

Super Nobody

Alphas and Omegas: Book One

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Smashwords edition

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This book is dedicated to Alfred Siegert and Harold 'Grampa Honey' Meske, for being strong, gentle, patient, kind, passionate, good cooks, good fathers, good teachers, good grandfathers, and for giving me life, though it was years and years down the road. I wish they were both here today so I could thank them.

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Super Nobody

Chapter 1 - Poink!

Michael was in sixth grade when he witnessed his first kid going up in flames.

One of the biggest problems with being in middle school is how quickly your friends turn on you. Michael knew it well enough. All the athletic kids, all the normal ones who didn't bother to question their friendships, they were all well and good. He wasn't one of them. He also didn't seem to grow quickly enough either, because he was always picking up cute little names like chopsticks, beanpole, string bean, twerp, geek, nerd. There were plenty of others.

The smart kids wouldn't have anything to do with Michael. He was a magnet for abuse from the bigger kids. As long as the geniuses at the Lincoln Area District Consolidated Elementary Middle School (LADCEMS) stayed away from Michael, all of them would head home at three o'clock with all their teeth, ice-cream free hair, their underwear intact, all parts present and accounted for.

Michael wasn't nearly as lucky.

All his friends had drifted away as soon as fifth grade hit. Some of them, like Richie Lewiston and Marc Olenkiewicz suddenly developed muscles, joined sports teams, and realized how much they had never really liked Michael to begin with. Others like Jordie Munsen and Jeff McNulty moved to different schools. Everybody else realized that Michael had shown up on the seventh graders' radars.

The first day of fifth grade ended up with him getting hit in the head with a rubber dodge ball at lunchtime. In the daze that followed, Michael wondered just how quickly his friends could have disappeared. It was like everyone developed invisibility or super speed as soon as the ball made that silly *poink* sound and the asphalt hit him on the other side of his head. And the oddest thing was that dodge ball was happening a good fifty yards away.

Two kids came over to grab the ball, already laughing. One was a tall, powerfully built seventh grader with a beaky nose and one of those bowl-over-the-head haircuts. As ridiculous as his face looked, nobody looked past the arms much. His name was Trent and he wore shirts two sizes too small.

“Man down! Man down!” the other kid laughed. This one was almost as tall as Trent, but put together from all the wrong parts. He had huge hands and feet, but comically thin arms and legs. His body seemed too small, with his hands swinging down around his knees, and a dopey face that seemed to be ears and not much more. This thing was named Davey Rightman.

“Don’t call *that* a man,” Trent told him. “Looks more like a popsicle stick with arms and legs.” He grabbed Davey by the face and pushed him away. He staggered, still laughing, as Trent bent down and jerked Michael to his feet. He bent down, quite a ways, and looked Michael in the eyes. Then he brushed some invisible dirt off Michael’s shirt.

Michael was aware that most of the kids on the playground had stopped playing, and a crowd was watching intently. It was sort of eerie the expectant and hushed way they were staring. This had to happen to somebody, and in the hot early September air, everyone else was hoping, hoping against hope that it wouldn’t be them. They were all secretly hoping Michael would have that huge target painted on his chest. Whether they felt guilty about wishing this on him or not, he couldn’t see any help coming.

“Unlucky,” Trent said. Michael’s vision was still swimming a bit, and his head was surely the size of a beach ball. It contained that much pain anyhow.

“Cough up,” Davey said. He was finally back next to Trent.

“Huh?” Michael asked at last.

“Trent here helped you up. Brushed the dirt off you. Made you presentable.”

“No way to make you look presentable,” Trent said conversationally.

“Well,” Davey said, “As much as he could. Fee for presentable is ten bucks.”

Michael’s mind whirled in confusion and pain. “Huh?”

“Got us a smart one here,” Trent muttered. “What’s your name kid?”

“Michael,” he said.

“Michael,” Trent said. “You’re in...what...third grade?”

He was dimly aware that they were making fun of him. At last he said, “Fifth.”

They shared a look of surprise, and then Davey burst out into high-pitched laughter. Trent grinned, and Davey took over the interrogation.

“Last name, fifth grade Michael?”

“Washington,” he said.

“Michael Washington, fifth grade. Put your hands in your pockets.”

Michael could do that. He did.

“Pull out what’s in there,” Davey said.

“What? No!” he said. Understanding had hit him like a dodge ball. *Poink!*

Trent just stared at him for a few moments. Then he straightened, shrugged, and turned to walk off.

“I were you, I’d find a good funeral home,” Davey said before he, too walked off.

Everybody was still staring at him, like those red dots from scopes in the video games.

It was done. Nuclear Launch Detected.

School that day didn’t matter. It was only the first day and none of the teachers were saying anything important. There wasn’t going to be any homework. The laws of karma and public elementary school required this. No reason not to dwell on his death. He did this throughout the last two hours of school, thinking about how many of them there would be, and how long it would take. Would he be able to scream? He doubted it.

They caught up to him on the way home. Actually, it wasn’t just Trent and Davey. He was walking home in a massive group of other kids, varying grades and an array of heights, when he realized he was surrounded by a bunch of taller, meaner looking kids. Davey was one of these.

He smiled, which made his head seem all teeth instead of all ears. “Let’s head across Wilson, kiddo.” With that, a pair of hands grabbed him and began hauling him across the busy street, away from the kids all walking home.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Hey!”

Davey’s fist looped around in a wide arc and walloped him in the stomach. All the air left him, and what was worse, no more air was coming in. He couldn’t make himself breathe. He was floating in space, eyes bugging out, choking on nothing.

Gradually, through the pain and the fear, Michael realized Trent was in front of him, and that huge hand was on Michael's jaw. He was being carefully inspected.

“You didn’t hit him in the face.”

“Course not,” Davey said, from far away.

“Good.” He turned his attention on Michael. “You’re gonna bring me ten bucks,” he said.

“Right?”

Michael nodded miserably. When he tried to close his eyes and block out the sight of Trent's gorilla face above him, the seventh grader slapped him lightly.

"Eyes on me. And tomorrow, at lunch, you come bring it to the dodge ball court. Give it to me front of everybody. You got me?" Trent's little posse was laughing. Other kids were watching as they walked slowly by. He was reminded of heading up north one year to visit some relatives, seeing a semi truck on its side and another car crumpled up nearby, with police milling everywhere. Traffic had just about stopped in both directions, which had made his father swear under his breath in a way Michael had never forgotten. Only now he was the wrecked car, and Trent was the semi truck...only not on his side.

Michael's face burned with humiliation and shame. Mostly it was fear. A couple of light slaps brought him back face to face with Trent.

"Answer me."

"Yeah," he gasped at last. His ability to breathe was returning.

"You tell any teachers or parents or whatever, I'll know," Trent said, and grabbed a handful of skin, pinching him and causing him to gasp in agony.

Michael nodded miserably. He understood.

"Now, there you go. Two yeses in a row. That wasn't so hard." He pulled Michael to his feet and slugged him in the exact same place Davey had hit him. He felt his shoes leave the ground, and then he was on his side, his face on the grass and the rest of him on the sidewalk. He was a fish out of water.

"Never tell me no again, got it?" Trent said over his shoulder.

Michael spent most of his fifth grade year doing two things: delivering papers so he could make Trent's weekly payments, and saving up for a bike to take him back home faster. Most days he could rocket out of school, be on his bike, and be near his house before Trent and Davey and the other jerks could even ask where he was.

His paper route actually turned out to be a huge blessing in disguise. He had to deliver a paper to the library every day, which wasn't really cool since it was well out of the way and he had to cross a really busy street. It was cool, however, once he stopped to ask for the library's money and the woman behind the counter gave him a free e-reader.

She wasn't the type of librarian he had seen in a pair of movies, the ones who were steel-haired hags with gold chains attached to their spectacles (these ones were so old they didn't even

use the right word: glasses) and flower print dresses with doilies attached. This librarian was a blonde-haired goddess who left the top two blouse buttons undone and who had to chide several men every day for asking her to go up the ladders to get some books they really didn't need. Her name was Lily, he knew it by the nametag: I'M HERE TO HELP!!! MY NAME IS Lily.

He had noticed a pair of kids clicking on a huge digital music player, and sneered at them just as Lily gave him the money in a little envelope, just like always.

"You shouldn't get down on them just for wanting to read," Lily said.

"Huh?" he asked. "Read?"

"Sure," Lily said. "E-readers."

Oh yeah, his grandfather had a tablet at home and was always scrolling on the thing, reading the news and whatnot.

"But it's not a tablet. No touch screen or anything."

"They're the old versions," Lily explained. And he drifted off into her blue-gray eyes while she explained about the buttons and the long battery life, even though they were over thirty years old. A ton had been donated to the library when the tablets got more popular.

"You want to try one out?" she asked.

"But...I don't have any money."

"They're free. I'll just need your home phone so if you don't return it, I can come and get you in the night." She winked and smiled. Some sleeping part of Michael stirred. He didn't understand it yet, and wouldn't for another few years. By then, of course, Lily would be dead and everything would be out of control.

But nobody knew the future, nobody Michael knew, and he would be able to see her and talk to her every time he finished a book. He just told her what to write down on the paperwork, and she handed him a white square thing with a leather case.

"There you go," she said. "In two weeks, the Hobbit is going to delete itself and the reader will call me to tell me where it is. So just bring it back in if you don't like it."

He loved it. He was back in four days to get the first of Lily's recommendations, a late twentieth century masterpiece called Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. And Harry didn't take no guff from no Slytherin.

There were Stephen King books, where the bullies got eaten by giant space spiders, and Watership Down, where the rabbits banded together to fight the bullies. There were Fablehaven

tales, where the kids had to spend their time in a magical reserve for faeries and satyrs and dragons and stuff. Five in that series. He devoured page after page on his little e-reader, clicking the thing furiously at night after his parents told him it was lights out. He went through Percy Jackson, who could control water just by thinking real hard (five books there), and His Dark Materials, where the kids had shapeshifting Daemons that could attack and spy and stuff. Three long books. There were four kids who went through their uncle's wardrobe and came out in a place that was always winter. Seven books. Michael was unstoppable. The librarian would just roll her eyes whenever he walked in, to plug in his e-reader and get something else loaded up.

“What is it today?” he'd ask.

And she'd always say it was a surprise, but he would like it. In this one, the unlucky kid teamed up with a magical squirrel, a talking toothpick and a girl who could freeze people solid.

“Leven Thumps,” he would say quietly, as he started reading on the way home. “Stupid name.” But then he wouldn't be able to stop clicking the next page button until after midnight.

This was how fifth grade went.

Michael was too young to know or be bothered by how lonely he was. He just watched movies with his mom, and dad when he was around, read comic books, and devoured novel after novel.

In June, one of his former friends stopped him in the hall. Billy and a whole ton of others had given up on him after that *poink*.

“Hey Michael,” he said. His face was already flaming scarlet, and he was looking around to see if anybody noticed him talking to the class head case.

“Yeah?”

“Trent's going over to Patterson for eighth grade. Just thought you should know.”

Michael was confused at first. He'd grown so used to paying Trent his money every week (and later twice a week) that it was just a fact of life. He never thought about Trent anymore, or the gut punches Trent threw in just for the fun of it, or the way none of the other kids looked at him. He was already far away.

The last day of school hit, and so did Trent. Michael was enjoying the exploits of a kid who was supposed to be a Warrior but who had a Wizard stone in his chest when he found himself on the ground. He dimly heard the *poink!* Of the rubber ball smashing into his face, and he dimly felt the tears. It was his nose.

“Oh man, that's my bad. My bad.” but that voice didn't sound apologetic. Through the stars flashing around his vision, Michael saw Trent and Davey hover into view.

“Michael Washington!” Trent said. “Would you look at this. Lucky for me I had a chance to come talk to you before he finished out.”

“Lucky!” Davey giggled. He almost sounded like a girl. “Lucky!”

“Listen bud, I got to thank you for all the money. But I'm leaving today, so you're gonna have to give me another twenty. Nothing personal you know, just a leaving fee. Little...what did old man Schektor say that word was? Ah...memorabilia. That's it.”

“A parting gift!” Davey was in hysterics. Michael realized they were standing just next to his fallen e-reader. He couldn't see it well enough. Was it broken?

“But listen bud, I'm leaving Davey here to watch out for you next year. He got held back, see. You just keep up with the payments, and Davey's gonna see they get to me. Got it? Got it? Hey, Washington, you listening to me? What the...oh, this?”

He stooped down and picked up the e-reader.

“What is this...the Warrior Heir. Think you're some sort of warrior, is that it?”

Davey doubled over, and Michael felt that unnatural silence flow over the playground, just like on the first day.

“Don't...don't do anything...that's not mine.”

“It sure isn't,” Trent told him. “Anything you have belongs to me.”

And he threw the e-reader down onto the pavement. Just the sound of it sent red waves of anger shooting down into his guts. Then Trent lifted his size ten way up high, and when Michael reached for it, stomped both the e-reader and Michael's hand.

He felt the glass crack under his palm, and the shards started digging in. As Trent ground his heel down, the bones started to creak and crack. The pain was explosive.

Then he was on his feet, and he felt Narnia and Foo and Middle Earth all coursing up his arm, which was swinging up to meet Trent's beaky nose. His bloody hand cracked against Trent's face. He snarled like the golden monkey daemon and only wished he had the sword of Gryffindor so he could hack Trent's soul right apart.

The big seventh grader fell back, shielding his face, yelling out.

“This kid is crazy! Geddimoffme!”

“You see my blood here! It's like battery acid!” Punch after punch fell down, he had battle axes for hands, just like Oin and Gloin and Thorin. If he couldn't put on a ring and be invisible, then he was going to smash his way through the problem. Dimly, he heard screams, but they were screams of triumph. The other kids were cheering him on.

“What would Percy Jackson do, you son of a-” He would have liked to finish the thought, but strong hands grabbed him around the arms and yanked him up off the ground. He knew the arms were a teacher's, just by the smell of aftershave.

Nobody was applauding him, or screaming his name. He wasn't a hero to anybody. In those few seconds, Michael had gone from pitied target to shunned, crazy outcast.

Chapter 2 - Super Awkward

And that was how fifth grade ended, with him going home to his grandfather and explaining that he'd broken the e-reader and he would pay for it out of his paper route earnings. Beating the tar out of Trent Millickie had slipped his mind in the furious storm roiling in his head over the thing he enjoyed most in the world.

He had been so looking forward to a summer of reading and reading and reading that he was physically shivering by the time he arrived at his grandfather's house.

The house looked like every other one on the block, a tall and pointy thing that didn't seem as wide from the outside as it actually was once you got inside. The sparkling emerald grass, the blocky hedges and the slate gray, almost bluish siding on the house only made it seem like a quaint, perfect suburban gem.

Michael's grandfather, Harold Washington, was seated where he always sat: at a rocking chair on his low porch, slowly puffing on a pipe and poring over the news on his tablet. He noticed Michael approaching and set the pipe down, tapped out some sort of code on the tablet, and put it aside too.

He was a very old man, Michael knew that much. Grandpa didn't have any of his own teeth, just the neat rows of slightly coffee-stained dentures, and he had a little gizmo in his ear (a hearing aid, and it was the only one Michael had ever seen), and a whole bunch of liver spots. Grandpa never seemed to have a bad word to say about anybody, and he was so old and sure of himself that it seemed he didn't mind being alone all the time.

"Well hey there kiddo," he said. It took a few more moments for Michael's condition to register. "Seems like you're a bit late. What brings...what happened? Let's get a look at that hand now."

Michael's chest was so constricted that he was squeezing out tears when he tried to talk. Grandpa had to take hold of him and murmur quietly to him that he was going to be fine, that the world wasn't coming to an end.

In halting, shaky breaths, Michael got out the story of his e-reader under Trent's boot, but didn't even bother with the part about the fight. As far as he was concerned, there wasn't anything

else to fight about. The reader was broken and school was over. Trent and Davey and school teachers had disappeared into a sort of summer fog, where only Michael and his thoughts and the few blocks around his house existed at all.

"Let me get this straightened out," Grandpa said. "You paid this kid twenty bucks today?"

Michael nodded. Speaking was giving him all sorts of trouble he didn't want to deal with, so he stuck with the basics.

"And this ain't the first time. No, I can see it ain't. You been payin him ever since you got that paper route, haven't you?"

Michael nodded. The reproach and surprise in Grandpa's voice had clenched the fist around his chest again. He had never heard his grandfather sound angry. Ever. Then the tone softened, and Grandpa put an arm on his shoulder. Michael's guts didn't stop squirming. He couldn't get over the feeling that he'd somehow let his grandfather down.

"You got that paper route just so you could pay him, huh?" When he nodded again, Grandpa said, "We'll just see about that. He's that little Millickie kid ain't he? Yeah. You go on inside and grab yourself a root beer."

Michael didn't know what Grandpa was up to, but he saw the old man pick up the tablet and make a complex set of touches to the screen before he headed inside and found the IBC in the fridge. When he returned, Grandpa wasn't reading the news on the tablet, he was talking into it.

"...he's been payin this bully twenty bucks every week or so for the whole school year. That sort of nonsense can't stand here. Specially not here. And this Millickie kid busted up library property. Well let me tell you, that snot had no idea who he was messing with."

"Grandpa no!" Michael blurted.

"Just have some root beer there, chief," Grandpa told him. "This fiasco's gonna be sorted out before you can get to the end of the bottle, mark me."

Sudden terror flashed through Michael. He couldn't just let Grandpa take care of these things for him. It wasn't that Trent and his goon squad were going to beat him up every day. He could take that. It was the insults he wouldn't be able to bear. The humiliation was already spreading through him, up his ears and over his cheeks. Grandpa's boy. Gramp's little baby boy, couldn't handle himself.

Worse than that, he didn't want Trent's little posse showing up at Grandpa's house, ever. He didn't want them toilet papering it, he didn't want them to throw rocks at it. Trent and his gang would think those sorts of things were just hilarious. He couldn't believe anyone would ever hurt his Grandpa, but he could believe Trent's gang would harass Grandpa. He'd seen a few movies where stupid kids did stupid stuff like that.

"Please Grampa, don't," he said. Something in his tone must have struck Grandpa the right way, because he put the tablet on hold and looked up.

"What's the matter chief?"

"I...I hit Trent today. After he...and my hand...he had to go to the hospital."

A couple of wheezy laughs escaped Grandpa. "That so?"

Relief flooded through his body, and Michael realized that he wasn't in trouble after all. Grandpa wasn't disappointed in him, he was furious with Trent. Michael broke into a huge smile. "I think I broke his nose."

"And you don't want your money back out of this turd?"

Trent was a turd, and Michael had the sudden idea that Grandpa could, and would, flush him. He giggled, then stopped. "No...I can take care of it."

After all, school was out and Trent was lost in the not-from-his neighborhood mist that enveloped everyone but a few kids he could have called friend until the beginning of fifth grade. Only now, he had to deliver his papers. And at the end of that route was Lily. At the end of that discussion with Lily, however terribly it was going to go, was the ache in his chest. She would never entrust him with another e-reader after this. But it had to be done, just like the papers had to go in the mailboxes and screen doors of the people who still wanted things printed on old-fashioned, get-ink-all-over-your-fingers type newsprint.

He liked the paper route basically because he could be alive in any little universe he wanted to. Mostly these days he was walking from place to place with his nose buried in the e-reader, clicking page after page as he strolled up in his silly white bag with the bright orange, swerve-to-avoid-me trim, which was bigger than he was.

When he didn't want to read, he could always just have phantom conversations with whoever he chose to, like Trent, or Lily, or his mom or dad. This was just as well, since he couldn't actually talk to any of them, least of all his dad. Dad was always off on some sort of

business trip thing, something that took him all over the world and left him home several days a month.

As his route neared the end, and he was coming up on the Van Buren light, Michael reviewed how the conversation with Lily was going to go. He knew it was going to start with her face all twisted up in horror, then a look of fury, and it would end with her hands on her hips.

“Oh Michael,” she would breathe, and not in the way he wanted her to. He didn’t know how he wanted her to say it, and didn’t even know that he wanted her to say his name in a certain way. But the way it played out in his mind was a big sigh of disappointment.

“I’m really sorry...” and his shoes were fascinating. The concrete beneath his feet was fascinating, with the irregular lumps of rock forever sunk into it like quicksand. Like that part in Jumanji.

“Sorry won’t put the screen back in the e-reader,” she would say, and maybe add a ‘buster’ on there. She seemed like the sort of lady who wanted to swear but always stopped herself because it wasn’t proper, and it definitely wasn’t proper in front of an almost sixth grader.

“I can...I can pay you back for it,” he would say.

“Good luck. Those things aren’t cheap you know. As a matter of fact, forget about the whole thing. We’ll just stop our subscription. You won’t need to come out here and possibly wreck the whole building.”

Though he saw the conversation going another way, possibly. She would be so distraught over his hand that she would lead him back into a little office, strewn with all sorts of books, and fawn over the injury. She’d tell him how brave he was, and not to worry about the e-reader, the library was going to give him another one. No, they weren’t just going to give him another one, they were going to give him a special present. An award for bravery, and a complementary e-reader with all the books he could stuff onto the thing. He would have to charge the thing’s battery every day.

And then she would look up into his eyes, and smile at him. It would be a cute, unsure smile, and then they would both realize her hand was on his knee...

“Yuck,” he said aloud, and then realized he wasn’t alone. A cyclist was relaxing nearby at the the corner of Van Buren, waiting on the light. The man gave him half an amused grin, and zipped off as soon as the light changed. Michael headed across the street and down the block toward the library, towards destiny.

What ended up happening at the library wasn't either of the scenarios he'd thought up. Lily was waiting for him, her beautiful features pulled into a sad smile.

"Your grandfather called a little while ago," she said. "He told me what happened. I'm really sorry Michael."

He handed the reader over silently.

"I wish I could give you another one," she said, "but I'm all rented out right now. That kid who broke it is a real jerk, right? But you laid the smackdown on him huh?"

"Yeah," Michael said, embarrassed and flaming pink at the non-compliment. He shuffled his feet, wanting to stay and talk with her, but terrified of what he would say.

"Well don't tell your mom and dad I said so," she said, lowering her voice and looking about to make sure she wasn't overheard, "but sometimes a-holes like that Trent kid deserve to get punched right in the kisser. You did a great thing today, Michael, and you did it on your own. Great job."

He felt a thrill shoot through him, that she would swear in front of him. He felt all grown up for a few moments. Then she held up her hand.

"High five," she said.

Oh yeah, he felt eleven again. But he gave her a high five anyway.

He headed home after waving goodbye to Lily, and not to Grandpa's house either. Dread swept over him again as he thought of his mother's reaction to the bloody bandages wrapped around his hand. But he needn't worry about being grounded or screamed at. Apparently that was what his father was for.

The strangeness started the minute he walked through the door. Michael's mother Susanna was the bedrock of the Washington household, the type of woman who looks like she may be made of bone china but is actually reinforced titanium with a brilliant shine. She had a razor tongue, most especially for baggers who weren't paying attention to what was going on in the supermarket, the people who sent bills in the mail, and for Michael's father. She wasn't much taller than Michael, and the common joke around the house was that when Michael hit his growth spurt she was going to be the baby of the family. Still, Susanna Washington's hips were shaped to have her fists balled on them, and her eyebrows had that soft arch that could travel up in concern, or turn wicked at any time.

She rushed straight up to him just as soon as the front door opened, making baby noises at him.

“Ooh, there's my widdle Michael...are you alwight?”

“Mom, I'm not three,” he said. She ignored him, pulling up his bandaged hand and inspecting the job the school nurse had done. He could see the dressing go through the inspection process. If it wasn't up to snuff, she would be on the phone, leaking acid into the ears of his school administration. She had transformed into a demon when Mrs. Richardson had checked a mistake as right on his third grade spelling test.

“Did they get all the glass out?”

“Yes mother,” he whined. “I'm fine. Really.”

“And who is this...this bully?” she spat the word.

“He's just some kid at school.”

“And you've given him hundreds of dollars for no good reason, is that it?”

No, he wanted to tell her, he did it so Trent would keep smiling instead of following him home and punch him in the guts every day with his band of merry idiots. He did because the paper route wasn't difficult. It was an hour and a half a day, seventy houses and the library, and he did it because he got the chance to talk to Lily several times a week. He couldn't tell her any of that though. She wouldn't understand. Susanna Washington wasn't the sort of person who just listened and nodded. She listened while coiled, ready to get on the phone or in the car, and make someone's life miserable until she got what she wanted. Michael had worked hard at this Trent thing, and though he was sort of proud of himself for beating the snot out of him, it wasn't what he wanted to do. There were a lot of Trent's shadows around, lots of them in fifth and sixth grade. They were vicious, they liked to smash bottles and leave the shards under peoples' car tires. They liked to let the air out of the tires in the entire bike rack, and grab peoples' lunches in the morning, just so they could shake up the cokes until they burst and rocketed across the ground. Beating up Trent wouldn't put them off his scent. They would swarm him every single day after school.

“Mom,” he sighed. She didn't understand, wouldn't understand. She wasn't built like him.

“I'm waiting for an explanation, young man. You know perfectly well that your father and I are here for you. We put clothes on you, I feed you three meals a day. We put a roof over your head. I carried you in my body for nine months, and I will be-”

Oh great, the nine months thing. This was her favorite guilt trip. He phased out of her rant, where she talked about feeding him and burping him and playing with him for years and years. Duh mom. Who did she expect birthed him and raised him?

“Well young man? What do you have to say for yourself?”

But he couldn't look at her. First of all, he didn't want to meet her eyes, see the confusion there, the hurt and the guilt. Second of all, he didn't want to have to try to explain something he just couldn't.

He was ready to build his wall out of 'I don't knows' when his father walked through the door.

“Dad?” he asked. He was supposed to be in Guatemala or something. Somewhere in South America.

His father filled up the entire doorway. He was the complete opposite of his wife: he looked like a Terminator was trapped under his skin, but he couldn't argue with anybody. He was a marshmallow on the inside. He had those bright blue eyes that showed every single emotion he was feeling, and the intense brow didn't help in the slightest. His face could have been chiseled from granite, and Michael sometimes wondered where his neck had gone off to. He was dressed in a suit, which looked just wrong. Anything but construction clothes or overalls just didn't feel right, and the briefcase in his hand seemed like a toy.

“Hey dude.” His father's eyes flickered from him to his mother and back. Worry creased his forehead, but disappeared as soon as Michael leaped up into his arms. He transferred Michael to one arm, forming a seat for his son, and put the briefcase down. Michael's head came close to brushing the ceiling.

“What's going on? I heard you kicked some royal butt. Broke a kid's nose? Nicely done!”

“Michael Edward Washington!” Mom shrieked. “Don't you dare put these ideas in his head. Fighting other boys at school? You must be out of your mind!”

“Dude,” his father whispered. “Go on and hang out in your room. Turn up the music nice and loud.”

He went, but no music. He'd never seen his mother blow a gasket like that before. She wasn't even going to stop long enough for him to get all the way upstairs and close the door. It started as soon as he was half way up.

She swore like Davey, a nice circle of acidic words Michael had never heard from her before. “You need to pull your head out of your butt, Michael! You know your son can't be fighting.”

“Susie...”

“Don't you give me that happy crap, Michael. It's not too early. There is no fighting over at that school. Not in this town. I don't care how they do it anywhere else, our son will not be a part of that. And you. Encouraging him. Like you left every speck of your brain back in whatever armpit of the world you just crawled out of.”

“Now that's not fair,” his father said quietly.

Michael didn't hear what came next. He strained to hear what his mother was saying, but they'd either moved out of the living room or she was whispering too quietly. He was about to head back down a few stairs when she exploded again.

“You see if I don't!” she bellowed. “I will not stay in this place with a husband who's not really my husband, pretending everything is fine when it's not, and you're trying to blast apart the entire establishment just because you never played baseball when you were a kid.”

“Sue, please...stop talking like that.” At first, Michael wasn't sure what he was hearing. His father's voice wasn't right. It was cracked and uneven. Then the light bulb clicked on: his father was choking down tears. “You're not being fair...”

His mother's shrill and bitter tone carried all the way up the stairs. “Fair. Talk to me about fair. I swear to God, Michael, if you are still here when I get back, I'm going to your father's house and I'm finishing this entire farce.”

Michael didn't know what a farce was, but it was probably another version of the D word. And it was that word, the D word, that Michael understood was the most horrible thing parents could do to each other. He didn't know what it meant really, or what the actual word was, but it seemed like it was worse than murder.

The door slammed, and his father made a sound that Michael had never heard a grownup make before. It was half a laugh, and half a sob. And when Michael Senior appeared at the base of the stairs, Michael Junior got the biggest shock of his short life.

His father's face was blotchy, red, and crumpled miserably. Tears poured down the normally stone face, and without thinking, Michael went down several stairs, level with his dad. Just like with his mother, Michael didn't have any words. Instead, his father just pulled him into

an awkward hug under the wood railing. Michael felt several days worth of stubble against his face and neck. And the tears. In the middle of his chest, it felt as though something large and spiky was shifting around, until it reached the bottom of his stomach. It settled down there and had an uncomfortable nap.

Chapter 3 - The New Tune

Only two things happened in the next two years that were worth mentioning, aside from lots more schoolwork and various teachers. The first happened on the very first day of sixth grade, just as he knew it would. The Trent legacy wasn't forgotten. Of course not. He just had to wait until it came and *poinked* him in the head. Only in sixth grade, he wasn't going to be stupid about the whole thing. He went out at lunch recess that day warily, watching the skies for incoming dodge balls and sneaking Trent shadows.

Looking around the playground, he was surprised to find that nothing had changed. It was one of those wonderful things about school; the first graders were swarming the place, and they looked smaller than ever. Second graders were engaged in the beginnings of cliques. Clusters of girls could be seen here and there, talking and giggling. Boys scrabbled around on all fours or threw themselves off the monkey bars recklessly. The older kids were playing four square, lined up and talking about strategies. They were dodging and shooting hoops as well. Other groups were looking at cards or comics. A few, he knew, were in the library drawing or reading books.

And nobody came over to him. None of them launched a dodge ball at him, or made an obviously horrid pass with a basketball to whack him in the chest. In fact, when he finally meandered over and around the playground, he got the distinct impression that people were watching him. Nobody would stare at him, of course, not full on. But there were a bunch of times he could have sworn people kept looking away as soon as he turned to look at them.

The fact hit home just as soon as he sat down on one of the courtside benches. The four girls who were sitting at the other side immediately got up and left. He had the whole bench to himself.

The very idea that people were scared of him made him laugh. Which made more of them stare at him. And that, of course, made him laugh harder. So he went and sat in the mini section of bleachers at the opposite of the court. It was like in Panetti's art class, when they dropped rubbing alcohol on watercolor. One second there was vibrant color, and the next second there was a perfect circle of white, the color retreating.

He couldn't stop laughing for a whole week. By the end of that week, he was sure everyone thought he was completely insane. He wasn't sure they were wrong, but boy did it feel great to be free of Trent's long reach.

Speaking of Trent, where exactly was he? Michael had lived in a sort of bubble for the first eleven years of his life, not really considering where other people were, or what they were doing. More than that, he was never sure if Trent was punished for breaking one of the bones in Michael's hand, or why his family hadn't called and been outraged. The whole thing had just disappeared.

The conclusion was that Trent had gone over to the Marcus Patterson wing, which wasn't actually a wing. It was a squarish building, dirty and ominous, a football field away from the LADCEMS. As far as he knew, it was a prison and the eighth graders never had any sort of break at all. They just vanished.

The nice scars on his hand hadn't disappeared. He hadn't imagined the whole thing. They were puckered craters, lighter than the skin on the rest of his hand. There were a couple of others on his palm, from where the glass had cut into him. As the weeks went by, he liked to pretend that they were bothering him, and stretch his hand out while hissing loudly. Everybody got the message.

Michael's former friends from grades one through four stayed gone. So what if they'd had good times in grades one through four. Good riddance, Michael thought. He was better served traveling to some far distant land, where people landed on solid clouds and met pirates who collected lightning. These were his friends. They didn't demand anything of him, and he controlled when they came and went.

He spent the first semester studying hard, because there wasn't anything else to do and because his mother demanded nothing less than perfection. Once, at the beginning of the first semester, his science teacher had told Susanna that her son seemed 'vacant' in class, which resulted in lessons on how to focus, posture practice, and just how often he needed to raise his hand in class. When his mother was finished with him, he was a model student. He didn't have a choice, really. His mother confiscated any books in his room until his homework was finished, along with the computer, the video games, and any toys he still hadn't sold at garage sales.

If he hadn't been public enemy number one with his peers, Michael might have been picked on for getting straight A's all through sixth grade.

He spent a routine Christmas break, totally exploding when he got a new e-reader from his mother. This was the new type with the glasses to project the illusion of a book into your hands. You wore these little battery powered things on your thumbs to turn the pages, and it was literally the coolest thing in the whole wide world. Lily went nuts when he showed her.

“You're totally lucky,” she told him. “You should tell your parents how much this means to you.”

Yeah, he'd get right on that, just as soon as he morphed into a girl and put unicorn posters up all over his walls.

So she started to put e-books onto the page-turner, which also contained the miniature hard drive. Miniature wasn't meant to imply that it had a low capacity. His mother told him it would store more than 5,000 books, as long as they weren't in color or had a ton of pages each.

He had paid off the e-reader a long time back, with the money from his paper route. If he hadn't, he would have given the thing to Lily instead.

His dreams were now being invaded by the young, pretty librarian. He couldn't really understand why, either. One minute, he'd be having a perfectly normal dream about fighting a ringwraith alongside his faithful daemon, a brilliant orange tiger. The next minute, Lily was chained up and screaming for him to come save her before the kraken devoured her. And the thing is, he would, every time. He ran up the steps carved into the mountain, slaying evil troops with skull masks until he got to her, and she would breathlessly thank him.

He kept waking up feeling confused and ashamed and funny at the same time.

The second important thing happened when Christmas was over.

After the break, he found a new face in his classes. She was definitely the strangest girl he had ever seen. She walked in dressed in, get this, in a suit much too big for her. Somewhere under the pants were gleaming leather loafers. She was very pale, but didn't look unhealthy. Her thin, sharp face was set with searching eyes the color of overcast clouds and blonde hair done up in a loose ponytail. The girls started snickering just as soon as she walked in the door, and the boys were nudging each other, eyes wide. Michael didn't much care either way, since none of the teachers had figured out he was reading his books with his special glasses on. He was in the middle of the last book of the Lord of the Rings, and it was shaping up to be way better than the movie. The first movie had been pretty awesome, and pretty close, and by now Michael was tracking all the huge changes the filmmakers had made.

“So she's weird,” he muttered. “Big deal.”

Mr. Shepherd called for silence, and he introduced the new girl to the class. Michael wasn't listening. Sauron's Mouth was coming out of the massive gates to inform Aragorn they all had a one way ticket to the worm farm.

“Mr. Washington?”

Maybe it was twenty other pairs of eyes on him that caused him to look up. The pages of the book were still there in front of his face, only now the rest of the class was too, hazy and indistinct just beyond the words.

Shepherd was looking at him impatiently. “Welcome back to the class. People, I know you've just been away for ten days, but we're going to be studying starting today, and you're going to have homework starting today. And don't groan like that either. You're not in third grade anymore. Next year you'll be getting ready to go to Patterson, and after that is high school. It's going to come quicker than any of us would like. Now, Michael, Charlotte is going to be stuck to you all day. You show her around, you help her get to her classes.”

“Yes sir,” he said, and shut the e-reader off angrily.

“I appreciate it very much, Mr. Washington. Now everybody, we've got a lot to learn about the Civil War. It's not just people shooting cannons at each other and dead bodies. Open up your books to page three fifty-six.”

The bizarre girl came over and got one of the empty seats near Michael. She gave him a brief smile, but he didn't return it. Shepherd was doing this because he knew Michael didn't have any friends. Teachers were always getting you to do things you didn't want to do. Things that were good for you. Ugh.

When the class ended, and Shepherd had lumped a healthy scoop of homework on top of his obligation to help this Charlotte girl, he packed up and gave her a flat, dead glare. She was struggling to pick up a backpack he hadn't noticed before, and her enormous sleeves were getting in the way. He gave her another snort.

The backpack was hardly visible under a wriggling mass of patches and buttons and frilly things hanging off it. You couldn't tell what color the backpack had been. There were tie-dyed peace signs and a funny smiley face with a drop of red on it, either ketchup or blood. There were others, like 'Save the whales' and 'Save the rainforest', and a bunch of other things that needed saving. Several were just pictures, or strange sayings he couldn't read, because they were half-

covered by other buttons. The 'Make Love, Not War' was the only good one, because it had somebody riding a missile on it.

“Come on,” he said quietly, but forcefully.

“Alright, hang on...” she was having all sorts of trouble.

He zipped the bag up for her, and held it out so she could adjust her sleeves enough to receive it. She thanked him, and they got going.

“Where's your class?” he asked.

“Um...” she fumbled about again. Seriously, half the break time was going to be gone already, and he wanted to pay a visit to the drinking fountain. Plus he wasn't going to be able to get in a minute or two of reading.

“Seriously,” he sighed. “What's up with the suit?”

“Oh, you like it?” she brightened. Not really, he thought. He was never late. She was going to make him late.

He shrugged instead of replying.

“It's a zoot suit,” she said. When he stared at her, she went on. “It's a 1940's thing. They wore them in big bands for a few years. It was really the style...though my dad said my great-grandpa hated the things. People in California had zoot suit riots, when World War II was going on. It was a pretty huge thing back then, because we were in a war, you know, and there was rationing. But there were black market suit makers, even though the government told people to cut back on how much fabric was in them.”

Holy mackerel, she was serious. She was really into this, but unfortunately she couldn't keep on. The bell had rung. She finally dug her schedule out of one of the pockets, and he got her pointed in the right direction. He was annoyed and grumpy by the time he got to his own class, but promised he would find her at the door and take her up to the third floor for her next class.

He couldn't shake the image of Charlotte for the rest of the day. He kept picking her up and taking her to her classrooms, and she kept up a running discussion of the 1940's as she did. She was a library of useless ancient history, and he wondered just what had made her so crazy.

It wasn't until the end of the day that he realized that Charlotte was just like him, only not as far along yet. There wouldn't be anybody to take her lunch money, but he watched everybody else, especially the girls, eye her with open disgust. There were random eye rolls, muttering, and all sorts of mean-spirited giggling going on. If she wore outfits like this all the time, she was in

for a world of trouble. He figured she might as well get an e-reader and kiss the idea of having friends goodbye.

And there wasn't anything about her he disliked, per se. She was...pretty, he guessed, and vibrant, like there were more colors around her than other people. And she was not interested at all in what other people thought of her. That was pretty awesome.

The teachers and adults were always telling you that. Peer pressure sucks. Don't fall for it. You don't have to be like everybody else. Let your inner beauty shine through. You can't judge a book by its cover.

Yeah, well none of them knew what style was. Teachers didn't flinch and sulk when you told them their shoes probably cost a buck fifty or were traded off a bum for a hamburger. Teachers did not understand that more than half of school was projecting the right you, the you everybody else wanted and expected to see.

The rest of them, like Cara MacCullin and Tenley Davis and their little clique, could disassemble people without even stopping as they walked through the halls. Back in September, Tenley had said something horrible about a kid named Jeremy, and he still hadn't recovered from it. Now he was like a cockroach, scurrying around. There were still half hearted snickers at Jeremy, and his nickname was 'Family Jewels' for some reason. Michael didn't know and didn't care. He had a social force field.

Charlotte wouldn't last long. Girls needed friends. Michael didn't know many, but he knew that girls didn't go it alone in the world of elementary/middle school at LADCEMS. Maybe the cliques ate the loners, like schools of piranhas swarming an injured cow.

"Hey Michael," Charlotte said, as he met her again. "You don't have to meet me here, you know. It's time to go home. I know where my locker is."

"Yeah," he said. Why was he here? "Listen, where do you live?"

"Over on Bellemont," she told him.

"That's just two blocks from my house," he said. "Do you want to walk with me?"

"Why don't you...your friends..." she stopped, appeared to think, and brightened up with a dazzling smile. "I'd love to walk home with you."

"Cool," he said. Their lockers weren't far away from each other. He finished slopping his books and papers inside ages before she even had her backpack open. He fought through the

press of middle schoolers and shorter fourth and fifth graders who had art or band as their last class.

By the time she was finished, the halls were mostly empty. The few suck ups and teachers' fans were stuck like leeches to their favorites, and the hardcore band nerds were just starting up their practice for the day.

"Usually I just take my bike," he said when she was finished packing the books she needed. He saw the confusion on her face and went on. "But, yeah, I'll...you know, walk it."

"Alright."

She started to explain about the zoot suits again, and about the big band music that came in the fifties. Michael was confused for a second, because he'd been born in the fifties, until he realized she was talking about a *hundred years ago*. Yikes, who was this girl?

"They'd usually have like ten or twenty people on stage, and people were dancing on TV all the time. They had swing shows, and sock hops. Dizzy Gillespie, it was like...wow. I'll play you some sometime if you want. I've got some of the later stuff, when it started to be influenced by South America, like Brazilian music. There's this one by Gil Evans, it's like...you've never heard anything like it. Smooth and fun, it really bubbles. It's like your own private waterfall. I tell you what, Michael, it was a pretty kickin' time."

Kickin. Right.

"So then in the nineties there was a mini Big Band revival. Squirrel Nut Zippers. Big Bad Voodoo Daddy. Mighty Might Bosstones."

He nodded and made a sound to show her he was still there. Just where did this girl come from, with her music from the twentieth century?

Early January was a crunching, hard-packed misery. It felt like it would be dark in an hour, and it was only three o'clock. Michael couldn't figure out why he had wanted to walk home with Charlotte for a while, and they walked in silence. He snuck looks at her, at the massive parka that was actually draped over his schoolbag as well, at the wisps of blonde hair escaping out around the fur-lined hood. Then he looked at the tight ankles on her suit pants, and the way they billowed in the stiff winter winds, and he remembered.

Disturbed by the way she made him forget what he wanted to talk about, he started to explain.

"Listen, you know, your zoot suit..."

“Groovy isn't it?”

Groovy? He shook his head: one thing at a time. “Groovy, right. Only, you don't know this school. The stuff you're wearing, there's no way...you're not going to...nobody's going to be okay with that.”

She smiled a little smile, but kept quiet.

“People who are different, I mean, they tell you to be different. They tell you different's okay, you know, but they're the teachers, right, and they don't know really anything. I mean they know science and English and whatever, but they don't know anything else. Not about us.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “The girls were all whispering about you today. I think, maybe, I mean, I don't know much about this sort of thing, because I'm not a girl, but you might still have a chance to, I don't know, do something. Make some friends. Whatever it is girls do to make friends. Talk about makeup and boys and whatever.”

She laughed. “Is that what you think girls do to make friends?”

“Yeah I'm not exactly an expert.”

“I did notice,” she said, “You didn't have a big fan club surrounding you.”

He laughed once. “Oh yeah, they all think I'm crazy.”

“And it doesn't bother you?” She kept her tone even. She wasn't making fun of him, or accusing him. Nothing like that. Everybody else in his school would have made the question into something else, a finger jab at least, a slap in the face at most.

He shrugged. “I guess not.”

“How long?”

“Last year, the first day.” He told her a bit about the Trent situation, but not about how he'd knocked Trent's face about. Instead he told her that Trent had gone to Patterson, the eighth grade building.

“Hmm.” she said at last, which wasn't much of anything. He was expecting some kind of reaction. Like she would be up in arms, like his mother, and want to go give Trent a thrashing. But she didn't.

“So you haven't had any friends for what...a year and a half.”

“Nope,” he said defiantly.

Her smile grew.

“Yeah, so, maybe I'm not a girl expert, or even a friend expert, but I know one thing: you can't just go around and show everyone you're totally weird. Anyway, here's Bellemont,” he said. “Just think about it. The...the backpack and the suit thing. If you want to have some friends.”

“If I want to have some friends.” There, that was the tone that told him she was making fun of him. He didn't know what the joke was, but he refused to feel the sting.

“Whatever,” he said, “I warned you.” And without giving her another chance to make fun of him, he took that running start, hopped on his bike and headed home.

He was three months to the day away from witnessing a world class meltdown.

In the weeks that followed, he tried not to watch Charlotte on her way towards rock bottom. It was like those videos of train wrecks and car crashes though. Didn't matter how much you tried to look away, you found yourself staring. She was the only other person besides him who didn't get a single valentine, and the only one who didn't get one of those shamrock notes they did on St. Patrick's day. Somebody must have gotten in good with Charlotte's homeroom teacher, or just stolen Charlotte's locker com, because they started leaving pictures and little notes in her locker, mostly four letter words Michael's mother refused to say.

Mostly Michael was watching for the slow progression of her soul leaking out. He had read about it, mostly, about people could put up with so much at first, no problem, but it started to wear after a while. And after a time their bright smiles dimmed, the rose was bleached out of their cheeks, and the garbage started to pile up. Usually, Stephen King said, it was under the eyes. You could see it coming on slow and sure, darkening and piling up in bags as they lost sleep or cried themselves there.

But Charlotte's resolve didn't waver in the first month. In fact, it was like she completely transformed into a different person. The zoot suits gave way to tight jeans with flaring bottoms, sandals (during February, no less), and shirts that were called tie-dye. They were like explosions of color all over the place, with enormous peace signs and bands like Bob Marley or the Beatles. She started wearing enormous aviator sunglasses and putting beads in her hair and stuff.

He'd retreated into the e-reader and his paper route, and really looking forward to dinner instead of really looking forward to hanging out with his friends. He'd had his own way of coping with the stupid people at his school, but he couldn't figure out what Charlotte's malfunction was.

In a way, he was disappointed when she didn't break down and start rushing through the hallways with her books clutched to her chest. Then he felt guilty for wanting that. Charlotte was pretty awesome, he decided. Pretty awesome, and pretty too. And unlike Lily, she was his age.

So February melted into a cold, gray, miserable March, and Charlotte's entire wardrobe changed up again. Now she was wearing cargo pants and flannel jeans. He thought for a second she had just given in over night, but then the way she was wearing something new and bizarre everyday meant something. He just couldn't figure out what, seeing as how he wasn't a girl.

But her behavior got him more and more intrigued. He started to figure they ought to be friends, just because neither of them had any friends. Plus, for some reason he couldn't nail down, he wanted to see more of her. So one day, after nearly three months of rocketing home on his bike after school, he decided to go one day without his bike. It was sort of like a knight going into battle without his horse. You didn't just strap on a whole boatload of armor and totter around with no horse. If he learned anything from Shepherd's history lessons, it was that if you had more horses, you won more battles.

He felt sort of naked without his bike, not standing apart from the others at the bike rack but in the middle of everybody. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe she was going to laugh in his face or just walk away without talking to him. He didn't know what he would do with that sort of rejection. Icy spikes of fear wormed through his belly.

The whole day went by through a sick film of worry. He couldn't absorb anything any of his teachers said. They called on him several times and the only thing to come of it was red cheeks and quiet snickers from the braver kids in class. After all, he was still the sixth grade psycho.

He waited by her locker after school, more afraid of this than he ever had been of Trent. With Trent he hadn't had a choice, but he'd never been terrified. He just paid up, and that was that. Here he had nothing to give Charlotte, nothing she required.

She came up to him silently, with her backpack slung over one shoulder. She eyed him flatly, and opened her locker. A big piece of paper tumbled out, taped to one of the shelves. It loudly proclaimed: **Cannot Understand Normal Thinking. Let's go with Slutzko!**

"What a humorous bunch they are," she said pleasantly. "Oh ignorant sign of pointless and empty hate, I shall enjoy burning you."

"Hi Charlotte," he said.

“Michael,” she said, just as pleasantly, which made him feel bad.

“Um...do you want to...um...walk home again?”

“Why Michael,” she said. “We haven't walked together for maybe three months.”

“Okay,” he said, defeated. “If you don't want to, that's cool.”

“Oh, I didn't say that,” she said. “But I wonder. What kept you away?”

He kicked at the floor and wondered how his shoes had gotten so dirty. They were stupid. He was stupid. Everything in the whole world was stupid.

“That's alright,” she said. “It doesn't matter. I would be happy to walk home with you.”

“Really?”

She laughed, but not unkindly. “Let's go.”

Most of the way they went in silence. This late in March, the weather was starting to go the way of the lamb instead of the lion. Buds could be seen peaking out of branches, but only if you looked really closely. There still weren't any flowers out, since it wasn't yet April. For now though, the snow was still clinging to the world in a few places, and in a few more it was just dirty black slush. The world would be alright soon, you just had to try hard to remember that it wasn't going to be cold and yucky every day.

“So anyway,” he finally said.

“Yeah?”

“What happened in February?” he asked. He didn't want to tell her that he'd been curious about her clothes. Or curious about how she'd been handling the stress of stupid people acting just as everybody would expect.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Uh...the clothes. You were like the fourth of July for a little while there. Your tie-dyed thing.”

“Oh!” she shouted. He could see he'd said just the right thing there. She just about glowed a hundred dazzling colors. “Right, oh man, yeah, there was this song...my parents' friends are always on about Bobby McGee, but geez, when you heard some of the stuff off the Big Brother and the Holding Company album, Cheap Thrills, it's funky stuff. The hit one was Piece of My Heart, you know, but I really dug on Flower in the Sun. That big band out of the fifties, there's something fun about it, but pretty rigid, you know? but Janis Joplin, she's a rebel. She's

groovadelic. She makes you close your eyes and everything turns this floaty light green in your mind. Light green and summer sky blue.”

Well, he'd asked. He should have anticipated the answer.

“So that's what happened. My mom got some of my great-gram's clothes out of the attic, and we went to some vintage clothes stores. I had so much fun, especially with the crummy weather, my mom said I blissed out. I think I did.”

He let her keep talking, and eventually she got away from Janis Joplin and onto the Beatles. They, at least, he knew. He knew the name at least. He couldn't tell the Beatles from any of the big band she'd mentioned, if you downloaded it off the cloud and listened to it on the surround sound at home. Old was old. It sounded old. So really, not important. And this was stuff that was so old that it fell off the face of the planet, and the only people who talked about it were already older than old.

Which made Charlotte's bubbly speech about this music really strange. She was clearly not a stupid girl, and not so dorky as to be a complete loner. She could talk to him, which meant she could probably talk to anybody.

Weird. Weird that she wasn't all that weird, even though she was. But sort of not.

Michael didn't understand it much. He did, however, snap out of his thoughts when he realized she wasn't talking anymore.

“Huh?” he asked.

“I asked if you've ever heard the Jimi Hendrix experience?”

“Uh...no. Sorry.”

She laughed. “You don't have to be sorry. So what do you listen to?”

“I'm...uh...I mostly read. Books. Novels. A lot of old fantasy.”

“Like Lord of the Rings and stuff? My mom says that's the father of all fantasy.”

“Your mom's right,” he said. He was in awe. Charlotte clearly knew everything about everything. “Wow. Have you read it?”

“No...I read the Hobbit, it was fun. All the funny little dwarves with their rhyming names.”

He realized they were already at her street. “Oh, we're here.”

“I'll see you later then. Unless you want to come over and listen to Hendrix and the Beatles, maybe some Led.”

Michael's stomach did a complicated dive off a high board, several flips and twists, and landed somewhere around his feet. His head spun with terror and anxiousness and glee, but also with something he couldn't identify. Alone with a girl. A friend. A girlfriend? Seventh graders had girlfriends. Sometimes a few sixth graders did. He understood the appeal now.

"I can't," he said at last. "I've got my paper route to do. Sorry."

She laughed again, but not maliciously. "You don't have to keep apologizing. Some other time."

"Okay," he said. His stomach lurched again, this time with hope. He knew the next few hours were going to be spent in conversation with himself, while his imaginary version of Charlotte spoke directly to his mind.

When he walked away, watching her head down Bellemont, he found himself humming a tune under his breath. He didn't know what it was, and it would have astonished him to discover it was 'Piece of My Heart' by Big Brother and the Holding Company, circa 1968. It was also a tune he had never heard before in his life.

Chapter 4 - The Lightning Ball

The day was drawing close. Nobody at LADCEMS knew, of course, or they would have stopped the Spring Ball and saved all the hospital bills, the burn unit being overfull...and the screaming. It could've saved on the screaming.

And to think, Michael wasn't even going to go.

It was a month before the Ball, and his mother was grumbling again. She'd forgiven dear old dad, for mysterious reasons only parents could understand, but she'd pestered Michael about what he was doing every single day afterward, so when he started to head to school without his bike she naturally became suspicious. He hadn't thought until later to just take the bike to school, and walk it back home every day. The damage was done on the first day, and by the end of that day she'd found out about Charlotte. And that was that.

Of course, Charlotte's life, and her parents' lives, and the lives of her two baby brothers were put under the microscope, and scrutinized down to the tiniest detail. Susanna Washington made gossip her stock in trade, since she could do laundry, iron clothes, cook, clean and go shopping with a bluetooth earpiece synced up with her phone attached to her at all times.

Still, the relentless questioning started to bother Michael.

What was her last name? Sulzsko.

Where were her parents from? No idea, but Charlotte had said something about 'out west', so Michael's only ideas were Phoenix, Las Vegas, or Los Angeles. Those were the only three she could possibly come from in Michael's mind.

What did her mother do? She was a stay at home mom, but also a painter.

A painter? Yep.

What sort of paintings did she do? The kind that were flat, with paint on them. Really mother.

Mrs. Washington was like a jackhammer; she could get to the bottom of anything. She eventually learned, through her 'friends' that Mrs. Sulzsko exhibited her paintings in one of the

two galleries in town, Mimsy's Whimsy. She also had some ceramics which, she learned and informed her husband with Michael listening, were for burning incense.

Which made his father nod and say, "Ahh, one of those." Like an exotic plant.

"One of those is right," Mrs. Washington said. Like that exotic plant was probably also poisonous, and best not even to look at it. "You mark me, there's going to be a drug bust there soon enough."

A drug bust? Michael's imagination went into overdrive. Was there a drug lab under Charlotte's house, like the radio station in that Stephen King book? Were there a dozen people in white suits cooking chemicals down there in the basement? Michael seriously doubted it. His mother had a pretty hefty imagination though.

Which brought them to the present. His mother knew about Charlotte, probably more than he did, and he knew she knew they were friends now. She hadn't yet let him go over to Charlotte's house for her own strange reasons, and while Michael probably thought it was the drugs and the art, he wasn't sure. He wondered, because she seemed to say the word 'art' with the same sort of light sneer as she said 'drugs'.

Instead, Charlotte had come over several times, mostly to listen to music and dance whenever she felt like it. While his mother didn't exactly approve of such things, she always put on a bright smile for Michael's only friend. She always made cookies and served milk and asked Charlotte polite, non-threatening questions that were, regardless, specially designed to know the enemy.

Michael supposed his mother was in a tight spot. Should she allow him to befriend the daughter of an 'artist' and 'drug dealer' or should she forbid them from seeing each other, and ruin Michael's only shot at a life outside his e-reader? He knew, and she knew, and he knew she knew, that if she tried to stop him from meeting and talking to Charlotte, she was going to fight a losing battle. She couldn't watch him at school, though he sometimes wondered about this. She could probably drive him to school and pick him up every day, but that would just be nuts. Surely she wouldn't go that far. Best to assume he still had some privacy.

The whole situation came to a dizzying, confusing conclusion when his mother piped up one night late in March.

"Have you asked Charlotte to the Spring Ball yet?"

He stared at her. She was kidding. She had to be kidding.

“Don't look at me like that,” she grinned.

“But...” he said. He was going to say 'but you don't even like Charlotte' but thought better of it. Then he congratulated himself on the brilliant insight.

“Oh go on,” she said. “You'll have fun. Once the dance is over you don't have another chance at going. And you'll only be in sixth grade once.”

With all the seventh graders going to be there. Davey Rightman being the highest on Michael's list of people to avoid, and a few of his other jerks from Trent's old crew. Though the last time he saw Davey, he was picking on a little fifth grade kid. He seemed to have forgotten all about Michael.

On the other hand, only sixth and seventh graders were allowed at the Spring Ball, so maybe Davey would focus on Michael again, for the first time all year. And anyway, he didn't have any intention of seeing all the people who thought he was nuts.

“But I wasn't even going to go.” He also didn't think Charlotte wanted to go, since all her musical tastes were fifty to a hundred years old.

“Trust me,” she said, “I didn't go to a couple of my school dances and I always wondered what the heck I was thinking. I should have gone. I wish I had.”

His mother had once been young. It was one of those facts that seemed to turn the world upside down to Michael. There were a couple of others. First, that his teachers had lives. Or ate food. Or went out of their sheltered monk hermitage homes far, far away in deep mountain valleys, and did things normal people did, like buy groceries or watch movies.

“Mom, I'm not going,” he said, and turned back to the virtual book in his lap. He was in the middle of a series of books about twins who discovered they had magic, and they met this old, old guy named Nicholas Flamel. It was one of those types of books that makes you exhausted. It was paced that quickly. Anyway there was this big lizard thing, and he wanted to know how the twins and Flamel (and this vampire/cat girl thing) were going to kill it.

“You're asking her tomorrow. And that's that.”

“Mo-om!” he said. “She's probably not gonna go anyway!”

“I'll take your invisible book away,” she warned. She couldn't even call it by its real name. Adults were so stupid sometimes. Most times, actually.

“That's not fair! Because I don't want to go to a dance?”

“Young man,” she said, “You don't realize it yet, but you don't have a whole lot of time to have fun and be a kid.”

“And dancing is kid stuff,” he said, rolling his eyes at her. Dancing was the sort of thing you did if you wanted to be a grownup. Never mind that he was twelve years old and had at least six years of fun left, which would probably be followed by plenty of fun while he went to university. And who knew? Maybe in the murky depths of the future he might find something he loved, and was good at, and had fun doing for his job. Like his dad.

“Alright,” she said. “Hand over the glasses and the thumb thingies.”

“Alright, I'll ask her! Gagggghhhh.” he snarled, and flung himself into his room.

He wasn't sure what happened the next day, when Charlotte said sure she'd go with him. On one hand, he was excited, but he was also anxious about the whole thing. If there was no date, there could be no expectations. He wasn't too worried about the rest of the kids, but what if he did everything wrong? He could make a fool of himself and ruin his entire friendly thing he had with Charlotte. He could do a hundred ridiculously stupid things, like dance, for one, and the whole school would decide to laugh at him instead of being afraid of him. He didn't want to admit that he was scared of a dance. Okay, so he was a little worried about the rest of the kids.

But it seemed so far away. Three weeks was practically half a lifetime for him.

And steadily, through English homework where he had to read stupid stories and then read the author's mind, and math homework of every even numbered problem (all the odd answers were in the back) along with showing his work, the days marched on. Finally, after school on Friday, his mother announced that they were going to go shopping.

“Shopping?” he asked. “What for?”

“You need something to wear,” she said. When he stared at her, she said. “At the Ball. You know, the Spring Ball, the one this Friday? You know, Marcus Patterson Day's on Monday, no school.”

Monday off. It was Marcus Patterson day. The dance was seven days away and he hadn't talked to Charlotte about it since she'd agreed to go with him.

“Why do I need something special?” he asked. “I could just go in this.”

He had on the same faded, ripped blue jeans he always wore, and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt Charlotte had given him she found at a thrift shop.

“If you think I am letting you out of the house in those rags when you are going to a dance, you need to get your head examined.” Then she brightened. “Come on, it’ll be fun!”

It was actually a sort of torture, picking out clothes. He would have been okay in an oversized t-shirt and a pair of shorts, but his mother was really into it. She also had no clue what to get for him. She wanted to pick out things with collars, and pants that weren't even called pants, but slacks, and shiny dress shoes, and he was horrified by the end of the shopping trip. She'd won. When he was an adult, he would be able to win all the battles.

Michael fought with himself that week, trying not to think about the terror or the awkwardness, the fact that he might royally embarrass himself. He even thought about trying to create a time machine like in that series Time Warp Twins.

On Friday his mother had a flower for him. It came in a plastic box and smelled nice and sweet.

“If you think I'm wearing that at the Ball,” he said, “you're crazier than I thought.”

She sighed. “It's not for you. It's for Charlotte.”

“Oh.” That made sense. “Then awesome! It's great! Thanks mom.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “You're welcome.”

By the time he was dressed and ready to go, his mother was shouting out worried orders and fussing around making the house look nice. It didn't make any sense, since Charlotte wasn't coming over, but that's what Susanna Washington did when she was nervous. In true Mrs. Washington style, she was at the front of the assault on the Sulzsko household, which involved Michael picking Charlotte up and driving them to school.

“We're going to be late!” she said.

“But I've been ready for ten minutes,” he said, confused.

“And what color socks do you have on?”

“Um...what? White.” Duh mom.

“White socks with slacks, did you leave your head in one of your dresser drawers? March right back to your room and pull on some dark colored socks.”

He went with a groan, because there was no getting out of it and because there were so many rules he didn't know and couldn't care less about.

But when he was all ready, and he passed by the mirror in the hall, he had to stop and look at himself. It couldn't be helped. He looked like something out of a kids' clothing website, or one of those giant posters in the stores. He looked so...respectable.

"You're so handsome!" his mother said, which made him really detest these clothes. "Now let's move."

Move they did, Michael thinking about dancing onto Charlotte's feet and getting punch on himself. Looking back on this later, these worries seemed so silly.

"Now," his mother said. "If she invites us in, you are to be polite. You can call her mother ma'am and her father sir. Speak when you're spoken to. Is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Don't get cheeky with me, young man."

Impossible, he thought. You do what they ask you to and this is what you get.

He'd never been to Charlotte's house, but it wasn't as big or as nice as he thought it would be. Sure, it was nice. None of the houses in town were eyesores. But this one had been painted brown, and you could see where the paint hadn't been scraped off before, because it was sort of reddish brown. The yard hadn't been mowed in a while, and there was a crack in one of the windows that had been taped over with silver duct tape. Toys littered the yard, from overturned tricycles to a thing called a big wheel, which was missing one back wheel.

"Hm," his mother said. Clearly this was just what she'd expected to find.

"Mom," Michael said quietly. He was beginning to feel the same anger come on when Trent had put his foot down.

"Hm?"

"If you're not going to be nice to Charlotte, we can walk to school."

She finally turned away from the house and looked at him, the shock plain on her face. He immediately felt guilty, and a bit ashamed, but he wasn't going to let his mother ruin this for him. It was her idea, after all.

She just got out without a word to him. They went up to the front door. It wasn't enough to worry about how Charlotte was going to react to him, and if the night was going to go well, now he had to worry about his mother too. He was twelve years old, for Pete's sake.

All his worries flew right out of his head when Charlotte opened the door though. She was beautiful.

“Oh my,” his mother said.

He opened his mouth, but all that came out was, “Aaaahhhhh.”

“You look wonderful, Charlotte,” his mother said for him.

“Yeah, really...um, really nice.”

“Thanks,” she said. The smile she answered with was even better than anything she could have said. Michael felt something painful dig into his chest.

She had curled her hair and piled some of it up around her head. Some sort of makeup effect made her gray eyes twinkle, and she definitely had lipstick on. The dress was some sort of thin, sheer fabric similar to the tie-dyed shirts she wore, which started out purple and blue on the bottom, but graduated into a rainbow as it came up. It was sleeveless, but she had something draped over her shoulders, something that looked like it might have once been a sweater, but had been slashed apart. Still, the way the fringes fell on her arms and the low-cut neck of the dress made him swallow to unclog his throat. She'd put a necklace on too, a little sparkling heart that peeked out from beneath the shoulder wrap as she turned to call to her mother.

“Mom, it's Michael and his mom!” she said.

Charlotte's mom appeared with a small child in each beefy arm. She was a solidly built woman with long rust colored hair and faint smudges of paint on every part of her body. One of the children was fast asleep, and the other was bawling at the top of his lungs.

“Sorry about this!” she chuckled. “Total opposites, these ones are. I'll be right back with you. Feel free to come right on in.” She called as she disappeared back into the house.

“Oh no, we couldn't-” Michael's mother said, but he was already inside.

It was like someone had shot a toy-filled missile at the place. There were action figures hanging from the ceiling fans and vehicles peeking out of the potted plants. Michael had to catch himself before he tripped on several balls, a NERF gun, and finally some sort of castle playset that probably didn't belong to any of the action figures, but had been taken over by them anyway. Charlotte laughed and went over to scoop heaps of Legos back into a huge plastic bin. Soothing jazz music drifted out from somewhere in the distance.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said. “The twins are little hurricanes. The property damage is somewhere in the trillions.”

“Everyone's an artist, I see,” Mrs. Washington said, eyeing some crayon artwork on the wallpaper. The crayons had mostly been snapped in half and left where they could be safely stepped on when coming in the door.

Charlotte laughed again, no trace of nervousness. Michael felt his cheeks flame with embarrassment. “They want to be just like their mom.”

There was more crying, even louder now. “Come now,” Charlotte's mom said. “Enough of that now. You got no reason to cry and you don't want me to give you one. I brought you in this world, boy, and I tell you, it was painful. It's gonna be just as painful taking you out.”

Michael watched his mother's face stay carefully stony neutral, just taking in more and more and more information as the seconds passed. He didn't even want to consider what was going on in her head, or how many people she would call about this just as soon as he and Charlotte stepped out of the car to head into the gym. Susanna Washington, the gossip grenade.

Well, there wasn't much he could do about it, except. “Mom, let's head out. We're gonna be late.”

“I haven't had a chance to talk to Mrs. Sulzsko,” she said.

“She's pretty busy,” Michael said.

“She'll be out in a minute,” Charlotte told them. “No problem.”

But she wasn't. The boy continued screaming, and Charlotte's mom continued in her sweet death threats, reminding him that if his brother woke up, he wasn't just going to die a nice and painless death in his bed, she was going to string him up by his big toes and poke him a million times so he couldn't sleep for weeks. Then he'd die stark raving mad, and she'd make another one just like him, only better behaved. She delivered all this as if she were sharing a cinnamon roll recipe with an eager neighbor.

It must have been too much for Michael's mom, because her lip started to twitch and Michael saw her folding her hands together and wringing them. Finally, after another five minutes of awkwardness and screaming, she broke.

“Maybe we should come back,” she said. “After all, I'll need to pick you up when the Ball's over.”

“Sure!” Charlotte chirped, and bounded towards the door. “Bye mom!”

“Bye honey!” came the reply, over the screams. “Have a good time.”

Michael expected the questions to start again, but his mom was mercifully silent the whole five minute drive to LADCEMS. It was a thick, awkward blanket she threw over them, but thankfully it was over as soon as he'd started to feel really terrible for Charlotte. They arrived at the Ball.

Someone must have swapped out a nightclub for their school. There were a pair of huge, kid-diameter searchlights cutting the night into big chunks, and a red carpet leading into the gym. They had those velvet ropes from movie theaters at either side of the red carpet, and plants up to his neck. Beneath those was some track lighting, making the evening into a sort of dim yet sparkling afternoon time. And a teacher dressed in a tuxedo with white gloves there to open the door and help Charlotte out of the car.

She turned to him and flashed him a grin. "Wow huh? I feel like I should have my zoot suit on."

Michael didn't say anything. He was too busy looking at the movie posters. Star Wars Episodes VII, VIII and IX, the Exterminatrix, Groskin's Run, So I Blew Up My School, and Invincible (the Marcus Patterson Story) were all in plain view as soon as he'd walked in, along with all the romance films he didn't know and couldn't care less about. There was a massive statue of the huge golden guy with the sword.

"Oscar," Charlotte breathed. "I totally want a picture."

Not only was there a photographer on hand to take their picture, but he led them over to a little station not far off to put accents and their names on the photo. They decided not to go with the wigs or silly costumes.

"We can do it again later if we get bored," she said.

They were pretty early, so only a few other kids were milling about. The parents and administrators were already outnumbered, but not by much. The gym had been decorated enough that it didn't much resemble what it started out as. Streamers hung everywhere, balloons were taped into large clusters, and in the center of the gym was a small section of painted plywood from which hung hundreds of little Oscars, to chest height. Charlotte immediately went over and started looking at them.

"Ah," she said. "One for each of the sixth and seventh graders. That's pretty tight."

"Tight?" he asked, and immediately wished he hadn't.

“It was a slang word in the eighties. I started listening to really old school rap, the first ever rap, you know, when the synthesizers were really just getting going. Totally radical time to be listening to music. Hair metal, synth pop, emerging rap, it was a good time for America.”

“Sounds like,” he said, and scanned the room. It wasn't lit like normal. There were a few spotlights piercing the dimness, and some strips of Christmas lights in strange places. There was even a raised platform, probably a dance floor, with hundreds of lights under it, pointing straight up. Well, he wouldn't touching that with a ten foot pole.

“You want something to drink?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, still picking through the Oscars.

He went over to one of the tables and checked out the refreshments. A pair of those big orange sports coolers were labeled 'ice water' and 'lemonade', but the punch was a mystery. The principal, Mr. Samuelson, sauntered over. “Having a good evening, Mr. Washington?”

“Yep,” he said. “I mean, yes Mr. Samuelson.”

“No need for the mister. Just call me Samuelson. I see you've brought the Sulzsko girl. A very bright young lady.”

Michael didn't know how to respond to that one. “Uh...thanks.”

“Punch?”

“I'll sue,” he said.

“I definitely don't want to get on the bad side of your grandfather,” Samuelson smiled. “No sir, not when your grandpa was my teacher growing up. Never met a scarier, nicer man in the whole world.” He must have caught the politely puzzled look on Michael's face, and the intention flooding out of him to get away from there and back to people his own age. “Two punches coming right up. Right and left hook.”

Charlotte had found his Oscar. It was a picture of him from last year's yearbook photos, but only his face remained, glued to the yellow piece of paper. On the back was printed 'You're a Star!'

“I bet they don't have one for me,” she said.

“Don't count on it,” he said. Sure enough, they found her Oscar a few minutes later, just as a massive rumble came from outside. Michael spilled some punch on himself, but was lucky Charlotte didn't notice because she was looking over toward the door.

“What is that?”

“Don't know,” he said.

Someone passed by them. “Davey Rightman, his brother brought him.”

Michael knew all about this. When he caught Charlotte's mystified face he explained. “Ronnie Rightman is in high school, and he's got his own car, and he likes his music nice and ear-bursting.” It seemed like all the nastiest jerks got cars. His mother had no plans to get him a car, ever, as far as he knew.

Davey showed up a few minutes later with a girl on his arm who was more undressed than dressed. Michael knew her name was Candice something, but everyone called her Candy.

After a while the deejay started up with an odd selection of new songs along with the really hokey garbage you always danced to whenever there was a cousin of yours getting married, like the Chicken Dance and the Hokey Pokey. Charlotte's face crumpled up in agony until she stormed over to the deejay's blaring table and started making requests. Then, after the deejay had shaken his head a number of times, she stormed back over to Michael.

“You were right. They don't have anything from the forties or fifties.”

“Why don't you ask about the eighties then?” he said. “I'm sure he's got some synth pop. Maybe some, what did you say...Depeche Mode?”

She smiled, which meant he'd just scored more points. “It's okay. I'll just dance at home.”

The new music just sounded like a cosmic ballet danced by skyscrapers, all bizarre echoes, groans of metal, and glass breaking with some words in there, only you couldn't hear anything they were saying. Michael hadn't understood the world of music until Charlotte began explaining, and still didn't know much. It just seemed like every time the world changed, the music changed with it, like a mirror. So when the world was happy, there'd be all sorts of sunny, cheerful music, like this old rocker John Fogerty, but when everything got serious, the music turned dark and moody and made people want to jump off tall buildings.

So right now the music sounded something like the world ending, only played in reverse. It wasn't exactly dance music, but layered somewhere in there was a kind of beat, so you could twitch and jerk to the rhythm. Davey and Candy were in a tangle of dancers, spread out around and inside the hanging Oscars.

Michael guessed it wasn't that bad, all told. He was spending time with the best looking girl in the school. There were more than a few confused glances, and a couple of open-mouthed starers. Charlotte might have had a chance at getting in with the popular people, a shred of

possibility someone would see her as just the misguided new person instead of a freak, but that time was gone now. He was still a bit worried for her, but he realized that it was her choice. If she wanted to damage her social life beyond hope of repair, it was okey dokey with him.

“Let's get another glass of that punch,” she yelled at last.

Mr. Samuelson smiled at them again, and served up the punch.

“Enjoying yourselves?” he asked.

“The music is a bit much,” Charlotte yelled.

“Ah.”

“Yeah it sounds like the whole place is about to blow up.”

Then the whole place blew up.

The wall with the big scoreboards imploded in a shower of concrete and sparks, throwing up a shower of screams and leaving behind a trail of flames. Something flew in, streaking across the entire gym, blowing through a bunch of hanging paper Oscars, smashing into the bleachers, and crunching into something beyond that. After that it was all smoke and confusion. People were rushing here and there, and probably smashing into each other or climbing over each other. Lucky for everybody, there were plenty of exits to crash into at breakneck speed, and throw open to be out of the sudden nightmare.

Michael had been knocked over by the refreshment table. The punch bowl had come down on him, soaking him from the waist down. He gasped, trying to remember how to breathe. His body was completely encased in pain. He looked around for Charlotte but couldn't make her out in the sudden gloom and thick smoke. Most important, his place in the gym put him closest to the thing that had embedded itself into the bleachers.

That something was a man, a well-built and square-jawed fellow with a few scraps of shirt that hadn't been burned to a crisp. Most of his hair, and all of his eyebrows had been singed off. He was coughing and smoking quite a bit where his pants were on fire. And he looked to be in a lot of pain.

Michael took one of the big orange coolers, righted it, and unscrewed the top. Then he dumped it on the man's leg.

“Thanks son,” he said quietly.

He wanted to ask if the man was okay, but that was a silly question. Surely, if you could rocket through a wall, through a set of bleachers and halfway into a cinderblock wall with only a

bunch of nasty smelling burnt hair, you were all right. At least, that's what he would have thought, until the man fell out of the hole and onto his face. He was out cold.

"Are you okay?" he heard himself ask, even as he thought about how stupid that sounded.

That was when Michael realized he was alone. And not alone. The gym was clear of almost everybody, anyway, though there was a lot of smoke. Teachers and students were making their way out, but there was someone standing at center court, hands balled and encased in smoke. Blue flashes erupted around him.

"Where is he?" the figure said. Michael knew that voice immediately.

"Trent?"

"What the...loser? Skinny loser Michael? Broke my nose Michael?" Yeah, it was Trent. The same ridiculous bowl haircut, the same too-tight t-shirt, only now his nose wasn't beaky, it had its own elbow. And now he looked to have gained about fifty pounds in the arms and shoulders.

Lightning lashed out from Trent's body in long, ragged arcs. They left black marks all over the basketball court floor. One of them latched onto the refreshment table and, sparks flying, whipped it across the gym.

There was Charlotte. She must have been knocked over by the refreshment table too, somehow. She was lying on the ground, and a surge of terror went through Michael as he saw that she wasn't moving. The bits of lightning were licking the floor not far away from her.

"Oh man," he chuckled. "This is too sweet. I didn't think I'd find you here. I get you and Springfield both at the same time. Bonus." He whipped his hands out to the sides, and arcs of lightning made a sort of web out behind him, scorching the floor, four coming from each of his forearms.

"What happened to you?" Trent said. "One minute I'm lying down in the hospital, the next thing I'm getting told that if I look at you the wrong way again my parents are gonna have to move out of town. What's that about, I want to know? You baby up on me, that what happened? Run crying to mommy and daddy? Get them to talk to the principal? Well they're not here to stop me now, Mikey."

His hand flashed up, but Michael was already diving away. A zing and the smell of smoke and burnt hair followed. He tumbled to the ground, sprang up, and started running. Away.

"Aww come on," Trent said.

Blue arcs flew by him, along with a crisp smell of air frying just beside him. He got another three steps before something went throughout his entire body like a freight train. One second his legs were pumping, his lungs huffing and puffing, the next minute every muscle in his body freaked out, shooting new pain from scalp to toes. He went down on the floor with a crack, and felt warm blood on his lip. And his shirt was probably on fire.

“You don't turn your back on the enemy Michael.” He came over and stomped down on Michael's back. “There you go buddy. Don't want you to get too badly scorched, you know. We've got a little catching up to do.”

Michael looked back at Charlotte and the meteorite who had face planted on the gym floor.

“You stop right there, young man!”

“Samuelson?” Trent said in a mildly curious tone, like you would comment on finding an Armani suit on sale for twenty bucks.

“I don't know what the devil is going on here, but you can stop this nonsense right now.”

Trent chuckled. “And you're going to stop me, are you? How exactly?”

He held out his hands, and Michael had just enough time to yell 'NO!' before electric bolts flew out everywhere. One jabbed Mr. Samuelson on the shoulder. In a second, Michael saw what had just happened to him. The principal's hair stood on end, and his teeth clicked together as every muscle in his body seized up.

“Stupid lightning bolts,” Trent muttered.

“That...” Mr. Samuelson gasped. “...is...enough...of that...young man...I am...calling your parents.”

Trent snorted, but Michael saw the fear there. The real world hadn't existed for Trent before, there were no parents and no police and no army with tanks and high-powered rifles. Only Samuelson had said the magic words.

“Don't listen to him dude!”

“Davey?” Trent asked.

“Go ahead man. Fry that sucker!”

Another flurry of lightning came out, and this time latched onto Mr. Samuelson's body like a dozen remoras. He didn't scream, but did a sort of jerky dance before the lightning winked

out and left him smoking on the ground. Davey came out from behind one of the overturned tables at the side of the gym, still loping like a chimp, and grinning like one too.

Charlotte was stirring. This wasn't good. She probably had no idea what was going on.

“Now back to this little...what the?” Trent looked from Michael to Charlotte. “Oh ho! Hey man, nice work on the chicklet. She's a pretty nice one, hey?” He walked over and bent down over her. “Prime, bro. Prime. Got to say though, I find it hard to believe you snagged one this hot. What are you, paying her or something?”

Michael caught sight of one of his teachers in the far doorway, waving over to him. Yeah, just run away. No problem. Leave Charlotte and Mr. Samuelson and the human cannonball over there to Trent, with Davey to egg him on.

The orange water cooler was standing nearby. Michael could just reach it. If he remembered anything about science...

He lunged towards it, and Davey shouted. Trent, bent over and with his back to them, was too slow to react. He only just turned his head before a five pound cooler whacked him in the head and splashed freezing water all over him. As soon as he stood, the lightning began to play over him. Only it went wrong, and Trent staggered back, jerking the same way Mr. Samuelson had. Then, to Michael's horror, he started to trip over Charlotte, and a visible web of electricity jumped from Trent's leg into her body. Michael was on his feet and pelting across the gym before he could think of anything else to do. Before Trent could properly fall over, Michael had barreled into him, both of them airborne and flying over Charlotte. And the shocks were back.

And the last thing Michael was aware of before going black was his head jerking forward from the electricity, bashing against Trent's nose.

Chapter 5 – Battery

“I did ask you not to call me here, right?”

“Yes, but this is important. We can't afford any sort of delays on this, Harold.”

“There's nothing more important to me than the life of my grandson.” A sigh. “What do you want?”

“Do you have any idea how many witnesses there were?”

“Oh, I'd imagine roughly two hundred. What with that Sulzsko girl, we were at one oh three sixth graders and a hundred one seventh graders. Or have we lost one in the last hour that I haven't been told about?”

Silence. In the dark, Michael began to realize that he wasn't dead after all. He couldn't remember whether or not he'd been dreaming something very painful and bright bluish white, but as soon as he moved his body, it screamed at him that no, it hadn't been a dream. He listened to his body and quit squirming.

He couldn't help but interrupt his grandfather. He groaned and cracked his eyes open. He was in a hospital bed, propped up to an almost sitting position. A tray with his e-reader glasses and page turners was there, along with some flowers. Grandpa was facing away from him, and in the second before he turned, Michael got a look at a squat, unhappy face with too many chins. His frown had gotten so big that it was basically dripping off the sides of his face. It was smack in the middle of Grandpa's tablet, and it disappeared as Grandpa turned to look at Michael.

His face was set in an even more terrible scowl than last year, when he discovered the truth about Trent and the paper route.

“I see that you're upset,” the froggy faced man said.

“You're goshdarn right I'm upset. Listen, we will talk about this after I talk to him.”

He jabbed at the tablet, which clicked like a telephone being hung up.

“Michael.”

“Wuh.”

“Here...drink some water.”

He couldn't move his arms very well, so he and Grandpa slopped water all down his chin. But enough got down that he could talk again.

"Hey Grandpa."

"Hey yourself. How are you feeling kiddo?"

"Terrible."

"But alive."

"Yeah."

"That's the important part anyway."

"Where's mom?"

"She worried herself to sleep." He pointed over to where his mother was sitting and lying uncomfortably in one of those boxy hospital chairs. It looked like she'd almost fallen out of the chair, but stopped herself, and fallen asleep just like that. Her hair was mussed up and a few strands were clinging to the wall.

Grandpa put a hand on his shoulder. "Mighty brave thing you did yesterday, son."

"Yesterday?" The moon was shining brightly through the window.

"You've been asleep, what, sixteen hours? Roundabouts."

He sat bolt upright on the bed. "Charlotte!"

"Relax kiddo. She's fine."

But he couldn't relax. As soon as he laid back, a big patch on his back flared to sudden, painful life.

"Doctors say you're mighty lucky to be alive."

"Where's Trent?"

"Don't you worry about him. He isn't gonna hurt anybody anymore."

"Is he..." He couldn't even finish the question.

Grandpa chuckled. "Dead? No, no. But I heard through the grapevine, the police got him off to a secure location."

"Police?" He could just imagine how long it was going to take before Trent's super electric power snapped open the electronic locks on the cells, and he zapped everybody in sight.

"Well, if I were going to disable a super kid, I'd throw him in a plastic and rubber room, myself. And everybody in his complex will have some rubber damping suits. If it were up to me."

“What about Samuelson?”

Grandpa's cracked face crumpled. “He's...he may pull through. The doctors are working real hard on him. But we should talk about you. You're fine.”

“Fine,” Michael replied.

“Not shaken up.”

“My body hurts.”

Grandpa looked ready to say something, but stopped and settled for, “Okay then.”

“Why?”

“Just...well, plenty of people aren't ready to meet a real Active.”

“Active?”

“Yeah, somebody who's like a superhero. Active. As in the switch's been flipped.”

“Why don't you just call them supers or something?”

“Well, maybe we just figured if we call them super, they'll either be super heroes or super villains. And nobody likes a super villain.”

Michael could only say, “Hm.” Grandpa had a point.

“Anyway, if you want to talk about anything, you just swing on by and have a sit-down with your dinosaur of a grandfather.”

Michael laughed. “You're not that old.”

“I'm old enough. I've got to skedaddle, but I'm around. You come on over and I'll beat you at cribbage a couple times, alright?”

“Okay,” Michael said. He wanted to ask about the fat man on the tablet, and how Grandpa knew exactly how many students were going to LADCEMS, but at that moment his mother screamed and threw herself across the room at him. Grandpa winked at him, smiled, and headed out.

He had the rest of the night to read, and the next day was Sunday, so he spent it recovering and trying not to talk too much about it when his mother was grilling him. She seemed to think it was somehow his fault that he was nearest to the half naked man, and his fault that Charlotte had been in danger. Still, she was in tears every time she reminded him that he was still alive, like he didn't know that.

Charlotte poked her head in just after dinner time.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey!”

“You okay? I guess you got it pretty bad from that jerk.”

“Yeah,” he said, trying to act cool. “I’m totally fine. Totally fine. A hundred percent.”

She grinned. “And yet you’re still here. That’s strange.”

“Well, the uh...the doctors, they’re just being careful.”

“Oh, okay! Cool, hey, listen, I’m going to head out and pick up some Taco Bell.”

“Um...is that allowed?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Anyway, the food here...blech.”

So he decided why not, and asked her to pick him up something that sounded good. When she brought it back, they sat down and ate until one of the hospital orderlies sent Charlotte back to her room.

He had Monday off for Marcus Patterson Day, which was great. Watching movies, reading, and eating his favorite food were all way better than facing a broken school and the idea that his principal might be dead.

Sure enough though, Tuesday rolled around to start another week at school, but Michael didn’t end up in his classes. He was just sitting down to his first period when a fifth grader rushed in with a note for Mr. Wozniak. The old teacher sighed, looked up at Michael, and gestured him over.

“Says here you’re supposed to head over to the counselor’s office,” Mr. Wozniak said.

“Counselor?” he asked. “Why?” Contrary to most of his classes, he rather enjoyed his computer class. Most everybody else hated it, mostly because it was stuff you learned while you were potty training, and the school’s computers should have been in a museum somewhere. Still, Michael liked the mindless repetition of the typing assignments.

“You let me know as soon as you get back, okay?”

What was strange was that everybody was back to school on Tuesday, just like he was. Mind, most of the students didn’t have a burn plaster taped to their backs, or nasty burns over their front half. They also didn’t have a shirt worth a month’s paper boy tips burned beyond recognition. They did, however, have eyes, and all of them were turned on him. Staring at him. He rushed to the counselor’s office with his head down.

Nobody had yet reacted to the fact that a fireball crashed into their school, and the gym now had a makeshift skylight, along with some rubble, and-

“What?” he asked, to nobody in particular.

He stopped and stared in through the gym doors. The hole was gone. The scoreboard sat in the place where the man had plummeted through, on fire. There was no fine sheet of dust from all the crushed cinderblocks, no cinderblocks or chunks of cinderblocks.

The burned spot between his shoulder blades began to itch, and he wondered if this was what going crazy felt like. Then he decided that, no, there was no way he was going crazy. He had bandages all over, and everybody was staring at him like...

...like he was crazy.

He rushed to the main office and burst into the room. Several secretaries with ages old spectacles connected at the back by chains frowned at him. Okay, maybe all was right with the world.

The main office was carefully neutral, with beige walls and gray carpets, a few cubicles and too many pieces of paper. There were plenty of little pamphlets that probably gathered dust and a few of those horrible inspirational posters, with pictures of eagles soaring over pristine lake/mountain scenes, and slogans like 'you'll never know how far you can fly until you spread your wings'.

“Yes?” one of the secretaries asked him, and not politely.

“I'm...I'm supposed to come down to the counselor's office.”

“All students are attending an emergency assembly. Go back to your class.”

“I got a message...” he said hopelessly, and waved it at them.

“Give it here,” she said. Her eyes widened the instant she saw his name on it, and she stammered for him to head into counseling room A.

Counseling room A was just as bland and boring as the rest of the main office. In a little six by six foot space, someone had crammed in a gray metal file cabinet, a large desk, and two chairs in front of that desk. The only things on the desk were a framed picture of a smiling man and his family, and a black nameplate that said C. Busey.

A lot more interesting than the room was the man sitting behind the desk. It certainly wasn't C. Busey, because Michael knew Mr. Busey. This was the human cannonball from Friday night, alive and looking healthy. And wearing clothes that weren't on fire.

“Hello there Michael,” he said with a smile, and gestured to the chair. “Have a seat.”

“You're...you're...” What had Trent said?

“Mr. Springfield. My students call me Jebediah.”

Something clicked way back in Michael's mind, and it had something to do with Charlotte. She was showing him a cartoon from fifty or a hundred years ago, and Springfield was there, somewhere. Jebediah Springfield exactly.

“But that's...isn't that...the Simpsons right?”

His smile deepened. “My name isn't actually Jebediah, it's a nickname. I'm surprised you know of the show. Most students don't.”

“Why do they call you Jebediah then?” he asked.

“I wear a raccoon skin hat,” he said. “In my wilderness survival courses.”

A thousand questions suddenly winked out in Michael's mind. He was suddenly trying to picture this man with a hat that had a tail hanging off the back, and it was hilariously difficult to do.

Springfield must have seen it, because he continued to smile. “Can I call you Michael? Great. Michael, I'm not a teacher over at Marcus Patterson. In fact, I'm just one of the counselors over there. My job's at the high school.”

“Oh...kay.”

“I wanted to thank you for what you did on Friday night.” Oh yeah, Friday night. When Trent had LIGHTNING COMING OFF HIM. That Friday night. “You'll notice everything here is sort of normal. Back to normal, as normal as you could get. Anyway, this is after we had probably thirty injuries, none of them really bad except for Mr. Samuelson. And you and Trent.”

“And you.”

Springfield smiled. “Yes. You may have questions for me.”

“And you're going to answer them?” Michael asked. He felt like, between his grandfather being weird on the phone and the fact that Trent was an Active, people were keeping a lot more secrets than they were telling.

“I'll answer everything I can,” Springfield replied.

“Okay,” he said. “What happened to Trent?”

“Hm, a good place to start. Well, some people in the world go Active. It's a difficult process figuring out who, but it usually happens starting at age thirteen, up to around twenty. One time a twenty-three year old man went Active, but we've never heard of anyone older than that. Predicting it isn't an exact science, at all.”

“How many people go Active?”

“Maybe one in a million,” he said. “Maybe a few more, but a lot of times they're in terrible situations. Some die. Others go totally crazy. So right now, with eight and a half billion people on the planet, we think there might be eighty five hundred. Less than ten thousand for sure.”

“Wait a second!” he cried. “The gym was fixed! You went through the wall. You lived!”

“I'm an Active,” Springfield said.

“You're...”

“Surrounded by a force field. Go ahead, throw something at me.”

“Throw...”

Springfield took the nameplate, tossed it into the air, and it bounced off a place about three inches from his head. There was a crackling sound, like someone bunching together a cheap plastic bag. Michael found himself speechless.

“Yeah,” he grinned. “Pretty awesome right?”

“But...but...”

“Right, the gym. We have a few Actives in our program here.”

Program, what program? Michael's mind was filling with more questions.

“How many Actives?”

“Somewhere around a hundred.”

“WHAT?” he shouted. The math sizzled through his brain like a lightning bolt. That meant there should be a hundred million people in the area, and he knew there were maybe five thousand people in the entire town.

“Relax Michael.”

“But that doesn't make any sense. There aren't...there aren't even enough people here to have one.”

“You're right.”

“But how...”

“I'm afraid we've come to the place where I can't answer.”

“But why?”

He seemed to regret not being able to answer Michael. “I wish I could. I won't lie to you, Michael, but my hands are tied.” He held up his hands like invisible handcuffs were restraining

him. "I've signed agreements. You find out the truth for yourself, that's no problem. But if you find it out from me, let's just say there's someone in charge who would make Trent seem like a baby throwing a temper tantrum. So I can't do that."

"But..."

"Yes, sure, but you won't tell anyone, sure. Like there isn't anyone on staff who wouldn't know if you were lying."

"Like read my mind or something?"

"Like that. Or something."

"So was everybody okay, you know, after the thing?"

Springfield smiled at him. "Very good of you. A true knight. Well, Don Samuelson is going to make it, we think. There were a few other minor injuries, but everyone is going to be all right."

"And they're...okay. I mean okay."

"Well, I'm going to be seeing students all week here, if you should know. And all the other counselors at Marcus Patterson and the High School. We'll need to do a battery of tests on everyone who was at the dance that night."

"And Davey Rightman."

"I heard about Davey Rightman. Yes him too. Anyhow we figured you were a bit of a special case. Since you threw a water cooler, and later yourself, at Mr. Millickie. Since you were responsible for keeping him from hurting anyone else."

Michael looked down at his shoes, wondering why they were suddenly so interesting, and why exactly his face felt like it was on fire.

"And your mother should be giving you a phone today."

"Mother...a phone. Okay."

"My number's going to be in there, just in case you feel like you want to talk about anything that's going on. You don't want to talk to your mom, I understand. It happens a lot in middle and high school. But if you want, any time, day or night. I don't care if you wake up at three in the morning and want to tell me something you don't think is very important, you call me, okay?"

"Uh...okay." There it was again, that divide. It was there and no pretending otherwise, even though Springfield seemed like a decent guy and all. He just wasn't the right age.

“I think the assembly ought to be about done,” Springfield said cheerfully. “Why don't you head out and meet up with your friends.”

The halls were filling up with the normal crowd of young people, with the occasional teacher towering overhead. A few of the seventh graders were getting taller too, and some of the teachers had never been tall to begin with. It was starting to become difficult to see the difference, but only starting.

After a time Charlotte came up to her locker. She brightened up as soon as she caught sight of him.

“Hey Michael,” she said.

“Hey,” he said. “What happened at the assembly?”

“You weren't there? I thought everybody was supposed to go. You know, I thought I would see you there.” Yeah, he thought, there were only two hundred something students in the sixth and seventh grades. “Anyway they just talked about Actives. Pretty cool.”

“What did they say?”

“Some old guy talked about how Actives can get their powers when they have a lot of stress. Most of them start out around our age. Mostly they just wanted to answer questions.” And how far those questions went before they couldn't be answered anymore? He had never heard the term confidentiality agreement before, but he understood the idea. Somebody had to shut the truth up, to stop knowledge from coming out.

“I guess there are only maybe one in a million, and we might have just seen the only Active in the whole state.”

Not likely, Michael thought. Then he wondered why the school was lying to them.

“Anyway if we see anybody doing anything weird, we're supposed to tell a teacher or Samuelson.”

“Whenever he gets out of the hospital.”

“Yeah.”

“What did they mean by weird?”

She shook her head as they made their way out of the school and into the fresh April air. “Like somebody jumping off a building trying to fly. They had some pretty nasty pictures. This kid in Idaho set himself on fire. Another one jumped in front of a bus.”

“Uch,” he said.

“Yeah. Uch.” She shrugged. “I know they just want to keep kids from trying something really crazy. Everybody wants to be special. What they don't get is that everybody already is special. You make the choice to be special every day. Or you just do the normal stuff, and you tell people you're bored because you never try to do anything awesome. You don't need to break physics to be special.”

Charlotte had always been pretty cool, but Michael didn't understand until that point. It was like there was a sunbeam shining down on her, the way she looked at the world. And maybe Michael wasn't that dazzling, but he could definitely recognize brilliance when the chorus of angels was singing right in front of his face.

Like Grandpa always said, if it looks like poop and smells like it, no need to taste it, you've got poop. Only Charlotte was totally the opposite. She looked, smelled and sounded like a goddess.

Oh no.

Michael couldn't get her out of his head all that day or the next. He knew something was very wrong by the way he dreamed that he and Charlotte were flying together, because they were both Actives. He knew something was terribly wrong when they came nose to nose, staring soulfully into each others' eyes when he suddenly woke up.

Trent had made the world go wrong.

Grandpa came over to dinner the next night, which wasn't normal at all. Usually they had dinner together on the weekends, or whenever his dad came back from being away. This time it was just his mother, Michael, and Grandpa. He felt the normal needles from his mother, all the questions about how much homework he had, what Mr. Wozniak was teaching that day, and how interesting history was when she was a little girl. To top that off, Grandpa started in too.

Was the math giving him trouble? Did any of the other kids pick on him or look at him funny in the halls, or at lunch time? Who was his favorite teacher? Did he ever stay after class and talk to that teacher? What was the science all about?

He did his best to deflect the questions with his normal shrug shield and grunt armor, but today he had to go the extra step of parrying by shoving extra food in his mouth. Then he had to endure his mother glaring at him when he tried to talk with his mouth full.

“Michael Edward Washington Junior!” his mother finally said. “Will you stop talking with your mouth full of food. That is enough of that. Now, your grandfather asked you a question.”

Grandpa sat back and folded his arms. His smile wasn't cruel, or triumphant either. Michael thought he was really just amused. He probably figured out what Michael was trying to do.

“You don't want me to eat dinner?” he asked, and drank some milk to show her just how good he was doing. He'd even gotten most of his peas down his throat, which was saying something.

His mother didn't have much to say to that, but Grandpa did.

“Well kiddo, when you grow up a bit, you'll see that adults like to have a bit of a chat over dinner. In fact, a long time ago, dinner was three or four hours long. People just talked and talked and talked, and their servants brought them something to munch on every half hour or so.”

“Oh.” A four hour dinner, without the chance to read or maybe catch an episode of *Minus Human* every day, sounded pretty awful. Like when they told him that, long ago, people didn't have the internet. Shudder.

“There was an assembly at school today,” he said. “I didn't get to go. I had to go talk to the guy from the high school.”

“Now, was that so hard?” his mother asked.

“And how did the conversation go?” Grandpa asked.

“Okay I guess.” He quickly realized, by the reptilian stare coming off his mom, that this wasn't going to be enough. “He said he was a superhero. I mean Active. He had a force field. So that was pretty cool.”

“Hm,” Grandpa said. “A force field.”

“Yeah, isn't that weird?”

“Weird how?”

Michael didn't know exactly, at first. “Well, that he's a teacher.”

“Even Actives have to do something with their lives, Michael,” his mother said.

“Yeah but, he could go out and stop people from getting hurt, like he's a shield.”

“Ah,” Grandpa said. “But he's not super fast, right? So he couldn't be everywhere at once.”

“I guess,” Michael said. “But then...what, the military? The police? Why doesn't he go and do that? He could take apart bombs.”

“I think these are good questions, and maybe you should ask him. It's possible he just wanted to be a teacher, and then he became an Active.”

“But he's all super powered,” Michael said.

“What if he's a super teacher?” Grandpa asked. “There are plenty of things you don't know about him, and your mother and I can't really tell you, since we're not him. So I think you should ask him.”

“Okay,” he said. He had Mr. Springfield's card with his number, but he felt like it would be weird just to call somebody up and start asking questions like 'why don't you go and stop missiles with your chest, why do you still teach?' Mr. Springfield had told him to call, any time of the day or night, but...it was awkward. It was awkward enough just talking to his mother and grandfather, and they were his family.

He had a brilliant flash of inspiration.

“May I be excused?” he asked.

His mother sighed. “Have you eaten your vegetables?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Yes you may.”

Boom. Manners almost always worked.

Chapter 6 - The Seventh Power

Trent was like a snowball thrown to the top of Mt. Ranier. He was the beginning, and slow to get started, but steadily growing.

The summer passed uneventfully, unfortunately. Charlotte was gone for a whole month to this music camp for people who had a special passion, and his dad was gone the whole time too. Charlotte told him the camp's name was Interlochen, and that some of the best future musicians in the country went there. She had to fly. They were going to keep her busy. There was no chance to get in touch with her.

Even so, he did get a few video e-mails from her, playing more music he'd never heard of in his entire life. And even when she came back, he wasn't allowed to see her very much. His mother was out of the house a lot doing community service and reading clubs and jewelry making parties and Tupperware parties (what was the point of these), and he was forbidden to have a girl anywhere near the house without his mother there to watch them.

So he delivered papers and scarfed down as many books as his brain could process, and sometimes stared at walls in utter boredom.

One thing didn't change as the summer came, went, and morphed into seventh grade, and that was the constant attention of mother, grandfather, and Mr. Springfield. He was horrified when Springfield called him up the first time, a month after the thing with Trent, and again a month after that.

"Just to check up," he said.

Right.

Michael was so caught off guard that he didn't even think to ask him why he was a teacher instead of throwing himself into volcanoes to see what happened. And Springfield called every fourteenth of the month, Michael soon learned.

He figured out, as seventh grade started and he talked to Charlotte about it, that he wasn't the only one the adults were keeping tabs on. He was in the middle of telling Charlotte about Springfield's 'call me at three a.m.' spiel when she held up a hand and he stopped.

“That’s weird,” she told him. “What’s really strange, right, is this school guy keeps calling me too.”

“What, what guy?”

“This counselor from the high school. His name is Terrance Jackson.” She explained that she’d had a similar counselor’s meeting a week after the Trent-threw-lightning-all-over-the-place night, and she hadn’t thought much of it. They just wanted to make sure everybody was adjusting to the new reality of an Active near them. But then Jackson kept calling and calling, to see how she was doing, what was new, and if she’d had any strange dreams lately.

“Weird,” Michael said.

“Yeah. And get this, he read my mind.”

“What? He’s an Active too?”

He told her about Springfield’s forcefield.

“Okay,” she said, “I was ready to believe there was just a teacher who could read minds, and he thought ‘I don’t need to be a super spy or anything, I can just teach better’, but here’s another one.”

“Mr. Springfield seemed like a nice guy though,” Michael said.

“Well, yeah, okay...maybe Terrance just wanted to be a teacher too.”

“But two Active teachers in one town, in one *school*, is...it’s impossible.”

She shook her head. “Not impossible. Just not likely.”

“And Springfield told me there are more than a hundred Actives in town.”

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open.

And there was that thing about his grandfather; he couldn’t shake the feeling like Grandpa was involved. He felt guilty and awful for the thought, but he couldn’t squash it. Grandpa was coming over more often for dinner now, and had popped in several times for breakfast over the summer. Come to think of it, he’d been asking the same sorts of questions Springfield had.

Stop it, he told himself. Grandpa was clearly just concerned that his only grandson had been through something completely nuts, and he wanted to make sure everything was cool.

Oh yeah, the thought countered, why does he know so much about the student population at LADCEMS? And who was that guy he was talking to on the tablet?

Grandpa had a life. He didn’t show Michael every single piece of mail or introduce him to everybody he ever talked to on the phone.

And the little thought worming his way through his mind replied: you're in denial.

Denial or not, he wasn't going to troop over to Grandpa's house and ask him what he was involved in. He was an old man who sat on his porch most days and read the news. He had a shot of whiskey before he went to bed every night. He played cribbage very well. Michael wasn't going to start accusing his own grandfather of anything, especially when he didn't know what was going on. Or if anything was going on at all.

If you couldn't trust your own grandfather, who could you trust?

He and Charlotte decided there had to be something they didn't know. Then they had a laugh over that, and decided there was something very big they didn't know. Something that probably affected the whole town and was an awfully big secret.

Seventh grade was no different from sixth, even the way Michael's classmates were looking at him. The fear directed at him had increased. Instead of being politely ignored, people went out of their way to get out of his way. If he was in line for hot lunch, other people got out of line. When he walked by, conversations stopped as if he had thrown a switch. Or worse, as if he'd become the new Trent. The teachers were too busy to notice this sort of thing. They all had hundreds of students to teach, hundreds of tests to grade, and whatever teacherish things they got up to that divided them from paying attention to students' lives.

Michael tried not to let it bother him. He knew that people were afraid of him, or afraid that bad stuff happened wherever he was. They were probably also talking about he and Charlotte. He didn't mind so much that they were talking about him, but it irked him when he thought he heard her name and his together.

The work was much more difficult now. He was expected to know the names and locations of every Asian nation, along with their capitals and some special facts about each one. He was expected to read two chapters of some books per night, which wouldn't be a problem except that these were stupid books about stupid, boring real life and made him want to jump in front of a train. A speeding train. The math was hard just because he didn't do well with numbers, but his mother helped him out. Science had him building musical instruments with his father in the garage, and bird nests with Charlotte a few weeks later.

It was enough to drive someone crazy.

The stress got to other students as well. He was halfway through his second geography test (Europe this time) when he realized nobody was looking at their tests. He glanced up at Mr. Groebels first, who was frowning, then followed his stare over to the corner.

A kid named Jared McClaren was pulling himself out of his chair. He wasn't standing up, there were actually two of him, identical carrot-topped kids with the same rash of freckles and hand-me-down clothes. One was trying to pull the other one out of his...their...seat.

"Let me do it," Jared said, hauling another Jared up by his shirt.

"Get off me!" the other Jared said.

"You are such an idiot!" the first one said. "Go, go back to math and talk to Rosenbaum."

"She told me I couldn't retake the test!" he told himself.

Just then, two more Jareds burst into the room.

"Are you crazy?" one of them shouted. "People are trying to take a test here."

Somebody giggled. Others followed, nervously. Michael wondered if any of them had realized just how messed up this was.

Three more Jareds stood up behind the original one and started pulling the other three away, but six more sprouted out of nowhere. Those sitting right next to Jared were thrown out of their seats by one kid having a cleared-benches brawl all by himself.

Most of the class was still laughing by the time there were twenty of Jared McClaren in the classroom, and the punches were being thrown. One Jared got his head smashed into a bulletin board, throwing an enormous map onto the floor. Then he snarled and Michael saw four more of himself split off. It happened so fast that soon there had to be forty of them.

The classroom was getting crowded, and it hadn't even been a minute.

Mr. Groebels stood up and bellowed at the top of his lungs. "That is enough of that!"

Forty crazed and identical pairs of eyes turned on him.

"Get yourself under control, young man!"

"It was his project," one of the Jareds muttered.

"And all the memorizing," another said.

"A hundred countries and capitals." Now they were finishing each others' sentences.

"Just give us a blank map, you think we don't have anything else to do..."

"...but sit around and stare at your stupid maps all day? Most of these countries..."

"...ain't gonna last ten years anyway."

“And there's math...”

“...English...”

“...science, what was that, bird nests and building musical instruments.”

“You can't just be one person and get it all done!” one of them shouted. None of them sounded quite right, horrified and laughing, like they'd just been watching *The Devil's Cheerleaders* and *How I Married a Martian* at the same time.

Some of the kids who hadn't left the room were going along with the Jareds, egging him on. This wasn't good. Michael got up and headed to the front, where an army was closing in on Mr. Groebels.

The teacher stared, wide-eyed and frightened, as the Jareds surrounded him. He had a phone in his hand, but his mouth wasn't making any noise. It was just opening and closing, like a fish gasping for water, caught on a hook.

“Don't do this Jared,” Michael said.

“Get out of my way, crazy outcast,” Jared said, and pushed Michael roughly aside. Half a dozen Jareds grabbed him. He was punched in the stomach, tripped, and then stomped on a couple of times before Michael smelled Charlotte's shampoo and realized she was pulling him out of the fracas.

All of the Jareds turned their mad anger on the teacher, leaping over desks and pushing other students aside to get to him. He went for the door, but his escape was blocked by more copies than Michael could count.

Then a flash of strange golden light appeared, and the Jareds fell back. Something happened in the middle of the circle, where Mr. Groebels had been, but there were too many carrot-topped heads in the way. The classroom was clogged with them.

All of the copies howled in rage and started streaming out the door. It was then Michael noticed the strange smell in the air. He wondered what was going on, because everything was getting blurry. Suddenly his head was a leaden ball, and he couldn't move his feet. He looked around for Charlotte and found her lying on the ground, was she asleep? He couldn't tell. In fact, he couldn't think of anything. He was supposed to be scared, he realized, but then he couldn't be scared, because he just need to lie down, close his eyes, and everything would be okay.

Or at least everything would be a nice, peaceful black.

When he awoke he was in his room, and the cheerful, annoying sound of crickets was coming in loud and clear through his window. It wasn't yet late enough in the year to shut them up, but the weather was cooling down, bit by bit. Grandpa was sitting at the foot of his bed, smiling kindly down at him.

“Hey there Michael. Rough day today?”

He mumbled something.

“Second time in a couple of months I've had to give you a glass of water. Here you go.” He handed it over and helped Michael clear the desert out of his throat. “Listen kiddo, I know you were scared, and you had every right to be. But I want to assure you everything is alright. Completely alright, okay?”

“Sure.”

Grandpa didn't wait for him to ask what happened. “The school used a sleeping gas in the air ducts. And yes, before you ask, they've planned for this. It's been on a lot of minds since your friend Trent crashed the Spring Ball. Your mother was in on the PTA meetings that decided it. They were ready as soon as Mr. Groebels called them.”

“What happened to Jared? Did anybody get hurt?”

Grandpa frowned. “There were a couple of scratches, but nothing serious. Jared only hurt himself, I'm sorry to say. Listen kiddo, people think that if they go Active all their problems are just going to go away. That's not how it works.

“Being Active is a whole new set of problems in and of itself. You don't just wish for a spaceship to fly away and then not read the owner's manual on how to fly the thing, right? You'd get yourself killed off in space, flying too close to a supernova.”

“That's from Star Wars isn't it?”

“I didn't know my grandson was into the classics.”

He wasn't, not as much as Charlotte, but she rubbed off on him a lot.

“Well anyway, you're right. Jared didn't understand that he couldn't just split off his mind in that many directions and hope he could stay out of the looney bin. He was trying to study for all his subjects at the same time.”

“Something happened,” Michael said. He explained about the gold flash of light.

“Ah, right,” Grandpa said. “That was another of the city's Actives. She can transport herself anywhere she's been before in the blink of an eye. She got Mr. Groebels out of there before Jared could really hurt him.”

Michael shook his head. Mr. Groebels had been under siege by fifty of one kid who had made himself nuts by copying himself too many times. Another kid had sprouted lightning from his body. This wasn't happening. You didn't wake up and say 'hmm, I wonder if someone's going to fly right through my office building today' or 'wouldn't it be totally out of control if this kid cloned himself over a hundred times and ripped apart his teachers?'

“What is going on?” Michael groaned.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean everything's nuts. Completely crazy.”

“I thought you'd say something like that. Listen kiddo, I wanted to have this chat with you, because others might think they can get in on the action. And everybody knows that you get your ability in a time of stress. Everybody knows you get something that you need, something that will help you at that point in time. They'll want their own power so they can levitate cars and shoot lasers at people they don't like. But I need you to promise me you're not going to try anything dumb, okay?”

Michael thought about it. Sure it would be cool, to fly or jump into a spiked pit or teleport wherever you wanted, but a lot of people had killed themselves trying to go Active, after Marcus Patterson. Thousands in the first few months.

“You told me that last time. Mr. Springfield said the same thing.”

“Well we meant it. There ain't nothing wrong with being a normal kid, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

“That's a good boy. Now, here's your reader thing. Your mother tells me school's going to be closed tomorrow, so you've got yourself a nice three day weekend. How's that sound?”

It sounded like the start of time flowing back to normal. October was half over by the time Jared went multiple and mental, and the rest of it slunk out without any other mention of Jared McClaren or Trent. Halloween passed as usual. He went out as Harry Potter and nobody really understood, but he hadn't expected them to. Charlotte showed up looking like a thrift store had thrown up on her. She explained that she was going as a hippie. It didn't do much to explain

the red-tinted sunglasses, flowery and flowing dress on top of the bell bottoms, or the rings and bangles, but Michael didn't mind. She looked great.

But when November showed its red, gold, and pink face, the worst and most unimaginable thing happened to Michael.

He lost his only friend.

One day she was telling him about how the twins were making trouble at home, and then that she'd started to get into the work of a guy named John Legend, and the next she didn't show up to school at all. She couldn't have been sick.

She didn't show up the next day. Or the next.

Then one day during first hour, which was social studies again, Jared McClaren came in before the bell rang. Silence took over the classroom at his heels. Everybody stared at him, but he only looked around, passed Michael, tripped over a desk, muttered something about a bathroom, and headed out again. He was lucky Wozniak hadn't gotten to the classroom, he thought.

Somebody told the old man just as soon as he'd walked in the class, though.

Mr. Wozniak's eyes widened. "What, where? Where exactly did he go? What did he do?"

Lindsay Schwartz cocked her head. "He must have been drunk or something. He was tripping all over the place. He went over there and..." She appeared to realize that she was pointing right at Michael, and hastily pulled her hand back.

"And?" Mr. Wozniak asked.

"He just went to the bathroom."

Mr. Wozniak was on the phone before she finished her sentence. The school was on lockdown in a matter of minutes. Even though his grandfather had told him about it, Michael was still surprised when someone came over the intercom to say it was a code yellow, and for everyone to remain in their classrooms. A golden flash erupted just outside the door, and the face of a young woman appeared in the window. Mr. Wozniak held up his hands in a big X shape. *He's not here.*

The search lasted through the bell time, and all of them were twenty minutes late for second period. Michael didn't mind. But what he did have trouble with was why Jared had come in, tripped on his shoelaces right in front of Michael, and then disappeared without a trace.

Michael didn't bother with where the carrot-headed kid was. He was probably on the run out to New Mexico or something. Anywhere but the prison they'd put him in.

He thought it was weird until he opened his bag to get out his math books and found a piece of paper stuffed inside.

“What the...” he said.

Open me after school, it said.

He did. It was a long and confusing day. Charlotte didn't show up again, but Jared did. Michael's worry about Charlotte was tinted with questions about Jared's situation. Was he locked up someplace? Could he just put his hand out of the bars and make a new copy to go out and deliver the message? And once he started wondering what was in the message, he couldn't get that out of his head either.

Maybe Jared was in contact with Trent. Maybe Jared knew about what Michael had done to Trent, and thought Michael could help. Maybe Jared didn't have any friends and wanted someone to talk to. However he'd gotten out, he should have just run away. Far away.

Michael tried to get through the day, imagining what Jared would do to keep himself company if he ran away. Playing chess against yourself had to be a pretty dull way to pass the time. He could play video games, but he would always win.

When the day finally ended, Michael didn't think he'd learned a single thing. He had a million questions for Jared McClaren and wherever they'd put him. He tore out of school, went to the bike rack, and realized he hadn't been bringing his bike to school for ages. It was another example of how strange everything had gotten.

He tore the note out of his bag and checked to see nobody was around. He didn't know why, maybe it was all the extra security at the school, but this was a secret note and he didn't want anybody reading over his shoulder.

“What...” he asked. The end of the note was signed Charlotte.

Hi Michael,

I'm really sorry I couldn't come 2 school the last 3 days. Actually I can't come anymore. Anyway don't worry about me. Just spin one of the old CDs I was telling you about. You should play track 6 on the Janis Joplin album. Or if you want, song #2 by Blur is another you would probably like. Or maybe 4 Non-Blondes. Maybe not.

My mom says keep your nose clean. And the twins are their normal boring selves.

Take care, and here's a hug for you,

-Charlotte

"Weird," he said to no one, as he finished the letter.

He tried to figure out just what she was talking about in the letter. She hadn't explained much of anything. All she'd done is not exactly be herself. Sure she was weird, but she'd never written him an e-mail or a letter with the word 'to' written in a number instead. Plus, the twins were never their 'boring' selves. It was like they'd lived through another adventure every day Charlotte talked about them.

Maybe it was a code. Michael's heart was suddenly racing. There didn't seem to be enough of a note for much of a code, but still. She was probably trying to tell him something. The numbers had to be the key.

If he put the 2, 3, 6, 2 and 4 together...

"Not long enough to be a phone number," he said. She could have made up an e-mail address, but she didn't put down any sort of site name. He puzzled over it on his paper route, thinking out loud while enjoying the brisk November weather. He hadn't realized just how miserable he'd been without any Charlotte in his life. There wasn't enough radical shifting in music with the regular kids, not that they talked to him, but he could still hear their music playing from their mini boomboxes. It was the same broken factory being blown to smithereens with someone shouting, or the softcore rap some of them were into. He wanted to hear about the music that had changed history, and see the clothes people wore way back when. He wanted something out of left field every few weeks. Mostly he just wanted to watch Charlotte be very animated, like the way her eyes slid halfway down whenever she put on a really groovy record, and she wiggled her shoulders back and forth. Sometimes she'd snap her fingers.

That was the best.

Everybody else at school had no idea what real was. They only listened to the new music because that's what they saw on TV, that's what got advertised all over the internet. Charlotte was more solid than the rest of them, pulsing with life. Everybody else was willing to give up on a bullied fifth grader. They were afraid of a sixth grader who'd beaten up the bad guy. Not Charlotte. She wasn't afraid of anything.

He thought maybe the numbers were a zip code, but he looked it up as soon as he got home, and discovered that it was the code for Ramona California. Even if she was there, it would

have taken her like an hour by suborbital shuttle. And if, by some reason she'd given the note to Jared and he was there, he would have had to drive for like four days just to get to town. Ramona California was a bust.

Grandpa was waiting for him when he finished his route, with a tall glass of IBC in one hand and a beer in the other.

"Guess which one's for you," he said.

"Umm..." he said.

"You're right, I couldn't just give you a beer. Wouldn't be responsible of me. How you doing kiddo? Got some time to chew the fat with your old grandfather? How was school?"

Michael had never been a super quick kid. He was smart, sure, books and all, well-read too, but he hadn't won any battles of wits, ever.

Still, when Grandpa looked at him like he did, it set off a warning bell in his head. His grandfather did not look at him with that eager twinkle in his eye. He also did not meet Michael at the door to his house. These were special circumstances.

"It was alright," he said. "Where's mom?"

"Off shopping. She sent me over to see you didn't set anything on fire. She told me the school called her to tell her that Jared was in today, which she thought was pretty strange."

"Yeah, he was in and out." Michael grinned, remembering the look on Mr. Wozniak's face. "You should have seen Mr. Wozniak." He knew right away this was the wrong thing to say.

"Mr. Wozniak might have been in danger."

Michael's face fell. "Yeah I know." Grandpa was the last person in the world he wanted disappointed with him. "He was fine. Jared didn't come back."

"And nothing else happened?"

"No...it was just school as usual." Except it wasn't. There were some numbers he needed to piece together. He hadn't learned anything all day, and he had some homework he didn't really understand that needed doing.

"Well, let's crack them books kiddo. Finish up homework by the time your mom gets back and I'll talk to her about ordering a pizza."

"Alright," Michael said, with an inward whoop of excitement. He was going to do his homework anyway. Bonus pizza? Letter from Charlotte? It was the best day of the week so far.

He still had the feeling, over bonus pizza, that Grandpa was trying to get something out of him. It was almost like Grandpa knew about the letter from Charlotte and just wanted Michael to admit it so he could take a look. But then he told himself it was just his imagination, and that he just felt guilty for holding something back from Grandpa.

The little thought popped back up into his head. Yeah, it said, but your grandfather is holding things back from you too.

Not that Grandpa owed him explanations for everything he did.

“Shut up, gah,” he muttered.

“Something wrong Michael?” his mother asked.

“No,” he said, and shook his head. “I’m going to head to bed.”

“This early?” She looked really worried about him, which worried him.

“I can read in bed,” he said.

“Well okay...say goodnight to your grandfather.”

He dreamed about numbers that night. He dreamed he was flying above the continental US, and that little flashes of numbers zapped to bright yellow here or there, where the numbers were rearranged. But that couldn't be right. If he had to mix up those numbers, there were thousands of possible combinations. As the thought came, it seemed like half the US flashed gold.

No, that wasn't it.

He tossed and turned all night, woke up feeling more tired than when he went to bed, and headed out late enough that he had to ride his bike. He didn't even have time to pack a lunch.

It was a crisp November morning, and his bike crunched through the early morning frost. The sun was being lazy today, just a silver disk low in the overcast sky. The wind pummeled at him.

School wasn't much better. It seemed extra dark today, for some reason. Michael didn't feel like he could get through a whole day like this, no Charlotte, just having something from her but not knowing what it meant.

He stopped at his locker and looked down at the black lock. It was a few minutes past eight in the morning. Normally he was a morning person, sitting with his back to the locker and immersed in a book only he could see. Today he just stood staring at the flat expanse of cobalt

blue, with the slits at the top and bottom to make sure he didn't suffocate his books to death. To let in a little light in case he was growing a predatory plant with a taste for human blood.

It took an extra helping of concentration just to remember his locker com. As he fumbled with the knob and messed it up for the second time, a bolt of white inspiration struck him right between the ears.

The numbers on Charlotte's note were her locker com. 2, 3, 6, 2, 4 Maybe it was 23, 6, 24.

He couldn't check now, with the halls nearly empty. New kids were showing up every minute. Or could he, there weren't many kids around, and practically no adults. It wasn't against some sort of school law, but he'd never broken into somebody else's locker before. He felt a thrill of danger as he looked down the hall to where her locker sat. Nobody around. One fourth or fifth grader sitting and doing some early morning homework.

He headed over there, trying not to look like he was up to something sneaky. He was trembling with fear as he drew close to the locker. It looked like every other one in the school. So why did he feel like there was some special secret hidden behind that cobalt-painted door?

He flipped the dial around to the right three times, and settled on twenty-three, then he spun it to the left and landed on six, and finally over to twenty-four. He sucked in a deep breath and tried to steady his hammering heart, then tugged the lock.

Nothing happened.

He stared at it in disbelief. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't right.

It could. And did. He couldn't go through another day like this, thinking over the numbers again and again until he'd spun himself in circles. Not that it would matter much, because he was headed to the hospital again.

There was going to be another Activation, and this one would be big. Big enough that Michael would have no choice but to jump out of its path.

Michael's eyes were swollen shut. He had to have a million broken bones. He was dull agony all over, with sharp pains whenever he tried to shift to get comfortable. Someone was in the room with him, he could feel the pity and concern somehow. Maybe he was just smelling his mother's perfume.

"Michael?" she said.

He could only manage a groan. Still, it was a lot of effort for a single groan.

“Mr. Springfield is here,” she said. “You remember, your dad's out in North Africa.”

Another groan. He heard a chair squeal as it was dragged up next to the bed. He could smell Mr. Springfield, something like ozone and grass clippings. Well, at least his nose was still working.

“It wasn't supposed to be like this,” Mr. Springfield told him in the hospital room. They weren't going to get a day off this time. No, they were going to get the rest of the month off this time. After the damage to LADCEMS, there wasn't another option.

“Tell me about it,” Michael said.

“So what happened?”

“Well...”

He'd been at his locker, looking at Charlotte's note when none other than Davey Rightman came pelting down the hall at full speed. He'd grown since he disappeared over to the eighth grade building, and not in any good ways. He was taller, maybe six two, gangly and super thin. Now he'd been infested by some pretty nasty acne. The acne was real proof that there was a face between those enormous ears.

“What did he say?” Springfield asked.

“He was pretty surprised to see me,” Michael told him. He didn't mention the note to Mr. Springfield. He was feeling every bit the super spy lately, though he couldn't remember the last time he had seen a super spy end up in the hospital...ever.

“So what happened?” Mr. Springfield asked. Michael had drifted away into his own thoughts of being the town's James Bond. Yeah right.

“Well,” he said, “The school started coming apart.”

From down the hall came a deep groaning sound, like the whole planet was upset with Davey.

“Oh...oh my god. Mikey Washington!” Davey stopped and put his hands on his knees and heaved a couple of breaths. He looked desperate. “You gotta help me.”

Yep. That was as likely to happen as Michael sprouting a second head.

But when Davey fell to his knees, the fear on his face was so complete, it was pure terror. Michael had seen Davey smug, deceitful, pompous and overconfident, but he'd never seen him terrified.

“What is it?” Michael asked, but he didn't have to wonder long. Davey shot a terrified glance over his shoulder and jumped full body into Michael's locker. He had to duck his head painfully to the side, but he fit without much fuss.

“Shut it,” he hissed. “Lock it.”

This was his lucky day. He shut the locker door and clicked the lock closed as well.

It was then the world turned upside down. Someone down the hall screamed. Michael looked, and found two people floating near the stairwell. One of them was furious, the other a terrified fifth grade girl.

“Where is he?” the furious girl said. Even from where Michael was standing, he could see the fissure appear in the wall of the school. One second it was the smooth surface that had been painted over a million times. The next, a black lightning bolt shot up from the floor to the ceiling.

“Answer me!” the girl shrieked. Michael started walking toward her. He could make out now; she was a bit chubby, wearing a thick maroon sweater and baggy pants. Her hair looked like it was constantly under water, dirty blonde floating up and down like a drifting octopus.

But the fifth grade girl just whimpered and cried.

“Worthless,” the Active girl said. “You know who I’m looking for. Tell me where he is.”

“Hey!” Michael said. “Put her down, okay? You want somebody, you don't need to hurt somebody else.”

The look he got was pure hate. Whatever Davey had done to this girl, it was bad. Bad enough that she was ready and willing to hurt somebody else to get Davey. He was really glad Charlotte wasn't here. Once the fifth grader was safe, he was going to run straight away from this situation.

“I'm looking for a pile of garbage about this tall,” the Active girl said, with her hand up to about six feet. “I didn't know they piled up crap that high. Not until today.” She threw her head back and laughed, a high and slightly insane sound.

“Davey Rightman?” he asked.

His vision grayed, and when he could focus again he was flat against the wall, four feet off the ground. She'd slammed him up there.

“Where is he?” she hissed. She was close enough to smell. The heavy scent of cheap perfume stung his nose, which was maybe the only part of him that didn't hurt.

He could have ratted Davey out. Heavens knew he had enough reasons to. All of fifth grade, for a start. Yet he couldn't get the pleading, terrified and pimple-studded face out of his mind. He couldn't just let Davey get hurt. If he had a grudge against Davey, it wasn't up to this girl to put things straight, it was Michael's responsibility.

"He blew past here to the end of the hall," Michael groaned.

"I think you're lying," she said.

"How do you figure?" he asked. "By the way I sound like somebody's shoved me up against a wall?"

His head cracked against the brick, and stars swam into his vision. He knew right away he was bleeding.

"You don't understand," she said.

"I'm not going to understand anything if I'm unconscious," he said.

"He thought he could just take what he wanted...that it didn't mean anything." She started wandering up the hall with her back to him. Doors began flying open, and a few tore off their hinges. They slammed into the ceiling, cracking like gunshots in the spooky after school quiet.

"He really believed I didn't care who I gave it away to."

She was crazy, Michael realized. If she didn't find Davey and hurt him, she was going to find somebody else. That meant he had to do something, he realized wearily. This was Trent all over again.

There wasn't much to grab onto, just the lockers and their thin metal slits. Michael heaved himself over onto his side and rummaged in his pocket for his key ring. It would have to do. He wedged the key into one of the air vents in the lockers, and started pulling himself along the wall toward the girl. She was talking loudly to no one in particular.

"Boys don't care. They just say they love you. They're all liars, every single one. They'll just keep talking pretty while they're sharpening the knife, ready to stab you in the back. You'll be doing the same thing next year, probably."

Michael pulled and pulled until he got to a classroom entrance. He wasn't going anywhere else.

"You're probably right," he said.

"You lied to me, too, didn't you?" she whirled. The school groaned at them, and fresh cracks appeared all over the place. It was like her presence was pushing everything apart.

“Yeah,” he said.

“But...I know you,” she said. “You’re that kid Trent messed with, aren’t you?”

He nodded, two feet from the floor. It was like gravity had turned sideways for him. He gathered up his legs under him and got ready.

“You were Trent’s girlfriend at the time,” he said.

She made a sound of disgust, but he could see her face soften up. She still liked Trent, the feelings weren’t gone at all. Some girls were just a sounding board for their group of boys, getting passed around and toyed with. It was horrible, but it happened. Some people just needed to be with someone at all times, for good or bad.

“You’re right,” he said, “I lied.”

There was no better word for what she did next: she snarled.

“I know where Davey is.”

“Now. Tell me now.”

“Let the girl go, and I’ll tell you.”

She did, and the girl ran off screaming. That might get someone here to help soon. Or the girl could just run straight home and hide under her bed for hours without telling anybody. She whirled on Michael. “Where?”

“He’s in that locker. That one right there.”

When she turned her back on him, he struck. It was like launching himself into a pool of butterscotch pudding. It seemed like he squished through the air, instead of jumping. He stretched, and stretched, and finally caught hold of her by the hair.

“Let go!” she shrieked. All the silver com locks sprang up toward her and snapped off. One hit him in the shoulder, sending red agony through him. Then her power smacked into him, but he held on. The girl staggered under the force of her own power. Michael got his other hand up through the jellied air, and wrapped it around her neck. Another bolt of force tore apart the ceiling, and punched a hole in the roof. Bits of plaster or ceiling tile or other stuff rained down on him, but he didn’t care. He adjusted his hold and started cutting off her air. He didn’t know how long he could keep the pressure on, with his body screaming at him to *stop it, stop it right now!* But if he didn’t, maybe she would do something really stupid, like hammer his head into a wall until it was raspberry jam.

When she hit next, she slammed both of them backwards through the air. Michael jerked hard to one side, before he was crushed against the wall of the school, and the girl took the full force of it. The last thing he knew before going unconscious was the shock and pain, and the blood coming out of her just before normal gravity took over, and blackness took the both of them.

Chapter 7 – Getaway

Michael's father was a wonderful guy, but wasn't around much. When he did come home, it was always a bit awkward. He just wanted to sit around and drink a couple of beers, then complain at his wife. Michael didn't play baseball because he wasn't at all coordinated, but there were times he would put up with the odd fishing trip. The fact was that Michael didn't know anything about his dad, and it had never bothered him until he was in the hospital.

One of the jokes Michael knew about his dad was that people said he was like an avalanche. He was slow to move, near impossible to get upset, but if he started moving, you best just get out of his way.

They thought he was sleeping. They also didn't seem to understand that sound carried.

“...don't care what the regents are saying!” his father bellowed. “My son isn't safe. I'm not going to leave him in a situation where his life is going to be in danger every other week.”

His mother muttered something.

“Don't give me that. They're supposed to have a handle on this. There's a whole...a system in place for this. And no, I'm not going to keep my voice down.” He swore in another language, a vile, guttural sound. Susanna Washington did not approve of curse words in her house, and wasn't above threatening her husband with a soapy mouth.

His mother said something else.

“Well the system is not working. How can I go off around the world and figure out how to solve every single problem on the planet when I don't know if my own son is going to have his brain hammered to mush by some immature...little...floozy!”

Clearly he wasn't too good at the insult thing.

Davey Rightman was alive. The girl, her name was Sylvia Packard, she was alive too. The damage to Michael was three cracked ribs, a broken tibia, and hairline fractures in seven other bones he didn't even know the names of. Plus pain, there was plenty of that too.

“You're going to be fine,” Mr. Springfield had said. “We've got our best people working on this.”

"I want Montgomery in to look at him!" his father shouted. "She's the best. Why can't they even spare him a single look? He's *my son!*"

"Get a hold of yourself Michael," Susanna said, loudly. "You're going to wake him up."

"Yeah, that's another thing. Isn't it about time we told him the truth? I mean, my God Susanna, considering who I am, and his grandfather...he has the right to know."

"You agreed not to tell him. For his protection!"

"That was before all this!"

What did he have a right to know, exactly, except that several of the teenagers over at Marcus Patterson were going Active even though the mathematical chances of that happening were astronomically low? That the teachers at LADCEMS and Marcus Patterson and the High School were Actives themselves? That he basically lived in Superville?

"Go home right this minute," Susanna said. "You're not thinking clearly."

"Oh yeah, and maybe you can sort me out," his father hissed. "That's your *job*, isn't it?"

"Maybe you should spare a few seconds and think about your son," she said. "He's lying in there, hurt, confused, probably scared. You want to dump a nuclear bomb right in the middle of that? Personally I think he's taking this better than you. He's the one who has to cope with this situation, not *you*. Now, put some faith in the administration and the school system. They're in place to handle these types of things. You're not."

"I-"

She steamrolled him. "Michael, I understand. You're confused, you're upset. We all are. But you're not the best qualified person to deal with this. The superintendent and the regents know what they're doing. Trust *them*."

Michael could just about hear the sigh of defeat.

She said something else, but Michael couldn't make it out.

"You mean it?" Michael's father asked, a hopeful note obliterating all the anger from earlier.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? Too long, I think. Go home, get ready." Suddenly his mother had gone from stern to playful in an instant. What was that about?

Michael's father came in and stood over him for a few minutes. Michael wanted to open his eyes and tell his father everything was fine. More importantly, he wanted to start asking

questions, mostly about their discussion outside. But then he would know that his son had been spying on them, and Michael couldn't have that.

He felt a bit guilty, but mostly he burned with loneliness and a little shame when his dad put a hand on his forehead, and left.

A specialist came to see him over the next few days, a woman named Mrs. Montgomery. She was big and round, with permanent smile lines deep in her bright red cheeks. She didn't carry a clipboard like the other doctors, but she did have a soft blue shirt and matching pants. Whatever she was doing when she gave him a back massage or had him exercise, it was working. The agony had faded on the first night, and his arms and legs were itching to move.

"Hi there Michael," she said, after the third day. She always gave him the same bright smile that wouldn't go away, no matter what.

"You're Active aren't you?"

"Bad news," she said, still smiling broadly. "Your parents sent me over with the homework you're going to have to do while the school jumps back on its feet. And I think today we can get you out of this bed and get you home."

He wasn't a doctor or a mathematician, but he could put two and two together. This was the same woman his mom and dad had fought about. When Mr. Springfield said he was getting the best treatment, he really meant it. This woman was putting his bones back together just by looking at him. Or maybe when she did the back massages. He'd never heard of someone with broken ribs getting a back massage. Then again, he admitted to himself, still not a doctor.

He groaned, looking at his backpack stuffed full of books. But, seeing as how he had a table on his bed, he figured he had to do it sooner or later, and he could do it standing up. When he pulled open his backpack to start his homework, he remembered the letter from Charlotte. Something still got to him about it, and he opened it.

Hi Michael,

I'm really sorry I couldn't come 2 school the last 3 days. Actually I can't come anymore. Anyway don't worry about me. Just spin one of the old CDs I was telling you about. You should play track 6 on the Janis Joplin album. Or if you want, song #2...

He hadn't seen it before, but there it was! All the others were numbers.

He couldn't wait. He changed in the bathroom, telling himself that his parents were keeping secrets from him, this Montgomery woman was keeping secrets from him, and maybe

even Grandpa too. At least Mr. Springfield had told him he couldn't tell Michael everything. This city was one big secret factory, and they were all working hard at keeping Michael (and everybody else) from knowing the truth. He resented being left in the dark, just because he was a kid. If they were worried about something, he felt he should know what it was, at least.

Sneaking out of the hospital wasn't as hard as he thought it might be. There were stairways at the end of the hall where the nurses didn't often go. Once, when he overheard two of them talking, he ducked into the floor above them and walked through as if he owned the place. At the other end of the hall was another stairway. He avoided the middle of the floor, where the elevators were. There he would be trapped with whoever decided to ask him questions.

He walked home from the hospital, keeping to the windswept side roads. He couldn't stay on the main roads, where people would stop and ask if he wanted a ride. On the other hand, his backpack weighed half a ton, and he couldn't be as sneaky as he wanted without risking a broken back.

It was weird, breaking into his own house, but it had to be done. His father was home, and his mother too, and they wouldn't understand if they saw him tromp through the front door, go out the back, go into the garage, and leave for school.

The garage had a motion light, and so did the back door of his house. Instead of cutting across the driveway, he stowed his ridiculously heavy backpack next to the garbage cans and went around back.

The back of the garage was a sort of micro-no-man's land of thorny bushes and broken equipment, like the shovel head from two summers ago when his dad had been working on the sump pump (a gross, horrible smelling thing that was buried in your yard for some reason), or Michael's first bike, which was now rust all over. The back of the garage was even worse. Sawhorses were piled with warped, gray old lumber, a canoe, and several unrecognizable shards of metal. Not to mention more tangles of thorny bushes. It was slow going, but at last he managed to duck under the canoe and pick his way carefully across the back.

Now for the hard part. Out in the open, there were windows to his parents' room, and the motion sensor could flash on at any time. He got his garage key ready and started inching his way down the side of the garage.

Time slowed down. His breath came super fast, but he was moving super slowly. He expected his parents to look out the window at any second. He expected the light to flash on, and

his dad to come out with a baseball bat, shouting to get off his property. Plus, it was getting pretty cold, now that he wasn't moving around.

He was just within reach of the doorknob when the bedroom lights turned on. He froze, even though he realized he was out in the open. His heart was hammering in his chest, ready to burst out as soon as he heard the first shout.

But it didn't happen. He could barely make out the forms of his mom and dad moving around the bedroom, but he didn't feel like they were moving in any strange way. Well, it was now, or just give up.

He inched his way down the side of the garage, moving as slowly as he could bear. After a few centuries the door came up ahead, and he slipped his key inside. Instead of the normal metallic rattle, it sounded like a machine gun going off. And the squeak of the garage door was like that fifth grade girl from the day before, screaming in protest.

He pushed the door open and eased himself inside. His bike was next to the unused but nicely built tool rack, and the other woodworking tools his father was never home to use. Then, with all the speed of a half-sleeping snail, he inched his way out the door and around the garage again, this time with his bike.

Only once he was down the driveway did he consider that it might have been faster just to walk to the school and walk home. His bike was better than running, that was for sure. He knew by his entire fifth grade year that with the right running start to hop on the bike, nobody could catch you.

The blocks flew past, and he crossed at the light that usually brought him over to the library on his paper route. He'd have to ask his mom who they found to sub for him while he was in the hospital. Last time they'd asked the neighbor girl, a fifth grader named Rachel Pescatello, and he had to pay her and everything.

But he couldn't think about that now. As the school came into view, he couldn't think about anything but being a stealth ninja. Because there were people crawling all over the place.

The school looked like a construction zone crossed with a police investigation. There were guys with hard hats and big steel-toed boots looking over the damage from hydraulic platforms. Several spotlights were pointed at different parts of the building, washing it in blinding white. A couple of fire trucks sat on the large lawn on either side of the school, with firefighters standing by. Police cars and officers stood nearby, drinking coffee and eating donuts.

The firefighters weren't in full gear, just heavy pants with suspenders. Michael guessed they were waiting for the school to blow up, or at least catch on fire.

And someone was floating in the air, just next to the construction guys.

He didn't have time to stand around gawking, as his mother put it, so he pedaled on and circled around the school. He went the long way, all the way around the hulking Marcus Patterson building and the sports fields near them. He went in at a good clip, and pulled up behind a lonely van standing sentry in the school's parking lot.

Another police car sat near the rear entrance to the school, but the only officer was inside and reading something on his tablet. Crouching low, it was easy to get right behind the car and get a look at the rear section of the school.

The back door was locked. He knew that, after school, you had to be buzzed in, and if there wasn't anybody in the office, it was tough luck, said the duck. He didn't need the door though. There were several enormous cracks in the school, big enough to get through easy. Big enough to get through without being noticed, that was a different story.

There was also a problem of motion detectors, but from the absolutely black look of the inside, Michael figured they had probably cut the power to the entire building. Who would be stupid enough to sneak into an unstable school, surrounded by police and firefighters, at night?

Michael smiled to himself.

It was a matter of a quick dart, though Michael thought he saw the policeman look up as he disappeared into the school. He wormed his way into the band room, headed out into the hall, and made his way to the stairs over near the office. Thank goodness for the carpeted hallway floors. He could hear voices, but in this spooky gloom it seemed like the wind was bringing strange sounds to him. There was no way to tell where they were.

Somewhere nearby, the structure groaned in protest, like a dinosaur with a stomachache. A bit of moonlight filtered in through some of the school's cracks, but other than that everything was black.

He'd never trembled with fear and excitement at the same time, except maybe when he made his first money delivery to Trent. It was a long time ago, but the memory came back fresh. He remember thinking that everybody in the dodge ball area was his enemy, any of them might just punch him for no good reason. Here and now, it was the same feeling, that there were threats everywhere, just around this corner...no. Good.

He took out the note. "Twenty-three, sixteen, twenty-four," he muttered.

He had to jump over an enormous crack in the school up here, but made the stupid decision to see what was down there first. As soon as he looked down, he regretted it. The moonlight clearly showed him a tangle of sharp edges, from the concrete and snapped off pieces of rebar poking up like frozen snakes. Below...yikes, he hadn't realized it was so *far* down.

No problem. Just don't trip, he told himself, you can jump three feet. Three feet is nothing, you do it in gym class all the time. Yeah, another part of him said, but in gym class the floor is *there*. It's not ready to eat me.

He backed up to get a running start. When he took off, he heard a noise, and nearly missed his footing. The gap seemed to stretch out as he ran up, but he launched himself across, and only tripped as he landed. He landed a little off, skinning his knees and his palm.

"Rug burn," he muttered. "Ugh."

There, her locker was there, bathed in the soft moonlight not far from the crack.

He ran up to it and began spinning the lock.

"Twenty-three," he said. "Sixteen...Twenty-four."

He took a deep breath. If this didn't work, he could be in trouble with the police for absolutely nothing. He could be in trouble with his parents, with the school. This note, and these three numbers could be the end of him. He pulled. The lock came open.

He was about to let himself breathe again when he heard a voice.

"I'm telling you I thought I heard something."

A radio hissed, and a far away voice said, "All right. Check it out."

The beam of a flashlight jiggled down the hallway, around the corner that led to the shop and band/orchestra wing. Michael threw himself into the next classroom door space. It was a recessed space of about two feet, enough to hide him completely. After that though, there was nothing else. If the policeman came all the way down here, that was it. He would be done.

The flashlight beam danced around a little bit, before the policeman swore. Then he whistled.

"Dispatch, you seen the state of this place? That kid tore a three foot gap in the hall here, over."

The radio crackled again. "Erikson, get your kiester outside right now. No more inventing burglars just so you can take the nickel tour, over."

"I'm not through with my sweep, over," Erikson said.

"That's an order. Get outside before I report you, over."

Erikson grumbled, but copied that, and followed with an over-and-out. The flashlight swung away and disappeared.

Michael waited five minutes before he slid down the wall and exhaled loudly. He was shaking so badly he could barely get to his feet, and even though he knew Erikson was gone, he was still as quiet as he could be with the latch, and the door.

Charlotte's locker smelled like her. He hadn't realized how badly he missed that smell until now. It wasn't anything he could identify, but he liked it. It felt cozy, friendly, and really nice. There were bad things in the world, but with this smell, you could make believe there weren't any. The rest of the locker was kept neatly, not like his own paper-filled trash heap, where his books were difficult to spot on the best of days.

The note was right there, on the bottom. Yes!

He picked it up and made his way back down to the crack where he'd gone in. He paused there, in the band room, and tried to peek out. Unfortunately, Erikson must have moved his car, because the headlights were shining right at the crack he was hiding in.

"Crud," he whispered.

His other option was the door, but he felt like there would be some sort of alarm going off. Then he remembered that the power was turned off. Still, if Erikson was paying attention, and he probably was, he would spot Michael the moment the door moved.

There was only one option: he had to wait. He sat down in a patch of moonlight and started reading.

It was wrong. He knew it from the word 'hello'. The words, though he could barely make them out in the weak light, weren't from Charlotte. They just said the same things: music, twins weren't doing anything exciting, mom said yo and she was being home-schooled. Her mom was afraid of the Actives popping up around LADCEMS, and didn't want any of her children near that place.

First of all, Michael thought he understood Mrs. Sulzsko pretty well, and she wasn't the type of woman to shy away from anything. In fact, she probably would have been excited to get Trent to pose, flicking electricity all over the place, in order to paint him. And the twins were nothing but a handful. One was always crawling down the stairs into the basement, somehow

getting past the safety fence while the other was trying to give the cat a bath. The last line of this letter from Charlotte went *take care of yourself, Mikey, and be careful. It's getting dangerous at school these days.*

Charlotte would never, ever in her life write or say anything of the sort.

And the strangest thing was that a phantom image of someone came immediately to mind, sitting at the antique writing desk in his study, the roll top kind you could pulled the cover down. He was looking over the letter Charlotte had put in Michael's bag with his tongue sticking out of his mouth, glancing back and forth. The man was his grandfather.

Michael wasn't old enough to think he knew everything. That would probably happen in eighth grade. His mother was always warning him about thinking he knew everything. But he did know some things. He knew what chicken tasted like, what his fingers felt like when he rubbed them together. He knew that by closing his eyes and pressing on his eyelids he could make himself see stars and weird checkerboard patterns. He knew the smell of apple pie in the oven, after school.

And somehow he knew, without knowing how, he just knew that Grandpa had written the letter and copied Charlotte's signature there. It wasn't like watching a movie, where you know what you're seeing isn't true. And it wasn't like looking in a photograph, which can be doctored up and enhanced. It was true.

And more than that, there had been another letter from Charlotte, maybe the real one, on the desk. He hadn't had the time to read it, but it was there. That meant Grandpa found the note in Michael's bag somehow, understood what it meant, and opened Charlotte's locker. Then he went through the trouble of reading Charlotte's real letter, and forging another one. He was just lucky that Michael hadn't gotten to the real letter, because he was more determined than ever to see Charlotte. The thought of his grandfather keeping things from him gave him a nasty headache.

Michael looked up as soon as he noticed the headlights dim and the car head out of the parking lot.

"Yes!" he said, and hopped to his feet. A few minutes later he was on his bike and pedaling toward home, where his parents were ready to kill him.

Chapter 8 - The Truth About Santa

The lawn was sparkling green, with a twinkly layer of morning frost on it, and the leaves burned bright red and orange and gold in the slanting morning rays. The paper boy would roll by in the mid afternoon, waving and smiling and saying hi to people. Him. Michael the paper boy. In the evening, you could see through those same leaves, and the place took on that apple cider tinted smell. Kids were still playing in the streets until the dull orange lamps clicked on. This wasn't the sort of place where people would flat out lie to their kids.

His parents were keeping secrets, Grandpa had stolen something meant for him, and he felt that Mr. Springfield and his grandfather were keeping close tabs on him. Close tabs was only inches away from spying. He'd read enough books to know what 'keeping tabs' meant.

He had to admit the possibility that there was somebody spying on him, an Active maybe. The town was full of them, and as crazy as it seemed, they could have put someone on him, like a tail. He knew he was being paranoid, but they could spare an Active to be a wilderness survival teacher at the high school. Maybe they could spare an Active to follow him around and make sure he didn't find out what they didn't want him to know, like someone invisible or someone who could leave their body or something.

There was nothing personal about keeping things from his parents, but he was a teenager and they were adults. Twelve years old was a teenager in his book. He couldn't just tell them things. It was a law of nature.

It was also a fact that adults were nosy and occasionally cleaned up your room for you when they felt it wasn't up to their insane standards. Or they would root through your backpack and tell you that there was an important school paper in there, they knew it! When that happened, if you had a secret note from your best friend, the situation wasn't going to go well.

He crept up the stairs to their enclosed porch and pulled both notes from his pockets. He had several enormous, inky newspaper carriers, the kind with two deep pouches and one hole for your head. He'd retired one of them, after he found a gaping hole in the corner with a trail of

newspapers fluttering on the sidewalk behind him. He stuffed Charlotte's notes there, careful to put them in the corner where the hole wasn't.

As soon as he turned around, his mother jerked open the front door, and the screaming started. She had the tablet in hand, which meant she was probably on the phone to Grandpa, the police, and the president of the United States by now.

“Michael Edward Washington, you get in this house right now!” she shouted. “What were you thinking, leaving the hospital without calling me or your father first? And sneaking into the garage. Honestly Michael, what has gotten into your head? Did you leave it back at the hospital? Well, what are you standing there for, get in here!”

He noticed his father towering just behind her, a frown pasted on his face. It wasn't a sympathetic frown either.

He didn't bother telling her that she was in the way. He just ducked and tried not to push through her as he went inside. He also didn't bother to head up to his room. That would have been like tying on a pair of hundred pound shoes and jumping off a pier. He just went in and sat down on the chair, so his parents could take the couch and team up on him. This was standard procedure when he was in trouble.

“Answer your mother,” Michael Sr. said. They talked about each other in the third person while they were giving him the treatment.

“I had to get out...and think,” he said. He knew exactly how lame it sounded.

“Wait, clear this up for me, because you must think I'm pretty dense,” his mother said. She was pinching the bridge of her nose, which meant nuclear meltdown was only seconds away. “To think, you need to walk home in the dark, sneak quietly around the house, unlock the garage moving around like a sloth, and lift your bike over all those vines and bushes behind the garage. Then you need to pedal your little kiester God knows where in the dark, where anyone can hit you, or walk up and kidnap you and we would have no clue where you were? Is that what was running through your mind, because I have to say, Michael, I didn't think I did such a terrible job raising you.”

“Either that or you're lying,” his father said quietly.

He thought furiously. He couldn't tell them he went rooting around a half-destroyed school for a note that made him think everyone in the world was keeping things from him. No, he needed to improvise.

"I...I wanted to see Charlotte."

Now she was up off the couch and pacing. "I knew it! I just knew it."

"And do you think showing up at her door in the middle of the night was a good idea?" his dad didn't stop staring at him, and he wouldn't raise his voice. Michael was hoping maybe he would start shouting. This calm and collected thing was giving him the creeps.

"Uh...when I got there I thought about that. So I didn't go up and knock."

"Did lightning strike your brain, because that was the smartest thing you did all night."

"I'm sorry...I know you guys didn't want me going to see her."

"Yes, well..." his father said. He locked eyes with Susanna, and it was like they were reading each others' minds. A very intense conversation seemed to pass through the air right in front of his face, and he wanted to reach out and grab it. He wanted to jump right up and scream at them.

"Michael," his mother sighed. She suddenly sounded very tired. "I didn't want to talk to you about this, but Charlotte's not well. You know she's always been a bit...strange."

"Susie?" his father said. "What-"

"Shush," she said. "Charlotte's in a special hospital now."

"You mean...she's crazy?" Her note didn't seem crazy. Okay, there was a code in the first note, and the second one didn't sound like her. But his grandfather at the writing desk...

"I mean she needs help, and the hospital will help her the way she needs."

"Susie," his father said in a warning tone. Like she was standing too close to a cliff's edge, peering over, like she couldn't see the cracks under her feet or that she was about to fall.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I know honey," she told him. "You've been through a lot lately. That Millickie boy, and then Jared McClaren, and that Packard girl. We didn't want to throw this on your back as well. It's a pretty terrible thing to have to deal with, especially for a twelve year old."

"I'm twelve and a half," he protested weakly. Charlotte couldn't be crazy. Couldn't be...right? Grandpa was at his writing desk, in his vision.

Oh man. Maybe he was going crazy too. Having 'visions'.

"I don't want to think about it," his mother said. "And I'm much older than you."

"Practically a million years old," his father said.

"Michael Edward, you are not helping."

“Yes dear.”

“I tell you what, sweetie,” she said. “I’m only going to ask you one thing, but I’m going to ask you once we’ve bought you something nice.”

Something nice? Michael knew he was too old for this, so what was going on? He tried to decipher what was going on with his parents by reading his mother’s face, but he wasn’t any good at it. And yeah, he might be twelve and a half, but he still enjoyed a new something from the store now and again. He didn’t like to admit it, but there were still interesting things in the toy aisle.

“Not clothes?”

“You name it, I’ll buy it for you. And maybe we can write Charlotte a letter later. I’m sure she’ll get it, and I’m sure she’ll write you something in return.”

“Susie, you can’t-”

“Shut your mouth Michael,” Susanna Washington said sweetly, and Michael watched while his father’s mouth slammed shut. He had his hands clasped in his lap so tight the knuckles were turning white. Michael wondered what he was missing, but there were all sorts of things his parents did he didn’t understand. After a while he just learned to try to ignore them.

“Don’t you have a trip to pack for?” his mother asked.

Michael’s father stared at her for a long time. Then, finally, he looked at the floor and muttered something under his breath. He left the room silently, face red and eyes down.

Michael wanted to think about this conversation, but shopping around Thanksgiving time was always one of those things that melted every other thought out of his head. He said goodbye to his dad and let his mother fuss him around until he was ready to head out. The atmosphere in the minivan was strained, but Michael put up with his.

His mother let him run around the store just as long as he was back at the registers when she beeped him on his phone. So he went to bounce a basketball around the sports department for a while, then stared at all the video games he wanted to play and knew he didn’t want to play, because they would suck away his reading time. Then he checked out some action figures, though he was getting too big for them. He stared at the Alphas for a long time.

There was Ginger, a red-headed, freckly figure, twelve inches tall and surrounded by a halo of light. The figure lit up from the inside, which made her look transparent. In real life, she could make light, or even blast somebody with it.

Next to Ginger was Stone, a smoother, happier and squarer-jawed version of Michael's father, who was a lot like the old Superman comics, if you could still find them. He had a dozen different hands, because the real Stone could turn into whatever he touched. There was a fire hand, a water hand, cement, steel, and one that was transparent and supposed to be air.

He looked over the others, Rajasthan and McKorsky, Shadwell, and Kravenz, and wondered if any of them lived in his town. Were these people walking around shopping at the local Kmart right now? Whenever you saw them on TV, there was always some sort of computer generated distortion, like automatic makeup effects or a digital mask. The real Stone or McKorsky might not look anything like these figures. Rajasthan might be a big fat guy, or Kravens might be ugly and scarred.

Well, his mother was going to buy him something. He could go for a new bike or a pair of sidewinder skates or a cheap tablet, but he really wanted to have Stone standing watch over him right now. Or maybe Ginger. She looked a bit like Lily, if Lily got a bunch of freckles and dyed her hair bright red. He could use a little super in his life, and a little less Active. Besides, he could stuff Charlotte's notes (real or forged) into Stone's real cotton shirt (complete with tiny pockets that wouldn't hold a button).

He was looking at the different hands when his mother rolled by, backed up, and then came up the toy aisle after him. She frowned down at Stone, and Michael knew he'd done something bad.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"This is what you want?" she asked. "A doll?"

"It's not a doll mom," he said. "Sheesh. It's an action figure."

"What sort of actions does it do?"

He just rolled his eyes at her.

"Well, I promised," she conceded. "You could buy whatever you want."

That was a challenge and he knew it. Well, the way things were going, with them keeping things from him, he wasn't going to back down. Besides, he didn't want Stone to play with it. He had another idea in mind for the fully-poseable figure with its 43 points of articulation and fabric clothing. He stuck it out and popped Stone into the loaded shopping cart.

“But I told you I'd ask you to do something,” his mother said kindly. She didn't say things kindly. It was like a full-grown tiger purring. “And I don't want you to get mad at me, okay? I told you we could write to Charlotte, and maybe we'll get word back from her.”

“Oh...kay.”

“But you can't be going over to her house to look for her. When she's healthy again, and ready to see you, she will come back, and you'll see her then. But you can't go looking for her.”

“But-”

“I know,” she said, “Charlotte's your only friend, but you have to think about her right now. What's good for Charlotte? I think we can agree that we should do what's best for her, since she's not healthy right now, don't you?”

“I...guess.”

“I guess too. So let's leave her in peace, and you'll see her again before you know it.”

In peace. That sounded odd.

There was no normal when it came to grocery shopping. His mother usually bought light when his father was off on one of his trips, but when he came back, she bought a ridiculous amount of food: steaks, potatoes for mashing, fruits and vegetables, baby back ribs. It was always pig out time when his dad came home.

That day the shopping cart was completely overloaded. Stone nearly slid off the mountain of bagged fruit and vegetables and boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter and whatnot.

“What's going on mom?”

“Hm?”

“This is a lot.” He swept his hand over the smorgasbord.

“Your father's been complaining he keeps going to bed hungry,” she explained, then went on to herself. “Should be a little more worried about getting a beer gut.”

Back at home, he helped unload the groceries, which involved trucking most of the groceries down to the basement where they kept a pantry that was practically a panic room. It was stuffed so full that sometimes he had to set stuff on the floor, because there weren't any shelves left. After that, he pretended to go out to the porch for something, and came back with the notes. He stuffed them into Stone's shirt, and partway down his pants. Then he put on a pair of concrete hands and posed him on top of his dresser, like Stone was ready to smash something.

The school announced there wouldn't be any classes until LADCEMS could be fixed up right and proper again. They estimated that school would be ready again just after Thanksgiving break. That gave them an extra week free, but nothing is ever truly free. The note promised that an extra week would be tacked onto the end of the year, which was very lame.

Michael's mother told him, since she couldn't just leave him in the house alone, that he could help her with the Christmas shopping. He was okay with that; it meant he had plenty of time to read in the car and walking around. His mother was amazed that he didn't even go tearing after all the new toys in the toy section, or head straight for the video game stores in the mall.

He shrugged. "Maybe I'll listen to some music."

But he stuck close to her, and they made their slow way around the mall. Lunch was a taco salad from the food court, while Susanna ate a custom built sandwich full of weird stuff like wheat grass and bean sprouts. Sandwiches were supposed to be lunchmeat pink or lunchmeat gray with cheese yellow, not green and orange and pink and cabbage purple.

Finally they headed toward the Macy's, where a short line of early Christmas-wishers were waiting to have their turn with Santa. When the big white and red fellow looked up, he gave a hearty 'ho, ho, ho' and waved at Michael.

"Hmm," his mother said. "Maybe you should go have a word with him."

"Mo-om. I'm not eight anymore."

"Too big for wishes are you? Well I sincerely hope not. Now go on, at least we can get a picture. You don't have to say anything, just for me okay?"

He dredged up a huge sigh. Once her mind was on something, there was no nay-saying. His father knew this already, and did whatever Susanna Washington asked, right off.

The mall had gone all out for the Christmas décor. An entire sleigh stood nearest them, with six reindeer staring off into the sky. Fake snow twinkled all over the ground, and a huge fake tree had been smothered with lights and baubles of every shape and color. At the top stood a permanently happy angel, just about to play his little harp thing. There was a striped barber pole not far from Santa's tiny house, which didn't look like it could even fit a twin size bed. Atop the enormous candy cane, a fake snow-covered sign read NORTH POLE. Several elves moved back and forth, explaining the deal to the kids and their parents as they waited. A couple of others helped children get to and from Santa, in whatever state they came. Several were dragged, kicking and screaming, not away from him, but *to* him. Michael grinned at the sight.

He joined the line and went through a few more pages of something called *Eldest*, which was about a boy who found a dragon egg. It was really old, but Lily had recommended the series. He had to admit, for a boy of seventeen to have written the first book, a 900 page whopper, that was pretty amazing. Though it definitely wasn't the *Lord of the Rings*, the second book was getting even better.

By the time he looked up again, he was standing at the stairs and Santa's elves were ushering off a five or six year old girl dressed all in pink, a space cadet who was telling the elf that she hadn't gotten through her entire Christmas list. She still wanted some Cinnamaroll shoes, and a diary to keep all her memories forever, and a new lunch box, and...oh yeah, a pony.

Michael shook his head and told himself it wouldn't be long, just get it over with.

"Ho ho ho!" Santa said. "Come on up here son, have a seat."

He did.

"Now...what would you like for Christmas? I hear BB guns and bicycles are popular this year."

He wasn't sure what made him say it. He hadn't planned on telling Santa a single thing beyond 'ah, I'm cool', but what came out was, "I just want to see my friend again. Her name's Charlotte." I think she's in trouble, he thought.

"Well son, I've got a message from Charlotte," Santa told him.

"What?"

"Look over here Michael!" his mother called.

"In the note you got. The numbers are her locker com."

He stared at Santa, but he was a middle-aged guy who smelled a little like sweat, with a big fake beard smashed onto his face. He couldn't know. But then again...this town was full of Actives. Over a hundred, Springfield had told him. What he couldn't figure out was why he was trusting this one.

"I know...I opened it. I got a note, but it was fake. They took the real one."

"Michael! Over here."

"Hm. That's a tough one then," Santa said. He sounded disappointed but not really surprised. "Well, she'll get you something. But she wants you to keep an eye open. Don't forget about her."

He looked up at his mom and smiled. Santa did too. He was sure it was a good one.

Whatever Santa knew, and however he got his information, Michael couldn't talk to him anymore. The elves ushered him away, and so did his mother. She was intent on buying something for his dad, and it soon became clear she was bent on buying the worst sweater she could find.

"So," she said later, "How was Santa?" She was busy with a sweater that was shedding itself all over the store floor. It had fuzzy eyelash things everywhere, green with silver glints all over it. It was the color of puke.

"Hm?" he said. His mind raced. He tried to figure out whether she could have heard. No, he decided.

"Santa? Big guy with the white beard and the sore leg from all the kids sitting on his lap. Did you have a nice chat?"

She'd heard something.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I just told him I didn't really want anything. I just wanted to see Charlotte again." He watched for her reaction, and wasn't disappointed.

"Ah," she said, and that was the end of the conversation. From the murder in her eyes, and the way she was tearing through the sweaters now, she wasn't happy about his Christmas wish, but he didn't believe she knew anything about the notes, real or fake. She finally settled on a sweater, a big periwinkle and red and mustard yellow monstrosity with a diamond pattern he wouldn't use as a blanket if he was freezing to death.

That was okay. Michael was just at the part where the hero got betrayed by the one guy he helped out. It was one of those parts of the book he couldn't read fast enough, and he had to stop himself to slow down a lot, so he didn't miss something. At the same time, he had to read faster, faster, faster, to know what was going to happen.

He felt like that too, only about his real life. When they got close to the Santa setup again, he was tempted to ask his mother if he could go line up again, but two things stopped him. The first was his mother's face: cloudy with a chance of hurricane. The second was the fact that Santa was gone.

But he was walking on hot coals just to see what was going to happen next.

Chapter 9 - Disassembly

Santa Claus was an Active. There was no other explanation. Michael, for once, couldn't focus on his e-reader. He kept trying to understand what the Santa guy and Jared McClaren had in common. Maybe, he thought, Charlotte and Jared were in the same place and had some way of communicating. He could see Jared, at least one of the Jareds, getting out of any sort of prison. He could have a riot all on his own, at least. Or he could dig a tunnel a hundred times faster than anyone else.

So maybe he escaped, and when he did he passed a message on from Charlotte. As a favor maybe. So that left Santa. Was he a prison guard wherever they had Charlotte? Or maybe he was an Active friend who also escaped.

Thinking about it didn't get him anywhere fast. He just lay on his bed, unable to really get the third book of Eragon moving. It was a million pages long anyway. He could almost feel it weighing him down, pressing on his shoulders.

Thanksgiving break ended, and he returned to a completely healed school. It was like nobody had split the school open with their own personal psychic earthquake generator. From the foundation to the roof, it had only taken them a week to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Just like with Trent, and just like with Jared, Michael was summoned to the counselor's office while the rest of the school had an assembly to discuss what had happened to the school. Mr. Springfield was in the same seat as before, in the little cubicle, but in front of the filing cabinet stood another man.

Mr. Springfield looked the same as always: like someone had turned a bunch of bricks into a man (just like Stone, he thought), only now he had a thin beard, and the raccoon skin hat he told Michael he wore at the high school. He wore a leather jacket with far too many little fringy things hanging about.

The new guy was dressed in a business suit, with a wool trench coat folded over one arm. It seemed a little much for a school counselor, with the red tie as well. Above that tie, the guy

was square-jawed and had an intense brow, like two caterpillars were staring each other down for a duel to the death. Whatever he might actually be thinking or feeling, he seemed very unhappy.

“Michael,” Mr. Springfield said with a nod.

“Hi Mr. Springfield.”

“This is Mr. Jackson,” he said, and gestured over toward the other man.

“Nice to meet you,” Mr. Jackson said.

“Nice to meet you too,” Michael said, and felt super awkward saying it.

“Now, we're here because you're the hero of the day again,” Mr. Springfield said.

“Mr. Hero,” Mr. Jackson said. Yeah, definitely unhappy. Bitter maybe.

“Let's not be like that,” Mr. Springfield said. “Michael did very well.”

“I think we have to ask ourselves at this point,” Mr. Jackson said. “Why has Michael been the focal point of all three of these incidents so far? What about him has attracted these people. It seems pretty far-fetched that he was in the right place at the right time three times in a row.”

Right place at the right time, who was he kidding? Michael would have given anything not to be anywhere near Jared when he went kaboom, and definitely would have loved not to be a part of Davey Rightman and his trouble with relationships. A super-powered lovers quarrel was not Michael's idea of a good time.

“Well, what better way than to ask him?” Mr. Springfield suggested. “So Michael, any idea why you're at the center of this crapstorm?”

“Um...no, not really.” And he wasn't the center of the Jared thing anyway.

“You think he's synergistic?” Mr. Jackson asked.

“How would I know? Are you telling me you *don't* know?”

Jackson frowned more deeply, if that was possible. Michael felt something tingling at his scalp, and then his sinuses felt really full, and a headache began creeping up from just above his nose.

“No, I can't tell.”

Mr. Springfield stared at him in a new way now.

“Well son, we're going to have to keep a closer eye on you. I'm sorry it's got to be this way, but if you're synergistic, that means you could Activate others.”

“Wait...Activate others? There's no way! I wasn't anywhere near any of them when they...when they Activated.”

“Actives are drawn to synergistic individuals. Like flies to a bug zapper,” Jackson said. Michael was beginning to dislike him quite a lot. Trent was not a fly, and neither was Jared McClaren. And it made Michael look like he was doing the zapping, which he definitely was not.

“What's going on in the gym?” he asked. He really wanted to be anywhere but here, with Mr. Springfield starting to think he needed someone spying on him for real, not just in his imagination.

“An assembly,” Mr. Jackson said flatly. “What do you think's happening?”

Last time he'd gotten the low down from Charlotte, but this time that wasn't possible.

“Tell me,” Mr. Jackson said, laying his hands down flat on the desk. The trench coat hung off one arm like a bullfighter's black cape. “Do you find you have trouble finding normal friends? And that the normal kids are afraid of you, or jealous of you?”

Michael didn't answer.

“Synergistic individuals are shunned by normal baseline individuals, Michael. It's only once they come into their powers that the Actives start flocking around them.”

“We're done here,” Mr. Springfield said, “Come on Michael. I think it's time we showed you what's going on at these assemblies.”

Then Terrence Jackson did something very strange. He snapped both his fingers several times, rapidly, and clapped twice, then once. Springfield went very still, and his eyes were suddenly glassy, like Michael looked when he was in the middle of a really good daydream.

“What-”

“Shut up,” Jackson said. Michael's mouth snapped closed. He wasn't used to being talked to by any adult, not even the one person who was allowed to: his mother.

“Now listen closely. Neither of you are going to remember this conversation, understand me? We had a nice chat, discussed the strange ability you have for finding trouble, and that was it. No synergists. Now I'm going to snap my fingers and we're going to head to the gym like nothing happened.”

Was this man completely off his medication? Apparently not, because when he snapped his fingers Springfield jerked, smiled, and stood up.

“Come on Michael. I think it's time we showed you what's going on at these assemblies.”

Michael spared one last look at Mr. Jackson and thought the man was probably completely crazy. He had these wild eyes Michael couldn't get over. You just couldn't see them normally, under those enormous eyebrows.

He got to the gym just in time to see an Active fly through the air and throw someone into the ceiling. It was just a blur, but the woman flew down around the gym while hundreds of students sat, horrified in silence. The man on the ceiling, just a splatter of blood, slowly peeled off and fell headfirst into the floor, thirty feet below. There was a chorus of horrified screaming.

"These abilities are not a game," the Active woman said. "They are not cool things we do to show off to our friends. We don't have cheeky classes and throw hyperspeed spit wads at our teachers. When we get these abilities, we're scared, boys and girls. Sometimes excited, but usually scared. We quickly realize how difficult it is to control ourselves. We're afraid of hurting people, like my friend Bob here."

She waved a hand back at the squashed man, who was now moving. Several dozen girls and boys screamed.

"Bob got lucky, he can't be killed. But you didn't know that, did you?"

Bob was unsticking himself from the floor and crunching his body parts back to their rightful places. He packed his arm bone back into the hole it'd punched out of his skin, and Michael watched while the hole repaired itself. Now some of the boys were laughing and pointing.

"I wish I could tell you this was fun play time," the woman said. "It's not. It's not a laughing matter. When you burst into flames, are you going to burn your house down? Are you going to be responsible for killing your friends or your parents? We hope not."

The lights cut out, except for an enormous projector illuminating the massive white rectangle of a screen, maybe twenty feet long and half that tall. A picture appeared, and everyone gasped.

"This is what happened in Tallahassee Florida," the woman said. "Just after an Activation."

The city was a smoking ruin. One of the buildings had been sheared in half, but there were piles of rubble everywhere. Everywhere, columns of smoke rose lazily into the air, pointing straight to where the damage was the worst. The most terrible part of the photo was a man standing to the side of the photograph, clutching his bleeding arm to one side. He had a

microphone in the other, and looked to be in the middle of delivering a newscast. And someone was flying, at least forty feet up and at least a half mile distant. It was little more than a speck, but the roiling, neon red energy was clearly visible all around that figure.

“These used to be houses, hospitals, schools,” the woman said. “People used to live in them. It only takes one Active to start this.”

“And Tallahassee is not the only place where this has happened,” Bob the indestructible man said.

“The problem is, Bob, that some of our young friends here still think this is a piece of cake, that you can run the world if only you have a little bit of power. I don't think they fully understand what it means. I don't know if they can appreciate the responsibility.”

“I think we need a volunteer,” the woman said.

Not a single hand went up. Many of the students looked around each other in bright-eyed fear. What sort of thing were they going to do, they were asking each other.

“How about the young man near the door?” the woman asked.

Mr. Jackson suddenly gasped and his hands flew up to his head. Okay, creepy. What was everybody doing looking at him?

Oh gods, the Active lady was pointing at *him*. Two hundred plus heads all turned to look at him. This was not a good idea. Nobody liked him. They weren't going to care what happened to Michael. A stab of fear sunk into his guts and he felt a weight press on his middle. All at once he felt like he really, *really* had to pee.

“Go on, son,” Mr. Springfield said quietly, but Michael could hear the glee in his tone.

The woman beckoned him forward, then turned back to the row of older men and women standing behind the podium at the base of the projector screen.

“Mr. L, if you could,” the woman said. “And get ready with Bob's ability, if you will.”

A bald man with a smug grin stepped forward. “Absolutely.”

“Young man, come here please. Everybody, could you help our young volunteer here? Give him a round of applause.”

A couple of half-hearted claps followed, and more than a few whispers about Michael.

“Mr. L is just about to give you my abilities,” the woman said. “What's your name son?”

“Michael. Michael Washington.”

Fear flashed across her face, here and gone so fast he wasn't sure he really saw it. No, he was sure. After all, there was Grandpa in the line of adults and teachers, at the far end, staring at him. He hadn't seen Grandpa since the sudden insight when he'd sneaked into the school. He didn't really want to see Grandpa right now. Then the fear disappeared from her face, quick as a whip, and the winning smile came again.

“Well Michael, are you ready?”

She held a microphone forward for him.

“Uh...no. Not really.” More snickers.

“And this is what happens, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. No one is prepared for this sort of thing. And there are those of you who will still walk away from this assembly and go 'this is really cool' and throw yourself off a building or shut yourself in your parents' freezer. And ninety nine of the hundred of you who try, you will die. Now, Michael.”

He was trembling with fear when she turned to him, bent low, and held the microphone away from them. In a quiet voice, she said, “Don't worry. I know this is going to hurt, but you're not going to be permanently injured in the slightest. Just take a deep breath.”

Then she brought the mic up and yelled, “Mr. L has given you the power, Michael. Now *fly*, Mr. Washington!”

And he was flying.

Oh God! His feet left the floor and he fell forward onto his face. He hit his head, but he only grazed it because he was still rising up into the air. He was listening to himself screaming, and flailing his body around trying to get a hand on something so he could stop. He smacked into the projector screen and knocked it off the chains holding it.

There was some new pathway open in his head, some unbearably painful and sweet openness that told him he had the power. Not just flight either, he had power over gravity. Somewhere in his brain was knowledge, or if not knowledge, then the instinct. Superheavy gravity could pull someone to the ground like they weighed seven hundred pounds. Light gravity could send somebody flipping through the air like...like they were in space. Just like Michael was doing right now.

When he finally hit the ceiling he turned and saw that everyone was starting to float off the bleacher seats in the gym. Lots of them were screaming. Many were holding tight to their seats, hanging upside down. Others were on their way to join Michael in zero G.

“Stop it!” some were saying. Michael was one of these.

“Thank you Michael,” the woman said. “Archibald? Archibald? Now would be nice, before any of them got too far-”

And it stopped. There was one instant of horrible stillness, while gravity still hadn't made up its mind about the LADCEMS gymnasium, only Michael's stomach knew. It dropped somewhere near his sneakers, and the place where it had been completely frozen.

And he fell.

He was so sure that he would wake up in the hospital again that he didn't bother opening his eyes. But something wasn't right, it was the wind rushing past his-

His eyes snapped open just in time to see the floor rushing up, and smashing him into nothing.

Michael had never thought much about dying. He had read about it plenty of times in plenty of books, and seen it in the movies, where the person sees their life flashing before their eyes. He wished something like that would have happened, so he could think about Charlotte. The trouble was, all these annoying screams were getting in his way. He couldn't think with people being hysterical so close to him. The only people he could think of, oddly, were that woman who flew, and Mr. L, the bald smiling man who was responsible for his death.

“Archibald, come on now!” the woman was shouting.

“I'm trying.”

“You'd best try harder than that, sonny Jim,” Grandpa said, from the end of a long tunnel. How'd he get in this tunnel?

“You think it's just a switch you can flip?” Mr. L asked.

“I know of other switches that'll flip if he don't heal up right this second,” Grandpa said.

“There!” Mr. L shouted in triumph.

“Michael! Michael! Concentrate, you can do it!”

He couldn't even breathe, he was drowning. His eyes wouldn't even work. Only that wasn't true, he was just staring at a pool of red. He was blinking, but his eyelashes were scooping up droplets of his own blood and getting tangled together with gore. His muscles were trying to move him out of the sick, sticky feel of his blood, but they weren't on his bones the right way.

“Uhh,” he said. He hefted his head and shoulders up off the gym floor, and shook his head. His neck screamed in pain for a moment, but stopped after he told his vertebrae to get their

act together and get back where they belonged. They answered his call, and he felt the skin protest while the bones slid back into place.

His hips were shoved sideways, the wrong way. Slivers of pain shot up his body, but he realized it was his bones rushing to join their buddies where they ought to be. He didn't have a gravity center of his brain anymore, he had a regeneration center, and it was definitely instinct this time, his mind controlling the ability to allow his body to live and function. His back cracked a hundred wrong ways as he sat up, and then stood up on shaky legs.

"I hope most of you remember this demonstration," the woman was saying. "I know a few of you still won't get it through your heads. Nine hundred and ninety nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine people who try this don't make it, but they still try. Cool will always overcome common sense when it comes to young people, and I have only one thing to say to that: I'll bring flowers to your funeral."

Later, he was back in the hospital again, even though he was in perfectly good health. The usual nurses and doctors were swarming around him. Outside their little circle, his mother stood frowning and worried. Mr. Springfield stood close to her, talking low and slow. He still had his ridiculous raccoon skin hat on.

"I'm fine!" he kept telling them, but they insisted on this or that test. He'd already been in several different machines, which sounded all sorts of strange.

"What are they checking for?" he asked Mr. Springfield.

"Sometimes there's internal bleeding," he said, "If you didn't have Bob's power long enough, for instance. They're also checking for other abnormalities."

"What?"

"It's difficult to know what will happen to someone who takes on others' abilities, even temporarily. Some doctors believe your brain has the instinct wired in there, and that instinct sort of wakes up when Mr. L uses his ability."

"What did he do?"

"He gave you Nora's ability...but the trouble is, when Nora Activated, she had no idea how to control her ability either. She caused a lot of damage before she got it to stop. Almost went to the moon, with half the neighborhood, if I remember right. So you couldn't possibly have learned how to deal with that. It took her years to be able to fly with any sort of speed."

"But I went straight up," Michael said.

“Right, but going up and down is the easy part of gravity control. Tougher to make yourself move sideways. Especially difficult to move sideways without messing up gravity all over the place around you.”

“These abilities aren't like people think,” his mother said, with her arms crossed. She wasn't comfortable being near Mr. Springfield. “It's like learning math. There are a lot of things you have to learn.”

Mr. Springfield chuckled. “Yeah, like learning math all right, only you don't have a teacher and you don't have a set of books. And if you fail the test, you can kill yourself.” Mrs. Washington went red in the face, but Mr. Springfield didn't seem to notice. “The doctors are just trying to figure out if your brain is going to be fine after this. We don't like to let Mr. L use his power much. The side effects can be...unpleasant.”

“I can't believe they brought Archibald Lansing into this! And on *my* son,” his mother said, and left the room. Maybe she'd throw something out in the hallway.

“What's with her?” Michael asked Mr. Springfield. But the big man just shrugged his huge, leather-fringed shoulders.

He did have a bit of a headache, and there were phantom feelings like he could fly or he could cut off his own arm and everything would be fine. The doctors and his mother assured him that he shouldn't, since he couldn't fly and wouldn't ever recover from a missing arm. More than that, if he did permanent damage to himself without Bob's ability, he wouldn't ever get the arm back.

The doctors seemed almost disappointed to tell him he was going to be okay, and that there weren't any problems with his brain. They let him go that night, and it was a relief to get back to his own bed. All this business about being in the hospital was getting boring. There were lots of times he couldn't even read a book because they had some test or another to do. Not that he could really read anyway, with the memory of the assembly and seeing his grandfather there. It stirred up an angry hornet's nest of questions in his mind, one he couldn't seem to get under control.

At home, his mother seemed to blame him for what had happened at school. She stalked around the house, doing rage cleanings. When she got really unhappy, there was always dust to lay siege to. First she vacuumed everything, then cursed herself for a fool, dusted everything, and attacked the floor again.

“Well I hope your father is happy now,” she kept muttering.

Michael retreated to his room and listened to the clanging of pots and pans, then of the hiss of the iron.

It didn't stop the next day either. Susanna Washington wasn't the type of woman to forget things so easily. She seemed preoccupied and distant throughout the morning, but stopped him on the way out the door.

“You be careful,” she told him.

“Yes ma'am.”

“Good, good boy. And if they ask you to go to some assembly or another, you tell them no. You can have them call me. I'll march right down there and give them a piece of my mind.” She'd give them finger shaking to go with it. Up one side and down the other, or something like that.

“Okay mom,” he said, knowing instantly he would never, ever call her from school unless he had to go to the hospital. Like if he cut off his own arm.

All throughout school that day, he tried to wrap his head around the idea that Grandpa wasn't just a guy who read off his tablet in the rocking chair on his porch in the summer. He was more than a man with a set of false teeth and an easy smile. The more Michael thought about it, the more he understood that he really knew nothing about his grandfather, and that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

He was also aware that the solitary, snarky voice in his mind was winning. It was saying 'I told you so' over and over again. He couldn't shake the image of Grandpa bent over the writing desk, penning a lie. He also couldn't help but see Grandpa try to fade back into the shadows and disappear as Michael floated up to the ceiling, seconds away from falling thirty feet and squashing himself like a peanut butter sandwich in a badly packed lunchbox. He got off lucky though. All his teachers called on other students, and didn't bother to penalize him when he didn't have the right answers on his homework.

The paper route called him home after the seventh bell rang. Normally he'd read a couple of pages in his e-reader, or watch a half hour of after school TV, but today he just threw the papers into his bag and headed out the door.

He saw Lily at the library again, and exchanged polite hellos as he delivered the paper. She was still looking as good as ever, though he couldn't help but notice how much like

Charlotte she wasn't. Lily wore plain clothes, like a suit only with a skirt, a white blouse underneath, and didn't do anything fancy with her hair. She definitely wasn't changing her wardrobe up every few months. Still, she had a soft glint in her blue eyes. She was kind and talkative, and interested in talking to him. Maybe she wasn't a friend, but she wasn't family, and she wasn't keeping anything from him.

She asked him how things were going, and he debated about telling her about the assembly yesterday, where he'd nearly killed everybody in the gym. He gave up and told her, especially the weird part about him rearranging his body after the fall.

"That sucks," she said. It was always cool hearing her talk to him like this, like he wasn't just a little kid doing a dorky thing like delivering newspapers. Obsolete, pointless newspapers at that, passed by a hundred years ago when computers started bringing all the facts practically straight to your brain instantaneously.

"Yeah," he said.

"But it was probably pretty cool to watch, pulling your body back together when everybody thought you were dead."

He smiled sadly. It wasn't that cool, since all his classmates were afraid of him, but there was no sense in worrying her.

"How's your friend, that girl?" Lily asked. He'd told Lily the details about Charlotte, and the librarian always asked about her. Sometimes it seemed like Lily was more interested in Charlotte than he was.

"Missing," he sighed.

"That's terrible...really?"

"I don't know. I..." He was about to tell her about the note, but stopped himself. Nobody could know, not even someone like Lily. Grandpa had talked to Lily before, about the e-reader. That meant she could call him too.

"What?"

"I'm worried about her," he said. "I told Santa I wanted to see her again."

Now it was Lily's turn to smile sadly. "That's so sweet. Well, I hope you can see her. As a Christmas present. It would be pretty nice."

He thanked her and headed out to finish his route. He still had a lot to think about, but couldn't get anywhere on his own. The only things he could do were talk to Grandpa, and accuse

him of stealing a letter, or do nothing. He was mortified to start saying bad things about his own grandfather. As his mother told him, if there wasn't Grandpa, there'd be no you, so you should be grateful to have him every day of your life. There was no way he could march into Grandpa's house and start pointing fingers. But he could sneak around...

Yeah, and that had turned out real well last time.

He'd just turned himself in several circles by the time he got home and found his mother putting a casserole in the oven. At least the papers were all delivered.

"Hi dear," she said. "You found your music player, right?"

"Huh?"

"Well you rushed in and out of here so fast I couldn't ask you. But I guess you found it."

What was she talking about? Michael's mind tried to wrap itself around what she was saying, and failed.

"Um, yeah. Yeah. I found it."

"Alright," she said. "Well, dinner's not going to be ready for another two hours, and your father's not going to be home until Friday, *if he even gets back by then*. So, let's crack the books and get some homework done."

He wasn't listening. He hadn't been in the house since he left to deliver his papers. Had someone been in here, impersonating him?

He glanced around his room, but couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Bed, bookcase-slash-computer desk, dresser and mini closet looked just like before. No mysterious imposter had cleaned up the clothes pile on the floor, or the scatter of papers at the base of his bed. Old homework. Stone was standing right where he'd stood before.

Wait. His music player was not in the drawer where he left it, and that was odd. He couldn't find it anywhere, in fact. This kick started a full-mess search, including throwing the clothes from the floor to other places on the floor.

"Music player," he muttered. Of course, it was another clue from Charlotte. If he'd ever doubted her before, about the note or the code, those doubts vanished faster than scraps off the dinner table, with the dog on patrol.

His clothes were all in the same places as before, all the video games were still in the wrong cases just like before, there weren't any secret Charlotte notes in the little video game instruction guides, his closet was still a horrible mess only a bulldozer could clear.

The computer desk still had the usual assortment of ancient pencils and broken and emptied pens. He didn't have any books about music, and didn't really have any use for books anymore anyway, since he had the e-reader. He didn't think any of them had been moved.

"Stone," he whispered. As soon as he did, he looked over his shoulder to see if his mother was watching. Then he closed the door and approached the action figure.

He almost expected it to jump off the computer desk and attack him, but the figure stared woodenly off toward the old Star Wars poster Grandpa had given him. Now he noticed the hands had changed up. This time they were the see-through plastic ones instead of the concrete Michael had snapped on before.

He took it down carefully, like it was a bomb. His heart hammered in his chest, and he kept looking at the door. If he didn't, he felt, his mother would burst through it and start prying into his business. Glancing up every few seconds protected him from this.

He also knew he shouldn't do this slowly. He couldn't help himself. He drew up the figure's shirt and, heart beating wildly in his chest, sweat prickling his forehead, he opened a new note from Charlotte.

And if it all hadn't been going bad before, this was when it really started to get nasty.

Chapter 10 - War of the Michaels

Michael didn't trust his mother enough to stay out of his room while he read the loopy script on the three sheets of paper Charlotte had used. Instead he skimmed it and packed it back into Stone's underwear. Even the bare essentials were enough to frighten him.

She'd been locked up, under the Marcus Patterson building since he'd seen her last. She wasn't being hurt, but she wasn't free.

Marcus Patterson was the building only for eighth grade students. Now it made sense, in a way. They had been using the building as an Activation site, a place where they could turn kids into super-powered kids in relative safety. That meant Charlotte was an Active. He would have to read the letter later that night before he knew exactly what she was doing in there, but now it wasn't safe. As long as his mother and his grandfather were out there, not asleep, he couldn't feel safe reading it. And not only that, but Mr. Springfield had said he needed to be watched.

He wondered if Charlotte had convinced another Active to come deliver the message to him, if they were the guards and the teachers. He desperately wanted to read every single word in the letter, but he couldn't.

Instead he ate dinner without tasting it, talked with his mother without hearing her, showered without remembering it, and walked around in a daze that ended with him back in his room, shivering with need.

And Stone was gone.

He stared at the place where the action figure had been in disbelief. Then he cried out, sort of a yell, and started tearing his room apart. Even after he'd checked behind the computer desk and under the computer desk, he knew someone had taken it. They'd put the mind reader guy, Mr. Jackson on his case, and Mr. Jackson had figured out about the notes. Well he was going to kill that guy, he was going to jump on him and punch him like he'd never punched Trent-

"Hey there kiddo," his grandfather said from behind him. Kindly, in his grandfatherly way. Harmless. Michael slowly turned around.

Grandpa. The liar. The letter thief. He couldn't just take the note and be done with it, he had to write a fake one instead and then come to gloat about how he'd tricked Michael. How would a twelve year old boy ever figure it out? Grandpa must think he was pretty stupid.

"You!" he screamed. In an instant he was on his own grandfather, climbing up his body while Grandpa fell back into the living room and his mother started screaming. Grandpa fell hard, landing on his butt with a sound like 'oof!' and then banging his back on the low table where they kept the coasters and photo albums.

It didn't even slow him down. He kept screaming, crawling, crying, up towards Grandpa's head, until his head snapped back.

His mother was standing over him, wide-eyed and heaving. She was looking at her red hand, then back at Michael's face. Michael started to tear up, but it wasn't because he was a baby. She'd hit him in the cheek, and in the nose. When somebody hit you in the nose, you didn't have any choice. He'd learned that in dodge ball.

"Michael Edward Washington Junior," she hissed. "Are you alright Harold?"

"I hope I ain't busted a hip. I'll know more when I can stand up." He looked at Michael. "You are going to let me stand up, eh kiddo?"

"You stole my letter!"

"Actually I didn't," Grandpa said. "But the person who stole it brought it to me."

"Well you...you wrote another letter and signed it Charlotte!"

"Guilty," Grandpa agreed. "And I'm awful sorry I did it too. Don't know what I was thinking. God's honest truth."

"You stand up right this instant," his mother commanded. "And you're grounded for a month. You will give all your money from your paper route to me, and you will help pay for your grandfather's hospital bills. Maybe until you're his age. Am I understood?"

The enormity of what he'd just done crashed down on Michael's shoulders, and he slumped aside. He buried his face in the sofa and just cried while his mother helped Grandpa off the floor. How could he have thought about punching his own grandfather? He burned with shame and humiliation. He couldn't stop them from watching him, and he couldn't run to his room without showing them his face. He would never look at either one of them again.

“Michael,” Grandpa sounded very close. His voice was soft, not angry. “I know you’re upset. I would be upset too, if I were you. I guess I deserved that. Ain’t had someone come up and try to punch me...well, tough to remember when.”

“You answer your grandfather when he talks to you,” his mother said.

“That’s alright Susanna. Actually I’m sure he’d love some hot chocolate right now. Wouldn’t you, sport? Sure you would. Could you be so kind, Susanna?”

His mother sniffed but said nothing, and left in a huff. Michael couldn’t see her, but even her footsteps were angry.

“Michael,” Grandpa said, in that look-at-me tone of voice. Not unkind, but definitely an order. Well he wasn’t going to give in this time. He was equal parts enraged and ashamed right now, and he couldn’t decide which side was going to win. But his throat burned in a tight, hot lump and even his stomach was getting into the action.

“Michael, look at me,” Grandpa said.

After a minute of trying to work his throat he managed to say, “No.”

“Fair enough. Then just listen. What your mother and father and I have done, it’s not fair. I know it’s not, now. It’s been hard on you, but we were afraid, you see? We didn’t want you to get the wrong ideas.” He chuckled to himself. “Instead you got the right ones. Don’t know where you found out I’d wrote your girlfriend’s letter, but there you have it anyway. That’s what happened.

“I know you’re going to ask why. To tell you the truth, I’m not so sure, kiddo. I thought at the time it’d be the right thing to do. You remember our doctor, Mrs. Montgomery? Anyway she found your note in your backpack, and she passed it on to me.

“It’s my job, Michael,” he said at last, like he was apologizing. “I’ve had this job now for...holy smokes, how long has it been? Longer’n you’ve been alive, for sure. Maybe fifteen years. Tough to say, the wires are getting crossed upstairs. Anyway my job’s to make sure the town runs nice and smooth. Because with over a hundred Actives living here, you can see how things could get messy in a hurry if just two or three of them got out of hand.

“Got me an army of psychologists, got a squad of Actives who are really good at searching and investigating, and I’ve got to keep everybody happy. Because, say for instance your dad-”

“Harold!” Susanna shrieked. One of the hot chocolates slipped out of her hand. She’d just been coming in the room, and hot chocolate went everywhere. It looked like someone had thrown a shovelful of mud on the white carpet.

“He deserves to know. Heck Susanna, he had that Stone doll up on his computer desk for, what, near a month now, eh?”

Wait.

Um. What?

What did his dad and the action figure have to do with anything? They were totally...but they weren’t even...

Michael’s eyes shot open. Grandpa had been waiting for it, with a tiny smile, and he nodded.

There hadn’t just been a resemblance between his dad and Stone. His dad was Stone. A superhero. No no, his dad wasn’t just any superhero, he was *the* superhero. He was the leader of the Alphas. He was always gone. Around the world, saving people from nasty floods and stopping terrorists and mashing wars into dust.

“You remember that slide of Tallahassee?” he asked. Michael would never forget that image, blown up ten feet tall and twenty wide. “Yes, you do. Well, that sort of thing happened in other places. We’re here to stop that. We’re put here to keep America safe...” He trailed off.

“Don’t you dare, Harold,” Susanna told him.

“Well anyway, that’s all the depressing junk. Our town’s been a nice place for the last, what, ten years? We haven’t had a serious incident in a long time. Grass is nice and green, people mow their lawns and say hello to each other in the streets. We have bake sales. Nice. Safe. Ordinary.

“You see kiddo, super people, they need this. They need a place to come back to and feel normal again. They can’t be out all the time throwing tanks around. The people they meet, sometimes they’re not happy your dad is there. Sometimes they’re *too* happy.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was a rebel group out in eastern India that tried to turn your father into a god,” Grandpa said with a sigh, like it was nothing more than a burned-out spark plug. “If it’s one thing your dad doesn’t need, kiddo, it’s to think he’s bigger than he is. Everybody fits into the world,

somewhere. Everybody's got a function my boy. The librarian, that Lily, is an important person just the same as your dad. She helps people expand their minds through the joy of reading."

"But your father redirects rivers," his mother said miserably. She had her arms crossed and her lower lip stuck out.

"And that's just it, Michael," Grandpa said. "He changes the course of everything. It's a huge job, and he needs all the normal he can get while he's back here. This place, this little town, doesn't need to feel like a time bomb just about to go off. This should be a place where your dad should buy bread and milk, bake some cookies, cut up jack-o-lanterns, and dress up as Santa Claus when Christmas rolls around."

He sighed again.

"I don't expect you to understand everything," he said. "But I do expect you to understand this: if you'd grown up knowing Stone was your dad, you probably wouldn't be a nice kid who I could be proud of. You might've been another Trent Millickie."

"Which you're not," his mother said.

"And we're darn glad you didn't turn out that way. But it meant we had to hold the truth back a few years. You understand that, at least, eh?"

Michael nodded. He guessed he did understand, though he didn't like it.

"Go wash up," Grandpa said. "I know your mama baked up some wonderful dinner, but tonight seems like an A&W night."

Susanna's arms flopped to her sides in defeat. "Oh well, why not? This night couldn't possibly get any worse."

The A&W in town was one of the town landmarks; it had been the same building and hadn't changed anything up for one hundred and three years now. The place was laid out as a large parking lot with a small building attached. At each parking spot, you could use the little telephone (with a cord, that was really odd) to place your order, and a high schooler on roller skates brought you a tray with your food on it. The tray clipped onto the car's window.

Michael had always thought it was kind of cool, but couldn't figure out why people would want to do it this way when they could sit in actual chairs where they didn't risk a crazy angry mother when they spilled french fries on the backseat.

But the root beer came in these incredible frosted mugs, and Michael always bought a root beer float. He loved to lick the whipped cream off the straw and wait until the ice cream was

mostly melted and the whole thing had turned into a vanilla and root beer mud ball. He always tried to get two, but his mother never let him. But sometimes a blue moon came out, and sometimes a hobbit had a stronger will than a demigod, so he tried to order a second one again.

“Absolutely not,” his mother said. “We’ve been over this a hundred times.”

Yes, but she was also the one who said if you fell off the horse, you had to get right back on and try again. So here he was, being persistent.

“Why not let him have a second? It’s been a tough night, after all.”

“First this, and then what? Soon he’ll be two hundred pounds overweight and we’ll be buying a specially designed van to lift the wheelchair up.”

Michael looked down at his body. When he sucked in, he could see every single rib. He couldn’t help it, he started to laugh. That got Grandpa laughing too, and when his mother scowled at them, it just made him laugh harder. It was the first time since Charlotte disappeared that he actually had something to laugh about, and it felt really good.

“Tomorrow night’s Friday, so I think a movie’s in order. We can see whatever you like. Pick something in the theater, or we’ll order up something on the cable doodad.”

Their living room projector and sound system was just about as good as the movie theater, with the bonus of not having your feet stick to the floor.

Michael was thinking about the movies he might pick. A number of the books he liked had been turned into movies, some of them really good and others horrid, when he realized he shouldn’t be thinking about movies at all. It was getting close to Christmas, the holidays were coming up and he hadn’t seen Charlotte in over a month. They were trying to trick him.

“I’m not stupid, you know,” he said from the backseat.

Grandpa stopped before he took another bite of coney dog. “Nobody said you were stupid, kiddo.”

“I want Charlotte’s notes then.” He didn’t know where this little wave of bravery came from, but he was going to surf it as long as it stuck around. “No, actually, I want to see her. Make sure she’s okay.”

“Michael! You are already grounded, young man, and you are seriously pushing your luck.”

Pushing it right off a cliff? He wasn’t sure.

“It’s alright Susanna,” Grandpa said. “Michael, it’s just-”

His mother cut him off. "It is not alright! My son, the boy I brought into this world, hit his own grandfather today. Makes me wonder if he was really raised by a pack of wolves, thinks he can just hit whoever he likes. And his punishment is a second root beer float? Well, he needs to learn a grain of respect, for once."

"But-" Michael said.

"Don't you 'but' me, sonny jim. You still haven't apologized to your grandfather. I don't know where you got this idea that everyone is out to get you. We have your best interests at heart, you know. When children grow up, they learn that they can't always have what they want. And maybe it's time that you learned that hitting someone is not a good way to get what you want. If you wanted those notes, and you wanted to see your friend, you should have thought of that before you jumped on your grandfather."

"As much as I hate to admit it, I think your mother is right," Grandpa said at last.

They were talking about each other in the third person again.

"Thank you," she said.

"You need some time to think about our reasons. If you want to ask me about them, I will be happy to explain everything to you, sometime in the next month."

"When is she getting out of prison?"

"Oh Michael," his mother moaned.

"It is not a prison, kiddo. Point of fact, it's a training facility. If we thought Charlotte's Activation was a real danger, there is another facility farther from here, but we don't think she's a big threat to herself or others. She gets three meals a day, study time with tutors, all the music she wants. It's more like a vacation away from school than a prison."

"Oh," he said. It didn't sound that bad, when you put it like that. What he'd read in the note said she wasn't really in danger, but she couldn't leave.

"So next time, you may want to use your head instead of your fists. Maybe if you had, you'd be on your way to talk to her right now."

Those words, especially out of his mother's mouth, steadily made their way into his guts, where they made him feel like a complete jerk over and over again until he just wanted to shrink into his seat, maybe squeeze into the space between the seat and the back, pop right out into the trunk of the SUV. There was a red mark on the side of Grandpa's face, but he wasn't paying any attention to it.

They finished their meal in silence and drove home in the December cold. Outside snow had started its lazy drift, piling up on the grass and a bit on the trees. Charlotte wouldn't be able to play in it, but neither would he, without some seriously good behavior. Oh, who was he kidding? The snow would probably be melted and March would be inching toward its miserable, gray end by the time he got on his mom's good side.

And his mother wasn't going to make it easy either. She sent him straight off to bed when they got back home. For a while he listened to the sound of a low, intense, muffled conversation just outside his door, but he couldn't make out the words. He decided, after maybe ten minutes, that he wanted to know what they were talking about. He crept to his door and tried the knob. He knew that if he made even the slightest click, his mother would be down his throat and he would be grounded until he was eighteen.

He felt the catch slide, slowly, slowly, until finally it was free. Then he eased the door open a fraction of an inch and peered down the stairs.

His mother was standing with her back to him and her arms crossed. Grandpa must have been on the sofa, or maybe the easy chair. If his dad was a superhero, why didn't they have a bigger house? Why didn't his dad drive a Ferrari? Why didn't he have the best bike in the universe, if his dad was Stone and he was making money off his action figure sales? It wasn't fair.

He lay down on the floor and pressed his ear to the two inch gap.

"...you knew what you were getting into. You knew the risks," Grandpa was saying.

"You think I don't know that?" his mother said. "And now that he knows? What now?"

"Oh, he doesn't know everything, not by a long shot," Grandpa said.

"The Alphas."

"The Alphas, the Betas, Deltas, he'll find out all of that at Marcus Patterson. By high school all of this will be a little memory. We'll have a drink and tell ourselves we dodged a bullet."

"He's got to make it to high school first," his mother warned. "What are you doing about that? Because I have to tell you, I don't like it. Four of them off schedule? When's the last one you had off schedule?"

"We're working on it, Susanna."

“You've been working on it since that Millickie kid. And what happens if his little friend Davey goes Active and he decides that my son needs to pay for humiliating him? What do you think is going to happen then?”

“Susanna, we're doing the best we can. We can't watch every child in the school and figure out the problem at the same time.”

“Is it the Omega Syndicate?” she asked.

“Would you keep your voice down?” Grandpa hissed. His mother's head whipped around and stared hard at Michael's door. He'd just had time to move his head. He wasn't sure if his ear would be visible when she looked, but he didn't want to take the chance.

Omega Syndicate. Just what was that?

“It's time I was going,” Grandpa said.

“I'll drive you.”

“Nonsense. It's only three blocks. You take care of my grandson. I won't discourage curiosity, but I can't have him poking his nose where it doesn't belong. I liked it better when he had it buried in that reader thing of his all day long. Not a care in the world. Heh, what I wouldn't give.”

“Tell me Harold, is it the Omegas?”

A loud sigh. “We don't know. We've suspected they have someone here for a while. This might be what they want, it might just be a streak of bad luck. We just don't know.”

He got up. Grandpa getting up was a loud and slow process.

“If it is, what are we going to do?”

“The same thing we did last time, I guess,” Grandpa replied. “Hide in bomb shelters and come out when the smoke clears.”

His mother laughed, but that laughter had a high, strange edge to it. It was the crazy laugh that girl had when she was tearing apart the school, looking at Davey. It was the type of laugh you made when everything was going all wrong.

If Michael thought he was done feeling like a criminal for hitting Grandpa, he was dead wrong. The next day, when he got home from school, his mother was holding the tablet and talking to...his father.

“Here he is,” his mother said. She turned the tablet around, and the angriest face he had ever seen swung into view. Michael's stomach turned to ice and dropped straight into the seat of his pants. He was sure he was going to pee himself.

“Oh,” he said.

“Oh?” his father said. “Is that what you have to say for yourself?”

“I'm sorry?” he tried. Wow, check out that super interesting carpet. The number of times Michael found himself staring at the carpet in embarrassment, you'd think he could work at a flooring company.

“Sorry doesn't cut it, buster. Do you know how close I am to letting this war in Bangladesh continue just so I can come home and beat your butt raw? I'll get Bob and Mr. L so I don't have to hold back either. You can heal up again every time it gets bad enough. I swear to the almighty God you will never know such pain in your life, boy. Then I'll think about whether we'll just take your head off and clone you.”

“Only figure out how we went wrong,” his mother asked.

“Probably we didn't spank him enough.”

“But dad-” he said. He was going to tell him how Grandpa had lied to him. Lying was the worst thing you could do in the Washington household (though apparently hitting your grandfather was the new number one), a crime punishable by death.

“Don't you dare,” Michael Sr. snarled. “You're going to learn how to be a big boy and not settle all your problems with your fists, or so help me, you are not going to have any hands left to punch with. Am I clear?”

He couldn't make his throat work.

“I said am I clear.”

Tears ran down his cheeks, hot and silent. He nodded, and hoped it was enough. He didn't have any friends at school, he didn't have Charlotte, now he couldn't even talk to Grandpa because he was a liar. Now, literally, he had nothing.

“You mind your mother,” he said. “And if I hear you've set a toe out of line, I'm coming back personally to fly you up into the stratosphere. You'll have a couple minutes to think about what you've done before you black out or land, whichever happens first. I am a busy man. If your mother has to call this number again, you're done.”

He zipped away from the tablet and into a hail of mortar rounds exploding the dirt all around where he ran. Michael had time enough to see him jump onto a tank, turn into plated steel, and tear off the gun turret before the call ended.

Michael ran up the stairs to his room, jumped on the bed, and tore the covers off like they were a gun turret, and buried himself in them to cry.

Chapter 11 – Orientating

The only things that were consistently true over and over again were a) the adults were lying to him, and b) the adults didn't trust him enough to tell him what they knew, which was more or less the same as lying. He thought, hard, about running away. He had money stashed in a little box under his mother's bed. He knew that he had nearly a thousand dollars saved up, now that Trent was out of the picture.

He wasn't sticking around this place because he was scared; he'd faced down scary and busted its nose, twice, and then faced down something even scarier and won. He wasn't even afraid (not completely) of running across smoking craters where big US cities used to be. And he definitely was not at all afraid of coming across Actives.

What stopped him were the notes he hadn't gotten from Charlotte. There were two that he knew of. Okay, one and a half if he wanted to get technical about it, and even though the evidence suggested she wasn't in danger, he wanted to help her however he could.

There were also a hundred or so Active people in this little gem of a town who could probably track him down, or keep him from leaving. He wasn't concerned with them. His father was Stone and his grandfather was some sort of superhero mafia don. They wouldn't mess with Michael Washington Junior.

Right, another part of him argued, just like they didn't mess with you at the assembly.

The second part was that life got back to normal really quick. His mother seemed to be normal enough, serving him up chopped apple bites and cereal for breakfast, packing his lunch, and reminding him to lock the garage door like she always did. Before he left, though, she reminded him that he needed to be back home directly after school.

“Yes mother,” he said, in what he hoped was his most respectful disrespectful tone he could manage.

The anger came though, and when it arrived, it came on strong. Just who did they think they were, keeping things from him? Did they think he was some sort of little baby? Maybe they did. They thought he couldn't handle the truth about his father, they thought the same thing about

his grandfather. As if he wouldn't think it was really cool to have a dad flying all over the world stopping bad guys.

Unless he wasn't stopping bad guys.

Whatever, he thought. It didn't matter much who his dad was fighting, since they were just lying and lying and lying. First about his dad, then Grandpa from the moment he was born, but lord knew what else they were keeping from him.

Christmas came and went. It was probably the worst one ever, since he learned that his father was searching through tunnels in the former Peoples' Democratic Republic of Korea for separatists. So he wasn't home, and he didn't get much for Christmas anyway, since his mother was still really mad at him. He was grounded. No place to go except out in the bitter cold to deliver papers to houses that didn't really need them to begin with. The whole paper route system was probably cooked up by his grandfather, who thought everybody wanted to reminisce about the old times by reading paper instead of an eye-strain-free paper substitute that wasn't a drain on the environment and didn't require hundreds of trees to die every day. He got a ridiculously long hat that was for downhill sledding, which he didn't do because he didn't have friends to sled with. The first week after Christmas, it got caught in his bike chain and stained with axle grease. His mother was not best pleased.

Maybe two weeks after Christmas break, he began to see Charlotte everywhere. When mom gave up and took him out for some post-Christmas bargain shopping (she couldn't just leave him at home, what with the danger of him going Active and burning the house down), he thought he saw her shopping for blouses. When he broke away from his mom, running, he didn't find anybody there.

She was an Active. She could turn invisible or something. Teleport away maybe.

He caught a glimpse of her later as they pulled up to one of the city's few red lights. Charlotte was having an animated conversation...with someone else's family. It wasn't her family, for sure. Instead of Mrs. Sulzsko, it was a strange man driving, and in the back seat were two other girls in ballet outfits, complete with sparkling tiaras.

Michael didn't want to sit bolt upright in his seat and cry out, he regretted it as soon as he did it, but it was something of a reflex. He couldn't have stopped it any more than he could stop a train with his bare hands.

“What was that all about?” his mother asked.

“Nothing,” he said immediately, but she could sniff out a lie at fifty feet. Actually he wondered if she could tell when the neighbors were lying to each other across the street.

“Michael Edward,” she warned.

The sigh he pulled up was a deep one. “I thought I saw Charlotte.”

“But it wasn't Charlotte.”

No, it was. But he wasn't going to insist on something that couldn't be true. Maybe Charlotte could make you see things, like illusions or something. No, that wasn't possible. She was deep under the Marcus Patterson eighth grade school building, under a ridiculous amount of security, including some Actives guarding her. There would be no sneaking in there, even if the rumors of deep tunnel systems under the school were true. They would sense him coming, and they would blast him with acid or fireballs or something.

It was hopeless.

But his mother didn't believe him when he agreed that he was just imagining things. It didn't make sense that she knew something was true, and she made him say it, and then didn't believe him when he listened to her. That didn't stop him from seeing Charlotte walking a dog before they got home, or sitting on the Henderson's front porch reading a newspaper he'd delivered earlier that day. Each time when he'd looked back, she was gone, or it was really somebody else. At least there was orientation to take his mind off Charlotte.

To get the students ready for the Marcus Patterson eighth grade building, the faculty had five whole days of orientation activities planned. The first of these took all of them over to the other school.

Just approaching the school, he knew it wouldn't be good. The Marcus C. Patterson eighth grade wing was a large and hunched over C-shaped structure, facing away from the LADCEMS main building. It clearly used to be something else. Where the main building was a technological marvel of graceful curves and a domed library with a bajillion books and little beanbags and artsy carpeting, the Patterson building felt like it was in danger of keeling over.

“Alright ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Samuelson said. “You're going to divide up into groups and take a tour of the building. Last names A through H, follow me please.”

Another teacher took the I through M's (there were a lot of M's for some reason), and Michael gulped when he saw who would take the N through Z's.

Mr. Jackson, the grumpy mind-reader guy who thought Michael was synergistic. He folded his arms over his chest and glared at the lot of them.

“Right, listen close,” he said, and leaned toward them. “You don’t want to be here any more than I do, but we’ve had an emergency at the high school. Three dead. So I’ve got the day off, and I’m here. Live with it. About this school: it is a garbage heap. You’re only going to spend one year here, we hope, and move up to the high school where things get really scary. So stick close, don’t touch **anything**.” A student who was about to try opening a locker jumped back. She also squeaked. “And whatever you do, don’t make eye contact with any of the students here. They don’t need any more stress than they already have.”

As much as Michael didn’t like Mr. Jackson, he was right: the school was a dump. There were a few banks of lights out, or flickering in a horror-movie-about-to-start sort of way. The walls were freshly painted, but only in select spots, more like something that had been torn out, replaced, and covered over. Dozens of banks of lockers couldn’t be opened at all, just empty spaces nobody would ever fill with books or backpacks. Several classrooms also sat derelict, with yellow warning tape criss-crossing them. Michael believed the whispers he heard, that these were former crime scenes and would have chalk lines somewhere inside, in the shapes of dead students or teachers. The drop ceiling tiles were mismatched as well and it wasn’t possible to tell the old from the new, so you always felt like something might fall on you at any time. There were stretches of hallway nobody ever went down. The basketball hoop had been torn down ages ago, just leaving a backboard standing watch over the dirt lot. Michael personally felt, as his imagination caught wind of the strangeness of Marcus Patterson, that there were bodies stashed all over the place, and that one day he might turn one up.

The teachers at LADCEMS were bright, cheerful people who made up nice bulletin boards and smiled when they heard their horrible nicknames, like Conehead Kroner, and Stick-in-the-butt Stackleman. These were the types of people that always came in with a new science experiment or some cheesy but enjoyable video full of singing cartoon cats.

At Patterson, the teachers were more likely to have a wandering eye, strange limp, shuffling walk or bad comb over.

“Who’s that?” one girl whispered to another. Michael followed their eyes to an honest-to-goodness hunchback, who was staring at them with one big eye. Either Michael couldn’t see the other one, or it just wasn’t there.

“That?” Mr. Jackson said. “That, is the English Teacher, Mr. Bones. Everybody wave and say hello to Mr. Bones.”

Instead of waving, everybody exchanged glances with each other. They were about to get up the courage to whisper to each other when Mr. Jackson spoke up again.

“A joke people. Mr. Bones is the day janitor. Now, you will be polite and say hello to Mr. Bones.”

Michael stepped forward and waved. “Hi Mr. Bones.” He felt bad that all the other kids would hardly look at the janitor. His mother taught him that the janitors had a tough job, cleaning up after hundreds of children. He could see her nod in his mind.

Mr. Bones grinned and raised a four-fingered hand at him. He had a mouth like a shark. “Yo. Niceta meetcha.”

A few brave whispers started up behind him, but Mr. Jackson snickered and shook his head.

“Of course you would. Wouldn’t be surprised if you were a synergist after all, Washington.”

The tour included the woodshop, which was down in the basement, and over to where art classes were going on. The teacher there seemed to have a thing for paintings of fire, demons, beasts that were made of different animals mashed up together, and one massive piece where inhuman things were eating and chasing people around toward somebody’s version of hell. Later, they were asked to fill out forms indicating their interests, and what classes they thought might be good for the future. Michael liked computers, but there was a lot of math involved.

Finally, Terrence Jackson called them together and said, “We’re probably going to be late to the gym, so we’re going to take a shortcut. Ordinarily, you should never head to this part of the Patterson building. It’s off limits.”

Michael’s heart leapt into his throat. They were going into the underground Active prison thing!

But he was disappointed. Mr. Jackson led them around a corner, ducked under more of the yellow police tape, and stepped into a dark hallway with one flickering light at the very end.

“Step lightly people,” he said. “Holes in the floor. Single *file*, Washington.”

It was one of those annoying things that Jackson could just bark out one word as a shout. Everybody always jumped, too, like they weren’t expecting it.

He started to weave his way around the hallway, and now Michael could see some glowing, molten-red spots in the floor here. They were melted deep, which was why he couldn't see them from far off. The walls also had scorch marks all over them, and in one place he looked out, through the wall, into a classroom, and saw another scorched hole looking out into the center courtyard.

"Mr. Jackson?" Michael asked. "What--"

"Not now. More you open your mouth, more radiation you're likely to get, Washington."

Several students screamed, but eventually they all made their way through the crater-filled hallway and past another big X of police tape. The gym was just beyond, and already full of seventh graders from LADCEMS. A large, fat, bald teacher in thick glasses was ushering everyone in. Michael recognized him as Mr. L, the Active who could take powers from someone and give them to somebody else. He turned a lopsided smile on Michael and the other N through Z's and ushered them through.

"Right here, all the way back, pack in tight," he said. "Here we go, here we...ohhh."

Most of the students had already made it into the gym, but Mr. Jackson suddenly folded up, clutching his head. One of the veins in his forehead suddenly stood out, and Michael wondered if his head wasn't going to just pop.

"What's wrong Mr. Jackson?" he asked, far too nicely.

"Shut up, Washington," Mr. Jackson grunted. "Get in there before I give you a month's detention."

The gym looked like a darker and more run-down version of the LADCEMS one, without the banners hanging from the rafters telling when the school had been state champions in girls' volleyball or boys' basketball.

Mr. L rushed (more like waddled) over toward center court, where a podium was set up. The throat clearing sounded just fine coming through the huge speakers hung high up over the center of the gym, but Mr. L got much too close to the mic when he started speaking.

"Thank you!" he said. "Thank you everybody. Settle down now. Heh. I know this is pretty exciting for everyone, of course."

Michael watched Mr. Jackson until the lights went out, but couldn't tell if he was just having a really nasty headache or something else was going on.

It didn't take a minute. The lights went out, like someone had stolen the sun out of the sky. Girls started screaming and boys laughing. The only light Michael could see was a few specks dribbling in under the doors.

"Nothing to worry about! Nothing at all!" Mr. L shouted. "Just...get...this darned...projector..."

Finally something buzzed to life, and a minute later a light came on. Another spotlight from somewhere high up flared to life, and after some confusion found Mr. L.

"Now, right, then, aha..." he said, and dropped a few of his note cards on the floor. More laughter followed, along with a ripple of disbelief. This was one of the Actives?

"Well, like the bird said to the flying fish, haha, just wing it," he said, and went on even through the groans. "Not long from now, what, roundabout five months or so, you'll be enrolled in LADCEMS no longer! You will instead be a part of the Marcus Patterson high school preparation building. Which, aheh, doesn't have a good acronym, but there you have it. And things, my friends, are going to be very, very, very, very, very different."

He beamed at them all. Michael stared at him in horror. He could not for the life of him believe anyone in the world talked like this. He also couldn't believe that person was trying to talk to *him* like this. He was embarrassed for Mr. L. If he had to give this presentation, he would probably burst into flame out of sheer embarrassment, and not in the good, I've-just-activated-my-super-powers way.

"It might not look like much, but Marcus Patterson has a long history of excellence. I'm sure in a few years, it's going to be bulldozed and remade like LADCEMS, but not next year! You'll have the pleasure and privilege of attending here next year.

"The programs that we, ah, set up here should help you get orientated to your, ah, new surroundings. This school will be your home for the next, what, nine and a half months? Let's call it a year. You will need to meet some of the people who will be your neighbors, no, your family, for that time. You'll need to be ready for high school, because Lincoln Area District High is very different, *very* different from what you have experienced so far.

"Why, I remember the moment I arrived at the Lincoln Area District," Mr. L said. "Takes me back, sure. I had no idea that I was going to be a part of such an exciting and wonderful environment. But then I met Mr. Jackson here, and..."

A bright white stab of pain, much like a two foot long nail, erupted into Michael's head. The gym disappeared. He was blind.

No, that wasn't right. The world just dissolved really quickly. Like if you were staring at the place a nuclear bomb was being dropped.

In its place were a few smells. One was a summer smell, the smell of grass cuttings on his lawn, the scent of summer roses and tulips in the city center not far from city hall. A hint of car exhaust. Aftershave, like the stuff his father splashed on his face. Sweat. Fearful sweat.

Bloppy voices came into his ears.

"-can't be serious," one said. "Washington won't stand for it."

"Won't stand for it," the other voice said. Both were familiar. "Listen to yourself. Who cares what people will stand for? Look at this place! No, really, look, look around you!"

Michael could look. He wasn't far from the high school, near the edge of town where fewer cars went. Everything was blurry, but he could make out the water tower as a sky blue blob and the chunky forms of trees. Two people stood before him, but they were nothing more than fuzzy smears of color. His eyes were starting to get the handle on this dream...hallucination...thing.

"What do you see? Let me guess. A flourishing community. Something perfect and wonderful."

"Well yes!" the first voice said. Michael knew it now, the first was Mr. L.

"You only see the shiny red apple, you can't see the rot on the inside. This place is doomed, Archibald. You take my advice and steer clear of here."

This had to be Jackson. Yes, his eyes were clearing, and he could see them now. Younger, both of them with more hair and Mr. L quite a lot thinner.

"No, no, that's not right," Mr. L said. "Have you seen the rest of the world, Terrence? They've really built something here. A diamond in the rough."

Somewhere, a long way off, a siren was going, a shrill blast like a super powered scream. "Eeeeeeee!"

"A diamond in the middle of a volcano," Mr. Jackson said. "This thing's going to come down, I promise you that. And you, you want to be here in the middle of the eruption?"

"So why are you here?" Mr. L still had that lopsided smile, still had the thick glasses, and only a little more hair than now. Neither of them made any sign that they heard the siren.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

Mr. Jackson looked uncomfortable. Finally he pointed a finger at Mr. L and jabbed it in his chest. “Don't let this place trap you, Archie. That's what it does. You get out before they get the hooks in you.”

“I won't listen-”

"EE!"

His head rocked to the side, and the sting of being slapped exploded in front of him. His head was his own again, only it was full of red-hot clamps, like jumper cables attached to his head all over, pumping a steady stream of pain in.

The siren: it was Michael, screaming and screaming. His body was nothing more than nuclear slag on a slow, total burn. Every cell of him screamed, not just his throat, though the sound only came out of his mouth. That one scream wasn't enough. His eyes were open but they wanted to shriek like the rest of him.

The last thing he remembered seeing was Charlotte's concerned face looking down at him, and a bright light. Then everything flashed from white to black.

Michael dreamed of Bangladesh. He dreamed of the dripping jungle leaves as big as his chest and the black, boot-tromped soil, and burning tanks without turrets on them. He was walking through a city, but it wasn't anything like the city he knew. This one was crowded, full of litter, and most of the streets were still dirt. A market was going, and Michael paused to step through. The scents of smoked fish and mushrooms and cayenne pepper assaulted him, but he kept walking. The people stared at him, but then looked away in fear. Let them look away in fear. He'd just saved their smelly, dripping armpit of a country, they were right to be afraid. He caught a reflection of himself in a dirty window, but saw his father instead.

Michael was in a brightly carpeted room with lots of space, plenty of toys and stuffed animals, and windows that looked out on fake sunny skies. It had a carefully disinfected smell to it. He was sure the cleaning people came in every day while he was in the exercise gym and sprayed everything to kill off all the germs. He looked up at the friendly man as he came through the lemon yellow door.

“How are we doing today? Still having headaches are we?”

“Not as bad,” Michael lied. His head was the chopping block they used over at Hildner's meat department, always being whacked by the big guy in the bloody apron. And the strange

thing: he had Charlotte's voice. Wait a minute. How was it possible that he was speaking with Charlotte's mouth?

"Good, that's really good. But just to be safe, we're going to keep up the dose for a few more days."

"I was thinking..." he said. Charlotte said. Somebody said: "...maybe my family could come and see me? I mean, yeah, I know, you said it wasn't a good idea for me to go out, but couldn't they come here?"

He laughed. Of course he'd laugh. "Well, of course we can't have you running off again. We don't know how your abilities are going to manifest, exactly. Until we know, it's time to stay put and keep healthy."

"As to having your family here: I think that's a really great idea," he said. "You never know where people get therapy from. Could be from reading a certain book, listening to a certain song, playing a certain game, seeing a certain person. I'll see what I can do, okey dokey?"

He wouldn't though. Doctors always made promises that meant nothing. Like that your dad was going to be all right. Like everything was going to be fine.

He was in his Grandpa's house. He'd been there a million times before, but it felt different now. Like it was *his* house, not Grandpa's anymore. He turned and saw Susanna, his mother, there. She was angry, which wasn't unusual, but she was holding herself tight, like she was scared. Michael didn't think scared was a part of her vocabulary.

"I'm pulling him," she said. "I can teach him at home."

"That's not a good idea," he told her. Grandpa told her. Michael was...his own grandfather?

She laughed, but there was no fun in that laugh. "Oh yeah? And why not? Because he's made so many friends? Because he's had such a positive experience? It's like he's a walking danger magnet."

"He's had accidents in the past..." he suggested. "He always bounced back."

"Accidents? This isn't like him falling and breaking his wrist!" And she did something he hadn't seen since she was just out of high school: she pulled up a pack of cigarettes and lit one. She was silent for a while, just pulling in the smoke (the first step on the road to cancer, like she'd said before).

“Every time my husband comes home we end up in a fight and I threaten to leave,” she said finally. “I’m serious, Harold.”

“We are working on the problem, Susanna,” he said. “We are doing the best-”

“*Your best isn’t good enough!*” she screamed. “I swear to you, Harold, if my son wakes up in the hospital because of your schools one more time, you will never see us again. My *husband* can kiss his peace of mind goodbye.”

Michael stared at her. Grandpa/Michael stared.

“And don’t even think about sending your little bloodhound Actives after me. Using these, these people every time you have a problem is a pretty poor way of doing things, I don’t mind telling you.” She took a long drag on her cigarette, and the end flared up like a sickly eye. Staring at him.

And Michael woke up in the hospital. Again.

Chapter 12 - Keeping the Keys

His mother wasn't smoking when his dreams finally ended, but she did look like she'd been through an ordeal. Any other public outing would find Susanna Washington with excellent makeup, carefully selected clothes (that matched) and hair that took at least an hour to do. Instead the hair was disheveled, the clothes were rumpled, and the makeup was creeping down her face as it mixed with the tears. And she was holding a pack of cigarettes in one hand.

At that moment, the doctor came through the door and pulled up Michael's chart. He decided to play possum for now, and shut his eyes.

"I have to apologize, Mrs. Washington, we must have been wrong about the aftereffects of Archibald Lansing's ability," he told Michael's mother.

"And what's happening to him?"

"It's difficult to say," he said. "We only found traces of Releshzna radiation on him, but the last time these were negative."

"Someone mucked up the test," she said, and knocked the cigarette pack so that one stuck out. Then she frowned and must have thought better of it, because she pushed it back in.

"I can assure you, Mrs. Washington--"

"Stuff your assurances, doctor. You know who my husband is. He pays you more than enough to find what is wrong with my son. So find it, whatever it is, and fix it."

"Of course we're doing the best--"

"Don't you say you're doing the best you can," she hissed. "I don't want your best, I want results. And another thing, I don't want any of those...Actives...near him again. He can do with medicine." Actives, oh boy, the way she said it, it sounded like something you'd find on the bottom of your shoe. Something crawling around the underside of a rock.

"Of course, we're going to do everything we can," the doctor said weakly. Michael could practically hear the man sag with relief, like a deflating balloon, as Susanna Washington allowed him to leave the room.

Michael was hooked up to all sorts of machines that were beeping out the functions of his internal organs. Apparently everything was okay, unless you counted his head. Everything from the neck down then was just fine.

And then a fresh wave of pain rolled over his head, and he moaned out loud.

“Oh honey.”

She came over to the bed and sat down.

“How's my boy feeling?”

“Not like a three year old,” Michael groaned. “I'm okay mom. I just want to go home.”

She just stared at him.

“How long do I have to stay?” he asked at last.

“Until they know what happened?”

“I had a migraine,” he said. “That's it.”

She continued to stare.

“Mo-om,” he complained. “I'm fine. The doctors are going to tell you the same thing.”

“And what about the Releshzna radiation they found?”

“I don't even know what that is.”

“It's the radiation given off by Actives when they use their powers. Something Archibald did to you must have left some sort of...stain. No, you stay put and the doctors are going to find out what's happened to you. I'm going to get cleaned up. Your father's supposed to fly home tonight.”

“Great.” Michael hadn't forgotten about the grounding, and he hadn't forgotten about his father's promise. Death threat really. Maybe, that doubtful voice inside him said, if you play this migraine thing up, they'll forget all about the grounding. He knew it wasn't likely to happen, but if one thing cut memory short it was getting sick.

He was grateful when she finally left to get the house ready for his father, because there was a lot to think about. He remembered the details of his dreams completely, which was odd. Normally he didn't dream, or woke up trying to catch them like streamers of smoke through his fingers.

He would have just put his dreams down as dreams, except for the cigarettes. She had never in Michael's life put a cancer stick to her lips. As far as he knew anyway. The way secrets were getting revealed around here lately, he wouldn't be surprised to learn that King Kong was

his uncle and that his grandfather was actually a robot sent from the future, waiting to destroy them all.

So he dreamed things that were real. Okay, fine. In the long line of super powers, it was probably the worst one. And either it was really his, or it was just some fading echo of whatever Mr. L had done to him. Either way it sucked. He would really rather have hot lava spit or invisibility or something, but he wasn't going to complain. Knowing more was better, despite what his parents and grandfather thought. Either it was going to make his head explode or it wasn't, and it was either going to lead to some other amazing power, like cutting guns in half with his mind, or it would fade away. Either way, he had a situation that needed dealing with, and it couldn't wait for him to try jumping off his house to see if he could fly also.

The main problem was that his mother was going to take him away. He thought he could be prepared for this, maybe. Just refusing to go and locking himself in his room might do, but there was the problem of food. And the bathroom. He'd have to come out, and he couldn't just climb out the window to eat at Charlotte's house.

If he couldn't stop her, then he needed to stop the other thing. Whatever was going on, it was clear Mr. Jackson was at the heart of it. He was the same guy Charlotte had talked to as a counselor, and he was a mind-reader guy. Michael didn't know anything about psychics, but he had read a few books about this sort of thing, and if they could take thoughts from your head, maybe they could put some back in. If he could do that, he could probably put in signals that would help Activate Trent and Charlotte and the others. Like a hypnotic thing. Like when you wanted a cigarette and popped a stick of gum instead, just because the hypnotist told you to.

He had other facts that didn't make sense. His mother had mentioned the Omega Syndicate. Definitely a bad guy name if there ever was one. So maybe Mr. Jackson was working for them. Maybe he was the leader. Anyway it was clear that if you wanted to stop something in this super town, you'd have to be secretive about it. If you just came rolling up in your evil engine of destruction with attached satellite death ray thingy, fifty or sixty super-powered people were going to punch your lights out.

Okay, so the Omega Syndicate was trying to blow the volcano. The town. If Mr. Jackson was right, and a few underage Actives were really a big problem, the whole town could go up. Well, his mother and Grandpa were really worried about it. Was Mr. Jackson right? Was it as easy as tipping the town off balance a little?

Michael wasn't about to find out. He may not be popular at school, and everybody might be afraid of him, but there were plenty of people on his paper route who were nice people. They didn't deserve to get caught up in a volcano blast. Mrs. Sulzsko and the twins didn't deserve that either. His mother didn't deserve it, no matter how many times she grounded or yelled at him.

He had to do something. The trouble was he didn't know what to do. His parents and his Grandpa were keeping secrets from him. They didn't want him to know about the Omega Syndicate. They wouldn't be happy if he told them about it. It might earn him another grounding. Talking to Charlotte was clearly always the best option, but she was stuck underground in some sort of prison cell. Call it a treatment facility, but it was nothing more than a jail cell dressed up and pretending to be a classroom.

He decided, after a bit of thought, that Lily was the answer.

The doctors, terrified and puzzled, informed his mother that there was nothing wrong with him. She told them that all the money in the world couldn't surgically remove their heads from their butts, and left the hospital with Michael in one hand and a pack of cigarettes in the other.

"Mom?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"What's with the cigarettes?"

"Oh, nothing. Stress. I used to smoke, you know. A long time ago." He didn't know, and he didn't approve. It meant something was very wrong, like a plague of locusts on the horizon, millions of them ready to swarm all over everything and chew the world to pieces.

"Did you get a sub for the paper route?" he asked.

"I did," she said.

"Call them back. Cancel. I need to go out."

She stared at him. "Honey it's January. You're not feeling well and there are two inches of snow on the ground. I don't need you sliding on your bike and falling in someone's front yard and freezing to death." They finally arrived home.

He looked at her. "Wait a second."

"You know what I mean," she said.

"You mean that if I fell off my bike--"

"You *know* what I mean. I'm worried about you!"

"-nobody in this town would come and help me out?"

“Michael-”

“They're just going to let me freeze to death right in front of their house or their neighbor's house?”

“Michael Edward!” she snapped.

“I might as well not walk to school, or take my bike to school either. The roads are *treacherous*. In fact I could just stay in the house and learn everything by computer.”

“We don't know who we can trust here. We haven't lived here forever.”

“My whole life isn't that long.”

“The face people show you in public isn't the same one they wear at home,” she blurted out. “People keep secrets here, Michael. It's a small town, they always do.”

“Like you and Grandpa?”

He'd gone too far. The realization struck him like a slap, his mother didn't even have to. The look they shared was electric, full of warning bells and the frightened urge to run away from her. So he did, back to the garage to grab his bike.

By the time he got back to the porch she was inside, probably calling one of her Tupperware party friends to talk about what a horrible son she had. He threw the papers into his neon, reflective newspaper sack and got the bike moving.

All throughout the ride he couldn't stop thinking about what he'd say to Lily. He'd sort of grown apart from her when he started to make friends with Charlotte, but she still said hi to him and still smiled at him. He felt guilty for not talking to her, but only a bit. She was just another customer. Who was pretty. And nice. And got him interested in lots of awesome books.

He definitely did not think about his mother, and how she was going to steal him away from his life here. And how she was keeping things from him. Focus, he told himself. Focus on what's important. You need to have a plan, and you need to have help.

He'd gone over the start of his conversation with her a few dozen times by the time he actually got to the library and stomped on the welcome mat to clear the snow off his boots. She was there, still with a halo of gold blonde hair tied in a very cute ponytail, still with the business clothes, suit coat and matching skirt.

“Hey Michael,” she said. “You okay? Looking a little peaky right now.”

“I had a migraine at school today,” he said. “Had to go to the hospital.”

“Ooh, sucky. You okay then? Clean bill of health for Mr. Michael Washington?”

“Yeah,” he started to stare at his shoes, and realized he was being a dork. “Hey listen, can I, are you busy right now? Because I need to talk to somebody about something.”

The smile dropped immediately. He hoped he hadn't just made a huge mistake.

“What's up?”

“I...not here. You have those study rooms right? The ones nobody uses?”

“Yeah,” she said. “The soundproof ones. Funny you think nobody ever uses them.”

She led him over toward the empty study rooms. There were two, just little boxes with a window, blinds on the window, a table, two chairs, a reading lamp, and a lame poster about how cool reading was. Nobody read books with that look on their faces.

“Okay...what's up?” she asked.

“Can you, um, shut the door?”

She did. Michael gathered up his courage and his breath at the same time. He wanted to tell the whole story as quickly as possible. He didn't want to leave anything out, but he knew he was going to forget things.

He tried to tell her the whole thing in one breath, from Trent up to the dreams he'd had in the Marcus Patterson gym, and how he somehow knew they weren't dreams (mostly because of the cigarettes...he wouldn't have believed about the cigarettes, and that would have made the whole thing just a dream). But it was real in real life, so they all had to be true.

In the end he told her about the suspicions he had about Mr. Jackson and the thing he'd overheard, the Omega Syndicate. Only when he finished did he see how stupid it all sounded.

He waited for Lily to laugh at him, to give him a slap on the back or an affectionate punch in the shoulder and tell him 'good one' and that April Fools' day wasn't for another two months and change.

If she had, he might have laughed and tried to forget the whole thing, to put it down to his own failing mind, and ask his mom to let him see one of his Grandpa's psychologist teams. But in the end she didn't do any of that.

Instead, she looked at him with a face more serious than he'd seen before, arms folded across her chest, and nodded.

“You're ready then,” she said.

In the break room, she pressed a combination of buttons on the coffee maker, and the wall with the coat rack slid aside. Revealed was a staircase leading down into darkness, and at the end

was something he couldn't quite make out, only that it was lit by halogen bulbs somewhere far beneath the library.

Apparently the architect behind the public library had been a paranoid nutcase, because he (or she, let's be fair) didn't just design it with an underground bunker to keep out fallout from nuclear blasts. The architect didn't just include the heating system that was tied into thermal vents from deep within the earth's crust. It wasn't just built with water and air purification systems, so that a dedicated army of moles could survive down there indefinitely. There was also light absorbing fungus under glass, which glowed in the dark, so they could conserve power, and a curious bank of stationary bikes along one wall.

Lily led him around, watching his face carefully.

The whole thing looked like a secret headquarters, which he guessed it was. He wondered briefly if the Omega Syndicate had just stolen him without a fight at all. Then he considered that this was Lily, the same Lily who told him about soppy romance novels he'd never read, the ones with oily bodybuilders on every cover.

"Michael, you probably got an echo of Mr. Jackson's power," Lily explained.

"Huh?"

"You said that Mr. L used his ability on you, and he's together with Mr. Jackson quite a lot. There was probably some residual mind control or telepathy when he gave you the other powers."

"You think so?"

"Yep."

Michael spotted something out of the corner of his eye.

"What is that?" he asked. He was afraid that Mrs. Susanna Washington had been right about Mrs. Sulzsko and she visited the library's underground marijuana farm.

"Hydroponics," Lily said. "You can actually grow plants down here with just UV lights and water, did you know that? We have soil, but you don't really need it."

"And the bikes?"

She handed him a flashlight. It was one of those ones you pump up several times.

"I don't get it."

“The bikes are bigger versions of this.” She explained how you could cycle up the generator every day with four people working 3-4 hours each, or sixteen people working an hour each. Good for the body, good for the community.

“And our generator will work for two days between recharging, if we conserve power a bit.”

“This is so...wow,” he said.

Another of the librarians was down there, but he was an old guy with finger-in-the-electric-socket hair around the back of his head, while the top was billiard ball shiny. He was staring down his nose through a pair of half-moon glasses at some clipboards tacked to one of the walls.

“Right,” Lily said. “Here's Zeus.”

“Zeus,” Michael said.

“Keeper of the thunderbolt,” she said. “Hi Mr. Z.”

Mr. Zeus (that couldn't be his real name) grunted. Michael hadn't noticed before, but there were a bunch of clear glass sticks hanging on the wall just behind this Zeus guy. Each stick had a clipboard next to it. He took a long look at one of the clear glass sticks on the wall next to the clipboard and grunted again. Then he took it off the wall and turned it.

“What's going on?” Lily asked, much more brightly than usual. Bright enough that Michael could tell she was worried.

“Trouble,” Mr. Z said.

When he turned, Michael saw that he had a wireless headset in his ear. Mr. Z grunted again, then looked at Lily. With a flip of the head towards Michael and an arch of the eyebrows, he asked a question without asking at all.

“Michael Washington. He's real concerned about his mom and dad, and his grandfather. So I thought I'd...I thought...” She trailed off. “Let's head back upstairs Michael.”

The glass stick said UNSTABLE on it in big blocky yellow letters. And the name on the clipboard was-

“Hey, no!” he shouted. “Why's my mom's name down here on this wall?”

It hadn't seemed as interesting before, but now he could make out names on the other clipboards. Terrence Jackson was one, and Mary-Ann Lansing was another. He guessed that was

Archibald Lansing's wife. There were well over thirty spanning the wall, each with a glass stick hanging next to it. Terrence Jackson's stick unbelievably read STABLE in lying green letters.

“Michael, let's go,” Lily said. Now she sounded a little scared.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

Mr. Z grunted and went to another clipboard, then wrote a note on the attached paper.

“Listen, I just wanted to show you the hydroponic farm and the generators, you know, and, and, maybe give you a spin on the generator bikes. I wasn't thinking-”

Mr. Z said “Yep,” and penciled in another note on another board.

“You tell me what you're doing with my mom's name there, and I'll go. Simple as that.”

Lily looked over at Mr. Z, who ignored her, and back to Michael. “Listen, I'm going to get in trouble as it is. *Please* Michael.”

“You've been really nice to me before,” he said. “So I'm not going to ask you about all these other names. You just tell me about this one, and no problem okay? What's the glass stick for, and what is her name doing down here?” He wouldn't have believed that it was a Bingo roster or a Tupperware party schedule for a second, and he was glad when Lily gave in.

“It's her key,” she said. “The glass stick. Your mom's one of the keys...we, uh, we follow her progress-”

“You *follow* her?”

“That came out wrong. We just watch to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“So you're watching her, and following her.”

Lily squirmed and tried to look at anything but him. She opened her mouth to speak, but Mr. Z exploded.

“NO!” he screamed. Not at he or Lily...whoever was on the phone. “NO, YOU DO NOTHING, DO YOU HEAR ME? ABSOLUTELY, UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCE ARE YOU TO APPROACH HER OR INTERACT WITH HER IN ANY WAY! I SWEAR TO ALL THINGS HOLY THAT YOU WILL DISAPPEAR OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH IF YOU LIFT A FINGER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE DIRECT ORDER I HAVE JUST GIVEN YOU, AGENT? Of course you do.” Pause. “No, I do not CARE if she is weeping herself blind up there! If she gets a bottle of sleeping pills and swallows every single one of them, YOU ARE TO DO NOTHING BUT REPORT TO ME!” He swore in a rainbow of words Michael had

never knew could go together like that. Finally he ripped the headset from his ear and yelled into it.

“YOU ARE INCHES AWAY FROM BEING TAKEN OFF ASSIGNMENT, AGENT! The regents are going to hear about this.” Then Michael watched as he smashed the headset against the floor and stomped on it not one, not two, but three times.

Lily cleared her throat, and Mr. Z looked up.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. He went to a place in the wall Michael would have sworn was a wall, opened it, and retrieved a new headset. Then he cut the plastic case off and fitted it into his ear. There was no trace of the fury he'd just shown. This Mr. Z looked tired and a little sad as he crossed to a dark doorway, flipped on a light, and motioned inside.

“Come,” he said.

It looked like an interrogation room from one of those cop shows: one table, three chairs, bars on the table you could be handcuffed to, gray paint on the walls, and a big mirror over one wall. That was it. The whole room was designed to make you feel like you weren't a part of the real world anymore, that you were already in prison. It was about as personal as Mr. Z.

Zues staring at him across the table made him want to go to the bathroom. Maybe to throw up, maybe not.

“There are more than forty individuals in this town who we think of as Keys,” Mr. Z explained. “This is where we keep track of them.”

“A Key,” Lily said, “is someone we think could tip over the whole town.”

“I think you've said quite enough,” Mr. Z snapped. Then he sighed. “Think of a shield, Michael. You put it on your arm, and what does it do? It protects you. Only this town doesn't have a shield. It has a hundred shields. And they're not just shields. They're more like tame lions. When the lion likes you or fears the whip, it will attack anybody that tries to harm you. But it's pretty easy to let your guard down and have that lion bite your arm off. Times a hundred. So we have a hundred crouching lions, ready to be a shield against any danger to our little town here, but we also have to watch that the shield doesn't eat us.”

All Michael could manage to say was, “Uh.”

“So you can see why I would rather you *not be here*. But since you are, I'm afraid I have to make a call. If you'll excuse me.”

Lily fidgeted. Mr. Zeus answered dialed, said a few curt words, and listened. He said nothing, but got the clipboards off the wall and wrote on them. Once he went to another part of the room, opened up the wall, and retrieved a file. He took it to a table, had a quick read through, and replaced it.

“I’m so sorry Michael.”

“Don’t say that,” he told her. “What’s he doing?”

“Collecting,” she said. “Zeus is the collector. He gets all the reports. If nothing happens, you know, it’s all paperwork, they can just stick the reports to the clipboard, but right now he’s having a really hard time. All our Keys have been having a lot of trouble. They don’t like what’s been going on at the schools.”

“Like my mom. She’s threatening to take me away.”

Lily nodded gloomily. “Others are threatening to leave the town forever, and we think we have a mole from the Syndicate somewhere. Trouble is we don’t know where.”

“The Omega Syndicate?”

“Yeah,” Lily sighed.

“Why’re you telling me all this now?”

“Oh, uh...it’s too late now anyway, right? You know what you know.”

“So what’s the Omega Syndicate anyway?”

“A group of Actives and people like us somewhere out there. They’ve been tearing parts of the world up. They mostly believe that the world’s coming to an end because of the Actives. The Active ones just like to be in control, they want to be kings, gods. We have to stop that wherever we find them.”

“Who did Zeus go and call?”

“Oh?” she was off somewhere else, not really with him. “Terrence Jackson.”

“You didn’t listen to me at all!” he shouted. “He’s the one, he’s in the Syndicate. He’s probably their leader!”

“Michael calm down,” she said, but there were tears at the corners of her eyes. She spoke to him like she’d just been to a funeral for her grandfather. “There’s no way Terrence Jackson is the leader of the Omega Syndicate. All the Actives that come here undergo a thorough screening process. And don’t worry. We’ve got him under surveillance all the time. If he is who you say he is, we’ll catch him doing something.”

“Yeah,” he laughed, “That’s what you think.”

Just then he heard footsteps on the stairs just outside, and when he turned Jackson was there.

“You can’t go stealing my lines, Mr. Washington. It wouldn’t be proper telling the telepath what he thinks.”

Chapter 13 - Brain Stew

Michael looked around at them, around the little soundproof room with its single desk, single lamp and single venetian blind drawn so nobody could see in. Aside from that there were two chairs, and two adults standing there, watching him.

“Is he supposed to be looking around like that?” Lily asked. “I thought they got, like, hypnotized...”

“You do your job, I do mine,” Terrence replied coolly. “I don’t tell you how to *stack books*.”

“Is that all you think of me, Mr. Jackson? Well, I wouldn’t expect anything differently out of an Active who couldn’t even make it in the Alphas.”

“Get out of here,” he snarled.

“Or what, are you going to make me go? Mess with my head and get me to leave?”

“Perhaps you’d rather be blind then,” he said.

“You wouldn’t!”

Mr. Jackson shrugged and turned back to Michael. He was frowning, but not in the usual frowny way. Mr. Jackson always, as far as Michael knew, had what his mother called ‘a bug up his bottom’, like he’d just been sucking on super atomic sour balls for the last four hours straight, and hadn’t figured out yet if his face would ever get back to normal. This frown was different.

“If you stay in this room, Ms. Burkholtz, the consequences are going to be on your head.”

“*In* my head, you mean. What are you going to do to him?”

“I will count down from five.”

Lily stormed out before he even started, and Jackson turned that lemon-sucking face on Michael. “You’re here and now you know what you shouldn’t. Part of growing up, I remember: knowing things your mother and father don’t want you knowing, and doing things they think you ought never even consider. Yes, absolutely the nature of growing up. And now, what will we do with you?”

Michael just stared. It was like Harry Potter facing down Voldemort for the first time. Only Michael didn't have the strength to do anything. No magic wand, no anger, no spells to throw at him. He was just a boy, and Terrence Jackson was a mind-reader. It was like playing poker against a guy who had a forty card hand, and he could see the two cards you were holding.

"Because let's face it, boy, ignorance is bliss, isn't it? Before you know about danger, you ride your bike all over the place, just as fast as you like. Wind whips through your hair, the world is just a blur and you're completely free. Nothing can stop you. Wear a helmet, elbow pads, wrist guards? Yeah right. All those things are for babies, you tell yourself.

"Then you skin your knee, or you hit the brakes wrong way and what happens? You snap a bone in your wrist. Only it's not just a bone that's broken, it's the illusion that everything is absolutely perfect. You swim out of the kiddie pool and into the deep end, where you can barely see the bottom, and what's down there? Well, you could be hit by a car in your bike. You could smash into a tree. Your chain could come off or your brake cables stop working, and you're out of control. First time you taste fear.

"You're better off not looking where you aren't invited to look, Michael Washington. Be happy learning the history that's in the history books, learn your x and y axes. And while you're at it, you might as well learn what you can about girls. Do it early. Make some mistakes and figure out where you can and can't go, what to and what not to do. And for the sake of all things holy *stop thinking about superheroes and super powers*. Do you understand me?"

Michael nodded, just staring. He was trying to figure out when the mind power was going to hit him. Or would he even feel it? He didn't know how it felt to have his head mucked around with. Was he just going to wake up in the hospital again?

"I mean it. Because you keep skirting around your mother and father, don't you? You're not telling them what's going on. You're on some little private detective kick. Well, you'd best watch it before it kicks you back. There's some chance that you're going to be synergistic. Nobody knows the future, and if that happens, you turn out to be a synergist, you're going to love that: Activating the powers of others while you just sit there and hope that the Activation doesn't get you killed. You know how many synergists we've had?"

"No sir," Michael droned.

"Five. And do you know how many we lost while activating some poor kid? No you don't. The number is four. One of them we had to scrape off the walls. So leave it be. Let this

garbage go. Whatever you think you know, better to go and play video games until your brain's mush and you've forgotten all about it.”

Yeah, like forgetting about Charlotte was ever going to happen. Still, Michael kept his best stone face on.

“Yes sir,” he said.

“Bull,” Terrence said. “I haven’t convinced you. You’re just going to keep down the path you’re on, and you don’t believe me. Where you’re headed, Michael, is a place that’s going to scramble your brains better than I could.”

“Yes sir,” he said again. Maybe if he just agreed with this evil madman, he wouldn’t die right now. He could still find a way to convince his mother and grandfather about Terrence Jackson, how he was...

Something huge and hot smashed into Michael’s forehead, rocking him back in his chair. He smelled ash. He didn’t see stars, but some sort of invisible lava stuff over his vision that crept down and made Mr. Jackson a wavy ghost man. No, it was tears. He was crying from the pain.

“Okay, I’ll stop!” he shouted.

“Not good enough,” Terrence whispered.

Claws raked down Michael’s spine. He fell out of the chair and tried to crawl away from whatever tiger Terrence had magically teleported into the room, but couldn’t. The thing on his back weighed five hundred pounds, and Michael’s muscles were jelly.

“Swear to me,” Terrence whispered.

“Huhaaaaaagggghhh-”

“Nothing about this place leaves this room.”

Was the man right next to him or in his head? The pain slashed at his body, and he realized something as he tried to flee to a nice secluded place in his brain, away from the pain: Terrence couldn’t kill him. His father was the leader of the Alphas, and his grandfather was the head of the town somehow, and his mother was a Key. Even the leader of the Omega Syndicate couldn’t just kill him.

But just because he couldn’t be killed didn’t mean Terrence Jackson couldn’t do something terrible to him. Some *things*, even.

“You’re never going to know what I’ve put in your head, Michael,” Terrence whispered. Sweat dropped down onto Michael’s face, *plink!* “One day you’ll just attack your father. Or

someone will call on the phone and say pink daisy, and you'll get a shotgun out of the cellar and shoot your grandfather. You'll watch the whole thing and you won't be able to control yourself. Now do you understand?"

"Yeeeeesssss," he hissed. Had he bitten his tongue, or was Mr. Jackson putting the taste of blood on it?

"You keep that mind to yourself. Don't talk to anyone."

"Noooooohhhhh," he groaned.

"Or I'll know. Maybe you'll wake up with the phone in your hand and you won't know who you've just called. What do you think of that? You'll be Michael Washington one minute, and you'll be strutting around clucking like a chicken the next. For the rest of your life."

Another bead of sweat dropped on Michael's face.

"Think about it. You don't have to dig further. You don't have to break yourself. Do as I say and everything will be just fine."

He didn't remember Terrence Jackson leaving, or Lily coming in afterwards. He didn't remember sitting in a back room with a juice box and cookies, or having Lily check in on him every several minutes. Eventually, Lily told him the next day, he had drifted out of the library, picked up his bike (unlocked, but not stolen, of course not) and ridden home. His mother was still angry at him but he didn't notice that much either. He skipped dinner, which she said was fine with her, and slept for the next fourteen straight hours.

He took some headache pills the doctor had prescribed, but they didn't work. School drifted by in a painful haze. The only thing he became aware of, at the end of the day, were the extra homework slips each of his teachers had given him. There was a landslide of homework waiting to bury him when he got home. It wouldn't matter for long, but when Susanna Washington was angry she became the most efficient person in the world. By extension, of course, everyone around her was expected to perform just like her. So while she was scrubbing the stove and the fan hood thing above it, Michael was cleaning up the porch, refolding and rearranging all the clothes in his closet, repacking his remaining toys and video games in boxes, and even organizing the files on his computer as per her instructions.

Michael found it amazing that the body and the mind could be in two places doing two completely separate things at once, but his did. As he did his lot of chores, Terrence Jackson did

not once fade from his mind. He was always there breathing orders and threats into Michael's ear and telling him how his life was going to end just as soon as Michael went snooping again.

In between folding clothes, he came to the conclusion that, in all the books, the hero never gave up when he was forced into a corner that he couldn't see a way out of. He might not have his mind for very much longer. Terrence might have planted some sort of...what was the word? Oh, now it would bug him, like a song that got stuck in your head all day long. They'd just studied sleep and dreams at school. Michael rushed over and ripped his science book out of his bag. Subconscious, that was the word. Terrence might have set up a subconscious bomb. With hypnotists, they put you into a dream-like state, and they worked on your subconscious directly. People almost always used hypno-therapy to get rid of bad habits. The hypnotist could make you chew gum instead of pick your nose, or do something silly every time you were about to go to McDonald's. There was even this theory about triggers, like if you saw a yellow flower, suddenly your subconscious would activate and you'd do a handstand or juggle axes or something. Michael hadn't felt hypnotized. But then again, Mr. Jackson was supposed to be the expert's go-to guy. He could fiddle with your subconscious while you were lying on the floor in agony, for instance. He could probably read your mom's mind and put thoughts into your head at the same time.

But there were a few things he felt were true: one, that all these super kids weren't *accidentally* going nuts around him. Either someone was Activating them (the synergist Jackson told him about?) or he *was* one, and that meant Actives were just drawn to his Active Activating power.

So he had to investigate synergists, and synergy, whatever that meant.

The second thing he felt to be true was that this thing was more serious than the adults realized. All of them were safe. They knew the town had never collapsed. There were too many shields protecting the city, too many Actives for any of them to be afraid. Well, Michael was afraid. He'd nearly died a bunch of times. His mother was taking it seriously, but only threatening to take him away. What about all these *people*?

The third thing he felt to be true was his dream visions. Charlotte was a prisoner, his mother and grandfather had had a shouting match, his father was in Bangladesh surrounded by people that probably hated him, and most importantly: Terrence had warned Mr. L to *leave town*.

One other thing was true that he hadn't thought of since the hospital: Charlotte had been there in the Marcus Patterson gym. She was *there*.

These things were all true for Michael. So he couldn't just sit here and do nothing. Anyway who knew? Maybe they had other telepath people who could turn him back to normal after Jackson made him think he was an alligator.

He began to search on the internet for synergy, but only found it was a word that meant two things working well together. Next, he searched synergism, but found nothing. Third, he brought up synergist.

The computer screen immediately flashed red and told him that he was searching through classified information. His computer had sent a flag to the United States Homeland Security office, and that this was a warning. If he continued searching about this sort of thing, he would be fined.

Now he felt absolutely alone. The screen had made it clear there was no one about to help him. There was no one who believed in him, and no one he could trust, not even himself. Lily hadn't helped him in the slightest, just added to the list of things he hadn't known, and then she'd brought in Terrence Jackson.

Wait a second.

Wasn't Michael's mind supposed to be erased? If Jackson could turn him into a human chicken, then surely he could scoop out a few memories, and maybe even put new ones back. Instead, he remembered every second of his confrontation with the evil teacher. Of course, that meant remembering all the pain, all the threats, himself screaming and crying and powerless.

"You've got to finish your homework, dear," his mother called out.

"Huh?"

"You've been cleaning your room for almost an hour, and MICHAEL EDWARD!" He hadn't realized she was coming into his room. "What have you been doing? The place still looks like McKorsky tore through it with one of his mini-tornadoes."

"I-"

"I'll take the video games out of here," she warned.

"Mo-om," he said.

"And the e-book contraption."

"I wasn't-"

“And the computer.”

“Okay!”

“Get it done before dinner time. After dinner you’ve got homework. And don’t tell me you don’t, because I called about your extra readings. I know you’ve got loads.”

He sighed and set to work.

“And don’t throw it all in the closet either! I swear I’ll open it and check. If I’m killed in an avalanche you’ll be grounded until you’re thirty.”

Dinner was meatloaf and cheesy potatoes, one of his favorites. He knew this was a white flag. His mother was trying to tell him she wanted a truce. No more fighting. No more cheap shots about secrets, and no more shouting at him. Time to be normal, the meatloaf said. It was the most boring thing you could bake in the oven. Sure it was nice, but there wasn’t anything special about it.

After dinner she announced that it was homework time, and she would be watching over his shoulder when the doorbell stopped her.

“Who could that be?” she asked.

Unless it was Trent or the girl who’d broken the school coming to apologize, Michael could bet safely on one of his mother’s friends.

It was Grandpa.

“Harold,” she said. “You didn’t call.”

“Apologies, mm, uhh, Susanna,” Grandpa said. “Might I come in? Bit chilly out here.”

“Sure, yes, sure, come on in.”

Grandpa stomped the snow out of his boots, shook some more snow out of his hat, and came inside. Before his mother was finished putting Grandpa’s coat and hat in the coat closet, Michael saw him look up and wink.

“Well what brings you over here so late?”

“Ah, well, you know, like to get out and stretch the old legs a bit. I’d like a word with Michael if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, sure thing,” she said.

But she stayed in the room, still looking awkwardly at Grandpa and Michael.

“Well why don’t we head on in to your bedroom then?”

“Um...okay.” Michael had a sudden stab of hope. Maybe Grandpa had found out about Terrence and was going to call in his other telepath to sort out all the issues with Michael’s blended brain.

“Won’t be long!” Grandpa said, and did something Michael had never seen him do: not so much run, but jump up a tiny bit and sort of rush to Michael’s door. His hopes fell through the floor at that point, and he wondered just how long it was going to be until this ‘Grandpa imposter’ left. He did have some serious homework. The countries involved in the 1990-something treaty that made the European Union weren’t just going to magically implant themselves into his cerebral cortex, unless Terrence implanted that bit of information. Which he doubted. Jackson would never do him a favor.

Grandpa shooed him in, smiled to Susanna, and shut the door. As soon as Michael turned around to ask just who the heck this fake grandfather was, he was greeted by the sight of Charlotte standing there with a finger over her lips. She was frantically shaking her head at him.

Luckily for Michael, he was stunned speechless.

Charlotte cleared her throat, and when she spoke, it was with Grandpa’s voice. Not just a girl’s imitation voice, which sounds as much like a man as a dolphins sound like helicopters. This was really Grandpa’s voice coming straight from her throat.

“Well son, I know you’ve had a hard time of seventh grade and all...”

She pulled up a flash card. It read, in big black marker: **JUST TYPE ON YOUR COMPUTER.**

She went on. “I guess you’ve been sick lately. That must be awful. Well, I called your teachers and they told me that you’ve got to do some sort of report about the Twin Towers.”

Michael sat down and started to type furiously, until Charlotte tapped him on the shoulder.

This time a new card read: **ANSWER ABOUT THE HISTORY PROJECT!**

“Uh...yeah. We’ve only got a few days to do it. I...uh, I don’t know what I’m going to write about.”

On his computer he typed: **What**, erased it, then **When did**, deleted that, and finally **what the devil?**

“Well,” she went on, perfectly in Grandpa’s voice. “If you really want to know what it was like, you come and talk to your old grandfather. Have I got stories to tell you.”

She held up a third card: I GOT OUT OF THE TRAINING FACILITY TODAY. THIS IS MY ABILITY.

“You’re kidding!” Michael blurted before he could stop himself.

“No sir,” Grandpa’s voice replied. Charlotte gave him a stern glare. “I see you’re getting ready to start typing your presentation. That’s great son.”

He typed **you don’t talk anything like him. Mom’s going to come in any second.** Then he deleted it. When he turned back, Charlotte wasn’t there anymore. It was Grandpa again.

WE SERIOUSLY NEED TO TALK, the card read.

“So what angle do you think you’ll talk about? The families of the deceased, or the Bush administration? Something else?”

The next card read: WE NEED TO TALK. TONIGHT. BEHIND THE LIBRARY.

No good, he typed. **town ambulance always parked there.**

“Well?” Grandpa asked.

“Sorry,” he said, “I haven’t had much time to think about it.”

“Well, there were tons of people watching. They watched the whole thing, just like your gramps.”

How do you know where my gramps was? he typed. He said, “Really?”

She leaned over and typed **Pick a place and time. You do your report on your own time.**

Duh, of course. She couldn’t waste time here. If his mother was suspicious, she might already be calling Grandpa now to see if he was at home, and then probably freak out and bust in at any moment.

North side of the school, there’s a dark area people don’t usually look at. Closer to Patterson building. This double conversation thing was straining his brain. He couldn’t keep it up much longer without saying something he should be typing, or the other way around.

“Really,” Grandpa finally said at last. “But I got to let you get back to your work. You’ve got a busy night ahead of you.” **Tonight at 12,** she typed. Grandpa typed. Somebody typed it anyway.

Michael cleared the document on his computer and stood up to show Grandpa Charlotte out. It was really strange watching Grandpa move with the energy of a middle schooler. In a way, this was much less real than his encounter with Mr. Jackson.

There was no studying after that. Still, his mother made him stare at his books and write things down. It was just like being at school for the last number of days. He couldn't read, he couldn't concentrate, he could barely deliver papers without drooling and shrieking for a banana like a chimp. Winter could be over and he would have no real idea.

He was getting to be an old hand at creeping out of his house. Again, he took his bike, and again pedaled down the lesser used little streets. His heart was thudding loudly in his chest, but his fears were wasted. There were like three cops in the whole town.

The area just north of LADCEMS was the only scary place at the entire school. For whatever reason, it felt neglected. Students didn't leave school out the doors that way, they didn't hang out in that little patch of grass in between the building and the fence that separated LADCEMS from Marcus Patterson. Nobody had picnics there, but somehow there was always more trash than anywhere else around the school. If there were houses, their backyards would butt up against that fence, and you could bet there'd be at least one nasty dog that would startle people out of nowhere, barking and rattling the fence.

When Charlotte appeared as herself this time, Michael almost squealed. He did rush up to her and throw his arms around her. He backed off again pretty quick, burning with embarrassment. He was glad nobody from school was here to see them.

She'd been gone for so long he was starting to wonder if he remembered her the right way. But no, she was the same as before, which meant totally different. She had on thick plastic glasses and her hair was cut real short. She almost looked like a boy, with her tight black jeans and thick vest.

"Wait, let me guess," he said. "The Rat Catchers."

She smiled. "You've probably never heard of them. Weezer."

"You get me every time. Like tonight. Whoa, what the heck was that all about? You can, I mean, you're a...whoa, right?"

She grinned. "Tell you the truth, Michael, I don't really want it. So far the only thing it's done for me is get me in trouble and keep me away from my parents and my friends...well, you."

"So are you allowed to get back to school and everything?"

She waved it off. "Listen, something's wrong. The people who had me under Patterson kept talking about it. They didn't think I heard, but I did."

"WAIT A SECOND!"

“Shh! Could you be a little louder at our, um, secret meeting?”

“You were Santa Claus weren’t you?” he couldn’t help himself.

She grinned. “Okay yeah, that was fun, but listen, we have to keep quiet. I’m not supposed to be out of the house. I’m not supposed to be talking to you.”

“What’s going on?”

“Something’s wrong. The guards and the doctors were talking about it.”

“Oh, I know all about what’s wrong.”

“Huh?” she seemed very surprised.

Michael told Charlotte everything in a rush. It didn’t take long, after all. He wanted to make sure he told her everything in case his brain was going to explode or he’d suddenly get the urge to move to Idaho.

“So listen,” he said after it was all over. “If I attack you or something, it’s not my fault. Mr. Jackson did something to my head today.”

“I never liked that guy,” she said.

“You’d think a guy who could mess around with your mind would have a million and one friends.”

“You’d think.”

“Ask people for all their money, or just walk into a bank or something, and get everybody to fall asleep. Read the bank manager’s mind and find the combination to the vault.”

Why wasn’t Terrence Jackson a rich evil mastermind, come to think of it?

“Well, your grandfather believes in him, otherwise he wouldn’t have hired him.”

“He’s lying low, waiting to change everybody’s mind in town before he sets off a subconscious time bomb.” He was proud that he could use that word in front of Charlotte.

“Listen, we have to do something,” she said.

Like what? Go to Terrence Jackson's house and see if there was any evidence he was a villain? Get caught and tortured again? Watch Charlotte get more of what he'd already gotten? No way, no how.

“I don’t know...” Jackson was going to scramble his brains in a frying pan and serve them up with ketchup. He thought briefly of the card with Mr. Springfield’s name on it, and then wondered if Jackson had messed with his mind already. Ugh, with Jackson able to control everybody, there wasn’t anyone he could trust.

“Don’t be afraid. He’s never going to find out.” He said he’d know, Michael thought, but didn’t say.

“I’m not afraid.” He lied. He was afraid. Only he couldn’t look weak in front of Charlotte. It wasn’t like he was so strong and she was just a girl, but...it was just the rules. You couldn’t be a weakling.

“Good, then there’s a teachers meeting on Thursday. For the whole district. We have a half day, and the teachers have to stay to do some training thing.” When she saw that he had no idea where this was going, she explained. “We’re going to sneak in and keep an eye on the teachers. Jackson’s going to be there. All the teachers are going to be there, and like fifty or sixty of them are Actives, Michael.”

“Okay, so what do we do?”

“See who Jackson talks to. I think he really has to be close to somebody to mess with their heads. We can see if they do anything funny.”

“He doesn’t have to talk to them...he can just put a thought inside your head.”

“Probably,” she said, “but he has to look at them and concentrate. I should know.” He suddenly wondered how exactly she had turned into his grandfather...or where she’d gotten the picture of him.

“So we watch who he *looks* at?” he asked.

“You don’t really have any better ideas...”

The only thing Michael was sure of, when he thought of all those teachers in one big room, as that there would be trouble. As if one teacher in the classroom wasn’t bad enough.

Chapter 14 - Johanna Lane

Until this teachers meeting got underway and Michael did some detective work, he still had all his normal homework, plus make up work. It wasn't just reading and writing itself, as his mother reminded him time and again. His grades were slipping. He knew it. He wasn't even going to get out of LADCEMS, or he'd spend all summer in school instead, working and studying even more, not enjoying any of his free time out in the sun.

He tried to get some work done, and for a while he succeeded. Math was hard, but most of it he could check by calculator, and Grandpa was always on hand to explain something again. But when it came to reading short stories about kids planting flowers on top of a building, he just couldn't understand it. What was the point, and more than that, who decided that this was the important stuff? There was one story about a mechanical house after the nuclear bomb went off, and the house was always trying to feed the people that were dead and gone. And really, that story was incredible! What was all this other stuff?

It generally took him two hours to get through a fifteen page short story, because of all the times he would get distracted. Philip Pullman would interrupt, or Neil Gaiman. They were far more interesting than this. He started wishing for another telepath who could fix his brain so he'd at least be able to concentrate and get this stupid book out from in front of him. He could answer the stupid questions and get to work forgetting all of it.

The teachers' meeting wasn't for another few days. He met with Charlotte at lunch time and talked over the plan in the library while she pretended to help him study the extra stuff he was missing. After school, she would often show up and follow him along his paper route, changing into different people she'd seen in school, or their teachers. She did this great impression of, well, everybody, since she could mimic their voice completely.

"How did...I mean, what happened?" he asked.

"How I got Activated?" she asked. "Yeah, well, I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom one day getting ready for school, and I was looking down at the floor, right? There's this pebbly glass window, it's really not big, but the most amazing light comes through it. We had this little

breeze, and the sunlight was shining in, and the pebbles were making these little rainbow sparklies all over the floor and up and down my bathroom. And, I mean, for a few days I was having a really great time hanging out with you, we were listening to Parliament Funkadelic, James Brown, you remember, right?”

“Uh, right...and Stone and his family, right?” Michael hadn’t gotten into music with Charlotte for so long that he missed it. P-funk was from the 1970’s, all velvety smooth horns and really slick lyrics, fun stuff you always found yourself smiling at.

“Sly and the Family Stone, the Meters, yeah,” she said. “I was really into it. More into it than the grunge stuff. And later was getting into the Afrobeat work, mostly Fela Kuti. Really organic and, just, wow sort of stuff. Anyway one of the twins came into the bathroom and said I looked like a rainbow. Must have been the glass and the music. I just went multicolored.”

Of course she would. That was the thing about Charlotte that Michael would always appreciate and love, but never understand. If he Activated it would be all fire and screaming, he would be one of those who killed people when he went. But Charlotte, she was able to see the beauty in basically everything.

“Then I got a headache and passed out. When I woke up I was in that room under Patterson.”

“And you just do voices and, like, change into people.”

She shook her head. “They don’t know. We did a lot of tests, but they’re still not sure. They think I don’t actually change into anybody, it’s more like a telepathic projection.”

“You just appear like that in my head,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Even though my eyes pick up your real image.” This was a science concept from not long ago. “It’s like...what, a mirage?”

She nodded. “We see things that aren’t really there all the time. Yeah, you can see liquid pavement on a hot day, it’s just the way the light hits the asphalt.”

They stopped.

“You see that?” she asked. He looked.

About five blocks down, across the main street, an ambulance and three police cars were flashing their blue and reds. Michael couldn’t tell anything from this far off, but he knew the

town well enough to know that three police cars was the limit. There probably weren't five police cars in the whole town, so three was definitely sixty percent at least.

"Hooray mental math," he muttered.

"What?"

"Thinking out loud, sorry."

"Do you want to..." she asked, and gave him a careful look.

"Um, no?"

"Come on Michael. This could be really important!"

"You know what's going to happen to me if Jackson finds out?" he said. "Or my mom for that matter? I don't know which one's worse." Oh man did he ever look like a whiny mama's boy on this one. It wasn't his fault. He didn't want to get into anymore trouble. This teachers meeting plan had him jumpy. One teacher at a time was plenty bad enough, but more than fifty teachers all in the same place, ugh.

She smiled at him. "Okay, I'll report back when I'm done. You're headed to the library right now, right?"

After a good ten seconds he said, "Oh all right."

It was still too far off when they saw the stretcher come out of the house, but Michael thought he saw a splash of red on the white cloth over the person. He didn't think there was anything showing, nothing peeking out of the white cloth either. Like they'd draped it over the whole person.

Or the whole body.

Michael hadn't seen his own mangled body when he fell from the ceiling of the gymnasium that day, and hadn't been in the gym to see the horror show for the first assembly. He hadn't seen Mr. Samuelson's smoking shoulder burn when Trent attacked either. He hadn't seen anybody dead. He didn't want to. Nobody in his family had died except Nan and Gramps, his mother's parents, but that didn't count since he was like two when it happened.

He probably wouldn't get his chance here either.

"Do you think they're..." Charlotte didn't ask.

"Don't know," he lied. They were only three blocks off now, and these weren't the long blocks either. He had this bad feeling like paramedics didn't take their time with the live ones.

"You ready to go yet?" he asked her.

She wasn't, and instead of going, they got even closer. Another car showed up as they were only about a block away, and who got out but Grandpa.

Charlotte squeezed his arm hard. He could understand her fear. Michael couldn't grasp how deeply into the town's workings his grandfather really was. Grandpa disappeared into the dead person's house as the ambulance pulled slowly away, lights off. Yep, whoever that was was dead.

"We need to get you behind some cover," Charlotte said.

"What about you?" he said automatically.

"Don't worry," she said in a cracked, jovial voice. When he turned back she was replaced with an eighty year old woman Michael vaguely recognized as Charlotte's neighbor.

"Gone now, git," she said, and followed it with an old lady's cackle.

Michael hopped a fence into somebody's backyard and began to shadow Charlotte as best he could. He didn't know these houses like he knew the ones on his route, but he'd learned enough in the past three years to know which houses had dogs. You just looked for the digging marks under the fences, or the scattered piles of poop. As for the people who were home, that was a little harder. Most people though, they had a real hard time seeing out their backyard windows. If they weren't already out there, they could ignore everything short of a crash landing jumbo jet. Finally he hopped the fence into the dead person's backyard. He had a sudden clear flash of his time under the library, and Mr. Z shouting into the phone that he didn't care if she swallowed a ton of sleeping pills to kill herself.

He landed just behind the garage, and knew right away it was a woman's house. People didn't just have birdbaths tied with red ribbons or those gazebo things. This woman's yard was at least double the size of Michael's, though the garage was smaller. The hedges were too neatly cut, there were all together too many flowers, and, there was the clincher, a pink butterfly thermometer/barometer suctioned to the sliding glass doors.

Grandpa came up to the sliding glass doors and poked his head out. "You sure nobody came in or out?"

Another man arrived, and pushed his way out onto the flagstones. He quickly lit a cigarette and raked a hand through his thinning hair. He looked about forty, and probably wouldn't have any hair left by the time he hit fifty. What he lacked in hair he made up for in stomach. It was so big his belt was just a rumor.

“You see what she did to herself?” the fat detective asked. “Whew.”

“I’m aware of her condition, yes. You didn’t answer my question.”

“You know Zeus, he’s got eyes and ears on this place all the time,” the fat man said.

“I wasn’t aware we made Zeus and his flunkies into detectives, detective.”

The fat man sighed. “I’ll look into it, sir.”

“You do that,” Grandpa said. “I’m tired of this situation and not getting any answers out of it.”

“What situation? Wait, you don’t think this Lane woman has anything to do with what’s going on at school, do you?”

“I ain’t prepared to take any chances, Ricardo. The timing is awfully bad.”

Michael tried to think where he’d seen a Mrs. or Ms. Lane before, and couldn’t. He wasn’t a very friendly kid. He knew Frodo and Percy Jackson far better than he did the people who cut hair or sold his mother deli turkey.

“Well you best have some answers for me,” Grandpa said. “I’m gettin’ fed up with explaining patience to the regents.”

“Yes sir,” Ricardo said.

Michael made his way back over the fence when he was sure Grandpa and detective Ricardo Fatbelly were back inside and out of the dead lady’s kitchen. Charlotte was a couple of blocks up, still as an old lady, still clucking her tongue and muttering about what a shame it was.

“What’d you find out?” she asked him in her own voice.

He told her about the late Lane woman, and how Grandpa thought it was connected to whatever was happening to all the kids at LADCEMS. He left out the part about Zeus and the keys. He didn’t know why, but it just felt wrong to tell someone like Charlotte that there really was a secret conspiracy headquarters watching after everyone they thought was important. Like it would stain her somehow.

She told him how she’d walked up and started talking about the poor, poor dear, the poor dear. The cops had told her that yes, it was a shame, and she needed to move on. Unfortunately she couldn’t get a look in the lady’s house, even when she said she was a friend of the deceased. But she did hear a couple of the cops inside talking about how messed up the lady was, never married, probably just time to do the deed.

“What do you think that means, do the deed?” she asked.

“Kill herself,” Michael said immediately, and went on quickly when he saw how Charlotte was looking at him. “People who are messed up, you know, sometimes they kill themselves. I’ve read it in books.”

“Reading things in books doesn’t make them true,” she said quietly. There it was, the subdued Charlotte he didn’t like. Everything else she did was so vibrant, so real and true and happy, he didn’t want to burden her with this black smudge of possible reality. He decided to change tactics.

“Let’s finish up the plan for the teachers meeting,” he said. “I’ve still got some issues with the plan and I need your ideas.”

“Alright,” she sighed.

After a few blocks, they turned back toward the library, and by the time they got there Charlotte was back to her old self. She was excited to see if they could find something at the meeting. Michael just hoped they didn’t waste a whole lot of time, or get caught, but she was convinced the problem was there and they just had to work to find it. Michael just hoped he wouldn’t get caught and killed by his mother and father.

In the meantime he had to ask about the Lane woman. She had to be one of the Keys. After dropping Charlotte at home, Michael headed back to the library to have a chat with Lily.

Her name was Johanna Lane, thirty-one years old, and for fifteen of those, an Active. She could read and control peoples’ dreams. Lily told him all this sadly, like Ms. Lane was a good friend. Perhaps she was. Michael didn’t know how to ask, how to try to comfort someone much older. From his mother at least, he expected that all adults built up some sort of layer of armor, and that they didn’t need anyone when things got tough. Then again, there was his father.

He left wondering what it was about Johanna Lane that would make her a target. So she could read peoples’ dreams. So what? She couldn’t fry anybody with her laser vision or squish them into nothing with super strength.

Yet the dreams weren’t under your control. Maybe Terrence knew that he wouldn’t have any power over Johanna Lane while he was asleep. Certainly if he was planning something, it would be in his dreams. Michael started to wonder just how much control Mr. Jackson had over his thoughts. It was possible he could wall off his own thoughts so they never came to the surface in his dreams. It was possible that this was well beyond him. After all, anybody could slap a band-aid on a cut, but not everybody could remove part of your kidney and sew you back

up with no ill effects. By his experience with the gravity ability, Michael knew that control was something that was learned. The finer points of powers took years to master.

So Terrence killed Johanna Lane, or made it look like she killed herself, and he did it because she might find out what sort of plan he had going on with the Omega Syndicate. Still, that didn't answer the question: why now? If Johanna had months to find out Terrence, why hadn't she found him out and blown the whistle?

Michael didn't have any answers to these questions, but he kept turning it over in his mind as he went about his homework and got ready for the teachers' meeting. In the end, he told his mom he was going for a bike ride, and she demanded he be back before nine at night. And not to accept anything from strangers.

The meeting was being held in the LADCEMS library, with its impressive size, its dozens of tables and scores of chairs, relaxed atmosphere and high speed wi-fi access. What it also had was a second and third floor, and those were the basis for their plan. They weren't exactly floors. The second was just a ring overlooking the first floor, full of study desks and quiet tables for students who liked to draw comics, gossip amongst themselves, play card games, or play video games. The third floor was also ring shaped, but had a number of study computers. These were monitored so heavily and restricted so much the students never really used them. Michael didn't like it because there was only one staircase and an elevator leading out, and both of those led straight into a mass of teachers who wouldn't take it kindly if they found out they were being spied on. Charlotte loved it (of course she did) because of the way the desks were set up. They were right against the railing, discouraging stupid students from trying to jump the fifteen feet downward, and were perfect for remaining hidden behind.

They arrived a full hour before the meeting was supposed to start, and searched around the place for anything they could find. Nothing. So they headed up the stairs twenty minutes early and settled down to wait, and watch.

It wasn't long before the teachers began to arrive in twos and threes and then clumps. Several teachers started bustling around with projector equipment while others brought in trays of refreshments. Michael didn't really bother watching any of this.

"What does it feel like?" he asked her. "When, you know, you change?"

She considered it for so long he was starting to think he'd made her really upset. He was just about to apologize when she held up a finger.

“It’s like slipping on a pair of gloves,” she said at last. “But each one’s different. Some don’t fit well. Like if I wanted to be a pretty awful person, it wouldn’t be any fun for me, or if I know I have to lie. When I had to turn into your grandfather, you know, I had to lie to your mom, so it squeezes real tight.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s how it feels when you lie normally.”

“But if I don’t like it, it’s harder. Changing is harder. Usually it’s really easy though.”

“Like Santa Claus?”

She blushed, and Michael had no idea why until he realized he had sat on her lap. They’d never shared any moments like that, and it made him confused. Did she like him? If she did like him, he had no idea what to do about it. Other boys were supposed to say ‘go out with me’ and then it all got very hazy. He had no idea of what was expected of him then, outside of hold hands and possibly sometime in the future, kiss. Like around the age of eighteen. He didn’t necessarily hate the idea, but he was almost thirteen years old. According to his mother, this was not too early to send himself on a beeline path toward Hell by doing things that were forbidden by the man upstairs.

There was still the question: did she like him like that? He didn’t have any friends, only books to rely on, and they made the whole business of girls awfully complicated. Also, the boys were mostly heroes and had super strength or magic or whatever. Most of the girls wanted to be ‘just friends’. He never understood why they couldn’t do ‘just friends’ type stuff when they weren’t kissing.

He told himself to forget about it. Charlotte kept explaining about her ability, how she had to keep her mind on her shape, like keep looking in a mirror or avoid talking. If she was just standing still, she could stay in someone else’s shape until the cows came home. If she was trying to be a world famous figure skater, it was better if she stayed off the ice. The other night as Grandpa hadn’t been easy for her, which was why she’d changed back as soon as she got in his room.

She’d been in his room. Alone. It was another jolting thought. He supposed most of the kids at LADCEMS already thought she was his girlfriend, even though they didn’t hold hands in the halls or kiss next to her locker or anything. The other kids were pretty fixated on boys and girls being together at all.

He promised himself that when things got back to normal, he was going to make sure everybody knew just how he and Charlotte fit together. First, he was going to figure out just how he and Charlotte fit together. Then, as soon as that was done, he would tell everyone. Maybe she knew how they fit together. Maybe he could ask her one day, when he stopped his mind from whirling in a million directions. For instance:

She liked him. Clearly she liked him. Yet, no, that wasn't true at all. Maybe she only liked him because they lived near each other. Plus, she had no other friends. Maybe their friendship was just a matter of convenience for her. If she moved to another part of town, they'd probably slowly stop talking and spending time with one another.

The teachers started to appear in a steady flow, most of them talking and hovering around the refreshment tables that had been set up. He recognized Mr. L, Mr. Springfield, Nora the gravity control woman who had nearly gotten him killed, Mrs. Montgomery the healer, and Bob the unkillable man. Samuelson and Wozniak were there also, sipping their coffee like they weren't surrounded by enough power to destroy the moon.

"Where's Jackson?" he whispered. He was pretty nervous already, and only about a dozen teachers stood below him. Maybe all of them together in one place would override all of his student senses and give him a heart attack.

"Can't see him," she whispered back. "Don't worry, he'll show up sooner or later."

One by one, the blob of teachers began to ooze toward the tables, where a complicated seating ritual of friends and enemies was probably going on, same as in the cafeteria. He saw several of them nervously looking for a table, only to be beckoned over (to their visible relief) by a friend at a far table. He saw art teachers, in their Halloween-like paint-smeared clothes sitting together, only one Michael didn't know sat apart. Michael kept himself entertained trying to imagine what the outcast had done to the other art teachers, like the one hadn't shown up to a coffee shop rant meeting, or she said one of the other art teachers' work wasn't very good. Maybe they'd gone to high school together and had just hated each other.

Michael realized he couldn't do this while bored.

"Guess what I found out?" he murmured. He always found these to be better than whispers. Whispers tended to carry too far.

"What's that?" Charlotte asked.

“I asked around about Mrs. Lane, Johanna Lane by the way.” Boy did he feel great, knowing something of interest. “She was an Active. She could go into your dreams or something.”

“Like determine what your dreams are going to be?”

“...right.” He realized he actually had no idea the extent of Johanna Lane’s ability.

“That would be so great,” she sighed. “You know, to fly. You can always fly in your dreams.”

Maybe she could, but Michael’s dreams were more of the run-screaming-and-hide-from-the-bad-guy sort. There wasn’t much flying, unless you counted the times he flew after getting smashed by some super powered person or ability.

“If I were Johanna, I’d fly all over the place in peoples’ dreams. Then I’d know all their desires, like if they wanted blueberry pancakes, I could show up at their house with blueberry pancakes.”

Michael stared at her. Yes, he thought, the people of the world had these insignificant little dreams, like which pancakes to choose. But of course this was why he kept wanting to have her around. She quieted the bubbling evil voice that said, *yes, and when she’s got all their secrets, she can blackmail ALL of them.* Because that’s what villains did.

Lily told him that Mrs. Lane had been the nurse at the high school, but the nurse’s job was really more like a psychiatrist’s than anything else. The counselors also filled in as head doctors. You couldn’t have a school half full of super weirdoes with super weird attitudes and super out-of-control hormones.

“You could make all the flowers into little apple and lemon pies,” Charlotte went on, “and all the clouds into cotton candy. Really, you could do anything if you were in somebody’s dream.”

“What is the matter with you? What are you doing!” someone shouted from below.

Apparently a lot could happen when someone was dream. Or daydreaming. Michael snapped out of his to find his eyes locked with Terrence Jackson’s.

“We’re in trouble,” he muttered.

And that was the precise moment the Omega Syndicate took over the town.

Chapter 15 - Poking the Hive

Terrence Jackson was furious, and he was a man whose face was always a few steps away from the depths of fury itself. It was a look that came natural to him, like smiles did to Charlotte.

“Let me OUT OF HERE!” the evil teacher shouted.

“What’s going on?” Charlotte asked.

“I don’t know.” Michael whispered.

And he didn’t. The scene down below was not what you’d expect of a teachers’ meeting. It took five other teachers to hold Mr. Jackson down. He was thrashing around, and got his arm free just long enough to belt another teacher in the head.

“Wozniak?”

The old man’s head rocked back, but he held onto Mr. Jackson all the same, and they had him pinned down again soon. A surge of relief and disbelief swept through Michael at the sight. Somehow they’d figured it out.

“Don’t be stupid, hold him tight Charles,” a new voice said. It was difficult trying to sort through all the teachers. Suddenly Mr. L’s bald head glinted in the light, and that smug grin appeared again. Well, Michael wouldn’t have figured him for the type of guy who was a hero, what with the large belly pressing against his horrible choice in plaid suit jackets. You just didn’t get that heroic vibe, unless it reflected off his shiny head, or the thick plastic frames of his glasses. His chin wobbled a bit as he talked.

“How’s the headache Terrence?”

“Let me up!”

“Pretty nasty, I figure. I don’t know what’s happening to your head while I’ve got your ability, but it can’t be good.”

“Just kill me!” Terrence breathed.

“Oh,” Mr. L laughed, “No chance of that now. Really, don’t be so dramatic. I’m not here planning to kill anybody.”

“Save it,” Terrence breathed. “Soon as I GET OUT OF HERE, I’m telling everyone you killed Johanna Lane.”

Michael’s mind whirled. Terrence Jackson wasn’t the leader of the Omega Syndicate? He wasn’t even bad? No, that couldn’t be right. He was a real jerk. You didn’t just hurt kids without being a world-class jerk, but that didn’t make him a scheming psycho trying to take the whole town apart.

And what was with the yelling?

“It’s Mr. L,” Charlotte breathed. “He’s the guy. The Omega guy.”

Mr. L was a couple of quarter pounders away from having a heart attack. He looked like he was about as dangerous and evil as Michael’s front lawn. But maybe, if you looked straight in his eyes, you’d see something wasn’t right.

“Oh Terrence, you won’t be getting out of here any time soon. We have a lot of work to do at this little teachers’ meeting.” Yeah, now he definitely sounded a few a few chapters short of the whole story.

“What are you talking about?”

“I think we should go,” Charlotte whispered.

Yes, that sounded like a nice, cowardly plan that didn’t get them any answers. If a bunch of teachers with super powers weren’t going to do anything about this situation, Michael was guessing Mr. L had already used Terrence’s powers on all of them. Several of them were staring into space, and a few were sleeping at their tables. One of the art teachers was asleep on the floor.

“I’m like a surgeon, Terrence,” Mr. L said, “Cutting for the very first time! This is going to be so much fun.” Next to him, Charlotte shuddered and mentioned something about a horrible reference. Michael started to back out from under the desk, careful not to put his butt too far up in the air and crash into something. The delighted, unhinged sound of Mr. L’s voice was frightening. He wasn’t cold, but goosebumps had popped up all over his arms.

“Why’d you kill Johanna?” he asked. “She never hurt anyone.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Mr. L laughed. “She was the only threat to me. In this whole town of super idiots, the only one. She and that Washington brat.” Michael froze where he was.

Terrence actually laughed. “You’re imagining things, Archibald. Michael Washington is harmless.”

“Imagining? I know he’s going to Activate, and I know what he’s going to become.”

“And what’s that?”

“A threat,” Mr. L said. “You take all the others in this town. I don’t care if they could crush the whole world, jump through electrical lines, talk to dolphins or have a campout on the moon. Only one power is a threat to us, Terrence.”

“Walking through dreams doesn’t sound like a very dangerous ability. Sure you haven’t made a mistake? I’m sure you have. Why don’t we all take a deep breath, think about this, and *walk away* while we’re still good, law abiding citizens alright?”

Mr. L threw back his head and howled laughter. Now Michael had it: Mr. L could be a mad scientist. All he’d need to do was get that hair around the back of his head to go silver and grow out all wild. And Terrence was definitely speaking in code. He was telling Michael to get away. Well, he didn’t listen to Terrence before, and wasn’t going to start listening now. Charlotte started pulling on his sleeve, but he pulled back.

“Michael,” she warned, really low.

He had to see this. He would pay to see Mr. Jackson get his.

“Michael we need to go get some help.”

Why, he thought. Just because there’s an army of mind-controlled Actives down there ready to tear Mr. Jackson apart? Pssh. Big deal. Terrence Jackson had hurt him, threatened him, basically tortured him. Michael had front row seats now. If only he had popcorn.

“And you really think you’re going to win this? Are you really so deluded that you think you’ve got a chance to pull this off? What’s your next move, genius?”

Mr. L snarled. “You said it yourself, this town is one flick away from destroying itself. All I’ve got to do is apply some pressure and the whole thing comes undone. And you, my good friend, can watch.”

“I’m going,” Charlotte said at last. But she didn’t go. This was another of those times, those 'shark attack videos' times, where you couldn't look away. Some horrible part of your mind wanted to see, so even while you were screaming or telling yourself how awful it was, you didn't miss a second.

“You Activated those kids, didn’t you? Trent and the others.”

Mr. L’s widening smile was all the confirmation Mr. Jackson needed.

“How? You can't steal synergism.”

“But you can tell her when and how,” Mr. L said. “So I just borrowed it from you and gave Jessamine a couple of suggestions. Telepathy really is the greatest thing since sliced bread. There’s nothing you can’t do with it.”

“You were trying to get that Washington kid killed weren’t you?”

“Go on Mr. Mathematician,” Mr. L said. “You’ve put two and two together so far. You’re on a roll.”

Instead Mr. Jackson laughed. “You failed then. You must have been pretty desperate to kill off a woman like Johanna Lane. If you thought a couple of kids would upset the balance here in town, you were sorely mistaken. Which is why you’re out in the open now. The coward’s plan went south. Now it’s desperation time, time for plan B, is that it?”

Mr. L shook his head. “I would have thought you of all people would understand, Terrence. You set events in motion, you can’t always predict how they’re going to turn out in the end. Hit the cue ball, strike the one, hope the eight ball finds a pocket. Sometimes though, even the best pros miss a shot.”

“And what number’s Washington?” Mr. Jackson said. A smile played over his face even though he was being held down by five mindless teachers. “Wait, let me guess...he’s the eight ball.”

“I know what you’re trying to do, but it won’t work,” Mr. L explained. “You see, I’m doing what I need to do right now, while you’re spouting off at the mouth. They’re all mine.”

It was true. One by one, the dazed teachers were opening their eyes, sitting up straight, and moving around in stiff, zombie-like motions. They started to shuffle around the library, looking a lot like kids who had just been told off by their teachers. Eyes to the floor, they even bumped into each other at times.

“Michael,” Charlotte begged. “We need to get out of here.”

Michael tried telling himself Mr. Jackson deserved this, that it was the magical karma boulder rolling back onto him and ready to squash him flat. He couldn’t convince himself, though. He kept looking at the pain on Mr. Jackson’s face. People didn’t deserve to suffer like this at the hands of people like Mr. L. He’d learned that much in fifth grade against Trent, while he was still a plain old jerk instead of a super jerk.

“All yours, eh? Everybody in town?” Jackson asked. “Right up until the moment you fall asleep. You don’t think you can keep this up forever, do you? Just until the real Omegas show

up, right? The ones who have real powers? They'll handle the situation for you. You're just small potatoes."

And then he screamed.

"The first trick is pain," Mr. L said. "I used it first when I was trying to get the hang of your ability, just the little headaches and bodyaches. You wouldn't believe how easy it is to convince the mind that the body is in pain. It's an easy trick. Everybody's in pain every day. It starts from the first minute you're in the world. And against a telepath, it's the only trick that works.

"Between you and me Terrence, I'm a little jealous you ended up with mind powers. The world's unfair, huh? You could be the fat bald guy nobody really respects, who's the laughing stock of the high school, and I could be the dark and dangerous hypnotist with no backbone for using his abilities."

He squinted, his smile broadened, and suddenly Terrence was screaming again. Cords stood out on his neck and spittle flew from his lips while he howled and thrashed. His face was already red, and started edging towards plum.

Michael couldn't leave him like that. Nobody deserved that, even if they'd done it to Michael just a couple of weeks ago. There was no question about going down there and smacking Mr. L around until he was unconscious. Up here there were just chairs and books.

Chairs and books!

"Michael-" Charlotte started.

"Go talk to my grandfather," he muttered. "I'll distract him."

She just stared at him.

"Trust me," he said. "I know what I'm doing. When they're not looking, you run."

Yeah, and if he was one of two people Mr. L really wanted dead, standing up and shouting 'here I am' was only going to get him killed faster. He just hoped that the Keys people and his grandfather's people, and maybe even his dad would have a chance against Mr. L. You'd think that the most powerful Actives on the planet who swept up the world's messes would do the trick, but Mr. Springfield was down there, Active and as useless as a one legged man in a butt-kicking contest. In fact, all Mr. L had to do was get behind him, and he wasn't useless, he was a shield for the bad guy.

What would his dad do against this? Mr. L was right, only another mind reader was going to even the odds. And whatever the crazy fat man thought, Michael was definitely *not* that mind reader.

He sneaked over to the reference shelves. Up here there weren't many books, but there were, amongst the study desks, a number of dictionaries and thesauruses.

"Thesauruses," he muttered, and picked one up. "What a silly word." It had some good heft to it, but wasn't hard enough. He settled on one of the old school encyclopedia Britannica volumes instead. W for Washington. You could probably kill someone with one of these things, it weighed half as much as he did with a nice cardboard cover, bound in leather.

He was about to heave it over the glass railing when a cry went up. It sounded like the shriek of a wounded animal, but Michael froze mid-hurl. Near the stairwell a teacher was pointing at him and shrieking.

He was getting detention for sure. He pulled the book up over his head like he was doing a soccer throw in and, as Mr. L turned to look at him, he let fly.

Chapter 16 – Drone

Teachers are a lot of horrible things. First, they are demanding. They make you show your work when you have the answer already figured out in six seconds. They force you to do scads and scads of problems just to show you can embed a single formula somewhere in your cranium. They all seem to conspire to give you huge amounts of homework on the same weekends that new games or movies come out.

Second, teachers are hypocrites. They tell you to act like proper human beings and then prop their feet up on their desks. They tell you to sit up, and then sit on their desks hunched over. They tell you smoking's bad for you, and light up as soon as they get in their cars to head home. They urge you to be punctual and then leave you sitting outside their classroom ten minutes after first bell goes. They never apologize for loading you up with a million things to do. They never seem to accept it when you just get the project done and no more. They make themselves out to be these all-seeing, all-knowing beings without a single fault, and when you test them, they admit they don't know.

But as far as teachers went, Michael had never known teachers to be violent. Oh, sure, he'd heard the stories about the old guard history teacher with the baseball bat he'd slam on students' desks if they fell asleep, and he'd heard about the time that the baseball bat broke some kid's fingers a few years ago, but you never knew who the kid was. And you'd hear about the teacher who got fired for flicking a student on the ear, but you never knew who that teacher was.

You never heard about getting bum rushed by thirty teachers all at once with murder in their eyes, but that's just what was happening. At least he'd have gone out doing some damage.

And it was a sweet shot, if he did say so. Michael's W-bomb sailed through the air with just enough time for Mr. L to flinch to one side and take the hit on his shoulder rather than his nose. There was a satisfying crunch, and Mr. L spun to the floor with a sissy little shriek of pain.

"Good job Mikey," Terrence Jackson called. "Now get your skinny little butt out of here!"

“Don’t call me Mikey!” he shouted. The army of zombie teachers was pounding up the stairs. The only ways down were the elevator (yeah right) and jumping fifteen feet down onto bookshelves. Both were right out. Neither was he keen on getting torn limb from limb by a pack of wild teachers. He didn’t have a whole lot of options here.

“Go on Charlotte,” he muttered as he went. “Get out of here. Go on.”

Michael darted back to the reference shelves and heaved out another volume. This one was random. He definitely had enough time to get in position and, there, hurl another book bomb down at the bad guy.

The heavy volume plummeted through the air, but Mr. L was quicker this time. One of the teachers raised her hand and the book exploded into a thousand fluttery, charred and burning little pieces. It was like flaming snow.

Nuts.

The mob of teachers appeared at the doorway and surged toward him. Well, that was it for his options. If he went down the elevator, he was going to be facing ten or fifteen rabid teachers when the doors slid open. He could go up, and, what? Delay getting caught by another minute? Get Mr. L even angrier with him?

He climbed up on one of the study desks and looked out over the edge of the railing. It looked like a long way to fall, with nothing soft to land on. The tops of the bookshelves were covered in other books, globes, and a couple of toys that went with the books. They weren’t even that wide, those bookshelves. Even if he landed on one he was bound to fall the wrong way and fall an extra four feet to the floor below. And that floor had carpeting so thin and hard you could use it in wood shop as sand paper. Or a saw.

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret,” Mr. L said.

“Right here, Mikey!” Terrence shouted.

Sure, he could jump down onto the people holding Terrence, if he was an Olympic long jumper. There was no way he’d clear fifteen feet with one jump. More likely he’d land on a chair or a table and break every single bone in his body.

They were getting closer. Michael looked straight down. It would be a simpler drop, just land on the bookshelf and sprint toward the exit. Just dodge around the super-zombie teachers and avoid getting scorched into nothing. He wondered if the terror squirming around in his stomach was the same kind of thing people felt when they were about to commit suicide.

He jumped.

And landed hard. Books clattered off the top of the shelf, and his knee banged against a globe, instantly tearing it open on the metal top, but the globe itself went flying off the top of the bookshelf. The pain was bright and immediate, but he tried not to listen to it. It might be telling him to lie down and cry until his mom showed up with the band-aids, but this was neither the time nor the place. He steadied himself with his hands, then bolted down the aisle toward the only exit available.

“Get after him!” Mr. L screamed. A dozen zombie faces turned and started moving toward the exit, but for some reason they weren't sprinting like the others. Then he realized: these ones were all older. The ones who had come up the stairs were the younger teachers. Did it make a difference? He didn't have time to find out.

Michael's body was a lean, mean running machine. He'd taken a few beatings, but more importantly, he'd worked his tail off two and half hours a day pedaling and running all over the neighborhood to pay off Trent, and later just because he liked making money.

So when he bolted, he really bolted. The books on top of the shelves didn't matter now, they were just hurdles. He imagined himself jumping over bikes and dogs and lawnmowers in peoples' yards. The front door came closer and closer with every hop. And then the Actives hit him.

Somebody pushed him, just a nudge and he lost his balance. He fell full on into the next bookshelf. Fire raced up his back where he cracked his spine against a couple of dozen other spines. He cried out in pain, this time he couldn't help it, before finally smacking into that scrub-sponge carpeting. All the air instantly left his body, and it was a miracle he got any back into his lungs after that. It was torture just to take a breath. Now both his knees were scraped up, along with his elbows.

They were getting closer now, and though Michael knew it, he couldn't make his body get up and go. It could have been worse, he knew that. Charlotte had all the time in the world to get out. That was the important thing. He tried to focus on Charlotte, but the pain kept bringing him back to the present.

“Well there, the all-important little bag of dirt, Mr. Michael Washington, in the flesh.”

Michael slumped over onto his back and got a look at Mr. L's big fat smug smile. Yeah, those eyes were nuts. You could see right away, and Michael wondered how he'd missed that.

“I'm not even a telepath!” he tried to say. Failed. The sound his tortured lungs made was more like 'nuh, tuh'.

“I have to give you some credit though,” Mr. L said. He was holding his arm. “At least you put up a fight. I couldn't just let you die at that assembly. And that Trent kid couldn't finish the job either. Too bad nobody's going to remember you. And we've had our setbacks, young Mr. Washington, but let's not let that stop us, shall we? Where was I?”

Mr. L had put all those kids up to the task of killing Michael. It all made sense, in a twisted sort of way. Whatever Mr. L thought Michael had, he didn't. Whatever ability he was supposed to get wasn't there. Still, that didn't stop Mr. L from mistakenly believing it, and wanting him dead all the same.

Mr. L turned, squinted, then smiled again.

“You know why I love telepathy?” he asked.

“You're...out of...your mind?” Michael wheezed.

“Ha! Oh, aha, that was great. Out of my mind...and in someone else's mind. I get it, I get jokes, I do. Such spirit. My associates would like you, I'm sure of it. No, I like telepathy because you can take all the fight out of people, even after you give up the power. It's no regeneration. Sure you can't die, but your enemies are still coming after you. With telepathy though, you mess with somebody's mind enough, they aren't coming out of it. They're just like putty, Michael, you shape them however you like. More bang for your buck.”

He spread his fingers and his entire hand erupted into flame.

“I was just going to let this town bowl itself over. Let everything fall apart while the people started rioting. You can just imagine it...so and so doesn't bring back the lawnmower after he borrows it, and the owner's had a bad day, so he obliterates his neighbor. Then the tardy lawnmower borrower's friends come over for poker night, find his smoking skeleton, and war starts. Houses get smashed to bits. It's Tallahassee and Memphis and Peoria all over again. It's Salem Oregon and Rio de Janeiro and Prague and Gwangzhou. Poof! Only this one, you know, you've got so many Actives here, it would just about upset the earth's revolution, and end up with us freezing to death before we crashed into Mars.” He threw back his head and brayed laughter. There was something definitely donkey-like about him, and it wasn't just the laugh.

“Why?” Michael wheezed.

“Why, yes, that’s always the question,” Mr. L said. “Why? Because when you have these abilities, you don’t limit yourself. You don’t tell an Olympic sprinter to slow down. You don’t tell the scientists to hold back and call it a day. Scientists keep pushing the boundaries of what we know, runners run as hard as they can, and Actives need to be, well, active. We have to use it, find out all it can do. Take this ability. You’d think Mr. Terrence Jackson over there could make himself into a god. He could transform the world. You set up the subconscious blocks, and people are no longer a threat to you. They follow your directions, and they tear apart their minds if they ever think of trying to resist. Why, Michael, should we have to limit ourselves? Because we could break their little buildings and upset the little civilization out there? Because everybody else is afraid of us? Let them be afraid. They should be terrified, they’re *obsolete*.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something. It was a flicker of movement...it was himself. There was a boy standing near the library office who looked just like him. No, exactly like him.

Michael sighed theatrically. “What’s the fire for anyway?” he asked.

The smirk dropped off Mr. L’s face. “What?”

“I’m starting to think you’re just going to talk me to death.”

“Why you little-” and he stopped, staring up at something. “What the...no! This one must be an imposter. Get him!”

Michael didn’t know what happened exactly, and stood up to get a better look as Mr. L started forward. Both of them stopped short as Mr. Jackson shouted.

“Go on, run you idiot!”

Michael didn’t have to be told twice. He ran for it. Fresh pain lanced up from his elbows and knees, and he pushed past a confused zombie teacher before coming to the automatic doors. They almost didn’t open at all, and he nearly smashed face first into them. They parted just as a burst of fire erupted near his shoulder. He couldn’t risk a glance back, not with the other Michael Washington running up ahead of him.

He burst out of the library and away. Charlotte went one way, and he dashed the other. At least if they caught him, they wouldn’t get her. She could change into basically anybody, so she’d be impossible to find. Then she could get back to her mom and dad.

His mom and dad...

Mr. L was already turning the whole town into a bunch of zombies, starting with the city's teachers. It wasn't going to be long before he had control over everybody in town. He could just use Mr. Jackson's powers to take over the police, and have them shoot anybody who resisted. And when the big boys, the super super powers showed up to make sure the police couldn't hurt anybody else, boom, Mr. L would take them too.

He didn't have much time.

There were maybe ten thousand people in town, give or take. Michael had to figure out a way to warn as many of them as he could as quickly as he could. Without help, Mr. L was going to destroy everything. He had to know what Mr. L was doing.

He found a place not far away from the library where he could watch Mr. L go out and into the world. And go he did. Ten teachers went out with Mr. Jackson held up between them. Mr. L went too, somewhere in the procession of teachers. They handed Mr. Jackson around in shifts before they tired themselves out and dropped from exhaustion. As they walked, people walking or driving by stopped what they were doing and joined the enormous blobs of people. They just walked up through Van Buren Road without stopping. It was like a bug zapper, that blob, with all the inquisitive minds drawn in only to be swatted down to nothing. It was a quiet riot calmly walking through the road in protest of the way the town was made up. Whatever force had brought this town together, it was crashing down around their heads. At one point someone flew toward them, only to stop short and float up there for a few seconds. Michael only heard Mr. L laughing in triumph. A few minutes later the mob had grown to several hundred people. Some were breaking off, walking up to homes and knocking on doors. When someone answered, they were pulled from their house, brought before Mr. L, and then joined up. It was the slowest moving surprise attack in history. The flier came back, this time with Grandpa in her arms. He was shouting and telling her to put him down immediately, then there was painful cursing, and Grandpa's movements slowed, slowed, and then stopped. And then he wasn't shouting anymore. Mr. L had him. Mr. L had everybody. The town was his.

They were moving, inching really, toward the high school.

Michael rushed home through backyards, outrunning dogs and getting shouted at a little, but he finally made it up to his house. He peeked around the edge, down the street, and saw the roaming groups carrying off someone, thrashing and trying to scream out. He shuddered and pounded into his house.

“Mom!” he shouted. “Mom!”

“What’s on fire?” she called.

“This is serious mom, they’re taking everybody!”

“I’m in the kitchen dear!”

He headed for the kitchen and put his hands on his knees to help him stay standing. His lungs were twin fireballs, and each breath was a struggle.

“Listen, mom—” he started.

“Go wash up for dinner dear.”

“Mom, stop!”

“Michael Edward, what has gotten into you?”

“Okay look, Mr. L is a bad guy and he’s taking everybody in town, I know I thought it was Terrence Jackson—” He didn’t get any further than that.

“I don’t want to hear anymore about it. Whatever strange fantasies you’ve got going on... your grandfather told me Charlotte’s been released and she’s probably been to see you, so I understand if—”

“They’re coming!” he shouted.

“Don’t you take that tone with me young man!” When he started to protest, she snapped again. “To your room, right now. And don’t even think about coming out until one, you’ve got your homework done, or two, you’re ready to use an indoor voice with me. Go on, off to your room. We will talk about this later.”

No they wouldn’t. There was a knock at the door, and Michael’s guts froze.

“Whoever would that be at this time of night?” Susanna wondered aloud.

“Don’t go out there mom!” But she was already going. Michael rushed to the door and flattened himself against it. She stared at him as if she’d never met him in her entire life.

“I don’t know what’s going on in that head of yours, but you are grounded young man. Now get to your room right now. Don’t think you’re too big or too old for me to paddle your butt.”

“Susanna Washington?” someone said from outside. That was it. They knew she was in here. There was no way he could get her out now. They’d just bust the door down and find her. Like all parents, she was just clueless about her own safety. Even if she realized the danger, she’d never move fast enough to get herself out in time.

He hated the thought, but he had to save himself. Mr. L was going to take his mom, and had already taken his grandfather. Grandpa was already one of those things. That left only one thing for him to do: leave, hide, and find somebody who could help him.

Sprinting through the house, Michael slammed his bedroom door, slid open the window, and was out in the garage before he wondered if they'd come to look for him. He hadn't closed the window. He didn't know how closely they'd look.

A shiver of ice went up Michael's back as he heard his mother scream in confusion and pain.

"Sherrie? Ross? You let go of me this instant, Leomund! Don't touch me!" After that it was just screaming, until somebody clamped a hand over her mouth.

They didn't look for him. There wasn't anywhere for him to go in the garage, but still, nobody came to look. Michael wasn't thinking clearly enough to know that Mr. L's instructions had been pretty simple: look in peoples' houses. He couldn't focus through the terror: they had all the adults who mattered to him, or were in the same hemisphere. Even if his super dad came home, what was he about to do against Mr. L and the drone army?

He finally fell asleep out there, propped up in a painful position that woke him sometime in the dead of night with a crick in his neck. He had no way of knowing how much of the town was already under Mr. L's possession, but he did know one thing: the high school was the right place to take them all. If Michael was a monster, he would make the high school his Mordor. It was big, had an enormous gymnasium or auditorium to hold over a thousand people without any problem. Mr. L could influence everybody he saw, and the gym would be the best place to set up a throne. Outside the gym was an enormous stretch of parking lot for students and teachers. Nobody could get close easily, except through the rest of the school, and his zombies could patrol a few exits easily. Very easily. The high school was definitely Mr. L's base of operations, and not just because he knew the school like the back of his hand.

"It makes sense," Michael told himself. Talking to himself didn't help kill the feeling of emptiness, but he had to hear *something*.

Now his house was pitch black. Only it was worse than that. It was *empty*. There was something spooky about his house when there wasn't anybody in it. Even when he was upstairs, or in his room with the door closed, there was a presence about the house, those random sounds

you heard someone make in your house. And even if his mother was sitting down doing some quiet knitting or basket weaving or something stupid, he still felt her there.

Not so now. His house felt like a tomb. His neighborhood felt that way. There were no cars rolling by, casting funky moving shadows on the living room. Nobody jogging by and disturbing the neighborhood bad dogs. Nobody watering their grass, and definitely nobody watching the news.

Knowing why and where everybody was didn't help. It still felt really wrong. Really spooky.

Michael crept inside and called Charlotte's house. There was no answer, either because Mrs. Sulszko and the kids were hiding or because they'd joined Mr. L's zombie army. Charlotte wasn't there, or she'd be answering. He didn't bother to leave a message. His hands were shaking as he hung up.

Police sirens rang out in the distance, and a few gunshots sounded like weak fireworks. There was a glow over to the south, which Michael discovered was a fire when the blaring yell of the fire trucks sounded. He wondered if somebody had been smoking when they were taken, or if they just left the oven on.

"The oven!" he shouted, and ran to turn it off. He pulled it open and immediately fell back as a choking bunch of black smoke rolled out. The smoke alarm started to squeal while he hacked and coughed the rancid stench of blackened casserole out of his lungs. Terror siezed him. If they heard it, they would come, and they would find him. He couldn't be found, it wasn't possible. After a while he crawled to the broom closet, yanked out something long enough to do the job, and smashed the smoke alarm until the plastic housing was destined for the recycle bin. Finally, he dragged a chair to the center of the kitchen and, still retching and coughing, yanked the battery free. Silence took over.

This was the worst he had ever felt in his life. With his eyes stinging, his throat and nose raw and feeling scratched all the way down to his stomach, and the lost feeling of hopelessness overwhelming him. Back to the kitchen wall, he let the tears come. He coughed and cried at the same time. There was no one to watch him. No jerks like Trent or Davey Rightman, nobody he wanted to impress like Charlotte or Grandpa or Lily, no one he should be strong for, like his mom. There was nobody. He might as well be on another planet.

With no plan, no hope, and nowhere safe to go, Michael felt like a hollow husk. He felt like he'd tried, he'd done all he could, and it still wasn't good enough. Only now there was no teacher he could ask for an extension. He couldn't appeal to his mother to help him finish on time. He had failed before he even knew who the real bad guy was.

At least he felt there was nothing worse than this.

Chapter 17 - To The Mac

It was another few hours before Michael's stomach began to remind him that this situation wasn't the end of the world. He had to eat, but the kitchen was a black, horrid smelling mess. For a few minutes he was terrified of his mother coming back and finding it like this, and when he finally remembered she wasn't coming back, he felt even worse. He couldn't remain in the kitchen like this, not even to use the microwave on his favorite thing in the whole world: canned ravioli in meat sauce. Still, the thought of ravioli made his stomach threaten to mutiny.

At first, he was scared even to set foot out of his own door, not knowing if Mr. L had sentries set up to catch stragglers who were just walking around. After a few backyards and careful looks, he determined that the coast was clear. He went back and got his bike. Once he decided that nobody was going to be around town, he had pretty free reign over the streets. He would have anyway, since dawn was on the approach, but he didn't see a soul. Even the restaurants wouldn't have anybody in them. He hopped on his bike and rode slowly through back streets until he came to the local McDonald's. Even at this hour, whatever hour that was, it was still shining in all its fluorescent glory. He checked for any roving bands of neighborhood zombies and darted inside.

It was the inside of McDonald's that did it. It didn't matter if it was dark or not, people should have been inside, cooking up something unhealthy to serve to whoever was there. Once his father was home for several weeks, and he made it a point to take Michael out fishing. Well, aside from breaking his dad's favorite fly rod and getting a stern talking to, the only thing they did that was interesting at all was go to 'the Mac' as his dad called it, at five in the morning. They were just getting going, but still. At five and change in the morning, somebody else had already set up, had ordered, eaten, and now was on at least his second coffee. That was nothing compared to the bustle of employees, already abusing the frozen stuff they called food.

An empty, derelict Mac was the spookiest thing he had ever seen in his life. It was worse than those apocalypse movies where the whole world's been destroyed. You know, at least, that

everything's broken down or blown up, or both. This place was fully intact, all lit up, and just as lonely as his house.

Michael scuttled around through the place like a crab, sideways, and always checking over his shoulder. He didn't want to just go behind the counter. It wasn't right. You couldn't just...

...wait a second. He could just. This wasn't just any normal situation. This was life or death. If he absolutely had to make his own Big Mac and fry up his own Mcpotato wedges, well then that's what he would darned well do. And he could leave some money on the counter.

He inched his way into alien territory behind the counter. This place was filled with stuff, rather than the simple tables-and-chairs setup of the dining area. Every little space had some kind of compartment for a million different sizes of bags, straws, a box of ketchup packets and little individual thingies of salt or pepper. Here there were those ordering computers, food slider things, packs of happy meal boxes (not put together yet, still lying flat and stacked up neatly). There were things he had no words for too, like boxes with hoses coming out, racks of chemicals, and sets of drawers full of burger making materials.

"Hold it together Michael," he murmured to himself. "It's just the Mac. No reason to get scared of lettuce and special sauce."

And most importantly, he was surrounded by stainless steel boxes. These had to be all the freezers. He opened one, and saw the Mcpotato wedges in brown paper bags. See, nothing to it. He went to the large walk-in one and jerked open the shining metal handle.

And fell back, screaming.

A figure rushed at him, half-frozen, also screaming and flashing a knife. Michael scrambled away on his butt, then turned and sprinted out. He didn't look back, but jumped out of the place, hopped on his bike and raced away.

When he was half a block gone, he turned and gave the place another look. A minute later, a pack of shuffling townsfolk walked into the Mac. Soon enough, Michael's attacker was being hauled out the front doors, kicking and screaming. He kept saying 'no, no!' over and over again. One of the people was clutching her bloodied arm. The group stopped, and the woman started to walk toward the town hospital. Or possibly toward the DMV, or a little strip mall. But most likely the hospital.

Both of these things should have been important. Michael knew that. Still, he was too hungry to stop and try to figure out what was worth knowing there, or how it mattered. First, home, then food, then figure out next steps.

There was a corner store, where he attacked the food before he had a chance to check the back rooms. He had a bag of chips and half a loaf of bread in his stomach before he realized he was dunking it in hummus. Yuck.

It was still hours before dawn on a cold winter night, Michael hadn't actually slept for about twenty-four hours, and he was terrified to be seen in the streets. He finally made it home though the backyards of people who'd been stolen out of their homes and collapsed on his bed. He was asleep before he closed his eyes.

"I didn't know you had flowery bedsheets," a quiet voice said next to him.

Michael couldn't help it, he screamed like a girl. In an instant he went from lying on the bed to doing the butt shuffle until his back was to the wall.

Charlotte just smiled.

"I've never been in your room before," she said.

"This..." he stammered. "What...I...huh?"

"Sun's coming up."

Yes, the sun was coming up. Michael could see her, a vague outline in the darkness, with her eyes twinkling. They headed to the kitchen, where she helped herself to some bread with spinach dip. It reminded him of the hummus dip he'd devoured a few hours before. There was a great big splotch of black all over the ceiling, like it had been smooched by a giant smoker, but all the color was slowly coming into the world.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Surviving," she said, as if this was nothing much, really. "I got my mom and the twins in a car and out of town for a few days. I have no idea where they're off to, and they're not happy that I stayed behind, but there it is. It's a good job they did, too."

She told him about a few other cars that had tried to get out a bit later, only to be fried to nothing by one of the zombie Actives. Mr. L had gotten to all the major ways out of town, and there were enough fliers that he could monitor all the little ways out of town too. Unless you

were going on foot with a backpack full of camping gear, you weren't getting out. And since it was winter, you'd have a rough go of it.

Michael explained how he had tried to get his mother to listen to him, but she wouldn't.

"I went straight home," Charlotte said. "I had to."

Michael thought about how he'd sat under cover and watched the whole town get hypnotized. He could have been back at home, saving his mother. A blast of regret dropped into his rumbling stomach. What a jerk he'd been, and how stupid too! If only he had thought a few minutes, his mother could be safe. Maybe he could have gotten Grandpa too. He was too busy watching and not acting.

It was just like with Trent. Instead of doing something, he'd just stood there like an idiot. It was so hard to do something when the whole world was spinning out of control. You didn't even know really what was happening, much less what to do.

"I'm sorry about your mom and your grandfather," Charlotte said.

"Yeah."

"Not your fault though," she told him.

"How you figure that?"

She grinned. "You really think it's your job to protect your mom and grandfather? It's their job to protect you, silly. You haven't signed up for the instant adult course. You're not even supposed to have a job yet."

"Well yeah, but I do."

"That doesn't make you responsible for saving peoples' lives, Michael. I know you took on that girl when she started pulling apart the school, and you took on Trent, but that wasn't your job either time. You were very brave, but it wasn't like someone put a sword on your shoulder and said 'hey bucko, whenever something goes wrong, you've gotta fix it.'"

"If I didn't, what would've happened?" he asked. "Some other person would get hurt. Maybe killed."

"Could be, but you don't know. You put yourself in that position anyway. So you change the outcome. After you're there, the only thing that can happen is *you* get hurt. Maybe killed."

He sighed. He just wanted his mother. He wanted his father, for what good that would do.

"Well," she said. "Looks like we're it."

Yep. Even if they searched the town, and even if they found other stragglers who were ready to take on Mr. L, it wouldn't help. He had so many Actives right now that any sort of assault would be suicide. You couldn't attack a force like that. Look how well all the Actives had done so far.

"We need to find out how heavily they're fortified in the gym," he said.

"What makes you think Mr. L's in the gym?"

"It makes sense," he said. "If I was an evil mastermind and I wanted to see everything, that would be the place I'd pick."

"Huh," she said. It wasn't a question.

"What?"

"Well, I did some scouting around, and they were all going to the high school. You're right, he's set up his base in the gym."

"I knew it!" he said. That faint smile was still drifting over her face. "What else did you find out?"

Mr. L had surrounded himself with a bodyguard of Actives. Not just the plain old 'I can change radio waves into light waves' sort of Actives, but the sort who hurled around fire, who could paralyze you with a touch, or Mr. Springfield. All the most powerful, dangerous Actives you could find. Which meant that, not only did he have them controlled telepathically, he also had a buffet of different abilities to hijack.

"Okay, but they don't want to work for Mr. L," Charlotte said, "They're definitely not gnarly dudes normally."

"Not gnarly dudes," he agreed. "But it doesn't matter. He's messed them up so bad that they'll probably try to protect him even if we take him out."

She shuddered.

"I know," he said. "I don't want to kill anybody." He was a thirteen year old boy for pete's sake. He couldn't just kill somebody. He could hardly even fight a kid who was two years older than he was.

"If we knock him unconscious, it'll give his powers back to Terrence," she said.

"Do you think Mr. Jackson could be that quick?"

"Well, he doesn't really have to be," she told him. "If we cover his eyes, you know, he won't be able to use his power."

Which excluded the fact that the zombies would most likely still be under orders to attack anyone who went after Mr. L. They would still try to protect him.

“So all we have to do is get through ten thousand people, into a heavily guarded gym, past the most powerful people in town, attack a guy who can control anybody's mind, and then put a blindfold on him while we're being attacked by gravity girl or fire guy. Then we hope that Mr. Jackson can put everybody back together again before Mr. L gets the blindfold off.”

“Or we tie up his hands,” Charlotte said.

“This is impossible,” he said.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “If only you were really psychic like Mr. L thinks you are. Then everybody would listen to you. You could, you know, break down their funky mind control issues.”

“If wishes were fishes...” he mumbled.

An idea was slowly pushing out of the dense soil of his stupid brain, and slowly spreading out its leaves. It needed more sun.

“Wait a second,” he said.

“You've got something.”

“Yeah, wait...I saw something. My grandfather was holding out against Mr. L for a long time. I mean, he still got him in the end, but the younger people just snapped, like, instantly. And then, wait, and then, one of them got hurt at McDonald's, and she started walking to the hospital.”

He started to explain, slowly at first. Then, as the sunlight reached his idea, Charlotte started adding water. The idea sprouted lightning fast, and before long had blossomed into a flower. An ugly, dangerous flower sure, but a flower nonetheless.

“You think it'll work?” he asked her.

She smiled. “Well let's see...your grandfather and the town forefathers are in some nasty juju, and all the Actives in town too. Probably the keepers of the Keys are down there in the basement of the library turning all of their little sticks from green to red. So I'd say our plan's got a better chance than anything else.”

“That's just because there is nothing else,” he said.

“Well yeah,” she grinned.

But, since Charlotte was a positive force of nature, and because there really wasn't any other plan in town, they were going to go ahead anyway. At this point, dying wasn't the worst thing that could happen to them.

Chapter 18 - The In Crowd

It was fully light by the time they pedaled all the way to the hospital. Charlotte didn't have a bike of her own, so she borrowed Michael's, and he used his dad's. It was an uncomfortable ride, and not because of the cold or the terror of being found and abducted by Mr. L's force of evil. Mostly it was that he couldn't get his butt up on the seat, and he couldn't settle the cross bar on his crotch without severe pain. He had to remind himself over the several mile journey, that Charlotte was more comfortable on his bike, and she was the linchpin to the whole plan. Eventually they stopped as BH Obama Hospital appeared in the distance.

"Alright," he said. They pulled over the bikes and stashed them in someone's backyard. Michael made a mental note in case of sudden escape: maroon house.

"Okay. So far so good. Now we just find an opening in the fence, sneak over this completely open ground for like half a mile, over the enormous parking lot, and into the emergency room."

"Where there are most likely going to be armed security guards."

"Yeah, that."

"Easy as pie," she grinned.

"You need to stop being relentlessly cheerful. The glare is blinding me."

Her dial-a-smile went up another few notches. Michael told himself that, after this was all over he was going to ask her out, like on a date. If he saved his mom's life, she would definitely probably take he and Charlotte to the movies. Then he shook his head and got all that soppy stuff out. If this went the way he thought it would, he would probably be burnt to a crisp, cut into a thousand pieces, shot, stabbed, stung with poison barbs, and maybe even eaten. There were a couple of Actives who turned pretty beastly when they put their abilities on. He'd seen it on the Discovery Channel once upon a time.

But the sneak over to the hospital proved uneventful. They approached the emergency room without any trouble, waited for the sliding door, and went inside.

"You're sure you can do this?" Michael asked her.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed. It did not help his distracting date fantasy at all.

“All right then. If this doesn't work...”

“It's going to work.”

“But if it doesn't, because any number of things could go wrong and we could be dead in a few minutes.”

“Always the optimist,” she chuckled.

“Anyway if it doesn't work, it was, I mean, you...I like you.” A fluttery burning sensation went up his chest. It was always something that had been there, whenever she was around. Only now it was a lot more...distracting.

“I like you too,” she said.

“Like a lot!” he blurted out. He continued to burn, and he realized his ears and cheeks were probably cherry red.

She winked at him. “You're a sweetheart Michael.” Then she faced forward, and Charlotte was gone. In her place stood Archibald Lansing, town terror, in all his five feet eight of bald, bespectacled, smirking glory. Complete with beer gut.

“Well if it isn't the infamous Michael Washington,” Mr. L said, and smiled his lopsided smile.

“You do that way too well,” Michael muttered.

“Now get in there so my minions can tear you limb from limb.”

“Very funny.”

But a dozen people had spotted them by now, and were all making their way out. Every single one of them had that slightly dazed, how-did-I-get-here look about them, like they'd just woken up from a particularly bad dream and couldn't figure out how they weren't in their beds.

As one, they moaned. Michael was sorely tempted to do the same. Their moans were all one, all at the same time, and all very zombie. Michael's was pure horror.

The emergency room looked untouched, for the most part. If it was a real zombie movie, this place would be full of blood and screaming. This hospital was sterile, smelling sharply of antiseptic. None of the soft, welcoming colors were coated in blood. It was just another peaceful day in Mr. L-town. In the middle of the emergency room reception area were a group of five doctors, all staring around at the others just like Michael was. Michael figured Mr. L couldn't mess with their minds in case of an emergency.

“It’s him,” twenty people said all at once. “The Michael.”

“Oh that is creepy. Creepy creepy,” he muttered.

“I have him,” Charlotte said from his side, only it was Mr. L’s voice speaking the words.

“The Michael must die,” they said. As one, they began to shuffle forward. Some of the older zombies weren’t quick about it. In fact, they weren’t quick about anything. The younger people darted from their positions, people his mom’s age jerked forward, and the older people practically dragged their bodies toward him. They seemed more like zombies every second, and here was Michael just calmly standing in front of them.

“Not just yet,” Mr. L replied.

Several of them paused and cocked their heads.

“The Michael must die,” they repeated.

“You listen to me, isn’t that right?” Mr. L said, sneering. “That’s your job, so listen to me now. The Michael isn’t ready to die yet.”

Several people jerked their heads to the side, like they were trying to shake loose some of their orders. Some of the younger people, high schoolers and anyone under maybe twenty five, started pulling their hair. Michael saw blood starting to flow from noses. Whatever Mr. L had done to them, it had been quick and dirty. Their minds were really starting to lose it in the face of these strange orders.

“We can kill him later, all right?” Mr. L shouted. “No problem killing him, just not right now.”

That seemed to settle them down. Michael shuddered, and not with the cold.

“First we have a problem,” Mr. L told them. “Listen carefully.”

It was an hour’s march with all these people. Michael had only been to the high school a few times in his life. One of those was when his father took him to a state championship basketball game, and he’d been five. The gym, like everything else at the time, had been completely titanic. He had trouble understanding how they could make walls or a ceiling that encapsulated the entire universe. The players on the court had seemed like giants. Even the basketball was enormous.

It had shrunk in the last eight years, but not much. The high school was still at least twice as big as LADCEMS, and maybe bigger. He couldn’t see all of it. What he could see was the gymnasium and pool, both huge brick structures reaching toward the sky, both with huge

‘Fighting Eagles!’ banners. Not far off was the Olympic-sized running track with dual sets of bleachers.

“Remember!” Mr. L shouted from beside Michael, “Your lives are at stake here. The imposter wants to destroy all of you, he wants to kill you and take your children and grandchildren. He wants to break down every home, every business in your town. He is a nasty liar, and he has no taste in music.”

Something in Charlotte’s words seemed to ring with the assembled wounded, and most especially the elders. Before, they’d fallen behind, they’d walked stiffly and jerkily. Now they seemed to wake up. It was the first time Michael saw something like life in their eyes, and he understood something: Mr. L hadn’t just chosen the high school for the size, for the ability to see everyone under his command easily.

He’d also come for the new Actives, the young ones who were easiest to control.

“Are you ready for this?” Charlotte’s voice whispered.

“Not really,” he said. He shifted the backpack in his hands, and tried not to think about what was inside. Clouds had started their lumbering move in while he and Charlotte were in the hospital, and now the first thick flakes drifted down.

“It’s already snowing outside.”

“Time to make it snow inside,” he said.

“Alright, let’s do it,” she said.

The gym had several entrances, one of which came in from the locker room and another two from hallways. The locker room was probably the sneakiest way in, but he had no idea how to get there. He went the long way around the pool, slipped a mask out of his backpack, and put it on. Then he went into the school. Far off already, he heard Charlotte’s Mr. L battle cry.

There was a patrol just coming out of the entrance, but they ignored Michael. He forced himself to calmly walk into the school, and observed the comings and goings of the zombies through the hall. There weren’t many. He wanted to linger. Every bit of his body and mind screamed at him to stop, not to go through with this. But Charlotte...

Another part of him calmly replied that Charlotte, while wonderful, was completely nuts. She believed that their little group from the hospital was going to last against Mr. L’s thousand or two thousand or whatever, and give him the time he needed.

The original part of Michael, the terrified and wide-eyed part argued that Charlotte was wonderful, and she was sticking her neck out for him. His mother was in this gym, and Grandpa too. As soon as his dad got home from wherever in the world he was, he'd be in the gym too.

He opened the door, slipped inside, and immediately wished he hadn't.

The gym wasn't just as big as it had been before, it was bigger. He'd never been down on the floor with a few hundred pairs of eyes on him. He swallowed.

All the bleachers were pulled out, and every single seat was full. The floor was similarly full. Down there, two Mr. L's were shouting at one another, pointing. People were staring at them, unsure of what to do.

"That man is clearly an imposter!" they both screamed at the same time.

Michael looked up, far above him. There was a sort of balcony, a smaller court with netting, where more bleachers were pulled out, and above that, gleaming metal nozzles stared down over everybody, like silent snakes just waiting to uncoil from the pipelines overhead and snap up everybody watching the spectacle below.

But the bleachers were completely full. There was no way he could get up there, unless...

"Kill that imposter, right now!" Mr. L shouted. Michael's stomach dropped into his pants, and he started up the stairs to the upper level. When he got there, he flattened himself to the wall and made his way under the bleachers. Now he was confronted by a jungle of black metal struts reaching up fifteen, twenty feet in the air. He began climbing.

He shut his ears to whatever was happening below, and kept repeating to himself. It was an awkward climb. These metal bars were flat, not sharp, but still not made for climbing. He slipped several times and banged his arms against them, but bit his tongue against crying out. Zombies did not cry out.

"They don't recognize me," he whispered. "They don't recognize me. They don't...and I'm definitely not looking down."

He reached the top and started the delicate process of worming his way back above the bleachers. If he thought the climb had been hard, he was wrong. Banging his body parts was a leisurely stroll through the neighborhood compared with hanging twenty feet in the air, trying to loop his leg over something all the while avoiding kicking zombie watchers in the stands.

By the time he pulled himself up, the shouting match was over. He risked a look down, and found Actives moving through the crowd, some huge, some glowing, some hissing, but all creating instant pathways.

They were looking for him.

He checked above his head. He could reach the stupid nozzles, but it would mean exposing his position. Oh well. Even a super fast Active couldn't get up here instantly, they'd have to push a couple hundred people out of the way.

But no reason to do it just yet. He snapped the trigger on the camping lighter and adjusted the flame to its highest. He didn't know the foot high flame trick that smokers did with their lighters, this two incher would have to do. Then he bound the whole thing in wire, so he had perma-fire.

Then he stood up.

"There he is!" someone shouted. It might not have been Mr. L. Right, and Michael might be a super-telepathic Active inside, just bursting at the seams.

Life wasn't fair. If it was any consolation, he was surrounded by the oldest people in town. This was really kind of cruel, when you thought about it. What kind of monster made old ladies with walkers climb up to the nosebleed section on arthritic knees and bad hips?

Michael got more of the wire, flipped the camping lighter upside down, and started winding it around the only nozzle within reach. It was instantly hot, like blistering hot, above the lighter and he nearly dropped the whole thing before it was fixed on the fire suppression nozzle. He'd just finished with it when a sea of hands came out to snap him up off his feet.

Mr. L smelled like old people. In actuality, he knew now it was the smell of coffee that had been burned and saturated and drip-dropped into coffee pots for generations. Still, coffee or not, he smelled awful, and he was almost close enough to bite.

"There he is, ladies and gentlemen, the cause of all our problems here today!" Mr. L shouted.

"I'm not even going to tell you how really stupid you are, kid," Terrance Jackson said from not far off. He looked halfway to becoming a duct tape mummy in his wheelchair. "Someone says get out, so you sneak *in*. He sneaks in!" He started laughing, then grimaced and cried out.

"Quiet, peanut gallery."

“Where’s Charlotte?” Michael demanded. He had no idea where the bravery was coming from, since his body felt like one big sweaty block of ice.

“Touching,” Mr. L said, basting him with coffee breath. “I think you should be more worried about yourself.”

A sudden burst of inspiration hit him. “You told my grandfather to substitute in the note from Charlotte.”

Mr. L just smiled. “I knew you were going to cause me trouble, kid, just as soon as that lightning kid failed to kill you. But like I said, you shouldn't be worried about any of that.”

“Why? Because you’re going to talk at me for another twenty minutes, and I’m going to disappear just like last time?”

Cold rage glinted in Mr. L’s eyes. A bright hot spear of pain erupted somewhere in the back of Michael’s skull.

“Pain’s the first thing you learn when you steal Mr. Jackson’s power,” Mr. L said. “It’s the only trick that works on you telepaths.”

He tried not to scream out, and failed.

“Now you’re going to die, but you know what, I want you to watch this first. Bring her over here!”

Michael’s chin was gripped painfully, and he was lifted up by his head until he could see his mother. She looked like she was paying for all of Michael’s mistakes while he’d been gone.

“Don’t,” Michael said.

“Or what?” Mr. L suddenly screamed. “Who’s going to ride in here and stop me? Your dad going to suddenly come bursting through the door with the Alphas? How long you think they’ve got before I have all of them? They don’t even know what’s going on here. They’re too busy fixing the problems of the baselines, Michael, to care about what happens to their own sons and daughters. Look how easily this place fell apart. Look how many of us it took to blow down this house of straw.”

He stretched out his hand toward Michael’s mother, and Susanna shrieked. Michael had never heard her make a sound like that. It was something out of a horror movie, only real and five feet away. It hurt his ears, but more than that it hurt his guts.

“Stop it!” he screamed.

“No,” Mr. L said, and to Michael’s amazement, the scream got worse. “You don’t make a fool of me and then strut around gloating about it.”

Michael looked up at the blackened nozzle, high up above the heads of the town’s old folk.

“Actually,” Michael said, “I do.” As Mr. L followed Michael’s gaze up to the ceiling, Michael pulled a three by five note card from his pocket and showed it to Mr. Jackson, just out of sight of the furious Mr. L. His face registered confusion, and then shock moments before the whole place went periwinkle.

Chapter 19 - A Periwinkle World

Michael had been through so many fire drills in his young life that he could probably stop, drop, roll, and then head out of school even in his sleep. Fire was nothing to play with, this he knew. He believed it. Every single story he read on his e-reader had the bad guys burning something down, or burning the building the good guys were in. And authors, he knew, did not lie.

He wondered if that made him a bad guy. One second the gym was just an HQ for Mr. L's Omega Syndicate invasion force, the next it was a purple-tinted winter wonderland. Periwinkle foam started to cover everything, shooting down from dozens of the metal nozzles in the ceiling. Everybody was certainly surprised, and nobody more than Archibald Lansing, arch-villain. Before anybody moved, the periwinkle foam was ankle deep and rising.

Michael wanted to be finished with the whole thing. He was tired of being frightened out of his mind, he was tired of people holding him, and most of all, he was tired of being in pain. His dad's bike hadn't been nice to his legs. Those holding him weren't at all gentle about gripping his arms. But there was still a lot to do.

Like, first, he had to stomp on these two peoples' feet. He didn't know them, and felt bad about it. They were only following orders, and now they were going to get in trouble.

Both of them squawked out, one after another, but only one of them let go of his arm. The other held on even tighter, and started shaking him. He was about to add whiplash to the list of offenses in this whole thing. That and his plan failing before step three.

Michael had learned, somewhere in one of his books (this might have been one of the Artemis Fowl books, but perhaps not) that a simple plan was most often the best. You get too complicated, with too many steps, and the thing started looking like an NFL playbook, and that's when you were in real trouble. When too many X's and O's started blocking with little arrows, you were doomed. He'd thought that, with only a couple of real important steps, this would work. There hadn't been enough time or calories in his system to think up a Plan B, or even pay attention to what would happen if something went really wrong. Well it had.

Mr. L was roaring in rage. At least, he was roaring for a few seconds before he took a step towards Michael and nearly did a flip, slipping on the fire suppressing foam. He went down heavily and was lost in a sea of pastel purple.

“Trent!” Michael shouted. “Hey Trent, where are you buddy?”

“Washington?” someone in the crowd said. It was Davey Rightman, sounding like he’d slept for about two hours and was just woken up with a bucket of water.

“Davey, get Trent’s fat, useless, ugly keister out here to fight me. I want my four hundred sixty dollars back, with interest!” Compound interest was currently confusing him in math, but he understood the basic concept of it.

“Washington!” came a roar. This wasn’t Mr. L either. Trent appeared, pushing and shoving people aside. Sparks leapt from his fingertips. The foam was past knee deep, and people were slipping and sliding all over the place, bringing each other down, shouting, purple-covered human dominoes.

Michael was really sorry to do this, but...

“Come on Sparky!” he yelled, then dove aside.

It was just in time. He didn’t get far with the man pulling on his arm, but got far enough not to get smashed with a lightning bolt straight from Trent’s hand. Instead, he got some volts anyway, even as he hit his chin on the floor and bit his tongue.

Michael had a pretty good memory when it came to interesting stuff. He could tell anybody who was interested all the major events that happened in any of his favorite books, for instance. He could also recount a lot of the major wars of the first twenty centuries, about when they were, who was fighting, and who the winners were.

Most people, he knew, just saw lines on maps. Most people also just saw metal nozzles sticking out of the ceiling, if they saw anything at all. They didn’t remember when the fire department guys came in with their axes and Jaws of Life and fire hoses, and set a sample house on fire just outside LADCEMS, then explained all about the properties of the chemical foam fire suppression system used throughout the school system. It was the next fact that most forgot: in addition to being the newest and latest in fire suppression technology, the foam was solidified with other chemicals and used in electrical cables, because it conducted electricity extremely well.

The confused screams of over two thousand people rang out as they were instantly electrocuted. It wasn't long, and it wasn't extremely powerful, but even through the pain Michael was worried about Grandpa's 'ticker', and the tickers of all the other old folks who might have caught some of the bolt.

It worked. It only took getting struck by lightning, but it worked.

Michael jumped to his feet, and instantly wished he hadn't. He was pain all over. Somewhere in the mass of purplish foam pool was Mr. L, and somewhere else was Mr. Jackson. Michael couldn't be sure that Mr. Jackson had seen the card, and he couldn't be sure that Mr. L lost the telepathy power. The fire department had said something about just how many gallons of gel were pumped out of the nozzles, and they might have mentioned how much foam that instantly changed into, but he was shaky on his math and didn't know how long the foam would last.

He wanted to shout to everybody, to get out, but everyone was moaning and groaning. With any luck, the doctors from BH Obama would stroll in at the sound of screaming and start getting everybody out of there. With even more luck, people would be shocked out of whatever stupor Mr. L had put them in, but Michael wasn't going to count on luck starting now. He had to find Mr. Jackson and put an end to this.

Moving through the gym now was like trying to swim across Niagara Falls. Everywhere someone wasn't lying on the ground waiting to be tripped over, there was someone's foot to step on instead. Now the zombie shoes were on the other feet, as Michael shuffled like a blind man toward the place where Mr. Jackson had been.

Michael heard a door creak open, and stared over the chest deep foam at Mr. L's smirking, disappearing face. He had to get Mr. L, had to put him down, had to blindfold him right after knocking him out. There was no other option. That's how the plan had ended in the first place, and that's just how it was going down.

"Mr. Jackson?" he called. "Mr. Jackson!"

"You are an idiot, Washington," came the groaning reply.

"Just stay down, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll just drown in your...your plan, shall I? The day I follow the orders of a seventh grade student is the day I wake up and heaven's kicked me out for bad behavior."

"Don't let him see you!" Michael shouted, as he ran out the door.

Mr. Jackson was in the midst of saying something sarcastic when Michael hit the door at full speed and sprinted out of the school. The cold smacked into him like one of Trent's lightning bolts. He hadn't realized that the foam had started to soak into his clothes. The wind cut into him like his jacket and pants were made of tissue paper. His breath went out of him in a steamy rush. The pain of the bolt of lightning returned, and he gasped out loud with the sudden agony in his legs from all that bike riding. And jumping recklessly in the library. Oh, and the rest of him: ow.

Mr. L wasn't far off. He had several sets of wireless door openers and keys, and was randomly unlocking doors, laughing quietly to himself.

"You aren't getting out of here!" he tried to shout. Wheezed actually. Hey, it was the best he could do. He slipped on the fresh snow, wrenched himself trying to stay upright, and steadied himself.

"A kid," Mr. L was saying, in between his own personal laughter. "A snot-nosed little twerp. Unbelievable."

Finally one of the cars nearby blinked its lights and bleeped, and Mr. L started to make a beeline for it. Michael drew himself up.

"Stop right there!" he barked. To his surprise, Mr. L did just that. Maybe he was psychic.

"You're like a festering boil!" Mr. L said. "Go away kid."

Michael didn't even know what that was, but resolved to look it up on his e-reader after this was over. Instead of saying something clever, he settled for, "No," then: "Where's Charlotte?"

"The Mr. L wannabe? Oh, I killed her. Oh, Oh, but don't worry, she didn't scream. Much."

If Michael could have developed his super power right then and there, he would have killed Mr. L with his laser eyes. He'd never really wondered what a super hot, exploding head would look like before, but he was willing to try right now, just in case it happened for real.

"My work here's done," Mr. L told him.

"What are you talking about? Trent just electrocuted everybody. Half are unconscious and the other half are rolling around in pain. Plus you don't have Mr. Jackson's power anymore."

Mr. L laughed. "So what? You think I need it now?"

"You can't tell the Actives what to do."

“Sure I can,” Mr. L said. “They’re programmed, understand. You think you won this? You better get yourself some seriously reinforced body armor, kid. I wasn’t sitting on my hands while you and your girlfriend made up your little plan. I just planted about five hundred time bombs in peoples’ heads.”

Michael had nothing to say to that. He just stared, then glanced back at the gym as if it was going to start exploding any second. Mr. L chuckled again.

“You’re lying,” Michael said.

“Uh, right, yeah, lying, you got me. Hey listen,” Mr. L said, that lopsided grin appearing. “I got to admit, I made a mistake with you. I tried killing you off. I should’ve offered you a job. That last synergist told me you got something in you, kid. She said you could really be the big one. Of course your mom didn’t want to hear that.”

What was he talking about? Michael didn’t bother trying to figure it out. Lansing was only trying to distract him from doing what he needed to do: stop this overweight lunatic from getting away.

“So I tell you what. You get in the car, the whole gym full of purple foam thing: forgotten. The electrocution thing: forgiven. You come to Omega, we treat you right, you get to be a king among kings. You can have your own island. A nice island, where you can have all the little girlies you like, feeding you tropical fruits and massaging your feet and whatever it is you twelve year old kids like doing.”

“I’m thirteen!” he snarled.

Mr. L looked surprised, and raised his hands. “Right, of course. Thirteen. Huge difference. But listen, I haven’t got much time, need to be away. Want to come along? I can only promise riches beyond your imaginings, all the time in the world to do whatever it is you like, pure pleasure, that sort of thing. Eh? Going, going...”

“Gone,” Michael said savagely.

“Oh!” Mr. L said, clutching at his heart. “You wound me, Michael. Anyway, that’ll be it. See ya. Good luck in Bombville, and send my love to your mom and gramps. If they survive.”

With that, he started up the car, drove out of the parking lot, and turned the corner. Michael felt a crushing load of despair shoot through his entire body, helped along by a generous amount of freezing cold and the pain.

Michael howled in frustration, and slammed his fist down on the snowy car in front of him. Mr. L was going to get away. He was going to drive into the sunset. What was Michael going to get out of this? A fresh headache, probably some burn treatment, a bit tongue, a twisted ankle from the library, and the searing anger of watching the car-

Watching the car drive straight into a tornado.

Chapter 20 - Flight of the Alphas

His dad was home. The elder Michael Washington, aka Stone to the rest of the world, stood in the center of the street as a concrete golem. Every bit of his enormous body was asphalt black, including (Michael knew this from watching on TV) his hair and eyes. A yellow stripe ran up the center of his body. His hands seemed even bigger than they normally did, big enough to palm a compact car at least.

That wasn't even the most amazing part. Sure, seeing Stone in action and knowing it was his dad was super awesome, but the rest of the Alphas were there as well. Around Stone, some up in the air, some standing around the car, were Ginger, McKorsky, Kravens, Rajasthan, and, Michael assumed, somewhere out there was Shadwell, invisible.

Right about now, on TV at least, Stone would say something like 'time to take out the trash' or 'about time we cleaned house', and they would absolutely smash the drug cartels in Mexico or the opium lords or the arms dealers wherever they were that month.

Then, generally, McKorsky would roll in some fog or a hurricane or some tornadoes or something, and the coverage would get really confusing. You'd see flashes of fire in the carnage from Ginger. Kravens would be everywhere at once, disarming everybody, dismantling guns as he went. The cameras would have to slow down to super slow-mo just to catch a glimpse of his hands moving, calmly taking the various pieces off at some hundreds of miles per hour. And Rajasthan would be there, just commentating while he disrupted the enemy radios or shut down their satellite feeds. He'd always get into the details of it even though you had no idea what he was talking about. Rajasthan always made the smartest people in the world look like grade-school dropouts.

It was always so well done, so beautiful like they'd done up their makeup for hours and rehearsed all the difficult parts a few times. They said things that sounded rehearsed in those powerful, we-are-the-absolute-law-of-the-earth sorts of voices. It was like watching a comic book happen in real life, except it was usually over in a few minutes.

But television and real life are very different things. Michael wasn't prepared for what happened in real life.

Mr. L shot out of the car like a bullet, while somewhere in the distance Ginger dropped to the earth like a stone. Kravens started running, but Michael realized after a few seconds that he was just running. Not invisible from the super speed. He coasted to a stop and looked about confusedly, but Michael wasn't paying attention. He was staring at Mr. L.

This fat, middle-aged man was doing the unthinkable: fighting the alphas single-handedly. Mr. L was taking all their powers in turn.

Not far away, Shadwell appeared. That was strange enough, in and of itself. Usually you'd just see someone trip and fall down, or their gun suddenly floating in the air but really in Shadwell's hands. On TV, the only time you saw Shadwell was when the fighting was all over and they were doing a press conference.

What was even more surprising was when Shadwell started running toward Stone, only he disappeared. A second later he'd tripped over a car at hyperspeed. Whatever hundreds of miles he was going, nobody would just trip. Instead, he flew through the air, tumbling end over end before he landed on his face. Then he slid about forty feet. Face first.

Then Stone turned into his dad. The concrete vanished and he shrank down to his normal size. He let out a howl of frustration and rage.

"Come out and fight like a man, Omega!" he shouted. "Command, something's wrong. All our abilities keep malfunctioning. They keep switching..." He stopped and listened for a second. From this distance Michael couldn't see the radio going up to his ear, but he knew it was there. He'd seen Stone enough to know.

"I won't do this to you, kid," Mr. L said from a few feet away. "I ain't gonna kill your dad in front of you. I do have to say though, I've been looking forward to this the whole time. I haven't been able to really switch up and give my power a flex. It's faster than I thought it would be."

Michael whirled, but Lansing wasn't there. Or, he was, and he was in the middle of stealing Shadwell's invisibility.

Half a block away, in the middle of the intersection Stone burst into flame. He and his son both jumped back and screamed.

“Relax, relax, he’s not dying,” Mr. L chuckled. “You should see them all, trying to figure out how to use each others’ powers. McKorsky is trying not to turn into a tree, and Ginger’s just turned this snowstorm into a blizzard...but pretty soon it’ll be a flood if she doesn’t get a handle on it quick.”

“Don’t do this,” Michael croaked. This was worse than looking at the smoking ruins in Tallahassee. The Alphas weren’t supposed to be undone by one guy with a beer gut.

“All you have to do is get your power and stop me,” Mr. L whispered. “Or...you know, maybe I will kill you after all.”

He appeared a few feet from Michael, sitting on a big SUV's hood. Kravens saw him, but it was too late. Flame roared around the super normal Kravens. His dad shouted too, but he was too far away to get here in time.

“Aww, not so fast!” Mr. L shouted in delight. “You get to watch your son’s friend get roasted alive.”

He turned back to Michael, and raised a fiery fist.

And a wolf jumped on him.

Clearly Michael had hit his head and this was all some sort of bizarre dream. His subconscious had to be taking a vacation, and left him with some other person’s subconscious. A gray wolf with electric blue eyes was tugging on Mr. L’s forearm, snarling and growling.

And then the flames were off. Mr. L staggered back and produced a very large pistol from somewhere. His left arm might be bleeding, and the white shirt hanging off in rags, but the rest of him looked very much alive.

“Let me up Jackson!” Mr. L screamed. “You know you can’t keep me down. I’ve trained too long for this. I’ve had that ability for too long...I’ve got my own psychic defenses. Now gimme!”

“Michael, get down!” Mr. Jackson? How had he gotten into Michael’s funky Technicolor nightmare? “I can’t keep him for very long. Charlotte—”

The wolf gave another snarl and leapt. Mr. L’s arm, trembling before, jerked up and shot the wolf. He threw back his head and laughed, and then turned the gun on Michael.

“Should’ve taken the job,” he muttered.

Something ripped Michael off his feet and pulled him onto his back. He turned his head to cry out, because the wolf wasn't lying on the pavement a few feet away, Charlotte was, and she was bleeding. She'd been shot, and the realization hit him: Mr. L shot her.

Wait, had he been shot? Michael was already very cold, but now he was shaking.

Mr. L turned back toward Terrence Jackson, face straining and shining with sweat.

“Now...give me...back...that...beautiful...power...Terrence.”

And that was the end of that dream.

Chapter 21- Just Super Enough

“We are gathered here to put these earthly remains to rest,” the priest said, “and bear witness to the departure of the spirit. We gather together, at times like these, to honor memories. Often times we feel that we can only capture glimpses of a person’s life, that they are smoke and we can’t hold on long enough. But the Lord is with us here today, beloved and friends, He who remembers all, past present and future. We have but to ask, and we will be rewarded life everlasting.”

“On days like these we are reminded that the day will come when we, too, will be that smoke slipping through the fingers of our loved ones, yet we will find ourselves in the hallowed halls of our Lord. I say this with every confidence, friends and beloved, we will sit on His comfiest of couches, and we will have all the time we need to watch every second, if we wish, on the Lord’s projection television. And, if we like, there will be plenty of time for reminiscence, for they will be waiting for us with the lights on.”

The priest went on. And on. He was jovial, in his way. He was amusing enough, not funny, no, you couldn't have funny at funerals. But death didn't have to be so heavy. The jokes lightened it up, brought heaven down to earth for a few seconds, enough for everyone to find comfort.

“Buck up,” Grandpa said. “Nothin ever so final as this, and we don't know as it is really the end. Mayhaps you get downloaded into the Big Fella's collective in the sky when you go. Or maybe you get started up again in a new body. Would be nice, you know, tryin' out being a woman.”

Stone, Michael Edward Washington Senior, nodded. Silvery tears glinted and fell from his eyes. It looked like he attempted a smile, but it rumpled painfully and disappeared.

“This ain't the end of the world, Michael,” Grandpa said. “You still got your boy.”

What was he talking about? Michael was only thirteen years old. He wasn't going to be having kids for another ten years at least, and probably never. Michael nodded anyway, and turned away while Kravens's relatives dropped sad white flowers on the polished casket.

He hadn't known Kravens well; hadn't known him hardly at all when you came right down to it. It was the type of thing you didn't realize until you didn't see his face anymore. They'd had the laughs, had the drinks outside Saigon, after trying to salvage something of Gwangzhou, but having drinks wasn't the same as finding out about the three kids Kravens had back in town. Why hadn't he known that? Come to think of it, he couldn't remember Kravens talking about anything except how the world was going bad, and how tiring it was all the time fixing it. This whole super hero business wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Maybe he'd get out of it.

Wait a second, he wasn't even in the super hero business. He was a seventh grade kid, and he didn't have any friends except...

"Charlotte!" he screamed, and woke up thrashing in his hospital bed.

He'd been in a forest of beeping machines and tubes before, but last time he'd been on some serious, can't-lift-arms-and-barely-lift-eyelids sort of medications. That meant this time, when he jerked awake and started moving around, all the things sticking in him pulled back, and did they ever *hurt*. Michael didn't feel bad for the words that came out of his mouth. They seemed like the right way to dull the pain, to spit it out as acid words. Several nurses came fluttering in, exclaiming about that rising number or this falling number.

"Where is she?" he demanded. He was also aware of the bleeding. He was leaking life, and it didn't feel wonderful.

"She's fine," the nurses lied. They had no idea who he was even talking about.

"Where is she, I want to see her!" he spat.

"Okay, alright," she lied again. Behind her, two more nurses were murmuring to each other and filling up a syringe with something. He wasn't quick enough, his body was still too heavy, and they had it injected into the tube in his arm before he could stop them. It wasn't long before medicated sleep snuck up and pounced on him.

He dreamed of Charlotte's mom, of all people, and the twins. He hadn't seen them in ages, since Charlotte had been a prisoner beneath the Marcus Patterson building for so long. Yet now they swam into view like he was climbing out of a tunnel, and when he spoke, he had Charlotte's voice.

"I'm okay mom," he said. Charlotte said.

"Course you are. You're my strongest girl."

"I'm your only girl," she said, and Michael felt her face lift into an easy smile. He also felt the mask over his face.

"I've got a few new 45's for you," her mom said. Michael looked down at the stack of records. "I thought you'd want some doowop and some easy listening."

"That's great mom."

"Coming home?" one of the twins asked. "Charrit coming home?"

Charlotte's mom smiled, but there wasn't any warmth in it. It was a hollow smile, and the way her throat worked up and down, Michael was sure she was on the verge of tears.

"Soon, bud," she rasped. There it was. On cue the tear slipped down her cheek.

"Quit it," Charlotte said.

Her mom just nodded.

Charlotte's mom blurred, and suddenly Michael was staring down at Mr. L. The fat, bald former teacher already looked thinner. And Michael was, well, he was enraged. A feeling he'd never before experienced went all through his body, the pure anger of a man who has carefully laid out the silverware, plates, folded up the napkins into peacock fan shapes, put on low candles and expected a pleasant dinner date, only to have some slob sit down at the table just before the conversation got interesting. Archibald was this slob, he was the man interrupting a scheme that was building up, and this was not at all something you just *got wrong*. This was the rendezvous, the soiree, the gala to end all galas, and when the French made up a word that slithered its way into English, you had better believe it was the perfect word.

"No manners," Michael said coldly. "You're the type of man to be third at a dinner for two, and not even ask to pass the rolls. Am I right? You'd just reach over and grab whatever you like."

It was a day of firsts. Michael had never before dreamed of Mrs. Sulszko, never woken up half boy, half tube. He had also never before seen Mr. L scared.

Now he was. Sweat ran down his face. The little hair he had was frizzy and stuck out to one side. His glasses, gone. This was not the time to be messing with Michael Washington.

"Sir, please, listen," Mr. L said. Where was that smug grin now, Michael thought.

"Oh yes, you think you've done us a grand favor, don't you? You think you've made everything easier for us. You're wrong."

"But, I, I don't-" Mr. L spluttered.

“The Alphas were nothing before. Now they will come back stronger and better prepared than ever. The same for the citizens of their pathetic settlement. There was no shield before. Our agents were confident of a full-scale collapse within a few months, but *only if you had done your job.*”

Mr. L's face contorted in pain, and he began screaming. He was tied to a chair, and he struggled uselessly against it. As Michael watched, several places in his face became like liquid, running over into foreign places. His cheek collapsed, and an ear slid down until it was at the corner of his mouth. There was no talking, just a growing scream that started out impossible to hear. It slowly ran up all the way to MAX, until Mr. L was drawing great gulps of air in between full throated screams.

And then he woke up again.

This time he drifted awake, like the hospital room was coated in a thick layer of fog and he was slowly burning it away. He could hardly open his eyes for all the drugs still circling around in his body. He didn't know what they'd given him, but he couldn't move a muscle. Dragging his eyelids open was more difficult than trying to climb that thirty foot rope in gym class. He hated that rope.

They were whispering to each other, his mom and dad. “Jackson's got his work cut for him then.”

“Between working on just about everybody in town, and getting ready for Alpha training, I'd say so.”

“And working on the shield.”

His dad snorted laughter. “Say what you want, maybe he was lazy and manipulative before, but he won't have enough time to be anymore.”

“We just better make sure someone's watching over his shoulder. I still don't trust him.”

Michael roared with effort, but just managed to pull his eyes open for a second. His mom and dad were sitting in the visitor's chairs a few feet beyond his hospital bed, well away from the cloud of beeping machines.

“I thought maybe...” his dad said. “Maybe this was it. You know, we talk about it sometimes.”

“Oh Michael,” his mom said. Michael couldn't sort through a statement like that, so loaded with feeling he'd have to separate them with a shovel.

“I can't lose you.”

“You're not going to,” she said.

“And you're not going anywhere, right? Because my dad said you told him-”

She sighed. “I just don't know, Michael. This place, it's...it's dangerous. It seems like its more dangerous than safe right now. Maybe it always was. You just can't put these people together in a town like this and expect everybody to cooperate.”

“But...but it's been that way for the last fifteen years.”

“I know, and we had some close calls. But nothing like this. And you know what, Michael? I don't think Archibald was the real deal. I think he was the tip of the iceberg.”

Michael opened his eyes again, and locked on with his mother's.

“Somebody's waking up,” she said.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, bud,” his dad said.

He could only manage a tiny 'mmm', and open his eyes for a fraction of a second. His mom and dad were sitting before him, smiling in some unfamiliar way. It took him a while to realize they were both worried and relieved: happy, mostly. They also looked bone tired.

“You were asleep a while there,” Dad said. “Your mom and I started to get worried you were getting carried away in whatever dream you were having.”

They got him water when he was finally able to ask, and watched him while he drank it.

“You feeling okay sport?” his dad asked.

“I got shot didn't I?” he asked.

“Pretty brave, everything you did. I heard all about it.”

Mr. Terry Pratchett had some interesting things to say about bravery, Michael knew. You could cook up a completely insane plan, like charge a dragon with a blindfold on and one hand tied behind your back. If you survived: brave. You died: crazy, stupid.

“Thanks,” he said anyway.

“You did...” his dad looked away, wiped his face, then turned back. “You did better than I did.”

“Michael,” Susanna said gently. It was her way of saying the whole thing wasn't anybody's fault, and most especially the funeral.

“Somebody died,” Michael said. It was half a question, and his dad nodded.

“We had the funeral just yesterday, while you were still recovering from the surgery.”

Surgery. He'd been out for at least an entire day, on whatever sorts of drugs they used to put you to sleep, for however many hours they needed to cut you open, do some business inside your body, then sew you back up again.

"That super sucks," he said.

"Language," his mother admonished. Still, the grunty chuckle out of his dad was worth seeing.

"How long..." he asked.

"Two days."

"They wouldn't tell me about Charlotte," he said.

"She's going to make it," his mother said, and still managed a look of distaste. Wow, even after all this, after Charlotte had saved his life, she still wasn't going to cut the Sulszko family any slack. He wanted to see her, but knew enough about his mom to keep his mouth shut. When he could walk, he'd walk. Find Charlotte. Ask her what it was like to be a wolf. Try to pretend he hadn't bared his soul to her.

"Well bud," his dad said. "Your mom and I are going to get some rest. Doctor's orders. Somebody hasn't gotten any sleep in the last forty-eight hours, has she?"

"Some things are more important than sleep," his mother said, but a touch of smile hit her face. Soon they struggled to their feet, left him with his e-reader and the TV remote, and shuffled out to get some sleep.

He wanted to bring up the Omega Syndicate, but they hadn't even talked about the Alphas. They hadn't talked about much, except that Michael was awake, Charlotte wasn't headed for the light at the end of the tunnel, and someone on the Alphas didn't make it.

They didn't mention how Stone had been contacted, and how they'd arrived back in town less than twelve hours after the situation got serious. They barely talked about Michael and his mother leaving *forever*. If there was ever a talk to be had and closed up, that was the one.

His dad was playing it very smart. In the coming days, Michael knew, his mom's mood was going to dictate the future of the entire family. They couldn't leave anything up to chance, not when she might cut herself chopping vegetables and then be packed to leave town twenty minutes later. This was the whole reason for the Keys. They were so silly, yet so important, weren't they? If Michael disappeared, his dad might collapse, and what would happen then? An

Active with nothing to live for, no reason, well, they might just start thinking things like Mr. L had.

Mr. L, good old Archibald. The details of the dream snapped into focus. He shuddered when he thought about what had happened to Mr. L's face. He had every reason to believe it had really happened too, and that somewhere out there was a person much scarier than Mr. L, a person with plans in the long term. Plans maybe older than Michael. Probably older. Someone patient and exacting, someone...

...someone who still had agents in town.

Michael had to tell someone, but now wasn't the time. Charlotte was the most important right now. He wanted to see her, and she was the only one who would understand about this.

Who else could he tell? The other adults in his life had their own agendas, or they were forced to talk to him, like Mr. Springfield, in which case they were part of somebody else's agenda. Which was just sad, when it came down to it. He was just a thirteen year old kid. He didn't need to be in the middle of something this huge.

He stopped.

"Huh," he said. "Course I don't. I don't need to know anything about it." And at the core, it was true, wasn't it? It was an adult thing, and the only thing he was going to get by involving himself was hurt, confused, and upset by what they weren't telling him.

But he was a part of it now. Active or no, adult or no, he had gotten involved. He couldn't just back out now. Too many things would circle around his head until he went crazy.

He swung his legs out of bed and hobbled out to see whether Charlotte's mom had actually cried.

He bumped straight into Mr. Terrence Jackson as he was about out his hospital room door. Just great. He hadn't even started looking for the one person he wanted to see, and already he smacked into the last person on his list.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Washington? You should be in bed. Doctor's orders."

"I-" he started. The old familiar deference to elders was springing up, closing up most of the parts of his mind except for the manners, and his mother's first lesson was clearest: no talking until your elder asks you a question.

"Have a seat. We need to talk."

He did. Jackson sat next to him. Right away Michael noticed the dark circles already under his eyes, like he'd been punched twice. He looked a bit like a raccoon. His hair stuck out in odd places, and he clearly hadn't had a shower since before Michael was in the hospital. Yuck.

"Think you were pretty clever, electrocuting the entire town, don't you?" Jackson said. "You'll get the hero's welcome from the rest of them, but not me. What you did was foolish and could have gotten a lot of people killed."

Michael found himself growing angry. This was a sort of normal reaction to Mr. Jackson. Even when Michael had cleared him of being in the Omega Syndicate, and while he was riding that train of thought, there might still be Omegas in town. Mr. Jackson could still be one of them.

"I'm not sure I understand, sir," Michael said.

"Course you don't."

"So you're saying, if I left Mr. L doing what he was doing, a lot of people wouldn't have been in danger of dying?"

"That's the sort of thinking, Washington, that gets innocent people killed. It isn't up to you to decide, boy. We leave the decision-making to the people of this town. They know the risks when they move in here. They know that at any time, a thirteen year old kid might Activate and go straight up nuclear on the town."

Meaning he, Michael, might just destroy half the town at any given time.

"What happened with Mr. L was anticipated. We had planned for it."

Michael made a noise. "Psshhyeah, and that worked out real well. The Alphas--"

"The Alphas were the distraction for me to engage Mr. L," Jackson snarled. "You just delayed that. You can keep your judgments and speculations to yourself."

Michael could just see it: Mr. L along with twenty of the town's Actives flying out to fight his father and the team. Everybody would have been dead, home and away teams. Of course, being an adult made you right. Even if being an adult made you impossible, you were automatically right.

"And you can feel free to wipe that look off your face. I may not be able to read your thoughts, young master Washington, but your feelings are very clear on your face."

"Yes sir," he said. Kill em with kindness. Or at least manners. Being kind to Terrence Jackson was always going to be much more than a stretch, it was going to be like cutting his own throat.

“So we are agreed then,” Mr. Jackson said. “You leave the defense of this city to the people who spend their days thinking of such things, and I leave the play time and the girl-chasing to young people who have very little concept of how the world works.”

Play time. Girl-chasing. Who did this guy think he was?

“Yes sir.”

“Wonderful. And if I hear your name, or see your face in connection with anything outside of LADCEMS for the rest of the year, mind you, what happened at the library is going to be absolutely nothing compared with what will happen when I'm not worried about Archibald Lansing.”

For a brief moment, Michael's entire body shuddered with remembrance. Or was Mr. Jackson doing something to him right now? It seemed like all the hairs on his body were standing on end, and there was a painful, awful itching in his fingers and toes. But it lasted only a moment, and then it was gone.

“We understand each other, I trust,” Mr. Jackson said darkly.

“Yes sir.”

He shook his head and left.

Michael set out, straining his tiny non-adult brain to its maximum capacity in order to find Charlotte. She wasn't in the extended care portion of the hospital, so he eventually had to ask one of the nurses where he could find her. In the end, after the nurse tried asking him to go back to his room, and after she threatened to call security, and after she told him Charlotte was in no condition to see him or anybody right now, she relented. After that it was a matter of heading down a few floors and patiently, with good manners, telling them to go suck an egg, that he was going to see Charlotte, and there was no way they could stop him without an Active. Plus he threatened (lightly, lightly) to inform his grandfather that they had stopped him from just looking in and saying a few words to the girl who had basically saved the entire town. At least, she'd saved his life.

A rush of emotion hit him when he finally saw the door. He'd told her about liking her. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to see her again at that point. Now it seemed really stupid. The situation was going to be awkward. Ugh.

Mr. Jackson was wrong. Michael didn't want to worry about girl stuff. Making up plans to fight Mr. L was much better than this sappy, crying stuff. What would he say? Sorry I got you

shot? Thanks for turning into a wolf? Thanks for putting your neck on the chopping block and hoping that Mr. L would miss when he swung his ax? I'm glad you're not dead? Everything sounded really horrible, either silly or something out of a romance movie like his mom watched all the time. Which made them horrible. So, horrible either way.

Not knowing about her reaction was worse than being afraid of Mr. L and his legion of zombies. His palms were suddenly sweaty, and his face was probably on its way from red to purple. Did he smell bad? He'd just been sitting in his bed. Maybe he should just go sit this one out. She was awesome, the most awesome girl in the entire world. Surely she would come and see him.

...unless she hated his guts. If she hated his guts, then he was wasting his time even being here. She would shout and rant at him until he had to run out of the room before crying in front of her.

His only friend in the world, and he had to go and tell her he liked her. What an idiot.

Well, there was no way to know how she felt unless he went into that room and stared into her eyes, talked to her (somehow anyway). There was no way to prepare, he just had to summon up the willpower.

"Just go and talk to her," he muttered to himself.

He pushed open the door and tried to sneak in. It was silly, he knew it. He couldn't stop himself though. Beyond was another sterile room with pastel yellow walls and too many machines quietly beeping away. Only this room was dark. Somebody had pulled the venetian blinds closed and left Charlotte in shadow.

She was wearing a mask, just like in his dream. It was clear and made her look a bit like a jet fighter pilot. The nearby machines pumped a little accordion up and down, and spat out a thin roll of paper showing how close she was to death. She was paler than he could ever remember it, so white it almost seemed like he should be able to see through her skin to whatever was hidden underneath. The bed dwarfed her, shrank her down somehow until she was the size of an eight year old.

He just stared.

"Hey," she said, after a while. He hadn't seen her eyes open. Her voice was muffled through the mask.

"Hey," he said.

“What've you been up to?”

“Oh...you know, doom and gloom from my parents, from Mr. Jackson...and, oh yeah, the nurses are all trying to kill me.”

She shook lightly. At first he thought there was something wrong, but he soon saw that she was laughing.

“I dreamed your mom came in here,” he told her.

“Yeah, she was in. She had to take the twins out.”

“I saw her cry.”

Charlotte's smile widened. “You know already, my mom never cries.”

He stared at her some more. There were a lot of things he didn't want to say. He didn't want to look stupid again. But something inside made him want to tell her that she was really important to him. He liked her. A lot. But that couldn't come out. It already had. What would be the point of telling her again? She knew.

She sat there, just looking at him. A slow smile started creeping up beneath the mask, and he felt himself heat up around the neck and ears. She didn't even have to say anything and he was embarrassed. He went over and opened the window.

The falling sunlight transformed her. He didn't know how, but when he turned around, there was Charlotte. She hadn't been there before. It was only a shell. Now this was the real thing, alive and sparkling. With a little sun on her, he realized he'd just helped her start to glow. Because that's what she did, she glowed.

“You're super, Michael,” she said.

About the Author

Brent Meske lives, works, takes care of his son, loves his wife, reads, writes, and experiments in Photoshop all from the comfort of his home just south of the border with North Korea. Some nights he dreams of transforming into a superhero and ending the communist regime in a little under three hours.

Author's Note

Thanks for reading.

Sadly, free books aren't free to write, as my wife enjoys reminding me. The next few can't be free. I have to eventually clear up my debt and put my son through school. If you liked this one, please ask your mom to fork over her credit card for a couple of bucks, because **Super Anybody** and **Super Everybody** are on their way. Or if you're old enough, skip going to Starbucks one day and buy one of my pay-for books. I'm sure you won't be disappointed.

An awesome fan might also write a review for this book wherever one found and downloaded it, hint hint. I also welcome folks to my [Facebook page](#), like and look around for some inspiration, reading, news, and community story writing, if you're into that kind of thing.

A special thanks goes out to Matt, who helped me polish this one up, Kevin and Brian, who weighed in on the cover design, and Renee who's been relentless in supporting everything creative I've ever done. She's kind of my hero.

Also by Brent Meske

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A Preview of

Super Anybody

Alphas and Omegas: Book Two

(Available soon from Smashwords)

Chapter 1: Super Jump

Down there, the cars were so small you could fit half a city block on one fingernail. People were just a stream of particles, like those diagrams of your blood cells zipping along your capillaries. It was so high, and so far down, that Michael's stomach wriggled and lurched like he was hanging over the edge instead of just looking down.

He couldn't understand how it got to this point. He didn't know how the summer could have changed into that horrible fall. Everything had gone wrong, and he had taken all of it, crunched it up into a ball that just barely fit inside his head until he was waking up every day with a headache. He didn't know how he kept at it, and he didn't have any idea what had brought him through. But it was over now.

"What are you doing?"

He looked over but couldn't see a face. His eyes were brimming with failure now. He wasn't good at anything, good for anything.

"Hey, look, don't do this, okay? Come on down, buddy. We don't want to do anything permanent okay? Okay, listen, it's not as bad as you think, okay? There are options, okay?"

"Stop saying okay," he said.

"Okay, okay, done. Just don't, I mean, come on back down. Whatever you're thinking of doing, there's a better way, okay? Don't do nothing-"

Don't do what, he wanted to say, but his throat was closed up. Blocked up and painful.

He jumped.

Chapter 2: One Last Normal Summer

Michael Washington was just not the right sort of super. Oh, sure, he'd done the sorts of stuff the superheroes all dreamed about: he'd saved the day. He'd (well, almost anyway) gotten the girl. Gotten the girl to like him at least. He'd gone up against practically the entire city, when it was in the clutches of a power hungry madman and come out on top. You couldn't get much more super than that.

Unless you could fly.

Michael had to shade his eyes against the sun, his feet firmly planted on the ground as Danny Silverstein soared overhead like a bullet. Michael hoped he got a bunch of bugs stuck on his face, like they had on his mother's windshield.

Danny did a couple of loop-de-loops, then darted off to one side to catch a football thrown at hypersonic speed maybe half a mile off. The throwers were laughing to each other. One of them slumped down to the ground, made himself into a real ball, and gestured to the girl to toss him. She picked up the ball boy as if he weighed no more than a tennis ball and heaved him out toward the lake. Ball boy flew like a line drive, and actually skipped over the surface twice, then three times before splashing beneath the water. Then he came up, made himself into a sort of boat, and floated out to where a couple of girls were sunning themselves on a raft in the middle of the lake.

"Don't sneer," Charlotte told him.

And really, when you looked at Charlotte, your sneering days were over. Or when you listened to her. Or smelled her. She was, at fourteen, already primed to be much more beautiful than her mother. You could see it in her broad, welcoming smile and the way her eyes twinkled whenever she smiled or laughed, both of which happened quite often. You could also catch the way her hair seemed to soak up the sunlight and glow, whether she was inside or out, whether it was night or day. It was naturally gold. She was naturally amazing. And there was the way she

went through clothing styles, following whichever bands and musical trends she happened to be following at the time. Right now she was dressed in something ridiculous, a hat that covered most of her head, and a long dress which ended at her ankles. Around her neck, in the June heat, was a fake fur stole. She was calling herself a flapper, for some reason. The strangest thing was that the clothes suited her. They always did.

Michael scowled to himself.

"I wasn't sneering," he mumbled.

"I could practically hear Danny smashing into a mountain in your mind, you silly head," she told him.

"He wouldn't have to hit it very hard." He didn't even bother with the silly head comment. If Danny's head was as full of crap as the rest of him, it would pop like a ripe melon on the side of a mountain.

She laughed, "Oh, so a minor bit of revenge then?"

"I know, I know, he didn't do anything to me. I shouldn't be jealous."

"You don't have to wait for your ability to blow them all out of the water Michael," she told him.

"Right." He was super just the way he was: unable to shoot laser beams out of his eyes or walk through cars or slide into computer systems or reverse gravity or have a barbecue on the moon. Nothing. He couldn't even do anything pointless, like command ants or shoot spaghetti from his fingertips.

"Just repeat after me," she said.

"Don't do it," he warned her, but she steamrolled him anyway.

One second she was Charlotte Sulszko, the girl of his dreams, the one friend he had in the whole wide world. The next Michael was standing next to his identical twin, dressed in exactly the same clothes, with exactly the same five freckles on his nose and the same boring brown eyes and hair. The same glasses perched on his nose. Everything was the same, down to the last detail.

"I'm super just the way I am," the other Michael said. Only this one said so in a mocking, lisping voice.

"Quit that," he said, but he couldn't help it. A smile crept over the corners of his mouth. Their school had tried to make up a slogan and little inspirational posters to make all of them feel good throughout the rest of their school year, after everything that had happened. Michael

finished out seventh grade disliking everything about the school, and making fun of whoever had thought up 'I'm super just the way I am'.

"I'm super just the way I am," Charlotte Michael said again.

Next, Michael was standing not in front of himself, but in front of a large rugged looking man in a raccoon skin hat. His leather coat was more fringes than actual material, and he looked down at Michael from a stern brow, over a well-kept beard.

"I am super just the way I am, so sayeth Mr. Springfield the force-field man."

"Quit it," he laughed.

But she got on a roll. She changed into Michael's mother and said it again, and then changed into Michael's father, a hulking giant of a man with a booming voice, and said it again. She changed into Michael's grandfather, then Charlotte's mother, followed by Charlotte's twin brothers. She started going through the teachers at their school, LADCEMS.

"The principal of the Lincoln Area District Consolidated Elementary and Middle School says you are super just the way you are!" Mr. Samuelson said.

His vision was beginning to swim with tears he was laughing so much, and his face was starting to ache.

Charlotte turned into a fat, balding man in thick plastic glasses and a crooked smile. He started to open his mouth, but frowned. Michael had flung himself backwards onto his butt. It was a reflex. He was starting to scuttle backwards like a crab when Charlotte reappeared.

"I'm so sorry Michael," she said, "I got carried away."

He slumped to the grass and stared up at the blue, blue sky and tried to get his breathing under control. Charlotte didn't have any problem with seeing Mr. Lansing, and she'd faced him head on. More than that, he'd shot her. Michael didn't know why that face should affect him like that. The fear was still coursing through him, making his arms and legs tremble with weakness. She hadn't seen him in February with his face dripping down his face like a candle. He shuddered.

She sat down beside him and ran her fingers through the grass.

"Not your fault," he said at last.

"I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay," he said.

"Forgive me?"

“Of course I forgive you,” he said.

They sat in silence for some time. After a while, she lay back on the grass too. She didn't like to crush the grass, it was kind of her thing about hurting or killing anything alive, but this time it seemed too perfect. The leaves on all the trees weren't ready to turn yet, but in the last light of day they were all bathed in gold. A faint breeze made all the leaves glitter.

“I want to give you a gift,” she told him.

“What? You don't need to do anything like that.”

“I know. But I want to get it for you all the same. What do you want?”

This was strange. Usually Charlotte was so creative she would just make him something, like a playlist of her favorite songs for the month or a little painting of him exploding with superheroic firepower. Somehow she knew what he wanted, and she gave him just that.

“I don't know,” he said. “A food fight in the cafeteria?”

She laughed. Then she gave it to him.

Michael had never before been out of Lincolnshire, a little town of about five thousand people in the backwoods of the U.S. In a lot of ways this was exactly the same thing as Lincolnshire anyhow. A purple mountain majesty sat in the east, where it made the sunrises perfect. The lake was situated to the west, and behind it some foothills, so the sun burnished the whole place gold and orange each night. You could believe the place was like the Lincolnshire golf course: specifically engineered to be beautiful and easy and perfect by someone who studied these sorts of things.

Twin clusters of cabins were situated just north and south of the main path leading from the lake over to the lodge. They were quaint little log-cabin style things with enough room for eight kids on bunks, plus one counselor's bed. North of the path sat the boys cabins, and the girls just a hundred meters or so down south.

This was Michael Washington's prison cell for the next few days, before he officially got to be a resident of Hell itself. After camp, he'd have about two weeks before he started the eighth grade at Marcus C. Patterson High School Preparatory Building. Two weeks before he would be forced to sit through classes with his Active, super-powered classmates. Two weeks of freedom, until the invisible girl would figure out his locker combination and fill his locker with shaving cream, or someone would shoot hyper fast spitwads at him while the teachers' backs were turned. Two weeks until he was the only non-super one in all of the eighth grade.

Yeah, he knew it wasn't true. Maybe eighty percent of the eighth grade hadn't gone Active, and most weren't ever going to do so. Still, it didn't give Michael any solace. His dad was the head of the world's only superhero team, the Alphas, and the rest of his classmates already hated him for electrocuting all of them this last winter. If they didn't hate him for that, they probably hated him for the medal of honor he'd gotten for 'saving the city' even though the only thing he'd done was heave a couple of books at the bad guy, and give him a bunch of sarcastic jabs. If they didn't hate him for either of those, they were afraid of him because he'd gone psycho in fifth grade, and had, at one point, been given the power to reverse gravity, which had nearly gotten everybody squashed like bugs on the gym floor.

The adults were experts at kidding themselves, sure. They might think Michael was something extraordinary, but all they'd done was tattoo a giant 'kick me' sign on the back of Michael's head in neon orange letters. Kids knew. They knew when you were the sucker, licking the teachers' boots. Whether you were after an A, or special favors for your dorky chess club or whatever, it was all the same. Why, if he didn't deserve any of this extra attention or praise, was he the only kid at Camp Super Kid without any super?

He entered the lodge and sat with the other kids from his cabin.

There were seven of them: Matt and Brian and Wally and Avery, Jason, Micky (real name Mikhail) and Greg, who everybody called Dorf. Michael wasn't friends with any of them. He knew them or knew of them, except for Micky who'd just been shipped in from Belarus or Abkhazia or someplace just outside Russia, and Avery who talked with a British accent. They would have been just normal kids, except they'd gone Active. His grandfather had explained everything, but Michael wasn't listening because he knew most of it anyway. When you went Active, it was like a metamorphosis. Tadpoles lost tails and gained legs as they became frogs, and ugly fuzzy caterpillars holed up in cocoons just long enough to transform into beautiful butterflies. So even if you were freckly and pimple-studded and one of your eyes was sort of wonky, and everybody called you buckey or snaggletooth, going Active changed all that.

Around him were perfectly sculpted cheekbones and clear complexions and broad shoulders, and not a pair of skinny hips in sight. Everybody looked like they were ready to put on a singlet and go figure skating in the Olympics. Or flip around on the rings or whatever.

Only Dorf looked a little off, and while Michael wondered why, he would never ask. Michael avoided speaking at Camp Whatchamacallit. He did not sing songs around a campfire, do cute skits, or join in the reindeer games. His only saving grace was Charlotte.

“Hey Mikey,” Matt said, ruffling his hair.

“It’s the Mikester,” Wally said. “The Mikeroo. Mike-man. Mikemeister. Mikrophonic.” Wally was the other exception to the Active-perfect spectrum. Where the others were lean and wiry, Wally looked like somebody carved him out of a mountain. He took up half a bench around the big square lodge tables.

“Shut up you guys,” Michael said gruffly, not looking at them. Mere mortals did not look on the faces of the gods. Michael knew his Greek and Roman myths pretty well, and what they always told you was this: when the gods get the slightest bit upset, it’s the normal people who end up squashed. And the lodge was like a junior Mount Olympus. Like, for instance, the way Brian Yamagatsu stared right through Michael, eyes fixed on his face like he was trying to figure out which piece to carve off and eat.

“Oh no!” Wally shouted, and dove to the side. The others laughed. He came up. “Oh...didn't shoot anything, did he? Didn't try to fry my brain or anything? Michael, you've lost your touch.”

Michael's scowl deepened. He probably looked like a toad.

“Lighten up Mikey,” Avery said in his accent. “We’re just joshing you. Ain’t that right mates?”

“Too roight,” several of them agreed. Michael felt his hopes rise a little.

“Wanted to invite you out, in fact,” Avery went on.

“To a party.”

“You...but you can’t...” They weren’t allowed out of the cabins after dark. There would be a counselor there to make sure they stayed put and fell asleep.

They laughed. “Listen to this one,” Avery said. “Michael, we’re Actives. We do whatever it is we like.”

“Whatevah we loike,” Wally echoed.

“You sound like a bloody Brummy with that atrocious accent of yours mate,” Avery said, and then turned back to Michael. “So we’re sneaking out. Dorf, my fine fellow, will have us covered.”

Dorf usually looked a bit like a lion, with his long blonde hair fanned out in every direction. Plus, he wasn't normally a small kid. Right now he looked positively scrawny. Maybe his power was looking like a refugee.

"So Mikey, I ask you this mate: you want in?"

"I...I don't know," he said. His mother and father had been very clear on what they expected of him while he was away at camp.

"Sure you do," Avery told him.

"Only one catch," Jason said. Michael just looked at him. "You gotta be Active."

"Oh now, be nice to the poor boy," Matt said.

"I was bein' nice," Jason said. "He's got, what, eight or ten hours to go and activate."

"Clearly your ability was not mental math, Mr. Bryzynski," Avery said.

"Huh?"

"Mr. Washington here saved the whole town. He did," Matt said. Michael didn't know why Matt was trying to be nice to him now, he'd been one of the ones bullying Michael all through fifth grade with another of the world-class jerks. Michael knew when he was being made fun of.

"How super," Wally laughed.

"A shame I wasn't here to watch that," Avery said.

"Just don't douse us in purple foam again, Mikey!" Wally hooted, slapping his enormous knee.

"We would not want that."

"And whatever you do, please don't electrocute us again," Matt said.

There would be no tears. Michael felt himself grown red, felt the anger course through him, and the helplessness. He found himself looking at Brian Yamagatsu, one of the other students who hadn't been in Lincolnshire when Michael had 'saved the day'. But Brian only stared him straight in the eyes, his almond-shaped ones to Michael's, and said nothing.

"What's going on here?"

The eight of them looked up to the new speaker. He had a massive hooked nose, which looked to have been broken at least once, and greasy black hair cut into a bowl shape. The rest, behind his ears, was buzzed close. Trent Millickie, extortionist, bully, grudge holder, would-be

killer, bad boy, and Active. Two years ahead of Michael. The last time they'd spoken, Trent had tried to fry him with a bolt of lightning.

They all shut up.

"Michael," Trent said. Without a hint of emotion.

"Trent?" He'd spent the entirety of his camp experience well away from Trent Millickie.

"These guys bothering you?" Little fingers of lightning crackled outward from his body, zipping around and leaving little char marks on the table, the floor, the ceiling, the benches.

What the heck was going on here?

"Uh...no."

Trent nodded and turned to leave. Over one shoulder he said, "Hope it stays that way."

Michael looked around the table just as the others were doing (except Brian, he just kept staring at Michael's forehead like it was about to sprout a vegetable garden) trying to figure out if anyone else had been as confused as he. The way Jason and Dorf and Matt looked, you'd swear that they thought they'd just dodged a bullet. Trent had that kind of reputation.

Michael hadn't earned some sort of free ticket to the super squad for putting the bad guy on the run this past February. He wasn't going to be the Batman of the Justice League, that was for sure. Trent Millickie hated him. Used to hate him. What the devil?

Michael didn't have an answer to that little conundrum, but didn't have much time to figure anything out either. Young super-powered persons started pouring into the lodge by the droves. There ended up being maybe fifty in all, almost half the number of Actives in the entire town. They had their own strange cliques, Michael saw. The rest of the eighth graders weren't in yet, they hadn't been allowed near the high school crowd.

The best part were the adult Actives. These were the city guardians, the teachers, the counselors, basically they did everything. They were here too, from Bob the man who couldn't die to a bunch Michael had never seen before. One he'd seen for a split second, when she teleported another of the teachers out of danger last year, and Mrs. Montgomery had healed up his injuries when they were nearly fatal, just after he almost levitated everyone in the gym to their deaths. There also was Terrence Jackson, stinky jerkface.

He was probably always reading Michael's mind, because he turned and stared Michael in the eyes. Michael quickly looked away and shivered.

He wasn't going to make the mistake of getting anywhere near Jackson's mean side again. He could still remember writhing on the floor as his brain threatened over and over again to explode all over the place. In fact, he might as well just shun Jackson entirely.

A brush on his shirt, and he turned just in time to see Charlotte heading to the female side of the huge lodge. She turned and winked at him.

Wally and Avery and the rest of his table carried on a load of uninteresting banter. Michael tried to watch Charlotte, but failed.

“So, how's it feel to be the only one in twenty miles without a super thingy?” Dorf asked him, as they were well into the turkey and gravy sandwiches. Bits of food sprayed the dishes as he talked.

Avery answered for him. “How do you think it is, it's like being the only seal in the ocean with a hundred sharks around ya.”

“Yeah, all of you are so big. Lot of good it did you against Lansing,” Michael mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Speak up Mumbles.”

“I believe he just emasculated the lot of you,” Brian Yamagatsu said, continuing that disconcerting stare.

“That right? You choppin' our jewels off, Washington?” Matt asked. The room around him began to darken. Bits of Dorf were wriggling around under his skin, like snakes were suddenly about to pop out of his arms and neck. Jason disappeared entirely, with something in his place that was basically a silhouette of bluish energy. Wally looked a little bigger, if that were possible, but Brian just continued staring at him.

“Is there a problem here, gentlemen?” Terrence Jackson was just about brushing Michael's elbow, his unsettling scrutiny sweeping over the rest of his table.

They quickly averted their eyes and mumbled their negatives, as though his mind powers wouldn't work on them if they didn't meet his eyes. Several of them shot venomous glances at Michael. Eventually Terrence drifted away.

“I feel all...like, invaded.”

“Violated,” Avery corrected.

“He didn't do anything to you,” Michael mumbled.

“Eh? And how'd you know that?” Dorf demanded.

Yeah Michael, part of him said. How do you know what it feels like to have someone crawling over your brain, doing their psychic thing, rearranging your personality, turning you into a donkey or something? There was no good way to describe how your brain felt while you were crawling around on the floor, itching at your scalp and trying to pull your cerebral cortex out of your ears.

Dorf was still staring at Michael when a glob of mashed potatoes hit him in the side of the head.

“Wha-” was all anybody at his table was able to say before the wave of mayhem washed over them too. Food was flying everywhere. A shadow floated overhead, and Michael looked up just in time to see an entire pitcher's worth of Kool-aid dropping on him.

Everywhere was food. A vat of mashed potatoes came zipping out of the kitchens and stopped to show the astonished face of a speedster holding a big plastic tray. The mashed potatoes continued in their forward momentum though, all over Terrance Jackson. Gravy slapped Wally in the shoulder and head, and he forgot all about Michael in a second. The rest of them leaped away to join the fray. Danny Silverstein was flying overhead, flinging cornbread down on everybody like a B-52.

Brian continued to stare at Michael. Children were howling with glee, pelting each other with ice cubes and green beans, and Avery was squeezing ketchup into Brian's hair. Brian never moved.

Michael was completely creeped out. Creeped out, until Charlotte showed up and put a banana cream pie on top of his head.

“I thought you needed a new hat,” she said, laughing.

“Did you do this?” he asked, and sampled some of the whipped cream. An entire cake flew right past his nose and crashed into Avery, who collapsed in gales of laughter, hugging the cake. She'd done this just for him.

“I wouldn't know what you're talking about at all,” Charlotte said. “Here, try some chocolate sauce. It's fresh out of the kitchen fridge.” She pulled back the neck of his shirt and squeezed some inside.

He shrieked laughter as the cold sauce crept down his spine, then remembered and looked back to where Brian was sitting.

Brian had vanished.

Following the fiasco, all the campers were told they would be washing up. Then the worst offenders would have to watch while the rest of them cleaned up the mess hall. Hey, you call it a mess hall, it has to become a mess at some point.

While they were cleaning, Michael saw Charlotte standing up on stage, watching everyone down on their hands and knees, throwing pieces of apple pie and mashed potatoes into enormous plastic garbage cans. Other squads were following behind them, dousing the whole shebang in soapy water.

Michael tipped her a wink.

Her face might have been carefully neutral, but just enough smile was there. He knew it, and so did she. They might be enslaved now, but the food fight had been the most liberating half hour of their lives. Even the grownups didn't look all that upset. Matt mentioned that he saw Springfield and Mrs. Madison throwing just as much food as any of the kids.

Only Terrence Jackson was storming around shouting orders to scrub and mop this or that, and he lost steam pretty quickly.