Bertrand, this is impossible, isn’t it?”

Thorndike groaned. “He is the Hand of God.” He shook his head and walked out of the room.

“I’m sorry, professor. I didn’t mean to do that, I swear.”

Donnelly hurried over and hugged him again. “I’m not. But don’t listen to Bertrand. He has always been overly dramatic.”

Carl nodded, but was not so certain. Aida’s tale of the Invisible Hand was burned into his mind. He was not ready for war either.

The six visitors sat with the Patrons for dinner. The talk of the night was the miraculous curing of Professor Donnelly, although neither professor nor Carl related what happened. The official story was that a special cure had been concocted in the school and sent over. The change in hair color and wrinkles were lucky side-effects of the treatment. Carl was thrilled. The last thing he wanted to hear about was the Invisible

Hand. Grace and Burt were satisfied with the story, but Aida was not. She sat across the table staring at Carl. He felt like her eyes were boring into him, trying to find the truth. He turned to the chef. "Mr. Patron, the food is delicious."

"Why thank you, Carl. I appreciate that, but please just call me Antoine or Chef."

Carl nodded and focused on his plate, but he still felt Aida's eyes on him. He glanced up and noticed it was Thorndike who was staring now. He sat next to Aida, who was cutting a piece of meat. She picked up the piece with her fork and put it into her mouth. She noticed Carl looking at Thorndike. She smiled and winked at Carl. He turned his attention back to his plate. He pushed a forkful of potatoes into his mouth. A faint voice spoke in his head. "How did you do that, Carl?"

He looked around as though someone else was nearby. "I'm not there. I have some talent as a Mentalist, and had hoped to understand your thoughts, but you are blocking me. Do you fear me, young man?"

"Eight, you need to leave me alone. I will not allow you inside my head," Carl thought back.

The strange voice laughed. "You are a fool if you think you are the Hand of God. She is here, safely contained. Tell your master, Satan, that we are ready for you."

Thorndike said, "What's wrong, Carl?"

"Eight, I saw what you did to Professor Donnelly. If you think you're some sort of angel, you're in for a big surprise," Carl thought back.

Donnelly was behind Carl and put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "There's a presence reaching out to him. I can feel it. Carl, who is it?"

He looked up. "Eight."

"Can you break the connection?"

The voice laughed again. "Donnelly and Thorndike are old fools, Carl. They cannot help you now. Soon I'll find my way in. Or maybe I should try with your girlfriends?" The voice faded, and both girls grabbed their ears and screamed.

Carl nodded and then spoke to the voice, “Eight, how dare you question the Hand of God.” The girls looked up. The voice screamed in pain and begged for mercy several seconds before Carl relented and released the connection. He looked at Professor Thorndike and said, “I think I just did a bad thing.”

Chapter 7

The following morning, Professor Donnelly took Aida, Grace, and Burt down to the beach to go swimming. Carl sat at a table in a small conference room inside the hotel. Dean Clarisse Whitehall sat across from him. Headmaster Dorchester and Professor Thorndike sat at the head and foot of the table, respectively. Thorndike sighed. “I think it’s important to recognize that my son is unharmed.”

“Carl, what did you do to Eight?” Dorchester asked.

The teenager did not look up. “When he attacked Grace and Aida, it was just too much. I care too much for both of them to allow that, so I turned his attack back onto him.”

Whitehall looked stunned. “That isn’t possible. Are you lying to us, Carl?” He shook his head but kept his eyes down. “Have you ever heard of such a thing, Alex?”

Dorchester considered the conversation for a moment and pursed his lips. “Perhaps, but only from ancient texts written at least four thousand years ago.”

“What about the Sleeping One, Alexander?” Thorndike noted.

Dorchester shook his head. “We should not speak of such things in front of a student, Bertrand.”

Whitehall leaned across the table and held Carl’s hand. He finally looked up, and all could see his eyes were red, and tracks of tears were on his face. “Carl, thank you for protecting my daughter.” He nodded and smiled briefly. Then he put both of his hands into his lap. She turned her attention to the headmaster. “Alex, if what Carl says is true, he did not initiate the attack. He only deflected it. Perhaps he let it go on too long, but I think that was appropriate so that Eight would think twice about such activities.”

“I agree with Clarisse,” Thorndike added. “You both saw what he did for Alistair. Carl is a good man.”

Dorchester raised one eyebrow as he studied the teenager. “Carl, I think Eight said something to you that you are keeping from us. Are you willing to share that with us now?”

Carl looked up at the headmaster. “I didn’t say anything because you all say it’s fiction. I figured he was just trying to start a fight or scare me.” He sighed deeply and looked down for a moment. “He said I was a

fool if I thought I was the Hand of God. He said she was there and safely contained, and that I should tell Satan that they're ready for me."

The three adults were stunned into silence for a while. Finally, Dorchester stood, and the others followed. "I think I need to contact Headmaster Greenleaf today. Bertrand, please come along. Clarisse, you handle the boy." The two men rushed out of the room.

Whitehall smiled warmly. "Come with me, Carl. I think you could use with some cheering up." She walked over to the door and closed it as the boy approached. "Do you know where your mother is?"

Carl nodded. "She's still at home."

"Interesting. The headmaster said you had some talent as a Visionary. Would you like to see her?"

"Of course, but the headmaster said we must not go to the United States."

"Carl, I will be with you, so it will be all right." She put her hand on his shoulder. "There are so many talents that I forget sometimes. I am quite skilled as a Portalist, which I will now demonstrate for you." She removed her hand from his shoulder and used the same hand to open the door. Through the doorway, instead of the hallway in the hotel, they were in the Prescott home where Carl's mother was standing at her bed and putting folded clothes into a duffle bag.

"Mom?"

Ginny Prescott turned to see her son and a woman on the other side of her bedroom door. Carl rushed forward into her arms. Whitehall stepped through and closed the door after her. Ginny hugged her son with all her strength as tears slipped out of her eyes. "My God, Carl, I've missed you so much." She looked up to see the other woman smiling at her.

"Mrs. Prescott, I am Clarisse Angelica Whitehall, Dean of the Thorndike Institution. How do you do?"

Ginny shook the other woman's hand. "Thank you for bringing my son home."

"You are welcome; however, we cannot stay for long."

"Mom, you're back with the agency, aren't you?"

Ginny nodded, released Carl, and sat on her bed. “Yes, Son. When the director asked if I was joining, you told him I was.”

Carl smiled. “I’m glad. Now that I’m at the school, you’ll just be by yourself here, and I know you loved your job.”

Ginny smiled. “Yes, but not as much as I love you, Carl.”

“Carl, where is the vehicle coming to pick up your mother?” Whitehall asked.

“Two miles away. Traffic is bad, so probably ten minutes.”

“How do you know that, Carl?”

“Mrs. Prescott, these things are complicated, but I can tell you that your son has many amazing talents which we are exploring. You are very welcome at the school anytime where you can learn more.”

“Carl, how are your friends?”

“They’re fine, Mom. They’re at the beach now with Professor Donnelly and our new friend, Aida.”

“Aida is my daughter,” Whitehall noted.

Ginny turned back to the bed and continued packing.

“Why are you crying, Mom?”

Between sobs, Ginny replied, “I don’t know how I can ever get there with my new job.”

Whitehall put her arm around Ginny’s shoulders. “Come with me for a second, Mrs. Prescott.” She led her to the door and opened it. Gentle waves rolled up the gravel beach. A man was sitting with his back to the door, and three children were playing in the surf. “All you ever have to do is reach out to Carl or me.”

“This is some kind of dream,” Ginny gasped.

Carl took her mother’s hand and led her through the doorway. There was a warm breeze and a few gulls circled around them. “Professor Donnelly, this is my mother.”

Donnelly got to his feet and turned around. An odd look passed over his face. He walked over with his hand extended. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Prescott. You should be very proud of your son.”

“Thank you, professor.”

Grace, Burt, and Aida hurried over. "Mrs. Prescott, it's good to see you."

Thank you, Grace. Hi Burt. This is all so amazing."

"My name is Aida Whitehall."

"It's nice to meet you."

"Mom, like Dean Whitehall said, if you ever need anything, just think about me, and I'll know."

"How is that possible, Carl? Is this some kind of magic?"

"I wouldn't call it that, Mrs. Prescott," Donnelly replied. "But as you are standing on a beach in the Azores, I suppose it is possible."

"Mom, the van to pick you up is only a few blocks away."

Ginny hugged her son and kissed his cheek. "Be good, Carl. I love you."

"Be safe, Mom. We're all looking out for you."

She turned and walked back through the doorway. Whitehall stepped onto the beach and closed the door, which dissolved into thin air. "You four should head back to the lodge. I need to speak with the professor for a few minutes. We'll be right behind you." After the teenagers had progressed fifty yards up the slope toward the lodge, she leaned over to Donnelly. "I noticed how you looked at Mrs. Prescott. What's up?"

Donnelly sighed deeply. "Bertrand and I met her before. It must have been thirty years ago or more. We were sent by the headmaster to recruit her. She was only eight as I recall; one of the youngest recruits ever considered. Even at that age, her abilities were very strong. I suppose now we know where Carl's talent comes from."

"Why didn't she come here?"

"Her father was a very strict disciplinarian and an FBI agent. Both parents were also very religious and felt our work was in league with the devil. I assume she was sent to one of those schools where the children are taught that their abilities were simply dreams or hallucinations. It's too bad when you think about it."

"At least we have Carl."

Donnelly looked down. “I know you took Carl there with the best of intentions, Clarisse. But now that she has seen some of the talents in action, it is possible that she may remember the past and dabble in her talents again. Perhaps the Masterson Academy will use her against us.”

The two headed up the beach. “Alistair, we need to make a full report to the headmaster. He’ll know what to do.”

By early afternoon, the students had returned to the Thorndike Institution. While the others were studying or enjoying the day, Carl was called again to the headmaster’s office. He knocked on the door, opened it, and stepped into the room. “I’m here, Headmaster.”

Dorchester was looking out a window. “Just take a seat, Carl.” The student walked over to the desk and sat on one of the side chairs facing it. Dorchester turned around and leaned up against the wall. “It’s been quite the week, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. It all seems unbelievable to me.”

“Are you enjoying your time here?”

Carl nodded. “Other than when I’ve dealt with Eight, yes I am, Headmaster.”

Dorchester walked back to his chair behind the desk and sat. “I’m glad. I would like to share some things I learned from my discussion with Headmaster Greenleaf.”

“Yes, sir.”

“First, I’ve known Trenton Greenleaf for a very long time, although I have not spoken to him since he took the post at Masterson. We were roommates when we attended this school at your age. I can categorically confirm that neither institution is good nor evil. I visited the Masterson Academy this morning, and there is no Sleeping One or Vizreagh imprisoned beneath either school. What Thorndike Eight told you was false.”

Carl smiled. “That’s good to know, Headmaster.”

“However, not all of Trenton’s revelations were positive. He said that Thorndike Eight was terminated several months ago, along with a group of five other teachers. That group likely included the one who performed the Succubus talent on you. Trenton believes they are attempting to set up another school focusing on the negative talents. At this time, they are somewhere in the Australian Outback.”

“Could they have the Vizreaagh there?”

“No, Carl. The Vizreaagh is a myth, although the story came from a well-known truth. Many people are born with talents and never discover them. We call them ‘Those Who Sleep.’ The myth arose around the honest debate whether some person could have enormous power and never know it.”

“Like the Invisible Hand, Headmaster?”

“That is likely a myth as well, but your point is correct. In one week, you’ve learned to do amazing things. If you had not come here, those talents would lie dormant, perhaps your entire life. To us, you would live your life asleep.”

“I understand, Headmaster.”

“That will be all, Carl. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.” Dorchester started to review some documents on his desk. Carl rose, turned, and walked back to the door. As he turned the handle, the headmaster said, “One more thing, Carl.” He turned to face the headmaster. “Could you please let Aida know that I wish to speak with her?” Carl nodded, opened the door, and stepped into mid-air. He screamed as he began to plummet to the ground from thousands of feet in the air. Dorchester heard the sound and rushed to the door. He pulled it open to find the hallway. “Clarisse!”

Carl was flailing his arms and legs as the barren reddish surface rushed toward him. Suddenly, he began to slow. When he was twenty feet from the surface, his body turned upright, and he landed gently on his feet.

“I mean no harm, Carl. I don’t want to fight.”

Carl turned around and saw Thorndike Eight and the woman who had kissed him a few feet away. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”

The woman puckered her lips and blew him a kiss. “Hi, lover boy.”

“Kayla, leave him alone!” Eight exclaimed. “Carl, I just want to talk to you. I know it’s hard to believe, but everything I did was just to test your abilities.”

“You’re right. I don’t believe you. You almost killed Professor Donnelly. And why would you be testing me anyway?”

Eight looked down for a moment. “I needed to know if you were the Invisible Hand.”

“That’s a myth.”

“No it isn’t, Carl. The headmasters are just thinking about it incorrectly. Having the Invisible Hand talent and being the Hand of God or Satan are two different things. While you haven’t exhibited all of the traits of the Invisible Hand, you’re still learning. Today, I know of four people who appear to have that talent, and there could be more.”

Carl smiled. “I suppose you’re one of them.”

Eight shook his head. “No, definitely not me. I believe you are one, a second student at Thorndike is another, and the final two are Those Who Sleep.”

“I thought there could only be two.”

Eight smiled. “We all thought that, but you have to remember that talent hasn’t been seen in thousands of years. Any discussion of it is pure conjecture.”

“But what about the Hands of God and Satan?”

“That’s just a story told to the ancients, Carl. If true, there may come a day when the ultimate battle of good versus evil must come. At that moment, God and Satan will choose their champions from those with the Invisible Hand. My bet is on myth.”

Carl laughed. “If it’s a myth, why are you testing me and everyone else? This sounds just silly.”

Kayla laughed out loud. “I can’t wait for your answer on that one, Bert.”

Eight took a deep breath and slowly released it. “I could be wrong. With at least four Invisible Hands alive today, that battle could happen anytime.”

Carl was back in his bedroom, having used his Teleport talent to leave Australia. He sat on the bed and held his head in his hands. In his mind, the faces of Aida, his mother, and Director Winston stared back at him. “He’s right. There are four.” He closed his eyes tightly for a moment. “Or maybe five.”

Carl told the dean about his side-trip to Australia and what Thorndike Eight had said. After that, he just wanted to be alone. Whitehall told him about a secret chamber in one of the bell towers. It afforded an excellent view of the atrium, but was unknown to most students and faculty. He climbed the stairs in the tower to the top. He opened a small broom closet door and pushed on the far wall, which then opened to reveal a narrow spiral staircase leading up. At the top was a small room, perhaps eight by ten feet. In it were one couch and two overstuffed chairs with footstools. There were two side tables, one between the chairs and the other at one end of the couch. He sat on one of the chairs and put his feet up on the stool before he reached over and turned on the lamp.

He took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes. In his mind, he could see his mother sitting on a military transport with several others. She was glancing at a magazine. Next, he saw his father sitting in front of a wall of monitors showing the feeds from multiple outside cameras. It appeared to be the center of a large European city. His consciousness drifted to Thorndike Eight. He was sitting on the side of his bed. The woman Kayla was still lying in bed.

He heard a sound and opened his eyes. Aida was sitting on the end of the couch. “How did you know I was here?”

She crossed her legs and smiled. “I didn’t. My mom has brought me here before. Sometimes, I come here just to be alone. I can leave if you like.”

“No, it’s okay. There’s enough room for both of us.”

“Mom told me some of what Eight said to you. Do you believe there’s another student here who has the Invisible Hand?” Carl nodded. “I bet it’s Grace. Her powers are amazing! Who do you think it is?”

Carl took a deep breath. “It’s you, Aida.”

She laughed. “You’re so funny, Carl. It can’t be me. My talents are nothing like yours. I’m two years older and can’t do most of what I’ve seen you do. Who do you really think it is?”

“I’m not kidding. Aida, you are the Invisible Hand.”

“Then how come I can’t do the things you do?”

Carl stood, walked over to the couch, and sat next to her. Aida pushed herself toward the arm of the couch. “I’m not going to bite you.” He moved a few inches away. “When I went to try and heal Professor Donnelly, he said that sometimes you just have to relax and let the spirit come to you. I mean I didn’t know how I could help him, but after I closed my eyes and relaxed, it all just happened. Maybe that’s what you need to do.”

She smirked. “If I close my eyes, you’ll just kiss me.”

Carl shook his head. “I’m not that kind of guy, Aida.” He stood, walked back to the other chair, and sat. “Now I’m safely out of range.”

Aida closed her eyes and giggled. “I don’t even know what to do.”

After a moment’s thought, Carl replied, “Your mom is amazing at the Portalist talent.”

She smiled. “I remember that. Okay, let’s see what happens.”

Carl sat back and watched her. The lamps flickered off, and a chill fell over the room. The roof disappeared and he looked up into the sky and wondered how that had happened. Carl floated off the chair, and his body moved into the center of the seating area.

Aida floated off the sofa and headed toward him. “What are you doing to me, Carl?”

“I’m not doing anything. It’s all you. Open your eyes.”

She opened her eyes to see them floating in the air a few inches apart. “I’m scared. Make it stop.”

Carl grabbed her shoulders. “You are in control of this. Don’t be afraid. Give into your powers, Aida.”

She smiled at him and leaned forward enough to kiss him softly on the lips. “Thanks.” The two shot up into the night sky and disappeared out of sight.

Now, they were turning slowing around each other through a transparent tube and shooting into space. Within seconds, they flew by the moon, barely five hundred feet over the surface, and then back out into space. “Why aren’t we dead, Carl? There’s no air up here.”

“Because you’re the Invisible Hand, Aida.”

Side by side and holding hands, they marveled as the red planet rapidly headed toward them. They zoomed past it and farther away from Earth. In thirty seconds, they entered the asteroid belt. Aida zigged and zagged around many of the asteroids. Both were laughing and joking around. Less than a minute later, they began to approach Jupiter. As they neared the surface, it looked like the Great Red Spot winked at them.

“Here goes nothing!” she shouted and they dived toward the planet.

They were being buffeted about by the high-speed storm bands. They struggled to hold each other’s hands. “This is getting dangerous, Aida!” Carl shouted over the pounding sound of the wind.

“How do I stop it?”

Millions of miles from home and in the depths of the Jovian atmosphere, Carl began to laugh. Soon, she was laughing as well. “You are the Invisible Hand. To stop it, you just have to stop it.”

Aida pulled Carl to her and kissed him. She put her mouth to his ear. “I love you and thanks for this.” She kissed him again, put her hands against his chest, and pushed him away.

The clouds disappeared and the room came into focus again. They slowly descended until they landed on the same seats they had left. Grace and Burt were standing at the top of the spiral staircase. “So, where were you guys?” Burt asked.

The two space travelers shared another laugh, but their friends did not seem to be amused.

Chapter 8

The following morning, Carl sat with Grace and Burt for breakfast. Grace said that Aida had been called to the headmaster's office. Carl took a bite of his toast and noticed Grace scowling at him. "What's wrong?"

"If you want to be her boyfriend instead of mine, that's okay. I don't own you or anything."

He gasped with exasperation. "It's not like that, Grace. The dean told me about that room. Aida just showed up there. It wasn't a date or anything."

"So, you both go flying around the universe, and that's not a date? I don't need this." She stood and walked away.

He started to get up until Burt said, "I'll do it, Carl. I'm not sure she's in the mood to talk to you right now." He left the table to follow her.

Carl looked down at his plate and realized his appetite was gone. He stood and noticed Professor Thorndike coming his way. "Good morning, Professor."

"Good day to you, Carl. It would seem you have woman problems. Don't worry, these things always work out for the best."

"Thanks, Professor. What can I do for you today?"

"Come with me."

Minutes later, they entered the headmaster's office. Dorchester, Donnelly, and Whitehall sat on one side of the conference table. Aida sat alone on the opposite side, dabbing at tears in her eyes. Thorndike took the seat next to Aida with Carl on his other side. The three across the table had stern expressions on their faces. Whitehall looked at the headmaster who nodded. She turned her attention to the boy. "Why did you lie to my daughter, Carl?"

"What? Wait, I didn't lie."

Whitehall pointed at him. "You told her she had the Invisible Hand. That is a lie. Her talent is middling at best. Do you deny telling her that?"

“No, ma’am. I did tell her because it’s true.”

Dorchester shook his head. “First of all, Clarisse, I think you underestimate Aida’s talent level. As for you, Carl, you’ve been here a week. Aida has been here thirteen years. What makes you think you are a better judge of talents than us?”

“I didn’t say that either. That is what I believe is true. Is having an opinion a crime here?”

Whitehall grunted with disgust. “You took my daughter on a joyride through outer space and told her she did it. Do you deny that?”

Aida turned to him. “Why did you trick me, Carl? I had real feelings for you. You’re a jerk, and I hate you.” She glanced at her mother who nodded. Aida stood and walked toward the door.

“Aida, I swear I didn’t lie! You really did it!”

She never looked back. She opened the door, stepped through, and slammed it after her.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Prescott?”

Carl turned to Donnelly. “Professor, you remember when I healed you, right? I had no idea what to do, and you told me to relax and let the spirit come to me. That’s exactly what I told her. I swear I did nothing else.”

Donnelly looked down and sighed. After a moment, he looked up. “I do remember, Carl. Both Professor Thorndike and I agree you did not trick Aida, but the headmaster and dean’s votes are what matters. I’m sorry.”

Whitehall turned to Dorchester. “Well, what are you going to do, Alex?”

Dorchester grunted. “Clarisse, you should go cool off somewhere. Alistair and Bertrand, please go with her.”

Whitehall scowled at the headmaster while she pointed at Carl. “I demand that you expel that child!”

Dorchester gasped with exasperation. “That is not going to happen, Dean Whitehall. Now, please do as I say!” Whitehall stood and hurried out of the room with the two men following her. “Bertrand, try to calm her down.”

Thorndike nodded and left.

“Headmaster, what did I do that was so bad?”

Dorchester smiled. “It’s complicated, Carl. Some believe that a person with exceptionally strong talents can share them with another, even without knowing it.”

“I don’t understand, Headmaster. I don’t remember doing anything like that. I like astronomy and science fiction movies, but I never imagined a trip like that.”

“I can tell you that Aida has always been fascinated by space. She has her own telescope and is constantly reading about stars and planets. It is also possible that we have vastly underestimated her talents, but I think the Invisible Hand is unlikely. That is an ancient story that has never been properly validated and, therefore, is likely a myth.”

“But there’s something else involved here, isn’t there, Headmaster?”

Dorchester considered the teenager across the table. After a few seconds, he nodded. “Clarisse is a very talented woman and an excellent dean for the school, but I doubt she ever considered that her daughter could be more talented than her.”

Carl looked down. “And now Aida hates me.”

“Love is complicated as well,” Dorchester noted. “For now, Professors Donnelly and Thorndike will teach you. I think it’s best for you to be away from the general population until this situation blows over. We have another site on a nearby island. That time will also allow both Grace and Aida to come to grips with their emotions. I will personally work with Aida on her talents. I have never heard of space travel as one of the talents. If true, we are all about to learn something new.”

An hour later, Carl met the two professors in the atrium at the center of the main building. The area was empty, for the students were in their classes. Thorndike led the others toward the center of the space as a light rain began to fall. By the time they arrived, the rain had become much stronger. Carl stood in the middle with the teachers on his sides. Donnelly and Thorndike put their hands on Carl’s shoulders, and the

three disappeared. Aida stood at the window in her room. Tears ran down her face. She wiped them away and moved away from the glass.

The three appeared on the top of a small hill. The sky was clear, and the temperature was rising. As the professors headed down toward a group of small buildings, Carl surveyed his surroundings. From this vantage point, he could see the entire island. Much of the land was wooded, while the acreage around the buildings was either paved with asphalt or covered in well-manicured grass. He could not see any other structures on the island. He also could not see any other islands. With no other options, he followed the other men.

As Thorndike and Donnelly neared the buildings, a man stepped out of a small house and headed for them. Carl arrived as the three shook hands. He stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Carl Prescott."

The stranger was tall at about six feet, three inches. His body was lean but muscular, and he appeared to be around thirty years old. He shook Carl's hand heartily. "Cornelius Thorndike. I have heard good things about you, my boy."

Professor Thorndike patted the groundskeeper on the shoulder. "Carl, Cornelius is my grandson, and yes, my namesake is his father."

Cornelius smiled. "I've heard about your run-ins with Dad. I suppose that makes him the black sheep of the family. By the way, everyone calls me Charlie. It's easier than Cornelius. Granddad, should we take the tour?"

"How far from the main island are we, Professors?"

Donnelly replied, "Not far, but just over the horizon. Why do you ask, Carl?"

"It's just that the weather here is totally different. I couldn't see any clouds from the hilltop."

"Carl, I don't think that was a natural phenomenon." The teenager looked shocked but did not reply.

"Charlie, please show Carl around. Your grandfather and I need to prepare our lesson plans, and I think you have something to tell him in private." Charlie nodded and led Carl away.

There were ten buildings in the compound, including the groundskeeper's residence, five guest bungalows, a dining hall, two classrooms, and a library. Each bungalow had three bedrooms, a study, a living room, and a bathroom. After showing Carl his room, the two boarded a four-wheel drive vehicle and drove away. "What did you want to tell me, Charlie?"

"Not yet, Carl. Please be patient." Charlie drove down a gravel road that led into the woods. Once inside the forest, birdsong filled the air. The road began to rise, and Charlie followed the switch-backs until they arrived at the edge of a tall cliff. Charlie turned off the motor and stepped out with Carl behind him. A handrail had been built into the ground near the edge. Charlie put his hands on the rail and looked down.

Carl held the rail as he watched a few gulls flying in low circles a hundred or more feet down the cliff. Waves crashed onto the rocky shore and kicked up spray. "How come I didn't see this from the hilltop, Charlie?"

"It's obscured by the trees." He turned to the teenager and then looked down. After a deep sigh, he continued, "Carl, I'm Aida's father."

Carl stepped back. "What?"

Charlie walked several yards away and sat on a fallen tree trunk. "My full name is Cornelius Charles Clark Thorndike."

"You're Charlie Clark? I thought you had been kidnapped."

"I was for a long time. Carl, please come over and sit down. You're not making this any easier for me."

Carl sat on the ground a few feet away from the other man. "You seem to be free now. Why haven't you reached out to her?"

"It's forbidden. If I tell her, others will die needlessly."

Carl shook his head. "I'm sorry but I just don't understand."

Charlie wiped some moisture from his eyes. "Do you want to understand?"

"Of course I do. She's my friend."

Charlie's head dropped to his chest. "I can't tell you either."

Carl stood. "Then what's the point of you mentioning any of this, Charlie?"

Without raising his head, Charlie continued, "Granddad says you might have the Psychic and Visionary talents." He looked up. "If you do, you can find out for yourself, don't you see? Then, I wouldn't have told you anything, and just maybe we'll all survive."

Carl was bewildered. He walked over slowly and sat next to Charlie, who smiled and closed his eyes. Carl closed his own eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He reached out slowly and put his hand on the other's back.

Carl's mind exploded with thoughts and images. He saw the two prison cells deep underground, one like a palace bedchamber and the other dark and cold. He witnessed Charlie being tortured by his own father. He saw the female prisoner, lying so still that she appeared dead. And Eight was there beating another man almost to death. In seconds, he had seen everything he could stand. The sheer terror and pain were too much, so he pulled his hand away.

"Carl, are you all right?"

Carl was lying on the ground, all of his energy gone. He looked blearily up at the man. "Oh my God." He sat up. "How long was I out?"

Charlie pulled Carl back to his feet. "Only a couple of minutes. Do you understand now?"

"Did all of that really happen?"

"I can't tell you that, Carl, and obviously I don't know what you saw." He looked around. "I think we should head back now. Those clouds you saw at the school seem to be heading this way."

By the time they arrived at the compound, the rain had begun to fall. Charlie led Prescott into the dining hall where they found the two professors sitting at a table and drinking coffee. Carl walked over to join them while Charlie went to help the chef prepare lunch. "Can I join you?"

Donnelly smiled. "Please do. I trust you had a pleasant trip."

"And that you learned something," Thorndike added.

“Yes, it was a nice trip and I think I may have learned too much.”

Donnelly took a sip of coffee and set the cup down. “Please don’t tell us either. It’s important that the knowledge stay with you alone.”

“I don’t understand the secrecy, Professors.”

Thorndike put his hand on Carl’s shoulder. “Relax, Carl, it’s not as bad as you imagine. First, everything you have learned could be a lie. My son’s Psychic talent is very strong. He could have implanted the lies in Cornelius’s head as a diversion. It is also possible that most is true, but a few falsehoods were inserted to cloud the truth. I’m afraid you’re going to have to determine what his memories mean on your own.”

Lightning struck nearby, and the room filled with light, followed by the boom of thunder. Donnelly snickered. “Someone is quite angry with you still, Carl.”

“Huh?”

“The storm. It has moved from the school to here, as if looking for you.”

Carl looked down. “It has to be Aida.”

Thorndike raised a finger. “Or her mother. Clarisse was very upset earlier.”

As they spoke, Charlie and a younger woman exited the kitchen and headed to their table. Each carried a large tray filled with dishes. The woman was tall with a nice figure, long black hair, and large blue eyes. She put the tray down on a nearby table and walked over to Thorndike and kissed his cheek. “Grandpa, it’s great to see you again.” She extended her hand. “Mr. Prescott, my name is Lucretia Thorndike, but please call me Lucy.”

Carl shook her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Lucy.”

Professor Thorndike noted, “Lucy is Charlie’s sister. Both have been at the school their whole lives, and I’m lucky to have most of my family close by.”

After placing the food on the table, two more chairs were brought over and everyone sat to eat. Carl sat quietly watching the others. The pounding of the rain was getting louder, and soon Carl could hardly make out their words. Lucy put her hand on top of Carl’s, and he turned to look at her. She leaned in and put her

mouth near his ear. "You need to tell my niece to cut this out." She sat back up and smiled. "Although we can use the rain."

Carl looked down. "I don't think she wants to hear anything from me right now."

Two hours later, Carl was sitting on the bed in his bungalow and reading his homework assignment. The storm had dissolved shortly after lunch and bright sunshine poured through the nearby window. Sometime later, the sound of birds singing woke him up. He closed his book and set it on the bed. Two birds were sitting on his window sill chirping away. The stress of his day had worn him out. He lay down and closed his eyes again while he listened to the avian lullaby.

In his dream, Carl was standing in a lavishly furnished bedroom. There was a woman lying on the bed. She seemed frozen in place and her chest did not move with her breathing. He walked over slowly with his hand outstretched. He needed to see if she were dead, but he did not know why. He was still several feet away when the sound of a lock turning caused him to stop and turn around. He heard a door moving on squeaky hinges. A hand appeared from behind a drape and pulled it aside. Eight was inside the room. Behind him, the jailor closed and locked the door. Eight was just feet away from Carl, but did not seem to know he was there. Eight walked straight at him, and Carl braced for the impact, but the Eight walked through him like he was a ghost.

Eight stood over the bed and scowled at the woman. "I don't know why I let you live, Bea. You turned my whole family against me. Oh, I know what you're thinking. If you die, my father and children will destroy me and Masterson." He pulled a long knife from a scabbard on his hip and held it menacingly. "Perhaps we've been playing this stupid game too long." He put the knife against her throat. "Let's end this now." Suddenly, the room was filled with ear-splitting noise. Carl bent over and pressed his hands to his ears. He wanted to stop Eight now, but he could not move.

Carl's eyes shot open. He was still in bed, but the booming noise resolved into birds squawking and singing. It was so loud that his ears ached. He got up and walked over to the window. His jaw dropped when

he saw thousands of birds everywhere looking at him. He hurried into the main room and pulled open the door. All of the buildings and open land were smothered with birds. He picked up one foot, and a few birds moved so he could take a step.

Carl glanced at the other buildings and could see the professors watching him from inside their bungalow. The swarms of birds had opened to create a walking path which Carl began to follow. The pathway ended in the middle of an expanse of grass. Hundreds of birds took wing and began to fly around the area. They moved closer together with each lap until the flock had become a bird tornado. They flew faster still. Suddenly, the birds separated and flew away. Where the center of them had been, Grace Mulligan now stood. She smiled and rushed into his arms. "I'm sorry I was mad at you, Carl."

He kissed her cheek. "It's okay, Grace. I'm glad you're here."

"That was quite an arrival, Ms. Mulligan," Professor Donnelly said as he approached.

"Thank you, professor."

"How exactly did you know where we were?"

She smiled. "The birds told me."

"Really? That's incredible. I've never heard that from a Mother or Master. When I was with the crows by your home, I could sense how they felt, but never heard anything concrete."

Carl said, "Professor, perhaps it's a new talent."

Donnelly nodded. "Or perhaps one I can discover in the ancient texts. I'll see what we can find. Carl, please show Grace to one of the rooms in your bungalow, and we will see you both at dinner." He started to walk away.

"Professor!"

Donnelly turned. "Yes, Carl."

"Before the birds showed up, I had a dream about Eight."

"Oh dear. Please go on."

“I was in a fancy bedroom, and a woman was lying on the bed. She didn’t move, so I thought she might be dead.”

“The Sleeping One. Yes, please continue.”

“Eight came in, and I could see the room was a prison cell. He walked over and talked to her. He pulled a knife and put it against her neck. I tried to stop him, but that’s when the birds woke me.”

Donnelly shook his head slowly from side to side. “Anything else. Any detail can be valuable.”

Carl looked down and thought. Finally, he looked up. “He called her Bea.”

Donnelly’s eyes bugged out, and he trembled. “This is most disturbing if true. We must realize that most dreams are just that, and also some can implant thoughts and dreams into our heads. Anything else?” Carl shook his head. “We’ll see you at dinner.” He hurried away and back into his bungalow.

Carl took Grace’s hand in his and led her toward the open door of the building. “I’m surprised you didn’t bring Burt.”

She giggled. “It was just a spur of the moment thing. He was in another class when a flock of birds landed on my classroom windows and wouldn’t stop singing. Dean Whitehall sent me outside to quiet them. That’s when they told me where you were, so we left.”

He squeezed her hand. “I’m still glad you’re here.”

They walked inside. Carl sat on a chair while Grace sat on the couch. “It looks like you got the same rainstorm that we did.”

“Yeah, it was pretty wild for a while.”

“You know Aida made it, don’t you?”

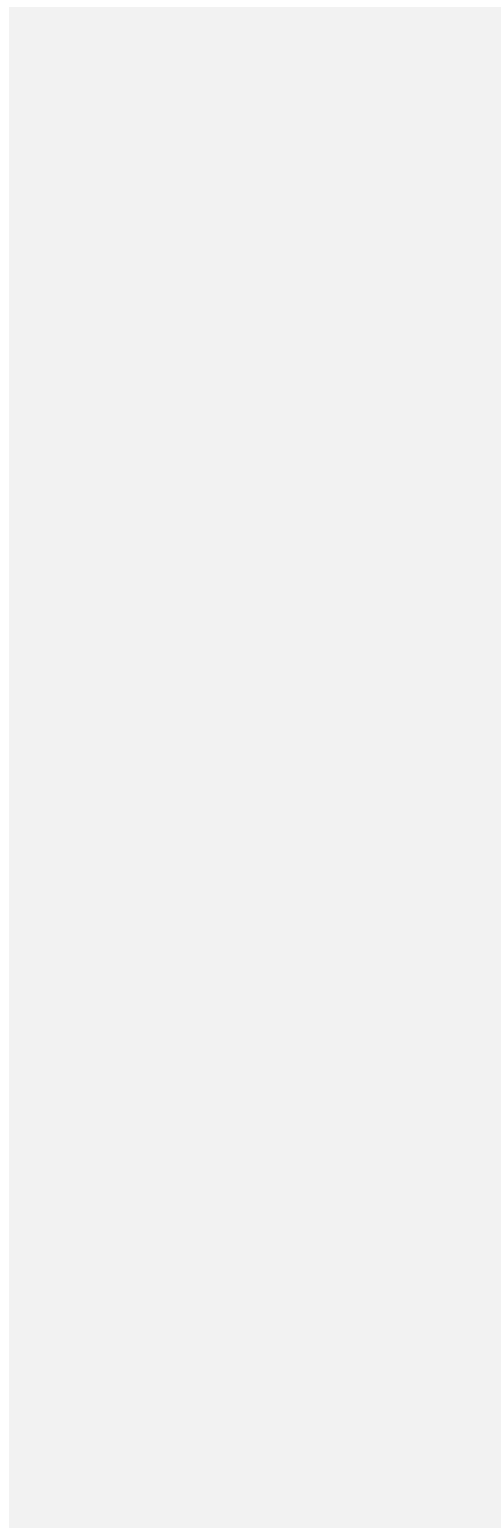
Carl nodded. “Yeah, but I never lied to her.”

“She’ll figure that out when she’s ready. I mean it was pretty obvious that she did the space travel thing. Plus Dean Whitehall is always putting her down, and it’s hard not knowing who your real parents are.”

Carl sighed, stood and walked over to the window. He glanced around the area. “I know who they are, Grace.”

She laughed. “She doesn’t even know, but you do?” He nodded. “Okay, tell me then.”

He turned back to look out the window. “I can’t just yet. It’s too dangerous.”



Chapter 9

The early morning sun shone into Carl's bedroom. He opened his eyes and sat up. He stretched and then got out of bed. He pulled the bedcovers up and straightened them out. Satisfied, he walked out of his room and immediately noticed the other bedroom doors were open. Both rooms were empty. Becoming concerned, he walked around the rest of the bungalow, but found no sign of Grace.

He opened the front door and headed toward the dining hall, which he discovered was locked. He knocked on the bungalow where the professors stayed. The door was open and all the rooms were vacant. Now, getting desperate, he headed to the groundskeeper's door and knocked. He knocked several more times, but there was no answer. His heart was pounding in his chest, and his breathing was erratic. Everyone had vanished. He sat on the dirt and covered his face with his hands. "What is going on here? Where did everybody go and why?"

He heard a bird chirp and removed his hands. A sparrow was standing a foot away. "Professor Donnelly?"

The bird began to chirp again, and this time the sounds resolved into a voice in his head. "No Carl. Alistair prefers crows, not simple sparrows like me."

"Where is everybody?"

The bird squawked. "On the island still preparing for their day. The question is where are you?"

"I'm on the island too."

The bird shook its head. "Unfortunately, that is not the case. When Grace noticed you were missing, she assumed you were in the dining hall or library. Then she went to shower. Well, one bird leads to another, and soon, we were all looking for you."

"How did you find me?"

"There are a lot of birds in the world, Carl. A couple of sea gulls named Manny and Phil came here and asked about you. Well, of course, you know how sea gulls are introverted about everything but food."

“No, I didn’t know that about gulls.” Carl stuck out his hand. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t ask your name.”

“Denise Sparrow, at your service.” The bird extended one wing and touched his hand.

“Can you help me get back, Denise?”

The bird looked down at itself and then back at the teenager. “I only weigh an ounce or two, so I doubt I could lift you, but some friends are on the way. Please stand up.”

Carl stood. “Now, what do I do?”

Denise flew up and sat on his shoulder. “I suggest you keep your hands at your side; otherwise, you might disrupt the funnel.”

“Did Grace get to the island in a funnel too?”

The bird laughed. “Carl, please be serious. Here we are, thousands of miles away from your island. I have no idea what she saw or did.”

“I’m sorry.”

Hundreds of birds arrived and began to fly around them in circles. “I’m not, Carl. It’s a real honor to meet the Hand of God. Please have a safe trip. I’m going to join the others.”

“Do you really think I’m the Hand of God, Denise?”

She chirped. “It seems obvious to me, Carl, but I am a sparrow, and we’re not known for our intelligence or clever discourse. You might want to consult an owl or pelican. They’re the big thinkers.”

“Thanks for your help, Denise.”

“That’s what birds or for.” She took wing and joined the thousands of birds now flying around him. They moved gradually closer and closer to him, their bodies a blur of colors. After a few seconds, his feet lifted off the ground.

Now he could hear all the birds talking over one another. They argued about their destination and talked about the arrogance of eagles, hawks, and falcons. After several seconds, they spoke about the taste and their preferences for various insects and seeds. The only universal agreement was about how unfortunate it was that ostriches could not fly. Carl felt as though he was in a room with thousands of people talking over one

another. Then, the birds suddenly disappeared, and Carl was standing outside the same groundskeeper's house. The door opened and Lucy Thorndike stepped out. "Did you have a nice trip, Carl?"

"Do you know where I was?"

She shook her head. "No, I was just about to go make breakfast for everyone when I noticed the bird funnel. Where were you?"

"I don't know. I woke up in my bed in the bungalow, but it turned out to be an exact replica somewhere. Denise said it was thousands of miles from here."

"Who exactly is Denise?"

"She's the sparrow who found me."

"You were talking to a sparrow named Denise. Somehow, I find that hard to believe. Perhaps you're disoriented from the trip or hunger. Come with me." They walked over to the dining hall and went inside.

The professors, Carl, and Grace still sat at the table in the dining hall after they had finished breakfast. Carl had related his appearance on the other island and the bird named Denise. Professor Thorndike was leaning on his elbows and massaging his temples. Donnelly took a sip of coffee. "A sparrow named Denise spoke to you and mentioned that I prefer to transfigure into crows rather than other birds." Carl nodded. "I suppose it's true then."

"What's true, Professor?" Grace added.

"After what you told me yesterday, I went through some very old texts and found the mention of a talent called the Natural Tongue. It was believed that a person with that skill could communicate directly with all sorts of animals. Another part of the text mentioned that birds have a penchant for gossip and spreading rumors. The passage warned the possessor of the talent not to waste time arguing with them."

Thorndike sat up. "It's likely an old legend."

Carl snorted and covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Was something I said funny to you, Prescott?"

Carl blushed. “No, professor.” He pointed to a nearby window where a yellow bird sat on the outside sill. “When you said that, the bird shouted, ‘Hogwash!’”

Grace giggled. “I heard that too.”

“Professor Thorndike does have a point,” Donnelly noted. “The Psychic talent is well known and documented. Such a person could put into your head words that you might believe came from the animal.”

Thorndike added, “Someone moved you from your bed here to that other island. That is clearly true. That person, likely my son, could have still been in the area.”

“But why?” Carl asked. “I was there alone. I never spoke to anyone. And if Eight was there, why did he allow the birds to rescue me?”

“Those are good questions for which I have no answers.” Thorndike put his hand on Donnelly’s shoulder. “It is time for school now. I need to return to the institution for a while, so Alistair will be your teacher today.”

After a full morning’s lessons in world history and literature, Grace and Carl went to the dining hall for lunch. Donnelly had been summoned back to the institution for meetings with the headmaster. Grace put her fork down next to her salad and wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Carl, why are the professors wasting time with regular lessons with all the weirdness going on around us?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. I imagine they want us to focus on other more normal things. Those crazy events are probably what they’re talking about now.”

“I was also thinking about that other island where you woke up today and what you said to Professor Donnelly. It doesn’t make sense that Eight would go to all that trouble to create a perfect replica and then just let you go.”

“You’re right, Grace. I don’t think it was him at all. But who would want to kidnap me and then just let me go?”

Aida Whitehall walked into the dining hall and headed toward their table.

“Her, for one,” Grace said and then took another bite of salad.

Aida stopped ten feet away from their table. She wiped some moisture from her eyes and looked down.

In an almost inaudible voice, she said, “I’m sorry.”

Carl stood and walked over to her. He took her hand, led her to the table, and pulled back a chair for her to sit.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Aida, please sit down.”

They both sat. Not certain what to say or do, Aida looked from one to the other. Across the room, Cornelius Thorndike stepped out of the kitchen. He saw the new arrival and walked back into the other room.

Grace stood. “I’ll give you two some time and try to get you some lunch.” Aida nodded and rubbed her eyes. Grace walked away.

Carl asked, “Why?”

Aida looked down and sighed deeply as tears rolled down her cheeks. She looked up at the boy. “I don’t know why, Carl. It was all I could think of. Since the moment I said those horrible things to you, I’ve regretted saying those words.” She grabbed his hands. “I’m sorry, Carl, and I swear I could never hate you. That was cruel and spiteful.” She pulled her hands away and held them clenched in her lap.

“It’s okay. Sometimes, the emotion of the moment makes us do and say crazy things. I’m sorry if my suggesting you had the Invisible Hand caused you to say those things. That is what I think, but as the headmaster said, I’ve only been here a week, and I’m no judge of talents.”

Aida smiled and looked down. “After our little trip, I went home and told Mom about it and what you said. She flipped out. But I don’t know whether she was angrier about what you said or that I could imagine myself to be more powerful than her. You remember what she said in the meeting. I have only middling talents. That hurt, but she’s said that so many times, and after a while, I begin to believe it.”

Carl held her hand and squeezed it. “I think you have amazing talents, Aida. I still believe you are as powerful or more than me.”

She wiped the tears from her face. “Thank you.”

“Let me ask you a question about that island. How did you come up with that idea? I really believed I was still here.”

Her eyes bugged out, and she blushed. After taking a few deep breaths, she replied, “You’ll think I’m a silly girl. You probably think I’m jealous of your relationship with Grace.” She sighed. “It’s not that, exactly. I’m jealous of anyone who gets your time and attention. I swear I don’t know why I’m so infatuated with you, but I am. I just thought if I could have you alone for a little while that you might feel the same way about me.” She dropped her head. “I know that’s a stupid, impossible fantasy.”

Carl put his finger under her chin, lifted it, and turned her head to face him. He smiled broadly, leaned forward, and kissed her softly. “Aida, I know things are complicated right now. If someday, you and I end up together, that will be fantastic. But we also know about our age difference, Grace, and all the craziness going on. One of these days, none of that will matter anymore, and we’ll see how our relationship turns out.”

“Thank you, Carl. You’re very sweet.”

“There are still a couple things I need to say regarding your middling talents.”

“Carl, please don’t say something negative about Mom.”

“I would never do that, Aida. That’s between you and her.” She smiled and nodded. “You realize that you transformed an island thousands of miles from here to look just like this one. The landscape was the same, as were the buildings, even the bed I woke up in. That doesn’t sound like someone with weak talents.”

Aida wiped a tear off her cheek. “I hadn’t thought about the things I did to the island.”

“One last thing. Why didn’t you show yourself when I was looking around and thinking I was alone?”

She sighed. “I was too worried that you’d be mad at me or, at least, think I was crazy. When I heard you searching the bungalow, I went into the building like this one and locked the door. Then, when you tried to come inside, I thought I’d have a heart attack. When you walked away, I desperately wanted to come out, but just couldn’t. That’s when I started crying. I felt like such a fool, coward, and silly, jealous girl.”

“What about the sparrow?”

“You mean Denise?”

Carl nodded. “Yeah, that’s right, but how did you know her name? Can you talk to animals too?”

“I don’t know. Somehow, I just knew her name. I begged her to help you escape so I could be alone in my misery.”

Carl smiled broadly. “I think you’re an amazing woman, Aida.”

The kitchen door opened, and Grace and Lucy stepped into the dining hall. Grace took her seat while Lucy put a salad in front of the other girl. “Hi, I’m Lucy Thorndike. You’re Aida Whitehall, yes?”

“Yes, Ms. Thorndike. Thank you for the salad. It looks great.”

“Can I get you anything else right now?”

“No, this and the water will be fine.”

Lucy nodded, walked over to Carl, and put her mouth near his ear. She whispered, “She looks just like her mother.” She walked back toward the kitchen.

Carl looked at Aida again, and his mind made the connection. She looked like the woman in the prison cell with Eight. He looked over at Grace, who simply smiled and returned her attention to her plate.

With the professors back at the Thorndike Institution, the three teenagers were given the afternoon off. Grace invited Aida to go for a walk to explore the area while Carl walked down to the beach and sat on a large boulder to watch the incoming waves break on the shore. He thought about his parents so far away. In his mind, he could see they were still safe, but something felt different. The air started to feel different, and then he noticed his hair was standing on end. There was a loud crackle. Carl turned around to see Burt Jackson standing ten feet behind him. “You’re getting good at sparking, Burt.”

“Thanks, Carl. It’s good to see you again. Do you know where Aida is?”

“She went for a walk with Grace. Is something wrong?”

Burt nodded. “A lot’s been going on since you left. All classes this afternoon were canceled. The headmaster made an announcement half an hour ago that Dean Whitehall is taking a six-month assignment at the Masterson Academy.”

“And Aida has to go with her?”

“Duh. She is her daughter. Dean Whitehall wants me to go there too.”

“But why you, Burt? You’re not related to them.”

Burt chuckled. “Did you forget already? The first day we got here, Professor Donnelly said we were brother and sister.”

Carl thought for a moment. “I think he was wrong, Burt.”

“You’re such a card, Carl. He’s a professor. How do you know more than he?”

Carl realized he was caught. He promised not to reveal Cornelius Thorndike’s secret. If he said anything else, he could destroy them all. “I guess I don’t know, but that’s what I think. Isn’t that the school where Eight was a professor?”

“We were told he was fired, and the headmaster trusts Headmaster Greenleaf. And since my grandfather left there, the school is shorthanded, which is why they need Dean Whitehall.”

“Do you want to go, Burt?”

“With you and Grace here, I’m pretty much alone. We both know it’s you that Aida likes. I figure we give it a try. What’s the worst that can happen?”

As Carl nodded and smiled at his friend, his mind was filled with the image of Bertrand the Eighth laughing like a madman. He stood and walked over to his friend, placed his hand on the other’s shoulder, and they disappeared.

They reappeared on a gravel road. Aida and Grace were twenty yards away and walking in their direction. Carl wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “I just can’t be here for this, Burt.” He turned around as tears pooled in his eyes. He closed his eyes and vanished.

As they approached, Aida asked, “What was all that about, Burt?”

Grace found Carl in the library at sunset. He had pulled several large volumes from the shelves and tried to bury his angst in the words of the ancients. She did her best to make him realize Aida's leaving was both unavoidable and ultimately for the best. Carl did his best to make her feel that she had convinced him. She returned to the bungalow to get ready for dinner. Carl flipped the pages of a large book entitled *The Avenger and Redeemer*. It was a translation from a long-dead language. The frontispiece noted the original was written around four thousand years ago.

Several hours later, Carl woke with his head resting on the open book. He sat up, stretched, and then left to return to the bungalow. After brushing his teeth, he got into bed and closed his eyes. Almost instantly, he was asleep.

Sometime later, the fragrance of lavender and soap reached his nose. He opened his eyes to see Aida sitting on the foot of the bed. She smiled as he sat up. "It will be okay, Carl."

"I just don't understand how all of this happened so fast. When do you leave?"

"We already did. You know my mom has the Portalist talent. As soon as Burt brought me back, we were gone. I hope you realize that I don't blame you for **us leaving Thorndike.**"

"But it is my fault, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "Of course not, Carl. The fact that Mom blames you is her problem, not yours." She moved to the top of the bed and sat next to him. She leaned over and Carl put his arm around her shoulders.

"That's nice. Do you know where you are?"

He looked stunned. "Is this that other island again?"

She shook her head again. "Nah, that would be too easy. Go look out the windows."

He climbed out of bed, went to the window, and pulled the curtains aside. His jaw dropped as several large fish swam by. "This room is underwater?"

She rose and walked over to join him at the window. "Yeah, isn't it cool?"

"But why did you do all of this?"

“Mom always likes to blame things on others. Until you came along, it was usually me. Now, she has you to blame for things that go wrong. I think it’s clear that she would never accept a relationship between us. And I’m sure Grace wouldn’t be thrilled about it either. You know where this place is, right?”

Carl closed his eyes for a moment. “Yea, the continental shelf fifty miles off the coast of South Carolina.”

“I figure that any time you want to see me, you can just come here, and vice-versa.”

“But how will the other know?”

Aida smirked at him. “I think you’ll know. If not, I’ll send a bird to tell you.” She motioned with her head. “Come on. Let me give you the tour.” She began walking to the door.

“It’s not just this room?”

She frowned. “Carl, do you think I did all of this to go to bed with you?” He blushed and looked down. “I don’t think either of us are ready for that. Come along now. You’re going to love the rest of the place.” She opened the door and walked out. He hurried to catch up to her.

Carl opened his eyes to bright sunshine pouring into his bedroom window. He sat up and hung his legs over the side of the bed. For a moment, he considered that his visit to the underwater lair had been a dream. He looked over to his dresser and saw the conch shell that Aida had given him as a reminder of their secret place. He smiled, stood, and headed to the bathroom to prepare for his day.

Shortly after breakfast, the professors and students returned to the Thorndike Institution. Without their roommates, Grace and Carl were moved to two smaller, single rooms on the top floor of the Gratia Dei Hall dormitory. Their rooms were the only dorm rooms occupied in this wing of the floor. The other wings held a study hall and several storage rooms, most of which held belongings left behind by instructors and former students. A final room was filled with text and reference books from previous classes over the long history of the institution.

After his last class of the day, Carl went to his room to relax before dinner. He was looking out the window at the rain pouring down in the atrium at the center of the building he heard a knock at his door. "Come in," he called without turning from the glass.

The door opened, and Grace stepped inside. "How was your day, Carl?"

He turned and smiled at his girlfriend. "Okay. Do you think this is regular rain?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. We can't know if there are any other cloud-seeders here. Come with me. I found some things you will want to take a look at." She walked out the door, turned to the right, and began to walk down the hall.

Carl hurried out of the room to catch up. Grace stopped at the last room before the corner leading to the next wing. She turned the doorknob, opened the door, and stepped inside. "Wasn't the door locked, Grace?"

"Maybe I'm the nosy type, but I haven't found a locked door yet. I thought that was strange too."

Carl closed his eyes, thought for a moment, and opened them again. "The other day I was reading this book called *The Avenger and Redeemer*. It mentioned a talent called The Pick, which is supposed to be very common. Someone with the talent can unlock a door with just a touch. Maybe you have that."

She pursed her lips for a moment. "Perhaps, but maybe they don't lock the doors because that talent is so common."

Carl nodded. "That makes sense." He looked around the room. "It seems like just a vacant room. There aren't even any sheets on the bed."

"Take a look in the closet."

He walked over and opened the door. Several school uniforms were hung neatly and covered with plastic bags. "Okay, there are some uniforms. Maybe a new student is coming?"

"You know they embroider the student's name in the lining. Check it out."

He glanced back at her. "I feel a little weird looking at someone else's clothes."

She smiled. "Trust me. No one has or ever will wear those uniforms."

Carl pulled the bag up and opened the top of the uniform. The name stitched inside was Virginia Cassidy. He turned back to Grace with an anguished expression. "That's my mom's name."

"I know that, Carl. Now you know where your talents come from. Come on, there's an even more weird room across the hall." She turned and walked out of the room.

Carl checked some of the other clothes and found they all had the same name. He closed the door and left the room to join his friend. "The name could be a coincidence, Grace. There's a lot of people in the world."

She smiled. "Not whose son has the Invisible Hand talent." She winked at him and pushed open the other door. "Be ready for this one, Carl." She stepped inside and he followed.

The room was almost identical to the other rooms on the floor, except for two things. It was bitterly cold and dark. "Is the air conditioning on full blast?"

"The school doesn't have air conditioning. You know that. Go look out the window."

He walked slowly in the darkness. He reached the window and pulled aside the curtains. It was a cloudless night where the crescent moon provided the only light. All the other lights in the building were off. He turned to look into the hallway and saw the light shining. "What the heck is this place?"

Grace motioned to him. "Come over here by the bed. This part scares me the most." He stood on the other side of the bed. "Put your hand on the edge of the bed, Carl." He reached down and touched it. "It's a cold as the room, right?"

He nodded. "Doesn't that make sense?"

"Yes, but now slowly move your hand to the center."

When his hand reached the center, he stood up straight. "It's warm."

She walked around the bed and stood next to Carl. "Now, let's bend down and look at the shape of the mattress." She motioned with her hand over the bed. "You notice how the mattress slumps in the middle."

"It must be an old bed."

She pulled him up to look at her. “Carl, I measured the part of the bed that’s warm, and it matches exactly to the bumps and dips in the mattress. It’s like somebody is lying there now sleeping.”

“But there’s no one there.”

“I know that. Go look at the uniforms in the closet.”

He walked slowly over, pulled open the closet door, and was met by a blast of even colder air. “Geez, that’s freezing.” He noticed a large sheet covered with strange characters from a language long lost was draped over the clothes. “What does it say?”

Grace now stood next to him. “I took a picture of it. At first, I was going to ask one of the professors, but then decided they might not tell me the truth. Eventually, I found a book in the library that translated some of the most ancient texts. I found this exact string of letters near the end of the book. It translates to ‘the sleeping one.’ In the ancient tongue, it was pronounced Vizsreaagh.”

He turned and stared at her. “You’re kidding, right?”

She shook her head. “It’s too dark to read the embroidery in here. Push the sheet aside and take one of the uniforms into the hallway.”

He took a uniform, and both of them walked out into the hall. Grace rubbed her hands on her arms to warm up while Carl searched for the name. When he saw it, his eyes bugged out. “It can’t be. There must be a mistake.”

“Say the name, Carl.”

“Beatriz Cardenas.”

“You mentioned the name Bea to Professor Donnelly the other day, and he freaked out when you did. Do you think that’s the same woman?”

He took her hand in his. “Yea, it has to be.”

“You need to put that uniform back and make sure the sheet is in place.” When he returned, Grace noted, “I’m surprised that room wasn’t sealed. They have to know that eventually someone enter this room

and find those things. Come on, there's one more room I want you to see before dinner." She headed into the next wing, pulling Carl along with her. She opened the first door on the right and walked inside.

Carl entered the large room and stood next to her. The room was thirty feet long and filled with rows of filing boxes stacked to almost the ceiling. "It's just a bunch of boxes, Grace."

She smirked. "Obviously, but notice the length of the room. Now, come back into the hallway." They exited and she closed the door. "The next corner is more than a hundred feet down the hall, and that room was only about a quarter of that length. Do you see any other doors?"

"There's a door way down at the end, isn't there?"

She pulled him along again. When they arrived, they found a plain, raw-wood narrow door. "This door is only a couple of feet wide. That's odd, isn't it?"

"It's like a broom closet or something."

"Carl, is a broom closet eighty feet long?" He looked confused and shook his head. "Let's go in." She turned the handle and pulled the door open.

"It is a broom closet," he said. "There's just a sink, a mop and bucket, and a few brooms. This is really strange."

"Come inside with me." There was barely room for both of them. "Close the door."

"I think I'm a little claustrophobic."

She kissed his cheek softly. "I'll protect you." He closed the door, and they were plunged into darkness. "If you start to feel bad, just open the door."

"I'm okay so far."

She turned to the sink. "Carl, look over my shoulder and watch what I do." He complied. The scent of her shampoo and cologne was mesmerizing. He kissed her neck. She turned around and he hugged her to him and kissed her mouth. After a few seconds, she pushed back. "I love you too, but this is not the time." She turned back to the sink.

"I'm sorry."

She turned once again and kissed him softly. “I’m not. Now watch.” As he looked over her shoulder, she turned on the hot tap until it stopped, but no water came out. She turned the cold tap on and off halfway three times. Then she closed the hot tap. The wall to their right opened, and they found themselves in a massive storage room. It was filled with furniture and other relics from the Institution’s past. The wall to their right was a massive bookcase stretching to the far wall, where it made a ninety-degree turn and continued to the windows.

Carl walked down the line of books. “How did they get all of this inside that door?”

Grace followed him. “They probably used the Portalist talent to create a doorway along one of the walls. The last person out pushed a bookcase over that spot and either left through the broom closet or with the Teleport talent.”

Carl stopped and faced his girlfriend. “How did you discover this place and how to get inside?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t. Aida brought me here and showed me.” She took Carl’s hand. “She told me she knew her relationship with you was difficult for me. She wanted to give me the most important secrets she had, which were this room, and that corner room where you two took your trip into space.”

“And now she’s gone.”

Grace nodded. “Yea, it really sucks that her mom did that to her, but now you know her secrets too. And you have all these books and artifacts to check out.”

“Is there anything else you’ve seen already?”

She took his hand and pulled him into the room. They reached an opening and turned left between stacks of objects piled to the ceiling. Near the windows, a large container of some kind was covered with a black tarp. “Now this will freak you out for sure. Are you certain you want to see?”

“I guess.”

“Carl, you pull back the tarp. You don’t have to go too far to figure this out.”

He grabbed the edge of the tarp and began to pull it up and off. He stopped when he realized that the body of a man was lying inside encased in a glass sarcophagus. “Whoa!”

“Read the plaque at the bottom.”

It read “Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike, Founder.”

“The school is named after him.”

“I know that, Carl. The dates are a bit hard to read. Check it out.”

Carl scoffed. “That’s impossible. It says he was born in 1036 and died in 1776. That’s seven hundred years!”

“Pretty awesome, right? And he looks like he’s still alive.”

Her words tore through his mind. He put his hands on the glass and took several deep breaths with his eyes closed.

“Are you okay?”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. Tears were standing at the corners of his eyes. “He is alive, Grace. He is another Sleeping One.”

Chapter 10

Classes were canceled on Friday for the observance of Founder's Day, which marked the birthday of the first Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike. In celebration, a number of amusement rides were being set up in front of the school. The carnival was due to begin at noon. The fun would continue with talent displays by the teachers, a large banquet, and finally, a fireworks display. After breakfast, Grace went to check on the progress of the preparations.

Carl returned to the hidden room in the adjoining wing of the dormitory. He was consumed with thoughts about the Sleeping Ones and wanted to find a book to help him understand how that fate could happen and how to reverse it. Walking along the bookcase, he checked the titles for a clue. After half an hour, he came upon a narrow tome entitled "Gadson's Talent Checklist." He pulled it from the shelf carefully and walked over to the window wall where the lighting was better.

He noticed a familiar shape covered by an ornate sheet. He pulled the sheet aside to find a wing chair with an ottoman. He sat, put his feet up, and was instantly bathed in bright light. He removed his feet from the ottoman, and the light extinguished. "That's weird." He put his feet back up and the light returned.

He opened the cover. The title sheet listed the name of the author as Antoine Marie Gadson. The year of publication was 1811. The next page was a table of contents. There were one hundred talents listed in alphabetic order. The last entry was Index. He turned there. The talents were now listed under the abilities. There was no listing for Sleeping One, awakening, hibernation, or sleep. He did find a listing for resurrection to be found on page 88. He turned to that page and read:

"Resurrection (Fantasy Level): True resurrection of the dead is a talent limited to God. Ancient texts reference a condition known as *Viszreaagh*, or The Sleeping One, but that has never been witnessed and is, therefore likely a myth. The author does not intend to imply that the following is either true or untrue and lists only what has been previously written. It is said that the Sleeping One condition can only be imposed on another by either a person with the Sage Hand or Invisible Hand talents. The Sleeping One appears to be

dead, with no sign of respiration, pulse, or heartbeat. The thought is that the spirit or soul of the afflicted is located away from the body. That spirit lives, but cannot move to recover its body because it is non-corporeal. Only a person with equal and opposite talents can reverse the effects by bringing the spirit back to the body.

“At this point, the translation of the texts begins to break down due to the inclusion of untranslatable phrases. This author’s best guess is that the one to afflict or cure the condition can do it only once in their lifetime. The text also implies that people of lesser talent who attempts to cure the afflicted will lose their talents permanently and may die as a result of their action. Without evidence of a Sleeping One or someone with that level of talent, no further discussion is warranted. The author has no reason to believe the foregoing is more than propaganda written to astound the masses.”

Carl closed the book and his eyes. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes again, and looked around the room. He peered out the window and saw Grace walking toward the door to the dormitory. Opening the book at random, he read:

“Linguist (Highly Advanced Level): First verified and documented in 1127AD. Present at some level in 15% of students. Advanced in 2% of students.

“Low level: Students can read, speak, and write languages similar to their native tongue which they have never studied. Example 1: Student can read and write Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Example 2: Student and read and write German, English, and Danish.

“Advanced level: Students can read, speak, and write any language, although the talent may emerge gradually. Exceptions remain for forgotten languages that cannot be linked to existing ones.

“Author’s note: The author possesses this talent at the lowest end of the advanced level, which has greatly aided the development of this tome and others.”

Grace walked toward him. “It’s almost time for the carnival, Carl.”

He stood and set the book down on the chair. “Great, we could use some diversion.”

She picked up the book, looked at the cover, and then opened it. After a few seconds, she closed it.

“Were you reading this?”

He nodded. “It was really cool.”

“Hmm. When did you learn Latin?”

“What? It’s written in English.”

She smirked and turned the book cover to face him. “It sure doesn’t look like English to me.”

He took the book in his hands as his jaw dropped. It was definitely not English. “That’s impossible. I was reading English, I know I was.” Grace smiled at him, turned around, and walked away. “Wait! I know what it is.” She turned back. “This chair. It has to be the chair.”

She walked back to him and patted his cheek with her hand. “The chair taught you Latin?”

He moved aside. “Sit down.” When she had, he said, “Put your feet on the footstool.”

She complied, and the light came on. “Where did that light come from?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what happened to me too.” He handed her the book. “Check it out now.”

She looked at the cover and then back at him. “Still Latin.” She turned the cover to face him. “See.”

Now Carl could clearly read the title again. “I see *Gadson’s Talent Checklist* again.”

“It must be another talent you have.”

“The last thing I read was about the Linguist talent. Someone with that talent at a high level can read, write, or speak any language. But hasn’t Latin been dead for thousands of years?”

She shook her head and stood up. “It’s still used a lot in the Catholic Church. Also, French, Spanish, and other languages are derived from it.” She gave him the book. “You should put that away, and then we can look around for a while to see what other cool things we can find. It’s only ten-thirty, so it’s an hour and a half before the fun begins.” She walked several feet ahead and turned into one of the perpendicular pathways.

Carl slipped the book back into its spot on the shelf. He ran his hands over the spines of the nearby books. As he did, he could hear the authors' voices reciting random bits of each book. He pulled his hand away and went searching.

He wandered around the storage room. Most of the items he had found were books or boxes of old papers from past instructors. He walked up the aisle and turned left at the next opening. Grace was sitting on a box with her head down. Tears rolled out of her eyes, and her body trembled in fear or sorrow. He walked up to her and put his hand on her back. "Grace, what happened?"

She looked up at him and then down at her hands, which were grasping something. It had a chain that extended out of her grip and hung down. She sniffled and gasped. "It's so awful, Carl. I can't bear it."

He put his hands around hers. Immediately, his body temperature dropped, and he began to shiver. "Let me see it, Grace."

She shook her head. "I have to save her."

Carl pried her hands open and saw an amulet at the end of the chain. It was round, two inches across, and held a red stone. She stared back at him, frozen in fear. Carl took the amulet in his hand and backed off.

"Give it back, Carl!" She stood. "I won't let you kill her!"

"I'm not going to hurt anyone, Grace." Carl closed his hand around the stone.

"Put it down, Carl. It's evil. Please put it down."

Grace grabbed him by the shoulders, but he did not notice. He seemed to be a different person. He walked down the corridor in Gratia Dei Hall in the middle of the night. The power must have failed because everything was shrouded in darkness. He saw a flash of light under one of the dorm room doors. He stopped in his tracks. He glanced to the left and noticed a mirror, but it was not his face that looked back at him. It was the face of Beatriz Cardenas. She turned, approached the door, and looked both up and down the corridor, but it was deserted. She grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and pushed the door open. The room appeared to be empty, but it was pitch black and icy cold. "Who's there?" she said. Gingerly, she stepped

inside. She took two steps toward her dresser where her flashlight was stored. The door slammed behind her, and a man grabbed her from behind. His hand was over her mouth, and his breath on her neck.

“I have her, master,” the man said.

The closet door opened, and the room was bathed in intense white light. After a second, the light faded. The master was standing in front of her. He wore a long robe, but only the faint outline of his features was visible underneath the hood. The other pulled the amulet from his pocket and put the chain around her neck. “Put her on the bed, Bert,” the other said in a deep, gravelly voice.

Beatriz’s body was rigid, as if frozen. The henchman carried her over to the bed and set her down. Carl looked up from the bed. The henchman appeared to be a younger version of Eight. The face of the master was still not visible. The master held his hands out over the body on the bed. He looked upward and shouted, “Viszreaagh!” Lightning shot out of his hands and struck the amulet which began to glow. Bright red sparks shot from the stone, flew across the room, and bounced off the walls. Then it was over.

Carl felt like a disembodied spirit watching the action. The master took the amulet from the woman’s neck and put it back into his pocket. He turned to Eight and said, “You know what to do with her. I’ll hide the amulet where no one will look.” He disappeared. Eight picked up the body and walked out of the room. Carl could see the indentation in the bed, just as he had seen the day before. Everything faded to black, and then he opened his eyes to see Grace staring at him.

“Are you okay?”

“Did you see all of that?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t see anything. When I held it, all I could feel from hopeless despair and terrifying sadness. She begged for help, but I didn’t know who she was or how to help. I felt totally helpless and worthless. What did you see?”

He pushed the chain and pendant into his pocket. “The amulet is the key to saving the Sleeping Ones. I understand what happened to them now. I just wish I knew how to reverse it. Show me exactly where you

found it. After that, let's go get a drink or something. We'll find a quiet table in the corner somewhere, and I'll tell you what I saw."

Just before noon, Grace and Carl left Gratia Dei Hall and headed toward the carnival, which was surrounded by a chain-link fence to keep animals away. Most of the students were already assembled outside the fence. A small dais had been set up just in front and to one side of the gate in the fence. Headmaster Dorchester stood there chatting with some of the students in the first rows. The two friends joined the crowd and waited. After a couple minutes, the headmaster called for everyone's attention. "Good day, students, and welcome to our celebration of the birth of our founder, the original Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike." The crowd applauded. "To help us celebrate this special day, we have a guest of honor. Please give a hand to the headmaster of the Masterson Academy, my dear friend, Trenton Cornwall Greenleaf!"

The crowd applauded politely as a man in a suit and black cape got onto the dais and waved. Carl grabbed his leg and bent over. "What's wrong, Carl?"

He put his mouth to her ear and whispered, "The amulet suddenly got red hot."

"Thank you, boys and girls," Greenleaf said with a grin. "It is indeed a pleasure to be with you today for this special event. You should all be proud of your place in the history of this school."

"Can you stand up?" Grace asked.

Carl stood but kept his left knee bent. "I'll try. Do you think this thing is sensitive to sunlight?"

"It's in your pocket," she reminded him.

Greenleaf waited for the applause to die down. "And now in the tradition of the Masterson Academy, I will give the blessing for this day and event." He pulled the hood of his cape over his head and raised his hands into the air. He smiled as he looked around the gathered assemblage. His eyes met Carl's, and his smile changed to a grimace. He looked up into the air.

Carl made the connection. The line of Headmaster Greenleaf's features matched the person who had turned Beatriz Cardenas into a Sleeping One. "I have to put this thing back now, Grace." He put his arm around her shoulders. "Help me get back inside." They walked away slowly.

Greenleaf glanced down and noticed the two hobbling away. He smiled once more and raised his head. "May the blessings of the Almighty be upon each of you on this day of remembrance for our dear departed founder. Blessings to the sacred memory of Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike!"

Greenleaf and Dorchester shook hands and watched as the students moved through the gate and into the carnival. "Well done as always, old friend."

"Thanks, Alex. By the way, did you notice that student limping back toward the dormitories?" Greenleaf asked.

"Limping? No, I didn't."

"Perhaps, we should go look for him."

"Trenton, you know the traditions better than me. We have to be the first to ride the roller coaster."

Greenleaf pursed his lips, and his eyebrows dropped. "I must have forgotten for a moment. Let us go there now so the students can have some fun. I'm sure the boy will find his way to the infirmary."

As soon as Carl and Grace stepped inside the building, he pulled the amulet from his pocket. Grace touched it with a finger. "It's not hot anymore. What do you think caused the jewel to get so hot?"

"There's no time to explain now." They disappeared and reappeared inside the secret storage area. Carl grabbed Grace's hand and pulled her along. They arrived where she had said she found the amulet. "Now, exactly where did you find it?"

She opened a wooden crate. Inside was a bejeweled box. She opened that to reveal a padded interior. She took the jewel from Carl and set it inside.

"Was it exactly like that?"

"You're acting like a nut, Carl."

"Grace, please, this is very important."

“Yes, it was exactly like that.” She closed the jewel box and the crate. “This is just how I found it.”

He took her hand, and they disappeared again. This time, they reappeared in his room. “You wait here. I want to check my leg and pants for a burn.”

“Don’t be such a baby.” She undid his belt and pulled his pants down. He clasped his hands over his crotch. “I’m not going to jump on you, Carl.” She squatted down and examined his leg. “Yea, it’s a little red. It looks like a sunburn.” She looked at the pocket in his trousers. “It’s fine.” She turned around. “I’ll let you put your own pants on. So, why do you think the stone got so hot?”

“You remember the guy I told you turned Bea into a Sleeping One?”

“Duh, that was only an hour ago. Of course, I remember.”

“I think that was Headmaster Greenleaf.”

She shook her head. “I thought you said you didn’t see his face.”

“I saw the outline of his face, and it matched the headmaster.”

“That’s not a lot to go on.”

He put his hand onto her shoulder. “Yea, but the stone didn’t get hot until he got on the dais.”

“That is a good point, but not conclusive. I thought the guy in your vision was with Eight? Didn’t the headmaster fire him?”

Carl walked over to the window. “Maybe that’s what they want us to believe. I’m really worried now about Aida, her mother, and Burt.” Looking outside, he could see the two headmasters heading toward the building. Grace walked over and put her hand onto his shoulder. “Here he comes now.”

A moment later, Grace said, “Look at that, they walked right by the place. You see, totally innocent.”

He sighed. “You’re probably right. We should go to the carnival. Today is supposed to be a party.”

Two hours later, Carl was exhausted from too many roller coaster rides. He sat licking his ice cream cone on a park bench near the refreshment center at one end of the carnival. Twenty feet away, the carousel turned with its wooden horses moving up and down. With every rotation, Grace waved at him from her

trusted steed. He smiled and waved back. He had almost forgotten the incident with the amulet when a familiar voice spoke into his ear. “Hello, Carl, I hope you haven’t forgot about me.”

“What do you want, Eight?” he thought back. Carl’s ice cream suddenly melted and ran over his hands. He dropped it to the ground and wiped his hands with a napkin.

Eight walked around the end of the bench and sat next to the teenager. As the carousel turned, Grace spotted the two and shouted. Eight put his hand on Carl’s knee. “I told you before that I don’t want to fight you. Do you remember that?”

Carl pushed his hand away. “Then, why are you here?”

The carousel started to turn faster. “A dear friend asked me to create a diversion.”

Grace shouted, “Carl!” He looked to see the carousel moving too fast as it started to lift into the air.

“Look over there!” Eight said. The structure of the roller coaster started to buckle. Lightning struck the roof of the refreshment center and set it ablaze. “Good luck, Hand of God.” He said and disappeared.

Carl jumped to his feet and ran toward the coaster. He pointed his right hand into the air over the refreshment center and rain began to pour down and douse the flames. He grabbed the roller coaster frame and pushed his energy into it. It rose back upright and became rigid again. He looked back for the carousel and saw it was gone.

A nearby student pointed into the air and shouted, “There!” The carousel was spinning like mad and was now half a mile away and a thousand feet in the air.

Carl jumped into the air and joined a large group of other students chasing it. He surged ahead of them, grabbed the carousel, and began to spin along with it. He pushed against the direction of the spin, as if his feet were on a solid surface, and gradually the device began to slow. When it slowed to almost a stop, the other students grabbed onto it and led it back to a safe landing. Carl stepped back and then fell to the ground. Just then, several others hoisted him onto their shoulders and paraded him around the area as the crowd cheered. An odd sensation swept over him, and he looked up at the Gratia Dei Hall. He could see the face of

Headmaster Greenleaf looking down at him from the windows in the secret storage area. The students put him onto his own feet, and Grace held him in her arms.

She kissed him over and over again. "That was amazing, Carl. How did you do that?"

He looked down. "The amulet is gone."

"What?"

"Greenleaf took it."

Later, the student body was in the dining room for the special meal in honor of the founder. The table for the teachers had been moved into the main room so all could be together. The two headmasters sat together facing the group. Both had congratulated Carl and the others for their quick and decisive actions to prevent injuries and damage. Even though Carl had told Dorchester about Eight, both men said an investigation would be held into the carnival company.

Carl and Grace sat alone at a small table at the opposite end of the room from the teachers. "Do you still think Greenleaf is the friend Eight was talking about?"

Carl nodded. "Has to be. I saw him watching me from the secret storage area. Eight said he was supposed to create a diversion, and he did a heck of a job. You and a lot of others could have been killed. I doubt either of them cared if anyone died."

"And you're sure he took the amulet?"

"It's in his pocket right now."

She put her hand onto his. "How do you know that? Do you have x-ray vision or something?"

"It must be the amulet. I held it, and it made an impression on me. It's like we're connected."

"But I held it too."

"Grace, close your eyes and see if you can tell where it is."

After a few seconds, she sighed deeply. "Yeah. Left jacket pocket. What do we do now?"

"Well, we can't pick his pocket."

“Hopefully, something will come up.” He took a forkful of mashed potatoes and chewed.

An hour later, the dinner was almost over. The two headmasters left their table and went around the room greeting students and making small talk. Grace excused herself to visit the restroom. Carl sat back and took it all in. A very pretty brunette walked over and extended her hand. Carl stood, and they shook hands. “I wanted to thank you again for saving us. I was on the roller coaster and thought we were about to die.”

“I was just happy it worked. I’m Carl Prescott.”

She smiled. “We all know that. I’m Barbara Conway. You know, you’re really cute.”

He blushed. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Who’s your new friend, Carl?” Grace said as she joined them.

“I’m Barbara Conway.”

“Grace Mulligan.” She sat.

Barbara walked around the table and put her mouth against Carl’s ear. “I heard you guys talking a while ago. I have a bit of the Transformist talent. I’ll give you a hand.” She kissed his cheek and walked away. Carl sat too.

“She has a lot of nerve to kiss you in front of me. What did she say?”

Just then, the two headmasters arrived at their table. Dorchester said, “Carl and Grace, let me introduce you to Headmaster Greenleaf.”

Carl and Grace stood, and each shook Greenleaf’s outstretched hand. “It’s an honor, sir,” Grace noted.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Carl said.

“That was quite a show of talent earlier, Mr. Prescott. Alex is lucky to have you on his campus.”

“Thank you.”

Greenleaf turned to the other headmaster. “Alex, let me speak to Carl alone for a couple of minutes. Please take Grace with you.” As Dorchester led Grace away, Greenleaf sat on her chair. “We are always looking for talented students for the Masterson Academy, my boy. I realize the teachers here are adequate,

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but if you find you need more expert guidance, please consider us.” He winked. “I think you know where to find us.”

Barbara Conway approached the table and touched Greenleaf’s shoulder. “Headmaster Greenleaf, what a pleasure to see you again.”

The headmaster was so taken with her smile that he stood up. Carl’s eyes bugged out when he saw the amulet fall down to the floor. Barbara kicked it under the table. “Ms. Conway, it is always a pleasure to see you. It is unfortunate that your parents chose this school for you. As I said to Mr. Prescott, we always have room for outstanding students like you.”

She blushed and looked down. “My dear Headmaster, your praise is embarrassing me.”

He kissed both of her cheeks. “All the best to the both of you.” He turned to Carl. “Please do consider visiting Masterson. I know you’ll enjoy it.” He walked away with a little skip in his step.

“How did you do that?”

She squatted down, retrieved the amulet, and put it into her purse. “Which part, Carl? Getting the pendant or mesmerizing him.”

“Both!”

She looked around to see if anyone was nearby. “First, I’ll give you the amulet tomorrow. If Greenleaf notices it’s missing, I’m sure he’ll come to you or search your room.”

“Okay.”

“I told you I have the Transformist talent, but only at a low level. There used to be another talent called the Tailor, but eventually it was decided it was just an early step of the Transformist talent. When I came over and touched his shoulder, I unstitched the bottom of his pocket. When he kissed me, I stitched it back.”

“That’s amazing.”

“No, that was just gimmickry. What you did at the carnival was amazing. You have to teach me.”

He chuckled. “I’m not really sure myself. Professor Donnelly once told me to just relax and let the spirit come to me.”

She frowned and looked down. “If you don’t like me or don’t want to teach me, that’s okay.”

Carl took her hand, and she looked up and smiled. “Sure, I’ll do my best, Barbara.”

She squeezed his hand. “Just call me Barbie.” He nodded. “The other thing was part Succubus and part Psychic. I heard you had your own experience with the Succubus talent.”

“Yea, it was pretty frightening to lose my memory.”

She patted his cheek. “But you didn’t mind the kissing, I bet.” Now he blushed and looked down. She laughed. “I met Greenleaf a few times before I came here when he was trying to convince my parents to send me to Masterson. He’s the one who suggested that I had those talents in the first place.” She giggled. “And now I’m using them on him.”

“I can’t imagine you French-kissing the headmaster.”

“I would never do that, Carl. He’s older than my grandparents, after all. A Succubus uses that kind of kissing to enslave a person or block parts of his memory. Attracting someone or getting him to like you requires only a touch, hug, or a kiss on the cheek. Frankly, I’m surprised it didn’t work on you.” She looked around the room. “Speaking of which, I’d better go before Grace gets more jealous.” She patted him on the cheek and walked away.

Carl watched her walk away. He had taken ten steps to follow her until he realized that her talent was working on him now. He stopped and went back to the table. Without his knowing, Barbara looked back to see if he was following. When she saw him moving in the opposite direction, she frowned and walked out of the room.

Following the firework display, Carl and Grace returned to their rooms and found both had been ransacked. Now, the two stood in the hallway while Professors Donnelly and Thorndike looked for clues. Dorchester stood facing the students. “Do either of you know who might have done this?”

Grace looked at Carl, whose head was down. “No.”

Carl looked up. “It had to be Eight or his friend.”

“What friend would that be, Prescott?”

He sighed. “I don’t know, Headmaster. I told you Eight was the one who caused all the trouble at the carnival.” Dorchester nodded. “He said he was sent to make a diversion for a friend.”

“Do you know where Bert the Eighth is now?”

Carl shook his head.

“Carl, look at me,” Dorchester demanded, and the boy looked up. “That was not a casual request. Close your eyes and determine where he is?”

After a few seconds, Carl opened his eyes. “He is at the Masterson Academy.”

“That is a lie, Carl,” Dorchester stated. “I told you he was fired by Headmaster Greenleaf some time ago. Now, where is he?”

“Headmaster, I am not lying. That is where I think he is. Maybe I’m wrong.”

The professors exited the rooms and joined them in the hallway. “What did you find?” Dorchester asked.

Donnelly began, “All the normal school-supplied items are there, except what Carl is wearing now.”

“It’s the same in the girl’s room, Alex.”

Dorchester closed his eyes and thought. “Eight is still in the Australian Outback. Do you two concur?”

The professors closed their eyes for a moment. Donnelly said, “I sense him outside the Mulligan girl’s family home.”

“And I sense him in a hotel in Paris. He’s obviously playing with us, Alex. My son is an advanced Mask.”

“What is a Mask, professor?” Grace asked.

Dorchester scratched his chin. “Now is not the time for lessons, Ms. Mulligan. I think tonight security outweighs our protocols. Bert, take these two to Aida’s old room. There are two bedrooms, so it shouldn’t be an issue. After that, join Alistair and me in my office.”

“Come on, you two,” Thorndike said, and the three walked away.

Chapter 11

Carl woke Saturday morning to someone knocking on his bedroom door. He sat up. “Come in.” The door opened, and Grace entered along with three other young women. He pulled the covers up to his neck. “Hi.”

“I’m sorry, but these girls insisted on talking to you,” Grace noted.

One of the others came and sat on his bed. “Carl, we saw you with Barbie last night. Do you know where she is? By the way, I’m Ashley, and that’s Joanne and Jessica.”

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you. Did you check her room?”

“Of course, we did. You see, her roommate Kelly went on a family vacation last week, so she’s alone there. But we knocked on the door for a long time, and there was no answer.”

The memory of being Beatriz ran through his mind. “I think I know. Could you step outside so I can put my pants on?” After they walked out, he dressed quickly and opened the door. “Take me to her room.”

These girls had rooms in Circumspection Hall, which was on the opposite side of the Institution. They led Carl to the third floor and the last room in the wing. “This is it.”

Carl smiled. “None of you have the Portalist or Teleport talents?”

“Most of us just got here this year, so we’re still learning. Barbie said you were going to teach her. Maybe you’ll teach us too.”

“Sure. I’d be happy to, but I think I should go in alone.” He disappeared and reappeared inside the dorm room. He checked both the front room and both bedrooms but found them empty. He was about to leave when he noticed the bathroom door was slightly ajar. He walked over. “Barbie, are you in there?” There was no response. He pushed the door open slowly. “It’s just me, Carl. Your friends are worried about you.” That’s when he saw her and held his breath. She was standing in front of the mirror over the sink, wearing only her panties and bra. The amulet was around her neck, her hands still touching it. Her eyes were wide

open and staring at her reflection. He carefully moved her hands away from the necklace and put one arm around her waist in case she fell. With his other hand, he grabbed the chain and pulled the thing off of her.

Her knees started to buckle, but then she steadied, turned around, and hugged him as hard as she could. Tears flowed down her cheeks. "Thank God you found me, Carl." She kissed his cheeks and lips. "I thought I'd spend the rest of my life just standing there. What the heck is it with that amulet anyway?" She noticed what she was wearing and turned around. "Sorry."

He smiled. "I'm not. You are a gorgeous woman."

"Damn it. It's that Succubus thing again. I didn't mean to do that."

He blushed and walked out of the bathroom. "That's okay. Your friends have been looking for you. They're outside right now."

She walked out of the bathroom, tying her robe around her waist. "I heard them knocking, but I couldn't do anything or speak." She walked to the door and pulled it open to let her friends inside.

Carl pushed the amulet into his pocket and then led Grace back to their room while the four girls discussed Barbie's adventure.

An hour later, Grace and Carl sat in the dining hall and ate their breakfast. "You sure have a lot of girlfriends now."

He was pushing a piece of French toast around on his plate. He looked up and frowned at her. "That's not fair, Grace. Barbie helped get the amulet back, and her friends just wanted help finding her."

"And now you're going to teach them? You're a new student like me. How are you going to teach anyone?"

"That's something I think about a lot. Not about me teaching, but more about why some people have many highly-advanced talents and others don't."

"People are just different." Grace ate a bite of toast.

Carl pushed the piece of French toast into his mouth and chewed. After swallowing, he replied, “No, I don’t think so. It was something Dean Whitehall said to me. Everyone keeps saying that neither school is good nor evil. When I think about it, that was the most obvious statement ever. The schools are buildings and books. Of course, they’re not good or evil. The dean also said it is our choices that lead us to good or evil or some mixture in between.”

She smiled. “It’s always been about choices.”

“Yeah, and that made me think about the talents. Maybe we all have the Invisible Hand, but we choose to believe we cannot be that smart, strong, or powerful.”

“I suppose that makes some sense.”

Carl wiped his mouth with his napkin. “It’s more than that, Grace. Until we realized some of our talents, we were just ordinary people. Maybe everyone is like us. The headmaster told me that people who haven’t recognized their talents are called ‘Those Who Sleep.’ Maybe everyone is one of them. Your parents and mine have talents, but have never experienced them. Remember the room that had been set up for my mom? The teachers here knew she had talents, but her parents never let her attend. You have the same talents I do, but won’t accept your greatness. And when Eight calls me the Hand of God, he’s right because everyone of us has the Invisible Hand!”

Grace smiled sweetly. “You think I have greatness?”

He squeezed her hand. “I always have, Grace.”

The dining room became very bright. Carl looked up to see the ceiling gone and saw nothing but blue sky above them. They shot into the air. “What are you doing, Carl?”

“I’m not doing anything, Grace. This is all you.”

“Where should we go?”

“You decide.”

“I think I know where we need to be.”

Seconds later, they landed softly in an alley. “Where are we, Grace?”

“Manila in the Philippines.”

“My mom is nearby.”

“I know that, Carl. She’s why we’re here.”

“Do you feel that tremor?”

She stopped. “They’re almost here. We have to hurry.” They rushed to the end of the alley and looked out on the street. The hospital was directly across the roadway. They turned left along the sidewalk as a sea of bicycles, scooters, and taxis made their way up the street.

Across the pavement, they saw Director Winston exit a vehicle and approach an open doorway to a market of some kind. He turned back and motioned to a woman stepping out of the car. It was Virginia Prescott. Winston walked into the building, but Ginny stopped, turned around, and stared at her son. She started to walk toward him. When she had moved ten feet down the sidewalk, two vans screeched to a stop in front of the market, and six men holding machine guns stepped out and opened fire on the market. Ginny dived to the sidewalk and covered her head with her arms.

“What do we do, Carl?” Grace screamed.

An angry grimace contorted Carl’s face. He pushed his arms outward and upward. He screamed, and a wave of energy surged from him. An eerie silence fell over the area. All the vehicles were stopped. The attackers stood in firing position, but their guns were silenced. Most had plumes of smoke at the ends of their barrels. Grace seemed frozen as well. He took her hand, and she could move again. “Let’s go get my mom and the director.”

“Did you just stop time?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” He did not look at her and remained focused on the attackers.

Carl and Grace squeezed between the tightly packed vehicles until they reached the other sidewalk. Carl looked down at his mother, who seemed uninjured. He reached down and touched her hand.

Ginny looked up at her son. “What happened? Am I dead?”

“No, Mom. I think you’re okay. Can you stand?”

“Let go of my hand so I can get up.”

He turned to his girlfriend. “This will only take a second.” He released her hand, and she froze in place.

Carl pulled Ginny to her feet and hugged her.

“What happened here? Why is everything stopped?”

Carl thought for a moment. “This is a dream, Mom. You’ll realize that when you wake up.”

“Well, it can’t be real, so I suppose you’re right. What do we do now?”

“How many CIA agents are inside?”

“Five, and the Director makes six.”

Carl took Grace’s hand, and she unfroze. “What did you say to me, Carl?”

“I was just explaining to my mom that this is a dream she’s having. There are six others inside, and everyone needs to be touching me or someone else who is. We’ll make a line and walk out of here. How far is the embassy, Mom?”

“Ten miles.”

“Don’t worry; we’re not walking that far. Let’s go.” They stepped into the market. There were at least a dozen bullets suspended in midair. One bullet was less than an inch from Winston’s forehead. He stood defiantly with his pistol in firing position. Two older women were lying in pools of blood near the front of the store. “Pretty nasty dream, Mom. I hope you forget it quickly.”

“Me too, son.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.” He released their hands, and they froze. He plucked all the bullets from the air and walked outside. He put a bullet an inch from one of the attacker’s head. In the back of his mind, he heard Dean Whitehall’s words about choices. He moved the bullet and put it at the end of the barrel of his weapon. “Maybe they’ll jam.” He put bullets at the ends of the other machine guns. He opened the hood of one van and placed four pointing at the engine. He closed the hood and put the last two bullets near the rear tires. Satisfied, he walked back in the market. He pulled the pistol from Winston’s hand without touching him and set it on the floor. The he took his mom’s and Grace’s hands again.

“Did you say something, Carl?”

“No, Mom. I need you to hold Grace’s hand, but don’t let go of mine until you do.” Ginny complied. He let go of his mother’s hand. “Are you still okay?”

“If this is a dream, I suppose so.”

Carl replied, “Now, touch the director.”

After she did, he came back to life. “What the heck? Who took my gun? Why did they stop shooting?”

Carl pulled his hand from Grace’s, and the three stood frozen again. “This is starting to get complicated.” His eyes moved to the two bloody women. He knelt next to one. “I’m sorry I didn’t act sooner.” He put his hands above her body and felt energy moving down into her. The blood moved back into her body. He raised her blouse where she had been struck by the bullet and examined her. There was no wound. “Cool.” He moved to the other victim and did the same. Then he walked over to Director Winston and pulled him away from his mother’s touch.

“What’s going on here, Carl? How did you get here?”

“A minute ago, there was a bullet from one of those attackers an inch from your forehead, so let’s say I’m saving your life.”

“Why is everyone frozen?”

“I told Mom she was dreaming. Maybe you’ll rationalize it that way too, but I’m not here to chat. I am going to save my mother, and would be happy to save you and the rest of your team. We don’t have a lot of time, and have to move fast.”

“Well, since stopping time isn’t possible, I think I’ll stick with the dream.”

“That’s fine with me, Director. Now, you need to be touching me so you don’t freeze like them. Let’s go get your team, and then we’re all going to walk out of here.” Winston considered the impossible situation he was in. He nodded and they moved away.

Ten minutes later, Carl walked out of the market holding Grace's hand with the rest forming a line behind her. He could feel the fear and terror in the agents' minds as they looked at the attackers. Carl and the group crossed the street and walked back into the alley. Instantly, they were gone.

They reappeared inside the compound of the US Embassy. "Enjoy the rest of your day." Grace released Ginny's hand and the others froze. A second later, everything started to move again. Several Marines rushed over to see who the intruders were.

Carl and Grace had already disappeared.

Carl and Grace sat under a tree on a low hill a mile from the school buildings. A flock of sheep rested nearby. "Do you think we'll get in trouble for going to the Philippines?" Grace asked.

"Probably, but I don't really care. If not for us, my mom would be dead. Actually, it's thanks to you that she's alive." He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"You did all the work, Carl."

"Yeah, but I didn't know the attack was going to happen. You're the one who knew where we were supposed to be."

"I guess that makes us a good team."

He patted her on the knee. "You're absolutely right about that."

Grace sighed. "It's okay if you don't want to tell me, but what happened to the Barbie girl? Why did you have to go to her room?"

Carl thought for a moment. "I guess I never told you the details of the vision I saw when I held the amulet." She shook her head. "In the vision, I saw Beatriz Cardenas. She was in the hallway of the dormitory late at night, and all the power was out. She went to the room where we found her clothes. Eight grabbed her from behind and held her. The other man, who I think was Greenleaf, came out of the closet and put the amulet around her neck. Instantly, she was as hard as a plank of wood. Eight put her on the bed. Then, Greenleaf put his hands over her and shouted, 'Viszreaagh!' Greenleaf took the amulet, put it into his pocket,

and then told Eight that he knew what to do with her body. After he picked her up, I could see the indentations we noticed in that mattress.”

“That’s freaky.”

“Yeah, but I figured Barbie might have put the amulet on to see how it looks. I found her in the bathroom wearing the amulet and looking at herself in the mirror. She was frozen solid, just like Beatriz had been. I took it off, and she was able to move again.”

“So, she’d just been standing there all night?”

Carl put his hands behind his head and his back against the tree. “That’s right. Until someone removes the amulet, they’re frozen forever.”

“I guess I still don’t get it, Carl. I understand that people can have these talents, but the amulet is just a gemstone. Do you think Greenleaf might have put a curse on it or something?”

He dropped his head and sighed. “I don’t know. All I remember was the man turning Beatriz into a Sleeping One. Maybe the same necklace and incantation will reverse it, or maybe there’s a different stone, different words, or something completely different.”

“You told me that book about the talents said the soul of the Sleeping One was separate from their body.” He nodded. “That’s why the bed had the indentation and felt warm, right?”

“Grace, obviously I can’t know for sure, but that makes sense. I just don’t know what we can do to help her.”

Two hours later, Carl and Grace sat across the desk from Headmaster Dorchester. He stared at the teenagers while drumming his fingers on the desk. “I must say that I’m very impressed with the talents you both exhibited in the Philippines. Unfortunately, you’ve put the school in a difficult position.” Both students looked down at their feet. The office door opened and Professors Donnelly and Thorndike walked in. “I’m glad you could join us. Please have a seat on the couch.”

“Are you going to expel us, Headmaster?” Grace asked.

Dorchester shook his head from side to side. “No, Ms. Mulligan. That would be a grievous error on our part. If you left the school, there would be no one to help you hone and control your abilities. With the skills Carl has already shown, the risk to the rest of the world could be grievous.”

“Me?” Carl said with a gasp. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, Headmaster.”

“Please don’t take me wrong, Carl. I’m not implying that you would deliberately harm anyone. However, imagine if you had arrived a few seconds later, and your mother had been killed. Your pain and anger might have driven you to kill those attackers. Perhaps they would have deserved it, but they would still be dead.”

“If I may say something, Alex,” Thorndike noted and the headmaster nodded. “Carl, from what you told us, it would seem you stopped time. There was video taken of the incident by cameras mounted on the hospital and market. Only one camera managed to capture images of you and Ms. Mulligan when you stepped out of the alley. After a few steps, you extended your arms. Neither of you were visible in the very next frame. A second camera inside the market recorded Director Winston walking inside. A few seconds later, he turned, drew his pistol, and fired. The next frame, he was gone. You should note that cameras typically record thirty images per second.”

Professor Donnelly added, “Time is one of the dimensions of the space-time in which we live. Therefore, time is not specific to a particular location. If time stopped there, it stopped everywhere, perhaps throughout the universe.”

The headmaster began to drum his fingers nervously again. “I have never heard of a talent that would enable one to stop time. It is impossible to do so, yet that is what appears to have happened.”

“What happens now, Headmaster?” Grace asked.

Dorchester smiled. “First, please don’t worry about how the incident in Manila will be viewed by others. Humans have an amazing ability to rationalize what has happened. Also, within a few days, everyone will be focused on something else, and the incident will fade into memory. For now, Carl will be tutored by Alistair. Dean Whitehall has agreed to return to be your tutor, Grace.”

“Does that mean Burt and Aida will be coming back too, Headmaster?”

“I assume so, Grace, but that decision is between Clarisse and Headmaster Greenleaf. It’s still only Saturday, so please enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

After dinner, Carl and Grace returned to the hidden storage room. They walked over to the location where the red amulet had been found. The wooden box and jewel box were lying on the floor broken. Several other nearby boxes had been searched, and paper and books were scattered across the floor. On top of the pile of papers sat a folded piece of paper sealed with a wax stamp. Next to the stamp were the words, “Deliver to the Hand of God.” Grace picked it up and handed it to her friend.

He stared at her. “You think this is for me?”

She nodded. “It has to be from Eight.”

Carl examined the seal. It has a raised image of a leaf, with the letter G written in an Old English script. He turned the paper to Grace. “Greenleaf.”

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

Carl broke the seal and unfolded the single sheet. The handwriting was barely decipherable, which he took to mean the writer was very angry when the message was written. He read the words out loud.

“I was surprised you were able to rescue your mother, but don’t be so confident that she is safe. If you do not return the necklace to me, she and everyone else you know will die most horribly. We will start with your friend, Aida.

“The loss of life will be a waste, as the necklace is of no use to you, foolish child. You will never know its power. Alex was a fool to let the girl and her mother out of his sight. And his foolishness will be the cause of your death as well.”

The signature appeared to be the number eight written in blood.

Grace wiped her eyes. “What do we do now?”

“We have to show this to the headmaster now.”

Dorchester was not on school grounds, so the two teenagers were now sitting in Professor Thorndike's office. This office was very different from the offices of the headmaster and dean. The room was barely eight feet square. The professor had a roll-top desk that faced the wall. Every slot on the desk was stuffed with papers and knick-knacks. There were bookcases on the sides of the office which were packed with old books. The two side chairs barely fit inside the room. Thorndike turned the paper over and back. After a few moments, he looked up at the two students. "I apologize for my son. I know I raised him, but never imagined he was so evil."

Carl adjusted his position on the narrow chair. "Did he really sign it in his own blood?"

Thorndike sighed. "Bert was always overly dramatic. He is actually taking credit for the assault on the CIA Manila office." He looked up at Carl. "You told me it was the Chinese, didn't you?"

"I still think it was, although it's possible Eight is pushing them too."

Grace asked, "Professor, has the dean returned yet?"

He shook his head. "No, but it is a simple matter with her talents. With the time difference, she may be waiting to arrive during the day."

"Do you have room for one more, Bertrand?" Professor Donnelly said from the doorway.

Thorndike waved him in and handed him the paper. "What do you think, Alistair?"

Donnelly clucked his tongue. "This is most troubling. Carl, what necklace is he talking about?" The boy removed the amulet from his pocket and handed it to the professor. Donnelly gasped. "This is not possible. It's a legend." He handed the necklace to Thorndike.

The professor removed a loupe from his desk and examined the stone and setting for several seconds. "It must be a replica, Alistair."

"Replica of what, Professor?" Carl asked.

"The Devil's Heart," Thorndike replied. "There are a number of ancient folktales about it, but no one believes them to be true. Most of the stories were passed down by word of mouth for many generations but

not written down for centuries. After so much time, stories generally become more outrageous and less factual, which is why we don't believe the actual Devil's Heart exists." He passed the necklace and loupe to Carl. "Take a look at the lettering around the outside of the stone. Those symbols have never been translated. An image of the stone and its setting was created perhaps a millennium after the original stories began. This stone and setting are exactly like the old drawing. It is hard to believe the actual jewel and its drawing would match perfectly after not being seen for a thousand years."

"Did the symbols mean anything to you, Carl?" Donnelly asked. Carl shook his head. "Let me have a look."

After a minute, Grace asked, "What do you see, Professor?"

"Pick up that mirror, Grace, and hold it in front of me." After she had, Donnelly turned the stone to face the mirror and examined the image in the mirror through the loupe. He looked up at Thorndike. "Bertrand, the three symbols beneath the bottom of the stone look familiar. I have seen them somewhere, but in reverse order. Through the mirror, it might make sense."

He handed the necklace back to Thorndike who examined it for another minute. He looked up at the others. "I suppose it stands to reason."

"What's that, Professor Thorndike?" Carl asked.

"Many languages are written right to left. I've seen these three symbols before, but written left to right. We have no way of knowing their true meaning, but those texts said this phrase translates as 'Sleeping One.'"

"Viszreaagh," Grace said with a sigh.

The two professors nodded. "But as I said, the jewel was most likely modeled after the old drawing, and the other symbols remain undecipherable and likely decorative."

"Professor Thorndike, may I see it again?" Carl asked. Thorndike handed the stone and loupe back to him.

Carl looked at the symbols, and slowly they seemed to morph into English. "I think I can read it."

“What does it say?” Grace pleaded.

“Behold the Soul-Ripper. Submit to Lord Satan or become the Sleeping One.”

Thorndike stuck out his hand. “Give it back to me, Carl.” He then shoved the jewel into his desk and locked it. “How did you obtain the stone?”

“It was in the hidden storage room on the third floor of Gratia Dei Hall.”

Thorndike stood. “What hidden room? There is no hidden storage room. Tell me the truth, Carl!”

“Aida showed me the room, Professor, and I showed Carl. Please don’t be angry with us,” Grace pleaded.

Donnelly smiled and patted her on the head. “We aren’t angry, Grace, but there is no storage room on the third floor of that hall.”

Carl stood and pulled Grace up. Instantly, the four were in the hidden chamber. “This hidden storage room, Professors!” He walked away with the others following him. He turned into the aisle where Grace found the necklace. He picked up the jewel box and crate. “She found the stone in this box, which was inside the crate. Satisfied?” He handed both boxes to the professors and walked away toward the windows. Grace followed him.

“Bertrand, you’ve been here longer than me. Did you know this room existed?”

“No, Alistair, unlikely as it seems. In fact, I think this hall was constructed while I was headmaster.”

“It almost seems like a memory has been removed or blocked from our minds.”

Thorndike chuckled. “You’re a younger man than I, but I have not been French-kissed since this structure was built.” The two walked over and joined the students by the windows. After verifying from the view where they were, the professor began, “I’m sorry for shouting at you, Carl. Neither of us knew this room was here, which is also a problem.”

Carl smiled. “It’s okay. I understand why you thought I was lying. But we need to show you two more things now.”

“In this room?”

“One is here, Professor Donnelly, but the other is near the rooms where Grace and I stayed when we were relocated after Aida and Burt left. Follow me.” Carl waked over to the sarcophagus and pulled off the tarp covering it.

Chapter 12

The next morning, Carl and Grace went to the dining hall for breakfast. They noticed Aida and Burt sitting across from each other at a table on the far side of the room. They walked over to join them. Carl smiled at his friends, set down his tray, and pulled out a chair. “It’s great to see you both again. We missed you.”

Aida looked up at him. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think we invited you to join us.”

“Aida, what’s wrong? It’s just us.”

Burt scowled. “We know who you are. We just don’t want you to sit with us.”

Dejected, Carl and Grace walked away and found another table, where they sat alone. “Carl, I don’t get it. They’ve been gone five days, and it’s like we’re their enemies.”

Carl closed his eyes for a moment. “I don’t think that’s them, Grace.”

“What do you mean? Of course, it’s them.”

Dean Whitehall entered the dining hall, walked over to her daughter’s table, and sat.

“I don’t think that’s the dean either.”

She laughed. “Now you’re just being silly, Carl.”

He leaned forward and whispered. “You remember when we saw Professor Donnelly turn from a crow to a person on the boat.”

“Those are people, not birds.”

“It’s the Transfiguration talent, that’s what they told us. I imagine if you’re good enough at it, you could be a different person too.”

“But they sound just like them too.”

“Grace, if they are exact duplicates, I imagine the vocal chords would be the same too, right?” He stood.

“I’m going into the restroom for a minute. You wait here.”

As he walked away, she said, "But you just went before we came here." He did not turn back, so she started eating her breakfast.

A minute later, the dining room doors opened and Headmaster Greenleaf strode into the room. "Good morning, students, it's a wonderful day, isn't it?"

Most of the gathered crowd looked up and replied, "Good morning, Headmaster."

Greenleaf smiled, waved at several students, and began to approach Grace's table. Knowing what she had learned about the headmaster, Grace stiffened and waited. Greenleaf stopped, turned, and walked over to the dean's table. "Dearest Clarisse, I'm glad you and your family returned safely. We are already missing your presence at Masterson. I hope you return shortly." The three at the table stared at him, but none replied. Greenleaf took a grape from Aida's plate and ate it. Then, he walked over to Grace's table.

He pulled out the chair where Carl had been sitting and sat smiling at her. "It is wonderful to be with you, Grace Mulligan."

She looked down. "Thank you, Headmaster."

He looked from side to side. "Where is your constant companion, Mr. Prescott?"

"He went to the restroom, Headmaster."

"Ah, well, I don't want to take you from your friend or meal, Ms. Mulligan, but I do need to show you one small thing that may convince you to come to my school." He stood. "Please come with me, my dear."

"I think I prefer this school, Headmaster, and Carl will be back any moment."

"Please, Ms. Mulligan, I guarantee you'll return before he arrives." Reluctantly, she stood. Greenleaf walked toward the doors with the girl ten feet behind him. When he reached the doors, he turned and said, "Study hard, students, and make Headmaster Dorchester proud." He turned and walked out of the room.

Grace followed him out into the hallway. "What did you want to show me, Headmaster?"

Greenleaf stopped at a narrow door and pulled it open. "A broom closet, how perfect."

"You want me to go in there with you?"

Greenleaf shook his head and motioned with his hands. "Of course not, Ms. Mulligan, that would be very inappropriate. I will step inside. You wait two seconds and open the door."

"I don't get it."

He winked. "Just trust me." He stepped inside and closed the door.

Grace considered running away. Because several other students were in the hallway, she gathered her courage and opened the door. Carl was standing inside. "I told you, Grace. Now, go back to the table and meet me there."

Back at the table, Grace looked down at her plate. "Aren't you hungry?" Carl asked.

Without looking up, she replied, "Every time I look up, Dean Whitehall is staring at me. You remember that she's supposed to be my teacher now, but if that's not really her, who is it?"

Carl stood. "Change places with me. She can stare at me all she wants." They changed positions, and Grace started to eat. After a few minutes, he noticed Whitehall staring at him, so he stared back. A few seconds later, Whitehall averted her gaze and focused on her food. He leaned toward Grace and whispered, "She was staring at me. I stared back, and after a few seconds, I knew who it was."

"Who is she?"

"I think she's Headmaster Greenleaf. I thought it odd that none of them said anything to me when I went to their table in disguise. Of course, if the dean is Greenleaf, he would know I was a fake."

"I don't want him or her to tutor me, Carl."

He nodded. "That would be bad."

"What would be bad?" Whitehall said.

They looked up to see the dean walking up to their table. They stood. "The bacon tastes a little bad, Dean Whitehall," Carl replied.

"That's a shame. I'll have a word with the kitchen staff later." She turned to Grace. "Are you about ready for our tutoring session?"

“In a little while, Dean. The food is bothering my stomach, and I was going back to my room first, if that’s okay?”

“Of course, dear, I understand. I want to apologize to you both for the harsh tone from Burt and Aida. I’m certain it’s just the time zone change. It’s almost bedtime at Masterson.”

“That’s makes perfect sense, Dean. Excuse me now. I’m going back to the room for a few minutes. Shall I come to your office afterward?”

Whitehall nodded. “That’s fine, Grace. No rush, we have all day.” Grace walked away.

Carl smiled as Burt and Aida approached the table as well. “It’s good to have you all back here. Maybe things can get back to normal.”

“That’s what we all hope, Carl,” Whitehall replied with a smile. “Aida and Burt, you two should head off to class now. I need to have a word with Mr. Prescott.” The two teenagers scowled at Carl and walked away. Whitehall put her hand on Carl’s shoulder. “Shall we take the shortcut to my office?” They disappeared.

They reappeared in a dark room. Greenleaf pushed Carl down onto hard, cold surface and held him down with his hand around the boy’s throat. “You stupid twerp. You dare to impersonate me! Prescott, your little reign of terror ends now.”

Suddenly more darkened figures were all around him, holding him down. “I won’t let you hurt my friends,” Carl gasped, the hand still on his throat.

“See if you can stop me.” One of the others put a long knife into Greenleaf’s free hand and he raised it over his head, ready to strike. Greenleaf released the boy’s throat and now held the knife in both hands.

“Goodbye, Carl.”

“Viszreaagh!” Carl shouted, and all of those around him collapsed to the floor. He sat up and sucked in more air. When his panic began to subside, he waved his arm and the room was filled with light. He noticed jail cells around the exterior walls.

Just then, Headmaster Dorchester appeared in the room. “Carl, are you okay?” He looked around. “What happened to these people?”

Carl stood carefully so as not to step on anyone. “Headmaster Greenleaf was going to kill me. These others were holding me down. The headmaster let go of my throat, and I shouted that word that means ‘Sleeping One’, and they all just collapsed.”

Dorchester squatted next to Greenleaf. “Well, he isn’t a Sleeping One, but he is asleep.” He looked up at his student. “The word Viszreaagh doesn’t have any power. It’s just a word.”

Carl shook his head. “I don’t know why I said it in the first place, but it stopped them from stabbing me. Then, I thought if I said it again, they might wake up and try it again. How did you find me?”

“I didn’t. I was walking toward the dining hall when I noticed Grace crying and hurrying away. Suddenly, I felt you reaching out to me. I just allowed you to bring me here.”

“Where is here, Headmaster?”

Dorchester shook his head. “I have no idea. It would seem to be far underground and a prison of some sort. Is there anyone in those cells?” Carl shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, you check the cells over there, and I’ll check the ones on this side.” After several moments, he said, “These appear to be empty.”

“Oh no! This one isn’t, Headmaster.”

Dorchester hurried over. There were two cots in the cell. Dean Whitehall was on one. The other was empty. “I just saw her at the Institution this morning. How is this possible?”

“She never came back. It was Greenleaf in disguise. That’s how he got next to me. Burt and Aida aren’t really them either. I think Burt is Eight, and Aida is that woman who blocked part of my mind.”

“I’d better check the other cells,” Dorchester said as he walked away.

Carl put his finger to the lock, and the door opened. He walked over to the dean and felt for a pulse or breathing. When he found none, he stepped over to the empty bunk. He felt from the edges to the center. It was just like the one in the room where they had found Beatriz Cardenas’s school uniforms. He stood up and sighed.

Dorchester walked into the cell and put his hand on Carl's shoulder. "It would appear that Burt and Aida are dead. I'm sorry." He looked over at Whitehall. "She is likely dead as well. Murder is a heinous, unforgivable crime. I never would have thought Trenton would be capable of this."

"They aren't dead, Headmaster. Do what I'm doing?" He moved his hand again from the edge to middle of the empty cot.

Dorchester copied him. "Why is it warm?"

Carl pointed at Whitehall and said, "Body." He pointed at the center of the cot. "Soul. That's what happens when you say that word while the victim is wearing the Devil's Heart." He looked up at the headmaster. "We need to move both cots from the cells back to the Institution. Then, we need to find out how to put them back together again."

Professor Donnelly and Thorndike appeared in the room. Dorchester said, "Let me show you what we need to do."

As they started to walk out, Carl said, "There's another body, Professors."

Dorchester turned back. "Bertrand mentioned the room where Beatriz Cardenas used to live, but all the other cells are vacant."

"Please give me a few minutes to look around. I have a feeling that she's nearby."

Dorchester replied, "Fine, but if these people begin to wake, we have to leave immediately."

Carl smiled. "Thank you, Headmaster."

While the headmaster demonstrated how the others needed to move the bunks together, Carl stepped outside. He walked around the perimeter of the room with his hand on the wall, checking for signs of another door or a breeze, but found nothing. He looked up to see the teachers standing at the doors of the three occupied cells. "Just one more minute, please." He looked down. Then he saw a piece of fabric at the end of Greenleaf's robe moving very slightly. He hurried over and put his hand by it. There was a cold breeze. "Professors, please help me move this slab."

They moved the sleeping people as gingerly as they could and pushed on the stand where Carl had been held for sacrifice. There was a stone staircase leading down. “Carl, if I shout that they’re awakening, get out. Don’t put your life at risk for the girl.”

Carl nodded and moved down. At the bottom of the stairs was a cell door. He touched the lock, and it opened. He stepped inside and pushed aside the draperies. He hurried over to her but tripped and fell to the floor where he saw a necklace with a clear stone on the floor next to him. He pushed it into his pocket and stood. Then, he walked over and picked up the girl.

He was suddenly overwhelmed by her thoughts. Even though she seemed dead, she was very much alive. Carl began crying for the terror she felt. His knees trembled from her memories of Eight standing over her, caressing her body and kissing her. Being unable to move or fight back had destroyed her completely. Carl was about to give in to her depression and agony. Then, Dorchester shouted, “Carl, now!”

Open sky appeared above Carl’s head, and he and Beatriz shot into the sky. Greenleaf and several of the others in the room were chasing him and catching up quickly.

“Give her to me, Carl, or die!” Greenleaf growled as he approached.

Carl was now surrounded by the others, reaching out and trying to pull her from his arms. One of the assailants grabbed her legs while another tried to hold onto her arms. Carl dived downward and the others followed. He leveled out as he reached the ocean’s surface. The speed of his descent had given him a lead of a hundred yards, but the others were closing the gap. Carl noticed movement under the water and accelerated. Just as Greenleaf and the others were closing in, several whales breached the surface, grabbed the attackers, and dived back underwater.

A few minutes later, Carl passed over the coastline of the island where the school was located. After flying over Santa Isabela and the woods, he and Beatriz arrived in the room where her soul rested. After taking several deep breaths, he set her down on the bed and stepped back. Nothing seemed to happen. He took the necklace from his pocket and put it around her neck. She remained unchanged. Unsure what to do, he sat on a chair and stared at her. The professors and Grace walked into the room.

“That is Beatriz Cardenas. I thought she died,” Thorndike said with a gasp. “She looks the same as when she married Bertrand.”

After thinking a while longer, Carl looked at Thorndike. “Professor, why was she staying here after she married your grandson?”

Thorndike walked over and looked down on her. “When your friend Burt was born, she fell into a deep depression. Some feel it was post-partum depression, but I believe it was partially guilt for abandoning her first child. That led her to abandoning Bertrand and Burt. Two years later, Bertrand found her living on the streets and asked me to help her. Six months after she returned, I thought she was doing well, but then she disappeared again. No one knew until now that she was a prisoner.”

Grace asked, “Professor, why does that necklace have such a long chain?”

The professor shrugged, but Carl stood and walked over. “I want to try something. Professor, pick her up.” He complied. Carl removed the necklace from her and put it onto his own neck. He got onto the bed, lay down flat, and closed his eyes. Gradually, his entire body began to tingle. He felt totally warm, safe, and protected. Now, a sense of pure joy washed over him, and he gasped.

“Are you okay, Carl?”

He opened his eyes, which shone like stars. “Grace, her soul is intertwined with mine now. It’s freaking awesome. Professor, please lay her down on top of me, face to face.” After he had done so, Carl looped the necklace around her neck. He could feel the warmth moving from his body into hers, but after a full minute, nothing had happened. Her terror returned, and Carl wondered how to make her safe.

“Kiss her, Carl!” Grace shouted. “Remember the Succubus thing!”

Their lips met, and Carl was overwhelmed with emotion. Intense white light shot out from the stone into their bodies, which shone like suns. The others had to turn away from the brilliance. White winged shapes escaped from their bodies and danced around the walls. Carl opened his eyes. Then, she began to kiss him and her arms held him tightly. She opened her eyes and pushed back. “Who are you?” The brilliance disappeared, and the others turned to see what had happened.

“I’m Carl. Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Professor Thorndike pulled Beatriz into his arms, and the others joined in their hug. Grace pulled Carl to his feet and led him out of the room. “You sure have been doing your share of kissing women other than me.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “You told me to do it this time, remember.”

“I know, but I still don’t have to like it.”

“I’m just glad it worked, but I want you to try it too.”

“Why?”

“I’m not looking forward to kissing Burt or the dean.” They both laughed.

“Please wait.” They turned around to see Beatriz standing just outside the door with the professors.

“Thank you for rescuing me, Carl. You should know that my father-in-law and others came into that room every day to molest, harass, and intimidate me. I was there twelve years, you know. I couldn’t move or stop them. It was the longest nightmare anyone could imagine. Thank you again.”

“I was happy I was able to do it, Beatriz.” He and Grace turned again to leave.

“One more thing, Carl.” Grace and Carl turned around. “When you kissed me, our minds joined together. I knew and felt everything you’ve known and felt. Can I tell you one thing and ask another?”

“Of course, Beatriz. Anything you want.”

She smiled. “Just call me Bea.” Carl nodded. “First, you know you’re the Hand of God, right?”

Carl shrugged. The headmaster replied, “Bea, that is most likely a myth.”

She nodded to the headmaster, turned her head to Carl, and winked. “What was the question, Bea?”

“Carl, are your two friends really my children?”

“Yes, no doubt about it.”

“And they’re here?”

Carl nodded. “Unfortunately, they’re both in the same state you were, but we’ll make them better next.”

Bea walked up and hugged Carl. Then she hugged Grace and said, “Don’t let this one get away. This boy is the salvation of mankind.”

Dorchester grunted. “I don’t think I would characterize it that way, Bea, but I understand your perspective and why you feel that way.” He turned to Carl. “You need to do the same for the others, Carl. I’m not certain who else has that particular talent.”

Carl sighed. “Headmaster, I’ll do whatever you ask, but I feel very uncomfortable kissing the dean and Burt. Plus, I’m sure Grace doesn’t want to see me with Aida either.”

“Of course, I know how you feel, but we have no other options. Having others attempt it may well be a waste of time. Bertrand, please take Grace and the others to the dining hall to wait.” Grace kissed Carl’s cheek and then left with the others. Dorchester put his hand on Carl’s shoulder. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Yes, sir.”

As they walked, Dorchester asked, “Why did you choose that method to return? Certainly, the Teleport or Portalist talents would have been easier.”

He looked up at the headmaster. “Honestly, I don’t know. I think it’s what you told Grace. We’re new to these abilities. Every time I use one, it seems like it just happens. We need training to be able to choose rather than letting things happen.”

“What exactly did happen, Carl?”

“When you called out, everything above me disappeared, like we were outside. Then we shot up into the air.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. Please continue.”

“We were flying very fast. Almost immediately, Greenleaf and some of the others in the room were chasing me. They tried to pull Bea away, so I dived down to the ocean’s surface. They started to catch up to me until a group of whales jumped out of the water, grabbed them, and dived down.”

“Clearly, we need to research this new talent. Perhaps you can take me on an adventure soon.”

“Of course, Headmaster.”

Dorchester opened a door and walked in with the boy behind him. The three others were lying on beds next to the empty cots. “Carl, why don’t you start with Aida? Perhaps we’ll let her try with the others, if that will help.”

“Thank you.”

After the others were restored, Carl returned to the hidden storage room. He had no desire to be seen by anyone. Aida had been unable to help Burt or the dean, so Carl was called back to duty. All of their memories were now swimming around in his head, as well as the shock they experienced when he kissed them. Only Aida was not confused by the experience, and she had seemed to enjoy it too much.

The first thing he did was to replace the cover over the sarcophagus holding the school’s founder. He had walked down all the bookcases looking for something interesting, but soon lost interest. Every book seemed to be too scholarly, which made sense for a school library. He sat with his eyes closed on the lone chair with his feet on the footrest. He had almost fallen asleep when he heard a slight, unintelligible whisper. He jumped from the chair and looked around, but the room was empty.

From behind him, the voice whispered, “Over here.”

He spun around to find nothing. He waved his hand and the room was brightly lit. “Who’s there?” There was no reply. He took two steps forward.

“Yes.”

Carl had a tingling sensation surge over him. He stepped back.

“No.”

He started to move forward very slowly. With each step, the voice whispered its approval. After twenty steps, it said, “No.” He took one step backward. The wall of windows was to his left. A narrow aisle way through the stacks of boxes and furniture was to his right. He took one step into the aisle. “Good.” After five steps, the whisper said, “Stop.”

To his right were several tall stacks of papers. To his left was a table with a built-in chessboard and chess pieces set up for a game. He picked up one of the rooks. It was metal and quite heavy. The voice whispered, "No time for games." He set the piece down. The table had a single drawer where the chess pieces were usually stored.

He pulled open the drawer. Under several pieces of paper he saw a pair of white, cotton gloves. Each had the phrase "Use Me" embroidered on them. Beneath the gloves was a very old book. The lettering on the cover had been worn away long ago.

He touched the cover. "Gloves please," the whisper commanded. He pulled on the gloves and picked up the book. "Enjoy," the voice said as it faded away. Carl closed the drawer and carried the book back to the chair. He sat and put his feet up onto the footstool. He opened the cover to see all the pages were yellowed with age. The writing was indecipherable. It had to be some ancient language long forgotten. He moved his finger over the title from left to right. As he did, he heard garbled speech in his head. Then he moved his hand over the same symbols from right to left. In his mind, he heard, "The Invisible Hand."

His mouth dropped open from the revelation. As he stared at the page, the symbols came apart and began to rearrange themselves. Within a few seconds, the words had changed into modern English. He read:

"Welcome, Master. In case you think otherwise, you did not find me. I found you. You will know that because I know you are Carl Sandberg Prescott, yet you know me not. Do not think you are unique in having the Invisible Hand. What makes you unique is your acknowledgment of it. You are Those Who Sleep no longer. For your information, the last time I was discovered was the year 1055 AD. I am pleased and surprised that the one who last found it at last is alive and nearby. That is a new experience for me. Please give Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike my regards. Perhaps, I will lead you to his spirit so he can become whole once more, if you survive long enough.

"Do not take those words as a threat, Carl. It was a statement of fact. While your fellow humans profess their love for God or Satan, they do not appreciate those whose connection to a deity is so direct and personal. Today, you may not know which your benefactor is. I do not know either. Do not take the

beneficence of a deity lightly. Monumental things will be required of you. And the power of the other and the jealousy of humanity will be harsh and life-threatening at every junction.

“Carl, I wish I could tell you that you can forego what will happen next, but that is out of my control. Only your benefactor can release you from this bondage. It is bondage, no matter how soft the chains or pleasant the dungeon you now reside within. Before I leave you, do you have any questions for me?”

Carl thought for a moment. “What is the necklace with the clear stone that helped me save Beatriz Cardenas and the others?”

The words on the page in front of him began to move around until they formed different words. He read, “The Sacred Eye is a very valuable, flawless diamond, however, it has no secret powers. That is equally true for the Devil’s Heart. Less advanced students of the talents falsely believe those baubles accentuate their abilities. Most will never accept the true level of their power, and choose to give much of the credit to rituals, charms, and incantations. I know you used the Incubus talent on those three as well, believing that would add to your ability. Since you are new to this talent, you can be forgiven for your shortsightedness. Eventually, you will understand better. Anything else, Carl?”

“How did you know that I kissed them? You were in a drawer.”

The letters in the next paragraph changed again to read, “In the same way that I know your name. The moment you touched my cover, I knew everything about you. Each time you return to me, I will learn more. There is no one else who can or will teach you how to use your talents. We are a team.”

“Thank you. Uh, I’m not sure what I should call you?”

All but four letters on the page disappeared. They spelled “Book.”

“Thank you, Book.”

More words appeared beneath that word, which read, “You know where to find me when you need me. When we meet again, open me at random to learn what you need to know. I wish you well.”

The book dissolved into thin air, and the room became cold and dark. Frost began to appear on the windows, and his breath was like fog. He began to shiver uncontrollably, stood, and hurried out of the room.

Chapter 13

An hour later, Carl knocked on the door to Professor Donnelly's office. After the professor told him to enter, Carl turned the knob and stepped into the small room. This office was similar to Thorndike's, but instead of a roll-top desk, there was a large traditional desk along the right-hand wall of the office where the professor sat. He also had two side chairs and a bookcase. Stacks of books filled most of the open room. There was also a chess table that looked exactly like the one where Carl had found the book in the secret storage area. He stared at the chess table. "Hello, Professor, I'm ready for our lessons."

"Do you play chess, Carl?"

He shook his head. "Not really, but that table looks familiar."

Donnelly turned around in his chair and admired his new possession. "You may have seen it in that storage area that you showed to Bertrand and me. I brought it over here fifteen minutes ago."

"Was there anything in the drawer, Professor?"

Donnelly looked up at Prescott. "Only a towel to clean the pieces. Were you expecting something else?"

Carl pulled his attention from the chess table and shook his head. "No, Professor. I was just wondering."

"Please have a seat, so we can get on to our lessons." Carl sat. "Good. First, what I have to tell you is difficult for all of the faculty here at Thorndike. The headmaster was not convinced about the story you told him about Headmaster Greenleaf. However, after you resurrected the dean and the others, we corroborated the facts with them. As you know, when you brought them back, they saw everything in your mind. We members of the faculty have always believed neither this school nor Masterson were inherently good nor evil. Based on what happened to you and the Sleeping Ones, we no longer believe that to be true."

"I'm not so sure about that, Professor."

"Carl, Headmaster Greenleaf came within seconds of murdering you. How can you suggest anything else?"

“I know that Headmaster Greenleaf is bad, as well as those others in the room when he tried to kill me, that doesn’t mean all the students are evil. How many students attend Masterson Academy?”

“About the same as here, roughly two thousand, five hundred.”

Carl thought for a moment. “Well, maybe the teachers are trying to convince them to be bad, but won’t that be each student’s choice?”

“Yes, everyone makes choices, but they are not necessarily informed decisions.”

The student looked over at the chessboard and sighed. “What bothers me is that if Masterson is bad, and Thorndike is good, these schools are training us for war with each other.”

Donnelly stood and stepped over to the chessboard. He picked up the black king and queen and handed them to Carl. “You may be right. Look at the face of the king.”

Prescott examined the piece. “There’s no face, Professor. It’s just blank.”

“Now, look at the queen.”

Carl gasped. “It looks like Beatriz Cardenas. How is that possible?”

Donnelly shook his head. “I don’t know.” He picked up the white king and handed it over. “Look at this piece.”

Carl held his breath for a few moments and then looked up at Donnelly. “It looks like me, Professor.”

Donnelly moved back to his chair and sat. “I looked at those pieces in the storage room minutes ago. None had any facial features. Now this. Something is changing before our eyes. Carl, you shared consciousness with Beatriz Cardenas. Did you sense evil?”

Carl looked down. “No sir, I did not. I sensed anger and hatred toward Greenleaf and Eight. She had been abused for twelve years and was helpless to stop it. I also felt her self-hatred and depression for abandoning her children and her husband.”

“What about Charlie Clark?”

Carl closed his eyes and tried to remember. After a minute, he looked up. “No, she definitely does not hate him. In fact, she still loves him. She blames herself for not being pretty or good enough to hold onto him.”

Donnelly smiled slightly. “It’s funny, you know. Greenleaf and Eight did their best to make her evil like them, yet their efforts may well have backfired.”

“Professor, is that what Cornelius meant about people needlessly dying if he told his secret?”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, Carl, but isn’t it interesting that Burt and Aida were being held hostage too? Before we go on, I wanted to tell you of the most ancient prophecy about the Invisible Hand.” Carl listened intently. “There was a man who lived more than two thousand, five hundred years ago named Siddhartha Gautama. He was believed to be the last to possess that level of talent. He once said that there can be no teacher for the Invisible Hand. He compared it to teaching the first bird to fly or first fish to swim. He did suggest that there was a book, however.” Carl sucked in his breath. “Are you okay, Carl?”

“Yes, Professor. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“Well, after so many centuries, scholastic opinion on the meaning of the words has changed many times. Today, most believe it was a joke. Others believe it was a reference to a religious text like the Bible, Bhagavad-Gita, or Torah. A few on the fringes think it is a physical book that presents itself to a person with that talent, and offers help and guidance.” Donnelly chuckled. “A magic book, imagine that. And they still call themselves scientists.” Donnelly looked at the clock on his desk. “I have an appointment with the headmaster now. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Carl stood. “Of course, Professor.”

Donnelly stood. “Several faculty members are joining us to examine that storage room Aida discovered. For now, that room is off limits to students. Is that understood?” Carl nodded. “Very well, you are excused.”

Carl walked out of the office and closed the door behind him. Still embarrassed by his kissing the others, he hurried back to his room. Burt was not there, so he went into his bedroom and sat on the bed. He thought

about the chess table and then began to worry about the book. He knew the teachers would locate it and lock it away where he could never find it. He sighed heavily and looked down. Something odd made him look at his nightstand. The two white gloves were sitting on top. He pulled them onto his hands and opened the drawer. The book was sitting on top of his socks. He picked it up, opened it, and began to read, “Carl, you need to stop being foolish and timid. I told you that you would know where to find me. This binding, cover, and parchment are not my first existence. Virtually, all humanity considers the talents to be evil manifestations, which is why your talent is often a curse, not a blessing. The fact that there have been evil-hearted people with the talent over the millennia only reinforces that perception. I have been etched on stone tablets that were smashed to gravel. I have been pressed into clay tablets that were ground to dust. As a paper or papyrus book, I have been burned to ashes more times than I can count. Many of those fires were also used to immolate people choosing to believe in my words. You can prove it to yourself right now. Throw me into a roaring fireplace and witness my destruction. Open any drawer nearby, and I will be back, most likely in better physical condition.”

“How is that possible?”

The letters on the page changed. “I am a gift from your benefactors. Neither of them provides flimsy nor fragile gifts. All are as powerful as the talents themselves.” The letters changed again. “I can tell you that the professors meeting in that room are discussing you. As I expected, none are eager to continue developing your talents, even though that is why they are employed here.”

Carl thought for a moment. “That’s probably because they think I’ll cause Armageddon.”

The page in the book flipped over. “Ha ha ha! You are correct, of course. They say I am a myth and then make up their own. I have been in existence for one hundred thousand years, Carl. Wars have occurred regularly over that time, but humanity remains and improves. Neither benefactor has shown any desire to end this world. I am not saying it could not happen, but the chances are minute.”

“Book, what if it does?”

“Then everyone will be dead, and I will disappear forever. But, Carl, please be realistic. The odds of a major asteroid or comet strike are many times more likely. It is feasible that you will cause Armageddon, but you can absolutely stop a few rocks from the heavens.”

“I can do that?”

The letters moved again. “Well, not today, but that is why I am here. There are two talents that are impossible for most, but simple for the Invisible Hand. They are called the Cocoon and the Shield. Shall I demonstrate?”

“Sure!” Carl exclaimed. He disappeared, and the book fell onto the mattress.

Carl found himself high above the planet and falling. From this altitude he could see the coasts of both North America and Europe. The Azores was a tiny dot. Carl attempted to fly using the Floatation talent, but continued to plummet downward. The book spoke into his ear, “I have temporarily disabled your other talents for this lesson.”

“You’re trying to kill me!”

“Carl, please relax. I can’t teach you anything if you’re panicking. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.”

He did so and began to feel better. He opened his eyes and noticed the coasts were now out of sight and the island chain was becoming closer. He screamed, but he suddenly stopped falling and began floating in the open sky.

The book sighed. “Carl, you’re not paying attention. I am your friend and will never harm you. I don’t think that is even possible. Close your eyes.” Carl complied. “Now, imagine a sphere of warmth and energy around you. Ah, that’s good. Just stay that way and keep focusing on the sphere. Good, good. Very well done, Carl. Open your eyes.”

His eyes opened and saw the ocean’s surface three feet below him. “Wow! I’m still alive, Book!”

The book laughed. “Yes, I know that. This sphere is the Cocoon talent in action. I understand that falling was unpleasant, but now you know what will happen if you focus on the Cocoon. This sphere will protect you from anything from bullets to nuclear explosions. As your skill grows, the sphere can be made larger, potentially covering the entire planet or even the universe, although that would be pointless. The only difference between the Cocoon and the Shield is that the Shield is projected onto others. When you rescued your mother in the Philippines, you could have projected a Shield from the school instead of stopping time. Of course, stopping time was amazing. I don’t think I have ever witnessed that before.”

“But you’ve been around forever. No one has ever done that?”

“Not that I can recall. It is not unusual for a new Invisible Hand to discover unknown talents. I have a feeling more chapters will be added to me in the next version, thanks to you.”

“Book, how come you’re talking to me now? I thought I had to read everything.”

“Well, reading is good, but sometimes not practical. Given the differences in our surface areas and weights, you would have fallen more quickly, and we would have been separated. Also, reading a book while falling from a hundred miles up would prove challenging. The Cocoon will also protect you from the vacuum of space or the pressure and water in the ocean. Why don’t you go underwater and have a look around?” The cocoon disappeared under the waves.

Later that day, Carl went through the cafeteria line for dinner and looked for a table. He saw Aida waving to him, so he began to move in that direction. He put his dishes down opposite her, set his empty tray on the nearest station, and returned. Grace sat on his left with Burt on his right. Grace touched Carl’s hand.

“Where were you? We were all looking for you?”

Carl looked down. “After that thing in the morning, I was afraid to face Aida, Burt, or the dean.”

“You mean because of the kissing?” Aida asked.

Carl only sighed.

“You shouldn’t be, Carl,” Burt replied. “At the moment, I thought it was weird, but it saved all of us.

Aida and I talked to Beatriz Cardenas this afternoon. She told us about what she went through, and we were horrified. How could anyone do things like that to a helpless person? That’s pure evil.”

Carl glanced up at Aida. “What did your mom say?”

She smiled. “Which one? Bea told us all about what Eight and Greenleaf had put her through, Carl.

Frankly, I was shocked, but I’ve always wondered what happened to my birth mother. Now, maybe I can find my father too. Wouldn’t that be cool?”

Carl looked unsure. “Yeah, that would be great.”

Grace slugged him on the arm. “What’s with the attitude, Carl? You’re hurting Aida’s feelings.”

Carl looked up to see tears in Aida’s eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I know who your father is.”

“What?” Aida exclaimed. “You know who Charlie Clark is? Why didn’t you tell me? I thought you were my friend.” The three others glowered at him and stood, ready to leave.

“Please wait,” Carl begged. “I’ll tell you everything if you just sit down for a moment.” After they sat, he continued, “He was forbidden to tell anyone. If he did, he said innocent lives would be lost. Instead, he let me read his mind. That way, he technically didn’t tell anyone. First, he didn’t abandon Beatriz Cardenas. He was imprisoned by Headmaster Greenleaf and Eight. He was almost beaten to death many times. One day, he was released, but he did not know why. What he never knew is they had turned Bea into a Sleeping One. They were in adjoining cells and never knew it. When Greenleaf turned you two and the dean into Sleeping Ones, I realized that you four were the innocent ones who would die. Greenleaf was a fool to think he could kill me. I know that now. He was defeated, and the four of you are safe again.”

Aida got up, walked over and kissed Carl. “Thank you. Now, who is my father?”

Carl smiled. “Cornelius Thorndike.”

Aida frowned angrily. “So, Charlie Clark was a fake name?”

“No, his full name is Cornelius Charles Clark Thorndike.”

“From the other island?” Grace replied with a gasp.

Carl nodded. "Since he wasn't at the Institution, he used a shorter version of his name."

Aida cried and trembled. Before Carl could stand to comfort her, Cornelius Thorndike joined them at the table. "I'll take it from here, Carl, and thanks." He put his arm around Aida's shoulders and led her away.

Grace wiped the tears from her face. "That was so awesome. Carl. You're amazing."

Burt seemed confused. "Carl, let me get this straight. Isn't Cornelius Thorndike my uncle?" The other boy nodded. "So that makes me Aida's brother and cousin at the same time."

"I think being her brother is more important."

"And neither my dad nor Cornelius knew she and I were related?"

"How could they, Burt? Bea gave her up for adoption when Cornelius disappeared. Now, everyone knows and you can be a family again."

"Yeah, that makes sense. But I was thinking about something else. The Sleeping Ones appear to be dead, right?"

"Yes, no pulse, heartbeat, breathing, nothing."

Burt groaned softly. "After Dad died in that auto accident, I never saw him again. The casket was closed because his injuries were terrible. At least, that's what they told me. Do you think he might still be alive and a Sleeping One?"

Grace asked, "Do you know who identified the body?"

Burt shook his head. "I don't think my stepmom wants to talk to me at all, and I really don't want to talk to her either."

"You were eight when your father died, right?"

"Yes, Carl."

"Did your father and stepmother have lots of friends and family who came to the funeral?" Carl asked.

"Some, but not a lot. Most of Rachel's family was there. They spent the whole time comforting her."

Grace asked, "Was there anyone from your father's family?"

Burt sat quietly with his head down for a minute. He looked up. "I remember there were several people in black whom I'd never met. They came and left together. They never really talked to my stepmother or her family. For some reason, I can't remember any of their faces. Isn't that odd? It wasn't that long ago."

Grace put her hand on Burt's and smiled at him. "I'm sure you were too sad to pay attention to them, especially if they didn't offer condolences to you or your family."

"Yeah, you're right."

Carl stood. "Are you finished with dinner?"

Grace looked up at him. "What's your rush? Can't you see that Burt is down?"

Carl put his hand on her shoulder. "I know that, but it is possible that Burt's father is a Sleeping One. We have to go to our room to check it out."

Burt looked confused. "Why the room?"

Carl looked down at Grace. "Because I want her to French kiss you, and that might be inappropriate for the dining hall."

Minutes later, the three were in Burt's bedroom. He sat on the bed while Grace stood next to him. Carl was pacing back and forth. "So, is this supposed to make up for you kissing all those other women?"

Carl stopped and turned to face her. "Grace, you know how I think we all have the Invisible Hand, but just refuse to accept it?" She nodded and frowned. "Well, the Succubus/Incubus talent is much less advanced. I could do it, but I'm sure Burt would prefer a girl to kiss him."

Burt smiled. "That's true, but I don't want to make anyone feel awkward."

Grace huffed. "Well, I'm not doing it, so there."

Carl clenched his hands together. "Grace, this isn't about you falling in love with Burt or vice-versa. When Burt said he couldn't remember any of those faces, his words rang a bell. Sure, he was in mourning for his father, but he remembers all of the others there. What if someone from Masterson was there? Maybe they

were there to make sure Burt's dad was buried, so no one would suspect he was a Sleeping One. You want to know the truth, don't you, Burt?"

Burt nodded.

"What's the worst that could happen, Grace? It's just a kiss."

She looked down at her feet. "I can't do that in front of you, Carl."

He turned around. "Is this okay, or shall I leave the room?"

"Just promise me you won't turn around."

"I promise."

A blush rose on Burt's chest and spread to his face. Grace sat next to him. Both moved closer together until their lips were an inch apart. Then both started to laugh. Carl turned to see what happened. "I told you not to turn around!" Grace exclaimed. He turned around again. They kissed.

After ten or more seconds, Carl asked, "You don't have to enjoy it that much."

Grace had risen and put her arm around Carl's shoulders. "That was nice."

Suddenly, the room was flooded with bright light, and sparks bounced around the walls. Grace and Carl turned to see Burt floating six inches above the mattress. His hair stood on end, and his eyes flickered with electric power. Burt screamed, and a giant whirlwind of lightning wrapped around all three. Seconds later, it was gone.

The three appeared in a cemetery. Burt was floating two feet above a headstone, while the others stood five feet away. The name on the tombstone was Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike IX. The light from Burt's eyes gradually faded as he drifted down to the grass. "What did you see, Burt?" Carl asked.

"You were right, Carl. Headmaster Greenleaf and my grandfather were at the funeral. Now, I remember one woman from that group came up to me and offered condolences. Then she kissed me on the cheek. Several of the others came to say hello, but they blocked the view. That same woman kissed me again and pushed her tongue into my mouth."

“Anything else?” Carl asked.

Thinking, Burt stood on his father’s grave. After a few minutes, he looked up. “Yeah. My grandfather offered his condolences to my stepmom and gave her a check for two million dollars to raise me. His only condition is that I be sent to the Masterson Academy when I was older. She refused the money and told him the two schools were evil. Just before that woman kissed me, I remember my grandfather telling her that he had identified the body. He told my stepmom that the injuries made it too terrible for her to see and that he’d rather she remember him as he was in life.”

Grace noted, “He could have been telling the truth.”

Carl sighed. “Only one way to find out. You two should step back.”

“You’re not going to dig him up, are you?”

“Of course not, Burt.” When the two had moved back, Carl got down on the grass and laid flat with his face down. Slowly, his body began to sink into the ground. Fifteen seconds later, he was gone, but the grass seemed unaffected.

“That was creepy,” Burt nodded.

A minute later, Carl began to reappear, face up this time. When he was fully out of the ground, he stood. “Yes, he is a Sleeping One.”

“How could you tell?” Grace asked.

“Well, I don’t want to be too gross, but he looks like he’s sleeping. He still has his color. His fingernails haven’t grown, and there is no sign of decay. There was definitely no sign of being in a terrible accident.”

“What do we do now?” Burt asked.

They were back in Burt’s room. “Whoa!” Grace exclaimed. “Carl, at least’ warn us next time.” She and Burt sat on the bed.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if Greenleaf has someone keep an eye on that place. Hopefully, no one saw us tonight. That’s why I wanted to get out quickly.”

“Can we save my dad?”

“I hope so, Burt. He’s like the founder, who is also a Sleeping One in that storage room. We know where the body is but not the soul. We have to find that before we can do anything.”

Burt dropped his head. “It could be anywhere. This is hopeless.”

There was a knock at the door, and Carl left the bedroom to see who was there. He opened the door to find Clarisse Whitehall smiling at him. “Good evening, Dean. Please come in.”

As she walked in, Burt and Grace came out of the bedroom to join them. “I’m glad to see you’re all here. Your absence from school grounds was noticed. Where did you go?”

“You track us?” Burt asked.

Whitehall shook her head. “Not you three specifically. We track all students since we are acting as your guardians while you are here. With the recent activity involving the Masterson Academy, we are being extra vigilant. Now, where were you?”

Grace and Carl turned to Burt, who looked down and replied, “It was my fault, Dean Whitehall. We went to my dad’s grave in St. Joseph, Missouri.”

“I appreciate your feelings, but it is not wise to leave without letting someone know.”

Carl raised his hand. “Dean, it turns out that Burt had part of his memory blocked by that same woman who attacked me. Grace removed the block, and Burt remembered that his grandfather and Headmaster Greenleaf were at the funeral.”

“My father isn’t dead!” Burt exclaimed. “He’s a Sleeping One like we were.”

“How do you know? You didn’t exhume his body, did you?”

Carl shook his head. “No, Dean Whitehall. I lowered myself into the ground and looked at his body in the casket.”

“You did what?” Whitehall practically shouted. “You dug down to the coffin?”

“No, ma’am, that would be creepy and probably illegal. I just sank into the ground and then came back out.”

Grace smiled. "It was really amazing, Dean, spooky but amazing."

Whitehall took a few deep breaths and then exhaled heavily. "Okay, all three of you are grounded for the night. No more adventures! We will meet in the headmaster's office tomorrow at eight o'clock in the morning. Good night." She turned on her heel and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Grace kissed the boys on the cheek. "I'll see you two for breakfast at seven, okay?" They nodded and she left the room as well.

"Do you think we're in trouble, Carl?"

He shook his head. "No, I think she's more frightened than anything. She probably never heard about someone moving underground like that. Don't worry about it. We'll find out soon enough."

After Carl brushed his teeth and changed into his pajamas, he crawled under the covers and rolled on his side to sleep. Even though the lights were turned off, there seemed to be a glow behind him. He rolled over to see light coming out of the drawer in his nightstand. He sat up, pulled on the white gloves, and removed the book from the drawer. The light was coming from the inside of the book. He opened it to the lit pages. Gradually, words began to form on the page. He read:

"Very well done, Carl! Another new talent for my next chapter! I suppose most would not have considered such a thing. The dead are supposed to be dead after all. What made you think of going underground?"

"Necessity mostly, Book. Burt feared his father might be alive, and we couldn't try to dig up the coffin. I also thought about the Cocoon talent you showed me. If that Cocoon was right at my skin, maybe it would allow me to sink underground. And it did!"

A new sentence appeared on the page. "Did you hold your breath underground?"

"I did at first because I felt like I was being buried alive. After a few seconds, I relaxed. I think I was breathing after that."

More letters formed. "Breathing underground, that's another new one. Fabulous."

“Wait a minute, Book. How was able to breathe underground? There’s no air there.”

“Carl, have you forgotten that I’m a book? I don’t know how anyone accomplishes any of the talents, but they do. You also transported the three of you thousands of miles in an instant. That is equally impossible. Do not doubt the truth, Carl. If it happened, then it must be possible, right?”

“That makes sense, Book. Thanks for clearing that up.”

“My pleasure, Carl. It is late, so please get some rest. I am looking forward to your meeting with the headmaster tomorrow. It promises to be electric. Good night.” The light behind the pages faded away.

“Good night, Book.” Carl closed the cover and returned the book to the drawer. He removed the gloves and put them back on top of the nightstand. He rolled over and closed his eyes.

Chapter 14

At breakfast the following morning, Professor Donnelly told the three friends that only Carl needed to attend the meeting in the headmaster's office. At eight o'clock, Carl knocked on the door. Dean Whitehall opened the door to let him enter. She and the headmaster sat behind his desk, so Carl sat on the one chair in front of it. Dorchester thumbed through some notes in front of himself. Finally, he looked up. "Why did you take those students to Missouri last night, Carl?"

"I didn't, Headmaster."

"What?" Whitehall asked.

"Burt took us there. When he learned about Greenleaf and Eight being at his father's funeral, he became very angry. Suddenly, the room was filled with a lightning tornado that circled around us. When it dissipated, we were in the cemetery."

"But you were the one who sank into the ground and found that Nine was a Sleeping One, right?"

Whitehall asked.

"Yes, Dean. I also brought them back here as fast as I could."

"We had already been notified of your exit. Your speedy return is irrelevant."

"Headmaster, that is not why I was in a hurry. I thought Greenleaf might have someone watching the cemetery. Obviously, he knew Burt's dad was not dead."

"Did you witness Burt's memory of the funeral?"

"No, Headmaster. Grace used the Succubus talent to unblock his memory."

Dorchester turned to Whitehall. "Clarisse, please meet with both of those children to verify the story."

"Of course, Alex. I'll do it right after this meeting."

Dorchester returned his attention to the student. "Carl, I'm afraid we have a major dilemma before us. The last time we had such an incident was under my ancestor, Headmaster Armand Veritas Dorchester, almost a thousand years ago."

Carl looked down and sighed. "I'm sorry to be the cause of any problems, Headmaster. Does this mean I'm expelled?"

Dorchester and Whitehall began to laugh. Carl looked up in surprise. After a full minute of laughter, Dorchester replied, "Please stop thinking like that, Carl. That will never be a consideration. You are the first verifiable holder of the Sage Hand or Invisible Hand in nine and one-half centuries!"

"I don't understand. Why is that a dilemma, Headmaster?"

Dorchester smiled broadly. "While we have studied the talents all of our lives, none of us can teach you the things that are beyond our own capabilities. While we will continue to train you to control your emotions and make rational choices, many of these talents are beyond us. And none of them are written down." As he said those words, both teachers watched the boy closely. Carl's eyes opened very wide.

"Please let me ask him, Alex?" Whitehall begged.

"Very well."

"Let me lead into my question a bit. According to legend, there is only one way to distinguish between the Sage and Invisible Hand talents. The Sage does not receive assistance, but the Invisible does. Your response will prove which you are. Now for the question." She paused several seconds. "Carl, do you have the book?" Carl gasped and held his breath.

Dorchester chuckled. "Most think the book is fantasy, but given the nature of your abilities, Clarisse and I take a more circumspective approach. Obviously, neither of us can never read it. Even if you brought it to me, when I opened the cover, it would be blank, or the pages would crumble away. In fact, that is exactly what happened to my ancestor. When Bertrand the First found the book, he immediately took it to Armand Dorchester. When that headmaster opened the cover, the entire book crumbled to dust in his hands."

"Carl, even if you tell us you have it, most educators will not believe the book is real. After a thousand years, most of those who believe in the book have been branded fools and heretics. But we would love to know, if you are willing to answer."

"Yes, I have the book."

The headmaster and dean shared a high-five and laughed again. "I can't wait to rub that in with Alistair. He can be so annoying."

"Clarisse, we will be professional as always."

"Yes, Headmaster."

Dorchester sat back with his hands behind his head. "Carl, let me ask one last question. The book, is it amazing?"

Carl nodded. "Absolutely fabulous, Headmaster."

Whitehall giggled like a school girl. "Did you learn how to sink into the ground in the book?"

Carl shook his head. "Actually, the book has never heard of that or the stopping time thing. He says those talents will be in the next version."

Dorchester looked stunned. "The book talks? No wait, don't answer that. It is not for me to know such things. Thank you for coming, Carl, and I'm very glad you're here and not at Masterson."

Carl stood. "I'm very happy to be here as well." He turned and walked out of the office. Dorchester and Whitehall stood and began to dance and celebrate.

After the revelation, Carl wanted to be alone. He needed time to think. First, he went to the secret room in the bell tower. As he reached the top of the spiral staircase, he was surprised to find two students kissing on the couch. He quickly turned around and headed down. After three steps, he turned around again. He realized that it was Burt and Grace embracing. Carl blushed and hurried away. He left the school grounds and headed into the meadow where they all had ridden the horses. He went back to the tree he sat under with Grace only days ago. He sat, put his hands behind his head, and sighed.

At first, he had been furious with his friends for their treachery, but he had not realized their relationship was between them, and it was not really any of his business. He put his hands around his knees and pulled them to his chest. He put his head on his knees and closed his eyes. "What a mess, Book, he said to no one in particular. He felt something touch his foot and opened his eyes. The book was leaning up against his feet,

with the gloves on top of it. He slipped on the gloves and opened the book at random. Letters began to form on the blank page. He read:

“Love is hard, Carl. You and Grace are very young, and your feelings will change and evolve over time. In my opinion, she is not the one for you.”

“Book, you don’t even know her.”

“Carl, I know everything you know, and you know literally everything. Unfortunately, that is part of the curse of the Invisible Hand.”

“That’s just silly. I don’t know everything. I’m only fourteen.”

More words appeared. “It is only your choice not to believe in yourself that keeps you from knowing, Carl. That is another curse of your level of talent. Humans are inherently prone to doubting their abilities. Remember the Cocoon? You were certain you would be smashed by the fall. Only hours later, you descended six feet underground with no apparent source of oxygen, and without damaging as much as one blade of grass or disturbing one stone. Once you learned the talent, you were no longer afraid.”

“Okay, let’s assume that I’ll learn over time then.”

“That has been the way of mankind for thousands of years.”

“So, what do you have against Grace?”

The page flipped and more words appeared. “Nothing at all, Carl. As I said, it is my opinion. It is not up to me which women you will have in your life. If you want my opinion, I think you will find a woman more like you in both temperament and talent.”

“Like who?”

“As I said, it is not up to me to decide. For now, I want you to know you are about to be tested three times. One test will likely be unpleasant, but the others will be the opposite. Let us see what you learn next. Now, please set me down so the first test can begin.”

Carl closed the book and set it on the grass. He put the gloves on top of it. As soon as he removed his hand, a deep guttural growl surrounded him. After a few seconds, a huge wolf walked out from behind him and stood five feet away. Carl carefully stood with his back to the tree. "Nice doggy."

The hackles on the wolf's back rose, and it growled again. It bared its teeth, and drops of saliva fell to the grass. It hunched down, ready to strike.

Carl began to laugh and point at the beast. It growled again and snapped its jaws. "Oh Eight, you're such a tool." He continued to laugh and held his sides.

The wolf opened its mouth to howl. Carl snapped his fingers.

Eight was on his hands and knees. He was also nude. He shouted, "Roar!" He noticed his condition and rolled into the fetal position. "What the hell did you do?"

Carl passed an arm over Eight, and he became fully clothed. "I'm not going to play your silly games, Eight. What do you want?"

Eight stood and pointed. "I want that book."

Carl bent down, picked it and the gloves up, and held it out to the other man. "You should wear the gloves when you read it. It's quite old."

"You're just going to give it to me?"

"Not that it will do you any good, but sure."

Eight snatched the book out of Carl's hands. "I can't believe it. You gave me the secrets to the Invisible Hand." He opened the cover, and flipped through several pages. "It's blank. What kind of game is this, Prescott?"

"You have the book. There is no game. I gave you what you asked for."

Eight lunged forward and grabbed the boy by the throat. "Tell me how to make the letters reappear or die now!"

The book burst into flames. Eight pulled his hand away and was engulfed in fire in only seconds. Carl blinked and a deluge of water fell down on Eight and extinguished the flames. The book was a pile of soggy

ashes, and Eight was naked and badly burned. Carl snapped his fingers, and the other was gone. He felt something on his lower back and discovered the book had reappeared between his belt and trousers. He pulled it out and opened the cover. “Don’t you think the fire was a bit much, Book?”

Words appeared on the page. “It was temporary, just a little pain to remind him of his stupidity. When he arrived back at Masterson, the burns were gone, but I made sure he appeared in the teacher’s lounge in the buff. That will give the other instructors a good laugh.” More words began to form. “And you learned two valuable lessons as well. First, this book is worthless to anyone but you, and perhaps one other. Whenever someone tries to take it, let them. The second thing you learned was not to fear lesser talents. Eventually, you will learn that you have nothing to fear except your own doubts. The next two tests will not be as difficult, however, you need to return to the atrium to learn them.”

“Thank you, Book. You are a true friend. By the way, what about the gloves?”

A sentence formed on the page. “Since I have been revitalized, the gloves are no longer necessary. Enjoy your other tests.” All the words broke apart until they formed the odd symbols he had seen when he first opened the book. Carl closed the book, tucked it under his arm, and walked back toward the school.

When Carl arrived in the atrium, he did not see anyone he knew, so he sat by himself at a table. He opened the book to see seven words on an otherwise blank page, “Now is not the time to read.” Carl chuckled to himself and set the book down. A few minutes later, Grace and Burt arrived in the atrium. They chatted for a moment, and then Burt went back inside while Grace walked toward him. As she arrived, Carl stood.

She dropped her head and sighed. “I’m so embarrassed, Carl.”

“There’s no need for that, Grace. Please have a seat.”

When both were seated, she continued, “I looked up to see you on the spiral staircase. I feel like such a tramp.”

Carl smiled and shook his head. “It’s okay, really. You and Burt are my best friends. If you two like each other, that’s great.”

“But I was always whining and complaining about you kissing other girls, and then I do the same thing. You hate me, don’t you?”

Carl took her hands in his. “I love you, Grace. I could never hate you. We’re both just kids, barely teenagers. Each of us will have several relationships in our lives. What’s happening is normal. I would not lie to you.”

She squeezed his hands and then pulled hers away. “Thank you. You’re the best! Let me change the subject. Tell me how your meeting with the headmaster went this morning.”

“Well, he and Dean Whitehall were both there. They asked me some questions about the trip to the cemetery. Then they said I was the Invisible Hand.”

She was stunned. “I thought they didn’t believe in that.”

“Yeah, we all thought that. I guess it was the stopping time and going underground that convinced them I was either the Sage or Invisible Hand.”

“So, you might be the Sage Hand instead.”

Carl shook his head. “I had a meeting with Professor Donnelly yesterday, where he mentioned an ancient belief that the Invisible Hand would be given help, but not the Sage Hand.”

“What kind of help?”

Carl picked up the book and offered it to her. “This book.”

She opened it and flipped through. “All the pages are blank. Is this supposed to be your diary or something?” She handed it back.

Carl softly rubbed the cover. “It’s not blank to me. I talk to it and it answers me.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s amazing.”

Aida Whitehall sat next to Grace. “Hi, you two. What are you talking about?”

Grace stood. “I need to catch up to Burt. We’ll see you two at dinner.” She walked away.

“Is she mad at me? Did I say something?”

Carl shook his head. “No, she’s okay. Actually, she and Burt are a couple now.”

“You’re kidding me. She dumped you?”

“I guess.”

Aida grabbed his hands. “Then I guess that means you’re available.” Carl blushed, and she laughed. She picked up the book and flipped through it. “Is this the book you told my mom about this morning?”

“Yes it is.”

“And this proves you’re the Invisible Hand.”

Carl shrugged. “That’s what they say.”

She turned the open book around to face him. “Can you read these symbols?” Carl’s jaw dropped. The same symbols were still visible.

When Carl arrived in the dining hall, none of his friends were there yet, so he took his tray to a table near the windows overlooking the atrium. He had left the book in his nightstand, but now, he felt lost and alone without it. A woman’s voice said, “Hey there, handsome.” He looked up to see Barbara Conway standing across the table from him.

“Hi, Barbie, how are you?”

She pulled out a chair and sat. “I’m great now that I’m not frozen in front of the mirror, thanks to you. So Carl, rumor is that you are the Invisible Hand. Is that true?”

“I guess so, but how did you hear?”

“You’d be amazed how much you can learn with a little flattery along with the Succubus talent. You must be great at that too.”

“How do you mean?”

“Carl, come on, everyone knows that the Invisible Hand is the master of all the talents.” She smiled and winked. “Do you want to enslave me, Carl?”

He blushed and looked down. “No, I don’t want to enslave anyone.”

She stood and laughed. “Too bad. Anyway, don’t forget you promised to tutor me on some of the talents?” She turned and walked away.

Aida sat next to Carl and slammed her tray down. “That Barbie is such a tramp. Was she bothering you?”

Just as Carl was about to reply, the entire room exploded in a massive fireball. Students, furniture, trays, chandeliers, and food were pushed away from the epicenter of the explosion. Carl flew backward through the glass windows and was slammed down on the grass of the atrium. Broken and smashed bodies were all around him, along with burning fragments of table and chairs. Carl felt like every bone in his body was broken.

He began to pass out when he heard the book speaking to him. “Carl, are you okay?”

Carl could not speak. His jaw seemed to be dislocated. Now, he could hear many of the students crying or gasping for breath. He thought to the book, “No. I think I might be dying. I’m sorry I failed you.”

“You haven’t failed yet, Carl. Greenleaf’s treachery this time is despicable. First, you must stop time.”

“How?”

“Carl, as long as you live, you are the Invisible Hand. Stop time now!” the book shouted.

“I can’t hear anything, Book!”

“Good, time is now frozen. Now, I know this is new for you, but next you must rewind time, go backward in time to before the blast.”

Carl began to cry. “I don’t know how. I can’t.”

“Do you remember what Professor Donnelly said when you went to heal him? He told you to relax and let the spirit come to you. Why don’t you try that?”

“Book, am I dead? I can’t feel anything.”

The book laughed. “No, Carl. I can only communicate with the Invisible Hand; therefore, you must still be alive.”

“Good.” Carl relaxed as best he could. Slowly, his body and the other people and objects lifted off the grass. He could see the wreckage of the dining hall. The ceiling had been demolished as well, and the items in the offices above were now floating up into the air. He passed through the broken window. Barbara Conway was just in front of him. Her head had been blown off. The head passed by him and reattached itself to her neck. A table leg passed through Carl’s back and out his abdomen until it connected to the table. His body lowered down onto the chair. The shock wave retreated until it ended in a large metal chest.

“Stop now, Carl,” the book exclaimed. Everything froze in place.

“Why did you want me to stop now, Book?”

“Go over to the bomb while I explain.” Carl stood and started toward the center of the room. “The device was teleported here only a second or two before detonation. We don’t want whoever sent it to have a chance to do the same again. Touch the bomb, and you’ll know who sent it.”

Carl put his hands on the device. “Greenleaf. No doubt about it.”

“Please sit down, Carl. This incident may forever change you, and I don’t want to rush it.”

Carl sat on the metal chest. “So, I just leave everyone frozen?”

“They aren’t frozen, Carl. Once time resumes, they will go on with their lives, although it is possible some memory of the reversed time will remain.”

“Book, I don’t want Barbie or anyone else to know they were killed.”

“Neither do I, but that is out of our hands. Don’t worry about things you cannot control. Now, your first reaction to this attempted mass murder may be to move the bomb to Masterson and let it detonate there. While that may provide revenge, it would also make you a mass murderer. You might also dissolve the device into atoms, rendering it nonexistent. While that may be deemed as good, it would not provide a lesson that Greenleaf desperately needs. What do you think?”

He sighed heavily. “I don’t know. What about you?”

“Carl, you are the Invisible Hand, and I am a book. I think this decision is up to you.”

“I don’t know. I need someone to help me.”

“Carl, remember the Philippines. You can ask anyone you like.”

“Do you think many of the people here will remember what happened?”

“I believe most of the faculty will. Their talents are the most advanced.”

“Thank you, Book.” Carl stood and walked over to the faculty dining room, pulled aside the drape, and walked in. Someone must have told a joke as most of the teachers were frozen in a laugh. He walked over to Dorchester and touched his shoulder.

The smile was replaced by a look of horror. Then he looked up and noticed the teenager. “What has happened? I had an image of this room exploding. Why is everyone frozen?”

“I have stopped time, Headmaster. Twenty seconds ago, Greenleaf teleported a bomb into the dining hall and detonated it. Most of the students were blow to pieces and died instantly. I was almost killed, but was able to reverse time to just before the blast.”

“You can let go of my shoulder now.”

“No, sir, I can’t. If you and I aren’t touching, you’ll be frozen again.” He removed his hand and walked to Dorchester’s other side and touched him again. “You see.”

Dorchester’s head snapped to the other side. “That is quite a trick, but why is time still stopped.”

“I need some advice, Headmaster, and the bomb is still in the other room. Please get up and come with me.” They walked out of the private dining room and stepped up to the bomb. “That’s it.”

“So, what is the advice you need?”

“The first thing I considered is returning the bomb to Masterson and letting it go off there, but then I’d be as bad as him.”

“Are you certain he sent it?”

Carl nodded. “When I touched it, I knew it was him.”

Dorchester leaned over and put his hand on the chest. “Yes, I can sense that as well. Frankly, I’m embarrassed that I ever met him. He almost killed all of us.” He sighed. “But I agree sending the bomb back could be seen as an act of evil.”

Carl moved his hand over the chest, and it faded away. "But there has to be some punishment for this, Headmaster. Do you have any ideas?"

"What did you do with the bomb, Prescott?"

"The book suggested I could dissolve it into atoms. It's gone forever now."

"I would prefer to call the faculty together to get opinions, but I don't want the school to be in danger. We need time!"

Carl closed his eyes for a few moments and then opened them again. "I've put a cocoon over the school grounds. Nothing can enter without your or my approval. That should give us the time, sir."

Dorchester laughed. "Amazing, simply amazing. Now take me back to my seat, and you take , so time can begin again."

When Carl sat again, time resumed. "No, Barbie is just kidding around."

Aida grunted and shoved a forkful of salad into her mouth. Her eyes opened wide. She spit out the food and turned to Carl. "Something horrible just popped into my head. There was an explosion and I was smashed against that wall. Then I felt like I was on fire." She threw her arms around Carl's neck and began to cry.

Dorchester and the other teachers hurried into the main dining hall. "Students, please be calm. Everything is fine now, thanks to our Mr. Prescott." Barbara Conway rushed into Dorchester's arms and cried. Half the students seemed to be in shock, with many more crying and groaning.

After several hours of weeping, Aida, Grace, and Burt were all asleep on Carl's bed. Odd whispering sounds woke him up. Now he stood at the window and wondered what was wrong. He pulled on his clothes and left the room. He walked out of Gratia Dei Hall and headed toward the wall surrounding the school. He arrived at a metal man-gate in the wall. Just on the other side stood Greenleaf and Eight. "What do you two losers want?"

Greenleaf reached out slowly until he touched the cocoon. A jolt of electricity knocked him back five feet. Eight laughed. “Stop giggling like an idiot and help me up!” When Greenleaf was on his feet again, he pointed angrily at the boy. “Next time I won’t fail, child. I’ll make sure to leave the bomb on your lap.”

Carl walked through the cocoon. Eight backed up. “If you want to kill me so bad, just try it now, jerk.” Greenleaf charged. Carl pushed outward with his arms, and Greenleaf was launched into the air and over the trees. Turning to Eight, he said, “Okay, now it’s your turn. Take a shot.”

Eight backed up again and raised his hands. “I want no part of this, Carl.”

Greenleaf flew back into the area and headed toward the boy at top speed. When he was three feet away, Carl held up his left hand, and Greenleaf stopped, frozen in air. “Let me go, child, or Eight will kill you.”

Carl twisted his hand and Greenleaf spun around head over heels several times. Eight laughed again. “Oh, I’m so scared, jerk,” Carl replied.

When he stopped spinning, Greenleaf retched onto the grass. “Your silly shield cannot last, boy. Soon I’ll kill you for certain.”

Carl looked back at the cocoon. “You don’t want a shield over the school? Why didn’t you say so?” The cocoon vanished and reformed around Greenleaf. “Oh darn it, I did it backwards. Now you’re stuck in there for a while, Headmaster. My apologies.” Carl pushed out with both hands and the ball shield soared thousands of feet into the sky. He turned to the other man. “Now what do you want?”

“Carl, remember that I’m the one who first said you were the Invisible Hand.” The boy nodded and smiled. “If I don’t attempt to attack you, Greenleaf will destroy me.”

“I know, but I promise to be gentle.”

Eight growled and charged. He grabbed Carl’s throat and began to squeeze. Carl put his hand on the other man’s chest. Eight released his neck and stood straight. His eyes rolled up into his head, and he fell backwards.

Carl looked at the shimmering ball of light in his hand and smiled. “You know Eight, this part of you is still pure.” He put the light into his pocket, touched the other man, and both disappeared.

Chapter 15

The next morning, Carl was called into the faculty dining room. All the chairs had been turned to face the boy who stood against the wall. Dorchester paced between Carl and the other teachers. He stopped and faced the student. "First of all, I can speak for all of us when I say we are grateful for what you did." He hugged Carl, smiled, and moved back to his seat. "Question one: What happened to the shield?"

"Greenleaf came to the school late last night, and I went to face him."

Several teachers gasped. Dorchester noted, "You should have taken one of us with you."

"I'll remember that for the next time, Headmaster. He attacked me. He said he was upset by the cocoon, so I removed it. I didn't want another bomb, so I put the cocoon around him, inside out. Then I threw it away."

Professor Thorndike chuckled. "Alex, that would explain the new satellite we recorded. Why did you launch him into space, Carl?"

"I didn't. He's insane. He tried to kill all of us. If the blast had killed me instantly, he would have succeeded. I just wanted him gone."

Dorchester asked, "How long will the shield contain him?"

"Until I remove it, Headmaster."

"And when will that be?" Professor Donnelly asked.

Carl shrugged. "I don't know. Last night, after I reversed time, the headmaster and I talked about how to prevent another attack like that bomb. He said he needed time to work with all of you to select the best course of action. I suppose that when you're certain the school is safe, I will remove it."

"Can anyone else remove it?" Dean Whitehall asked.

"Only someone with the Invisible Hand, Dean."

She smiled. "That's good. Then we're safe. You are the only one."

Carl shook his head. “No, that isn’t true.” He held out his hand and the book materialized on it. “This book taught me that having the talent isn’t enough. You have to believe you are the Invisible Hand before you can become one.” He handed the book to the headmaster. “Only a person with the talent who knows they have it can use the book. The book will present itself to such a person, as it did to me.”

“This book is blank, Carl.”

“Headmaster, that is because you either don’t have the talent or acceptance of it. I gave it to Bertrand the Eighth yesterday, and it burst into flames.” Dorchester dropped the book. “Don’t worry, Headmaster, it did that to protect me. Eight was trying to kill me at the time. Go ahead and pass it around. If anyone can see the symbols inside, that means you have the Invisible Hand. If you can read it, then you are it.”

When Whitehall opened the book, it was just a cover. She handed it to the next person. “What’s this game about, Carl? What is your point?”

“I’ve shown this book to my friends, two of whom saw blank pages. One could see the symbols, but not read it.”

Dorchester replied, “Don’t keep us waiting, Carl. Who was it?”

“Aida Whitehall.”

The dean glowered angrily at Carl while whispered side conversations rose around the table. Dorchester stood. “Quiet please!” When silence returned, he asked, “Did you turn Bertrand the Eighth into a Sleeping One?”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

“So, you admit to stealing the Devil’s Heart?”

Carl shook his head. “No, Headmaster. I assume it is still locked in Professor Thorndike’s office. I do not require gemstones to create or restore Sleeping Ones.”

Dorchester turned to Thorndike. “Bertrand, you should check for the stone now.”

Thorndike pulled the amulet from his pocket. “I keep it with me at all times now. Prescott did not take it.”

Dorchester smirked. “Carl, where is Eight’s soul?”

“In a safe place, guarded by a shield.”

“And where would that be?” Dorchester asked.

“Sir, I would rather that information did not become public. It is where Grace found the amulet.

Professors Donnelly and Thorndike know the place.”

Dorchester turned to the teachers and both nodded. “Very well, are you planning on joining them soon, Carl?”

“No, Headmaster, I am not. I want to make a trade.”

Dorchester was aghast. “You want to trade a man’s soul? That is evil, Carl.”

“No, Headmaster, I don’t think it is. I will restore Eight when Greenleaf gives us the souls of One and Nine.”

“But he is in orbit.”

“Not anymore, Dean. I have moved the shield to the bottom of the Mariana’s Trench.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” Dorchester asked.

“Don’t worry, Headmaster, no harm will come to him while the shield holds. We cannot forget that he almost succeeded in killing most of the students here only hours ago. I will not allow that to happen again, no matter what the cost. I also thought some time underwater might cool him off. If we’re finished here, I thought I’d go see how he’s doing. May I be excused?”

“Just go,” was all Dorchester could manage to say. Carl disappeared.

Professor Donnelly held up the book and said, “He forgot this!” The book faded away into nothingness.

Greenleaf sat on the floor of the shield in absolute darkness. He had been spitting mad for hours, but had now almost surrendered to his fate. When he had been in orbit, at least there was some light, even on the dark side of the planet. He held out his hand and light shone out through the shield to illuminate the ocean floor around him. The area was barren. Every now and then, a transparent, glowing fish or crustacean would

float by. He sighed and looked down. A bit of light caught his eye. He looked up to see Carl Prescott walking along the ocean floor toward him. He appeared to be surrounded by a bright glowing aura. Greenleaf stood.

“What do you want?”

“How are you holding up, Greenleaf?”

“Don’t you have any respect, boy? You should address me as Headmaster.”

“You almost succeeded in murdering my friends and me only hours ago. I don’t think you deserve any respect.” Carl tapped the shield and a thin trickle of water started to run down the interior wall of the shield. He smiled and then ran his hand over the opening, stopping the water. The puddle of water on the floor slipped through the shield.

Greenleaf sat on the floor of the shield. “Why don’t you get this over with, Prescott? You know you have to kill me to stop me. Then you’ll be a murderer too.”

“I want the souls of the other Thorndikes, Greenleaf. That is part of the price for your release.”

“Why did you say that in the plural? I only have one.”

“Nine?”

Greenleaf nodded. “Who else?”

“You didn’t know that Thorndike the First is a Sleeping One?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I found his body at the institution.”

“Well, sonny, I’m old, but not ancient. I was taught he died at the time of the American Revolutionary War. That was more than two hundred years ago.”

“Will you give me Nine’s soul?”

Greenleaf stood. “I’m not going to give you anything but a bomb. The sooner you’re dead, the better.”

Carl stepped through the wall of the shield. “You know, I’m a real dummy. I thought you might change your ways, but you are rotten inside. Nothing but a crust of skin over a pile of sewage.” He pressed his hand

against Greenleaf's chest, who fell to the bottom of the shield. Carl looked at the glowing orb in his palm.

"Hard to believe you could survive in there." The shield, Greenleaf, and Carl disappeared.

Carl found Aida Whitehall in the hidden storage room. She sat on the chair with the footstool. She had been crying. He moved her feet to the side of the footstool and sat. "What happened? Are you okay?"

She put her arms around his neck and pulled him close. "Why did you tell the teachers that? Now my mom hates me."

Tears poured out of her eyes, and she trembled. He stroked her hair gently. "I told her because it's true and vitally important."

"But I don't have that level of skill, Carl. We've been through this before. Are you trying to hurt me?"

He kissed her ear. "I would never do that to you. You are my best friend."

She moved back so she could see his face. "And your girlfriend?"

"Yes, and my girlfriend." They kissed. "Do you know why I said you had the Invisible Hand?" She sat back and shook her head. "Do you remember that book I showed you in the atrium yesterday?"

She nodded. "The one with the funny symbols?"

"Yes, that's it, and my point. The book presented itself to me in this room. It did that because I have the talent and accept and believe I am the Invisible Hand. I showed it to Grace, and all she saw were blank pages. I passed it around to the faculty this morning, and most saw the same thing. When the dean had it, it was just the cover with no pages at all."

"So you know I have the talent because I could see the symbols."

"That is exactly right. When you choose to acknowledge and accept your talent, you will be able to read it, and it will talk to you."

"Then, we'll share it?"

"I doubt it. I imagine you'll have your own copy. Having two Invisible Hands on Earth at the same time is rare."

She looked down. "Does that mean one of us is the Hand of Satan?"

"Honestly, the book talked to me about that. He said that he has been around a hundred thousand years. There have been many wars, but there is no evidence that God or Satan wants to end it. Sure, there could be an evil Invisible Hand someday, but the book believes Armageddon is a myth."

Aida stood and turned away. "I'm not so sure. I just had an evil thought that scared me."

He stood and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sure it was nothing. Tell me about it."

"I'd be embarrassed."

He turned her around and smiled. "It's just between us."

"I want to kiss you and make you my slave."

His eyebrows rose, and then he grinned. "Well, since I'm the Invisible Hand, your attempt to enslave me probably won't work, but I don't mind if you try." They embraced.

She moved back. "Well?"

"Tell me your orders, Master." Both laughed. He took her hand. "Let me show you a few things." He walked away, pulling her along after him. At the far wall, he released her hand, removed a carton from the bottom shelf, and set it on top. "Now this is all just between you and me." Aida nodded. He pulled the top off the box and extracted a snow-globe. There appeared to be a three-inch long model of a person inside.

Aida looked at the figurine. "That looks like Headmaster Greenleaf."

"No, it doesn't look like him; that is Headmaster Greenleaf. I realized he would never change, so I made him a Sleeping One until our teachers find a solution." He put the globe back into the box, replaced the cover, and put the carton back on the bottom shelf. He took her hand again and led her to the inside wall, which was lined with bookcases. The third bookcase from the far wall was filled with books and boxes of knick-knacks. He took the top box from the left-hand side of the third shelf and lifted the lid. A globe of light twinkled inside.

Her hand moved toward it. "Oh, it's so pretty. What is it?"

"That is Greenleaf's soul."

She pulled her hand back. “What? That’s horrible!”

He put the cover back on and touched her hand with the box. “See how it’s warm.”

“That’s gross, Carl. How could you do that?”

He put the box on the shelf. “Headmaster Greenleaf tried to kill us all yesterday. The explosion blew Barbie’s head off. Most of my bones were broken, and I was barely alive. You were killed and your body was on fire. If the book hadn’t helped me reverse time, we all would have died and Greenleaf would have been thrilled. Not to mention Greenleaf had turned you, Burt, your mom, and Bea into Sleeping Ones, or don’t you remember? He ripped the souls out of you and them.” She started to cry, and he held her to him. “Greenleaf is still alive. He and his soul can be put together. Then he can try to kill us all again and again until he succeeds or dies.”

She smiled and kissed him again. “Sorry for misjudging you. Why didn’t you kill him?”

“I never wanted to hurt anyone. If people thought I was a murderer, they might think I’m the Hand of Satan. I don’t want that.”

“Even if Greenleaf or others keep trying to kill us?”

“I think there is something causing him to attempt murder. As a child, Headmaster Dorchester attended this school with Greenleaf. He had no idea that his friend could be evil. Something had to change him. If I can find what caused him to change and get rid of it, perhaps this nightmare can end.”

Carl and Aida walked into the main dining hall at half past noon. All the students present stood and applauded. A crowd of students formed around them, eager to shake his hand or pat him on the back. After the welcome, they filled their trays and sat with Grace and Burt at a table for four. Carl picked up his cheeseburger and put it to his mouth. He disappeared, and the burger fell onto the plate.

Carl found himself sitting in Dean Whitehall’s office. She sat behind the desk with her head in her hands. After a few seconds, she looked up. “Sorry to interrupt your lunch, Carl, but I need to talk to you.”

“Of course, Dean Whitehall, whatever you need.”

“I realize that I’ve been unfair to my daughter, and I regret it. Frankly, I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this, but I have to tell someone.” She stood and walked around to the front of the desk and sat on the desktop, less than a foot from the boy. “One of my strongest talents is Empathy, which allows me to sense the talents of others. That makes me ideal for my job here.

“From the moment I met her all those years ago, I could feel the power pulsing in her little body, and it’s only become stronger over time. It honestly frightened me. All of us have heard the stories about the Hand of God and Hand of Satan. If my child turned out to be the latter, it would destroy me. I thought if I suppressed the talent, she could have a normal life, and just perhaps, we could avoid Armageddon. You should know that I have only felt that level of intensity one other time. That was with you. What can you tell me?”

He smiled. “Dean Whitehall, I have actually wondered if I could be the Hand of Satan myself. The book told me Armageddon is a myth. He said that he had been around for one hundred thousand years, and there has been no evidence that an end is ever coming. When Greenleaf tried to kill us last night, I realized that Aida and I could never be the Hand of Satan. I don’t believe she or I could do something so depraved and despicable. I know that the blast killed her, and I was on the verge of death. If not for me being alive, both of us would be dead. If you survived, you would never see her again.”

“I don’t know what to do, Carl,” Whitehall said as she wiped her eyes and sniffled. “I’ve been so horrible to her.”

Carl stood. “Dean Whitehall, just tell her you love her and are sorry. That’s all it takes, I swear.”

“But now she has her birth parents. What if she wants to be with them?”

Carl put his hand on her shoulder, and she looked up at him. “You are the only mother she has ever known. She’s not going anywhere.”

Whitehall stood and hugged Carl. “Thank you.” After she released him, he walked out of the office and headed back to his lunch.

When he returned to the dining room, Grace and Burt were about to leave. Aida was already gone. He walked over to his seat and smiled at his friends. "What happened to you?" Grace asked.

"Dean Whitehall wanted to talk to me."

"So, she just pulled you out of the room?" she asked. "That seems pretty crazy to me."

"Well, hopefully, she knows better now. By the way, where's Aida?"

"We don't know," Burt replied. "After you left, she ate a little and then said she had something to do."

Grace added, "Yeah, she seemed upset that you left. We told her that you wouldn't leave like that unless someone made you."

Carl smirked. "That is pretty weird. You guys can go. I'll try to find her later and talk." The others moved, and Carl sat down. He took a bite of his burger. He looked up to see Barbie Conway standing on the other side of the table. After he swallowed, he said, "Please sit down if you want."

"Thanks, Carl." She sat on the chair next to him. "That attack last night was awful. I had this thought that I died. You saw everything. Did that happen?"

He sighed heavily and looked down. After a moment, he looked up into her eyes. "Lots of students were killed, and yeah, you were too. The explosion launched me through the window. When I woke up, it felt like most of my bones were smashed, and I was about to die too." He smiled. "I'm just glad I was able to reverse the damage."

Barbie grabbed his head and pressed her lips to his for several seconds. She released him and smiled.

"Thank you for saving our lives, Carl."

But Carl did not hear her words. His eyes were fixed on the pained expression on Aida Whitehall's face. She had just come back into the dining hall when Barbie kissed him. She turned and walked back out of the door. Carl rose and headed toward her.

"Aren't you going to finish your lunch?" Barbie called out, but Carl kept moving.

Carl left the dining room. Aida was fifty feet down the hallway, so he started to run to catch up with her. "It wasn't like you think!" She did not respond. "She just grabbed me, I swear!" She waved her arm behind

her and Carl was launched out an open window, over the top of the building, and out into the trees. He fell through several small tree branches and landed on the forest floor with a thump. His body ached, and he lay there for several minutes while the pain subsided. As he sat up, he found he was surrounded by deer. A doe walked up to him and licked his face. “Thanks, but I think I’m okay.” A large stag approached and lowered its antlers toward him. Carl grabbed the antlers, and the stag pulled him to his feet. “Thank you, I appreciate that.”

“Are you okay, Carl?” the stag said.

“How do you know my name?”

All the deer laughed. The stag replied, “Everyone knows you. My name is Sylvester.”

“Gee, I didn’t know deer had names.”

“Well, there’s probably a lot you don’t know about us. What happened to you?”

Carl stretched his sore back. “My girlfriend kind of threw me out a window.”

Sylvester noted, “Perhaps you need a new girlfriend, Carl.”

The doe that had licked him said, “Or maybe you could stop kissing every girl you see?” All the does laughed.

“That’s enough, girls,” Sylvester replied with a sneer. “Carl, you know your society is not like ours. As a stag, I am expected to have a harem of females.”

“At least, until a better stag comes along!” the doe said with a chortle.

Sylvester looked back at the doe. “That’s quite enough gossip for today, Sally.” He turned back to the teenager. “In a way, Sally is correct. Human females need to know their mate is faithful. Anything that undermines that belief can sour the relationship. You need to find that girl and apologize.”

“Thanks for the advice, Sylvester.”

“Would you like a ride back to the school?”

“No, that’s okay. The walk isn’t so far and might give her the time to cool off.” He patted the stag on the forehead, waved to the rest of the deer, and headed back to the institution.

“One last thing, Carl.”

He turned around to face the stag. “Yes.”

Sylvester walked up to him and spoke in a whisper. “Last night, when the explosion did not occur, the other headmaster was not alone.”

“Who was with him?”

“Please keep your voice down,” Sylvester warned. “It was not a person or animal. It is a most evil thing, or perhaps a presence of some kind.”

“A presence?” Carl whispered. “What does that mean?”

The stag shook its head. “We don’t know, but we can sense the evil within it still because the other left it behind. You will find no animals or insects around the grounds of the school. All of us have fled into the woods. The birds have left the compound entirely. For some reason, none of the humans seem to notice, even those with advanced skills like you. We find this doubly troubling.”

“You want me to get rid of it.”

The stag shook its head. “I don’t know if that’s possible. Mostly, we wanted to warn you about it.”

Carl considered what the deer had said. “Okay, I’ll see what I can do.” The stag nodded. “I can make the walls disappear for a couple of hours so you all can escape. Would you like that?”

Sylvester thought for a moment, and then licked Carl’s face. “We would like that, but think it’s a bad idea. You might need our help.”

Carl rubbed the stag’s head. “Just let me know if you change your mind.” He turned and walked away.

When he walked back into his room in the Gratia Dei Hall, he found Aida sitting on the sofa waiting for him. “Hi.”

She stood. “I know I overreacted, and I’m sorry.”

Carl walked over and hugged her. “I swear she just grabbed me. I am not interested in that girl.”

“Sit with me, Carl.” After they were seated, she said, “Thank you for talking to my mom. She apologized for treating me badly and explained why she was afraid of my talents. She was afraid I was the Hand of Satan or something.”

Carl took her hand in his. “We both know that isn’t true.” He kissed her lightly.

“By the way, what happened to you? You were following me, and when I turned around, you were gone.”

He smiled. “Do you remember waving your hand behind your back at me?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, that little wave tossed me out a window and more than a mile away into the forest. It took me all this time to walk back.”

She pulled her hand away and blushed. “I’m so sorry. Were you hurt?”

“Only my pride.”

“Sorry. You know, I’ve been thinking about what you told me, and I don’t think I want to be the Invisible Hand.”

“Why is that?”

She looked down for a moment. “It’s too much responsibility. I think I’d be too afraid to do the things I would be expected to do.”

Carl sighed. “Yea, the book compared the Invisible Hand to slavery. I have to do whatever my benefactor desires.”

“Did he tell you who that is?”

Carl shook his head. “No, and I have no idea.”

She turned to look at him. “So, we’re good? You’re still my boyfriend?”

He smiled. “Of course.”

She kissed him. “Good. My mom is taking me to Paris for the afternoon. Then we’re going to have dinner at the Eiffel Tower.” She stood. “I’ll see you in the morning.” Carl stood, walked her over to the door, and closed it after her. He went into his bedroom to think and rest his back.

After dinner, Carl, Burt, and Grace went to the secret room in the bell tower of the main building from where he and Aida had taken their voyage into the solar system. Earlier, they had been in the hidden storage room where they found several ancient texts. Carl had told them about his discussion with the stag, and now they all looked for any stories about an evil presence. Because the others could not read the text, Grace and Burt sat on opposite sides of Carl while he read. At nine o’clock, Dean Whitehall entered the room. “A bit crowded up here tonight.”

“We’re sorry, Dean. We’ll leave if you want,” Grace offered.

She smiled and sat on one of the armchairs. “No, that’s okay. What are you students reading?”

“It’s a bit complicated, Dean,” Carl replied. “I heard that an evil thing or presence might have been left here by Headmaster Greenleaf when he sent the bomb.”

“The ancient texts have many of them, although most experts do not believe the stories are true. Where did you hear about that?”

Carl raised his eyebrows. “Actually, it was from a deer in the forest, Dean.”

She chuckled. “Really, from a deer in the forest? I’m not sure I’d put a lot of confidence in an animal’s assertion.”

“Dean, he said all the animals and insects are now hiding in the forest in fear of it.”

She pursed her lips. “I have heard that the sheep who usually graze near the school grounds haven’t been seen since yesterday. I just assumed they found a better stand of grass elsewhere.”

Carl smiled. “You’re probably right, Dean. By the way, how was Paris?”

“Fabulous as always, Carl. Perhaps one day I’ll take the three of you with us.”

“That would be totally cool,” Burt replied.

“How is Aida?” Carl asked.

“She’s fine. She has this new fascination with that hidden storage room. She went there right after we returned. She found it originally, right?”

“Yes,” Grace replied. “She showed me, and I showed Carl and Burt.”

Without warning, a massive explosion shook the building. The glass facing the atrium shattered and pelted them with shards. Whitehall and Carl rushed to the windows while the others took cover behind the couch. Whitehall gasped. Greenleaf, Eight, and Aida were standing back to back in the center of the atrium. There were ten professors surrounding them. Both sides exchanged lightning bolts and streams of fire. Whitehall disappeared and reappeared with the professors fighting the invaders.

Carl jumped out the window and flew downward on a ball of lightning. He pushed off the ball, and it careened toward the attackers. Aida waved her hand and the ball shot backward. It struck Carl and drove him into the stone walls. He fell to the ground and immediately jumped to his feet. He could still feel her lips on his from earlier, but now she scowled and hissed at him. Sylvester’s words ran through his mind. He projected a force shield in front of him and moved forward. Greenleaf and Aida concentrated their fire on him while Eight managed to keep the others at bay.

He walked past the line of teachers, who moved to avoid striking him with their energy. Carl looked through the shield, fire, and sparks to see her growling at him like a beast. The shield was almost on them now. Carl pushed it away, and it surrounded the three assailants. The shield shrank to the size of a basketball and hovered in midair with the three still inside. The shield detonated, knocking Carl over the building and the professors from their feet. The three attackers were gone.

Carl slammed through tree branches and crashed down to the ground. He tried to sit up, but collapsed and passed out.

Chapter 16

Carl woke sometime later to find himself on the ground, surrounded by deer. The sky above was filled with a warm, golden light. He thought it was dawn, but looked up to see Aida staring down at him. She appeared to be undressed, but her entire form was bright light, with no detail other than her face. “What happened?” he asked.

She smiled. “I was going to ask you that, Carl.” She knelt on the ground next to him and touched his face. “I’m so scared.” She laid next to him and put her head on his chest. “Can you help me?” She nestled up to him, and he turned to face her. “Can you please help me? I don’t know what’s happened to me.”

“Why did you release Greenleaf and Eight and then attack us?”

“Where did you get that idea? I would never hurt you. I love you.” She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his.

His body began to get very warm, and every nerve ending tingled. Slowly, her body sank inside of him. He gasped and rolled onto his back. He opened his eyes and saw the shadow of tree branches over his head. It was still the middle of the night. He felt animals laying all around him to keep him warm.

Sylvester the stag was standing over him. “Bless you, Hand of God. The evil presence is gone. Good night.” Carl fell asleep.

Carl was now standing in the hidden storage room. It appeared to be around sunset. He remembered the attack on the school and assumed he was having a dream. He walked to where the chair and ottoman had been and found Aida Whitehall sitting there. Her head was in her hands, and she had been crying. “What’s wrong?” he asked, but she did not seem to notice.

“Over here!” a strange voice whispered.

He and Aida looked for the source of the sound.

She rose from the chair. “Who is it?”

“Come here. Find me,” the voice begged.

“Carl, is that you?” Aida asked.

“Better than that,” the voice replied. She began to follow the sound, and Carl followed closely behind her. After she took several steps, the voice added, “Almost there.”

“Carl, if that’s you, you are in so much trouble,” Aida replied.

The voice laughed. “After you meet me, you won’t be so enamored with that silly boy.”

“What?” Carl exclaimed.

“Mom, you’re playing some kind of game with me, right?” Aida asked.

“That woman will never be your real mother,” the voice added. “Once you are with me, none of that will matter.”

“Where are you?” Aida wondered aloud.

“Stop where you are, my love. Open the box next to you. I am there.”

Aida opened the nearest box and found a book entitled, “The Invisible Hand.”

She gasped and picked it up. “This is some kind of joke.”

Carl felt something sinister. “Put the book down, Aida.”

But she did not hear him. She held the volume to her chest. “Carl was right. I am the Invisible Hand. I have to go tell him.”

“Put the book back, Aida,” Carl pleaded.

“Don’t tell him just yet, Aida,” the voice said. “You and I must join forces for you to become what he wishes.”

She set the book down and turned to walk away. “I don’t want to be the Invisible Hand!” She took two steps.

“Master, it was Carl Prescott who sent me to you,” the book replied.

“No, I did not!” Carl exclaimed.

Aida stopped. “Really?”

“No!” Carl shouted. When she did not notice, he remembered that it was a dream and wondered why he was having it. “Please, God, don’t let this happen.”

She turned around, picked up the book, and held it against her chest again. “Thank you for your trust in me, Carl.” She walked back to the chair and sat with her feet on the ottoman.

Carl sat on the ottoman and touched his lips to hers. “Please don’t do this, Aida. I love you. Don’t let this happen!”

“Open me,” the book said with sugary sweetness. “All will be answered within these covers.”

Carl was crying. His chest was heaving as tears poured out of his eyes. “Please no.”

She opened the cover. The title page said, “The Invisible Hand.” The subtitle was, “The Story of Carl Sandberg Prescott.”

Carl put his arms around her knowing she would never know she had been in his dream. Or was this some kind of memory?

She turned the page.

A demonic form shot from the page and penetrated her young body. She writhed in pain for several seconds before her body became still. She screamed in agony for a second, and then a small orb of light emerged and floated away, through the walls, and out into the evening sky in search of a place to rest.

Aida’s face smiled and laughed. She stood and walked over to the box where Headmaster Greenleaf’s soul was imprisoned. A deep, gravelly voice said, “That boy will be a problem.” Minutes later, Aida, Greenleaf, and Eight appeared in the atrium.

Shortly after the attack on the school, the disembodied orb of light found a teenager’s body lying in the woods surrounded by deer. The deer noticed and watched it descend. The stag took the orb in his mouth and walked over to where Carl was sleeping. He opened his mouth and the orb descended into the young man’s body. Sylvester saw the females staring at him. “I told you he might need us.”

Carl opened his eyes to see the deer all around him.

Sylvester the stag was standing nearby. "Bless you, Carl. The evil presence is gone. Good night." Carl fell asleep.

Carl woke in his dormitory room's bed. He remembered the battle the previous night, but could not understand how Aida had been a part of it. He stood up and walked into the bathroom. He looked at his reflection in the mirror and was shocked to see that the iris of his right eye had turned from green to brown. He hurriedly dressed and then headed for the school infirmary.

Fifteen minutes later, he sat on the examination table while Nurse Paxton made notes in her log. When she finished, she closed the log and looked up at him. "Honestly, I've never heard of such a thing, Carl. Rarely, babies are born with eyes of two different colors, but that is a different situation. I did a cursory exam this morning after you were discovered in the forest and brought back. I noted the eye color change then and reported it to the headmaster." She stood, removed a tissue from a box, and wiped a few tears from Carl's right eye. "Are you upset? I don't think this change is dangerous."

Carl rubbed his right cheek. "I didn't know that I was tearing, Nurse Paxton. Is that a sign of anything?"

She opened her log and made another annotation. "Not likely. Our eyes tear when they are dry or irritated. Sometimes, we don't even realize it until a tear runs down our cheek." There was a knock on the door, so the nurse stood, walked over, and opened it. She stepped aside so that Headmaster Dorchester and Professor Donnelly could enter.

Donnelly stayed by the door while the headmaster walked over and examined Carl's face. He turned to Donnelly. "Alistair, I've never seen anything like this. What do you think?"

Donnelly pursed his lips for a second. "I'm baffled as well, Alex. After witnessing Aida Whitehall become the Hand of Satan last night, I suppose anything is possible. Perhaps the concussion from the explosion or his crash landing in the woods caused it."

Carl reached for his cheek to wipe away tears as they slipped out of his eye again. "There it goes again. He's crying out of one eye," the nurse noted.

Donnelly walked over and put his hand on Carl's shoulder. "I apologize, Carl. I know you had strong feelings for that girl, and I do not actually know she is the Hand of Satan."

"There's no need to apologize, Professor. My eye is doing this all on its own. I'm not upset," Carl replied. "By the way, how is the dean doing?" Donnelly only shook his head.

"Not well, as you can imagine, Carl," Dorchester replied. "She told me about your talk with her yesterday. She doesn't blame you, but now her worst fears have been realized. If the old tales are true, the existential battle for humanity is near."

Carl sighed and looked down. After a few moments, he looked up again. "I really don't think Aida is the Hand of Satan."

"You're letting your emotions run your brain, Carl," the headmaster said. "If not for your intervention, the entire school and all of us would have died. Even you could not stop the three from causing damage and wounding several faculty members. You were launched miles away into the forest."

Donnelly added, "Not to mention that Greenleaf and Eight were joined again. The amulets are securely locked away, which means she did it without them. An Invisible Hand is the only human who can do that."

Carl still did not believe she had suddenly become evil. He smiled. "Nurse Paxton, can I go back to my room now? I didn't even take a shower before I rushed over here."

"It's okay with me," she replied. "What do you say, Headmaster?"

Dorchester said, "Carl, I want the nurse to examine you every day for a couple of weeks. Other than that, you are excused."

"Thank you." Carl stood and left the room.

Part of his dream from the previous night drifted across his consciousness. He immediately headed for the hidden storage room. When he entered it, he found Professor Thorndike leaning against the windows and looking at the sarcophagus holding the school's founder. "I didn't mean to interrupt you, Professor."

"That's quite alright, Prescott. I come here most days to visit him. It's hard to believe that he's been a Sleeping One for more than two hundred years."

“Professor, if we could find his soul, I can rejoin them.”

Thorndike smiled. “Thank you, Carl, but after so many years, I doubt it could ever be found.” He looked out the windows. “It’s a big world, and the soul is a little thing. You should know that Dean Whitehall is here as well. You might want to leave before she sees you.”

“It’s too late for that now, Bertrand,” Whitehall said as she walked toward them. “Good morning, Carl.”

“Good morning, Dean Whitehall.”

“Follow me, Carl. I would like your thoughts on a few things.” She turned and headed away. Carl was just steps behind her.

“Be gentle, Clarisse!” Thorndike exclaimed.

She turned right into an aisle and stopped. Boxes and furniture were scattered about. A wooden crate was badly burned. “What had been hidden here that my daughter would want destroyed?”

Carl took a deep breath, and slowly released it. “That crate held a jewelry box where I had placed Eight’s soul.”

“How did she know it was here?”

He looked down. “I showed her, Dean.”

She pulled a tissue from her pocket and handed it to him. “Your right eye is leaking, Prescott.” She pushed by him and headed down the window wall. Carl hurried to catch up.

She walked past the chair and ottoman and kept going. As Carl passed the chair, a searing pain surged through his head. He pressed his hands to his temples and doubled over. He groaned. Whitehall turned back and stopped next to him. “Are you well, Prescott?”

The pain subsided and Carl stood. “I’m sorry.” Before he could say more, she moved away.

They reached the far wall where the aisle had collapsed. Boxes were strewn about, and several had been scorched. “What was here?”

Carl wiped the tears from his cheek. “Inside one box was a snow globe. Headmaster Greenleaf was inside.”

She smirked. "On the other wall, a bookcase was reduced to sticks. I suppose Greenleaf's soul was hidden there, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you showed all those things to my daughter?" Carl nodded but would not look up at her. She sighed. "At first, I was furious with you, Prescott. After what happened, I knew someone had to be helping her."

"I'm sorry."

"Carl, I am not angry anymore. I realize that you and I were both being used by her all along. She played us to get what she wanted, and she won. You and I are the same. Both of us are stupid idiots. She used our feelings against us. Now, you and I have failed utterly."

"Dean Whitehall, I really don't think she did it. I know her, and she's not capable of such terrible things."

"Wake up, Carl. We almost died last night. My daughter is pure evil." She walked past him and disappeared.

As he stood with his head down, with tears pouring from both eyes, a tiny voice in his head said, "The chair, Carl." He started walking toward the chair and ottoman hoping to avoid another spike of pain. When he reached it, he looked down for clues. The spine of a book was visible between the chair frame and cushion. He pulled it out gently. The spine was blank. He looked at the front cover. There was a single symbol embossed in gold. He opened the cover. The pages had been reduced to ashes, which slid out and down to the floor.

"What have you got there, Prescott?" Thorndike asked.

Carl handed it to Thorndike. "It used to be a book, but the pages had turned to dust."

Thorndike sucked in a quick breath. "Where did you get this?"

"It was stuck between the frame and cushion on this chair, Professor."

Thorndike showed the front cover to the boy. “Do you know what this is?” Carl shook his head. “I’m not entirely certain, but I’ve seen symbols like this before. Please come to my office after lunch so we can discuss it. I’m going to the library to do some research now.” The professor tucked the book under his arm and walked away.

Carl sat on the chair and put his feet on the ottoman. Suddenly quite drowsy, he closed his eyes and fell asleep. He felt lips touching his, and he opened his eyes. Aida kissed him again and then turned around. The area seemed quite cold, and he suppressed a shiver. He looked around them and discovered they were standing on the moon. A crescent Earth hung near the horizon. Carl knew he was still dreaming, but it was a nice dream. He put his arms around her and held her tightly

to his chest. “What happened last night?”

“It was awful. At first, I blamed you for sending that book to me.”

“I didn’t send you a book.”

“I realize that now.” She turned around and smiled. She put her hand on his right cheek. “What happened to your eye?”

“I don’t know. When I woke up, I found my eye had turned brown.”

She glanced down. “Like mine.”

He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face. “That’s it!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your right eye is green now, like my left.”

She pushed him away and turned. “I don’t have any eyes, Carl. That beast destroyed me.”

“What beast, Aida? I don’t understand.”

“It was in the book. When I opened the cover, the demon attacked me. It wrenched the soul from my body and discarded it. I was shocked to see it had taken over my body and was trying to destroy the school. But there was nothing I could do to stop it. After a few seconds, I floated away. I figured my soul would go

to heaven or hell, and that would be the end of me. After some time, I began to descend. That's when I figured hell was my destination. A stag named Sylvester saw me and caught me in his mouth. He walked over to where you were lying and released me. I figured I would just float down through you and into the ground, but once I entered your body, I stopped. I felt at home again. You won't discard me too, will you, Carl?"

"Of course not. I love you. I'll find your body and get rid of the demon. I will make you whole again. I swear I will."

"Please don't try to do that. The demon is too powerful. It will likely kill you too."

"If that happens, it's okay as long as we're together." She rushed into his arms.

Carl woke up.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, Carl stopped in the open doorway to Professor Thorndike's office. "I'm here, Professor."

Without looking up, the professor said, "Please come in, close the door, and take a seat." When Prescott sat, Thorndike looked up at him. "This rune is most disturbing. Four thousand years ago, a satanic cult dominated most of Eastern Europe. Just before the Romans destroyed them, there were more than a million adherents, and they controlled vast amounts of territory. Their religion focused on the devil and his demons. They worshipped five hundred specific demons, and created a rune to signify each one. Each demon was thought to have their own unique skills." He set the book down and stared at the boy. "I'm only going to ask this question once more." Carl nodded. "Where did you get this book?"

"Professor, it's just as I said. I found it on that chair in the hidden storage room."

"Do you swear that is true on your own life?"

"Yes, sir. I have never seen it until today when we were in that room. I swear."

Thorndike picked up the book and showed Carl the cover. "Do you know the name of the demon signified by this rune?" Carl shook his head. "His name is Viszreaagh."

Carl's mouth fell open. "That's impossible."

"It is the truth, and I can prove it." Thorndike turned around and unlocked a drawer in his desk. He pulled out the red amulet and slowly turned around. The gemstone began to glow. When the professor held it over the book, beams of red light past from the stone to the cover, which also began to glow. Thorndike turned around again and pushed the amulet back into its cubbyhole and locked the drawer. He turned back to face the young man and stared blankly "Carl, do you remember the first words on the inscription surrounding the stone?"

He nodded. "Behold the Soul-Ripper."

Thorndike nodded and smiled. "We have learned a great deal this day, Carl. We now know the words Vizreaagh and Soul-Ripper are synonymous. We understand that the word is not an incantation to enable the stone to remove the soul. Speaking the demon's name is a form of prayer to beseech the demon to do the deed."

"Professor Thorndike, I think that's what happened with Aida. She did not attack the school. Greenleaf left that book in the storage room the same day he left the bomb. When Aida found it and opened it, the demon ripped the soul from her body and took its place."

"That's an interesting theory, but no more than that."

"Professor, that's also why my eye turned brown. She has brown eyes and her soul is inside me now. It came to me for protection, but now I know I have to get the demon out and put her soul back."

Thorndike drummed his fingers on the book cover. "That would explain the girl's sudden change, but I pray it isn't true."

"Why, Professor? Don't you want her safe with her mother?"

"We all want that, of course." He leaned forward. "Vizreaagh is a minor demon to be sure. But if he exists, he is still immortal and incredibly powerful. People, even the Invisible Hand, will find it almost impossible to stop him."

"I can do it."

Thorndike chuckled. “I applaud your optimism, but you have no idea what you’re facing. But it’s worse than that still.”

“How so?”

“Carl, if the demons have chosen to openly interfere with humanity, our lives will be changed forever. Eventually, the angels will have no option but to intercede as well. That battle, Armageddon, will likely destroy all life on Earth and perhaps cause the end of existence itself.”

“Professor, I don’t think we have a choice. If the Soul-Ripper is living in Aida’s body, the battle has already begun.”

Thorndike put his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands. After a few deep breaths, he continued, “I will need to make a full report to the headmaster.” He sat up. “We are entering a very dangerous time for the human race, Carl. You told us that you believe Aida had the Invisible Hand talent as well, correct?”

“Yes, Professor. She could see the symbols in the book.”

“I recall that. Obviously, no one knows whether the talents exist in the body, brain, or spirit of the person. The demon has his own powers. If Aida’s talent is now inside you, it is possible that the double talent may provide an advantage.”

“That means I might be able to defeat him.”

Thorndike clucked his tongue and shook his head. “Anything is possible, Carl. Personally, I would like to believe that demons are not choosing to come into our world. Earth could become hell itself. Go now. I must contact Alex.”

Carl nodded, stood, and walked out of the office.

Carl Prescott sat outside at lunch time. As he had gone through the food service line, he noticed everyone in the room was staring at him. When he turned and headed for a table, all the others turned away. He walked over to the doors to the atrium and headed for the nearest empty table. After he sat, several

students at nearby tables took their trays and went inside. Carl felt tears slipping down his right cheek. He wiped them away with his napkin. "Don't be sad, Aida," he thought.

"You know it's me they're afraid of, even though it wasn't really me."

"I know. It's totally unfair, but they just don't know the whole story like we do."

Barbara Conway walked up to his table. "Hi, Carl. I'm sorry about your girlfriend."

"Thanks."

A broad smile crossed her face. "You really know how to pick them. First, one dumps you for your friend, and the next tries to blow up the school. I'm not like either of them, if you're interested."

Carl smiled. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm still recovering from what happened last night."

"Let me know when you change your mind." She blew him a kiss and walked away.

"She's right, Carl," Aida's voice said. "I want you to remove my soul from your body. It's time that we both move on."

"That's not going to happen. You heard what Professor Thorndike said. Maybe the two of us together can stop that demon so you can reclaim your body."

"But he'll probably kill you. I'm not worth it."

"Aida, first of all, you are absolutely worth it. But if a demon is in your body, the End of Times is approaching. If he wins, everybody dies."

Grace Mulligan walked up to the table. "Hey, Carl, why aren't you sitting inside? Burt and I have a table."

"Hi Grace. That's okay. Everyone was giving me the stink eye in there."

"Well, we already put our trays on the trolley, or we'd come out here. Come on, it'll be fun."

"That's okay. I'm going to the hidden storage room as soon as I finish here. You two can meet me there later if you like."

Grace opened her purse, removed a small mirror, and set it down on the table. "Here's that thing you asked me for."

Carl picked it up. "Thanks. I'll see you guys later."

Grace turned and walked away.

"Why do you have my makeup mirror?" Aida asked.

"I asked her for it earlier today. Didn't you hear me?"

"No, I guess I was sleeping. Can souls sleep?"

"I think you're proof positive that they can." He picked up the mirror by the handle and turned it to face him. Aida's face looked back at him. "There she is. Do you see me or yourself?"

"I see you. Can you really see my face?"

He nodded. "Absolutely. You look the same as the last time I saw you."

"What made you think of that?"

Carl felt the book in the small of his back. He pulled it out and set it on the table. "I guess it was the book. Let's see what it has to say." He opened it randomly to a page near the middle. Both sides were blank, but slowly letters began to emerge. "Aida, I'll be reading what it says. Let me know if you can hear my thoughts."

He read: "Master, the situation is deteriorating rapidly. I am glad the girl is with you now. Can you hear me, Aida?"

"Yes, I can, but I don't understand why?"

The book continued, "There are several reasons, including what Carl speculated about you reading his thoughts. What the Beast did to you was a most heinous crime. Please never use his name again. It stains your souls to utter the word. Both benefactors have agreed that the creation of Sleeping Ones is unacceptable, except in the most extreme cases. Care must always be taken to preserve the life essence of the victim so they may be joined again. In your case, the Beast tossed it aside, leaving it to wander the universe for eternity in loneliness. It should also have been impossible for your spirit to have found and joined with Carl. The benefactors agree that could only happen because you have both become the Invisible Hand."

"But I could not read the symbols, Book."

“Aida, please be calm and accept the truth. The benefactors are omniscient and all powerful. They cannot make a mistake. You and Carl are mere humans, and of course, I am a book.”

“What did you mean about the deteriorating situation, Book?”

More words appeared on the page. “The two of you are unique in the history of humanity. As Carl has presumed, all people have the potential to achieve this level, yet virtually none are willing to accept the burdens that come with it. Carl accepted it to help his friends and family and has already saved many lives. Aida, while it pains me to say it, the decision was made for you when the Beast ripped your soul from your body and discarded it. That is why your spirit searched for and found Carl in the woods. Now, with the two of you united, there is a chance to end the madness.”

“I don’t understand,” Carl replied. “Why would Satan send his Beast to do that to her?”

More letters began to appear, written in an angry scrawl. “I did not mention the name of a benefactor or that the Beast was allowed to attack. If you want a response, please ask a question I am able to answer.”

“I’m sorry, Book. I made a stupid assumption. Did a benefactor allow the Beast to invade our world?”

“No.”

“Will a benefactor intervene on our behalf?”

The writing on the book returned to normal text. “Thank you for apologizing. The answer to your question is no. Although it is conjecture on my part, it is possible either or both benefactors helped Aida’s spirit to find and join with yours.”

Aida asked, “Is it possible for Carl and me to defeat the Beast?”

The writing on the page changed to an elegant script. “Thank you for asking. I serve you as well, Master. The only answer I can provide is maybe. If a benefactor aided in getting you to where you are now, it must be possible. We should all hope so in either case.”

Carl asked, “How did the Beast do this without its benefactor intervening?”

The writing returned to typed text. “The servants of the benefactors are individuals like both of you, although not human. They have their moods, opinions, desires, and fears. On occasion, a servant decides that

the game of life has grown tiresome and intervenes. The benefactors choose not to stop the intervention as long as it is limited. Just like human adolescents, the servants need to express their individuality and release their anger, affection, and frustration. If there is open rebellion by one set of servants or another, the benefactors end it.”

“How much time do we have, Book?” Aida asked.

“A few days at most. The Beast is angry, reckless, and afraid,” the book replied and then dissolved into nothingness.

Chapter 17

Carl woke in the middle of the night. He could hear Aida begging him to wake. He looked around the dark bedroom. “What’s wrong?”

“Close your eyes. Then, you’ll know.”

When he closed his eyes, he could see Headmaster Greenleaf and Eight sitting on upholstered chairs staring at them. “What’s this?”

“Just be quiet,” she said.

Now, Carl could hear another voice that sounded like Aida. “I’m back, and now I want to rule the Earth. Why are we just sitting around this stupid school?”

“The boy almost destroyed all three of us, Master,” Greenleaf replied.

The other Aida said, “He just caught me off guard. I wasn’t expecting an Invisible Hand. I’ve already told you two not to call me that. Just call me Rae.” The perspective began to change as if the Beast had stood and was walking away from the others.

Eight’s voice said, “I agree with Rae, Headmaster. Carl Prescott is no match for her powers. It’s about time we assume control, through you of course, Rae.”

They were looking at a dresser with an empty necklace stand on top. The perspective changed again, and moments later, Carl and Aida were looking at Aida’s physical form. She turned and headed back to the others. “It’s a shame I’ve got this female body. It’s a big change for me.” Rae returned to her seat. “Perhaps one of your bodies would suit me better.” The two men pushed back in their seats and cringed. “You two make me laugh. You’re both old and feeble. We’ll find a strong young man for my spirit. You can throw this piece of crap into the trash after that.”

Aida began to cry, and tears leaked from Carl’s right eye. “I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. I swear I’ll make you whole again.”

“I feel so helpless,” Aida admitted.

“Don’t worry. We’ll kill that demon and restore you. I know we can do it if we’re together.”

Rae jumped to her feet. “I know. Let’s go to the United Nations. It’s time I assert my dominion.”

“It’s still night there, Rae,” Greenleaf explained. “They won’t be in session for eight or more hours.”

“Get on your feet, you two. It’s day in Tokyo. Let’s go give our regards to the Emperor.” After they stood, all three disappeared.

“What do we do now?” Aida asked.

“We’re not going to Japan by ourselves. Even if we’re lucky enough to be an even match with the Beast, Greenleaf and Eight will be there too.”

“So we just go back to sleep?”

“In the morning, we’ll talk to the headmaster. We have to wait for a fight we can win. Did you hear the quaver in the Beast’s voice when he said Invisible Hand? He’s afraid. I know it.”

“Well, Carl, I scared out of my mind.”

“Please get some rest. Tomorrow will be a better day.”

Long before they woke, news of the assault on Tokyo was making news around the globe. Tokyo was heavily damaged and fires continued to burn throughout the city. The Emperor and Prime Minister had prostrated themselves before the Beast.

At eight o’clock in the morning, Carl met with the faculty about the situation. By nine o’clock, the residents of the Lodge and the other island had been relocated to the school grounds. Dean Whitehall and Professor Donnelly had been dispatched to New York City to witness the events at the UN. Carl had then placed a cocoon over the entire island chain.

Unable to face the stares from the students and faculty, Carl retreated to the hidden storage room. He sat on the chair with his feet up. He sighed deeply. “God, I hate the waiting,” he said out loud.

“You really think he’s coming for us?”

“Yes, Aida, he has no choice. One of us will win, and the other will die. The longer he waits, the more convinced he’ll become that we are superior. His doubt will ensure our victory. I think the Beast knows it too, so, he’ll want to end it one way or the other quickly. If he wins, he can go forward with impunity. If not, he goes back to his benefactor with his tail between his legs.”

“Do you believe the two of us can do it alone?”

“I sure hope so, but we need something to make sure we do.”

“You mean another Invisible Hand?”

“Perhaps,” Carl replied.

“There isn’t another one, Carl. Sure, maybe others can be convinced, but that takes time, which is something we do not have.”

He stood and began walking forward. “Just maybe there is one chance.” He stopped at the glass sarcophagus and pulled off the tarp. “The Founder of this school, Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike I was an Invisible Hand.”

“But his soul is missing. How does that help?”

“Aida, what if we can find it?”

“It’s a big world, Carl, and his soul has been gone for over two centuries. Where would we look?”

Burt and Grace joined them. “What’s up, Carl?”

“Aida and I were just thinking about how to find the founder’s soul, Burt.”

Grace put her face close to Carl’s and looked into his right eye. “Hi Aida.”

“She says hello, Grace.”

“Thanks. How do you intend to find his soul? He’s been in that state for more than two hundred years. We don’t even know where he was when he became a Sleeping One.” Grace leaned against a window sill.

Carl thought for a moment. “The book told me the gemstones in the Devil’s Heart and Sacred Eye have no special powers. They are just rocks. Yet, when Greenleaf took Beatriz’s soul, it glowed red. When I rejoined her with the Sacred Eye, it glowed intensely bright and filled our bodies with light. Professor

Thorndike held the Devil's Heart over the book that attacked Aida. It glowed red. Also, when I had the Devil's Heart in my pocket the first time I saw Greenleaf, it got very hot and burned my leg. Rocks can't do that. That's why I think the souls of the founder and Burt's father might be hidden inside them."

Burt nodded. "That makes a lot of sense."

Carl continued, "There's more. When I confronted Greenleaf about those two souls, he admitted to having the one from Burt's dad, but not the Founder's. He had Eight attack us on Founder's Day as a diversion so he could recover the Devil's Heart. When he realized he failed, he tried to kill us with that bomb. If he had succeeded, he could have just gone to Professor Thorndike's office and taken it."

"So, my dad's soul is in the Devil's Heart? Wow, that's horrible."

Carl put his hand on Burt's shoulder. "Yes, but if we have his body and soul, I can rejoin them. You can have your father back."

Burt was too overcome with emotion to reply. He wiped the moisture from his eyes and walked away. Grace kissed Carl on the cheek and hurried to keep up with her boyfriend.

Aida's voice spoke into Carl's mind. "I remember that necklace, but I'm not certain where it is."

"After I rejoined you, Burt, and your mom, Headmaster Dorchester took it. He said he'd put it in a safe place."

"Are you going to ask him for it?"

Carl shook his head. "No, I already know where it is, but we are going to discuss the matter with Professor Thorndike right now."

When he arrived at the professor's office, he found a note on the door stating that Thorndike would be out for an hour on his lunch break. Carl wrote at the bottom that he would be in the atrium. As he arrived at the main building, he noticed a crowd of students had formed facing a small dais where the headmaster stood. Not wanting to upset others, Carl stayed some distance away and leaned against a tree trunk. Dean Whitehall sat on the lone chair on the dais.

When the crowd noise level died down, the headmaster began. “Students, I called this impromptu assembly to advise you on the situation in New York City. The three that attacked here two days ago took over the United Nations Headquarters. They demanded that all nations declare war on this school or die. When the General Assembly scoffed at them, the entire structure collapsed. I’m afraid only the attackers were confirmed to have survived. We believe an attack on the school by military units and the evil three is imminent.”

A nearby student pointed at Carl. “It was his girlfriend who led the attack. Let’s get him.” The mass of students charged. When they were twenty feet away, Carl raised his right hand, and the students froze in place.

Dorchester and Whitehall left the dais and headed toward him. Carl walked in their direction. “What in God’s name did you do to them, Prescott?”

“Headmaster, I was not about to allow them to harm me or anyone else.”

“Did you stop time again?” Whitehall asked.

Carl shook his head. “Since both of you are talking and moving, it would appear that I did not.”

“When are you going to release them?”

“Very soon, Headmaster. Let’s go back to the dais to watch. I think a lesson in humility is in order.”

Carl walked between them, and they turned to follow.

“You should leave the school, Prescott,” the dean noted. “Perhaps the attack can be avoided if you do.”

“I can’t. The headmaster said there would be an attack on the school, not just on me. Don’t you see, this is what the Beast has wanted all along?”

“Who is the beast?” Dorchester asked.

Carl walked up onto the dais and the others followed. Carl transformed into Professor Thorndike. He waved his arm over the crowd of students, and all were changed into likenesses of him. “Watch this.” He snapped his fingers and the crowd surged forward, but quickly stopped when their target was suddenly gone.

They began to look around and started to attack each other in wild confusion. He snapped his fingers and they froze again.

“This is a silly game, Carl,” Whitehall said angrily.

Carl waved his arm again, and now the students looked like Aida. He snapped his fingers and the mass stepped back in shock and then attacked one another again. Dorchester grabbed Carl’s arm. “That is enough!” Carl snapped his fingers, and the students froze once more.

Carl pulled his arm free and glowered at the headmaster. He looked like himself again. “They were going to rip me limb from limb, Headmaster. That would not have been a game. You both know that without me, you cannot stop the Beast.”

“What beast, Prescott?” Whitehall shouted.

“The evil presence I mentioned to you, Dean. It is the Beast who ripped Aida’s soul from her body and tossed it aside. At least, when I turned Eight and Greenleaf into Sleeping Ones, I took special care of their souls to make sure they would be safe. The Beast did not care. Her spirit would have wandered the universe for all eternity, lost and alone. Now she is with me, and I will stop at nothing to tear the Beast from her body, return her soul to it, and send her home to her mother.”

Tears poured from Carl’s right eye and both of Whitehall’s. She put her hands against her face and sobbed. “I’m so afraid that I lost her, Carl. I don’t know what to do.”

“Your daughter and I have a plan.” He turned to the headmaster. “I will require the Sacred Eye. The Devil’s Eye must be hidden securely in the hidden storage room, far away from the sarcophagus. I am hoping that will draw Greenleaf away from the Beast, if only for a minute or two.”

Dorchester took a few deep breaths. “What about the armies coming? How do we stop them?”

“Headmaster, I believe they will attempt to attack us with nuclear weapons first. The cocoon I have placed over the Azores should stop that. It will also prevent any soldiers from entering. I believe that the Beast may be able to get through it with Greenleaf and any others from Masterson. Everyone here must be prepared to fight them, but leave the Beast to me.”

“How are you going to stop the beast?” Dorchester asked.

“I’m not sure it that possible, but I have a couple of ideas. I can’t tell either of you because the Beast might be able to read your thoughts.”

Fear was etched on Dorchester’s face. “I understand.”

Carl turned to the gathered students and waved his arm again. Now, they were all sheep. He smiled and snapped his fingers. The flock moved around at random, bleating and almost at a state of panic.

“Listen to me!” Carl shouted. The sheep turned to face him. “This lesson may have been harsh, but it was necessary. I am not your enemy. Neither is Aida Whitehall. Her soul was ripped from her body by a demon that now inhabits it. I know this because her soul is inside me right now. It was the Beast who destroyed the United Nations. It is the Beast who will now attack this school. All of you will need to do your part, but please do not attempt to confront the Beast inside Aida’s body. It will destroy you without a thought or care. If you can slow down any of the others, please try.

“If you confront any of the others, please do not kill them. They are not evil. Their senses have been corrupted by the presence of the Beast.” He turned to the headmaster. “I know that is also true for Headmaster Greenleaf. He is being manipulated by the evil presence.” Carl waved his arm and the students were now themselves. Suddenly, they were washed in intense light, and the ground shook under their feet. “The attack has begun. The cocoon I erected over the Azores has stopped several nuclear bombs. Do your best, and tomorrow life can return to normal again.”

“What happens if the Beast prevails?” a student shouted from the crowd.

Carl looked down and sighed. Slowly, he looked up. “Many here will die. The survivors and everyone else on the planet will become slaves to the Beast.” The crowd broke up with many crying and others wondering if they would see tomorrow. Headmaster Dorchester led Carl and Clarisse away.

The nuclear attack lasted an hour. Two hours later, a conventional ordnance struck the cocoon, also to no effect. Most of the students had retreated into the woods or other parts of the island. The faculty members guarded the buildings, while Carl, Dorchester, and Whitehall waited in the hidden storage room.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Headmaster Dorchester walked up to the chair where Carl sat. "I have hidden the amulet, Carl. Would you like to know where?"

"I already know, Headmaster, and the series of locks and chambers is a stroke of genius."

Dean Whitehall was seated on the footstool. "What's happening outside the shield?"

"All military units have left the area. The Beast has fifty soldiers from Masterson, which includes Greenleaf and Eight. They are close now. The Beast will open the cocoon enough for them to enter at any moment."

"Can the beast destroy the shield?" Dorchester asked.

Carl shook his head. "Only by killing me."

"Some days, I wish I had not visited your school, Carl. You would be safe with your family then," Dorchester noted.

"I disagree, Headmaster. None of us had anything to do with the Beast choosing this time to rebel against his benefactor. If I were at home, nothing would have stopped him from destroying the world. At least now, we have a chance."

Whitehall put her hand on Carl's knee. "Thank you for removing the Founder's sarcophagus. It would have been a shame to lose it."

Carl smiled. "Frankly, it was in the way, but I doubt it will have much purpose anymore."

She removed her hand. "Yeah, when we're all dead, no one will care."

Carl did not reply, but slightly nodded his head. He stood up. "The cocoon has been breached. Please get into your positions."

As the teachers moved away, Aida's voice said, "I'm scared, Carl."

“Don’t be. You have a critical role to play and so do I. Just remember that I love you, and we’ll be together whatever happens.”

She sighed. “I’m ready.”

Explosions rocked the school grounds. Through the windows, Carl could see the enemy flying into the area in a V formation, with the Beast at the apex. The teachers and students on the ground had moved away from the path of the Beast and focused on the others. Lightning crackled and showers of flame shot from one group to the other. The formation of attackers broke ranks, with most of the force engaging the students and faculty in the woods. The remainder landed on the roof and in the atrium of the main building. The teachers in the main building attacked the intruders. Carl casually put his feet up on the ottoman and closed his eyes.

There was a massive explosion. Carl opened his eyes and looked out the window. The main school building was in ruins. The Beast, Greenleaf, and Eight were rapidly approaching the Gratia Dei Hall, while the remaining attackers fought the teachers on the ground. Carl turned away from the window and closed his eyes again. The windows in the storage room shattered and rained down inside the room. The Beast stood five feet from Carl’s feet, with Greenleaf and Eight close by. Carl pretended not to notice.

The Beast looked down on the teenager who appeared to be asleep. “What’s this then?” the Beast said with a growl.

Greenleaf bowed. “Master, I must recover the Devil’s Heart.”

The Beast now spoke with Aida’s voice. “Whatever for? It’s a paltry thing, hardly worth your time.”

“Please Master! It is the source of my power,” Greenleaf begged.

“I am the source of your power, Trenton! Not some meager gemstone.”

“I’m begging you, Master.”

The Beast walked over to the sleeping boy and looked down. “Well, my task here looks simple enough. Go ahead and take Thorndike with you.”

Both men bowed to the Beast. Greenleaf pointed and said, "You go in that direction, and I'll go in the opposite. If you find it, let me know." The men rushed away.

The Beast smiled. "So, this is the Invisible Hand. Not much to look at, although that body is more suited to me than this weak female. Time to end this, boy." The Beast reached down and put his hand on Carl's chest.

Carl opened his eyes. He could feel the Beast starting to pull his soul from his chest. Lightning bolts shot from his eyes, struck the Beast in the chest, and launched it across the room. As the Beast crashed against the bookcases on the opposite wall, Carl stood and began to move toward the enemy. He motioned with his hands, and all the items in the aisle way were pushed back. He could see the Beast getting back onto his feet. "Your benefactor is calling you, stupid. Time to go lick his boots again."

The Beast screamed, grabbed a bookcase, and flung it at Carl. Carl raised his hands, which stopped the bookcase in midair. He clenched his fist. The bookcase broke into a thousand arrows and shot back toward the enemy, who was pinned to the far wall by the projectiles. The Beast pulled himself free and extended his hands. A massive spear of flame shot toward Carl, who raised a cocoon around his body. The flames were deflected into the room. In seconds, the entire room was engulfed in flames. Carl flicked his hand, and the flames turned to water and sloshed onto the floor.

Eight has noticed the commotion behind him, but knew better than to get between the Beast and an Invisible Hand. He was opening cartons and rummaging through drawers and bookcases. He noticed a tall cabinet against the wall and walked to it. He pulled open the double-doors to find two bodies with sacks over their heads. One fell toward Eight, but he stepped aside quickly and let it hit the floor. He smiled for a second, until Dean Whitehall pulled the sack off her own head and then struck Eight in the chest, which launched him out the open window and down to the ground below. She jumped out the window and landed on his Eight's back, just as he was about to stand. Their battle has begun.

Greenleaf had found an unusual box. He had defeated several booby-traps and opened it. Inside was a second box, apparently carved from a single large emerald. After a few minutes, he was able to open it, fully

expecting to find the Devil's Heart inside. The box appeared to be filled with smoke or fog. He blew into the box, and the fog began to break. Now, he could see the Devil's Heart very far away. "What kind of magic is this?" Dorchester's hand shoved Greenleaf from behind, and somehow he fell into the emerald box, which was much too small for a person. Dorchester jumped in after him. The lid closed and the box disappeared.

Carl looked at Aida's body, soaking wet with a puddle forming under her feet. He started to laugh. After a few seconds, he turned right and walked in the direction Eight had gone.

"Don't walk away from me, Invisible Hand!" the Beast shouted. "I demand you bow down to me, or you will die."

Carl kept walking, but knew the Beast was not far behind now. "I'm sorry, moron, but I have things to do. By the way, your Benefactor called, and he needs you to clean his toilet again."

The Beast screamed. The building began to come apart at the seams. Carl turned around to see the flooring and walls disassembling before his eyes. Carl clapped his hands together in front of him. The building components moved back together, and the room was whole again. "This building is a historic landmark. There's a fine the Portuguese government will levy if you cause damage."

The eyes of the Beast glowed red. He charged. He slammed his hand into Carl's chest. "This body is mine now!"

Carl smashed his hand into the Beast's chest. "No, stupid, that body is mine!" Carl could feel the spirit of the Beast pulling his soul away again. In a fraction of a second, Aida's soul joined the fight.

A look of terror passed over the Beast's face. He screamed in agony and his arms fell loose by his side. Carl wrenched the soul from the Beast and tossed it across the room. Aida's body fell limply to the ground. The Beast screamed again. With no time to lose, Carl dropped to his knees and took Aida in his arms. He pressed his lips to hers and pushed his tongue into her mouth.

A second later, she returned the kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck. He pushed her back. "We'll do that later. He's coming."

She nodded and reached into Carl's pocket. She pulled out the Sacred Eye and hurried away on her hands and knees. Carl stood and prepared for the worst.

As the Beast returned, all the items in the storage room shot out of the windows and down to the grass below. He could only see the top of the head of the thing. It looked more like the head of a dinosaur or giant reptile than human. More priceless artifacts blasted out of the windows. "Boy, the fine you're going to pay is huge!" Carl said with a laugh.

The last of the items between Carl and the Beast flew out the windows. It stood fifteen feet away. The Beast appeared to be a reptilian human, standing on two feet. Its hands and feet had long claws, and massive fangs protruded from its upper jaw. "Bow to me and beg for my mercy, Carl Prescott. You are a weak human, but I am a divine immortal."

"I just have to say your name, and you'll spare us?"

The Beast nodded. "Yes. An Invisible Hand who speaks my name grants me his powers as well."

"Okay, that's cool. I'm not really sure what your name is though. Is it Shirley?"

The Beast screamed, which caused the room to tremble. The temperature soared. Carl could feel sweat on his skin. "You know what it is. I can read it in your mind."

Carl slapped his own forehead. "Oh silly me, your name starts with V-I, right?"

The Beast nodded and smiled, such as it could.

"Vicky!" Carl shouted.

The Beast screamed again and shot lightning at his victim.

Carl blocked the attack with his own lightning. The room was filled with sparks. Arcs of electricity bounced off the walls. Carl's hair stood on end. Gradually, the spot where the two streams of lightning met began to move back toward Carl. He pushed harder, but to no avail.

The Beast grinned. "It looks like your time to die has come, Carl. Too late for remorse when you're dead."

"I'd rather die than let you hurt anyone."

“Wish granted!” the Beast shouted and pushed his bolts even harder. The end of the Beast’s lightning was inches from Carl’s hands.

The Founder and Aida joined the fight, shooting their own streams of lightning at the Beast. He spread his attack to cover the three, but soon the lightning from the Beast had been pushed back almost to him. He screamed and pushed again, but to no effect. The three streams struck the Beast. A massive explosion blew the three from their feet and set the room on fire.

Carl sat up, coughing in the dense smoke. “Aida! Are you okay?”

Instantly, the fires and smoke disappeared. Carl could see Thorndike the First and Aida sitting up and smiling at him. An ornate doorway formed on the wall to their right. The door opened, and a man in a dark blue business suit walked in. He smiled at them, walked over to Aida, and pulled her to her feet. He kissed her on the cheek. “Very well done, Aida Whitehall. Your mother will be very proud, both of them.”

He stepped over to Thorndike and helped him up as well. “I bet you’re surprised to still be around, Bert.”

“Do I know you, sir?” Thorndike asked.

“Most everyone does, but I’ll let you figure it out.” He patted Thorndike on the back and then walked over to Carl, who was already standing.

The man shook Carl’s hand and then hugged him. “You’ve done an amazing job, Carl. I am proud of you, very proud.”

“Thank you, sir. If I may say so, your voice seems very familiar to me.”

The man laughed. “I’ve been told I have a common face and voice.”

“You’re the voice from the book!”

“I wasn’t aware that books could talk. Was it an audio-book?”

“No, I, uh, I don’t know what to say.”

“Who gave you this book anyway?”

“My benefactor.”

The man smiled broadly. “Oh, that book. Well, perhaps it was the voice of your benefactor that you heard.”

“You’re my benefactor!” Carl exclaimed.

“Well, to be honest, I am the only benefactor, if you know what I mean. The old tales about two or more are just fiction, but don’t tell anyone about that. People need to figure that out on their own.” He looked around at the room and destruction outside and clucked his tongue. “I do apologize for Victor’s actions here. This kind of thing doesn’t happen very often. I have to imagine I wasn’t giving him enough attention. I’ll have a talk with him later.”

“But we killed him.” Aida said.

The man motioned to Aida and Thorndike. “You two should come over here.” When they had arrived, the man continued, “I understand from your perspective, that would seem true. After all, all living things in this truth are born and die. But from my perspective, no one dies. You just move from one existence to another. Those brave enough to risk death choose physical existence. Yes, the body does pass away, but you live forever, with me.” Carl gasped, and tears poured down his cheeks. The man put his arm around Carl’s shoulders. “He understands now.”

The man walked to the center of the room, and the three followed him. A small orb of light was floating in the air. The man took the orb into his hand. He pressed it against his chest, and the orb slipped through his clothes. “You three stand very close to me for a moment.” When they were in position, all the items that had been in the storage room were around them. “All the damage here and elsewhere has been undone. Unfortunately, I cannot change the memories of the events that occurred. Now that everything seems unchanged, I hope most will consider those events as dreams. The normal drumbeat of life will wash the terror away. So it has always been with people.”

“Lord, what are we supposed to do now that the battle is over?” Carl asked.

The man put his hand on Carl’s shoulder. “Just call me Manny or Father if you prefer. We are all a family, and as such, there is no need for formality. The abilities you three have are no different from those

granted to every person. The difference is whether and how you use them. Carl was correct to presume that it was Victor's presence that changed Trenton's behavior. However, there is plenty of evil in this world and others. My children need your help, and if you can enable them to know the strength they too possess, the whole world will benefit."

"Manny, will you still speak to us through the book?" Aida asked.

Manny shook his head. "You don't need the book. We can speak and be together whenever you wish. And if any of you would like to visit me, just let me know. I'm sure our whole family would be happy to see you again." He took two steps back. "Enjoy your lives, and remember that I love each of you more than you know. I'll see you again." He walked back through the ornate doorway and closed the door behind him. Then the door and frame disappeared.

Chapter 18

The following morning, Carl walked into the dining hall to have breakfast. He noticed that the teachers' table had been moved into the main room. All conversation stopped, and everyone in the room focused on him. Carl smiled at the assembled crowd and waved meekly. Not seeing his friends, he walked over to a small table near the windows and sat by himself. He immediately noticed everyone was staring at him, so he moved to the chair on the opposite side of the table and looked outside. Soon, conversations began again, and he relaxed. Not wanting to upset the others, he stood and walked out the doors and into the atrium. Within a few minutes, he had left the main building and was walking toward a clump of trees not far ahead. He stopped at the first tree and sat with his back against its trunk. He pulled his knees up to his chest, dropped his head, and sighed deeply. After a few minutes, he felt someone was nearby, so he opened his eyes.

Manny sat two feet away. "What's wrong, Carl?"

Carl smiled. "I just feel like more of a freak than ever. The way they stared at me was unnerving. I just thought things could get back to normal. That's all I wanted."

Manny nodded and touched his knee for a moment. "I understand. It would seem that Professor Thorndike had a strong connection with his ancestor who fought alongside you. He saw what happened in that room and shared it with the faculty. Now, everyone knows. Fortunately, he did not know or speak about my appearance."

"But we saved everyone, didn't we? How does that make me a freak?"

"Carl, please stop using that word. You are not and have never been a freak. However, humans have no experience with immortals or demons. Most now believe them to be fantasy, yet a demon was there, and threatened to destroy the world. Based on many religions, most people believed that only a god or angel could defeat a devil or demon. Yet that is precisely what you three did."

"They're afraid of me?" Carl asked.

Manny laughed. “I don’t know that I would characterize it that way. I would say they thought angels and demons did not exist. Then they discovered that Victor was very real. Suddenly, the threat was defeated by two teenagers and a thousand year-old man whom they thought died long ago. Frankly, I understand their confusion. Many of their strongest beliefs were erased in front of them.”

“So, what happens now?”

“As I told you yesterday, the memories will fade, and new events will take their place. Then, these people will just remember how you and Aida saved the school from some villains. Everyone will just move on. Isn’t that what you said you wanted?”

Carl stood and pulled Manny to his feet. “Yes, that’s great.”

Manny patted Carl’s shoulder. “I suppose you’re wondering why Aida, Bertrand, and your other friends were not in the dining hall.” Carl nodded. “The entire Thorndike clan is on the other island sharing time together. Burt asked Grace to go along. I spoke with Bertrand the first earlier, and he told me he is ready to join me and leave this world.”

“He’s going to die?”

“Carl, didn’t you listen to me yesterday? Nobody dies. They all just move from one existence to another and always with me by their side.”

“I’m sorry, Manny. I must have forgotten.”

“That’s okay. From your perspective, it is normal to phrase it that way. He is almost a thousand years old and felt that was enough. He wanted some time to be with his family first.”

“I understand.” Carl extended his hand, which Manny shook heartily. “Thank you for your trust in me. I’ll try my best to help others.”

“I know you will. First, I need to tell you a few things I did not want to share with the others. Bertrand will know once he passes to the other side, and Aida is just discovering her talents. You however, are more comfortable with your abilities.”

“Okay, say what you want to say.”

Manny scratched his chin. "I may have understated the situation somewhat. The divisions within my family are getting out of hand, but as a father, I do not want to denigrate their feelings or stifle their ability to live their lives."

"I'm not sure I understand, Manny."

"Victor was the first, but will not be the last to strike out at me and my will. It is possible that open warfare may break out as more and more flee our home to make names for themselves in this reality or others. As you discovered with Victor, they will come for you first. If they can defeat you, they may believe they can openly go against me. You need to be prepared for what may well come to pass."

"I'm ready and not afraid."

Manny smiled. "I know you believe that, but they may turn other humans against you, as they did with Trenton Greenleaf. Your family and friends may decide you are the evil one and work to destroy you and those you love."

"I was wondering about that headmaster," Carl began. "You said the demon changed him, but you didn't say anything about Eight. Wasn't he corrupted by Victor too?"

"No. That particular Bertrand has always had a certain passion for self-aggrandizement and ignoring the rules. When Victor showed up on the scene, I am certain he chose to go along as a way to gain power and respect from his family."

"Respect? He tried to kidnap my friend and might have killed him. How can that gain him any respect?"

"There are different types of respect, Carl. You respect your parents because they care for and love you. You respect a rattlesnake because it can kill you. Bertrand would fit in the latter category."

"Why is everyone in your family so upset? Did you do something to them?"

Manny sighed and looked up. "Well, creation is a big place, and each of us have many different aspects to our minds and varying levels of emotional sensitivity. In that way, my children are very much like you, Carl. Do you know why?"

Carl shook his head slowly. "No."

“That spark inside of you and them is a piece of me. Ultimately, I am nothing more than the aggregation of all life. The difference between me and all living beings is perspective. I see all of creation as a singular whole. All others, including those like Victor and you, are limited in your view of creation. From my viewpoint, I see it whole and perfect. From your view, life can be challenging and your feelings can be hurt. You see the errors others make, and know you could do better. You can become jealous, envious, or resentful of your meager lot. Or you can be condescending, pompous, and cruel. Victor felt others were treated better than he, and that humanity was weak and easily controlled. He chose his actions to feel more powerful and respected. However, I can never feel that way about a living being because each of them is a part of me.”

“Manny, how am I supposed to fight them all? I’m just one kid.”

“Fighting is only one option. Perhaps you will discover other methods as you learn and grow. Also, remember that all life is part of me. Each living thing can help you, although sometimes in unexpected ways.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Manny smiled and nodded. “I know you will. Now I must take my leave; however, I have a small gift for you. Please take my hand.” When their hands met, both disappeared.

Carl stood in the entryway of his parents’ house. He heard muffled voices upstairs, so he rushed up the steps. Then, he stood staring into his parents’ bedroom. His father was sitting on the bed while his mother unpacked her suitcase. “It’s great to be home, honey.” Frank said. “I only wish Carl could be here too.”

“Hi,” Carl said softly. His parents turned to see him outside the door. Frank stood while Ginny rushed forward and pulled her son into her arms.

The End

