

Invisible Justice

By Kim Jewell

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Chapter One

It blasted him like a sucker punch. Sam wasn't sure where the pain came from, but the burning sensation radiated from his temples all the way down to his ankles. His body was immobilized and seized by a flash of fire. The wind rushed out of him. He dropped to his knees on the kitchen floor. He clamped his eyes shut, not daring to open them.

Son of a... What is this pain?! Oh my God! My head... Is it a stroke? Can't breathe... Heart attack? Why won't it stop? What's wrong with me?

Then it left, as quickly as it came. The flash of torture disappeared. Sam sat on the cool tile and raked shaking fingers through his short, sandy blond hair.

What just happened?

The burning, still fresh in his memory, made him wish someone was home. His mother would be home soon, or he could call his dad at work. But Sam didn't want to worry either of them. Especially since now everything seemed normal again.

Well, almost normal. He shook his head and realized that there was something new going on inside his brain. Not pain. But a sense of something extra.

Still lightheaded, he got to his feet and reached for a glass from the cupboard. He turned on the tap and the stench assaulted his nose. He glanced down – the water looked clear, but he could vividly smell the iron and fluoride as it ran out of the faucet.

Maybe it's just my imagination. I can't be smelling fluoride in water. What does fluoride even smell like? And is that calcium carbonate? What – how do I even know what that is?

For a boy of sixteen, and one that didn't pay much attention in his general chemistry class, he couldn't figure out why these thoughts filled his head – let alone how he could smell and identify each of the particular elements themselves.

A loud sound, something like a bowl of cereal crackling distracted Sam. He turned to peek out the curtains and saw a bicycle in the driveway. *Just the neighbor kid, riding his bike after school.* He headed back towards the kitchen, and then froze.

How in the world can I hear bicycle tires on the sidewalk?

Standing still, he closed his eyes to test his ears. What else could he hear? The quiet hum of the refrigerator, Mr. Parker's lawnmower from across the street, the television in Sam's upstairs bedroom that always stayed on, which resulted in constant nagging from his mother. But there was more.

He could hear the toilet flush from the basement bathroom in the house next door. He knew that sound didn't come from his house, since he was home alone. So how exactly could he sense the specific location of that sound?

A squirrel scurried up one of the trees in the back yard. Without even looking, he knew from the sound that it was the papery bark of the birch tree in his mother's flower bed. And further back, he could hear the gum balls falling from the sweet gum tree – the tree his father always griped about – from Old Lady Cullen's house, whose property butted up against theirs.

How can I hear all of this? And will someone please shut that dog up?!

Suddenly he realized that the dog was Buttons – the poodle from two blocks over that never left the house except for his morning exercise. He only knew the bark because he heard it every morning on his way to school when he passed Buttons and his very nice looking owner as

they took their morning jog. Buttons always lunged and barked at him, but Sam never minded, probably because he was too busy checking out Jeannie in her spandex.

Okay, this is really weird. What do I do? What do I DO? Get a grip, Sam. You're not losing your mind. Well, maybe you are. NO, you're not. Crap. Mom's on her way home.

He ran upstairs to throw his backpack in the corner of his bedroom, made a quick attempt to straighten up his bed, and threw all of his dirty clothes in the closet. Then he glanced in the bathroom mirror to check for any visible marks from whatever happened. There were none. Big sigh of relief.

Just. Act. Normal. Wait, how did I know Mom was coming home early?

As if on cue, Sam's mother walked in the door, which only added to the paranoia building in his head. In his mind's frenzy, he couldn't figure out if he simply heard her car outside or just *sensed* that she was on her way home. He didn't believe in psychic abilities or sixth senses. If it couldn't be seen or proven, it didn't exist, simple enough.

"Hey kiddo, how was school today?" she said, watching Sam run awkwardly down the stairs. "What's wrong? Do you feel okay? You look a little pale."

"Uh, no... I'm fine. School was fine. Good. Why are you home so early?" He winced, knowing he sounded strange.

"Your sister has that cheer meeting... Are you sure you're okay?" She didn't sound convinced, and her eyebrows pinched together as she looked at him closer.

"Yeah, mom. I'm fine. What's for dinner?" Not that he was even remotely hungry.

"Well, that sounds more like you. Actually, I'm just here to get her forms and run – Lexi is waiting on me at school. Can you just grab something?"

"Sure."

"You're sure you're okay?" She looked hard at him once again. "I can stay home..."

"No, Mom, go. I'm fine, really." *Get out of here so I can think.*

"Okay, if you're sure. But call me if you need anything."

"Sure."

He knew his mother hated his one-word responses, but he really wasn't in the mood for conversation at the moment. He just needed a few quiet minutes to think. *Quiet. Right. As if I can't hear football practice from halfway across town.*

As soon as she left, Sam sprinted upstairs and got out his laptop and hit the power button. While he waited, he decided a hot shower might clear his head. Turning on the water, the stench invaded his nose again, and he decided that dinner was definitely out of the question for tonight. As he stepped into the spray, he realized that something felt different. Not only did the water feel too hot, but the pressure was much harder than he'd ever experienced.

That's strange. I always set the temperature the same way. Great. Does that mean my skin's affected now, too?

He readjusted the temperature to a cooler setting and closed his eyes. The water hit his shoulders and echoed off the walls. He could hear the soapy water as it circled through the drain and down the pipes through the house and under the ground. But the new pressure felt good, and relaxed him, despite the noise.

Clear your head. Clear your head. Good. Now let's do a little research, figure out what's going on.

School was easy for Sam. His grades were so good that his sister called him a geek because he never had to study. He also had an uncanny skill with computers and could find just about anything he wanted to know by researching on the web.

If there is something medically wrong with me, I'll find it.

Dried off, dressed and rejuvenated, he sat down at his desk. Once the Internet popped up, he typed in “heightened senses.” He found thousands of hits from World of Warcraft to comic book heroes. With “super smell” he found any product one could hope for – from home air fresheners to antihistamines. His “hearing” results ranged from hearing aids to radio woofers. He could find absolutely no connecting medical information on any of the search terms he plugged in.

After almost an hour of fruitless research, his head swam in pure frustration. He sat down at the edge of his bed, laid back and closed his eyes. Through the floor his feet could feel the traffic outside, the car engines purr and the tires bump along the potholes. His nose could sense the just-before-rain drizzle as it mixed with the oil and dirt on the roads and sidewalks. His ears – now buzzing with new sounds – honed in on an argument between two small children a few houses down as they fought over who got to ride the scooter next.

Then, all of a sudden, it just stopped. After a couple of hours of the constant noise and sensory static, it seemed as if everything totally shut off. His eyes flew open and he sat up in one jerky move. He brought his fingers to his ears and snapped.

Ears, check. Eyes, check. Nose...

Looking for something to test his nose on, he grabbed the nearest basketball shoe on his floor.

Check. Well, seems like everything's back to normal. Is that good? What the...?

Sam had to get out of the house. He needed fresh air and greasy fast food. Once he started the ignition, his mind settled a bit, knowing that the radio was exactly the right volume – where he always kept it – loud, but not “drive your neighbors crazy” loud.

Heading out of his subdivision, he turned towards the burger joint on Broadway Avenue. It wasn't his favorite food, but since his best friend Ty worked there, he knew he might get a freebie in his bag. Pulling into the drive-through, Ty's voice greeted him through the intercom. He waited for Ty to finish his usual greeting before placing his order.

“Yeah, I'd like an order of crab legs, three tacos, a funnel cake and a keg of Guinness. And make it speedy.”

“Hey Sam! Very funny... What do you really want?”

“Uh, I guess the double cheeseburger combo – make it with onion rings and a root beer.”

“You got it, come on around.”

Sam and Ty had been friends since the third grade, when they had to endure Mrs. Fisher together. Ty was new to town, and had the good fortune of sitting next to Sam on his first day. They had been getting each other out of trouble ever since. And sometimes into trouble.

As they grew older, they began to share everything: forts, secrets, homework, sports activities, and stories about girls – including the various theories on how to get past first base. As they grew older, their bond had only grown stronger. There really wasn't anything one couldn't – and didn't – tell the other. Sam had one sister, Ty had two – so the two of them were as close to brothers as best friends could be.

He drove around the corner and up to the window and his friend greeted him with his normal crooked smile.

“Hey bro. What's up?” Ty handed the drink through the window.

“Not much. Just getting some grub. What time are you off tonight?”

“Eight.” He handed Sam a bag much bigger than it should have been, had it only held a cheeseburger and onion rings.

“Cool. Call me later?”

“Will do. Anything wrong?”

“Nah. Just call me. Or text. Whatever.”

Sam took a deep breath towards the drive-through window, testing his nose. It smelled like it always did, a fast food burger joint loaded with greasy food. He felt relieved to not have his nose smacked with the smell of each individual ingredient used in the place, glad that he couldn't hear every bit of chatter in the dining area, and even more comforted that he did not have the names of the chemical components of cooking grease floating around in his brain.

Maybe I just had a mental moment. That has to be it. Like an out of body experience. There is nothing wrong with me. I'm fine.

He turned back to Ty, gave him a reassuring smile and his money. “I'm headed back to the house. Got some homework to do, and will probably catch some of the Cubs game. Thanks for the brew – it'll go great with the game!”

Ty smiled at him. “See ya, man.”

“Bye. Thanks for the food.” He steered his truck out of the drive-through and headed back towards his house. Sam felt every bump in the road and as he bounced in the cab, he was keenly aware of the knots in his shoulder muscles and the throbbing in his temples.

Gotta shake this off...

Chapter Two

“Hey, Nerdley,” Lexi greeted him as he walked in the front door.

He gritted his teeth. “Well, hello Princess. Are you at the top of the all-important pyramid of brainless cheerleaders yet?”

She sneered back.

He breezed right by his sister, ignoring her ribbing and planted himself in the recliner to watch the game with his dad. The diversion helped a bit, but he still wasn’t able to shake off the afternoon and completely relax again. Exhausted, he decided a good night’s sleep was just what he needed.

He said goodnight to the parents and headed up, brushed his teeth, washed his face, then stripped down to his flannel pants and slid under the covers. Tossing and turning, he continued to worry about the pain, wondering what caused it.

Ty never called or texted that evening which was a little odd. But Ty spent quite a bit of time lately with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, Mena. She was a nice girl, but if Sam was honest, he didn’t like the fact that she took so much of Ty’s time away from him. She tended to be pretty bossy and possessive with Ty, and Sam knew he could do better.

It was probably just as well, though. Sam decided he wasn’t going to talk about the “headache” incident anyway – not with Ty, not with anyone. He kept telling himself that it really was nothing more than a headache, hoping that if he kept repeating that to himself, it would become a reality. He’d never had any health problems and he’d determined he wasn’t going to start now.

He let his mind wander to other things. His homework, which he blew off that evening – understandable, all things considered – would need to be completed in the morning before he went to his first class. He didn’t have any tests tomorrow, so the only thing he needed to get done was his trig homework. His first period was study hall, and since he was pretty good at math, he could get it done easily.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but the electrical current that seemed to run through his body jerked him straight up and out of bed in a flurry of flying sheets and pillows. His temples were throbbing and the burning sensation was back and radiating throughout his body. He couldn’t think straight enough to remember if he screamed in pain or not, but at the moment, he really didn’t care if he woke anyone in the house, or the entire neighborhood for that matter. He just needed the burning to stop.

Son of a... Shit!

Sam glanced at his clock. The red numbers were so bright they seared like fire into the back of his brain. When he looked around the room, he wondered who turned the light on after he fell asleep. Nothing was really out of order – he couldn’t make sense of it.

Okay, this is seriously freaking me out! What’s going on?

Covered in sweat, he panted, trying to concentrate on slowing down his breathing and heart rate. It seemed like the more he filled his lungs, the less the fire in his body burned. He focused on his breathing, all the while trying to figure out if anyone in the house was stirring. He could hear his father’s quiet snore from downstairs, along with the ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room. He heard his sister, two rooms over, switching positions in her bed.

Farther out, he heard the rustling of fallen leaves as they scratched across the driveways and sidewalks each time a breeze came along.

And, just as suddenly as before, the pain was gone. He looked back at his alarm clock.

Whoa! Two minutes. Tops. Not long, but too long for that kind of torture.

Still out of breath, but relieved that the fire was gone, Sam swiveled in his bed and set his feet on the floor. He walked to the bathroom, opened the door and went to switch on the light and realized he could see the bathroom fine – just like it was daylight. Confused, he looked up to see if someone left that light on as well. The bulbs were unlit. He looked back at his bedroom, bright with detail, and noted those lights were also dark. Checking the switches, just to make sure he wasn't losing his mind, he found them switched off.

How can I see in the dark?

He looked out the window, and everything outside was light as well. His alarm clock read 2:37 a.m., so he knew it had to be middle-of-the-night dark. Cautiously, he walked back towards the bathroom and reached for the light switch. When he turned it on, he could see the light bulbs pop on, but the addition didn't make much difference as to how he saw in the room. He switched it off again. No change.

Huh! So this time I can see in the dark. This might be a little cool, in a super human kind of way, if I wasn't so wigged out about the pain.

Sam realized he was much more collected about the episode this time, even considering that it was the middle of the night. Though he wasn't sure exactly what was happening to him, it didn't scare him as much this time as it had earlier in the afternoon. For some reason, he was just sure that nothing was medically and drastically wrong with his body. He knew there was something off about what was going on in his head and senses, but he also knew he wasn't going to get horribly sick or die from it. How he knew this, he wasn't certain, but he was grateful for the extra "sense" that calmed his mind.

He sat back down on the edge of his bed to test his senses. Closing his eyes, he focused first on smell. Breathing in deeply, he could smell the film of toothpaste he forgot to rinse down the sink in the bathroom. Further away, he could smell the vast array of perfume bottles his sister kept on her dresser (which reminded him to tell her he hated her newest one.) Reaching out further, he could smell the bag of dust and particles that sat in the vacuum cleaner, left out in the downstairs hallway for the cleaning lady who would be there promptly at nine a.m.

Switching to his ears, he heard Brandy – their twelve-year-old cocker spaniel – as she dreamed and twitched her legs. He wondered what she was chasing in her sleep. He heard the click and turn of a key next door as Mr. Harris came home from his evening shift as security supervisor at the local museum. And further out, he heard the flap of the giant flag at the gas station four blocks away on Main Street.

Now, for the newest ability, Sam decided to explore a little. Opening the door and walking down the stairs, he felt like he was looking at his home in the middle of a sunny afternoon. There were no sunbeams streaming through the windows and no shadows to be seen, but his eyes were viewing the environment like it was the middle of the day.

As Sam walked through the house, he heard and smelled things he never knew existed before. Padding across the kitchen tile, he opened the refrigerator to grab a bottle of water. Normally the fridge light would blind him in the dark of night, but he realized again that there was really no difference in the light of the dark kitchen and that of the open refrigerator. He opened the bottle and drank deeply.

Oh, that feels good on the dry throat. Wait... This tastes normal, but it's bottled water. I wonder if I drank from the tap...

He took a glass from the cupboard and turned on the tap water. As it ran, he remembered the horror of smelling it earlier in the afternoon – same smell, individual elements. This time he tried his taste buds.

BLECK. People really drink this stuff? I'm not sure I'll ever BATHE in it again. Taste buds, check.

Satisfied that he was able to wrap his head around these heightened abilities and keep his cool all at the same time, Sam realized he was too amped up to go back to sleep. He didn't dare turn on the television, which would wake his parents. So he sat on the couch and reached for the sports magazine on the coffee table.

How cool is this that I can read in the dark?

He flipped through the pages, read a few articles, but found he couldn't concentrate on the stories in the magazine – his head was too filled with questions about what was going on with his brain. He didn't want to see a doctor – how could he explain any of this to a physician without being sent directly to a shrink? He would just have to do more research online and see if he could find an expert or specialist who might have some direction or answers for him.

And then it happened. Again. Everything shut off. Sam found himself sitting in the pitch black of the living room, and his sense of calm flew completely out the door.

He sat there for a full five minutes, muttering four-letter words, hoping it would come back, scared that it wouldn't. And when it didn't, he fumbled his way back to his bedroom, crawled back into his bed, and laid with his eyes wide open until his alarm went off at 6:45 a.m.

Chapter Three

Sam spent Thursday going through the motions at school, just waiting for the pain to hit. Nothing happened.

At home he was quiet and withdrawn, which was pretty typical of a teenager, so his parents weren't overly concerned. But Sam was. He was convinced that something – whatever this thing was – should happen again, and hopefully bring with it some new answers. But nothing surfaced.

Friday came and went about the same. By Saturday morning, Sam was so frustrated, confused and moody, he just needed to get out of the house to get his mind on something else. Anything else.

His father asked him to go out to the local home store and pick up some landscaping stones. His was the only truck in the family, since his father upgraded to an SUV, so Sam found himself doing a lot of the running and hauling for the family whenever the need arose. A small price, he guessed. Except for the fact that his twin sister ended up getting a brand new Beetle when she got her fifth high school report card in a row with straight A's. *Show off...*

But he was not in the mood for a quick run to the corner store to do his business. The great thing about the metro area where they lived in the outskirts of St. Louis was there were several different sections of town, and plenty of space in between. He needed time in his truck, quiet time for his brain, and a place where he wouldn't run into anyone he knew. So on to the west side he was headed.

While he drove, Sam thought about the fact that he seemed to be waiting, anticipating when the next weird anomaly would happen to his brain. He spent more time researching, but still hadn't found anything close to explaining what was taking over his body.

I'm going out of my mind about this crap. I need to stop obsessing... Just put it out of my head.

Sam was grateful for the long drive. It gave him an opportunity to calm down, think over the events of the past few days. He pulled into the parking spot nearest the lawn and garden end of the store and turned off the engine. He walked toward the gate and pulled a flat bed cart from inside the door. His dad gave him plenty of cash to cover the supplies, plus a detailed note with a description of the stones he wanted for the side yard.

As he walked through the store, he stopped by the display of rose bushes, which reminded him of his mother. On a whim, he picked out a rose bush with vibrant orange blossoms to surprise her.

That oughta earn me some points with Mom! Now, on to the rocks.

At the far side of the garden center, the entire end was lined with the heavier items – like bags of soil and mulch, bricks, stepping stones, edging tiles, and ceramic statues that Sam could never figure out why people would bother putting in their yards. He went straight to the stones his father wanted and loaded up the quantity his father requested.

He knew it was a fairly heavy load he just put on the flat bed, but he was surprised when suddenly he felt a little light-headed. He started toward the checkout, thinking that perhaps he just needed to get out of here and to a drive-through for a Coke. Then, out of nowhere, the burning hit.

Oh shit! Really? Here?!

His squinted eyes looked around for nearby shoppers and a place to sit down. Luckily, there was a concrete bench three paces away. He stumbled over to it and collapsed onto the

bench. With his head in his hands, he tried to breathe as deeply as his cramped body would allow.

C'mon. Now?! Damnshitdamn. C'mon! It's gotta pass...

Sam tried to slow his breathing, calm himself. As he did, he suddenly realized that he could hear the thousands of water drops from the fountain section of the store a hundred yards away. It was deafening. The smell of the mulch bags across the aisle was more than his stomach wanted to handle.

If anyone knew the number of termites that were in each of those bags, they'd switch to river rock in a heartbeat! Wow... I can hear them crawling. And chewing. That's disgusting! And cool.

And then he felt it – the pair of eyes on the side of his skull. Hoping it would go away, Sam didn't dare look up.

Maybe it's just another shopper looking at the potting soil behind me.

Then he felt the eyes boring into him stronger, as if they were getting closer in proximity. Yes, in fact they were getting closer, as he could hear the soft patter of her flip-flops approaching him.

Go away, please. I'm fine, this will pass. Just go away. I can't take any questions right now. PLEASE.

“Oh. My. God! I know what's happening to you!” said the voice.

Sam looked up through the sunlight and realized that he couldn't completely make out her face between the glare of the sun and the haze in his brain. “What?”

“I know what's happening to you,” she repeated.

“How could you...” he started, then thinking better of himself, he kept up his ritual of deep breathing. He felt her sit down next to him. Not close enough to touch, he knew she was keeping a cautious distance. Well, more like he sensed she was keeping a cautious distance.

They sat there in silence for what seemed like an eternity. He couldn't completely concentrate on his breathing, which in his recollection was supposed to speed up the process. His mind was muddled with the scent of her – a mixture of apricot facial scrub and some kind of floral shower gel. Sam was never good at girly scents, and with his brain all jumbled, now wasn't even the moment to try.

Focus, Sam. One breath... Two... Three...

All of a sudden the weight seemed to lighten, the pain stopped. He exhaled sharply. As if she knew it was gone, she reached out and touched his shoulder. He looked up at her, finally seeing her clearly.

“Is the brain burn gone?” She couldn't have worded that question more accurately or efficiently.

How in the world could she possibly know what was going on in my head?

“Who are you? And how could...” he cut off his sentence, fearful of giving too much away. He rubbed the back of his neck, which he realized was wet with a cold sweat.

“How did I know your brain was frying like someone poured battery acid into it?”

Okay, perhaps she could get just a little more accurate. Bullseye. Pretty and smart. Who is this chick?

She continued, “I'm not exactly sure... It was kind of weird. I felt the quick blast hit my forehead – it almost pulled my eyes toward you – I couldn't help it. So cool! Then I saw the reaction in your eyes. I haven't had any in so long, and this one didn't stay long. I figured it was

some sort of signal... That maybe we're connected, we can sense each other's flashes when we're close to one another. I knew there had to be more! Well, I hoped at least."

"What? Signal? More?" *She's speaking in code!*

"More people like me! Anyway, back to you. Once the quick flash in my head startled me, made me look at you, I could see the way it took over your body so suddenly – I'm surprised that you had the strength to even stagger to this bench. And I could see the way you looked around, hoping that no one else would see that something strange, something you can't even explain if your life depended on it, would notice."

"And yet, here you are. All full of notice. How lucky am I?" he managed back, through gritted teeth.

"Well, I can't speak for you, but I'm feeling pretty lucky myself. I've been hoping, waiting to find you." She laughed, her blue eyes sparkling. "I just never imagined it would be next to the garden gnomes."

Chapter Four

“What do you mean you’ve been waiting to find me? How did you know about me?”

“Well, I didn’t really,” she replied. “I was hoping, actually. I spent the last year and a half struggling with this all on my own, hoping to find someone who might be going through the same confusion that my life has turned into. I’m Leesha, by the way.”

“Sam.” His head was still reeling, but it was getting gradually better.

“Nice to meet you. I mean, it’s really nice to find you. I thought I would be stuck with this secret forever, and now, out of the blue, here you are! Hey. Can you move stuff?”

“What?” *Could she ramble any more?*

“Can you move stuff? You know, with your brain.”

This chick is making no sense at all. Who can move things with their brain? Wait... It’s not as if my brain hasn’t been doing some pretty incredible stuff.

“No... Can you?”

“Yep. It was pretty freaky at first, and then when the flashes of pain finally stopped, I decided it was a pretty cool parlor trick! Wanna see?”

“Uh, YEAH.” *Duh. Of course I want to see this.*

She set down the duct tape in her hand and looked around to make sure no one was watching or within earshot. All of a sudden the conversation had the feeling of some secret covert operation.

“Do you see that sign right there – for the bird baths on sale?”

“Yeah.”

And then it happened. It moved four inches to the left.

“YOU did that?” Sam was scared and amazed all in the blink of an eye.

“Yep.”

“With your brain.”

“Yep.”

“No way. Do it again.” Sam wanted to make sure his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. Or worse yet, that she wasn’t playing tricks on him.

“Okay, but let’s be careful. I don’t think the general public is ready for this kind of thing. Hey, that’s a nice rose bush you’ve got there,” she nodded to his cart.

Sam glanced down and his plant was levitated about two inches in the air and turning a complete one-eighty. She set it down as gracefully as it floated, all without lifting a finger.

“Does anyone know you can do this?” he asked Leesha. His eyes were wide, his mouth gaping.

“No. I’ve been afraid to talk to anyone about it. I mean, who’s going to understand? Plus, I don’t really want to be the next NASA science experiment. Who knows what scientists would do with something like this.”

This was all more than Sam could comprehend. There were so many questions he had for her, to try and get a grip on what was going on inside him. As his mind raced, he snapped back to reality and remembered his dad would be expecting his return with the landscaping stones.

“Look, there’s so much I want to ask you, to discuss with you about this,” Sam started, “but right now my dad is waiting at home for me, and I’ve already been gone longer than I should have. Can we get together later?”

“You bet we can. I just found you – I’m not letting you get away so easily. We’ve GOT to figure out some answers to all of this stuff. I hope you’re my key to finding them.”

“What are you doing later on tonight?”

“Nothing, now. My schedule is cleared for this.”

Sam thought quickly. “Do you know the coffee shop on the corner of 3rd and Madison? Frannie's?”

“Yeah, sure I do. It's a dive.”

“It is,” Sam replied, “but it's always empty.”

“Right. I follow you...”

“Meet me there at eight tonight?”

“You got it, partner. See you then,” she smiled widely. Sam couldn't help but notice the gleam of hope in her blue eyes.

“See you then.” His hope for answers was probably just as strong as hers.

Sam bolted out of the nursery, loaded up the truck and headed for home as quickly as he could. His mind was racing, and he couldn't quite get a grip on what just happened. Not only did he have another episode – and he had been waiting for this to happen – but he found someone else that has been through the same thing. So many questions were churning through his mind, which only added to the chaos in his brain from his extra senses that lingered from the last blast of fire.

Did she really just move things with her mind? How cool is that?! I wonder if she can teach me how to do that... Okay, okay. Focus. You've got to figure out exactly what you need to know about her and from her. For crying out loud, you didn't even get her whole name – or her phone number! Oh, I hope she shows tonight...

As Sam sped home, his mind methodically checked off all the questions he wanted to ask her. He didn't get a clear look at her – his head was reeling and burning the whole time they talked – but he figured she was in high school or college. She was there alone, so he guessed she was old enough to drive, but he suspected that she was a couple years older than him. He needed to know everything about her – who she was, where she came from, places that she had been – there had to be some sort of connection between the two of them. If they could find that connection, maybe they could figure out what happened to them.

Sam parked in the driveway around four o'clock that afternoon and spent the following three hours helping his father unload the stones and place them according to his instruction. The work wasn't hard, but in Sam's mind, it seemed like the time dragged on forever. Finally at seven, they finished and Sam bolted for the shower. He hurried to get dressed and as he raced down the stairs, his mother stopped him.

“Hi, honey. Do you want dinner?” Sam knew she worried about him, even though he tried his best to act normal.

“No, thanks Mom,” he flashed his brightest smile at her, all the while knowing she could probably see right through his attempt. “I'm going out to meet a friend.”

“Oh? Who are you going out with? Is it a date?”

She is so totally on to me. “No, it's not a date. Just a new friend I met – her name is Leesha. We're meeting at Frannie's, so I'll grab some dinner there.” *Keep it simple. The less info the better, but stick to as much of the truth as you can, just in case.*

“Well, okay then... Be careful. What time do you think you'll be home? Do you have your cell with you?” As mothers went, she was totally thorough. She never ran out of questions.

Sam's curfew was at midnight, but he always tried to be home before then, thinking that he got extra credit for being reliable. "I've got my cell. I shouldn't be out too late – maybe eleven or so. I'll call if it's later than that." *That should earn me a few points.*

"All right." He turned to leave. "Oh, and Sam?"

"Yes, Mom?"

"The yard looks great. Thanks for helping your dad with that."

"No problem, Mom. Anytime."

"And Sam... I love my new rose bush. You picked out my favorite color. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mom. You deserve it," and he meant it.

Sam knew that his family was pretty normal, kind of straight-as-an-arrow kind of perfect. His was the kind of family that everyone wanted when they saw "story book" families depicted in movies and television. His sister was a pain sometimes, and his parents were overly protective, but all in all, Sam knew he was pretty lucky.

He turned and headed for his truck. He couldn't wait to get to Frannie's.

Chapter Five

She was waiting for him when he got there, in the back corner booth. He recognized her immediately, even from his muddled recollection of the few moments they spent together earlier, her jet black hair and quick smile made her an easy target to identify. He glanced at his watch. He was early, by about four minutes.

Well, she's prompt. Points for her.

"Hey," Sam started, sitting down. "Thanks for meeting me. My mind's been racing since I saw you this afternoon."

"Mine has too! I gave up hope that I might be able to find any rational connection or answer as to what happened to me. I was so... Well, relieved is the right word, to find you."

"You said happened – past tense," Sam questioned. "Do you mean you're not having episodes any more?"

"No. You call them episodes? That's funny. No, the flashes are gone. All that's left is the extra brain power it left." She tapped her head and gave him a crooked grin that reached half of her face.

"Okay, start from the beginning. Tell me what happened. I want to know everything – how old were you when it started, what it felt like, what you did about it, who you told – give me all your details," he pleaded.

"The first time it happened I was sitting in detention. It was maybe a year and a half ago, so the end of my freshman year."

"Wait. So you're in high school? Where do you go to school?"

"Central."

"Have you always lived here?"

"Born and raised," she continued. "Except for about nine months - I was seven - my mother wanted to move to the Gulf Coast. She followed some deadbeat boyfriend of hers down there. He was a fry cook at one of the casinos. We moved back right after they broke up. My grandparents are here, so it's always been home base for us."

"So you were in detention..." he prodded, trying to get her back on track.

"Right, detention. I got in trouble in Spanish class for talking too much..."

I can't even imagine...

"... so I was just sitting there after school, trying to not do my homework, when out of the blue a migraine hit me like a ton of bricks."

"Uh-huh..."

"I mean, I know now that it wasn't a migraine, but that's what I figured at the time. I'd never had a headache like that. It started in my temples and burned like fire. I couldn't see for a few minutes. I laid my head down on the desk with my eyes squeezed shut, because I knew if I opened them, the light from the room might burn holes in my brain."

"Did it hurt anywhere else?" Sam was curious, as it felt like his burning reached every corner of his body.

"No – just my head. It was on fire."

"How long did it last?"

"Oh, I don't know," Leesha's eyebrows pinched in thought. "I suppose three or four minutes. Hard to remember now... But I remember it felt like forever!"

"And then it stopped?"

“Yeah. That’s the really weird part. Just when I thought my head was going to explode, the pain stopped, almost like it never started.”

“Did you tell anyone what happened?” Sam wondered.

“I mentioned it to my mom, but we both just figured it was like a migraine. It didn’t happen again for like a couple more months, and she never asked about it again... She’s not really the best mom, if you know what I mean. And the next time it happened, I accidentally discovered the telekinesis thing, and was so freaked out, I didn’t tell anyone. It’s been a secret ever since. Until today, that is.”

“What do you mean you accidentally discovered the – what did you call it?”

“Telekinesis,” she continued. “It’s basically the technical word for the ability to move things with the power of your mind.”

She threw her head back and let out a deep, throaty laugh. “I suppose it wasn’t very funny at the time, but when I look back at it now, I can’t help but laugh. Anyway, it’s like two months later, early June, and I’m sitting in my lifeguard chair at my summer job.”

“Lifeguard?” Sam raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

“Champion of the swim team, thank you very much.”

“You don’t seem like the jock sort.”

“I don’t fit well into any mold. You’ll figure that out quickly.”

“I suppose,” he said. “Continue...”

She smiled. “Thank you. Anyway, I was in my chair and the migraine hit my head out of nowhere. I seriously thought I would fall out of that chair in front of everyone. Luckily I had my sunglasses on, so when I clamped my eyes shut, no one noticed. When the burning hit my head, everything else was kind of blurry – all of the sounds kind of got quiet and fuzzy – almost like an out of body experience. I peeked through my eyes to figure out if I could get myself down from the chair, and I caught sight of this fat kid – a real pain in the butt every day of my summer – who got a cramp in the deep end of the pool and was about to go under. I was torn between trying to save my head, and do my job. In a fit of rage, I kind of just willed him out of the pool.”

“What do you mean you willed him out of the pool?”

“Well, I knew that my head would not allow my body to move. I literally couldn’t get down from the perch I was on and physically get him out of the water myself. So I wished him up and onto the concrete. That fat kid FLEW out of the water and just flopped onto his side, like a walrus. What was his name? Nate! Nate. Nate, the walrus. Honestly, it would have been a chore for me to haul him up with my own two hands. It ended up much better this way.”

“Did anyone see this?!” Sam looked horrified.

She chuckled, her blue eyes sparkling with the recollection. “You know, you’d think someone would have. And looking back, I’m probably lucky that no one did. The other lifeguard on duty was on the other end of the pool, at the zero entry side. And the pool was always so loud and full of kids that no one else really paid attention to what anyone else was doing. Anyway, Nate flew up out of the water and hit the slab, instantly crying and holding his calf. He was hysterical, everyone swarmed him at once, but no one could get any information out of him beyond the fact that his leg cramped up. In all the chaos, I don’t think anyone even realized that he had concrete burn marks on his left shoulder and butt cheek!” She threw her head back and laughed again.

“Did you know instantly that you did that with your mind?” Sam was riveted.

“Not really. By the time my head cleared, I thought maybe my mind was playing tricks on me through all the haze. Once I got home, and really thought through the afternoon’s events, I

tried to recreate the telekinesis, but it didn't work. So I figured I just imagined it. Or another person got him out of the pool – someone I didn't see in the midst of my headache.”

“So you lost it?” Sam was coming up with more questions as each one he asked was given an answer. “How did you get it back?”

“It seemed like the burning flashes came in spurts, like a couple at a time really close together, then it took a few days off. Then I'd get like three more, then a week without anything. Each time I'd get a flash, the telekinesis would kick in and last an hour or so. After about a month, I started getting flashes every day, then twice a day, then the last couple of days it was a constant burn. Then it stopped. Well, the burning stopped, but the telekinesis stayed. It's been with me ever since.”

“And no pain since?”

“Nope. None at all. It's over.”

“You mean to tell me that this pain is going to get worse?”

“Well, I can't be sure for you, but for me it got more frequent, but the pain lessened each time. Almost as if the burning cooled a little with each episode.”

“And your burning was just in your head?”

“Yes. Isn't yours?”

“No,” Sam grimaced. “Actually, it kills my entire body. I burn everywhere.”

“Oh... That sucks.” Her face was sober.

“Tell me about it.”

“How many times has it happened to you?” Leesha turned the conversation over to him. She had as many questions for him as he did for her.

“It just started Wednesday. Wednesday after school I was home alone and it hit me – much like you said, but the burning felt like it crippled my entire body. I had another one that night – woke me up in the middle of the night. Then nothing until this afternoon. So three times, total.”

“And can you move things with your mind?”

Sam looked down at his napkin. “No.”

“Well, what can you do?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Sam, it didn't happen for me right away. But it does sound like we're having similar experiences. I have to think your body is changing the way mine did. Isn't there anything different that happens to you after each flash?”

He thought a minute. “Well, I can't move anything with my mind, but it seems like each time it happens my hearing and my sense of smell get stronger. The first time it happened, I could hear things like a half mile away from me, and I turned on the faucet and was blown away by the smell of the gunk in tap water. Oh! And the second time – in the middle of the night – I could see everything clearly without any of the lights on.”

“Super senses?! That's cool! Does it affect your touch?” Leesha was alert with curiosity.

“Yeah. The first time it happened I got in the shower and it felt really hot, and almost like the water pressure was cranked up to super sonic power.”

“What about your taste?”

“I'm not totally sure... Every time it's happened, I've been too freaked out to wanna eat. By the time I'm hungry again, the power has passed. I did notice our tap water is disgusting,” and he proceeded to fill her in on his experience with the water.

“My power got stronger as the flashes grew in intensity. I had to work on it a bit – really concentrate on objects and distances, but you’ll find that you’ll get stronger and better at it. I wonder if this will grow into any other powers for you as you get closer to the end of the flashes...”

Sam’s eyebrows went up. “Do you really think the flashes will end? I mean, do you honestly think our experiences are connected somehow?”

“They have to be. I believe that you and I were brought together by some force to figure this out. You are my gift to understanding this. Because if I can’t finally understand what this is all about, eventually it will drive me crazy.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to work on finding some answers.”

Leesha smiled in approval. “Agreed.”

They sat and talked for a total of three and a half hours, updating each other on their experiences and research that they’d done. Since they both agreed that Sam was in the beginning phases of his transformation (for lack of a better word), they decided each time he had an episode, he would keep a diary of when it happened, how it felt physically, how long it lasted, and ultimately what strange anomalies or abilities resulted from the occurrence and how long they lasted after the episode. Sam preferred to call them “magic powers,” but Leesha’s scientific rationale shot that down right away.

Leesha promised to do a little more research on heightened senses to see if she could uncover any information that passed by Sam in his initial search. She also had some files on telekinesis that she would bring for Sam to review when they met next.

They swapped phone numbers, email addresses and physical addresses, and set the next meeting date – next Saturday afternoon at the downtown library. They could communicate in between as needed, but the next meeting was designed to be a working session. They knew they would have to be discreet in a quiet library, given the sensitive material, but if they were going to research, a library was the best place to start.

Chapter Six

He watched the teenage boy leave the diner and walk across the parking lot to his truck. He'd followed Leesha from her home to Frannie's, not completely sure who she was meeting and why. He couldn't hear what they talked about, since his surveillance point was the parking space right outside the front window.

He saw the girl discretely demonstrate her powers once during the conversation, though she was careful to make sure no one was watching. But he didn't hear a word of what was said. It didn't matter for now, he was just thrilled at the thought of possibly finding another one of his patients.

He lost track of this one – this one and each of the others during his time in the slammer. The authorities confiscated his medical records when he was convicted, so he didn't have any paper trail of the names and contact information of those he injected so many years ago. He had so many plans, and each day he spent in jail felt like another day of progress slipping away from him. He wondered if he would ever realize his vision, his ultimate goal for the children. His dream. His army.

It was by pure luck he found Leesha Conway one day last year at a flea market thirty-eight miles south of here. He was puzzled when he looked up and saw the falling tent pole mysteriously change directions and miss the toddler by inches. In the confused ruckus that followed, he noticed one person – a teenage girl – was the only one that didn't seem surprised by the near miss. In fact, it was when he saw her satisfied smirk that he wondered if she was to credit for the miracle. Then he recognized the woman accompanying her – her mother – and put the pieces together.

Leesha had changed a lot in the years since he delivered and treated her as a baby, but her mother looked like the tramp she was back then – just a few years older, but still the same trash. He would recognize her anywhere, and remembered the day she came into the hospital wing, screaming in pain, and begging for drugs. She was just a child then herself, probably close to the same age her daughter was now.

He was at the flea market scouting, had been searching the area for any sign of those he spent his time, his research, his resources on so many years ago. He never quite gave up hope that he could gather them together and finish his work.

He had done as much as he could to change his appearance in the last few years, but he was still leery of mingling in the town that had once uncovered his secrets and put him in jail for them. Though he didn't think anyone today would recognize him, he stayed far away from the hospital and past connections, with a few exceptions that continued to supply him with information and any necessary materials. He paid them well for their loyalty, so they kept coming back.

He was sure that following the Conway girl for the past months would eventually pay off, and now it had. Neither she nor the boy noticed him watching them from just outside Frannie's, and for now, he would continue to keep his distance. But he hoped that they were pooling their resources, and connecting on the very level he originally intended the group would be capable of when the time was ready.

As the boy pulled out of the parking lot and turned onto the street, he took note of his license plate number in order to trace his identity and find out his location.

Chapter Seven

Sam's Sunday went by uneventfully, just another quiet day with the family. Church, then Sunday school, then Dad put steaks on the grill for lunch afterwards. The weather was starting to get cooler, and since they always stored the grill in the shed for the winter, they all wanted to get one last home grilled steak before winter broke.

Sam was secretly relieved not to go out to brunch after church, which was often the family tradition, but he was trying to avoid any kind of public activity until he got a handle on what was going on with the episodes. He wished there was a way to know when they were going to hit, with enough time to find some privacy, but up to this point there had been no precursor signal to the burn.

After lunch, Sam sat down to watch the Packers game with his dad, a lifelong cheese head. When the game was over and victorious, Sam excused himself to his bedroom, with the explanation of homework. He did have homework, which he intended to get done, but he first wanted to do some research on telekinesis as well.

Let's see... According to Wikipedia, telekinesis – or psychokinesis - refers to the direct influence of mind on a physical system that cannot be entirely accounted for by the mediation of any known physical energy. Examples could include distorting or moving an object or influencing the output of a random number generator. Blah, blah, blah... Here we go: There is no convincing scientific evidence that telekinesis exists. A meta-analysis of 380 studies found a "very small" effect which could be explained by publication bias.

What is publication bias? Whatever...

Experiments have historically been criticized for lack of proper controls and repeatability. However, some experiments have created illusions of telekinesis where none exists, and these illusions depend to an extent on the subject's prior belief in the ability.

Sam spent some time reading through the history of telekinesis, how it was named, and the scientists who worked together to define it. Terms such as "remote influencing," "distant mental influence," and "directed conscious intention" kept appearing throughout the material, but Sam just found all of the scientific jargon confusing and burdensome. He was grateful that Leesha would be better at this research thing than he seemed to be.

As he got to the information on modern technology and scientific studies, Sam began to understand why Leesha was hesitant to request any medical or scientific help in uncovering this mystery. Not only is the general public super skeptical (not that he can blame them, he would be too if he hadn't seen it himself!), but the ways in which some of the scientists tested this kind of stuff were downright barbaric.

You'd be crazy if you think I'm going to let anyone drill a contraption like that into my skull! No way. No how. NOT going to happen.

There were other web pages he found along his search, but most of them were hokey and didn't appear to have any scientific data to back up the information that was presented. Some were downright laughable, some pages showed people with spirals in their eyes and others merely listed sci-fi movies where the plot line revolved around the paranormal. The bottom line was that no one really knew if the ability was possible, there were a million different theories, but no one had been able to document a particular person or case in which telekinesis was recorded and measured.

Sam felt that reading through the information, after all was said and done, was a good exercise, as now he felt he knew a little bit more about Leesha and her abilities. He couldn't

imagine having to discover this and mentally process it alone, and he realized that he was grateful that Leesha found him when she did. He recognized that while he spent about half of a week scared out of his mind wondering what was happening to him, she spent the better part of a year and a half feeling the same exact way.

That must have sucked for her! All of this, and she was alone. Well, at least we've got each other now. I'll do everything I can to help her figure this out.

And with that pledge, he begrudgingly switched over to his trig assignment, then on to drafting his book report for literature class. After a couple more hours at it, he shut down his computer, loaded his school pack for the next day, and got ready for bed.

Great. Just EXACTLY what I needed today. Why, of all days, does my truck decide not to start? I don't have time to mess with it now! I guess I'll have to fix it after school today.

Sam kept turning the ignition, hoping each time that the truck would suddenly miraculously come to life, but so far, no luck. Angry, he stepped out of the cab, slammed the door, and stomped back up to the house. His sister was already gone – she always left early to socialize before the start of classes – or he'd have hitched with her.

"Mom?" He yelled as soon as he hit the door.

"What is it, Sam?" It was the first thing she heard out of him in what seemed like days, so naturally she sounded a little worried. "What's wrong?"

"My truck won't start."

"Oh no, honey! That's awful. What do you think it is?"

"No clue. But I don't have time to figure it out. I need to get to school. What time are you leaving?"

"Not for another forty-five minutes or so. I've got a meeting close to here, so was going straight there, then in to the office. But I think your dad is leaving here shortly." She turned and yelled across the house: "Dan! Sam needs a ride to school. Can you take him?"

"Yep," he said in a much quieter tone, as he was just appearing around the corner of the entry way. "I'm headed out now. You ready, pal?"

"Yeah, Dad. Thanks."

"No biggie. And I'll come home early this afternoon to give you a hand under the hood. We'll get it fixed this afternoon." Sam was grateful that his dad was so handy around the house – especially with mechanical things. He guessed that was where he picked up much of his fix-it skills, tinkering around with his dad.

His mother turned back to Sam. "Lexi is supposed to come straight home from school to finish her biology project. Make sure you catch her at school, she can give you a ride home."

"Mom, I can get a ride home..." The last thing he wanted to do was ride with his sister, for crying out loud.

"Okay, but if you need to, she can take you," his mother insisted.

"Okay, Mom. Thanks."

Mondays were always Sam's favorite school day because instead of having to go to P.E. in fourth period, he was excused to participate in student government. Normally it wasn't a big deal – the group got together to talk about upcoming events like Homecoming activities and the rules and regulations of the ad hoc student clubs. Sam would not have even run for election,

except that he knew the activity would look good on his college applications. Plus, Ty ran with him, so it gave them an extra chance to hang out during school time.

Today, however, Sam was having a hard time concentrating on the agenda the group was discussing. His mind seemed to be on eleven different things, and this Monday couldn't go quite fast enough. He needed to get home to fix his truck, then study for a health quiz, and most importantly he needed to do more research on senses.

"Hey Sam," Ty whispered across his desk. "What's going on tonight?"

"Uh, nothing man." Sam was caught by surprise. Ty had kind of neglected him for the past few weeks, spending the bulk of his time with his girlfriend. He wondered if Ty was suddenly single again. "My truck wouldn't start this morning, so I've got to get it fixed when I get home. Hey – can I catch a ride home with you after school tonight?"

"No, sorry. I've got to take Mena to shop for her dress for the dance."

Well, that answers that. What a loser – he's shopping for dresses?

"That's okay, I can catch a ride with Lexi."

"Do you want to try and get together tonight to watch the game? We could hook up for pizza? Mena wants to go out, and I can't stand to be around some of the girls she's invited..." Ty grimaced.

Oh, so now he's using me as his backup entertainment. Great. Well, I am a good wing man, but I don't have the stomach for Mena or her girlfriends. Not tonight.

"Ty, I can't. I don't know how long it'll take to fix the truck, and then I've got that health quiz to study for." Truth be told, Sam didn't think he'd need long to study, but he was hoping to connect with Leesha online tonight to see if she got anywhere in her research attempts.

"No problem," Ty said, though he sounded disappointed. "Maybe next time. I may bail anyway. She's kind of getting on my nerves right now anyway."

Big surprise. Huge. He'll go anyway. She'll make him.

When school was finally over, Sam walked out to Lexi's car. He saw her over lunch, so she knew to wait for him before heading home. She was already inside, adjusting her radio and checking her lip gloss in the rear view mirror.

"It's about time, bro." She looked at him impatiently.

"Well hello, Lexi. It's lovely to see you too. Thank you so very much for the gracious transportation."

"Shut the sass or I'll leave you here."

He knew he was at her mercy. Normally the two of them got along, but like most brothers and sisters, they knew how to push each other's buttons. He settled back in his seat as she put the car in reverse.

That's when it hit. Like every other time, this one came out of nowhere. He wasn't expecting it, and there was no warning whatsoever.

"Ahhhhhh!" Sam screamed and instantly gripped his temples and put his head between his knees, eyes clamped tightly shut.

"What?! What is wrong with you?" Lexi's expression went from annoyance to wide-eyed horror in an instant. She slammed on the brakes.

"Nothing. Nothing. Just get us out of here." Sam tried to concentrate on his breathing, but the vibration of the car motor was shaking his seat so badly he couldn't clear his mind to focus.

“Sam! What IS it?” Lexi was screaming now. She’d never seen her brother in this much pain.

“Lexi. Stop shouting and get us out of the parking lot. Now!”

Lexi slammed on the accelerator, throwing gravel everywhere in her path, and headed for home. Sam thought his head would explode, or worse yet, he would throw up from the pain. In a moment of clarity, he glanced at his watch to note the time. He knew he would need to document this later.

In between breaths, Sam did a check list of his senses. His ears could hear each mechanical clicking, grinding and turning of the motor of Lexi’s VW. The other traffic on the road was just as noisy, with the turning of rubber wheels on the pavement and the vast array of radio stations that each car in the six block area was tuned on. He found that he could choose to tune that out and concentrate on the environment – the rustling of the leaves in the trees overhead and the chirping of birds in flight. Then, blocking that, he was able to focus on each house they passed and what was going on inside the walls – they just passed a television tuned to Oprah’s afternoon show, and the next house was having a debate over the dinner menu.

Selective hearing... I can focus on what it is I want to hear. That’s progress. Now let’s see if it works for my nose.

He sat back in his seat, eyes still shut, and breathed in deeply. At first notice, Sam caught the scents within the car – the gas that pumped through the ignition system, the oil, lubricants, and windshield washer fluids, and the dirt and dust that was caught in the car’s interior carpets and upholstery.

Gross! It stinks in here. Lexi really needs to clean her car!

Sam then tried to shut these scents off and reach out further. This was a little bit harder, but after a few seconds he noticed the scent of burning leaves approximately two blocks to the right of where they were driving. He also picked up the smell of freshly cut lawn from several different yards around them.

Ew, stank! Is that dog shit? Okay, block that one... It’s good I’m learning how to do this. It feels like the burn is starting to fade. Finally!

With that relief, Sam decided to try and open his eyes and test his sight. Looking out the window, nothing really seemed out of the ordinary. It was daylight, so he couldn’t test the see-in-the-dark theory, but he did notice that everything he looked at seemed a bit crisper, like he put on corrective glasses for the first time. He could see the ribbing of lines on the protective coating on the telephone wires above the streets, the rust crystals that stained the side of an office building as they turned the corner, and the pollen particles floating in the air each time the breeze seemed to spring up. It didn’t appear as if anything was closer to his eyes, but Sam noted the detail as if he were seeing it through a different lens – like a pair of binoculars or a microscope.

As they topped the hill, Sam looked down and realized that he could see the detail much further down the horizon than he ever remembered. Shifting his gaze, he looked down at the floorboard, to see if he could see the particles trapped in the car’s carpet. He squinted and focused on his eyes, and everything in his sight shifted. First he could see the carpet fibers and the dirt and grime that was tracked in over time. Then, as if he was concentrating too hard on seeing into the carpet, his eyes focused through the floorboard and he was suddenly watching the pavement below the car as it sped down the road.

“Oh. My. God,” was all Sam could get out.

“What?! What is it? You haven’t said a word since we left the school... Are you okay?” Lexi was almost hysterical with worry. He looked over and saw that her eyes were filled with tears and terror as she pulled into their driveway.

“Lexi, I’m fine. Calm down,” he tried to comfort her. “It was just a headache that hit very quickly. It’s gone now. Really, I’m fine.”

Then suddenly he heard her, only she wasn’t talking. She didn’t believe him. Her mind was racing, though he couldn’t make out any words. But he could sense her feelings, and he knew she was worried about him and contemplating whether or not to tell their parents about what just happened.

“Listen, Lex...” he pleaded. “Look at me. Look in my eyes. I’m fine. Believe me – there’s nothing wrong. Nothing at all. You don’t have to freak out, and please don’t tell Mom and Dad.”

She knows something is up. How can I convince her that everything is normal? Especially when I don’t even know what’s normal anymore?

“What do you mean don’t tell Mom and Dad? What is going on Sam?”

“Just trust me. I can’t explain it, but I promise you, there is nothing wrong. Please don’t tell anyone about what just happened.” Sam resigned himself to the fact that she knew something was off, so he improvised, because he knew he wouldn’t be able to convince her otherwise.

“There is something weird happening, but I promise it’s not life threatening. I haven’t figured it all out yet, but I am getting help from someone, and I promise to fill you in when I know myself.” It was really all the truth he wanted to give her at this moment. He prayed it would be enough to satisfy her, for now.

Suddenly he could feel her calm down. She looked at him skeptically, but he knew she trusted and believed him.

“You promise? You’ll tell me everything?”

“I promise.” He hoped he could keep his promise. If she kept this secret for him, without knowing any of the details, he owed her at least that.

“Okay. I won’t tell. But promise me something else?”

“Sure, what?”

“You’ll come get me if you need me?”

“Sure, Lex. I promise,” and with that, he noticed that the burn was completely gone. He glanced down at his watch and noticed the time again.

I’ve got to go and write all of this down. Leesha’s gonna freak...

Chapter Eight

Sam spent the next forty-five minutes feverishly making notes of the afternoon's episode into a journal file he created on his laptop. He knew his father would be home in the next few minutes, so he was trying to wrap up his documentation while it was still fresh in his head.

Lexi kept pacing back and forth from the hallway to the adjoining bathroom to peek in on him. It was kind of sweet, Sam thought, that she was worried about him. There had been studies and folklore for years about the bond between twin siblings, but Sam never really put any stock into it until today. They really did seem to have a connection, and Sam wondered if that was why he could sense what was going on in her head, or if it was perhaps another facet of his abilities.

He kept checking his senses, and up to this point, they were still heightened. He was starting to get used to this, and knew when they faded away this time, he would ultimately be disappointed. He was mostly intrigued with the ability to see through things, and kept testing this sense. So far he was able to see through the walls in his house, the floor between his room and the living room below, but he was unable to crack the stainless steel of the refrigerator door.

I wonder... Why can't I see through metal? Will I be able to as my abilities strengthen?

Knowing he needed to get out to his truck, but still keep track of his thoughts and the timing of when his abilities faded, he stuck a Post-it pad and pen into the back pocket of his jeans and headed towards the stairs. He heard his father's car turn the corner into the subdivision three blocks away.

Okay, here we go. Just act normal.

He put on his best game face and headed out into the front yard.

It only took them about ten minutes to realize that the battery cables to the truck were corroded and needed replaced. Sam and his dad hopped in the SUV and headed to the nearest parts department, relieved that they didn't have to pay for a new battery, or worse yet, a new alternator. All along the drive, Sam continued to test his senses, which were going strong now for almost two hours.

As they hit the door to the store, Sam's nose was greeted by twenty-two different versions of auto air fresheners, and since they were displayed to the immediate left of the entrance, his nose went berserk. He shook his head.

Wow! Um, yeah... Block this fast!

He reached out a little further, first with his nose, smelling the metal parts and cardboard boxes. Then he tested his eyes. It was funny how he could try and look through an entire aisle – he could see through the paper and plastic packaging, but anything that contained metal parts inside it left a big blind spot in his vision. The anomaly with metal is definitely something that he wanted to mention to Leesha. He figured if anyone could research the solution, she could.

Sam followed his dad to the area of the store where the battery supplies were, picked out what they needed, paid the cashier and headed for home. At this point, Sam noted by the clock on the dash, the sky should be getting dark, as dusk was setting in earlier and earlier. But his vision was still as clear and bright as if it were in the middle of the day.

Racing against the impending darkness, Sam's dad quickly pulled into the driveway and the two of them unwrapped the parts they needed and proceeded to install the new battery cables. Sam's head was under the hood of his truck and he was fastening the last clamp when all went dark in his vision.

Great. It's gone. Crap!

He looked at his watch and discretely wrote the exact time down on the pad of paper in his pocket after he lowered the hood of his truck.

“Well, I guess we finished in the nick of time,” his dad said. “A few more minutes and we would have needed a flashlight.”

“Yeah, I guess we got lucky,” Sam responded, trying not to sound sour at his new misfortune.

“Go ahead and start it up. Let's see if we got everything hooked up properly and fixed.”

Sam crawled in behind the wheel and turned the ignition. Sure enough, it started right up, and all was right in the world again.

Well, almost everything...

After dinner, Sam helped load the dishwasher and then excused himself to his bedroom. He finished his homework in his last period at school, so he booted his computer up with the hopes that Leesha was online. She was, so he sent her a message to let her know he had another flash earlier that afternoon.

Leesha was thrilled with the news and asked if he recorded everything. He said that he did, and he would share his notes with her at their next arranged meeting on Saturday afternoon. Beyond that, both of them were afraid to get too detailed with specific information online, in case anything they communicated got intercepted by some unknown source.

So they spent the next hour and a half chatting back and forth about normal teenage stuff – school, families, activities, homework. Sam had a lot of questions for Leesha about her past, but since they were online, he focused on asking her about her family and basic history. Since she seemed to be a talker, it wasn't hard getting information of any kind out of her.

Leesha shared that she was an only child. Her mother, Toni, got pregnant with her when she was fourteen, and delivered her shortly after her fifteenth birthday. Since she was still in high school, Leesha's grandparents were a major part in raising her, especially in the first five or six years. They insisted that Toni go to college, which she tried, and eventually partied her way into failing out of in the middle of her fourth semester. She then bounced around from job to job, all the while they continued to live rent free at Toni's parents.

Eventually Leesha's grandparents got tired of Toni's freeloading and failure to make anything out of her life. Conflicted about Leesha's upbringing, but determined to teach Toni a valuable lesson, they kicked the two of them out of the house and set them on their way.

Leesha started kindergarten in the fall, and her grandparents continued to be a major force in her life – picking her up after school and babysitting when needed, even though the relationship between them and their daughter was strained at best. From what Sam could tell, Leesha loved her grandparents very much, and was grateful for all they had done for her throughout her life. She still saw them almost daily, but as she got older, her relationship with her mother grew more and more distant.

Toni, now in her early thirties and still never married, continued her party-animal lifestyle – freeloading now on boyfriends that would pick her up and take care of her as long as the relationship lasted. Her waitress job paid the rent in the little house she shared with Leesha, but neither of them saw much of each other. Toni slept during the day while Leesha was at school, and either worked or partied in the evenings and through the night while Leesha was

asleep. In Sam's opinion, it almost sounded like the roles were reversed – that Leesha was the responsible adult, and Toni was the undependable and irrational child.

I can't believe that Leesha hasn't screwed her own life up. Her mom's a total deadbeat. It's good she's got her grandparents to depend on when she needs it.

Leesha started working when she was fourteen, and continued to pocket away money for a car she knew she would need when she turned sixteen. Every chance she got, she would try and make herself more and more independent.

There were times along the way when she figured out her mother was taking money from her savings, so she started hiding it away in different places in her bedroom – so that even if she found one of her hiding places, it wasn't the entire stash. When she turned sixteen, her grandparents matched her savings, and she was able to afford a used, but respectable, compact car that served as reliable transportation to and from school and work.

In school she loved the sciences, but excelled at everything she did. Chemistry was her favorite class, and she took every opportunity she could to add another science class to her schedule – from physics to anatomy. Her dream was to go to college and then on to medical school. She didn't know if she would specialize, or what she would focus on, but her dream was clear and she intended to follow it. Sam was astonished at how determined she was at such a young age.

I guess when you have to grow up so early, you decide what you want as quickly as you can, and then stick to it. She's got guts, I'll give her that.

It was getting late, but they enjoyed getting to know each other on a personal level, so they agreed to try and connect the following night again. They weren't getting much research done, but Sam knew once he turned his notes over to Leesha on Saturday, it would give her a whole new direction to research. And hopefully she could give him some work to do on his end as well. In the meantime, he hoped he could have another episode to journal and chart, so she had more than one experience to calculate from.

Tired and pleased with the day, Sam turned off his light and fell instantly asleep.

Chapter Nine

Tuesday came and went without incident. The school day seemed to creep slowly, as Sam found himself both waiting for the burn, and looking forward to going home. He never really paid much attention in any of his classes, and luckily he was bright enough to get by with decent grades without having to put in a lot of work.

In biology class his teacher droned on about the genetic makeup of animals versus humans, and something he said triggered Sam's attention. DNA.

I wonder if there is anything to our DNA makeup that is affecting our bodies... Write that down, I'll talk to Leesha about that on Saturday.

It was just a fleeting thought, then Sam went back to clearing his head and trying not to pay attention to either his teacher or the other classmates in the room. As he sat there bored, he decided to try and summon his abilities, wondering if perhaps he could make them work without the pain that usually came first.

He took a deep breath. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He strained his ears. Nope.

He squinted his eyes. Still nothing.

All that was left was a dull headache in his temples that resulted from the extra strain he was putting on his eyes, ears, nose and brain. This one was just a tension headache. He reminded himself not to try that again.

I guess I'm just going to have to let this thing happen. I can't force it, apparently.

Wednesday started out as just another ordinary, boring day at school. It was just mid-fall, and already Sam was tired of school. He walked lazily to each class, listened to lectures half-heartedly, and wished the week would go by faster than it was. He was looking forward to his research time with Leesha on Saturday.

They chatted again the night before, but still wary of communication via internet channels, they kept their conversations light and free of sensitive details. But they were getting to know each other better, and Sam hoped that if nothing else, it would allow them to trust each other and work together more effectively. They shared a common goal, after all.

At lunchtime, Sam sat down in his usual seat next to Ty. It was the one time of the day that they got totally to themselves, and so they both looked forward to this period of the day. On the lunch menu was chicken and dumplings and institutional cafeteria pizza. Neither sounded appetizing, so they both opted to hit the vending machines. Ty got a ham sandwich and pretzels and Sam took the last sub sandwich and a bag of chips.

They got back to the table and just started to unwrap their lunches when the burn hit Sam right in between his eyes.

Son of a...!

He bowed his head slightly and fought the urge to scream, groan or moan, but as the stinging sensation spread through the rest of his body, the urge got harder and harder to ignore. Sam glanced at his watch. Ty was so engrossed in his lunch that he didn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

That's good. He's clueless. I'm not ready for him to know yet. If I can just sit still long enough for this to pass...

He played with his bag of chips as his body burned. Looking down, he could see each and every chip inside the bag as if the packaging itself was crystal clear. He glanced up to see if Ty was watching him and noticed that his lips were moving.

He's talking? I didn't realize that I was tuning him out. Awesome!

All of a sudden, Sam realized that he was seeing the bubbles of carbonation from inside the can of soda sitting in front of him. He could see the brownish syrup swirl around the bubbles as they worked their way toward the air hole in the top of the can.

Oh, sweet! I'm seeing through an aluminum can! Now, I know it's very thin, and it's only aluminum, but that's metal, right? That's progress!

With that, Sam's outlook turned optimistic, and even though his entire body ached, he decided to test his sight. Glancing over at the soda machine, he could see through the lit plastic door and into where the cans were stacked. Even though they were stacked with the bottoms facing him, he could tell what type of soda each column held by the color of the liquid inside. He looked over to the left towards a bank of lockers and sure enough, he could peer right through the front door of each one and see the contents inside. But when he glanced over his right shoulder at the front entrance, he was disappointed to find that he couldn't see through the solid steel of the security doors.

Man, too bad we're not near the girls' locker room! I gotta change my route to lit class after lunch...

"Sam!" he was suddenly awakened from his internal thoughts. "What is wrong with you? You're looking around this room like you're lost or something!"

"Nothing," Sam responded, sheepishly. "Sorry man, I guess my mind was just somewhere else."

Sam noticed that the final traces of the burn were fading away, glanced at his watch and logged the time inside a sheet of paper in his trig book. He reminded himself to write all of this down in his next period. He didn't need to listen in lit class anyway, he could catch the movie version of the book they were covering over the weekend.

"Well, you better hurry up. Lunch is almost over." Ty was still looking at him questioningly. When Sam picked up his sandwich and took a bite, Ty shrugged it off and continued whatever conversation he was having before the interruption.

Sam spent most of his next class logging every detail of his latest occurrence into his notebook, with the intent of typing it all in his laptop log later that night. Then, for the remainder of school he kept testing his abilities. His sense of smell was getting much stronger, and it seemed to him like he could reach out further and further to capture scents. His hearing was much the same – he kept blocking out the immediate environment and tapping into classrooms, one at a time, each one further than the next. His sight didn't change much either – still able to see through walls and doors, and having trouble with some metal objects. There had to be something to this metal thing, and he couldn't put his finger on it, but he would keep working on a theory.

His abilities lasted even longer this time, which Sam found encouraging. They finally faded away around dinnertime, six o'clock or shortly after. As disappointed as he was to lose them, he was feeling upbeat about the fact that his flashes were trending much like Leesha said hers did, and were becoming more frequent, less painful, and the effects were lasting longer.

They touched base online again that night, and he filled her in on his day as much as their discretion would allow. He could tell from her comments that she was really looking forward to reading his logs and getting some more concrete information to start her research.

Thursday was pretty uneventful. No flashes, which meant no pain. But no pain meant no progress. Sam tried his best to act as normal as possible at lunchtime so that Ty wouldn't ask about his strange behavior the day before.

I suppose I need to tell him about all of this. He is my best friend and all. But until I get this figured out, I'm not sure I want to worry anybody with the questions they'll have. I know if this were happening to anyone I knew, I'd freak about all of the pain they were going through. I can't put that on anyone yet. Hopefully this will all be over soon and I can fill everyone in on the details.

Sam and Leesha touched base briefly that night, but with no new details, there really wasn't much to talk about. They logged off fairly quickly, and Sam grabbed his book bag to study for a history test the following day.

Chapter Ten

When Sam got to third period on Friday, he really wished he'd studied a little harder for the impending test. He hated history, though, and with his mind filled with so many other questions, he had a hard time focusing on the material he knew would be on the test. He kept reading paragraph after paragraph the night before, but none of the information was sinking in, so after about an hour he just gave up.

Nevertheless, when he got to the classroom he sat down at his desk, took a couple of pencils out of his bag, and waited for the torture to begin. As Mrs. Hancock was passing out the stack of tests at each of the front desks the burn hit him so hard he almost gasped. Instead, he gripped his temples with his fingers, gritted his teeth, and tried to act as normal as he could.

Oh my God. Are you friggin' kidding me?! Now? Please stop...

He could hear the squeaking of the chairs as each person turned around to pass the tests to the person behind them. He could smell the copy toner on the pages as they spread throughout the classroom. He took his test, and with the fire now radiating throughout his entire body, he thought about telling Mrs. Hancock that he needed to go to the nurse's office.

Just then he heard a voice say: "Eighteen sixty-three."

I know that voice. It's Jen. Why is she talking during a test?

He looked down at his test and read the first question, which asked what year the battle of Vicksburg occurred.

Why is Jen, the smartest girl in school, giving the answers to the test out loud? And why isn't Mrs. Hancock stopping her?

Regardless, he took his pencil and wrote down the answer. Next question – who was the leader of the Union army?

"General Ulysses S. Grant."

Sam's head snapped up to see what Mrs. Hancock would do. She didn't appear to be phased by what was going on, as she was completely absorbed in an educational trade magazine she just pulled out of her inbox. Sam quickly wrote the answer down, but instead of reading the next question, he directed his eyes – as discretely as he could – to Jen's mouth.

"Prairie Dog Village." This time Sam heard her, but realized that her mouth hadn't moved one bit. Her voice was clear as a bell, but she wasn't speaking.

You've got to be kidding me! I can hear her thoughts? How sweet is that?! I'm getting the answers to a test that I haven't studied for from our future valedictorian? Um... Greatest. Day. EVER!

He knew it was wrong, but he spent the rest of the period listening to her thoughts and writing them in the appropriate spots on his test sheet. He also knew Mrs. Hancock would suspect something was awry if he got all of the answers right, so out of guilt – or fear, he wasn't sure which – he erased three of the correct answers and put in wrong ones. Then, after reconsidering, he changed one of the wrong ones back again to right.

I could stand to get a good grade on this test, to pull my average up.

He still had plenty of time to spare, as Jen sufficiently over-studied for the test and finished way before anyone else, so he pretended he was still writing answers for a few more minutes before turning in his test paper. He felt quite smug, with just a teeny bit of remorse, knowing he would almost ace this test.

Sam spent the remainder of his school day testing his newfound sense, tapping into and out of the minds of those around him. Lunchtime was particularly fun as he rummaged through Ty's thoughts of his girlfriend and their plans for the weekend. He toyed with the idea of making some comment about the movie they were planning to see, just to see if it would startle him since he didn't mention it out loud, but Sam thought better of it. He wasn't ready to talk. Yet.

He blocked Ty's mind and then tested how far out his mind could reach. It was amazing how well he could focus on just one person at a time, once he put his mind to it. It was also equally impressive how he could put his other senses on hold – smell, sound, sight – when he was trying to hear the unspoken thoughts of others. And then when he tried, he could combine one or all of the senses at once.

This is really starting to blow my mind just a little! No pun intended...

Just then, he glanced over at his sister as she passed through to her next period. She met his gaze and he read her worry about him, and realized that he hadn't given her feelings too much thought in all of this craziness. He felt a bit guilty about that, and made a mental note to try and spend some time with her after school today. He didn't need to explain what was going on, but even if he could spend some time acting normal around her, maybe her mind would ease up a little. This wasn't fair to her, having seen what she did the other day in the car.

Oh... I guess it's not a twins thing that connects our minds. Well, that mystery is solved, but it brings up another question. I'll have to note all of this, questions for Leesha to think about.

For the rest of the afternoon, Sam spent his time logging the flash, writing notes and listing questions for discussion on Saturday afternoon. He was pleasantly surprised that his abilities were with him longer today, and he also noted that while the burn lingered longer than last time, it was also much less painful than in the past.

No pain, no gain. That's my new mantra.

When he pulled into the driveway after school, Sam homed in on his hearing, which told him that Lexi was upstairs in her room typing a term paper that wasn't due until the following Thursday.

That's just like her. Friday afternoon and she's doing homework that's not due until almost a week from now! I think she does it to make me look bad in front of Mom and Dad...

He walked up the stairs and leaned against her door jam. "Hey, Lex. What are you doing?"

"Oh, hi Sam. I'm just finishing my essay on medieval torture. Pretty brutal, but it was a fun paper to write," she grinned half wickedly.

"Yeah, right. Aren't all papers fun to write?" he asked sarcastically.

"Humph," she scoffed, then tilted her head to one side to look at him cautiously. "What are you doing? Or should I say, how are you doing?"

"I'm good, Lexi. Really. I'm not sure what happened the other day," he figured it was merely a white lie, as he truly didn't have all the answers, "but it didn't happen again. Must have just been a small migraine or something. Hey, do you want to go out and get some ice cream? My treat?"

"What do you want?" she replied suspiciously. "You got homework you want me to do for you?"

In fact, he didn't have any homework she needed to finish for him, but now that he thought about it, she could be of use in helping him prepare for a pop quiz he was able to capture from the mind of Mr. White earlier that afternoon.

I can hit her up for that later. Let's just keep this casual for now.

"I don't need anything, Lexi. I just thought you might like a little break from your homework. That paper's not due on Monday... What are you working so hard for anyway? It's Friday afternoon!"

"Well, okay. I could use a little break," she sighed, then turned skeptically. "You're really buying?"

"Yep." He gave her his best smile.

"Okay then. I'll have a double!" And with that, they headed for the door.

Good job, Sam. She's back at ease. I was really hoping that she wouldn't end up telling Mom and Dad about all of this. I think we're good.

Sam was thrilled as he made it through the evening and his extra senses were still with him. He tried, for the most part, to stay out of the minds of his family – it seemed like a huge invasion of privacy, and made a note to figure out how best to ethically tap into this new resource. One of the greatest benefits, he realized as they sat down to his favorite dinner, was that his mother's lasagna was even more amazing with his new taste buds than he ever knew before!

This is so good, I should send her a thank you note or something. Right... Like she wouldn't think I had lost my mind if I did that!

He grinned, and just enjoyed his dinner in silence, listening to the cheerful banter of the rest of the family. After dinner, he helped his mother clear the table, then sat down with his dad to watch the Cubs game.

Sam thought about going up to his room to log on and see if Leesha was online, but since he knew he'd see her tomorrow, he settled on just sending her a text message to confirm the time and the place to meet.

She texted right back: "Confirmed! I hope you've got lots of information for me!"

Oh, do I...

Chapter Eleven

When Sam went to bed the night before, he was stunned that his abilities were still with him. In fact, he found it hard blocking out all the noise so he could finally calm down and go to sleep. When he woke up on Saturday morning, he was elated that he was still in tune with his heightened senses.

This is incredible! It's the longest they've stayed so far. I wonder... It's probably too much to hope for, but I wonder if the flashes are done?

Sam and Leesha were supposed to meet at Central Library at 1:00, and when Sam walked in with his senses still intact, he was thrilled. He noticed, as he walked through the front doors, that he'd never heard a library so filled with noise. Pages turning, people shuffling down the various aisles, and fingers tapping on the search computers – he knew that it wasn't really this loud to regular ears, but since he was tuned into it, it seemed extremely clear and vibrant to his ears.

He glanced around the room quickly, and thanks to his new acute sight, he saw - through the ceiling and three aisles of non-fiction books - Leesha sitting at a table in the far corner of the second floor study. He headed up the stairs, around the non-fiction section and met her eyes as she looked up.

He heard her think: “What’s that smirk for? Almost like he’s got a secret...” His grin widened into a full smile.

“Well,” he said, “it won’t be a secret for long.” He watched her eyes pop open in surprise.

“No way!”

“Way.”

“You just read my mind?” She tried to muffle her surprise into a whisper, but it ended up being louder than she wanted, trying to be discreet and all.

“How long?”

“Since yesterday morning around 10:30. Here – here are all of my notes,” and with that, he pivoted his laptop her way and she was silent for a good twenty minutes as she read and re-read his electronic log.

“Okay,” she started, “it looks like your flashes are ramping up.”

He interrupted her. “Do you think they’re done?”

“There’s really no way to tell, at least none that I know of. We’ll know they’re done when you stop getting them. But it’s a good sign that your abilities have hung around this long. So... You’ve detailed your sense of smell, sight, hearing, taste and the newly acquired cognitive sense.”

“Cognitive sense?” he lost her.

“Yeah, kind of like ESP. Extrasensory perception. It’s kind of like a sixth sense. It would totally make sense – no pun intended – if you had a sixth sense! The one area you haven’t explored at this point is your sense of touch.” She tapped her pencil on her notebook, pondering.

“I’ve noticed that things feel... How do I explain it... Stronger? Like right now I can feel everyone walking on the floor through the soles of my feet. I can feel the floor moving, bumping. I guess I’ve been too caught up in everything else to really pay attention. But in Lexi’s car the other day, I thought the motor was going to shake my insides as we sped down the road. So, yeah, that’s heightened too.”

Leesha was still processing all of this. “Okay, Sam. Here’s your homework. Continue logging everything like you have been, but what I want you to do is pay particular attention to your sense of touch. Not only what you can touch on the surface, but on a peripheral level as well.”

“Um, peripheral?”

“Well, you know how you can block out sounds and sights and move your ability further and further from you?”

“Uh-huh...”

“See if you can do that with your sense of touch as well. Start by temperatures. See if you can feel heat or cold from an object that isn’t necessarily in your hands or within your reach.”

“Okay,” he agreed. Then his head snapped up in shock.

She continued, not even noticing “And then I want you to...”

“Shhh.”

“What?” she whispered.

“Shhh. Let me listen,” he said shortly.

Leesha sat there quietly and watched Sam’s eyes as he scanned the room.

I didn’t know that I can’t find the person unless I know the voice... Where is that voice coming from? Wait. There he is!

“Leesh. You see that guy over to the right?” She looked to the right. “Sorry, my right, your left.”

“The one in the gray sweatshirt?” she asked.

“Yes. He’s gonna swipe that lady’s purse on the floor. I just heard him think it.”

Leesha’s eyes opened wide, and without thinking about it more than a second, she concentrated on the purse. In the blink of an eye, it moved from the floor to the chair next to the owner, safely tucked under the study table.

The guy rounded the table, dropped a piece of paper near where the purse was originally set, and looked puzzled that it was no longer there. The woman turned to glance at him, so all he could do was pick up his paper like it was an accident, and keep moving.

Sam turned to Leesha with one eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face. “Justice! Nicely done, partner!”

“I think we just lowered the crime statistics in the city!”

They gave each other a quiet high five and just sat there for a moment, smiling.

“Okay,” Sam continued, “you were saying... What else do you want me to be working on?” And suddenly his green eyes popped open in horror. This time Leesha noticed the change in his expression.

“What now?”

“It’s gone.” He was totally deflated. Just when he had done something good with his abilities, they were stripped away from him. He put his head in his hands.

“Sam... Don’t worry about it. You know it’s just the way the flashes work. They will come and go – but your abilities will eventually stay. They’re already getting stronger!”

“I know,” he said miserably. “But...”

“Look at it this way,” Leesha continued, trying to be positive. “You’ll have more experiences to log, so we’ll have more to research. I’ve already got a bunch of notes on things I want to read up on before we meet next. And when the next flash happens, your homework is to work on your sense of touch. We’re getting somewhere. Really, Sam, we ARE!”

“Okay, okay. You don’t have to remind me. I’ll be fine,” he reassured her, half-heartedly.
“So when do you want to meet next? Next Saturday again?”

“I can’t next Saturday. It’s my birthday, and my grandparents have reserved the whole day for birthday festivities.”

Sam’s face popped up again. “It’s your birthday next Saturday?”

“Yep.”

“Which birthday?”

“My seventeenth. Why?”

The color drained out of his face. “It’s my seventeenth birthday next Saturday too.”

Chapter Twelve

Her expression stayed blank for a moment, and then Sam saw the recognition and curiosity put a spark in her eyes. “We have the same birthday?”

“I guess so. You suppose it’s a coincidence?” Sam knew where her mind was going.

“I can’t imagine that it is... What town were you born in?”

“Right here. I’ve never lived anywhere else. You were born here too, right?” Sam tried to search his brain through the background gathering conversations they typed back and forth over the last week.

“Yep,” Leesha continued. “Which hospital were you born in?”

“Sartori.”

“Me too.” Sam could see the wheels in Leesha’s head turning. “It looks like you’ve got some more homework then, Sam. How good are you with a computer?”

“I can hold my own. What do you need me to do?”

“Think you can hack into a hospital’s record system?” The left side of her mouth turned up in a crafty half-grin.

“I’m not sure – I’ve never tried hospital records before – but I’m willing to give it a shot. Once, in eighth grade, I was getting a D in Spanish class, so I hacked into my school’s online server to print out a bogus report card for my parents.”

“Eighth grade? Impressive,” Leesha commented. “Did you get caught?”

“No, my conscience wouldn’t let me keep the B I plugged into the system. I basically printed out a report card for Mom and Dad, and then changed it back to the original grade. No one knew. Then I worked my butt off to bring my grade up the next period. All that work, and my parents ended up disappointed that my grade fell to a C!” He laughed, remembering.

“Nice... Okay, more homework. Can you handle it?”

“Yeah. What do you want me to do?”

“We already know you and I were in the same hospital at the same time when we were born. I want to find staffing records of who was there at that time – nurses, doctors, residents, janitors – you name it, I want to know. And then patient records too. Not just the OB wing, but everyone. Think you can handle that?”

“I’ll give it my best shot. I’ll see what I can find first online. If I can’t hack through first by computer, I’ll go on the premises and research in person. I’ll find a way.”

“That’s good, that’s good. Hey, with any luck, you’ll have another flash and be able to tap into your abilities to help somehow!”

He sighed, still disappointed he was in the dark again. “Yeah, right. I’ll do what I can. I’ll keep you in the loop with what I can throughout the week. When do you want to hook up next?”

“Are you free next Sunday?”

“Sure, in the afternoon.”

“Perfect,” Leesha grinned. “Let’s meet at 2:00 at Mo’s Grill on Main. The lunch crowd should be done by then, so it should be a quiet place to meet.”

“Not back here?”

“Let’s keep our meeting places different for now.”

“Smart,” Sam agreed. “Mo’s it is. I’ll see you next Sunday. Call or send me a note this week if you need something sooner.”

“You got it,” and with that, they packed up and walked out of the library together. They never noticed the pair of eyes that watched them, and had been trained on them for the last twenty minutes of their meeting.

Sam went through the motions of school and classes, but his heart definitely wasn't in it. He ended up getting an A- on that history exam, which surprised his teacher much more than it did Sam.

In his free time, both at school and at home, he put his efforts into trying to compile records and information from the homework assignment Leesha gave him on Saturday. By Monday evening, he managed to completely explore the hospital website, even hack into their intranet, but he found out very quickly that the records they kept online were only from eight years ago, so that wasn't going to do any good.

He did manage to find the birth and death records on the local newspaper's website for the year he was born, and narrowed down the entire list of names to the week before his birthday through the week after. He expected that many of the names wouldn't be connected to Sartori Hospital, but it was a least a start.

Some of these people would have been in some hospital, right?

He printed the records and put them in an unmarked manila envelope that he kept under his bed for now. He'd turn it over to Leesha when he saw her this weekend.

His next flash happened in the middle of the night Monday night. He sat up in bed, both cringing in pain, and celebrating that his abilities were back. He noted the time from the red numbers on his alarm clock, and found he was too awake from the combination of the burn, the brightness of the room, and the excitement that came with it to go back to sleep. His alarm was going to go off in another hour and a half anyway, so he booted up his computer to log the details in his cyber notebook.

The burn was definitely lighter this time – just a nagging buzz all over his body. As he felt the sensation, he wondered why his whole body hurt, when he recalled that Leesha mentioned her flashes were concentrated only to her head. He noted the question in his log – something for the two of them to discuss and explore as they continued their research. He backed up his notes, shut down his computer and headed towards the bathroom to shower.

Lexi will be happy that I'm done with the bathroom by the time her alarm goes off! I wish I didn't share a bathroom with a teenage sister that needs a whole hour to make herself presentable for school...

By the time Sam ventured downstairs, his parents were both downstairs having their first cup of coffee, and his dad was reading the morning paper.

“Morning Sam,” his mother greeted him. “You're up early.”

“Yeah, I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep.”

It's not entirely a lie...

“Sam,” his dad started, “don't forget we're headed over to Uncle Andy's tonight to help him grind and clear out that old stump of his.”

“Right, Dad. I remember – I'll be here after school. We can drive together, okay?”

Crap. I forgot that was tonight... I wanted to go over to the hospital to snoop around. I don't know how long this will last... Maybe I'll just have to ditch after lunch and get it done this afternoon.

"Sounds good pal," his dad responded. "I'm taking off early, since it's getting dark earlier now. I'll be home at 4."

"Okay, Dad. See you then." He sighed.

It's not like the darkness will be a problem for me...

And with that thought, he grinned, and then turned to fill his cereal bowl.

Sam went to school that morning, had lunch with Ty, and then prepared his departure for the rest of the afternoon. He didn't normally see Lexi in the afternoon's set of classes, so she wouldn't detect his absence and rat him out. He forged a note from his father (his mother's handwriting was way too elegant to imitate), excusing him from the afternoon for a dental appointment. He felt a twinge of guilt about doing it, but he knew this may be his only opportunity to get over to the hospital and use his senses to glean whatever information he could.

Once he was in his car, he made his way over to Sartori and parked in the visitor lot. He compiled a list of things to investigate earlier that morning – first and foremost was find out if the old staffing records were filed by paper somewhere on the property, or if there was a separate database, either connected through the current web, or housed on another server somewhere. He also wanted to try and get a couple of different physician names and ID numbers from badges, which he knew he could capture visually and note on the little pad of paper he stashed in his back pocket. His thought was perhaps he would need some sort of clearance to access other fingers of the intranet he wasn't able to tap into on his first attempt.

Where to start? I guess maybe I'll head to the cafeteria. I need to look like a visitor, but appear like I know where I'm going. I'll head to the food first. Surely I can find something on the way.

He read the sign inside the door which directed him to the café, and also took note of the floor and wing of the Obstetrics area, along with the ER and ICU. The OB was definitely first on his list – he wanted to tap into the minds of some of the nurses and other staff there – but he'd make his way around as much of the hospital as time allowed him.

Along his stroll towards the cafeteria, he passed a man in a lab coat who looked like a doctor, took note of his name and badge number, and wrote it down on his pad. He also paid attention to where the elevators were so he could find them when he backtracked to head towards OB on the third floor.

In the café, he wandered aimlessly through the line, trying to appear as if he were checking out the food selection. He picked up a bottle of water, paid for it, and went to take a seat in the back corner of the dining area. A quick scan of the room showed plenty of tables of visitors, but Sam triggered right into a table of four people in business suits – three men and a woman. All of them were wearing staff badges.

Score! Hospital management... The woman's badge says Public Relations Manager.

He took note of her name and badge number, and then stood to walk around the table of suits, appearing to throw a napkin in the trash. He found the Director of Hospital Administration and noted his name and badge number as well.

Next, he walked out and headed towards the elevators. Feeling like he had enough names and ID numbers for now, he aimed his sights on the staff of the OB and neonatal department. As

the elevator doors closed, Sam noticed that he was barely able to see through the thick metal doors. His vision was blurry, as if the metal was a filmy substance that shielded him from seeing clearly, but he was definitely able to see through the metal as the elevator ascended to the floors above.

Awesome! More progress. I'll have to tell Leesha later. Also about the burn sticking around longer. Maybe this will be the last one. Hopefully...

He got to the front desk at OB and made a note of the physicians on staff from the sign on the wall. He figured there would have been quite a bit of turnover in the last seventeen years, but this was somewhere to start. He saw an elderly nurse standing behind the computer and decided to try his luck.

"Hello ma'am," he started politely. "I was wondering if perhaps you could point me in the right direction."

She looked up from the computer screen and her eyes narrowed when she saw him. He knew she was thinking he was just another pesky kid, here to interrupt her already busy day. "What is it I can do for you?"

"Well, I was thinking about college – I'm only a couple of years away. Anyway," he looked down at the floor as if he were trying to pull off the personality of a gawky, shy, self-conscious teenager, "I was thinking about med school. But before I commit to any particular field, I was hoping perhaps I could volunteer at one of our local hospitals."

Her expression changed from suspicious to pleasantly surprised at his, albeit fake, generosity. "Well, aren't you quite the young gentleman! You'll want to see the human resources department – they are located down one floor, on the east wing in the business department. Just take those elevators down one level."

"Thank you, ma'am," he turned as if he were immediately going to take her direction, but he wasn't quite done with her. He turned back around to speak again. "I was really hoping they might have something I could do... You see, this is the hospital I was born in seventeen years ago."

"Really?! I'm sure I was here back then – I've been here for twenty-eight years this December." Her expression went soft, reminiscing.

Bingo. Now I've got her. Like putty in my hands...

"You don't say? That's incredible! You may have helped deliver me! Wow..."

"I very well might have. Huh... What a small world. Well, I guess it's not ALL that small. I've helped deliver a lot of babies here – I've always been a nurse in OB, my entire career here."

Sam gave his biggest toothy smile, appreciating the fact that she was eating this up. "My mom's told me the story over and over. I don't remember my doctor's name, at the moment... Who was on staff around then?"

"Oh, let me think... I guess at that point we had four doctors on rotation at the time. Doctors Hart, Blevins, Smith and Goldman." Her memory was perfect. He knew he'd struck gold.

"I'll have to ask Mom again. Well, I've taken up enough of your time. Thank you so much for all your help, ma'am. I'm going to head down to human resources right now. Maybe I'll see you around here soon," and with that he gave her his best smile, waved, and turned towards the bank of elevators.

In the business office of the hospital, Sam found a nice looking young receptionist that he turned his charm on. Explaining that he was hoping to find an afternoon internship – volunteer, of course – he asked if he could fill out an application for employment. She was happy to help him, and told him about all of the positions they had available for high school applicants.

Oooh... Candy striper or janitorial duty. How could I possibly go wrong here? Bed pans or toilets... I can't decide.

Sam took the application and clipboard and sat down at a chair nearby to pretend to fill out the paperwork. Keeping his head down as much as possible, he scanned the room for any filing cabinets he could peer through to read the files inside.

It's a good thing the metal barrier is starting to lift. I can easily see through this thin stuff... So cool!

He rifled through the cabinets in the room he was sitting in, but didn't see anything he could use in his research. His gaze lifted up to the office doors around the perimeter of the room. Each door had name plaques and corresponding titles neatly posted to the right of door facing. He found the door to the Director of Human Resources office and trained his eyes to look through the wall and into office.

The owner of the office wasn't present, and he couldn't find any metal cabinets inside, but did find a couple of desk drawers full of personnel files. Upon further examination, he saw a file marked "Server Retention." His vision sifted through the paperwork in the file, and he found the information he was looking for – the website and access information into the personnel files and medical records for the twenty years prior to the new server they switched to eight years before.

Rather than reaching into his back pocket for the notebook he had stashed, he wrote down the information he needed onto the application, and headed towards the gal behind the front desk.

"Ummm... I'm afraid I don't know some of this information. I'm going to take this application home to my mom to help me fill it out," Sam smiled meekly and tried to act embarrassed. "Here's your pen back. I'll just bring this back tomorrow when I've got it filled out completely."

"Okay," she smiled at him, like it happened all the time. "No problem. We'll see you tomorrow."

He turned to the door and headed toward the bank of elevators which would take him to the exit nearest his car.

Mission accomplished.

Chapter Thirteen

“Rowe. It’s me.”

“Uh, hi. Listen, now’s not a very good-”

“I’ll be brief. I’m going to be emailing some information soon on Sam Dixon. He’s the second one I’ve found. You’ll get the DMV records, address, phone, vitals, all that stuff real shortly. I want you to start a file on him. You know what to do.”

“Um, okay. Do you know what... symptoms he presents with?”

“Symptoms? What’s the matter – are you with someone?”

“Not right now, but I am in my office, which is filled with people.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“Look. I’ve got a practice to run.”

“So you keep rubbing in my face every chance you get. You know you wouldn’t have anything, had I not covered up your involvement. You could have lost everything like I did.”

The silence on the line was heavy, awkward. “Yeah, I know. Right, so I’ll start the file on the Dixon kid. Do you know what he presents with?”

“Not yet. But there is a slight wrinkle in the situation.”

“Which is?”

“He just left the hospital. I’ve been tailing him, and just saw him leave-”

“Wait. You’ve been tailing him?”

“Of course I have. I’ve been trying to find these kids for years! Now that I’ve located two, and they’re working together-”

“They’re working together? That doesn’t bother you?!”

“No, not at all. In fact, it’s just what I had hoped they would do. With me directing them, of course, guiding their ways, but that can come later. For now, I’m happy just keeping a distance. Hopefully they can lead me to more.”

“What exactly do you plan to do with this group of kids, once you get them all together?” His voice cracked slightly with the tension behind it.

“That’s none of your business, Rowe. That’s not what I pay you for. You just do what I tell you, and you won’t have to get involved any further. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I understand you perfectly.”

“Good. Now back to my wrinkle, the hospital. I can’t be sure, but I think Dixon may be snooping around for information on me. Do you know if there are any of the old staffers still there?”

“It’s been years since I’ve been there. I have no way of knowing.”

“That’s not good enough. You’re still in the medical circle. Find out.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know.”

“When I figure out his power, I’ll let you know what it is. I need you to figure out the chemical combination so that I can recreate the serum. I’ve got Conway’s formula perfected now.”

A huge exhale filled the pause. “You’re recreating the-”

“Never mind that now. That’s nothing you need to worry about. You just deliver on your end of the work. I’ll take care of mine.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of this...”

“It’s not for you to like or dislike. None of this has ever been up to you. Are you telling me you want to quit working for me? Because that could have drastic consequences for you.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’ll do it.”

“Perfect. Stay in touch.”

The line went dead.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam got home just in time to run into his room, stash his school bag and notes from his afternoon field trip, and grab a snack before he heard his dad's engine as it purred down the neighborhood street. His dad walked in the front door and greeted him with a smile.

"Hey, Sam. I just need to change real quick, and I'll be ready to go. You may want to change into some different shoes, too. We will be getting a little dirty with this project."

"Sure, Dad." It was on his list of things to do but he hadn't gotten to it yet. He ran upstairs to change into old tennis shoes and a sweatshirt.

Back in the car, Sam remembered his other bit of homework to accomplish – working on his sense of touch to determine if he could extend it out further than his immediate reach.

He closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of his seat. His feet could feel the glide of the wheels on the road, and the subtle bumps of the pocks and cracks in the pavement. Through his seat, his body could feel the churning of the engine and the changing of gears each time his dad slowed down or sped up. But all of this was something he was feeling through immediate sensations – something his body was already resting on.

Improvising, he decided to reach his fingers out and concentrate on the air outside the SUV as it drove down the country road. He imagined reaching his fingers through the closed window, and suddenly he had the sensation of the wind's resistance on his hand, as if his hand was truly reaching out the open window. His eyes flew open, just to make sure that his father hadn't opened the window without him realizing it. Sure enough, it was still closed, and his wrist was still resting on his leg, fingers stretched towards the window. He was clearly feeling the coolness of the outside environment as they sped down the road!

Wow... I can't believe it!

He then concentrated on his toes, mentally stretching them toward the front of the car. Extending their reach forward, he could feel the heat radiate from the running engine. Wondering if he could use more than fingers and toes, he concentrated on the soda can his dad set in the cup holder when they got in the car. Leaning his head slightly to the left, his cheek could feel the coolness radiating from the can he had taken from the refrigerator just minutes before.

Wish all my homework was this easy. I'd ace high school for sure!

Sam knew that although this particular assignment was a breeze for him, he still had plenty of research to finish with the details he brought back from the hospital earlier that afternoon. And even if he got some initial answers from the hospital's ancient server, it still didn't answer the most important question – what happened to him and Leesha, and more importantly, why.

By the time they got home that night, Sam didn't have much time to do anything but shower and get his math homework done. He'd neglected his homework in that class as of late, and he knew he was on thin ice with his teacher, so he dutifully finished his worksheet and was too tired to do anything else but fall into bed and into a deep sleep.

When he woke the next morning, his abilities were gone.

Crud. Fantastic. Just when I thought I was making headway!

Sam shoved himself out of bed and got himself ready for school, stewing the whole time. When he went downstairs, the whole family was already gathered at the breakfast table.

"Good morning, honey." His mother greeted him in her normal morning sing-song voice.

“Morning,” he grunted back, and stomped over towards the pantry. He didn’t notice the raised eyebrow Lexi shot over to his mother. He grabbed a Pop-Tart and headed out the door to his truck.

“What do you supposed is wrong with him?” his father asked as the door slammed behind him.

“Beats me...” Lexi said, her eyes still watching him as he climbed into his truck and slammed the door. It was a good thing Sam couldn’t read her mind right now, because if he could, he’d know she was worried again and contemplating telling her parents about what she saw happen to him in the car last week.

Sam’s mood didn’t get any better over the course of the school day, as he continued to wait for the flash that never came. By the time he got home that afternoon, he was fit to be tied. He barely spoke through dinner, which the entire family noticed, then excused himself to his room with the explanation of school work he didn’t intend to do.

He decided to focus instead on his other homework – the work Leesha assigned to him. Doing a quick search for the server he found in the old files at the hospital, he poked around long enough to find the hospital records he was looking for. Narrowing his search down to the month and year in which he was born, he printed off lists of hospital employees that were on staff at the time – sectioned by practice field. He knew he could go back in and get more detailed contact information and personnel information on each of them, but at this point, until they narrowed down their search, he wasn’t going to waste the paper. He bookmarked this page and filed the lists in the envelope under the bed.

Soon he was able to find the medical records of everyone who was treated in the same period of time. He sectioned these lists by treatment rendered, printed the patient lists and filed the paperwork in the envelope as well. His mood was still foul, so he had absolutely no interest in reviewing the paperwork he had printed. He just wanted to finish his assignment, and knew Leesha would know what do to with it when he delivered it to her on Sunday.

Resigned with his progress, he then logged on to see if Leesha was online. She was. He sent her a clipped message: “I’m down again.”

“Sorry, Sam. I know you’re frustrated, but you’ll feel better again soon.” He recognized her attempt at speaking in code while they were chatting online. “Listen, I’ve been doing a little research on my end, and I wanted to do a little digging...”

She proceeded to batter him with question after question about his past – houses his family had lived in, where his father worked, where his mother worked, previous jobs both of them had held...

What vacations had they taken as a family? Where? When?

Had they ever been out of the country?

What schools he attended prior to high school?

Where did his relatives live?

Did you ever go to summer camps?

What church do you go to?

What activities have you been involved in, for your entire life?

Sam answered question after question.

Why is she asking all of these things?

His mood had been bad from the start. The more she dug into his past and that of his family, the more invaded he started to feel. He didn't like that she was digging not only into his past, but she was also asking personal questions about his family, and this made him feel threatened and consequently protective of his family. This only escalated his mood from foul to angry. By the time her questions started to slow, Sam was ready to log off. He quickly excused himself, saying he was tired, and they said goodnight. He turned off his light, rolled over and willed himself to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Sam woke the next morning to the strong smell of bacon and the quiet sound of it bubbling in the skillet in the kitchen downstairs. He raised his head to see if his bedroom door was open, and realized that it wasn't.

I'm back! I can smell... I can hear! Wait... That means my senses came back in the middle of the night and the flash didn't wake me up!

He did a quick rundown of his body – sight, hearing, touch, smell – everything was heightened again. He could feel the dull burning in his body, but it was so slight that it didn't even seem uncomfortable.

I must have slept right through it. Amazing! I really MUST be making progress!

He got up, got ready for school, and practically skipped down the stairs to the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mom,” he leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Bacon! Yum...”

He poured himself a glass of orange juice, filled his plate full of bacon and scrambled eggs, and almost danced toward the table to sit down next to his sister to eat breakfast.

“You look nice today, Lexi,” he smiled at her. “Is that a new top?”

“Uh, yeah. I got it last weekend when I was shopping with the girls.” Her expression was filled with wonder, but her mind was blank with surprise, so Sam never even noticed.

“Hey Dad, I was thinking about going to the football game this Friday. Do you want to go with me?”

His dad glanced up at him, a bit surprised by the invitation. They all noticed that he was holed up in his bedroom most of the time lately, so he was pleased at Sam's attempt at family time – he wasn't going to pass this up. “Sure, pal! Sounds great.”

“Great, Dad!”

He finished his plate, chugged his orange juice and threw his dishes haphazardly in the dishwasher. “Thanks for breakfast, Mom! I'm gone.” And with that, he flew out the front door.

His family just sat there for a moment, shell shocked. His mother was the first to speak. “Well, that's certainly a change in attitude. What do you think has gotten into him now?”

“Huh.” His sister shook her head. “No clue. Um, his PMS is over?” she half smirked.

Her mother swatted at her with her napkin, they shared a giggle, and Sam smiled to himself as he climbed into his truck.

I heard that!

Sam's mood couldn't have been better for the rest of the week, and nothing could have ruined it. Not Ty, who had once again broken up with his girlfriend and whined to him during every lunch for the remainder of the week. Not his mother who went out of her way to plan a huge birthday celebration on a precious Saturday evening. Not even Leesha, who continued to grill him more about his background and family history.

Leesha was thrilled when Sam reported on Wednesday evening that his “health” was back, and asked how he was doing with his homework. She seemed happy with his progress, then proceeded to batter him with questions – this time about his health history and that of his family.

When's the last time you've been to see your doctor?

Height? Weight?

Does the doctor think you are still growing?

Any health problems with any other family members?
Cancer? Radiation?
Genetic disorders?

He told her that other than some thyroid issues Lexi encountered in when she was nine, which was finally resolved through medication, everyone in the family was in good health. He did feel a twinge of protectiveness, but when he asked her why she was asking all of this, she said that she would explain it all to him on Sunday. He was satisfied by that answer, for now.

By Sunday when they met at Mo's, Sam's abilities were going strong, and Leesha could instantly see that he was more positive and cheerful than she had ever seen him.

"Yep," he said, answering her thought. "They're still here!"

"And the burn?" she questioned, this time out loud.

"Still here too, but I barely feel it. It's been here since I woke up on Wednesday morning."

"This may be it, Sam."

"That's what I'm hoping," he responded, sitting down and reaching into his bag. "Here's the research you asked me for. But you first. I'm dying to know why you've been drilling me all week with the questions."

Leesha sighed, but smiled up at him. She sensed early on that he was feeling a bit cornered and defensive about her line of questioning, but she hoped that once she explained it to him, he'd understand her train of thought and forgive her online evasiveness.

"Okay," she started. "We know that we were born at the same place on the same day, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I've been trying to timeline my life and yours to see if there is any other connection where we could have possibly crossed paths at one time or another."

"Why?"

"Well, it's hard for me to think that what has happened to me, and what is happening to you is just a coincidence."

"Understood."

"I believe whatever it is that is making us... different from everyone else... happened to us at the same time. I believe whatever happened, was done to us at birth. Think about it. We'd be so young, we wouldn't remember it."

"I'm following you. That's why you wanted me to do the research at the hospital. Do you think we were tampered with as babies?"

"I do. But I needed to rule out any other ways we could have possibly been connected. So I researched our family trees – no connection. I timelined our school days and extracurricular activities – nothing. I even tried to figure out if there was any health or genetic anomaly that may be connected – but found nothing there either."

"Do you think that someone did this to us?"

"Maybe," her expression was a bit sour.

"When we were babies?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who do you think would do this, and what could they have possibly done?"

“This I don’t know yet. But I think it has to be some sort of neurological tampering of some kind.”

His eyebrows creased in concentration. “But you went through this like a year and a half ago, and I’m just now having flashes. Even if we were tampered with at the same time, what triggered the timer? That doesn’t make any sense... How do you explain that?”

“My theory is it was designed to kick in when our bodies were done growing – when we reached complete physical maturity. I finished growing – at least getting taller and filling out – about a year and a half ago. You, on the other hand, said your doctor just told you last month that your growth finally topped off, right?”

I suppose that makes sense. Girls usually mature faster than boys.

“Right. Okay, I’ll bite on that theory.” Sam thought about this for a minute, turning his attention to the who part of this theory. “Who would be capable of doing something like this?”

“Well,” Leesha turned to his manila envelope, “I’m hoping your research may fill in some of the gaps. With that, she opened it up and started pulling out the pages he neatly clipped and filed inside. “Were you able to find staffing records?”

“Yes,” he reached and took the paperwork from her. “There’s tons of information online, and I can print off more detailed information if we can figure out exactly who we want more specifics on. This stack here is the entire list of doctors on staff seventeen years ago.”

Leesha nodded approvingly.

“This stack is the list of four doctors specifically on the OB wing, and here is the list of nurses and residents. This one here is basically the rest of the staff, the hospital administration and business personnel. And this list is all the patients treated in the hospital the entire month surrounding our birthday. Happy birthday, by the way,” Sam added sheepishly. He overlooked the small detail of her birthday in all the excitement of the week.

“Thanks, you too!” Leesha turned to the detail of his hard work. “Good job, Sam. How did you get all of this?”

“I ended up having to go to the hospital and interview a couple of people. I couldn’t find anything prior to eight years ago on their current online server, so ended up doing a little research on the premises.” He looked down at the last stack of papers that had not yet been addressed. “Oh, and this is actually the first thing I was able to find – it’s the birth and death records for the two weeks around our birthday from the newspaper’s website archives. I figured it might be a good place to start, if we weren’t able to find anything from the hospital records.”

“Good thinking,” she agreed.

“So, if you are thinking that you and I were messed with while we were staying in the hospital, do you think any other patients were too?”

“I suppose there’s no way of knowing, but I’m guessing – even seventeen years ago – the hospital would have been a pretty regulated environment. It’s not like anyone could just come in and start testing and tampering with the patients in the hospital, especially if it was the baby ward.”

“So where do we start, Leesha?”

“I guess we start with our birthday, researching the list of babies in the ward, the other patients in the hospital, and the doctors on staff. I can’t imagine that anyone else on the staff would have the access or the scientific experience to pull off something like this.” She started scanning the birth records that Sam handed over to her and suddenly stopped. “Sam... How do you spell your last name?”

“D-I-X-O-N.”

“There’s another baby Dixon on this list...”

Sam’s blood turned to ice. His whole body froze, except for his eyes, which snapped up to hers. *Shit.*

She continued: “A baby girl?”

His expression was stone solid with fear. “Mom and Dad didn’t name Lexi, my twin, until three days later when we were home from the hospital.”

Chapter Sixteen

“You don’t ‘spose she’s gonna... You know?” Leesha looked at Sam as he asked the question, and realized his neck was flushing as his blood pressure rose.

“I don’t know, Sam,” she started, and instantly knew she needed to tread lightly on this one. “But if she is, first of all, you know what will happen. You can watch her and help her through the process. She doesn’t have to do this alone.”

“I know, but...”

“Sam, let’s take it one step at a time. We don’t even know anything about her yet, and whether she’s a factor in this.” Leesha was getting more worried at his expression by the minute. “Have you seen anything weird with her lately? How close are the two of you?”

“We’re pretty much like any typical brother and sister. We fight sometimes, but I know she’s always got my back if I need her to. Oh my gosh! She was with me when I had a flash!”

“And you haven’t told her anything yet, have you?”

“No.”

“Do you think we need to?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“Well,” Leesha continued, “my first instinct is to say let’s not tell her. I don’t want to worry her yet. Plus, I think that if she were going to go through this, her body would have done it a year or so ago, like mine did.”

Sam’s color started to normalize again as his brain began to analyze the facts more scientifically. “Yes, you would think... But, do you remember when I told you she had thyroid problems several years ago?”

“Yes?”

“Her growth was stunted because of it – she wasn’t growing, and that’s what initially tipped my parents off. It’s why they took her in to be checked out. It ended up taking a couple years to regulate with medicine, and now she’s back to normal, but is still catching up on some of that missing time. Basically, she’s still growing. Her doctor told her she’d probably level off here soon – any time between now and the next year or so.”

“Oh. So we won’t know anything about her until her growth evens out and we see if she gets flashes.”

“Uh-huh. So what do I do?” Sam looked worried again. “Should I tell her?”

“I wouldn’t tell her just yet. But Sam, I do think you need to keep a close eye on her. That way, if she starts showing signs, you’re there to support her. Think you can do that?”

“Absolutely.” Sam was never more certain of anything else. If his sister was affected, he would do his best to protect her and keep her safe.

Now it’s personal, you bastard. If my sister suffers, I’ll find you, and you’ll pay for whatever you’ve done to us.

Leesha continued: “If she does start having flashes, I want you to call me right away. I can help, too. I want to help.”

“Okay.” Sam was touched by her compassion and generosity. He then switched gears, “So what do we do next with this information?”

“I want you to look into the four doctors on rotation in the OB and get more detailed information from the hospital server. My gut says this happened in the obstetrics wing – this could not have been handled across the entire hospital – there are too many areas, too many staff members to sneak this around. So we’ll start there. Find what you can on the server, and then

reach out into external news sources for articles and information about these physicians from before and after their time at Sartori. Where did they go to school? Where else have they worked? Any special research projects? Specialties? Lab experiments? See if you can find anything connecting the four doctors to each other beyond their time at Sartori. Do a criminal background check on them and any family member. Find out everything you can about the docs, okay?"

"Check. I can do that," Sam agreed.

"I'm going to focus on the babies delivered – not only on our birthday, but the few days before and after. There has to be some overlap when we shared the nursery and the staff. I'll find the babies, and who they are, where they are, and if any of them are close enough to talk to. If we can't visit in person, which I would prefer as I want to see them face-to-face, then we'll contact them by telephone. If my theory is correct, then you and I aren't the only ones going through this right now. And we've got to find anyone else out there – not only to help them, but we could also use the extra manpower as we get deeper into the search for the cause of all of this."

"Good point. When do you want to meet next?"

"Um... I don't necessarily want to wait another week. Can you meet Wednesday after school?"

"Sure," Sam said, thinking about his assignment. "That gives me tonight, Monday and Tuesday nights to put my research in. I can be ready by Wednesday. This is too important to slow down now."

Leesha knew he was thinking about Lexi when he said that. "All right, then. Let's meet at the coffee shop on Sycamore Street at 4?"

"Let's make it earlier – my parents will want me back for dinner by 6:30. Can you do 3:15? I can come straight from school and be there then."

"3:15 is fine. See you then."

Sam went home and immediately began to dig into his project. He accessed the hospital server to gather all the information they kept on file for Doctors Hart, Blevins, Goldman and Smith. He was able to find complete resumes for Hart and Goldman, and curriculum vitae for Goldman, Blevins and Smith. Each document told him where they went to school, where they completed their internships, and any facility where they practiced up until their time at Sartori. He printed off this information and started filing in four different envelopes – one for each doctor.

He then spent a little bit of time on each of the university websites where the doctors had done their studies, searching for news by physician name and then special medical projects that were archived for the time period they were at school.

Next was a general news search by physician name. He came across several articles, both nationally and internationally. Most were announcements of speaking engagements or news mentions in birth or death records. He bookmarked most of these pages on his laptop and only printed the articles he thought might be relevant in his research. He was able to find retirement dates for Goldman and Smith, the most recent employer for Hart – a hospital in Seattle, but what he found most interesting was a series of news articles that talked about the incarceration of Dr. Blevins for what was termed "improper use of laboratory equipment."

Due to the litigation regulations of the court system, he wasn't able to glean much more than the court dates, attorney names and sentence information regarding the case, but Sam's

interest was peaked enough to know he wanted to dig further into this. He printed all of the articles pertaining to the court case and legal administration, but fatigue wore in and he knew he needed to get some sleep.

I've got a lot done, and know what I need to do tomorrow. I'll do a criminal background check for all four, but I want to do some extra digging on this Dr. Blevins and why he went to prison. I can't believe the articles wouldn't tell me more, but I know there's more to it than what the news is telling. I'll find it.

Sam got frustrated with how slowly classes seemed to be going on Monday. He was ready to get home and continue his research. During class, he tried to make time pass more quickly by keeping a running list of the items he wanted to accomplish in his research that afternoon, and testing his abilities. He noted that the burn finally completely faded away around 11:45 that morning, but his abilities lingered, so he was optimistic.

I hope this is it... Finally.

When he got home, he grabbed a snack and took it up to his room to start his research. First he decided to dig a little into Dr. Blevins' past – he went to the Naval Academy for his undergraduate work, and so Sam wanted to know what he studied there and if he had any active combat experience in his history.

Hmm... Interesting. His major was bio-chemical engineering. How did he end up in obstetrics?

He also noted that Dr. Blevins was required to complete some active duty, as is normal for any of the military schools. He spent a little time in the Middle East working with national and international medical personnel, as well as a few months in China on a biological warfare and chemical engineering study program.

Before switching gears, Sam did his due diligence and did the same historical background research on the other three doctors, but all three of them received their education through the more traditional route – pre-med undergraduate studies, medical school and then internship rotations at a hospital. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary in the histories of Doctors Hart, Goldman and Smith.

He then moved on to what Sam hoped would be the most important part of his digging so far – the criminal background of Dr. Blevins. It took him more than an hour to finally tap into the federal archive of information surrounding this legal investigation and litigation, due in part to Dr. Blevins' military background. Once he found the trial dates and matter numbers in the court archives, he printed all of them and set them on his bed stand to review later.

Mom is ready for dinner, and she's getting twitchy. I'd better get down there before she starts yelling.

After dinner, Sam spent some time trying to figure out what Dr. Blevins' time in prison was like. He already knew he went to the federal penitentiary in Birmingham to complete his sentence of six years (twelve total, but he was paroled early for good behavior). He was placed in the military wing of the prison, but beyond that, there was virtually no information of activities and information inside the prison walls, since it was a high-security facility.

The next mystery was what happened to Dr. Blevins after he was released from prison. The more he tried to investigate, the more dead ends Sam ran into. He searched newspaper sites

for every known town Blevins had ever lived in – from birth to the time he went to prison. He knew where his family was located throughout his past, and searched those archives as well. He did general searches on the internet for his name, his branch of the military, the court case he was involved in, and the prison he was released from. Nothing came up in any of his searches, and he didn't know what else to try.

It's almost like he fell off the face of the planet. It doesn't make any sense.

Sam started to fear they may have trouble physically finding the elusive Dr. Blevins, and wondered if that was by design. He knew his medical license was revoked through the criminal case, so he couldn't be practicing medicine anywhere.

At least in his own name. What is this dude up to, and why can't I find him?

Chapter Seventeen

Tuesday's classes came and went without incident. Sam's abilities were still with him, and the burn was completely gone. He tried to focus on his class work, knowing he neglected it for much of the past few weeks. But thanks to his new heightened skills, he was doing better in his classes than he was a month ago.

He tried not to tap into the minds of his classmates during tests again, like he had Jen's last week – it just seemed like cheating a bit. But he didn't mind getting an advanced notice of what was going to be covered on the test from the minds of his teachers. The way he saw it, it just helped him prepare for the test better. He did his own studying, and noted his own answers, just got a little help on the front end from those that taught the classes.

My grades are going up. Mom and Dad are pleased. I am so good!

After school, Sam went straight home to get started on more research. He had completed and filed most of what was on his to-do list already, but wanted to double check that he hadn't missed anything along the way.

Lexi's bug was already in the driveway. He pulled in behind her, leaving the rest of the driveway open for his parents who parked in the garage, and headed to the front door.

As Sam walked up the sidewalk, he could hear her mind screaming first, then the blast of burn hit his forehead in warning. *This must be the signal Leesha was talking about...*

He sprinted up the stairs, bolted through the front door, and found Lexi on her hands and knees in the front foyer.

It's happened! Stay calm. She needs me! Oh, hell.

"Lexi? Lex, what's wrong?" he asked like he didn't already know. He could see the tears streaming down her cheeks and the agony on her face. Suddenly the burning sensation was fresh in his memory, and he couldn't have felt worse for his sister.

"My whole body is on fire," she panted out, almost as if she was speaking each word as its own sentence.

"Okay. Okay. Just sit here." He took her shoulders in his hands and lowered himself to the floor to meet her face to face, trying to rack his brain for whatever he could say to give her comfort. "Breathe in and out as deeply as you can. There you go, slow breaths."

Lexi tried to breathe as he instructed, but the pain was searing, and her breaths ended up being shallow and jagged when she tried to follow his advice.

"Lexi, listen. Just hang in – this will be over in a minute or two."

"I. Can't. Think." Lexi was crying again, and trying to roll over on her side to lie on the floor.

Shit!!! What do I do? This is my SISTER!

Sam watched her for what seemed like an eternity, trying to breathe in and out, all the while her body jerked in pain and tears poured from her eyes. He could hear the terror in her thoughts as this flash raked through her body. She thought she was dying, and she couldn't find a way to free herself from the pain. Sam thought he might vomit from the stress of watching her go through this.

And then, just as suddenly, it was gone. Lexi's body stilled, her eyes cleared, and her expression glazed over with questions Sam knew he'd have to answer.

I forgot how quick my first flash was.

“Are you better now, Lex?” Sam asked cautiously. “Is it gone?”

“Is it gone?! You’re asking me if it’s gone, like you know exactly what just happened to me,” she accused and questioned in the same statement. “Sam, do you know what just happened to me? You know, don’t you?”

“Not entirely. But I’m working on finding answers. I’m working with someone else who has been through this, too.”

“What do you mean you’re working on it? How do you know all of this?” she demanded.

“Do you remember what happened to me a couple of weeks ago in your car?”

Her expression sobered with the memory. “Uh-huh.”

“It’s happening to me too. There’s a lot to explain. And there’s someone I want you to meet. I’ll try to explain as much of it as I can, but you’re going to have to open your mind and trust me. Okay?”

She paused, silent. “Okay, Sam. I can do that.” She knew she didn’t have many other options.

“I’ve got to send a note to my partner. I’ll be right back.”

“Your partner?”

“Yes. We’ve got a meeting tomorrow after school – you’re coming. I want you to meet her – she’ll have more answers,” he turned towards the stairs. “Oh, and Lexi?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t tell Mom and Dad yet. Not until we know what this is.”

She stared at him in total disbelief. He bolted up the stairs and got his cell phone out to send Leesha a text.

“Bringing company to our meeting tomorrow. It’s time you meet my sister.”

When Leesha got his text, she knew exactly what that meant.

In the end, Lexi was so tired after her episode, Sam wasn’t able to get much out of her. He did ask her if she felt anything different about her body.

“No.” She was so exhausted, she couldn’t even put together long answers for him.

“Any more burning?”

“Nope. It’s gone now.”

“What were you doing before it happened?”

“I had just gotten home,” she reflected. “Thank goodness that didn’t happen while I was driving!”

You can say that again.

“And nothing feels weird? Your vision’s okay?” he continued to press her.

She looked around the room, “Yes.”

“Hearing – anything louder or softer?”

“Nope.”

“Smell – anything different?”

“No, Sam. What is this all about? I’m so tired, I just want to go to bed and sleep it off.”

“Okay, Lexi. I’m sorry,” Sam conceded. “It’s fine. Leesha and I can explain it tomorrow when we meet. You go get some sleep. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay, thanks Sam. I just want to forget it for now. My brain’s too tired to do anything else.”

As she walked towards the stairs, Sam took a closer look at her. She did look tired. She had dark circles under her eyes and she was walking gingerly, like someone had beaten her up. She turned to him at the bottom of the stairs.

“Sam?”

“Yes, Lex?”

“You called this a headache?”

“It’s the best way I could explain it at the time.”

“It’s one heck of a headache,” and with that, she disappeared to her room upstairs.

Not long after, Sam went upstairs to try and finish the research he had started the two days before, but he had a hard time concentrating on the task at hand. He kept finding himself walking into the bathroom to peek through the crack in the door to check on Lexi. She was sleeping peacefully each time he looked, but he wanted to be close by, should she have any more episodes.

At dinner, he explained to his parents that she mentioned not feeling well, and she was napping in her room. They seemed mildly concerned, but didn’t question him further or go to wake her and check on her. Lexi slept all the way through the evening and through the night until her alarm woke her up the next morning.

When Sam did sleep that night, he had both bathroom doors wide open, just in case he needed to hear Lexi. He never did. So for most of the night, he just laid in his bed, wide awake with worry.

Chapter Eighteen

The next day flew by in such a way that Sam and Lexi never got a moment alone. Sam was in and out of the shower, and heard Lexi turn on the shower later than her normal routine.

Must have overslept.

By the time she hit the kitchen, Sam was downstairs with both parents, so she couldn't ask him the array of questions that finally started to build up in her brain as the shower steam cleared her muddy head. She remembered that Sam wanted to be discreet in front of the parents, so she opted not to ask too much.

"Um, Sam?"

"Yeah, Lex?" he shot her a warning look.

"Are we still on for that study group after school this afternoon?"

"Yep. It's at 3:15, at the coffee shop."

"What study group?" his mother asked perkily, trying to be involved.

So not the time to dig, Mom.

"Oh, a few of us are getting together to share notes for a trig test next week." Sam hoped that his mother couldn't tell he was lying. When he tapped into her thoughts, he knew she bought it.

"What time do you guys think you'll be home?"

Lexi shot him a questioning look. He was in charge of talking, since he was the one with all the details.

"We'll be home for dinner, Mom. 6:30-ish?"

"Sounds great. I'm off – have a great day at school!" She leaned in to kiss all three of them on the cheek and breezed out the front door.

Sam didn't see Lexi much at school that day either, but they never normally saw each other – they didn't share a single class this semester. When they did pass in the hall, there were too many people around to have a private conversation. Sam could hear the frustration and nagging questions in Lexi's thoughts, and wished he could reassure her.

I wish I could reverse this mind reading thing – that I could project my thoughts into someone else's head. Hmm... I'll have to ask Leesha if that's a possibility, and if so, what I need to do to practice.

In the end, they never got any time alone during the school day. Even after school in the parking lot, they just shot each other knowing glances across the parking lot, signaling that they would meet in a few minutes at the coffee shop.

Sam walked in first, followed a few seconds later by Lexi, and Leesha instantly saw the family resemblance. They both had All-American looks with thick, wavy blond hair – his shorn fairly short, hers pulled back in a loose ponytail. Their eyes were the same shade of green, and although Lexi was a few inches shorter than Sam, they had the same athletic build and look.

Sam saw Lexi step in the door behind him, so paused to let her catch up, then led the way for her. As they approached the booth Leesha was in, he turned to Lexi for introductions.

"Lexi, this is Leesha. Leesha, my twin sister, Alexis."

Leesha could see the fear in her eyes, so cautiously stood up and slowly reached out her hand. "It's nice to meet you Alexis."

"You can call me Lexi. Everybody does." She smiled a little, but both Sam and Leesha could tell she was still very uncomfortable and scared.

"Here, sit down. I've got lots of questions." Leesha decided she would take the lead, and the pressure off both Sam and Lexi. "Sam, you did your research?"

"I did." He pulled his four fat envelopes out of his pack and Leesha's eyes bugged with the mass of information he brought with him.

"You've been busy!"

"A little," he smiled proudly. "I've got some leads for us."

"Good," she said, but gave him a quick, discreet nod towards his sister. "Let's start with the most important part first, though. Lexi, how are YOU doing?"

"Um... I'm feeling better after yesterday, if that's what you're asking. But I have a lot of questions. Sam and I haven't had much of a chance to talk. I was so tired yesterday after everything happened, and we've not been alone since. So I don't know much about what's going on. Can you fill me in?"

Leesha looked at Sam, then back at Lexi. "What did Sam tell you?"

"Not much. I didn't give him a chance..." she said, almost embarrassed. "He told me that I wasn't dying, it was just a flash of pain, and that it would go away. And it did. He stayed with me the whole time, but then I was so tired I went straight to bed."

"She slept for sixteen hours," Sam interjected.

Leesha turned to Lexi and touched her sleeve. "Can you tell me what happened? Don't leave out anything."

"There's not much to tell," Lexi sighed. "I just came in the door from school and all of a sudden a burning pain started in my temples and took over my body. I dropped to my knees, and I couldn't breathe. It felt like I knelt there for hours, but it was probably no more than thirty seconds or so before Sam came in."

"And the burning hit your entire body – head to toes?"

"Uh-huh."

Sam interrupted to ask Leesha the question that was nagging him. "Why do you think it happened only in your head, but affects my and Lex's entire body?"

"I have a theory on that," Leesha answered. "I believe that since my abilities are concentrated to my mind only, my head is the only thing that was affected when the chemical makeup in the body changed. Your abilities, however, reach and are accessed throughout your whole body, so the progression of whatever this is affects your whole body."

"I guess that makes sense," Sam shrugged.

Leesha turned back to Lexi. "What can you do?"

"What do you mean what can I do?" Lexi looked puzzled.

"You haven't told her?" Leesha shot Sam an accusatory glare.

"Haven't told me what?"

"No, I haven't told her. I haven't had the chance. I got to ask her a few questions, and didn't see anything out of the ordinary. We didn't get any further than my first line of questions. It's not something you can just bring up over the breakfast table!" Sam shot back at Leesha.

"HAVEN'T TOLD ME WHAT?" At that, both Sam and Leesha stopped glaring at each other and focused on Lexi and her terrified expression.

“Okay, Lexi, I’m going to start from the beginning and give you the highlights.” Leesha took a big breath. “Stop me at any point if you have questions.”

“Okay.”

“I started having these flashes when I was fourteen. For me, they lasted about three months. They came and went, each time they were a little less painful, but lasted a little bit longer. About the second time it happened, I realized that it was changing the makeup of my brain, and creating a special ability inside my mind. My power is telekinesis.”

“Wait... You’re telling me this is going to continue for MONTHS?” Her expression increased from terrified to horrified.

Sam grabbed her wrist. “Yes, but it gets easier, and it eventually ends. I think mine are done.”

“When did yours start?”

“About three weeks ago.”

“So yours didn’t last for months?” Lexi asked hopefully.

“No, Lex, they didn’t. We don’t have anyone else at this point to compare with, but we think that the flashes act a little bit differently. We’ll learn more with yours.”

“Great. Like a lab rat. I can’t wait.”

“We’ll help you through it,” Sam promised.

Lexi turned back to Leesha. “Your brain changed?”

“Yes. I can now move things with my mind.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Sam chuckled under his breath, and Leesha used her mind to push a napkin across the table to rest in front of Lexi.

Lexi shook her head in denial. “That was just a breeze. That’s not possible for a person to do with their mind.”

When she took her eyes off of Leesha’s and looked back down at the table, Leesha’s glass of water was suspended in the air, gliding gently towards Lexi. She set the glass down in the center of the napkin.

“Are you serious? You really did that with your mind?”

“Yep. Pretty cool, isn’t it?” Leesha gave her a half shrug and tried to sound nonchalant about the subject. She could see that Lexi was struggling to wrap her brain around the entire topic. It was a lot of information to process in one setting.

Lexi then turned to her brother. “Can you do that, too?”

“No, I wish,” he shot Leesha a jealous glare. “My abilities are more centered around my senses. My hearing, sight, smell, taste and sense of touch are all heightened. Like right now, I can smell the cinnamon they just opened in the back kitchen and I can hear the gentleman in the far corner of the room as his thumbs text a message on his Blackberry.”

Lexi looked up to glance over Sam’s left shoulder, and sure enough there was a man in a ball cap texting on his gadget.

“How did you know it was a man? Did you see him when we came in?”

“No, he just sat down a few minutes ago. I could tell by his aftershave, which he really needs change.”

“Then how did you know it was a Blackberry?” Lexi was still in disbelief.

“The keys make a different sound than phone ones, plus the screen has this annoying little hum when it is lit up. I doubt anyone else can hear it, but it sounds like a mosquito in my ear.”

“That’s amazing!”

“Wow, Sam,” Leesha finally interrupted them. “You really HAVE been working on your skills. I’m impressed!”

“I told ya I would.” Sam turned back to Lexi. “Mine are new. We haven’t really figured out everything yet. There are still a lot of questions, and Leesha’s having me test different things – like projecting my sense of touch beyond objects that I’m not actually touching. Which reminds me... Leesha, do you think I can reverse the mind reading ability – like project my thoughts into other people’s heads, rather than catch their thoughts in my head?”

“Hmm... That’s an interesting theory,” Leesha started to consider it, but got interrupted.

“You can read minds?!”

“Oh yeah,” Sam smiled at his sister. “I can’t believe I left that part out. It’s probably the coolest part!”

“Prove it.” Lexi closed her eyes.

“Lexi, you can’t just sit there thinking that you don’t believe me. Give me something else.”

She opened her eyes, then shut them again.

“Mom’s chocolate cake. Of course, your favorite. Give me something harder.”

Her eyes flew open in surprise. “You could have just guessed that!”

“Then give me something harder!”

She shut her eyes again, this time pinching her eyebrows together in concentration.

“A brown Hermes saddle bag,” he said, then paused to think. “That’s what you wanted for your birthday? That’s so snobby of you, Lex!”

“How could you possibly...”

“I told you!” Sam smiled back at her smugly.

“Can you do it all the time? Did you hear how mad I was at you this morning for taking longer in the shower?”

“Yes, I can do it all the time, but I do try and block it out. It’s a little annoying – some of the thoughts. And yes, I did hear you this morning, but it’s not my fault you overslept.”

Lexi glared at him. Then, resigned that this was happening to her, she turned back to Leesha for information. “Okay, tell me everything, from the very beginning. Don’t leave anything out.”

And both Leesha and Sam took turns telling their stories to Lexi, detail by detail, until they downloaded all of their experiences to her. After that, they walked her through Leesha’s theories, and the research they both put in up until today’s meeting. It was getting late, so they didn’t have time to review Sam’s new information and everything Leesha gathered in her work, so they decided to meet again that weekend.

Since the twin’s parents were out of town on Saturday, they opted to meet at their house – it was private, casual, and Sam could sense that Lexi would prefer to stay close to home as much as possible, just in case she was hit with another flash. He couldn’t help her much at school, but once they were home – and she’d be spending most of her free time at home – he’d know how to combat the pain.

Chapter Nineteen

He caught the boy's eye as he sat there in the coffee shop, but he was pretty sure that Sam didn't notice anything unusual about his presence there. He was there to eavesdrop on the prearranged meeting between Sam and Leesha, but the addition of the twin was a bonus he wasn't expecting. She must be coming into her own set of powers.

In the end, he was too far away to hear much of the conversation, other than a few bits and pieces. They seemed to be filling her in on the details they gathered to this point. It didn't matter anyway, the biggest piece of excitement was that the twin – Lexi – was now in the circle. He took out his blackberry to send a note to his research assistant to tell him the news. "The twin is here. Must be phasing. Will send you her power once I know."

He got an immediate response back from his very efficient and resourceful assistant, which made him glad that he decided to keep him in the end, rather than terminate him for his knowledge of the project. The latter had been a fleeting thought once a few years ago – you never could be too careful with those you shared your secrets with. There had been a few casualties, and he was smart to dispose of them. They would have ultimately exposed him for what he was trying to do. But Charlie proved himself faithful, and so he remained on staff, and would until his resources were no longer needed.

As he watched them, it struck him as sheer dumb luck that he had three of his patients together in one place. With each one he found, he had to uncover their power and send the information to Charlie, who then would figure out the chemical combination that was administered in its dormant state seventeen years ago. He was also responsible for finding the most current pharmaceuticals similar to what was used almost two decades ago. Charlie then compiled the medical charts that were lost so many years ago and updated them with the most current medical alternatives. Unfortunately it felt like they were often working backwards – find the power, then document the mixture that caused it.

By now he deduced Leesha's power was telekinesis and Sam's was heightened senses and mental telepathy, so their clinical diagnosis had been carefully documented, serums unveiled and noted, and charts filed for future use. They would continually add to the information as he monitored their progress. This was so very exciting for him – watching his children evolve...

If his original charts weren't destroyed, none of this would have been necessary. The searching, the detective work, the hours of rewriting all the medical records. He shuddered with fury as he thought about the original charts, and how they were disposed of. He heard about it shortly after he got out of prison, from an old military bunkmate that followed the matter from the inside for him.

His only satisfaction was he was able to quickly track down the sergeant responsible for incinerating his ancient, but meticulous documentation. He smiled, knowing that in the end, the sergeant was disposed of in exactly the same way.

Chapter Twenty

Sam was in his room that night after dinner trying to concentrate on a paper he needed to finish, but he couldn't seem to get his mind off the afternoon's conversation with the girls. He originally thought he and Leesha would get a lot of work done on their research, downloading to each other what they uncovered in the few days since they met in the library. But with Lexi's addition, and all they needed to tell her, they didn't get much work done. He hoped they would be able to do more work this Saturday.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Sam was suddenly brought back to reality when he looked up and saw Lexi leaning on his door jam with a hundred questions in her eyes.

Wow. I didn't even hear her come upstairs.

He turned to answer her question, and suddenly realized he didn't know quite where to begin.

"Umm... I was afraid you wouldn't understand. I worried that if you did, it would scare you. I thought you might tell Mom and Dad. I didn't think you'd believe me. And heck, Lexi, I don't even have any of the answers to the questions you'd ask."

"I almost did tell Mom and Dad. After the scene in my car. I didn't know what was going on with you, but I knew it wasn't a headache. I knew you were lying to me – well, not telling me the whole truth," she added when he glared up at her. "Why don't you want to tell them?"

"I guess for the same reasons I just told you. Plus, if we were messed with in the hospital, can you imagine how mad they're going to be?"

"Yeah. I guess so," she paused, thinking. "Did you know this was going to happen to me?"

"No. Well, not at first. I didn't put the pieces together – Leesha did. She's had like a year and a half to think about this, so I think the theory part of this comes easier for her. She's a lot more rational about the way she's thinking everything through. Anyway, when we figured out that we have the same birthday, and were born in the same hospital, she's the one that figured it must have happened when and where we were born."

"So that's how you figured it out?"

"No," he laughed sarcastically. "Not even then. She had me doing this research on the hospital – doctors, patients, staff, everything. I put everything I dug up into an envelope. She's the one that found you on the birth records. I guess she figured that one out too. She's sharp, that Leesha."

"You like her. LIKE her, like her, don't you?"

"What? No! No, Lexi. It's not like that."

"Whatever."

"Seriously. We're just partners in this. Hey! You should have seen her the other day in the library! I heard this guy think about snatching a purse from some lady, and all of a sudden Leesha teleports - or whatever she does - the purse right out of his reach. Well, he didn't see it move, but it was really cool!"

"That's kind of a nice thing to do. Did she know her?"

"Nope. I don't even think she gave it much thought. It was just kind of an impulse thing to do. He had this dumb look on his face, and we laughed afterwards about lowering the crime statistics."

"Huh. I guess you did," Lexi got quiet again. "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

“Do you know when it’s going to happen to me again?”

Oh man, she’s scared. He sighed.

“I don’t know, Lex. I wish I could tell you.”

“How long in between your flashes?”

“Days. Sometimes two or three, sometimes more than that. I could never tell when the flashes were going to hit – they just blindsided me.”

“What if it happens to me at school?”

“Lexi, I think the thing that helped me cope the best was knowing what was actually going on. Once Leesha told me about her experience, and I understood what to expect, it didn’t seem so scary. It doesn’t take the pain away, but I think understanding it helps you get through it.”

“Okay.”

“You can come get me at school. Anytime. If it happens, I mean.”

“Okay,” she still didn’t sound convinced.

“Look, Lex, I know I’m not the best person to talk to. Maybe you should call Leesha. She knows more about this, and she might be able to explain things better than I can. I’m not good with words…”

“Sam, you’ve helped. Thanks. You’ve helped a lot.”

“You’re not alone in this, Lex.”

“I know. That helps too.”

“Lex?”

“Yeah?”

“I thought I was losing my mind before Leesha found me.”

She thought about that for a minute. “How long did you deal with it before she found you?”

“Four days. She found me during my third flash.”

“Wow. I guess I’m lucky you found me when you did.”

“I’m not sure either one of us is lucky… We’ll see how this plays out before we decide on the luck thing.”

“Right. Well, I’ll let you get back to work.” She turned to leave, but he interrupted her.

“Lexi, did I tell you I can see through walls too?”

“You can?!”

“Yep. I can see through pretty much anything now – it’s getting stronger.”

“You’re a freak.”

“Speak for yourself… We don’t even know what you can do yet!”

For the first time in a while, she smiled.

The rest of the week was pretty quiet. Lexi was pleased that she didn’t have any more flashes, and Sam’s senses remained intact, and he was getting more and more confident that his painful episodes were done.

He continued to keep tabs on Lexi throughout the school day by peering through classroom walls when she was in close range, and resorting to wandering the halls when she was too far away for his sight to reach. He noticed each day that he was able to reach his eyes out further and through things with more ease. He wondered how long his abilities would continue to strengthen, and dared to hope that his flashes were gone for good.

Chapter Twenty-one

As arranged, the gang gathered at Sam and Lexi's house on Saturday morning at 10:00. The parents left around nine, and were supposed to be gone through dinner time, so they were looking forward to a quiet day to get some major work done. When Leesha arrived promptly on time, they sat in the family room and got straight to work.

Sam had his research already laid out on the coffee table, and gave Leesha and Lexi the low-down on Drs. Hart, Goldman and Smith. Since nothing was really out of the ordinary, he opted not to spend too much time on dwelling on the information for any of these three.

"Now, Dr. Blevins is an entirely different story," Sam started. "I believe he is the man we are looking for. If he's not the one responsible, I think he's a good place to start. But I'd bet my college fund that he's the guy."

He proceeded to walk them neatly through his history, starting with his education and experience in the military, his work history, and finally – the part that he had been working up to – his legal troubles, litigation and time in prison.

"You mean to tell me," Leesha sat there with her mouth open, "that this dude has a specialty in chemical engineering, experience and training in biological warfare from our very own military, and then just chose to practice in obstetrics?"

"Yup," he said as he crossed his arms.

"And then he just happened to get in trouble with the law for misuse of lab equipment?"

"Uh huh." Sam smiled, knowing she was following his exact train of thought.

"And you can't find out any other details on the court case?"

"Nope. I figure the military has it marked TOP SECRET, and therefore not easily accessible unless you're a high ranking military official. I wouldn't be surprised if he was working for a special military unit the whole time he was at Sartori."

Lexi interjected "Well, that would be hard to prove, wouldn't it?"

Sam nodded. "I can't imagine where you could even start."

Leesha's mouth was still agape. "And you can't find him?"

"Nope."

"Nowhere?"

"Not a trace."

"Did you try his family?" Lexi asked.

"His father died ten years ago, his mother is in an Alzheimer's wing of a nursing home in Phoenix. I'm not sure how far her disease has progressed, but since she's been there two and a half years – I'm not counting on her for help. No siblings of record. I would think our next step is to try and talk to his staff or peers who worked with him in the past. Meaning, first off, here at Sartori. Don't you think?"

They both paused to think, but Leesha was the first to respond. "I think you're probably right, Sam. I could try and search for him through the internet, maybe tap into some channels you may not have tried. But I think we'll need to go through these lists of staff members he may have worked with and interview them..."

Her train of thought was broken abruptly by Lexi's scream. Both Sam and Leesha looked over to find her curled over on the couch, one hand across both eyes, the other firmly grasping the back of her neck.

A flash. It's back.

Sam was the first to reach her. He grabbed her shoulders, while Leesha sat down at her feet.

I don't know what to do for her.

Luckily for Sam, Leesha was clear-headed and able to talk her through this one today. "I know it hurts, Lex. Just breathe deeply and slowly."

She motioned to Sam to switch places with her. He stood at the end of the couch as she took over by her head, rubbing her temples. All he could do was pace and hope this flash was over quickly.

Lexi just moaned, writhing in pain.

I can't stand to watch this.

He turned his back to face the television.

"Lexi, listen to my voice," Leesha comforted. "Just keep breathing. It'll be over in a minute."

He heard her scream again, and turned back around quickly. He looked down at Lexi, her face dripping with sweat, and then in an instant – she was gone. She just vanished.

What the?

He looked at Leesha in terror and her eyes were already on his, astonished. He looked back down at where Lexi had been lying on the couch and she almost appeared to flicker back into sight, and then was in full view again. Her eyes were still shut, and she was still being tortured by the pain. She hadn't moved. Then, in a flicker, she was gone again.

He looked back up at Leesha, finally finding words. "What is happening to her? Where is she going?"

"She's not going anywhere. I've still got my hands on her. Come down here, Sam."

He followed her instructions, sat down on the couch, waiting for her to reappear. She flickered back into view, and he grabbed her by the ankles, which were kicking with the burning sensation that wracked her body.

This is torture! I don't understand...

He was still wrestling with her ankles when she disappeared from sight again, and all of a sudden the reality of the situation hit Sam and Leesha at the same time as they both continued to hold her. They looked at each other and a slow, knowing smile spread across both of their faces.

"I can't believe this!" Leesha shouted.

"This is so cool!!!" and Sam was suddenly on his feet laughing and screaming, and soon both of them were jumping and dancing around the room like they had just won the lottery.

They were both too caught up in their celebration that neither one of them noticed Lexi's flash ended, and she was sitting up in plain view, glaring at both of them.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU TWO!" Lexi shouted, silencing both of them at the same time. "I'm writhing in pain, thinking I'm going to die in this fire, and you two MORONS are laughing like idiots at me?"

And with that, she stood up and stalked out of the room. Sam heard her bedroom door slam seconds later. They just stood there, feeling guilty and gleeful all at the same time.

Mostly guilt.

"I guess we'd better go explain," Leesha's expression was remorseful.

"I'll lead the way."

They walked upstairs to her bedroom and knocked quietly on the door.

"Lexi, we're sorry," Leesha started. "I know that really hurt. We weren't laughing at you, I promise."

Sam listed through the door.

Silence. She's really pissed.

"Lex, let us explain," he tried.

"NO!"

"Lex..."

"Go AWAY!"

This will get her...

"We figured out your power."

And at that, he heard her jump off her bed and run to the door, which whooshed open, her eyes wide with wonder. "What is it?"

Both Sam and Leesha smiled like Cheshire cats, and answered in unison.

"Invisibility."

Chapter Twenty-two

After taking about fifteen minutes of pure, unadulterated celebration – now that Lexi chose to join in as well – the gang got back to the task at hand. The focus shifted slightly from research to Lexi, now that Leesha knew what they were dealing with.

“All right, Lexi, now it’s time for your homework. You need to work on accessing your power and figuring out how to control it. Do you remember, was there anything in particular you were doing or thinking when it happened?”

“Not really. I didn’t feel any different. I didn’t even know it was happening.”

“What were you thinking about?” Sam asked, prodding.

“Well, I was thinking I wanted to get away from the pain. Those flashes suck!”

They all laughed, agreeing.

“Your powers should linger for a short time after each flash,” Leesha continued. “The more flashes you have, the longer the ability will stay with you. Let’s try to practice...”

“Okay. What should I do?”

“Close your eyes and think about the pain.”

Lexi followed her instructions.

“Now imagine yourself wanting to get away from the pain, just like before.”

Lexi’s image flickered, and then disappeared. Sam and Leesha jumped up and cheered. Upon hearing that, Lexi flickered back, her concentration interrupted.

“I’m sorry...” she said, deflated.

“No, Lexi,” Leesha interjected, “that’s really good. You were able to do it on the first try – great job! Can you try again?”

“Sure.”

“This time keep your eyes open, and look down at your lap.”

They were all silent, letting Lexi concentrate on the task at hand. In an instant, she was gone. This time, Sam and Leesha tried to keep their cheers silent, just throwing excited smiles at each other.

“Lexi?” Leesha asked her. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes.” They heard her, but didn’t see her.

“Good. You’re doing it. Now, tell me, can you see yourself?”

“Yes.”

Sam spoke up. “So she can see herself, but we can’t see her?”

“I guess so. Lexi, can you see us?”

“Yes, I can see you.”

“Good. Now, are you getting tired by this?”

“I can feel this draining my energy a little bit.”

“You’ll get better at it – you’ll get stronger. Try one more thing, then I’ll let you rest.”

“Okay.”

“Try standing up and walking somewhere else in the room. I want to see if I can detect your movement.”

Even Sam, with his acute sight, couldn’t see Lexi as she stood up and moved towards the doorway. He could hear her footsteps though, but as quiet as they were, he knew Leesha couldn’t. She had no idea where Lexi went.

“Where are you Lexi?”

From across the room, she answered “I’m right here!”

Leesha whipped around, startled, and then started to laugh. Then they all started to laugh and Lexi lost her concentration and reappeared. She collapsed into the recliner next to her, still smiling.

“Wow! That was so cool! You guys really couldn’t see me?”

“Nope.”

“No, but I could hear you. I could tell from your footsteps where you were, but Leesha had no idea.”

“Yeah, I could see that by the shocked look on her face!” Lexi grinned slyly. “I’m definitely going to have to practice that. Imagine all the people I could sneak up on!”

“I know you’re excited about this Lexi,” Leesha cautioned, “but remember we’re still trying to keep this fairly quiet for now.”

“Yeah, Lex. Mouth shut.”

“I know, I know. Buzz kill... You two can spoil a girl’s fun, you know that?”

“Here’s your homework,” Leesha continued. “This flash lasted about two and a half minutes. I want you to log each one you have, the length of time of each one and then how long your abilities stay with you afterwards. The more detail the better. We’ve already got Sam’s detail – this will be a great addition to his.”

“I can do that.”

“On top of that, I want you to test your abilities. I know you can see yourself, but can you tell when you’re invisible?”

“Yes, my body feels different – kind of, not sure how to explain it... Shimmery?”

“Shimmery?” Sam asked sarcastically.

“Shut it, Sam. It’s all I could come up with.”

“Oh great, working with a brother and sister combo should be a lot of fun,” Leesha rolled her eyes at the pair. “Lexi, you can test your abilities by trying to stay invisible longer and longer. See if you can do it without having to imagine the pain – just do it on command.”

“I’ll try...”

“I promise, it’ll get easier the more you work at it,” Leesha encouraged her.

“What about me?” Sam asked. “What do you want me to do?”

“You and I are going to split your lists. You take the staff members, start with nurses and residents in the OB – see if you can locate any information on them – which ones are still alive, and if so, where do they live, what are they doing? Are they still practicing? We’re eventually going to need to figure out which ones to try and make contact with.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to take the patient list and do the same. I’ll start with the nursery and the children’s ward and work my way out. I’m also going to take a shot at some more avenues at finding Dr. Blevins. He’s got to be out there. We’ll find him.”

“That’s a lot of work,” Sam commented, all business. “Next meeting?”

Lexi looked up. “Sam, we’re off on Thursday afternoon – we’ve got a half day of school that day. Leesha, what time do you get out of school?”

“Usually 2:15, but my last period is study hall, so I can get out earlier than that.”

Sam took charge. “Let’s meet at the pizzeria on Fourth Street. Lex and I can get there and order, Leesha – you just meet us there when you can, okay?”

“Sounds great! Send notes or call before then if you find anything earth shattering,” Leesha said as she headed to the door.

We are on our way to finding you, pal. Watch out.

Chapter Twenty-three

Sam hit his research with a new vengeance that weekend. He started by tapping into the hospital server to see if he could find any connections between the staff at the hospital and Dr. Blevins' background. At first glance, he didn't find anything that struck him as immediately out of place. No one had gone to the Naval Academy for their education, or served any time in the armed forces.

He then cross-referenced the resumes of the nurses and residents with any former employer of Dr. Blevins. Still nothing glaringly out of place.

Dead ends. All I keep running into is roadblocks. Are you kidding me?

So in the end, he spent hours researching each and every one of them – their careers before, during and after their time at Sartori. Three nurses and two of the residents were deceased, so could officially be classified as dead ends, as they obviously couldn't be interviewed.

From the nursing staff list, seven had retired, two of which were out of the country, so they would be hard to contact as well. Of the other five, only two were still in the area – Sam made note of the most current contact information on them and filed it away.

Eight residents were on staff in the OB at that time. Three transferred to other facilities out of state – one was now a pathologist in Scottsdale, Arizona, one was in private practice in upstate New York, and another was the director of obstetrics at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. None were easily accessible.

In the seventeen years that passed, only five staff members that worked back then were still at Sartori. Sam took note of the names – two nurses and three residents, who were now doctors – and filed the information away. He knew his next step was to try and interview these five in person. They were the easiest to access, as they were still in town, but it would have to wait for another day. He made a mental note to try and access the hospital's staff schedule tomorrow.

Finally on Sunday evening, after long hours of digging everywhere he could think of, he shut down his computer and gave up for the night. Sam's head ached from staring at the computer screen too long.

I wonder what Lexi's doing.

Although his abilities stayed steady, Sam usually tried to block his intrusive skills, especially in his own house – out of respect for his family.

So he decided to first try and look through the walls to see what she was doing. She was there, sitting cross-legged on her bed. Not doing anything. He watched for a while, but got frustrated that she didn't seem to be doing anything. Her television wasn't on, she wasn't listening to music – so his ears told him – she was doing absolutely nothing.

Last resort. Her thoughts.

Tapping into what he felt was the utmost invasion of privacy, he found her concentrating on her ability. She was frustrated that she lost her powers a couple of hours ago, and worried about when the next flash would come. Rather than continue to listen to her thoughts, Sam thought the more honorable vehicle of communication was to talk directly to her. Walking through their joint bathroom, he knocked on her door.

“Lex? Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

He opened the door. “Whatcha doing?”

“Nothing,” she sighed.

Duh. Like I didn't already know that.

“Did you already know that?”

Oh crap. She's on to me.

“I was just checking on you. It was awful quiet in here.” *Not a total lie.*

“I was just thinking about everything that's happened over the past couple of days.

Trying to get a grip on everything,” she gave him a half smile. “I don't think I'm doing a very good job – getting a grip.”

“Don't worry about it,” Sam shrugged. “I didn't at first either. I'm still not sure I completely have.”

“Do you really think someone – a human being – is responsible for doing this to us?”

“I guess so. Leesha thinks so, and I trust her judgment.”

“Why? I mean, why would anyone do this to us?”

“We haven't figured out the why yet. All we've been able to figure is the when and the where.”

“In the hospital, when we were babies, right?”

“That's the only connection we've been able to uncover at this point. It makes the most sense.”

“But how?” Sam could tell that Lexi was having a hard time sorting out all of the details, among everything else that was racing through her mind at the same time.

“I don't know, Lex. Right now we're trying to track down the who part of the equation.”

“And you think the who is Dr. Blevins?”

“He's my best guess at this point. He's got the background, the education, the experience and the opportunity. Plus, he went to jail for something – we don't know exactly what – but whatever it was, it must have been illegal. Hopefully once we find him, we can figure out the how, and most importantly the why.”

Lexi paused for a few more moments, thinking. “So this jailbait doctor just walked into our hospital room, did something – we have no idea what - to us, that years later made us go through this horrible pain and gave us crazy powers...”

“That's our theory.”

“Makes us sound like the teenage mutant ninja turtles.”

He laughed a quick whoosh of air out of his lungs, sat down on her bed and shrugged.

“That may be the best explanation I've heard so far!”

They laughed softly for a moment, and then Lexi turned serious again. “So what can I do to help track him down?”

“I'm not sure you should do anything just yet, Lex. You really need to work on your powers. Specifically controlling them during your flashes. You can't be going through a flash in public, scream in pain, then just suddenly disappear from sight! People might notice.”

“Okay, you're right.”

“I'm always right,” Sam said and she slugged his arm. “I know this is frustrating for you right now, but Lexi, if you're going to help, we need you to be able to focus and control yourself. You'll get there. Your flashes will stop soon, and then you'll be able to help in other areas. But for now, just try NOT to let others in on this little secret, okay?”

“Okay,” she sighed. “But you'll let me know if I can do anything else?”

“I promise.” And she knew he meant it.

Chapter Twenty-four

Sam continued to follow Lexi through school on Monday. She was nervous about having another flash, so while she didn't talk much to her friends, he could hear her thoughts race. By the time they got home from school, she was so relieved that she didn't have to go through the pain at school, she was giddy and wouldn't stop talking to save her life.

I'm sorry I asked... Since when has she EVER talked to me this much?

She continued to pace and talk, talk and pace for two hours straight. She pumped Sam for information about his research, talking a mile a minute. Then she changed subjects to ask him about Leesha's abilities and theories until Sam heard his mother's car coming into the neighborhood.

"Lex! Shhh... Mom's coming." He lifted his nose into the air. "And she's bringing home Chinese! Sweet!"

Lexi turned from him to bound out the door to help their mother with the bags of dinner. "Hi, Mom!"

Suck up.

At dinner, she continued to blather on about this and that. Sam was so bored from her constant chatter, he tuned the dinnertime conversation completely out, and focused on detailing his next steps of research information he would gather. He needed to tap into the current hospital server and see if he could find a rotation schedule for the staff for the next couple of weeks – or however long they had set already. He also wanted to do a detailed criminal background check on all of them – just in case anyone else had been in trouble with the law for some reason.

That might be another connection. Good thought...

All of a sudden his mind snapped out of his to-do list as he heard his sister mention Leesha's name in the middle of her babbling. His head snapped up and he tried to concentrate on what she was saying before she said too much.

Shut it, Lexi!

The table went suddenly quiet, and Lexi's mouth shut and her eyes met Sam's.

His mother looked from Lexi to Sam and back. "What were you saying, dear? Who is this Leesha?"

"Oh, she's just a girl we met at a study group once. She doesn't go to our school, but she's really nice," Lexi tried to change the subject. "Hey Dad, can you pass the moo shoo?"

Did you just hear me?

Sam saw her look up at him again, and heard her think "Yes, I heard you, moron. Quit yelling at me!"

I just projected. I JUST PROJECTED! Awesome!

Lexi was smiling back at him and thinking "Yes you are! That's great – congratulations! This is going to make talking to you so much easier!"

Fantastic...

"I heard that!"

He couldn't help but feel a little smug. He was making progress.

Sam did a little research that night, printing a copy of the hospital rotation and on-call schedule, plus a criminal background check on each of the staff members on his list, but wasn't

able to do much more than print and file the paperwork. He needed most of his evening to finish an essay that was due first thing in the morning.

He finished shortly before ten, and was beat from the evening's excitement. He took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and literally fell into his pillow asleep.

The next thing he knew, he was being awakened by Lexi's voice. "Sam!"

His eyes flew open. Now with his heightened sense, he couldn't tell if it was light or dark, so he looked at his clock to determine the time. 3:45 a.m.

"Sam!"

It sounded like she was close, but after a quick scan of the room, figured that she must be calling to him from her room. He wondered if she was awake, or was dreaming and calling to him from her sleep. He swung his legs out of his bed and walked towards the bathroom door to go and check on her.

"Sam!"

This time, the sound of her voice was behind him, so he knew she was in fact in his room. And this time he could hear her jumping up and down with glee. But he still couldn't see her.

"Lexi?" he whispered, not wanting to wake his parents downstairs.

"I'm over here." He still could not see her, but could tell from her voice that she moved again – this time to the other side of the room.

She's screwing with me. At 3:45 in the freaking morning. Wait...

"You flashed?" His mind was alert finally.

"Yep!"

I can't believe I didn't hear her.

"Why didn't you come get me? I would have helped you."

"Well, the pain was bad, but by the time my brain woke up and I realized what was happening, I decided to take advantage of being alone."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see if I could manage the power while the burn was running through me."

That makes sense.

"Did you? Were you able to?"

"I did, Sam! I was able to turn it off and on whenever I wanted to! You know what this means, don't you?"

"Lexi, first of all, please show yourself. I feel like I'm talking to an imaginary friend!"

In a blink, she appeared, standing in the corner of his bedroom. Her arms were crossed in front of her, and her smile couldn't have been any bigger.

"Thank you. Now, what does this mean?"

"That I don't have to be afraid to flash in school or public! I can handle this, Sam. I can!" She seemed as excited now as she was when she first discovered what her power was.

"That's good, Lexi. Really, great job!"

"Sam, I want to do more! Give me something else to do."

She really does want to help. One step at a time...

"Well, Lexi, first thing's first. Have you documented any of tonight's flash?"

"No. Not yet." She sulked like this boring task was not the job she wanted.

"Go get your laptop and bring it here. I'll help you. Then we'll work more on stretching your powers."

"Okay. Thanks Sam!" She ran off to get her computer.

Well, she gets an A for enthusiasm.

Chapter Twenty-five

Lexi's power – the ability to make her body's matter transparent – was not as easy to sense coming and going as Sam's was. When Sam's abilities shut off, he instantly sensed the difference in his hearing, smell, sight. Lexi's, on the other hand, was more of a light switch effect, in that you had to mentally turn it off and on.

Sam was sitting in his trig classroom the next morning, trying his best to not pay attention to the teacher's boring demonstration, when he glanced through the door and saw Lexi pacing back and forth outside his classroom. Tapping into her thoughts, he heard the frustration and disappointment in her voice when she told him that her power vanished. They continued to have a silent conversation from classroom to hallway as Sam practiced his projection skills.

"How did you find out?" Sam asked.

I hope she's not testing this in the middle of her classes...

"I was in okay. It'll come back. I know you're excited about all of this, and you're doing everything you can to stretch your powers, but it's not going to all happen overnight."

"I know, but it's so infuriating!"

"Lexi, calm down. First of all, you need to stop pacing in the hall. People are going to notice you're acting weird."

"Oh. Sorry. Didn't think of that." She stopped pacing and paused by a bulletin board to act like she was reading the material. "I just needed to talk to you, and knew you'd see me."

"It's fine. That's better. Are you sure no one saw you in the bathroom?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Sam, I know how careful you and Leesha want us to be. And I understand why. I'm not a total dope."

"I know, Lexi, but sometimes your enthusiasm gets out of control..."

"You're right. I know, you're right."

"I'm always right – didn't I already tell you that?"

He heard her grunt through the wall.

"Secondly, Lexi, I promise you'll be back soon. My flashes came and went, and so did my abilities. And I promise I was just as frustrated as you are – maybe even more so, once I got the hang of controlling them."

"Really?"

"Really. Just be patient. But quit acting like a lunatic in the halls. We can talk about this more after school. For now, make sure you write down the time you think you lost your power, and we can log everything at home, okay?"

"Okay." She still sounded bummed, but Sam knew he couldn't do much about that.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday came and went, and Lexi still hadn't flashed again. She barely spoke to anyone in her sullen gloom, not even silently to Sam.

I swear, girls are the moodiest. She'll be a blast at our meeting this afternoon. Can't wait...

But when she sprinted into the pizza joint after their half day of school, Lexi looked like she was busting at the seams with joy.

"Did it happen again?" Sam asked, his clipped question in obvious code.

"Nope," she sighed. "Not yet."

“Then what’s with the sudden change in attitude?”

This oughta be good.

“I just thought of a way to help in our research!”

“Okay... What is it?”

“I’ll tell you, but let’s wait for Leesha. I don’t want to explain it twice.”

Like talking’s ever been a problem for her.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s decide what to eat. I’m starved.”

Suddenly, Sam felt a sense of déjà vu, but couldn’t quite put his finger on it. His head snapped up and he concentrated on testing his senses. Nothing sounded out of place. He did a quick scan of the room – didn’t see anyone or anything out of the ordinary.

“What is it?” Lexi noticed that he had a strange look on his face.

“I’m not sure. Probably nothing. Something just feels weird.”

He mentally scanned the room, tapping into the thoughts of everyone. There was nothing strange about the mental or verbal conversations around him. He then peered through the restaurant walls outside to see if he could find anything weird. Still nothing.

I must just be losing it. All this super power business is messing with my head.

He took one more glance around, only to see Leesha coming in the front door to meet them, and his mind cleared to focus on the work that they needed to cover. She smiled as she greeted them and sat down.

“Lexi, how was your week?” she started with an update from the newest member at the table.

“Fine. I had an episode on Sunday night then nothing else,” she sighed as she passed some pages to Leesha. “Here are my notes. Sam helped me document everything so they are consistent with his.”

“Good – that’s great!” Leesha scanned the pages quickly. “This looks fantastic, Lexi. You’re doing a great job with control!”

“Yeah, I was pretty excited too. Now I’m just ready for more action, if you know what I mean.”

Leesha shot Sam a knowing glance, and turned back to Lexi. “I know. It’ll happen. Just be patient. You’ve made great strides, though – this is fantastic work!”

“Be patient, I know. It’s all Sam keeps telling me.”

Sam chuckled at her frustration, then projected to Leesha. “She won’t listen to me.”

“Oh my... Did you just?!”

“Yep.”

“Really?”

He projected “REALLY.”

“You two have been busy!”

Lexi sneered at him. “How come he gets all the cool stuff?”

“Are you kidding me?” he shot back. “I’d kill to have yours!”

“Hmpf.”

If she doesn’t flash soon, and get of this funk, I’m running away.

Leesha turned to Sam. “Do you have notes on this new development?” She seemed to be the resource center of the group. All of the notes and research were funneled through her. Plus, since Sam and Lexi lived together, they were able to keep each other up to speed much easier.

He slid his notes to Leesha, along with his research paperwork from the past three days. Taking advantage of his new ability, he decided to fill in the two of them silently.

“There’s not a lot of ground breaking material in there, but maybe you can find something that I’ve overlooked. There’s a list of deceased staff and their information, retired staff and their information, and staff that are still working – some here in the area, some out of the area. I’ve got a schedule for Sartori, and will start interviewing staff members this week if we all agree it’s the best route to take. Look over the information and tell me where you think I should start.”

“Okay,” Leesha said out loud, more for Lexi’s benefit than Sam’s. “Anyone of interest?”

“Not really,” Sam told them mentally. “There’s a resident with a red flag on his criminal check, but no charges of note. I couldn’t find anything on him other than he was involved in a pharmaceutical investigation around the same time Dr. Blevins was in court. The timing of it made me wonder, but I can’t find any connection. In the end, it looks like he was written up by the Sartori administration once, worked there for four more years, then transferred to a hospital in Scottsdale. He’s a pathologist there now.”

Lexi’s eyes snapped up. “He is?”

Sam tilted his head in thought. “Why is that so interesting?”

“Well, my theory – the one I was so excited about, hit me in chemistry class today. Did you know that there are chemicals, like medicine, that can actually change the way a brain functions?”

“Um... Yeah,” Sam said half sarcastically. “They use them for mental illness all the time, Lex.”

“I know that, moron. But open your mind a little bit more,” she glared at her brother. “According to my advanced chemistry teacher – and perhaps if you were smart enough to take advanced chemistry, Sam, you’d know this – there are studies at some of the Ivy League medical schools where they are testing certain chemicals on animals to see if it can permanently change the way a brain can function. Like, for instance, affecting the way your brain processes the strength in which you hear things through your ear drum.”

“Go on...” Leesha prodded, encouraged by this new information and direction.

“I don’t know much more than that, but I was hoping that maybe I could do a little research project of my own and report my findings at the next meeting. What do you think?” Lexi’s smile was back, enthused by her chance to help the group.

Leesha was just as enthusiastic. “That’s a great idea, Lexi! Good thinking. Find exactly which schools and staff members are running these tests, chemicals they are using, and any news items related to the studies. Also, if you can find out the properties of each of the medicines, and how they affect humans when they are administered. See if they are mixing any of these chemicals, and if so, what kinds of results they are getting. Think you can do that?”

“Absolutely!” she grinned broadly.

Sam turned to Leesha. “Were you able to come up with anything from your list of patients?”

Leesha pulled out her list, which was highlighted and color coded. “Yes. These three that are in green are still in the metro area – I’ve got addresses and phone numbers for all three. This one here – in the yellow – was killed two years ago in an car accident, so I don’t think we’ll get any information there. And the other four – in pink – have all moved out of the area. I think we should start by contacting the three that are here – they’ll be the easiest to find. Do you recognize any of the names?”

Both Sam and Lexi looked at this list and shook their heads.

“Yeah, me neither. I was hoping that perhaps one of them would be at our school or in some similar circle. No such luck,” Leesha shrugged. “Well, I can start by tracking them down.”

“Be careful, though,” Sam cautioned. “We don’t know anything about them.”

“I know, Sam. I will.”

Lexi interjected “You don’t think they’re dangerous, do you?”

Sam shot Leesha a look as she answered. “There’s no way to know until we make contact.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take care of interviewing them?” Sam was now worried.

“No,” Leesha said. “I think I can handle it. I’ll be careful, and if I run into any trouble, I’ll let you know.”

“All right,” he conceded, and forgot his worries as the pizza was delivered to the table.

Chapter Twenty-six

It was a close call, sitting down in the booth next to them at the pizza joint. But he had to try and get close enough to hear their conversation.

He knew the boy didn't see his face – he made sure that wouldn't happen. But he did know, from Sam's clipped conversation with Lexi, that he detected something weird. He made a note to change his scent – shower gel, shampoo, toothpaste, laundry detergent – anything the boy could sniff out. Thanks to his meditation instructor, he was able to concentrate on clearing his mind while he sat there, so that the boy couldn't hear his thoughts. He recorded what conversation was said aloud, and would review the content later.

They were being discreet. He liked that. He didn't want his secret out any more than they did. But the fact that Sam could now speak to the others without saying anything out loud was going to be problematic. It was already hard to get close enough to gather any information, though he placed tracking devices on each of their cars so he knew where they were at all times. He was not able to tap into their phones yet, which would make surveillance of their conversation and text messages easier. He'd still have to work on that one – he was still looking for a trustworthy person who was adept at communications technology.

The fact that they were printing and gathering their information was also an issue, since he wasn't able to get his hands on the research they were stockpiling. It would have been easier for him to intercept if they sent the information electronically. But he was optimistic, for the time being, that they seemed to be doing his research for him. He'd get his hands on their intel, once the time was right. For now, though, he wanted to make sure that he remained undetected. No one needed to get hurt. Yet.

Once they were gone, he got up to head towards his black sedan. He wanted to get this new recording in transcript form and sent to Charlie. As he unlocked the door of his car, he looked up and recognized the man stepping out of the Bronco parked two spots down. He wouldn't forget that tall, lanky frame in a million years. It was the same man that paced the waiting room for eleven hours straight, seventeen years ago, as another doctor fought to save the lives of both mother and baby in an emergency c-section.

He backed his sedan up and wrote down the plate number of the Bronco. He knew he found another.

Chapter Twenty-seven

It was at the dinner table that night when Lexi finally flashed again. Sam was just filling his plate with seconds when he heard Lexi groan inside her mind. Luckily, no one else noticed what was going on. She silently got up to walk out of the room.

“Where are you going, dear?” their mother asked, noticing her sudden flight.

“Uh, just going to the bathroom real quick. I’ll be right back, Mom.”

Sam listened to her footsteps as she walked slowly up towards their bathroom. He heard her quietly shut the door and he took a quick peek through the ceiling to see her lay her head down on the cool tile.

“Stay calm, Lex. Just breathe in and out slowly. Don’t worry about the time – I just checked my watch. Let me know when it’s over,” Sam sent his thoughts to his sister upstairs.

I wish I could go help her, but Mom would sniff out trouble.

His interest in his parents’ conversation was suddenly lost as he focused his ears on the activity – or lack thereof – in the bathroom upstairs. Her jagged breathing was slow and calculated. Lexi wasn’t thinking anything other than to focus on her breathing. Slowly but surely, her breathing finally evened out, and she sent him a mental “all clear” signal. He heard her flush the toilet, just in case her parents were paying attention, and head back downstairs.

Sam took another look at his watch. Almost four minutes for this one. He caught her eye as she sat down and projected the length to her. “They’re getting longer, Lexi. That’s a good sign. Are you okay?”

“Yes. A little rattled – they’re still not fun to go through – but this one was definitely easier than the last.”

“We’ll head up after dinner and log everything and practice your powers.”

“Okay.”

They then joined the other conversation – the one their parents were having out loud – so that nothing seemed out of place to them.

After dinner, they sat in Lexi’s room to write up the notes and practice, but Sam got quickly bored watching Lexi turn herself on and off like a light switch.

She’s definitely getting the hang of it.

“Lex, I’m going to head over and try and get some other research done. You just keep practicing. See how long you can hold it.”

“Okay,” she said, then disappeared again.

That is so annoying.

Sam walked into his bedroom and hit the space bar on his computer to clear the screen saver. He glanced down at his phone. There was a lengthy message from Leesha.

Sam-

Going over your paperwork. Can’t put my finger on why, but this pathologist in Scottsdale is giving me heartburn. Can you do some kind of search? See if there is anything that connects this Dr. Rowe to Dr. Blevins.

I just find it odd that an old co-worker of Blevins’ is now about 30 minutes away from his mother’s Alzheimer’s wing... Might be just a coincidence.

Also, see if you can tap into the prison logs and run a list of anyone that may have visited Dr. Blevins during his stay there? I know you weren't able to find much information, so this may be a dead end. Just thought I'd ask – I know you're good at hacking into places – thought you might be up to a challenge.

Let me know if there's any new activity. See you soon.

Leesha

Sam sent her a quick note back.

Will do.

Dinner time activity tonight. Log done. Lex is practicing. Keep you updated.

Sam

Now that he thought about it, he too found it interesting that an old co-worker of Blevins was so close in proximity to his mother's nursing home. He wondered why he didn't already pick up on that, but shrugged it off, as Leesha was usually the one to put everything together.

Sam decided to focus on the prison logs first, mostly because he was curious enough to want to snoop into this kind of information.

What kind of person visits at a high security prison? I can't wait to see how often some of these people show up on the list. If I can even tap into it...

Through his earlier searches, he was able to find an external and internal web site for the penitentiary that Blevins spent his time at. He knew that most of the staffing information was kept on the intranet, so he started there.

He surfed in and out of the site for a couple of hours looking for visitor logs. Along the way, he was able to find employee listings, and while he didn't print all of them out, he did decide to print out a list of management administration and medical staff during that time. He bookmarked the list of prison guards, but because the list was so long, he opted not to print it for now.

Finally!

After what seemed like an eternity, Sam was able to find an email document that noted the server address and password for the security department documents. Opening another window, Sam went directly to the site and found everything was listed first by category, then by year. He opened the file named "visitor logs" and accessed the six years that Blevins was there. Luckily, the data was all done in spreadsheet format, so he was able to combine everything into one document on his laptop and slice and dice by inmate name.

Sam did a quick run through, just out of morbid curiosity, of the number of people who visited the prison. Most of the inmates had regular visitors, even though visitation was only allowed for two hour time blocks on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Scanning down the list of names, most inmates had just wives and family members who visited them.

As he continued to peruse the list, Sam finally got down to Dr. Blevins and was surprised at the lack of visitors on his part of the list. In six years, there were only 24 entries in the log, and only two unique names listed.

What was strangest, in Sam's opinion, is that three of the entries happened in the first year, then Blevins went four and a half years before anyone else came to see him. The last six months, he was visited by a woman named Sara Milligan. His eyes scanned up again for the name of the first visitor.

Bingo! Charles Rowe.

He then did a quick search on Rowe and his current information in Scottsboro. It looked like he was a partner in a private oncology practice with four other physicians, took note of their address and web information, and printed out the detail from the website. On the personal front, he was married, had two pre-teen daughters and lived in the suburbs just south of the metropolitan area. He noted his home address and telephone number and filed it in the newly created envelope marked with his name.

On a whim, Sam then decided to see if he could find web information and visitor logs for the nursing home in which Blevins' mother was staying.

It can't be just a coincidence.

Blevins' mother, Virginia Blevins, had been at the Alzheimer's unit of Angel Wings Convalescent Center for two and a half years – approximately thirty months to the day. Before that, she lived in the assisted living facility within the same community.

With the higher medical legalities and HIPAA regulations, Sam figured it would be hard to tap into the medical database of records, but was pleasantly surprised to be wrong. Not only was he able to find staff files, rotation schedules, and lists of other patients, but he was also able to access the electronic visitor logs for the last ten years.

He scanned quickly through the last three years of logs for any visitor of Virginia's, and came up with just one name.

Jackpot. Charles Rowe.

He grabbed his phone to text Leesha one simple message:

Emergency meeting. Tomorrow night, 7:30 pm. Meet us at the mall food court.

Her response was just as brief:

Good. See you then.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Sam planned their meeting in a crowded place where they could talk and not be overheard. Plus, they all agreed that changing the location of their meeting places was a must.

Sam filled Lexi in on as much of his information as he could. They both agreed that Dr. Rowe must be still connected to Blevins – maybe even helping him.

They met in the food court as planned, promptly at 7:30. Leesha was already waiting for them at a table in the back corner. Sam came in first, followed by Lexi a few minutes later. They decided to drive separately – their parents would have wondered why they were spending a precious Friday night together, and not off with their separate sets of friends.

“What’s up?” Leesha asked, not even waiting for either of them to sit down. She wanted details.

Sam slid the new envelope across the table to Leesha and began to fill her in. “You’ll find all of the documentation in there, but in a nutshell, I found the two instances that prove that Rowe and Blevins could very well still be in contact.”

Leesha’s eyes snapped up from the paperwork she was flipping through to check Sam’s face. “Really? What?”

“Well, first of all, Rowe visited Blevins three times in the first year that he was in prison. That would have been the same time that he was still working here at Sartori, before he moved to Arizona.”

“He traveled all the way to Birmingham to visit him in prison. Three times?”

“Yep. Three times over the course of the first eight months of his prison sentence.”

“Okay,” Leesha mentally chewed on that. “What was the other connection?”

“You were right on target about checking out Blevins’ mother. Virginia Blevins has been visited by just one person over the last two and a half years at Angel Wings. Guess who?”

“Rowe.” Leesha smiled, knowing they were getting somewhere.

“Yep. I think he’s our key.”

Lexi sat there nodding. “I vote for a road trip!”

They all laughed, but knew that going to Arizona in person may be the best way to question him.

Leesha’s face sobered. “Let me think about this for a little bit. I want to plan this properly – we can’t just run down there without a plan. We’ll need a good strategy, very detailed and thought out. Sam, can you do a little more research into the logs at Angel Wings? Specifically before she moved over to the Alzheimer’s unit?”

“Sure. What am I looking for?”

“Well, here’s how I see it laying out – follow my timeline here, I’m using our birthday as the starting point... We know that Blevins was at Sartori working, then going through the court case for three years after our birth, he went to prison right around our third birthday...”

“Right.” Both Sam and Lexi were following her so far.

“Then he was in prison for six years.”

“Okay.”

“So he’s been out of prison since the time we were about nine years old. We know Rowe visited him until the time he moved to Scottsdale, then at least after that point – they didn’t SEE each other after that while he was in prison. That doesn’t necessarily mean they didn’t communicate.”

“So you think maybe Blevins ended up in Arizona after he got out of prison?” Lexi seemed to be connecting the dots faster than Sam.

Leesha answered, “Well, it seems to me like Rowe’s the most faithful contact of Blevins – at least we know he was the only one that visited him early after he was in prison.” She turned to Sam. “I can’t think it’s just a coincidence that Rowe just happened to end up in the same area of Virginia Blevins shortly after Dr. Blevins wound up in prison.”

“I’m following you,” Sam agreed.

“So see if you can find out how long Virginia was in Arizona – when did she move there, did she live anywhere before Angel Wings, and how long was she in the retirement village? See if you can find staffing information there – maybe Rowe was even on the board of directors or staff there – and then let’s check the visitor logs and see if we can find Blevins.”

“Or some other name...” Sam wondered.

“Are you thinking of other family?” Lexi asked.

“Maybe, but that’s not really what I was thinking. I’m wondering if Blevins changed his identity after leaving prison, which is why I can’t find him anywhere.”

“That would make sense,” Leesha agreed.

“If he did, and went to visit his mother under a different name, we’ll find him,” Sam resolved.

“Sam, that’s a lot of work. Is there anything I can do to help?” Leesha offered.

“I’m not sure. Maybe do a little checking on that other visitor on Blevins’ prison log – Sara Milligan. See if you can find anything out about her. Find out who she is, where she works, let’s see if we can figure out her connection to Blevins. Maybe they’re still in contact. Okay?”

“I can try. I’m not as good as you on the computer, but I’ll give it a shot. I’ll call you if I have problems.”

“What can I do?” Lexi felt left out.

Leesha changed her focus. “Sam said you had another episode last night. Do you have notes?”

Lexi slid her paperwork over to Leesha.

“Are you still...?”

“No. I must have lost them in the middle of the night,” she sighed heavily. “I woke up this morning without them.”

Leesha glanced down at her notes, then looked back up at Lexi. “Looks like this episode was longer yet. You’re making progress, Lexi! Your practice notes are very detailed – good stuff. Hmm... I wonder...”

“What?” Lexi’s interest was peaked.

“I wonder if you can centralize your ability.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here’s your homework. Next time it happens, I want you to try and focus your ability to just one area – like your hand, or your head only. See if you can make just a portion of you transparent.”

“That’s kind of freaky!” Lexi laughed.

“Yeah, I guess. But what I’m also wondering if you can change the makeup of your body enough to transfer through – like reach your arm through - solid material.”

“How do I do that?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not even sure if you can. But if Sam’s sight can reach through solid materials, I have to wonder if yours can too. You two are genetically linked – I wonder if your abilities are similar in nature too.”

“That’s an interesting theory, Leesha,” Sam praised her.

“Just a theory at this point. Lexi, you’re the only one who can answer it.”

“I’ll give it my best shot!”

Sam thought for a minute. “You know, if we try to make contact with Rowe in person, it may take all three of us – with our abilities – to infiltrate and snoop around. Can you imagine how helpful it would be if we could have someone walk in the front door – invisible – and go undetected?”

Lexi grinned. “Not to mention that you can pick his brain without his knowledge!”

“We’ve definitely got some good tools. But we do need to get our facts straight first, then put together a good plan of attack. We don’t know if this guy will talk to us, or if he’ll be on the defensive,” Leesha noted. “We may find, like Blevins, that he does not WANT to be found.”

“Right,” Sam agreed. “And if he’s cagey, he’s got a family to protect. This could get dangerous.”

“We’d better get planning, then. And Lexi – your homework may be the most important of all. You need to get yourself as strong and capable as possible.”

“I hear you. I’m on it!” Lexi always rose to a challenge.

Chapter Twenty-nine

They sat and planned for almost two hours, going over all the details of the research needed and the trip they eventually planned to take. The mall was going to be closing in another half an hour, so they knew they needed to either wrap up their meeting, or find another place to move to.

Sam heard him first, the lanky tall kid that walked in the door. He didn't see him right away, but could hear him repeating Sam's name in his head as he entered the building. Sam's powers were getting stronger, so he could tell from which direction the mental mumbling was coming from. He halted the threesome's conversation by raising his finger in the air and his eyes snapped directly to the door. He immediately recognized which mind his name was coming from.

"What is it, Sam?" Leesha asked.

"See that boy over there? The one in the faded black t-shirt and jeans?"

Both girls scanned the room. "Uh-huh."

"He's saying my name over and over in his head."

That seemed to wipe the lingering smile off Lexi's face in a hurry. "Do you know him?"

"Nope. Never seen him before."

"What's he saying?" Leesha asked.

"He seems to be looking for me." Sam's eyes continued to follow the boy as he stepped a few more paces into the food court.

"Does he sound nice? Angry? Violent?"

"No, Lexi. He sounds... Well, confused."

The three of them continued to watch the boy take slow steps into the middle of the court and scan the room. When his eyes finally met their table, and he realized they were all watching him, he cautiously walked towards them.

He slowly approached them, and when he reached their table, he directed his dark eyes toward Sam. "Um, are you Sam Dixon?"

"Yes. Have we met?"

"Not that I know of." The boy looked even more confused.

"What can I do for you?" Neither one of them was comfortable with this conversation.

The boy scuffed his toe against the floor and then looked up again. "I'm not sure. I was just told to meet you here. I thought you sent the message."

"What message?"

"This one," he handed his cell phone over to Sam. Sam read the text:

Important meeting in food court at mall. We need your input. Please come meet us now. –Sam Dixon

Sam looked up at the boy, whose face was as puzzled as the rest of them. He checked the details of the text.

Of course, no number. Sent 28 minutes ago.

"So you don't know who sent this to you?"

"No. Really, I thought you sent it."

A chill ran down Sam's spine and he heard both Leesha and Lexi shudder.

Who knows we're in the food court? And why would they send him to us?

“Are you a police officer?” Sam asked, knowing it was a stretch. This kid couldn’t be more than like fifteen or sixteen, even if he was tall.

“No.”

“Medical professional?”

“No...”

“Evil scientist?” Lexi couldn’t help but butt in. If she had hackles, they would have been raised.

“No! Why are you guys asking all of this? And who are you?”

Sam looked up at Leesha, then back at the boy. “I think the more pressing question is who are you?”

“My name is Clint. And I have no idea what I’m doing here. I’m sorry I even came. The message just sounded important.”

Leesha’s eyes cleared and she turned her body towards Clint. “Clint. Clint McKay?”

Clint’s expression was a mixture of curiosity and fear. “Yes. How do you know my name?”

She turned to the others. “He’s one of us.”

“He’s on the list?” Lexi asked.

“Yes. He’s one of the three still in the area.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Clint looked there, stumped.

Leesha looked at her watch. “The mall’s going to close in a minute. We’ve got a lot of questions for him. We need to find another place to meet.”

“You just want to start talking to him about this?!” Lexi sat straight up. “I mean, we don’t even know he is who he says he is. We don’t know if we can trust him. He just walked in here, from nowhere, says he is looking for us, and we’re just going to take him at his word?”

Leesha understood Lexi’s caution, but didn’t know what else to do. Clint could be another key to finding the answers they wanted. “Do you have any other suggestion?”

“Stop it you two,” Sam interrupted. “Hang on just a minute.”

Sam looked up at the boy, searching through his thoughts for a minute. From what he could tell, the boy was scared stiff. He couldn’t understand why the three kids were speaking in code, like they had some kind of secret they were protecting with their lives. He wondered who sent him the text, because obviously none of these three had done it. Just as he was considering turning around and walking out the door, not look back, Sam spoke.

“It’s okay girls. He is who he says he is. He really doesn’t know why he’s here, or who sent him.”

“How do you know that?” now Clint was even more confused.

“I’ll explain in a minute. We need to find somewhere more private. He’s going to need some proof,” he said to the girls. “He’s not been affected yet.”

Leesha spoke up. “My mom is gone for the weekend. We can go to my place.”

“And I’m just supposed to follow you three?!” Clint was not convinced, as their behavior in his opinion was more than a touch bizarre.

Lexi looked at his face for a minute. She trusted Sam’s assessment, and was now feeling compassionate for Clint, knowing what was in store for him, if he was at one point been infected like the rest. She touched his sleeve.

“It’s okay, Clint. You can trust us.”

He looked down at Lexi’s pretty face and instantly softened. “Okay. Where are we going?”

“Follow me,” Leesha said, and walked the foursome out the front door.

Leesha’s house was kind of a matchbox little house on the fringe of the dodgy end of town. Not quite in the sticks, but you knew it was close. Inside, the place was clean, but as Sam looked around, he detected the trail of someone who packed in a hurry to leave for a weekend getaway tryst. He looked up at Leesha’s face, and heard the embarrassment in her thoughts. She instantly breezed around the room to pick up the clutter. He thought about saying something to her silently, telling her not to worry about it, but decided to leave it alone.

It might just make her feel worse.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered, still cleaning up her mother’s trail of discarded clothes and empty soda cans.

“Don’t worry about it, Leesh,” Lexi reassured her. “Let’s go sit down in the living room – it’ll be more comfortable anyway.”

Sam had filled Lexi in on Leesha’s mother and their history, and Lexi instantly felt sorry for the lack of direction in Leesha’s life. Sam and Lexi always had positive influences in their parents, and now reflecting on Leesha’s life, knew that they often took their life for granted.

Lexi walked over to Leesha, and Sam heard her whisper “Don’t worry about it. None of us care. C’mon. We’ve got work to do,” and she steered Leesha to the other room.

“Thanks Lexi,” Sam projected to his sister. “I didn’t know what to say to her.”

“Which is why you are so terrible with the girls,” Lexi shot back silently.

Clint sat down in one of the chairs, looking even more uncomfortable than the red-faced Leesha. He looked up at the group, and started to stammer, more out of fear than anything else.

“Um... Okay. First of all, who are you?”

The other three quietly chuckled first, then sobered knowing they needed to fill Clint in on a lot of information.

“I’m Lexi, and this is my brother Sam. We’re twins.”

“I’m Leesha. We’ve got a lot of questions for you. We’ll also have lot more information to tell you in return. I need to know that we can trust you – at this point we want to keep all of this a secret. No one can know anything about what we tell you, okay?”

“Okay,” he reluctantly agreed.

Leesha looked over at Sam, who nodded his approval. He had just reached into his head again, and knew the boy was telling the truth. He could be trusted.

Leesha turned back to Clint. “We know who you are because we’ve been doing some research on the history of our birth. All three of us – and you, too – were born on the same day in the same hospital.”

“October 14th?” Clint’s eyes bugged. “We all four have the same birthday?”

“Yes,” Sam picked up the explanation. “And the three of us – me, Lexi and Leesha – are all now having side effects we think can be traced back to our time in the hospital.”

“Nice one,” Leesha thought to Sam silently.

“Well,” he projected back, “I think we should ease him into this slowly...”

“What kind of side effects?” Clint looked a little worried.

“Have you experienced any kind of burning headaches or pain in your body you can’t explain?” Leesha continued.

“No.”

“Nothing at all out of the ordinary?”

“Nope, nothing.”

“When’s the last time you’ve been to see your doctor?” Lexi helped out in the questioning.

“Um... Right before my birthday.”

“Are you still getting taller?”

“Yeah. Doc says I will probably grow another inch or two in the next year, then level off. Or so he thinks. My dad is tall. Why do you ask?”

“We all started seeing symptoms once our bodies stopped growing,” Leesha said. “I started going through it about a year and a half ago. Sam just got done, and Lexi is just getting started.”

“Getting started with what? What are you talking about?”

Leesha looked from Lexi to Sam with a note of concern. “We don’t even know if he’s been infected...”

“Infected with WHAT?” now Clint’s concern was bordering on pure terror.

Sam scanned the room, then silently addressed the two girls who still had mixed emotions running through their brains. “You’re right, we DON’T know if he’s been infected. BUT, he was sent to us for some reason. We need to find out that reason, and who sent him. And he’s got the same birthday, and he’s on the list. He’s not done growing, and we don’t know when he will be, and even then if he will show signs. But I’ve listened to him, am still listening to him, and I trust him. I do. I think we can let him in on this. Really.”

The girls looked at each other, then Lexi took the lead. “Clint, can you promise us that you won’t tell anyone what we’re about to tell you?”

“Yes.”

“I need to hear you say it.”

Leave it to Lexi to be a stickler with words.

“I promise.”

“Leesha, you’re better at explaining all of this – I’ll let you explain.”

“Okay, Clint. The truth is, we think that someone did something to us when we were babies that changed us – wasn’t set to affect us until our bodies were completely matured. That is, when we stopped growing. We don’t know why, we’re not even sure who, and we certainly don’t know how, but we’re trying to put the pieces together.”

“Why do you think it happened when you were babies?”

Sam jumped in, “Well, Lexi and I are siblings – obvious connection... But the only connection that we have with Leesha is the fact that we were born on the same day in the same hospital, and treated by the same staff.”

“So you’ve never met before?”

“Not until a few weeks ago,” Sam continued. “Leesha ran into me as I was in the midst of an episode.”

“An episode...?”

Leesha took over. “For me, it was kind of like a blinding, burning headache – but just a flash of one – it was over in just a couple of minutes. I thought it was a migraine at first.”

“For Lexi and me,” Sam added to her explanation, “The burn affects us throughout our entire body. It completely takes over – head to toe – but the flashes are much the same. Further apart at first, then as they get closer and more frequent, the intensity decreases and the time of the flash lengthens.”

“So you’re saying that flashes of burning pain take over your entire body?!”

As if on cue, Sam heard her mind scream first, then her voice followed. Lexi leaned forward, her head in her hands, and leaned her forehead on her knees and started rocking back and forth. Both Sam and Leesha sprang into action. Sam looked at his watch and ran to go get a notepad and pen. Leesha ran out of the room, Sam heard her turn on the bathroom faucet and wet a wash rag.

Clint's face was suddenly white. "What is going on?"

"Well Clint, it looks like you're going to experience a flash first hand," Sam answered as Leesha sat down on the couch next to Lexi, leaning her towards her to put her head in her lap. She laid the cold cloth on Lexi's head and slowly started to rub her temples.

Both boys watched with horror on their faces – Sam because he hated watching his sister suffer, Clint because he had no idea what was happening. Leesha sat patiently with Lexi, stroking her hair. "Breathe in... Now out..."

Lexi just continued to writhe there in agony, moaning quietly and shuddering with the burn.

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, Lexi's forehead finally smoothed, she sat up and rubbed the back of her sweaty neck. "Ugh. Sorry about that guys. I'm all good now!" and she shot them a winning smile, full of relief.

"What... the heck... was that?!" Clint's olive skin had still not regained its normal color.

"That, well... That was a flash."

"But... You're smiling now. You just looked like you were in the most excruciating pain..."

"Oh, I was. It's no picnic. To be honest, it pretty much feels like you're trapped in a flaming barrel of gasoline... But it's over now."

"And you're HAPPY now?"

They all chuckled – all three that were in on the secret joke anyway. Sam checked his watch and noted the time on his notepad.

"Wow, Lex. That one was almost ten minutes! You've really upped the production with that one!" He smiled a congratulatory look at her.

"Really? That's fantastic!" Lexi walked over to check his notes.

Clint shook his head, like he was trying to clear the fog that was preventing him from seeing clearly. "Why are you guys so upbeat about all of this?! It seems to me like she was just being tortured!"

Leesha smiled. "Well, Clint... We haven't told you the good news yet."

Chapter Thirty

“Good news?” Clint’s mouth dropped open in utter astonishment. “There’s good news?”
Leesha took a deep breath and braced herself to tell him the rest of the story. “Clint, I know what you just saw was pretty weird.”

“Um... YEAH,” he nodded.

“What I’m gonna tell you now is even harder to wrap your head around. If you think you’ve taken in too much for tonight, we would all understand.”

His square jaw tightened, as if he were trying to summon up the courage to finish this conversation. “I’m fine. Go on.”

“We believe these flashes are some kind of chemical reaction starting in our brain, and is changing the makeup of our bodies. And the abilities of our mind.”

“What do you mean it’s changing the abilities of your mind?”

“Well,” Leesha continued, “it’s different for each of us. My brain was left with the added power of telekinesis.”

“You mean like moving things with your mind?”

“Very good!” Leesha was impressed with his knowledge of scientific terminology.

“I thought that was just comic book stuff...” Clint continued to look puzzled.

“I did too, until it took over my body,” she laughed, and proceeded to give Clint the Reader’s Digest version of her history.

When she wrapped up her story, Clint still looked skeptical. Sam laughed from his seat, shook his head and said, “Yeah, man. I didn’t believe her either.”

Clint looked over at him. “It can’t be possible.”

“I promise, it is,” he grinned back at him, knowing what was coming next.

Clint looked back at Leesha. “Can I see?” he timidly asked.

“Sure! I feel like I’ve been a terrible hostess. Let me get you something to drink,” and her gaze moved from the living room to the kitchen. They all three followed her eyes and watched the refrigerator door open silently by itself, and then a can of Coke was gracefully drifting through the air until it landed gently on the coaster in front of where Clint was sitting.

“Un... believable,” he looked up at Leesha, shocked. “Can you do that to anything?”

“Yes.”

“Any weight?”

“Yes, now. It took a little while to strengthen my ability, but now I can pretty much move anything. I’ve even lifted a car once, just to see if I could.”

“Can you lift living things?”

“Yep.”

“Lift me.”

And suddenly he was floating mid-air, about two feet above where he was sitting. He looked down, and fought the urge to scream like a girl.

Sam laughed. “Good one, Clint! I can’t believe I didn’t think to ask her that.” He turned to Leesha. “Do me next!”

“Take a number, pal,” Leesha smirked as she set Clint back down in his seat.

Clint shook his head again, now believing, but still trying to understand what the group was telling him. “And you think the flashes are making this happen?”

“We do,” Leesha answered. “I wasn’t sure at first, but once I found Sam and saw what he was going through, I was convinced it was connected. That we were connected.”

Clint turned to Sam. "What can you do?"

"My senses are heightened. I can see better. Hearing, taste, touch, smell – all of it is superhuman. And I've got a sixth sense – I can read minds, and project my thoughts into the minds of others."

"Really?"

"Really. Remember earlier when you asked how I could know everything that I did? I was reading your mind."

"Oh. OH! Oh... Well, that's kind of rude," he shot, only half sarcastically.

"I know. I can turn it off when I want to, which is most the time. But it comes in handy. I heard you come into the mall tonight, too. Could hear you repeating my name in your mind, so I knew you were looking for me."

"That's why all of you were watching me?"

"Yes."

Now completely filled with curiosity, he turned to Lexi. "What can YOU do?"

Lexi, in her flair for grandeur, opted not to tell him. She simply showed him. In a flash, she was gone.

Clint's body jerked back in surprise, mixed with a little fear. He scanned the room, then looked back at the other two. "Where'd she go?"

"I'm over here," she said from the other side of the room.

"Invisibility?"

"She has the ability to change her body's matter to be transparent," Leesha explained, more scientifically.

"Pretty cool, isn't it?" she said from yet another corner of the room.

Clint's head snapped toward the direction from where her voice was now coming, still perplexed by the fact that he couldn't see her.

Sam butted in. "And she uses her ability to screw with people."

And just then the group heard the smack and saw Sam's head fly forward. "Ow, Lexi! I swear... I'm going to put a cow bell on her."

In a flash, she was back, appearing right next to Clint on the couch. He flinched as she appeared right in front of his eyes. "Yeah, I can see how that would mess with a person."

They all laughed, then Leesha's eyes got serious again. "So none of this has happened to you, Clint?"

"No. NO. I'd know if I'd have gone through anything like this. Do you think it will?"

"There's not an easy way to know," Leesha began. "Either we can wait for your body to stop growing, which could be a while..."

Sam interrupted, "OR we could find the bastard that did this to us and ask him."

Leesha got quiet for a moment, thinking. She turned to Clint. "You don't have any idea who sent you to us?"

"No. Really, I thought it was you guys. I'm as clueless as you are."

Sam heard the fear run through Lexi's brain as she caught up to speed with what Leesha was thinking. "You don't think HE sent Clint to us, do you?"

"Well, that's the only obvious answer I can think of. I mean, who else would know about us?"

"Who are you talking about?" Clint asked, confused again.

There is so much we need to fill him in on...

“We believe that a man, Dr. Carl Blevins, is the one who did this to us,” Leesha started. “He was an OB on rotation during the time that we were born at Sartori, and we’ve done enough research on his education, experience and – most importantly, his criminal background – to believe that he is the guy we’re looking for. So far, he’s the only one that makes sense.”

“The only problem,” Sam continued Leesha’s explanation, “is we can’t find him. No trace of him anywhere – no trail of him from since after he left prison. So we can’t ask him any of the questions we have in order to get the answers.”

“Well, someone knew that the three of you were together,” Clint said, pondering, then looked at the twins. “I know you two live together, but how do you communicate between the three of you?”

“We mostly try to meet to discuss our research,” Leesha answered for the group. “Between meetings, we email from our computers, and text and call from our cells.”

Clint turned to Sam. “Let me see your phone.”

Sam pulled it out, and flipped it to Clint. He caught it gracefully and in what seemed like a few seconds, had the back off and the whole thing dismantled to check out the internal parts.

“Hey!” Sam said protectively. “I hope you can put that back together!”

“I can, don’t worry.” Clint continued to look through the internal wiring, then in a couple more blinks put the phone back together, turned it back on and flipped through the settings. After thoroughly scanning the contents on the screen, he flipped it back and to Sam and reported: “It’s clean. No bugs or tracing devices.”

Lexi’s eyes popped. “Are you serious? You can tell that?”

He grinned shyly. “I’m pretty good with electronics.”

“Check mine,” and Lexi walked over to hand her phone to him. After the same routine, he reported hers was clear of surveillance too. After Lexi’s, he checked Leesha’s phone – which also got a clean bill of health.

“Okay,” Clint started, “we know that he’s not tracing your texts or listening in on your conversations by phone. I can check your computers, too, if you want.”

Sam checked his watch. “Oh my gosh, Lexi! Do you see the time? We’ve got to get home or Mom will kill us!”

Lexi jumped up, and then hesitated. “But we just got started... We’ve got more questions than answers now!”

“What are you guys doing tomorrow?” Leesha asked. “Mom’s gone all weekend. Can you guys come back and spend the day working?”

“Yep,” both twins said in unison.

“Clint?” Leesha asked. “You want in on this? We could really use your help.”

“You got it. I’m in. What time?”

“How about ten?”

“Sounds good,” Sam said. “I’ll bring doughnuts. We’ll need some brain food.”

The group laughed, and Sam, Lexi and Clint headed for the door to leave. As they walked down the stairs toward their cars, Sam noticed for the first time what Clint drove up in.

“Nice cycle, man,” he said enviously.

“Thanks. It’s a ’73 Harley Davidson Sportster. My old man helped me rebuild it last year. I saved for a whole year to buy it and the parts, and it took us another just to rebuild it,” he said, pulling his leather jacket off the back. “It rides sweet. You wanna take it for a spin tomorrow?”

“Can I really?”

“Sure!”

“Cool... See you tomorrow,” and the gang headed off in their separate directions.

Chapter Thirty-one

Sam got to Leesha's house last, as he stopped by the local bakery to get a mixed assortment of breakfast pastries on his way. When he got there, he saw Lexi's car in the small driveway, but noticed right away that she hadn't gone in yet. She was outside standing next to Clint, who was sitting on his bike showing it off. He opted not to tap into her thoughts – he could tell by the way she was standing there, with one hip shifted to the side, she was trying to get his attention.

Ugh. I don't have the stomach for this so early in the morning.

He walked up the stairs to be greeted by Leesha at the door. Her lips curved up as she nodded towards the two in the driveway. "Most guys are hotter with leather jackets and motorcycles."

"Shut up, Leesha." He turned his back to her and walked away as she sniggered.

He set his laptop down on the counter, along with the box of doughnuts. Leesha was setting drinks out on the counter when the other two stepped through the front door to get started. They all converged around the box Sam opened and made small talk as they finished off their first round of doughnuts and muffins.

"Lexi, do you still have your powers this morning?" Leesha asked, hoping for a positive update.

"I do! This is the longest they've stayed with me!"

"That's great, Lexi. Good news..."

"So you say," Sam interrupted. "YOU don't have to try and talk her out of showing off every chance she gets. I caught her toying with the idea of driving over here invisible – so it would look like her car was driving itself."

Clint burst into a throaty laugh. "That would be so awesome!"

"I know! Right?"

"Lexi..." Leesha started.

"I KNOW, Leesha. Jeez. You two have to give me a tiny break... I really am more responsible than Sam makes me out to be," she rolled her eyes. Then giggled again. "Imagine your motorcycle driving down the highway by itself!"

Even Sam laughed at this imagery. While the mood was light, Leesha thought she would test Clint's overall emotional balance after all they dumped on him the previous night. "Clint, how are you doing with all of this? I know we pushed a lot of freaky stuff on you last night. I'm actually kind of surprised to see you back this morning. And in such a great mood, after everything... You know."

"Well, I did have a hard time sleeping last night, after the initial bomb shell," he admitted. "But I think my adrenaline was more amped up after seeing everything I did, and knowing that I could be a part of this. It's really cool!"

"Did you think any more about how someone could have found us?"

"I still think that it has to have something to do with your computers, and the email trail between the three of you. It's not hard to get into someone's email address, and ultimately their hard drive – especially now that everything has gone wireless. It'll take me close to forty-five minutes to do a thorough search of all three computers – I think that's where I should start."

"Sam," Leesha turned to him. "I was thinking that perhaps we should split up and help out the others. Lexi needs to work on her ability since it's still here. I can help her with that, as I

know what tests I want her to try. With your technical knowledge, do you think you could help Clint check the computers?"

"Sure. No problem." And to their separate corners they went.

Leesha had Lexi practicing her abilities, first by isolating certain parts of her body. It was not an easy task, and eventually Leesha asked Lexi to shut her eyes to keep her focus, talking her through the exercise. They started with smaller part of the body – fingers first – as that sounded like the easiest route. After about fifteen minutes, Lexi was able to make her entire left hand disappear.

"Lexi, you're doing it!" Leesha shouted, and Lexi's eyes snapped open to see her arm stubbed off at the wrist.

"Oh. My. GOSH! That is so weird looking!" They both giggled loudly, which made the boys stop what they were doing in the other room and pay attention. Lexi looked up at Sam and Clint and waved with her handless arm.

"Ew! Yuck! That's disgusting!" Clint laughed.

"Great job, Lexi! Was it hard?"

"No, not after Leesha helped me focus. I think I can do it by myself now..." and with a look of concentration, made her other hand disappear. Then her legs disappeared, then both arms. She then stood up – though you couldn't see her legs move, and her limbless torso floated around the room as she walked in circles around the coffee table. The other three cheered and laughed. The boys then went back to concentrate on the laptops.

"Okay, Lexi, now I want to see if you can make something else disappear."

"What do you mean?"

"Hold this remote control in your hand and see if you can make it disappear with your hand. I don't think this one will be nearly as hard to do – you're already kind of doing it in a way."

"I am?"

"Well, yeah. The way I figure, your clothes are disappearing as your body material goes transparent. It's touching you, so you must have some kind of control on what you're touching too."

"Okay, that makes sense." Lexi looked down at the remote, thought for a split second, and then both her hand and the remote were gone.

"Great! You're a quick study, Lexi."

"Thanks. I promised you I would work hard at this."

"I know, and you have," Leesha agreed. "Now, let's take this one step further. This time I want you to concentrate on making JUST the remote control disappear. Not your hand, just the remote."

Lexi held her hand out again, paused again, and then the remote was gone, her hand still there cupped as if there was something resting in it.

"Awesome! That's amazing, Lexi..."

Leesha looked down at her feet. "Do you think you could make your shoes disappear?"

They both concentrated on her feet, and in a flash, her shoes were gone, showing her bare feet – freshly pedicured in pink toenail polish.

"Nice..."

The boys stopped what they were doing to watch. Clint yelled from the kitchen table: “Now take the rest of it off!”

“Yeah right, pervert!” Lexi shot back, grinning, just as Sam landed a sharp punch to Clint’s shoulder.

“Ow! I was just kidding...” he half shrugged.

Leesha turned back at Lexi. “Okay, now I want to try something else. I’m wanting to test my abilities in sync with yours and see if they can work together. You willing to let me lift you?”

“Yes! I’ve been dying to since I saw you do it last night!”

“Okay... First, just let me do it while you’re in full view, so you can get a sense of how it feels.”

“Okay,” Lexi said, setting her feet apart in a ready stance. “I’m ready.”

And suddenly she was lifted six inches into the air. Leesha took her and moved her back and forth gracefully through the living room.

“This is so cool! It’s almost like flying! Can you do it faster? Higher?”

“Yes, but not without serious damage to the house. One thing at a time Lexi,” and she set her back down in her original spot. “Now, disappear.”

Lexi’s image suddenly flashed away and the room was silent.

“Lexi?”

“Yes?”

“Are you floating?”

“No.”

“Darn it! I was afraid of that...” Leesha looked disappointed.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked from across the room.

“I can’t move her if I can’t see her. I’ve got to have something to focus on.”

“What if you could see my pinkie?” and suddenly the tip of her little finger appeared. Leesha tried again, and all of a sudden the group cheered as her finger levitated back up into the air by six inches.

“Well, it’s not completely fool proof,” Leesha admitted, “but it’s a workable loophole. How are you guys doing over there?”

Clint looked up from the last laptop. “We’re just finishing up. I can’t find any trace of illegal activity on any of the computers. He can’t be tapping into your conversations this way either, as far as I can figure.”

“I guess that’s a bit of a relief,” Leesha sighed. “I don’t want anyone tapping into anything in my life – especially the research I’ve done and the conversations we’ve had.”

“But then how did he know we were meeting at the mall?” Sam asked, and the group went silent for a few minutes, trying to figure out the key to the puzzle.

Suddenly, without warning, Clint bolted up from his chair and out the front door. The other three looked at each other, dumbfounded by his behavior. Finally, after the initial shock wore off, they got up to follow him out the front, to see if he left.

He hadn’t. When they reached the front steps, they found him walking around his motorcycle, searching the various parts on his bike.

“What wrong, man?” Sam asked.

“Just a minute... Got a theory...” Clint was focused, looking under and around each piece of detail on his bike. He knelt down and peered around the inside of his kickstand.

“Gotcha.”

He reached around to the inside and pulled out what looked like a small black box, the size of a postage stamp. He shook his head and held it up for the group to see.

“What’s that?” Lexi asked.

“It’s a GPS tracking device,” Clint answered her question, for the sake of the entire group who all looked confused. “And I’ll bet my jacket that each of you have one planted on your cars as well.”

Sam’s face sobered. “Looks like we’ve got a search to start. Lexi, Leesha – bring me your keys.”

Chapter Thirty-two

Sure enough, within about an hour, Clint and Sam were able to locate the three other tracking devices. They decided to keep them in place for the time being.

“I don’t know if this makes me feel better having the answer, or more scared knowing someone is following me,” Lexi said, sitting next to Leesha on the steps.

“I know,” Leesha agreed. “I kinda feel violated.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure,” Sam said. “If we take the devices off our cars, he’ll know we’ve found ‘em and we’re on to him. I’m not sure I want him to know that yet. We don’t know what he’ll do if he realizes we’ve figured this out.”

“Yep,” Leesha nodded. “For now, we know he’s not able to follow our conversations. He doesn’t know what we know, but he knows where we are – which is how he knew where to send Clint and when. But he really only knows where our cars are, and we can certainly work around that.”

Lexi looked alarmed. “He knows that we’re all here – right NOW. That doesn’t concern you?”

The girls are freaking out...

“Not yet. We don’t know if he’s friendly or not,” Leesha said back, but not sounding totally convinced herself.

“If he wanted to help us,” Lexi started, “don’t you think he’d approach us himself?”

“Good point. But we don’t really know anything about him or what he wants until we can talk to him. Or someone who knows him.”

Sam agreed with Leesha and added, “Which leads us back to Charles Rowe.”

“Who is Charles Rowe?”

“He’s a pathologist in Scottsdale, Arizona,” Sam said, answering Clint’s question. “He was a resident at the hospital when we were born. We’ve found a couple of connections between him and Blevins. We think they were working together at one point, and might even still be now. He’s basically the only person we have found that we know has information on and about Blevins. He might even know where he is today.”

“BUT,” Lexi interrupted. “We don’t know if HE is friendly.”

“You’re right, we don’t,” Sam agreed. “So if and when we decide to make contact, I think we should do it in person. With our abilities, we can scope him out first – get a feel for him and his life – before we have to actually talk to him. Think about it – Lexi, you can go into his office undetected. If he’s got files on us, you can grab them and make them disappear as you bring them back with you!”

“Sam’s right,” Leesha backed up his thought process. “Plus, he can tap into Rowe’s mind, get a sense of what he is thinking, and what his intentions are.” She turned to him. “Can you access the history in someone’s brain, or do the thoughts have to pass through their mind?”

“It has to be a thought. It’s like hearing, only I’m hearing what they are thinking, rather than what they are saying.”

“Gotcha.”

“But if we have to, we can always send one of us in to ask questions and I can process what he’s NOT saying. Monitor how he reacts. See what he’s not telling us... But first, I think we spy.”

“Right,” Leesha nodded. “We’ve got some planning to do if we want to pull this off. Like, for instance, how do we get to Arizona without tipping Blevins off, now that we know he’s

watching us? Why don't we go inside and order pizza – I'm starving – and we can start working on this little road trip.”

As they waited for the delivery guy, the girls continued to work on Lexi's powers while the guys watched and cheered. Lexi was able to make Sam disappear when she touched him, confirming Leesha's theory that she could extend her powers to other people in addition to inanimate objects. At one point, Lexi disappeared and flickered Sam on and off, on and off, several times by just touching his shoulder, then taking her finger away again. The group was lively as they laughed at the scene.

When the pizza arrived, Lexi practiced her skills more. First she made the pizza slice disappear as she ate it, making it look like she was eating nothing more than thin air. Then she reversed the situation, having her body disappear, while showing the pizza slice and taking bites out of it as it floated in the air. Her parlor tricks were just what the group needed to take the edge of fear out of their minds.

All of a sudden, Lexi appeared back in her seat, and her face fell. “It's gone. It's gone again...” and she put her forehead in her free hand, crestfallen.

Leesha and Sam looked at each other, knowing how disappointed she was at the loss of her power. Leesha spoke first, “Lexi, you know this is going to happen for a little while longer. But cheer up! You're doing great. Your power is strengthening, and we were able to expand it into a bunch of new areas we didn't even know were possible before today!”

“Yeah, Lex,” Sam said, checking his watch and noting the time. “I wouldn't be surprised, looking at the frequency and length you've worked up to, if you only had one or two more flashes and then you'll be done.”

Leesha shot him a warning look, and told him silently not to get her hopes up.

“At least you've got a power,” a quiet voice spoke up. Clint watched all of this happen, and didn't realize until just now that he was a little envious of their abilities. “I mean, I'm sitting here watching you guys do all of this amazing stuff. I want to be a part of this team, this effort... But I have nothing to offer! I can't do anything to help in this project.”

Lexi looked up from her hand, her face suddenly filled with warmth and empathy for him. “Clint, you don't know that. It's very possible you are just like us, but your body just hasn't caught up yet.”

“Once you stop growing,” Leesha added, “we'll know for sure. But if my gut is right, and it usually is, you're definitely one of us. And I believe there are more like us out there.”

“Besides,” Sam chimed in, “you've already helped us figure out so much! Your electronics knowledge alone has given us so many answers. And you found the tracking devices. You're already protecting us and our effort... Power or not, you're definitely a bonafied member of this unit!”

Clint seemed to cheer a little at this encouragement, but remained quiet for the rest of lunch and the planning session.

At the end of the day, each left with their own set of homework. Since they didn't really get started on their last set of assignments, Sam, Lexi and Leesha's homework was still the same.

Sam was to research Virginia Blevins and her time in Arizona, check the Angel Wings staff and visitor logs, in the hopes that he could track down an alias for Dr. Blevins.

Leesha was going to do some digging into Sara Milligan, the only other visitor to meet with Blevins during his time in the penitentiary.

Lexi needed to look into the medical school studies and determine which ones were experimenting on brain altering drugs, find the medical details on each one, and the affects if they were combined.

Clint was shocked when they included him in the task list. His job was to research any other way that Dr. Blevins might be monitoring them – up to and including home surveillance. And, most importantly, figure out a way for the team to make it to Arizona without being detected by the prying eyes that watched.

Chapter Thirty-three

Sunday was a work day for the foursome, each working on homework from their own separate corners of the city.

Sam dug right into his search for Virginia Blevins and her history in Arizona and her time at Angel Wings. In his previous research, he only reviewed her documentation from the Alzheimer's unit at Angel Wings. Digging further, he tapped into the parent company of the healthcare organization and was able to find a more complete set of medical records.

Now 82, Virginia was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease eight years prior. For the first five and a half years, she was able to be treated and monitored at Angel Wings' assisted living facility. When her senile dementia related problems escalated to the point when she needed constant supervision and medical assistance, she was transferred to the more specialized Alzheimer's unit.

Her next of kin was listed in her original healthcare directives – a husband – Roy, now deceased, and a son, Carl. Sam noted that the last address listed for Carl was the federal pen in Birmingham.

Nothing more recent. So they don't know where he is either.

Sam switched over to the visitor logs for the five and a half years that Virginia spent in the assisted living facility. These logs were scanned from the original pages and archived into the server.

Crap. This would be a whole lot easier if they had this in database format. I'm going to have to read through each and every one of these pages... Boring!

It took Sam about three hours to pour through all of the information, but in the end, he had a very short list of people that visited Virginia in the time she was at Angel Wings. Two female names he determined were relatives – Betty Johnston, her second-cousin from San Diego and Andrea Neal, a niece of her late husband's. Only one other name came up in his search – the only male name – Mike Smith.

Well, isn't that clever. If you're gonna rename yourself to conceal your identity, pick a name that like a million people share. Fantastic...

With his head throbbing, both with frustration and fatigue from scanning the log documents, Sam decided to take a break and go and check on Lexi. He knocked on the bathroom door.

“Lex?”

“Come in!”

When he entered her room, she was sitting in the middle of her bed, her laptop in front of her, and her entire bed covered with papers and notebooks. Her hair was up in a makeshift ponytail kind of knot, with three pencils sticking out from inside the hair band in all different directions.

Does she know she looks like a dork with those pencils in her hair?

She looked up at him, the dark circles of fatigue just starting to show under her green eyes, which were contradicted by a sparkle of the enthusiasm of success.

“What happened to your room? Did you get hit by a tornado?”

“Har, har. I'm making serious progress with my research, and while you may not know it, all of this is very organized,” Lexi said, gesturing to the chaos of paper.

“What have you found so far?”

“Well, there are three universities and one – ahem – military school that have medical departments specifically geared toward the research of psychoactive substances. They’re all creating and testing new forms of chemical neurotransmitters to test pharmacodynamics and neural circuitry...”

“English, please, Lexi.”

“They’re all working on developing new meds to see how they affect and change brain activity.”

“Which is pretty much what you said before, right?”

“Right. Only the most interesting thing came as I was searching lab results from the university departments and news stories online. There’s a seven month period of time in one lab that I can’t find any information. No lab results through the layers of web material, no articles in any of the media – regionally or nationally, nothing. Guess which lab?”

“The military one.”

“Bingo.”

“Guess what dates?”

“I’m not sure I can guess the exact dates, but I’m betting it was during Blevins’ time there.”

“You’re a smart one, you...”

“I guess if there was some kind of scandal or illegal activity, the military would know how to bury it. Especially they weren’t directly involved – if the activity wasn’t ordered by them, they would want to make it disappear, so they wouldn’t be liable.”

“I’m guessing someone has erased it. But I’m stumped. I can’t figure out how you can manage to eliminate seven months of activity... There’s got to be some information somewhere!”

“Probably in some file marked CLASSIFIED, hidden deep within the pits of a very large security safe that is guarded by sharpshooters with sniper rifles.”

“Yikes. When you say it like that...”

“Makes you want to know, doesn’t it?” Sam grinned at her.

Lexi smiled back. “Sure does.”

Just then, Sam’s cell rang. He looked at the screen, then back at Lexi. “It’s Clint.”

To Lexi’s ears, Sam’s end of the conversation sounded something like: “Yeah. Sure. No, we’re here. Come on over. No, you’re right, it’s a good idea. I’m glad you thought of it. Bring Leesha. You two can meet the fam. See you soon. Bye.”

He hung up and Lexi asked, “What was that all about?”

“Clint’s doing a sweep of all of our houses to see if there are any surveillance cameras or recording devices. He got the idea this morning – has already run a check on his and Leesha’s houses.”

“Did he find anything?”

“No, not there. But he just wants to be sure. You know, cover all the bases.”

“Good idea. I don’t want someone watching us here. You don’t think Mom and Dad are in any danger, do you?” Lexi suddenly looked worried.

Good grief, she’s paranoid.

“At this point, Lex, I’m not going to jump to that conclusion. But it’s certainly in the back of my mind. I don’t know what Blevins is capable of, but I won’t let him near Mom and Dad.”

“Okay... Me either. We’ll make sure of it.”

“Lex?”

“Yeah.”

“Clint and Leesha are on their way over here. How do you suggest we introduce them to Mom and Dad?”

By the time Leesha drove up, Sam and Lexi had all the details down. Sam projected the plan to the other two before they got out of the car, so they were all on the same page. They basically agreed to give the least amount of information possible.

“Mom, Dad,” Sam opened the door for their guests, “this is Leesha...”

“Pleased to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Dixon,” she smiled and offered her hand.

“And this is Clint.”

“Nice to meet you,” Clint mumbled as he shook Mr. Dixon’s hand.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet both of you,” Mrs. Dixon sang, as she shot a puzzled look at her husband. “It’s always nice to meet new friends of Sam and Lexi’s.”

Uh-oh. Her radar is on alert.

“Mom,” Sam continued. “I told you about Leesha – she is the new friend we met at that study group. She goes to Central. And we met Clint through her. They just stopped by to say hello.”

“Well, welcome,” Mr. Dixon said. “We’re always glad to have friends of the kids over.”

How quaint... Barf. Let’s move ‘em out of here.

Lexi must have had the same thought, because she grabbed a couple of sodas from the refrigerator and said, “Hey Leesha. Come on up – I really want to show you that new pair of shoes I was telling you about.”

Sam smiled, then projected to Lexi, “Thank, Lex. Fill her in. And grab my paperwork on the bed for her – it’s next to my laptop. Clint and I will start a perimeter around the outside and will be up shortly.”

Sam then made some excuse about a CD in his car he promised to give to Clint and the two boys stepped out the side door. Once outside, they could talk a little better, but still used quiet voices.

“I’m glad you didn’t show up on your bike, man. My mom would have freaked!”

Clint laughed. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. Most moms don’t like the Harley.”

“Where do we start?”

“Just walk me around the house. I want to see if there are any cameras hidden either in your landscaping or on your house. It shouldn’t take too long – there aren’t that many places you can put something like this and still get viable use out of it. You want a good hiding place, but an angle at which you could actually see something.”

“Can I help you look?”

“Sure. Just check along the seams of the house. Under the roofing, around the windows and down the eaves spouts. I’ll take care of the landscaping and the yard.”

In about ten minutes, Clint was satisfied that they covered all the necessary hiding places for surveillance equipment, so they headed inside. As they rounded the house, it occurred to Sam that he should warn Clint to act normal.

“Hey, be sure not to act too weird around my mom,” he projected into Clint’s head.

Clint’s eyes bugged when he realized that Sam’s lips weren’t moving, then he relaxed again and whispered: “I still can’t get used to you being able to do that.”

Sam laughed. “You’ll adjust. It’s a whole lot easier to communicate discreetly once you remember we can do it.”

They headed through the house slowly. Sam picked carefully through the refrigerator to grab drinks, then the pantry to get a bag of chips. He stopped to have a conversation with his dad about the Chiefs game that was on that night. Then paused to ask his mother what was for dinner. All of this was a stall tactic. He was moving the two of them gradually through the house so Clint could scan the downstairs without making a scene.

Once they got upstairs, they went straight to his bedroom, where Clint performed a much more intense search. His reasoning was if there were going to be any serious surveillance efforts, they were most likely going to be aimed specifically at Sam and Lexi. Nothing turned up in his bedroom, so on they went into the bathroom.

Normally Sam wouldn’t even notice the boxers lying in the corner of the bathroom – a sign of his bad basketball skills, as he totally missed the laundry hamper and neglected to pick up his mess. And if it were just Clint there, he wouldn’t have even bothered, but knowing Leesha was in the next room, he was suddenly aware of his foul and bent over to put them in the hamper and close the lid.

He turned to Clint, “See anything?”

“Nope. Clean.”

“Lexi’s room is right through here.” He knocked on the door and entered before an answer. He could hear them talking excitedly already, and couldn’t wait to participate in the download.

“Did you guys find anything?” Leesha asked as she looked up.

Clint was still scanning Lexi’s room, but answered “No, not yet. I don’t think there’s anything to be found.”

“The guy would have to be pretty stupid to come to our houses and install cameras or bugs,” Lexi piped in.

“You’d think so, but he had the nerve to put tracking devices on our cars,” Leesha said. “Now, he could’ve done this while we were at school, so not necessarily trespassing on private property, but still a violation!”

“Uh-huh.” Lexi nodded.

Both of them are a little uptight about this...

Clint finished his search. “Nope. Nothing here.”

“Well, that’s good,” Sam tried to act reassuring. “That’s good news, guys. We know that he’s not watching our homes or listening to our phones. Yes, he’s tracking our cars. But at this point, that’s all he’s doing. Let’s just be aware, make sure we don’t let him get any closer for now.”

Sam brought in a couple of bean bag chairs and the boys settled down on the floor in Lexi’s room to start yet another download from this weekend’s research. As the group was uncovering larger amounts of information, the need to meet was obviously becoming more and more urgent.

Sam projected his research findings to both Leesha and Clint, and then Lexi turned to Clint to tell him everything she was able to uncover about the medical substances that were being tested in the laboratories. Since her information sounded much like a chemistry assignment, their mother didn’t think much of what she overheard as she came around the corner.

“You kids doing okay?” she asked, standing in the doorway. Normally it was a steadfast rule that kids of the opposite gender were not allowed in the bedrooms, but since this was a group, she let it slide. She noticed the boys were sitting together on the other side of the room, and the scene looked pretty harmless. Not that it kept her from checking in, which was exactly what she was doing.

“We’re good Mom!” Lexi responded too quickly to sound casual.

Tone it down, Lexi.

“Okay,” Mrs. Dixon said. “I was just checking on you guys. Clint and Leesha, would you like to stay for dinner?”

Clint mumbled something, without looking up, at the same time Leesha politely said, “Thanks Mrs. D, but we’ve probably overstayed our welcome already.”

“Oh, it’s no imposition. And there’s plenty of food – we’re grilling burgers and brats…”

Clint looked up at her finally, “Well, that does sound pretty good. Are you sure?”

“I am. We’d love it if you would join us. Leesha, you’ll stay too, please?” It was more of an announcement than it was a request.

“I’d love to, thank you,” Leesha smiled at her genuinely. Her mother wouldn’t be home for another – well, who knows when – so a home cooked meal was appreciated.

Satisfied that she wrangled these new friends into family time, she turned back around to start dinner preparations. Sam could hear her filling in his father about the new guests, and then open the freezer door to grab more hamburger patties and another package of brats to thaw.

“Your mom seems nice,” Clint said.

“She is,” Sam said, still listening to her pace back and forth between her kitchen preparations and the bottom of the stairs where she was monitoring the sound of the group. “She’s a little overbearing with the friends thing… She wants to know everyone we are friends with. They’ll grill you two at dinner, just be prepared.”

Lexi laughed. “Yeah, and she’s up here checking to see if we’re behaving. I’m not supposed to have boys in my room! Oooohhh… They’re both really strict, but we’re on to them, and know how to work around them!”

“Lexi,” Sam gave her a knowing smile, “you know she’s down there pacing back and forth as we speak.”

“I figured.”

“I think you guys are pretty lucky,” Leesha looked at both of them soberly. “My mom’s a wreck. Always has been. I’m the adult in our house, and I’ve never had a father around. Count your blessings.”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “My old man is great, but he has to work all the time to make ends meet. We usually end up passing each other coming and going – say hey to each other on the way. We don’t get to spend a whole lot of time together.”

“What about your mom?” Lexi asked.

“She passed away right before my tenth birthday. Cancer.”

Sam heard Lexi’s heart skip a beat and he saw her eyes fill with tears, just a little. “That’s awful, Clint. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. Thanks. I had a good ten years with her.” He tried to brush it off, and the room went quiet for a minute.

“Hey Clint, let’s go see if Dad needs any help with the grill.”

“Okay,” and the boys walked out of the room. Their meeting was over for now.

Chapter Thirty-four

Dinner went by well. The Dixons seemed to enjoy the company of new friends – Leesha turned up her charm, complimenting Mrs. Dixon on her potato salad and fresh lemonade. Clint had Mr. Dixon in stitches with his sarcastic remarks about the inept talent of the Cardinals pitching rotation this season. (Sam forewarned him that his dad was a Cubs fan.)

Both Sam and Lexi were more at ease, knowing their parents were relaxed and approved of their new friends. The four kids helped clear the table, then retreated back into Lexi's room to talk some more about their next steps.

Leesha took the lead, "I think that it's time for a trip down to Arizona to see Dr. Rowe. Ultimately I would like to talk to him – ask him about these medicines that have been tested, and what their effects are on humans. But first, I think we should just scope him out, figure out what we can about his home life and the situation at his office."

"I agree," Sam said. "He's really our only connection to Blevins at this point. We know where he is, so let's capitalize on that, take a weekend and get down there and make contact with him."

"So we really are going to take a road trip?" Lexi looked excited. "How do we pull this off?"

"It won't be a problem for me," Leesha shrugged. "My mom never knows when I'm coming or going. I'm good."

"Me too," Clint said. "As long as I keep my nose clean, my dad pretty much lets me do what I want. I'll just tell him I'm going on a weekend trip with some buddies."

Lexi turned to Sam. "You know it won't be that easy for us, Sam. Mom's not just going to let us leave for the weekend without knowing exactly what we're doing and where we're going. And Dad'll back her up."

"I know... Let me think about this for a minute."

Clint smirked. "I think I may already have the answer for you," he said and pulled a bright yellow flyer out of his back pocket and handed it to Sam.

"A church mission trip?!" Sam rolled over, completely lost in a laugh that came from the pit of his belly. "Oh man, do you EVER have my mom pegged... She'll eat this up! Where did you get this?"

Clint smiled back at him, angelically. "Why, church of course. I thought it sounded like fun, and thought that you three would like to join the effort. We'll be helping erect a shelter for the homeless in the parish that my pastor used to work in."

"Nice one, Clint. You're right, Sam – there's no way Mom won't go for that!"

"It's next weekend. Do you think we can get everything together and ready to leave next Friday after school?"

"Sure!" Leesha said. "I'll go over all the research and map out the locations we need to visit, get information from and put together a list of questions that we want to ask Rowe."

"One question," Lexi piped in, worried again. "How do we get there without Blevins knowing? He's tracking all of our cars."

Clint gave her a reassuring smile. "You let me worry about that. I've got it all figured out."

After the other two left, Sam and Lexi went downstairs to check in with their parents and get their overall assessment of Clint and Leesha. If their parents were positive, they planned to broach the subject of the mission trip. As a rule, they normally didn't lie to their parents, but given the circumstances, they didn't want to put them in any more danger than necessary. And they both agreed, if their parents knew what was going on and where they were going, they might be in danger. Ignorance was best in this instance, and they would continue to call in and check on their parents to make sure they were okay while they were gone. Neither one wanted to take any chances on this.

As they came down the stairs, their mom looked up from cleaning up the kitchen. "Oh, hey you two. Are you all done with your homework?"

"Yep."

"Oh yes," Lexi crooned. "I finished mine in study hall on Friday."

She just loves to make me look like the slacker.

"Okay, good. Sam, can you take this bag of trash to the garage?"

"Sure Mom," he turned his back to his mother and projected to Lexi: "Hey suckup, why don't you ask Mom about the mission trip while I'm gone?"

Since she was right next to her mother, she couldn't do anything but exhale at him, which did not go unnoticed. He decided to take a little longer in the garage, partly because he wanted her to suffer a little alone, but also because he wanted to scan the garage for anything unusual. Clint hadn't gotten to see the entire house, so he gave Sam instructions on what to look for, and where to look.

Mental note: I need to check Mom and Dad's room, too.

By the time he returned, Lexi was having an animated conversation with their mother. "Tell her Sam, tell her how many kids are going and how much fun it's going to be!"

"Yeah, Mom. You know I don't usually get too fired up about stuff like this, but it sounds like there are a bunch of kids from high schools all over the area going. Should be a good time – a great way to meet new people and do something worthwhile."

"I don't know..."

"Here, Mom," he handed her the flyer. "Here's the information Clint gave us – there's a web address if you want to find out more. Please, Mom. I promise we'll call every day."

"Every HOUR if you want us to."

"Well," she sighed, looking down at the flyer. "It does sound like a good activity. Let me talk to your dad about it."

Sam shot Lexi a smile, which she returned. They both knew it was in the bag.

"Hey Dad," Sam looked up at his father in the recliner. "Is the game getting ready to start?"

"Kick off's in about five."

"I'm coming. You want popcorn?"

"You bet! Bring me some tea, too, pal."

"You got it, Dad." He threw a pack of popcorn in the microwave, filled a couple of glasses of tea, and got settled in for a night of Sunday Night Football with his dad.

The next morning, Sam and Lexi got the green flag from their parents for the weekend getaway. Since the following Monday was a holiday, they were going to get three days of work

done in Scottsdale, but they were still quite worried about the length of travel needed to get there.

According to driving directions on the internet, they were looking at about twenty-one hours on the road, not counting gas, bathroom and eating stops. They were going to have to drive through the night and get as much done as they could while they were there. There wouldn't be a lot of time once they got there. It wasn't going to be an easy trip, but they really didn't expect it to be. Still, it was a vital one to make, if they wanted to get further in their research.

Lexi texted the "All systems go" message to Leesha, while Sam texted Clint to tell him they were free to go the next weekend. His text included the nagging question of how to get there, and how not to get detected.

Clint's response was: "You worry too much. Leave it to me. I've got it covered."

I hope he knows what he's doing... There's a lot riding on this trip.

Chapter Thirty-five

Sam didn't see Lexi all morning on Monday, and only guessed something was up as she strolled by his lunch table and caught his eye with a telling smirk painted on her face. Her expression puzzled him enough to tap into her brain so they could have a silent conversation.

"What's up, Lex?"

She paused at the vending machine, appearing to consider her options. "As of eight minutes ago, I am flashing again!"

"Did you log it?"

"Yes."

"So you're flashing right now?"

"Yep!"

"Why do you look so happy?"

"Well, first of all, because the pain is not nearly as hot as it's been in the past."

"Good, good. That's progress."

"And because it means my powers are back!"

"Lexi..."

"I know, I know. I won't do anything here. Gosh, you're such a buzz kill..."

"What are you smiling at?" Sam's mind snapped to attention when he heard Ty's question. He didn't realize that his face was reacting to a conversation that Ty couldn't hear.

I really need to be more careful around Ty... What do I say?

"Nothing. Just eavesdropping on those two freshmen girls behind me. They're talking about AJ's butt... Girls are so stupid sometimes."

Ty looked around him to see the girls who were being singled out. He chuckled and picked up his sandwich to continue eating. While he chewed, Sam glanced back at the vending machine to see Lexi look back at him and nod towards the door.

"I'm heading to French. I'll catch you after school!"

"Bye Lex. Stay visible."

"Duh, moron." Sam could hear her laughing in her head as she walked away.

Sam turned to Ty, feeling a little guilty that he hadn't spent much time with him lately. He'd been so wrapped up with Lexi and his two new partners, and just now realized how much he missed time with his best friend.

"Hey, Ty... What are you doing tonight? Do you have to work?"

"No, thankfully. I put in double shifts all weekend long. We were short staffed due to the flu. Why?"

"Wanna go see a movie?"

"Sounds great! Are girls invited?"

Hell no! I don't want to be stuck with Mena...

"Let's just do some guy time. That okay with you?"

"Perfect. I was hoping you'd say that. Mena has been getting on my nerves..." and he started to tell Sam about their latest arguments. Sam acted like he was listening, but instead started a list of things to pack for the foursome's upcoming road trip.

He got home that afternoon after school, very much looking forward to his evening out with Ty. He had a little homework he could get done before dinnertime, which would leave the

rest of his evening guilt free. Since most of his Blevins research was on hold until they could go and interview Dr. Rowe, there wasn't much he could do in that area either. Ty suggested the new slasher film, and Sam was amped up about blood and gore – and time with Ty.

Lexi beat him home and was in her room when he got upstairs. She was sitting on her bed with her laptop in front of her.

“Hey Lex. Homework?”

“Yep. Almost done.”

“I'm headed over to do the same,” and he walked into his room and set his book bag down next to his bed. The “click, click, click” of Lexi's keyboard was too loud to concentrate, so he decided to shut both his bedroom door to the hall, and the door to the bathroom that they shared.

Kicking off his shoes and grabbing his bag, he settled down at his desk to tackle his trig homework.

Ugh. I hate this...

He was halfway through his fifth problem when out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lexi appear in his bedroom. He jumped, more out of shock than fear, and realized that he didn't hear her come in. He looked – both doors were still shut.

“Lexi! You just about gave me a heart attack. Where did you come from? And how, when my ears hear every cotton pickin' thing, can't I hear you open and shut a friggin' door?”

Lexi grinned, which only infuriated Sam more. Instead of answering, she just silently disappeared again.

“LEXI!”

Oh, she's pissin' me off...

Then, all of a sudden, the bathroom door opened, and Lexi was peering at him from behind the door.

“How did you get into the bathroom without opening the door?”

She grinned again, and closed the door.

If I get my hands on her...

“You know that number four is wrong, don't you?” she said, invisible, but apparently standing right behind him peering over his shoulder.

Sam turned around and reached out, found her and grabbed her by the invisible wrist.

“Lexi, I swear. Show yourself.”

She appeared. “What's the matter Sam?” she asked as innocently as an angel.

He took a deep breath, trying to settle his nerves. “What is going on?”

“I figured out how to walk through things! Part of my homework was to see if I could reach through objects. I guess I can,” she answered excitedly.

His mood changed from intensely annoyed to stunned and overjoyed. “That's fantastic! How did you... When did you?” he couldn't even finish his sentences, his mind was racing too fast.

“I started playing a little in school this afternoon. Don't worry, I was careful,” she said as his eyes narrowed at hearing this. “I was just holding my pencil to see if I could make my finger pass through it. It took me a few minutes to get it right – my finger had to be invisible to make it happen. And I've worked on it more here at the house. At this point, I can't pass through everything. I'm having a hard time with metal – I couldn't reach through the refrigerator door...”

“That's weird.”

“What is?”

“When I was working on seeing through things, metal was tough for me too.”

“But you can now? Wait... I thought you said you saw through my car’s floor. That’s metal, right?”

“Yeah, I know. I can’t figure that one out either. The only thing I can come up with is maybe my power was stronger during the flash, which helped me see through the metal. But over time, my power strengthened, and I got better at it. I was eventually able to consistently look through metal. But at first it started with wooden doors and walls and stuff like that.”

“Oooh. I didn’t think about walls!” and suddenly she disappeared. “Yep!” she yelled from the hallway.

“Lexi, you don’t have to yell.” *Oh, never mind.*

And suddenly she appeared in his room again. “If I wasn’t worried about breaking my ankles, I’d try dropping through the floor!”

Sam thought about that for a minute. “Yeah, that does sound cool! But dangerous... Wait a minute! Mom and Dad’s bed!”

She knew what he was thinking before he explained, and ran into her bedroom, which was directly over the bedroom side of their parent’s master suite downstairs.

“Wait ‘til I get down there!” Sam yelled from the stairs, bounding down two at a time. Once in his parents’ room, he looked through the ceiling to see where Lexi was standing. “A little to the left. Little more... One more little step. There. Now you’re lined up with the middle.” *Oh shit. This could go really wrong.* “Are you sure you wanna do this?”

“Yes, Sam. Now shut up so I can concentrate!”

He watched her through the ceiling. She took a deep breath, then disappeared and he couldn’t see her any longer. So he focused his sight on the bed. His ears heard her first – the whooshing sound of something passing quickly through the air. Then the king size bed dipped in the middle, as if something large landed on it. It bounced a couple of times, then was still, with the concave impression still in the middle of the mattress.

“Woo hoo!!! That was so fun, Sam!” she said and suddenly reappeared, sitting in the middle of the bed.

“You did it!” he was laughing like a lunatic. “Are you okay? Nothing hurt?”

“Nope. I’m fine. But I dropped so fast, I’m sure glad I hit this mattress and not the kitchen tile! I could have broken my neck. But that was a major rush!”

“You really DO have the cooler power.”

“I don’t know, Sam. I think yours are pretty great. Plus, I couldn’t have done this,” she spread her arms out across the bed, “without you!”

Chapter Thirty-six

The rest of the week flew by quickly, much to Sam's delight. He couldn't wait to get down to Scottsdale and see what they could track down from Dr. Rowe, or his staff, or even just by scouring his office.

In preparation for the trip, he packed his clothes, plus a bag of snacks and drinks – knowing they would be spending a great deal of time in the car. The fewer stops they made to get food, the better.

Besides, what's a good road trip without snacks?

By Friday morning, Lexi's dull flash was still with her, and even though the slight nagging pain lingered, it did nothing to dampen her spirits. Her mood was soaring, and while Sam was happy for her, she was really starting to wear on his nerves. He was looking forward to some time with Leesha and Clint to buffer Lexi's perkiness.

The group opted not to have a formal meeting during the week, both due to busy schedules and large amounts of homework, but also because they could use the time together during the trip to update each other on new information and compile a list of deliverables they wanted to accomplish while in Arizona.

Clint was in charge of transportation, and was being frustratingly mum about the details. He merely told Lexi and Sam to meet him at the church – the one in the flyer – and they would leave their car there. That would keep up the ruse that they were going on the mission trip, in case Blevins was keeping tabs on their cars over the weekend. Plus, there would be other cars there, and activities going on over the weekend, so their car would be safe.

They arrived in the church's parking lot at the designated time in Sam's truck –there was really no need to take two separate cars. Lexi's beetle would stay in the driveway at home over the weekend. As they parked and started to unpack their bags, they scanned the church's lot for any sign of Clint.

"Do you think he'll be on time?" Lexi asked.

"I would think. I mean, he's the one giving the orders," he sounded a little miffed by his lack of knowledge or control with the situation.

Just then, an old navy and beige Bronco rounded the parking lot, and they saw the driver's side window lower. "Hey guys," Clint called from behind the wheel. "Throw your bags in the back and hop in!"

He looked down and watched Lexi lift her one duffel bag, and was surprised to see that Sam had two larger ones – one in each hand.

"That's kind of weird," he said from the window.

"What?" Lexi asked.

"Your brother packed twice as much as you. Which one of you is the girl?" he smirked.

"Cute," Sam shot back. "I've got my clothes and my laptop in one and the other is drinks and snacks."

"Well, aren't you the boy scout?"

"You'll thank me later when you're hungry."

"Yeah, maybe."

They hopped in the car and set off to pick up Leesha at her house. She was sitting on the front steps when they arrived, ready to go. As she loaded her bag into the back, Clint got out of the driver's seat and pointed to the neighbor's car in the street.

"That the one?"

“Yes,” Leesha answered.

Clint walked over to Leesha’s car, took the GPS device from the rear wheel well and stuck it quickly onto the neighbor’s car. They both climbed into the Bronco.

“What was that all about?” Sam asked Clint as he put the car in gear.

“Well, I figure we’ve got to have a couple of vehicles accounted for while we’re gone, so if Blevins is checking, he’s seeing some activity on his radar,” Clint answered. “Your truck and Lexi’s car are accounted for, if he does enough digging to find that you’re at a church retreat. I left my bike at the shop, as if it’s getting fixed, which is pretty normal for that fixer upper. If he’s been tracking me for any time at all, it’ll make sense to him. But we’ve got to have at least one vehicle mobile. The neighbor’s car is close enough to Leesha’s house for him to believe it is her car. And he’ll see some driving activity while we’re gone, so hopefully he won’t get suspicious.”

“Great idea!” Lexi’s enthusiasm continued to bubble.

“It was Leesha’s – she’s the one who originally thought of it.”

Leesha smiled, then her face got serious again as she watched Clint take turns she didn’t expect. “Okay, Mr. Secret Man. Where exactly are we going?”

At least I’m not the only one in the dark about the details...

“We’re going to pick up our transportation,” he replied, revealing nothing.

“We’re not driving this?” Sam asked.

“Oh no, this is my dad’s Bronco. He’ll need it for the weekend. I just borrowed it to pick you guys up – I couldn’t figure out how to get all of you on the bike.”

As they took their final turn into what looked like an industrial driveway, Sam noticed the sign at the edge of the road.

Gold Club Private Aero. What the heck?

Clint drove up to the largest of five hanger buildings and drove the Bronco into the garage entrance. Once parked, he climbed out of the car and walked over to a tall man in a pair of cargo pants and a work shirt. Their conversation was brief, and gave Sam no indication of what was happening.

“What do you think is going on?” Sam asked no one in particular. None of them budged from their seats.

“I have no idea,” Leesha answered from the back seat.

They watched him sign a clip board and take a bag from the tall man and head back towards the Bronco. “C’mon guys. Let’s load up!”

“Load up what?” Lexi asked. The three of them scanned the hanger for another car.

“We’re taking the Cessna – it’s the red and white one over there.”

“We’re flying?” Lexi shrieked, part out of fear, part of excitement.

“Well, technically, I’m flying. You three are just going to ride.”

“You can fly?” Sam demanded incredulously.

“Yep. I got my pilot’s license the same week I got my driver’s license. Been flying with my dad for years now – he started training me when I was thirteen. Had to wait until I was sixteen to actually get a pilot’s license, though.”

The man in the cargo pants approached the group. “All set kids?”

“All set, Dad. Hey, meet Leesha, Sam and Lexi. They’re my passengers for this little weekend trip.”

“Nice to meet you guys. You’re in good hands here. Clint’s the best pilot I ever trained. And I’m not just saying that ‘cause I’m his dad.”

“Nice to meet you too,” all three of them said in unison, still dumbfounded.

“Clint, you be careful. Call me when you land. Bernie knows you’re coming – just radio him when you get close and he’ll clear you for landing.”

“Thanks Dad. We’ll be fine. I appreciate the help on this one,” he turned and glanced at the little plane. “I’ll bring her back safely.”

“You better. You know how hard we worked on her.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I was there.” He gave his dad a pat on the shoulder and turned to start loading bags into the cargo area of the plane.

“This is your plane?” Leesha asked him in a half whisper as they walked toward the front of the aircraft.

“Technically, it’s my dad’s. We rebuilt it together, take it out for spins together. I did most of my flying time in this thing – even though you have to get flight time in bigger planes too,” he said nonchalantly.

Holy crap. He acts like it’s no big deal that he can fly a plane. Holy crap. I’m getting ready to get into a plane with this kid behind the wheel. Holy crap.

“Well, I think that’s great, Clint,” Lexi gushed.

She would. Jeez.

“How long do you think it’ll take us to get to Scottsdale?” Leesha asked as she handed her bag to him to store.

“Should be close to a three hour trip. We should land by dinner time.”

Okay, now that’s good news... Think of all the extra time we’ll get to poke around there.

“I thought we’d be in the car most of the weekend,” Sam finally piped up sheepishly.

“This is going to make things so much easier. Thanks, Clint.”

“It’s no problem. I love to fly. Besides, it’s not like I can offer anything special once we get there. I’ve got no power...”

“Dude, you don’t need a power. You can fly!” Sam caught Clint’s eye and they shared a grin.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Sam took the seat next to Clint in the front of the small plane, the girls were buckled up in the back. Once the propellers started to churn, Sam's senses went on high alert. He had only been in a plane twice before – for family vacations – and both times it was much larger commercial airliners.

Both times there was a real pilot.

Lexi and Leesha were jabbering a mile a minute in the back, talking about how exciting all of this was – the plan, the mission, the weekend away from home...

Once they started taxiing out of the hanger and onto the open runway, Sam could hear both of the heartbeats behind him speed up. He couldn't figure out if the girls were scared or exhilarated.

Or just hot for the pilot. No power, my ass...

He looked out the window. The runway really didn't seem that much farther down than if you were in a tall van or bus. It was hard to believe they were sitting in an airplane, at least while he was looking down. Once he looked back up and saw the wings and whirring propellers, his panic set in a little bit too.

He watched Clint make adjustments to the many knobs, buttons and dials in the cockpit. He put on his earphones and talked back and forth to whoever was in the radio tower. Once he got clearance, he started to accelerate on the runway.

Well, he looks like he knows what he's doing.

Within forty-five seconds, they were in the air. The girls cheered from the backseat, both with their backs to each other, watching out the window. With all of the engine noise, it was hard to hear what they were saying, but Sam could tell they were talking a mile a minute. Once Clint leveled off the plane, he reached down and handed Sam a set of headphones like his own. Sam put them on.

"You doing alright?" he asked Sam.

"Yep. This is pretty cool, man."

"There's nothing like the thrill of manning a plane. It's a rush of adrenaline," he smiled.

"I can only imagine. My head's buzzing now, just sitting here next to you."

"You're my official co-pilot. If I pass out – which has only happened two, no three times, you're in charge of landing this thing."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?"

"Well, I don't do so well with thin air..."

"CLINT..."

"Dude, I'm just messing with you. Relax! Enjoy the ride." He shook his head, chuckling.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Sam looked down and out the window. Thanks to his new sight, he could make out the smallest of detail, even from the soaring height. The best part, in his opinion, was when they would hit a cloud. Most people usually saw a total white out through their window, but Sam's eyes picked up on every brilliant rainbow effect from the tiny water droplets that made the cloud. It was fascinating.

He turned back to Clint. "How much does your dad know about this weekend?"

Clint's dad certainly didn't seem to have any trouble letting four teenagers – three of which he had never met – get into a plane and go away for the weekend. He struggled to wrap his head around that. Plus, he wondered if Clint filled his dad in on the details of their trip.

At some point, I think Lexi and I will need to talk to Mom and Dad. They should know the truth about this.

Clint glanced back at Sam. “Not much. I told him I made a few new friends and we wanted to get away for the weekend. He has to work the tower all weekend, so he knew I’d be on my own anyway.”

“What does your dad do there?”

“He started out as a mechanic thirty some odd years ago. He worked his way up into radio control, then management, and then six years ago got the job of general manager at the airport. It’s privately run, and the guys that own it have always been real good to my dad.”

“Is that how you ended up with your own plane?”

“Yep. Dad’s job certainly has benefits. Dad and I don’t get a whole lot of time together, but we do share a passion for fast vehicles and rebuilding them. This little filly,” Clint patted the control panel, “was an old broken down piece of junk when we got her. Little by little, we found parts and rebuilt it from scratch. It was the first major machine we tackled together. I’ve always helped him in the shop, but this was our first real trophy.”

“And he doesn’t mind that you’re going half way across the country with a bunch of strangers?”

“Naw. As long as I keep my nose clean, he gives me a lot of freedom. When Mom was around, she was always the heavy hand. Dad never did do a whole lot of parenting. He tries to do his best now, but as much as he works... Well, we’re more like roommates than father and son. He’s my best friend, though. And he trusts me to do the right thing.”

“It must have been hard, losing your mother.”

“It was. Dad took it real hard. He’s never gotten over her. I think that’s why he works so much. To escape.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. From what I understand, it was hard for Mom to have me. Some sort of complication or something. They stopped trying after they had me.”

“Oh.”

They sat in silence a little while longer. Sam listened to the chatter in the back for a while. They were discussing everything from clothes, to what they wanted for dinner tonight to the things they wanted to get done this weekend. They never ran out of things to discuss.

Yakity yak. Girls. I swear.

Sam peered out the window for a while, blocking out the banter from the backseat. He was amazed at this height at all of the detail he could make out. The vehicles on the road and the homes spread across the landscape – his vision would let him look right through them and see the interior of each and the people inside them. He zoomed in close enough that he could read a map on the passenger’s lap of a small car on the highway. The rivers and creeks they passed had fish and other debris floating down the water stream. And the birds in flight seemed like their own little aircraft themselves. It was amazing to experience flight this way.

Then suddenly, a thought occurred to him. He turned back to Clint. “I guess I thought we would end up taking shifts and sleeping in the car. I figured we wouldn’t have so much time in Scottsdale. Where are we going to stay?”

“Bernie, my dad’s friend, has everything set up for us. He does basically the same thing my dad does – only for a different private airport. It’s a tight circle – Dad’s got friends all over the country. They have to work together to make arrangements for the flights.”

“That makes sense.”

“Anyway, Bernie’s got a bunkhouse there for any pilots that have to stay over for whatever reason. We can stay there when we need to crash. He’s also got a Jeep for us to use to buzz around town in.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought of everything.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve done this. Dad and I travel like this all the time, at least when he’s not working.”

“Nice.”

“It has its ups. It’s basically the only quality time Dad and I get together.”

That’s sad.

“Don’t feel bad for me,” Clint said, as if he could read Sam’s mind. “We’ve got a good life, Dad and I. It’s just not what was planned. But you cope with the hand you get dealt.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

As they started their descent, the tension increased inside the cabin. The girls both got quiet and each leaned towards their window to watch the landing. Sam did the same. He still had his headphones on, so he could hear Clint call to the air traffic controller and the directives given back to Clint from the radio tower.

Clint never looked at any of the knobs or levers he adjusted as he prepared for the landing. He looked at home in this cockpit, as if he had been flying for decades. He was a natural.

Sam watched the runway creep closer in the horizon. As the plane finally cleared the pavement, they floated just a few more seconds, and then Clint gently set the wheels down on the runway to glide the rest of the way towards the hanger. Sam heard two sighs of relief from the backseat, and hoped Clint could not hear it too.

Once they were parked in front of the hanger, Clint finally turned around to the girls. “You two okay back there?”

A nervous giggle erupted from both of them.

“We’re great. That was amazing, Clint!” Leesha said.

“Incredible!” Lexi doubled, gushing.

Oh brother.

Sam turned back towards the front to see a man, shorter than Clint’s dad, but dressed similarly in work clothes and boots, approaching the plane. Clint hopped out of the plane and bounded over to give him a half hug, half pat on the back. He turned back towards the plane and signaled for the group to join him.

Sam got out, then helped Leesha and Lexi dismount the plane. The three of them ambled over to Clint.

“Guys, I want you to meet Bernie Newman. Bernie, this is Sam, Lexi and Leesha,” he said, pointing at each of the kids as he introduced them. They each stepped forward to shake hands with Bernie.

“Nice to meet you guys,” he said, then turned back to Clint. “The bunkhouse is set up for you guys. There are groceries in the fridge – help yourself. Here’s the key to the Jeep. Just let me know if you need anything else, okay?”

“Okay, Bern. Thanks for everything.”

“Not a problem, kid. It’s great to have you back. Next time you’ll need to bring your old man!”

Clint smiled at Bernie. “Will do. He just wouldn’t fit in this time, and he refused to be strapped to the top of the plane.”

Bernie’s deep laugh was loud enough to wake the sleeping three miles over. “Well, you tell him I said hello.”

“Sure. I’m supposed to call him now to let him know I’ve landed.”

Clint turned back towards the plane and signaled the others to help him unload their gear. They needed to get settled in, then get to work. There was a lot of ground to cover this weekend.

The bunk house was a small building a short distance from the main hanger and control tower. Inside the front door was a kitchen and sitting area which led to four different doors -

three small bedrooms and one bathroom. It wasn't fancy, but it was a perfect headquarters for the mission at hand.

"This place is great, Clint," Leesha commented as she set her bag down next to the couch. "Do all private airports have facilities like this?"

"No, actually most don't. There was a time several years ago when they needed a place for a couple of pilots to stay on site for a few months on and off. They ended up turning this building, which was a small office building, into a living quarter. Dad asked Bernie if we could use it, and he said of course we could. It's Dad's way of keeping tabs on me," he shrugged his shoulders.

"Whatever, man," Sam smacked him on the back. "This is perfect. Thanks for setting all of this up. We're going to get a lot done with all the extra time and space."

Each of them spread out to stash their bags of clothes. Lexi and Leesha decided to share the bedroom with bunk beds, leaving each of the boys with their own bedroom. Sam set up his laptop on the kitchen table, which would be their workspace. Once they all came back to the table, they grabbed snacks and started mapping out their plan of attack.

"So where do you think we should start?" Leesha asked as she was looking over the Scottsdale map with Rowe's office and home both highlighted and GPS coordinates noted next to each one.

"I was thinking we should start with Rowe's office tonight," Sam answered. "At this point, they are closed for the weekend. If we go after dark, we can scope out the office without being seen. I can walk around the building and draw out a rough map of the inside, and then we can send Lexi in if we need to retrieve any files or information from the office."

"How are you going to get Lexi in?" Clint asked dumbfounded.

"He didn't fill you in?" Lexi smiled. "I told Leesha all about it in the plane..."

"Tell me what?"

"My power is getting stronger! I can now manipulate my body matter to move through solid objects!"

"Nuh-uh. You can walk through things?" Clint looked skeptical.

"Yep," Lexi beamed, then proceeded to demonstrate going in and out of the bathroom door. Sam just laughed at her exhibition while the other two cheered in delight.

"That's fantastic!" Clint said. "I've never seen anything so weird... So you can pretty much walk right into the office building undetected?"

"That's the plan," Sam said. "I'll be able to look through the office walls and tell her what to look for inside."

Clint looked glum again. "And there's nothing I can do at this point to help..."

"Stop. First of all, we wouldn't be here with all this time and opportunity without you. And yes, I will need your help. I need you to help scope out any surveillance cameras. If the property is under surveillance, we need to know so that we don't get caught on tape."

"Okay," Clint cheered considerably, knowing he was still a part of the mission. "I can do that."

"Leesha, if there are cameras, I'll need your help in diversion."

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, you're the only one of us who can physically move something from a distance. Hopefully we can just move a tree branch or flag to cover the camera. We won't know for sure until we get there. But worst case," Sam frowned, "we may need to move the cameras away from wherever we are. I hope we don't have to – it'll be more obvious to anyone looking at the tape."

“We’ll get it figured out,” Clint agreed, and looked at his watch. “It should be completely dark in another hour. Should we load up and at least drive by the place while there’s a little light?”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Lexi agreed. “How far is his house from the office?”

Leesha looked at the map. “Looks like about fifteen miles or so. I’ve got the addresses plugged into the GPS here. We can drive by both places tonight if we’ve got time – get a feel for the land.”

“All right guys, let’s go,” Sam said and the four walked out the door and loaded into the Jeep.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Clint was at the wheel, since he was the most familiar with the area, though it was a good thing they had his father's GPS gadget handy. The office building was close to the downtown area, and by the time they got there, dusk was setting in. It gave them just enough light to drive around the building and get a visual of the three security cameras on the medical office, plus two others in close proximity – on neighboring offices.

A storm was building up, so the winds made it understandable that two different tree branches were broken to cover the cameras on the front and left side of the medical office. The other camera, located above the rear door, would just have to be avoided by the Jeep and its four passengers.

The camera at the front of the building to the south wasn't pointing towards the medical center, so was of no concern. The only other one in question was a rotating camera stationed on an art gallery that was closed for the evening. After much discussion, it was decided that Leesha would mentally stop the camera from rotating its full half circle, keeping its lens from taping the others' activity at the medical center.

Once it was completely dark, Clint parked the Jeep three blocks away and they separated into groups of two to meet up back again at the Rowe's office. Leesha took her place on a bench near the art gallery and kept tabs on the camera.

"All right, guys," Sam projected, while getting his wits about him. "I'm walking around the perimeter. I'll keep my senses open – let me know if you see anything strange."

"Will do," they all said in unison, silently.

Sam started at the front door and walked around the front and towards the north side of the building.

Front room, reception, which leads into the main filing and admin area. Behind that, six private consult rooms. To the left, a bull pen of chemo chairs and medical treatment area.

He walked down the north side of the building, stopping short of the corner, not wanting to get detected by the camera on the back side.

Three offices, none belong to Rowe. Bathroom, break room.

Sam then backtracked to the front and began the same route on the other side.

Two more offices – bingo – the second one is Rowe's. Next room, radiation lab, then bathroom.

He walked back to the front of the office and took the notebook Lexi was holding for him and proceeded to map out and label the office layout.

"Okay, Lexi. Here's the schematic. I think there are two places you'll want to start searching first," he said pointing on his homemade map. "First is the admin area. I doubt there are any active files for us in there – we're not exactly patients of the office. Plus, I would think if he's got charts on us, they'll be locked up and out of general circulation, but check anyway."

"Got it," Lexi said, looking at the map.

Sam moved his finger on the map. "Here's where Rowe's office is. This is where you'll do the most digging. Hopefully you won't run into any problems getting into drawers and any other nooks and crannies. But if you do, let me know, we'll get it figured out."

"Right. Okay, then. I'm off." And with that she flickered out of sight.

"Lexi?"

"Yes?" she said, stopping just a couple of steps away.

"I won't be able to watch you, so keep talking to me, so I know you're okay."

“I will, Sam.”

“And Lexi?”

“Yes, Sam...” She sounded annoyed.

“I’ll project to you if there are any problems out here.”

“Okay. Good. Sam?”

“Yes, Lexi?”

“I’m going in now.”

Please be careful.

He listened to her in silence for what seemed like an eternity. Leesha was stationed on her bench with camera duty, and Clint paced back and forth on the sidewalk a few yards away. Sam knew both of their minds were racing with thoughts, but he blocked them out so that he could concentrate on Lexi.

“Okay Sam, I’m in the admin office. Going through the charts now. Looks like they’re all in alpha order going back three years. Did you see another room of charts?”

“No. I didn’t...”

“They must keep their older cases stored electronically. I bet they do most of their records digitally now anyway.”

“You’re probably right. I can hack into that later, if necessary. Do you see anything with our names on it?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

“Okay, then head over to Rowe’s office to poke around there.”

“On it.”

Sam turned and projected the update to both Clint and Leesha who were both anxiously awaiting any news. He turned back to face the front of the building to listen for Lexi again.

“Sam?”

“Yes?”

“The door’s locked, and it’s metal. I can’t get in.”

“Did you try the walls?”

“Yes, no go there either. There must be lead panels in all the walls, due to the radiation lab here. I can’t get in...”

“Crap!” Sam said out loud and instantly Clint was by his side.

“What’s wrong?”

“Lexi can’t get into Rowe’s office. It’s locked and the place is full of metal doors and walls, so she can’t pass through them.” He projected the update to both Clint and Leesha, still sitting across the lawn.

Clint’s mouth twitched at the corners. “I can jimmy a lock.”

“Well, that’s not going to do us any good if you’re out here.”

Lexi materialized next to the boys, who both jumped, mostly due to an overload of nerves. “I’ve got an idea. Clint, take my hand.”

He did, and instantly they both disappeared. “Let’s see if we can get you through the front door with me,” she explained to him, turning towards the front doors.”

“Good thinking, Lex,” Sam said, then updated Leesha with the change in plans.

Clint turned to Lexi, who he could still see plain as day. “My body is tingling. Are we invisible?”

“Yep.”

“Weird... And how is it that you can get in the building, but not through the office doors or walls?”

“The front door is glass, so it’s easy to pass through. The admin door was wooden, which I can also go through. But the office doors and walls are metal. I can’t crack that yet.”

“And Sam couldn’t see that from his original scan of the office?”

“His powers are stronger, he can see through metal. I hope that eventually mine will be that strong too.”

“Sounds like you’re on your way,” Clint shrugged, partly jealous.

“Well, see. It’s a work in progress. Let’s see if I can get you through the front door with me,” she said as they approached the double doors in the front. “I’m going to go in first. Just follow me, you’ll have to step over the metal edging around the door.”

“Okay, gotcha.”

Lexi stepped in first then turned to watch Clint pass easily through the glass.

“Holy shit! That is so cool!” Clint’s whisper was getting louder with his excitement.

“Keep it down you two,” Sam warned from the outside. “I can hear you from out here.”

“Well, then turn down your bionic ears,” Lexi shot back. She turned back to Clint.

“You’re going to have to keep holding my hand – we need to stay invisible in case there are any security sensors or cameras, okay?”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “I can do that.”

“Follow me, the door’s right over here.”

Once they got there, Lexi showed him the doorknob with the lock in question. Clint looked at it from every angle, and then pulled a Swiss army knife out of his pocket. Lexi shifted her hand up to his elbow so he could use both of his hands and she could keep the invisibility intact. He pulled a pair of tweezers out of his knife, and then opened up one of the knife’s small blades.

He bent one end of the tweezers and inserted it into the lock at a strange angle, and positioned the knife blade gently into the door jam, then turned to Lexi. “Can you try to turn the knob with your free hand?”

She reached out and the knob turned easily and instantly the door was open. “Clint, you’re a genius! Wait... Are you a criminal?” she smiled at him, teasing.

“Nope, just good with tools.”

“Sam, we’re in.”

“Great job guys,” he projected back to Lexi. “Now see what you can find in his desk and filing cabinets.”

The filing cabinets were unlocked, and after a quick shuffle of the contents, they determined nothing was of use to them. Lexi then reached for the desk drawers. The top drawer was nothing more than pens, legal notebooks and prescription pads. To the left of his chair, the drawer contents were filled with medical journals and research on various clinical trials.

Lexi then turned to the credenza behind his chair and discovered its drawers were locked. “Clint, can you work your magic on this one too?”

“I’ll give it a shot...” He looked at the desk from all angles. The lock itself was positioned at the top of each of the two long drawers. This time he took out a long narrow file from his knife and jiggled it along the top of the drawer jam, which adjusted the lock to the open position.

The top drawer was filled with personnel files. “Sam, I’ve got the staff records here. Do you want any of this information?”

“Yeah, but I hate to waste a bunch of time with photocopies,” Sam answered Lexi. “Is there a personnel form in each one with contact information?”

“Yes – it looks like the most recent updates are at the front of each file. Do you want me to read you addresses and phone numbers. You can make notes?”

Before Sam could answer, Clint interrupted with another idea. “What if I just take pictures of each form from my telephone?”

“Better,” Sam agreed. “Great idea, thanks Clint.”

It took about four minutes for Lexi to open the files and Clint to snap the pictures. After everything was placed back in the proper order in the top drawer, they turned their focus on the bottom drawer. Most of the files were office related policies and procedures – all but the last four files in the very back of the drawer. Lexi read the labels and a chill ran up her spine.

“Sam, there’s four files in the bottom drawer – one for each of us.”

“Grab them, Lexi. I want those files.”

“I would but...”

“But what?”

“They’re empty, Sam. He must keep the contents with him.”

“Oh.” Silence.

“Sam? Are you still there?”

“Yes. I’m just thinking. I guess there’s not much else we can do in there. We know he knows about us, has information on us. You guys come on back out here. We’ll head back to headquarters and figure out our next plan of attack.”

“Okay Sam, we’re on our way.”

Chapter Forty

They had fallen off the grid.

He didn't notice at first. The Dixon truck in the church parking lot made sense. Those goody-two-shoes were always doing church activities. It wasn't their normal church, but when he found the flyer on the bulletin board inside the lobby about the youth retreat, it made sense.

The cycle in the shop was not a new occurrence. He made a note to put a tracker on Daddy McKay's vehicle, as that was the kid's backup when the cycle was down. Three vehicles stationary.

It was the pattern of the fourth that threw up the red flag. The stop at the liquor store was strange, but what teenager didn't buy beer anymore? The stop at the video store didn't cause him concern either. It was the thirty minutes spent at the emergency veterinarian clinic that gave him heartburn.

She didn't have a dog. Or a cat. Not even a goldfish. He had done enough surveillance on this one over the last year and change to know everything about her home and lifestyle. He had the layout of her house mapped out on a chart he drafted when he broke in shortly after the flea market sighting. He followed them home that day, and had been watching her activity on and off – mostly on – since his lucky encounter.

Out of curiosity, he loaded his laptop into the car and drove over to her neighborhood. It was late and the street was dark, so he parked just a few yards away from her house, across the street. Her car sat in the drive.

According to his computer screen, her car was driving on the west bound loop on the other side of town.

Which meant the device was located. And moved to another vehicle.

They were on to him. They knew he was tracking them.

He realized the placement of the other vehicles was probably just a decoy too. And now they just disappeared, right from under his nose.

What were they up to? And where were they?

He cursed, threw his laptop in the backseat – what use was it now – and started his car. He didn't know how he would find them, but he vowed that he'd figure out what they were up to.

Maybe it was time he have a little chat with the gang. They needed to start cooperating with him, now that they knew. And if they didn't?

If worse came to worse, he'd just have to start watching their parents. If they didn't want to work with him, he could use Moms and Dads as leverage.

Chapter Forty-one

They picked up sandwiches on the way back to the bunk house, and settled into the living area to hash out a new plan.

“Okay, so it’s safe to assume,” Leesha started, licking ketchup off her finger, eating and talking at the same time, “that Dr. Rowe is working with Dr. Blevins on our case, right?”

“I think that’s a safe assumption,” Sam agreed. “Unless... Unless Dr. Blevins isn’t involved at all.”

“I think we have to assume Blevins is involved,” Lexi interjected, the left side of her mouth filled with French fries. “He’s the one with the right background, and he’s the one who went to prison. We came across Rowe – who was just a resident at the time we were born, not even experienced enough to pull this off – because he was visiting Blevins in jail.”

“Right. Good point,” Sam agreed. “But why would he still be gathering information on us now?”

“He must have been involved from the start,” Leesha pondered. “My bet is that he kept updating Blevins while he was in jail, which explains the visits.”

“Then why would he just suddenly stop?” Clint asked. “I mean, why would he just up and move to Arizona?”

“Good question,” Sam swallowed the bite of cheeseburger in his mouth before continuing. “I think it’s safe to say there was probably not a lot of work they could be doing, information to compile, while we were still children. Nothing out of the ordinary started happening until now. Plus, we know he was visiting Virginia – maybe Blevins sent him here to monitor his mother’s case. I think the better question is why didn’t Rowe move back to St. Louis around the time our flashes should have kicked in?”

“We’ve got too many questions,” Leesha sighed. “I think we’re going to have to talk to him. There’s no amount of poking around that’s going to give us the answers that only he knows.”

“I’d still like to get my hands on the files he has on each of us,” Lexi said in a huff, like her privacy was being invaded.

“Me too,” Clint agreed. “I wonder why he’s got a file on me when I’m not even officially a part of this.”

“I think it’s safe to assume at this point,” Sam noted, “that you are a part of this. I’ll bet that Blevins sent you to us. How he found you, I don’t know. But my guess is that he is feeding our names to Rowe, who is then putting together charts on us.”

“Why wouldn’t Blevins be doing this himself?”

“I’m not sure, Lex, but I suppose it may have something to do with the fact that he can no longer practice medicine. Rowe, however, still has access to any and all medical information and technology at his fingertips.”

Leesha smiled. “You may be on to something, there, Sam.”

“There’s only one way to know for sure. I think we need to get a good night’s sleep and head out early tomorrow to talk to Rowe.”

Uh-oh. Lexi’s worried.

“Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“I don’t know. But there are four of us. We got each others’ backs, right?”

“Absolutely!”

“No problem.”

“Right!”

As they headed off in their separate directions to unpack and get ready for bed, Sam was once again grateful for the extra time and space for the weekend mission. He decided to thank Clint again for the work he put into the trip.

“Clint?” he said, popping his head into his bedroom door.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks again for all of this. You really pulled through for us – the plane, the place to stay, helping Lexi in the office... We couldn’t have done this without you.”

“No problem. I mean, thanks for saying that. I kind of feel a little useless in all of this.”

“Well, you’re not. I promise. You’ve pulled more than your share of the weight.”

“Sam?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Do you really think I’ll have a power?”

Sam smiled. “It’s kinda fun to think about, once you wrap your head around it, isn’t it?”

Clint grinned back. “Yeah. Plus, I got a little taste of it when Lexi took me with her tonight. It was really cool! Do you think I will?”

“I do, Clint. I think that is why Blevins sent you to us. And I believe that is why Rowe has a file on you. You saw it – you saw your name in that drawer.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“It’ll happen. Just be patient.”

“So what do you think it is?” Clint nudged.

“What? What do you mean?”

“My power... What do you think it is?”

Sam laughed. “I don’t know, man. We’re all different. I guess you could have one of our powers, or something entirely different.”

“Huh...”

“What do you WANT it to be?”

“I dunno. Maybe I could fly!”

“Dude, you can already fly.”

“Yeah, I just meant... Well, maybe I can throw fire or something like that.”

Sam laughed again. “That’s just kind of weird and evil... What are you going to do, walk around and burn things?”

“Right. I’ll have to think more on that.”

“Don’t think too hard. It’s not like you’re going to get a choice.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Clint’s head turned down.

“But Clint... It’s gonna happen. I just know it.”

“I hope you’re right. I get a little jealous when I watch the three of you in action.”

“I know. Hey, maybe Rowe will know something. We can always hope!”

“That’ll be first on my list of questions for him.”

They both laughed, and said goodnight.

Chapter Forty-two

The group was up and moving around 6:00 a.m. the next morning. With the time change, that would have been seven their time, which was still early for teenagers to be up, but they were all excited about the day's task list.

They took turns rotating in and out of the bathroom for showers. Sam noted the speed in which the girls got in and out of there.

Usually Lexi takes forever... She must be anxious to get to work!

As promised, the kitchen was well stocked, and the kids' banter was lively as they ate breakfast of bagels and cereal. Sam could feel the tension and electricity in the air. The group was antsy to get to Rowe's house, but they decided any time before eight o'clock was too early for their assault of questions.

"Did you gals sleep okay last night?" Clint asked as he poured a glass of orange juice.

What a suck-up.

"We did," Leesha answered, "once we finally stopped whispering about everything that happened last night."

"Speak for yourself," Lexi interjected. "My bed was lumpy! Did we keep you guys up?"

"Not me," Clint said. "I slept like a rock."

"I heard you two yapping."

"Nothing like an eavesdropper with super ears," Lexi scowled at her brother.

"Remind me to start following you on your dates from now on," he shot back.

Leesha and Clint grinned at each other, enjoying the sibling banter.

Deciding to get the group back on track, Clint turned towards the table and said, "You know, it's about twenty minutes to the house. We probably ought to load up and head over."

"Yeah," Leesha followed his direction. "Let's get over there and look around the neighborhood."

They all headed towards the Jeep, everyone ready for their next mission.

They turned onto Rowe's street at approximately 7:50 a.m., which gave them a chance to circle the block twice to find the right parking spot.

Sam wanted to approach Rowe solo, rather than have him feel like he was being bombarded by a group of four teenagers, all wild with questions. The other three insisted on staying close enough to watch what was going on, just in case the conversation went south.

"I still don't understand why it has to be you," Lexi asked, sounding worried. "You should stay here – you can listen from the car and keep everyone here in the loop. If I go, and he gets angry, all I have to do is disappear and run away."

"True," Leesha interrupted, "but I'm the only one who can physically affect him, stop him. I should be the one to go."

"But neither one of you can tap into his thoughts. Get inside his head. Know what's really going on in there during the conversation."

"Oh," they both said in unison.

"Listen, if I need reinforcements, I can tell you right away. Leesha if I need your physical force, you can help from here."

"Okay," she agreed, begrudgingly.

“If anything looks weird, Lexi can disappear and meet me there without him noticing. But right now, we don’t know what he’s aware of... We don’t want him on the defense right off the bat. Let me go to him one-on-one, get his reaction before we tag team him.”

“Okay,” the girls said together again.

“Now, did you guys notice,” Clint spoke for the first time since they parked, “that Rowe has come outside since you three have been playing your power tug-of-war?”

The three of them snapped to attention and followed Clint’s eyes toward the front of the yard. Sure enough, a man was coming out of the open garage door with an extension ladder under his arm.

“Is that him?” Sam asked to no one in particular.

“Yep,” Lexi answered. “I saw a picture of his family on his desk last night. That’s him all right.”

“What do you think he’s doing?” Leesha leaned over Lexi in the back seat to peer out the window.

They watched him extend the ladder and set it against the front of the house, a big black trash bag hanging out of the back pocket of his pants.

“Looks like he’s getting ready to clean the leaves out of his gutters,” Clint said.

He looked like a fish out of water, this man teetering on a ladder, trying to juggle getting the leaves out of the gutter in one hand and putting them into the garbage bag in the other. He was definitely out of place in his designer jeans and rugby shirt, his top of the line running shoes trying to keep his footing on the seventh rung of the ladder.

He looks like a doctor who hires someone to do this for him.

They watched him for a while in silence, each one trying to figure out the best way to approach him, how to interrupt his dirty job to talk about yet another one. Just then, the doctor leaned a little too far to the right and the ladder started to slip. Sam heard it first, the grinding metal on metal, before the rest of the group noticed the tilt from their naked eyes.

“Leesha! The ladder...” Sam said out loud. “Hold it. I’m going in.”

“Got it. He’s fine until you get over there,” Leesha responded.

When Sam approached him, the doctor was gripping the eaves spout on each side of the ladder, and from the panicked look on his face, he apparently noticed he was seriously in danger.

“Hey mister,” Sam started out innocently, “can I give you a hand?”

“Oh, thanks,” Dr. Rowe looked down, his face taken over with a sense of relief.

Sam took the ladder in both hands and steadied it as the doctor descended.

“It’s a good thing you came along when you did. I think I was about ready to take a header!”

“Here, let me prop this ladder back up. Hey, do you want me to climb up and do this for you?” Sam tried to act helpful, while coming up for a reason to prolong his stay.

“No, I’m already dusty and grimy from the job. I’ll get back up there,” the man answered. “But...”

“Yes?”

“If you’ve got a few minutes?”

“Sure. What can I do to help?”

“I’d feel much better if someone were just holding the ladder. I’ve got just girls in the house – my wife and two daughters.”

Sam didn’t let him get any further. “No problem! Here, I got it...”

He watched as the doctor climbed back up to finish what he started. He stood there in silence, struggling for what to say next. Instead, he just watched, deciding not to distract the man from his task at hand.

“Hey!”

I have got to get her to stop doing that...

“What, Lexi?” Sam answered, gritting his teeth at the fact that his sister knew how to get his attention, even from across the street.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’m just helping him. Holding the ladder.”

“We can see that. When are you going to make your move?”

“I’m not sure. I’m waiting. For the right time.”

“Do you think we’ve got all the time in the world?”

“I know, Lexi. I’m just figuring out what I need to say. How to bring up the subject.”

“Well, hurry up. We’re getting stir crazy in here.”

His nostrils flared in anger, and he was glad that neither the kids in the car, nor the doctor on the ladder could tap into his brain.

After about a half an hour, he and the doctor worked their way around the entire house, getting all of the gutters cleaned. Three trash bags full, at the end of the drive, and the doctor finally came down for the last time from the ladder.

“Thanks again for the help, and the company,” he said, wiping his hands on his jeans so he could shake Sam’s hand. “You’re a good kid. I’m sure your parents are proud. Where did you come from, by the way?”

“Oh, I just saw you from the sidewalk...” Sam tried to sound evasive.

“Well, I am fortunate you came along when you did.” Just then, his phone buzzed from his belt clip.

Sam sensed what it was before he heard him read the text. “Here it comes guys,” he projected to the gang in the car. He heard the doors open from the Jeep, as quietly as possible.

The doctor took his phone from his belt clip and read the text. Sam heard his mind as he read it: “The kids are gone. Have you seen them?” Sam heard his mind race from wonder and curiosity to just a little shiver of fear down the back of his neck. He heard his answer as he texted back: “No. All clear here.”

He looked back up at Sam as he put his phone back in his clip, his smile a little too forced. “Sorry about that. Now, what were you saying?”

Sam looked at him and just decided to jump right into the conversation. “Dr. Rowe, is he dangerous?”

His expression changed from pleasant to shocked in an instant. “Who?”

“Blevins.”

“You didn’t just happen here, did you?”

“No, sir. We came here to see you.”

Dr. Rowe looked back at Sam with fear in his eyes, and then he glanced over Sam’s left shoulder to see the three others standing by the Jeep, watching the conversation.

He’s scared. I can hear it.

“We’re not here to harm you,” Sam said, trying to reassure him. “We were just hoping to talk to you... To get some answers.”

Sam watched him size up the other three at the Jeep, then look back at him. His eyes cleared a little. “Are you Sam?”

“Yes sir,” he said, extending his hand in greeting. “Sam Dixon.”

Slowly, he reached out and took his hand, and smiled just a little. “Charles Rowe. You can call me Charlie.”

“How did you know who I was?”

Charlie chuckled just slightly, and Sam could feel him relax the tiniest little bit. “Clint is a spitting image of his father. And I can see the family resemblance between you and your sister. I expect the fourth in your party is Leesha?”

“You know us well...”

“Just on paper. I’ve always hoped to get the chance to meet you guys in person.”

Sam heard his thoughts again as the fear came to the forefront of his mind again: “He’ll kill me if he knows.”

“Who will kill you? Blevins?”

“You heard that?” Charlie’s eyes got wide with wonder.

“I did.”

“Your powers have gotten very strong. All four of you...?”

“Just myself, Leesha and Lexi for now. Would you like to meet them? We’d really like to ask you some questions, if you don’t mind.”

Sam heard the worry and wonder in his mind.

“I promise, sir. We just have questions.”

He sighed, as if trying to gather his courage. “I’d love to meet your friends. Come on, we can go sit out back.”

Sam turned to the three others, still leaning on the Jeep and projected: “He’s fine, guys. Come here. I’ll introduce you.”

Chapter Forty-three

The five of them sat on the patio furniture of Charlie's very elaborate backyard. The pool was closed, but fall in Arizona still lent to warm weather and sunshine. Even in the morning hours, the temperature was comfortable to sit outside.

"So," Leesha started right in, "you were a resident in the hospital when we were born?"

"I was. I was doing my rotation through all of the departments back then. I was in the middle of an eight-month stint in the OB. That's how I met Dr. Blevins."

Sam heard the rest of his thought, which was very bitter: "... what a mistake that was."

"What was a mistake? Why?"

Charlie smiled sheepishly. "I keep forgetting you can do that. That must come in handy..."

"Sometimes. What was a mistake?" Sam prodded.

"Getting involved with Blevins. He was very charismatic, and I didn't know what he was asking me to do at the time. By the time I put it all together, I was in so deep there was no way to get out."

"What were you doing for him?" Lexi asked.

"I was helping him get different medications from other areas of the hospital. My class – the residents – were all rotating in different departments. He would tell me what to get, and who to get it from. He was a doctor – a mentor, someone of authority – I was too young and stupid to figure out what I was doing was wrong."

"What was he doing with the medications?" Sam asked, even though he thought from their research that they already had the answer.

"It was basically an extension of a research project he started in the military. He was mixing drugs – designed to alter the mind and body functions – the combination of which was supposed to create special abilities if administered in the right dosage."

"Why to babies?" Lexi asked.

"Babies are designed to be resilient... While small and weak physically, babies are surprisingly strong and immune to a lot of illness and external dangers. It is nature's defense mechanism – it starts when you're in the womb, when your mother's body protects you, but continues throughout childhood. Children heal faster."

"Did you help Blevins administer the medications?" Sam asked, half accusing.

"No. I didn't know anything about what he was doing until it had been uncovered and he was in the middle of the court case. Even then, I didn't understand everything. When the military got wind of it, the case was moved to their jurisdiction and they kind of swept everything under the rug."

"Why?"

"Because the work he was doing was something he started in his time in the military. They began with animals, and the experimentation eventually turned to humans, which ended badly and was covered up. They tried it on adults, and had several deaths. Years later, Blevins switched his practice to OB with the intention of trying it on babies. The military put two and two together, and opted to handle the litigation so they could manage how much of the information went public."

"Which was none," Leesha noted sourly.

"Which was none," Charlie agreed. "I didn't know any of this until Blevins filled me in later, when he was in prison."

“Why would he do that? Why did he spill to you?” Lexi wondered.

“Because he thought he finally created a successful study. And while he was in prison he needed someone to recreate his documentation and monitor your health through your pediatricians. Even after he was released, he still couldn’t practice, so he needed someone in the medical arena to help him.”

“Why did you agree?” Leesha asked.

“He threatened me. Basically he told me he would turn me in as an accomplice if I didn’t cooperate with him. I was young, and had started a family... Anyway, it seemed easier to just do what he said than worry about what would happen if I didn’t.”

“That’s horrible,” Lexi was sympathetic.

“Yes, I suppose it is. Though he’s been fairly decent to me in the years since his release. He pays me well for the work I do... And I haven’t done anything illegal. All he wants me to do is compile the information he gives me into charts. He’s done all of the surveillance. Once he figures out who you are and what powers you have, my job is to figure out what mixture it was that you were doped with after you were born and chart it.”

“How many?” Clint spoke for the first time.

“How many what?”

“How many babies were medicated?”

“Eleven. Well, thirteen originally. Two died in the hospital,” Charlie grimaced, remembering. “So eleven of you are still out there.”

“When?”

He turned to Clint to answer. “According to what Blevins told me, it happened around 2 am in the middle of the night, the morning of the 15th.”

Clint turned to Leesha. “Was I there then? Am I on the list?”

Leesha didn’t need to answer. Charlie beat her to it. “Yes, Clint. You were injected with some combination of something.”

“Do you know what?”

“No. All of the medical records were seized by the military. Probably destroyed. I don’t know, they may be locked up somewhere. There’s probably no way of knowing until you realize your power.”

“Oh. Okay.” Clint sounded a little disappointed, but Sam could hear that he was encouraged knowing that he would eventually be affected, have a power.

Just then, the back door opened, and a pretty blonde stepped out onto the patio.

“Charlie?”

He turned, and smiled at his wife. “Yes, dear. Hey, come meet my guests. They’re, uh, doing a school project on medicine. Lexi, Leesha, Sam, Clint, meet my wife Amber.”

“It’s nice to meet you kids,” she smiled as each of them greeted her in return. “I won’t keep you. I just wanted to let you know I’m taking Ellie to swim practice. Caitlyn wanted to stay here. She’s in her bedroom. We should be back in a couple of hours.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll hold the fort down. See you in a bit.”

“Bye,” she waved at the group and retreated back indoors.

Chapter Forty-four

He watched Charlie as he sat casually in his backyard, chatting up the teens. What a moron. Did he think he could get away with lying to him? Did he think he could steal his kids from him?

He was glad now he installed the surveillance cameras at the Rowe house. He hadn't needed it much, but it was coming in handy today. The more he watched the group around the pool sit and chit chat, the hotter his temper got. Rowe's smile was coming easier and easier the longer he sat there, and he knew Rowe was getting more comfortable discussing his work the more they talked. What a sap, to let four teenage kids gain his trust and pump him for information. Charlie had always been weak, soft, too trusting.

He would have to teach Charlie a lesson for his betrayal. For his disloyalty.

He checked his GPS tracker and saw Charlie's wife's car in motion.

One phone call was all he needed to make – he had connections everywhere, but he had a couple of thugs he kept in the Scottsdale area just in case he needed to keep an eye on Charlie. It looked like he was going to need their service today.

He gave the two goons the GPS coordinates and told them to intercept the car, then told them where to take it and whoever was in it. By the time he got there, he could finish the job himself.

He'd give the goons a head start. They'd need about an hour to get the car and take it to the house.

He typed up his text message to Rowe and set it to send in about an hour. He then dialed the number to his pilot and told him to get the jet ready. Destination, Scottsdale. Please. There was always time for manners, at least for those that were still on his payroll. As long as they did what he wanted, no one needed to worry.

But for those who crossed him, well, they'd pay. And Charlie Rowe was getting ready to do just that.

He sat back to plan the rest of his trip to Arizona. He might even sneak in a visit to his mother while he was in the area. He hadn't seen her in more than three years, ever since he moved back to the St. Louis area to begin his search for the teens. Not that she'd recognize him, he thought to himself. But if he was going to be close, he may as well swing by and check out her new surroundings.

Charlie had always been able to give him updates on his mother... He guessed he would have manage that role himself, or find someone else that could do it after Charlie was disposed of.

Chapter Forty-five

“So there are eleven of us?” Leesha wanted to find out all she could. They all did, and none of them seemed to run out of questions.

“That’s what we think. We don’t know for sure until one of you is found. Since all of the medical records were taken, we haven’t had an updated paper trail of names and contact information to locate you from.”

“How has he found us?”

Charlie turned to Leesha. “He found you about a year, maybe a little more, ago – at a flea market. Said he saw you save some kid from a falling tent.”

“I remember that! It was very shortly after I finished flashing, and I was finally starting to control my power with some regularity.”

“He’s been following you ever since. And you led him to Sam, which led to Lexi. He was thrilled when he found the set of twins. Kind of a two-for-one deal, if you know what I mean,” the corner of his mouth turned down in kind of a guilty frown. Sam knew he was torn between guilt and the intrigue of finding kids and learning more about them.

“How did he find Clint?” Sam asked. “How did he know to send him to us?”

“He recognized his dad in a parking lot outside a pizza place one day. He was there listening to one of your meetings, and ran into his dad as he left the joint.”

Lexi turned to Sam. “Isn’t that the day you said you felt the déjà vu thing?”

“It was! No wonder... I must have sensed him there. You mean he’s been listening in to our meetings? We knew he’d been tracking our cars, but I had no idea he was showing up where we were meeting...”

“He saw you for the first time meeting at the diner. That’s where he got the plate number on your truck and was able to find out who you were and where you live.”

“He’s crafty...”

“Sam, you have no idea.”

“So why did he send Clint to us that night at the mall?”

“His whole mission was to get you together, to work together. He didn’t know if Clint started realizing his power yet, but either way, he wanted Clint to be able to benefit from the teamwork your group was putting together.”

“And why,” Lexi pondered, “has he not come forward himself yet?”

“I’m not entirely sure. He doesn’t tell me everything, but I don’t think he has, um, honorable intentions for your powers.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

Charlie tilted his head, trying to find the right way to explain. “Have you ever heard of a God complex?”

“Sure. It’s like when someone feels like they’ve got more power than anyone else. That they deserve the power. That they can control people, places...”

“With Dr. Blevins’ time as a physician, plus his previous training in the military, he developed kind of a power trip. He kept talking about creating his own army of super soldiers. Kind of a take-over-the-world effort.”

Sam heard both Lexi and Leesha shiver slightly at the thought of what Charlie was implying. The next thing Sam heard was Charlie’s phone buzz from his belt holder. He took the phone and read the text. No one paid much attention until both Sam and Charlie left out of their chairs, wild-eyed.

“What’s wrong?” Leesha asked.

Sam answered, as Charlie couldn’t find the words - he was already dialing his phone. “Blevins knows we’re here, and he’s pissed. He’s on his way here.”

The three others sat in silence, not completely understanding, watching Charlie and what he was going to do next. He snapped his phone back closed. “I can’t reach her. She’s got Ellie. What am I going to do?” his eyes pleaded with Sam.

“Sam?” Clint looked at Sam for an answer.

“He sent someone to intercept Amber’s car. They’re holding Amber and Ellie until Blevins lands here. He told Charlie that in order to get them back, he needs to turn us over to him.”

“What?!” Now both girls were on their feet, in panic.

Sam took charge. “Calm down everyone. We need to figure out…”

Clint was a step ahead of him. “Sam, go to the Jeep and get your laptop. I’ll do a perimeter of the house for surveillance equipment.”

“Right.” Sam sprinted towards the gate.

“Wait… There’s a computer inside.” Charlie pled, trying to help.

“His is clean. I’ve already checked it. Charlie, you go inside now and check on your daughter. Don’t scare her, but make sure she’s okay.”

“Okay.” He turned, knowing he was at the mercy of the kids, who hopefully knew what they were doing.

Clint scanned the exterior of the house, finding two cameras – one above the front door and the other in the patio area, where undoubtedly they were discovered. He did nothing about the cameras – there was really nothing to do at this point but steer clear of them as they planned their next move.

Charlie came out the back door again, still looking full of anguish. “She’s fine. She’s in her room.”

“Good. Charlie, I need to come inside the house. Is that okay with you? I need to check for cameras.”

“Cameras?”

“Yes, surveillance cameras. He’s got two out here. I need to check the interior to see if he’s got any inside so we know where we can work.”

Charlie shook his head in an attempt to clear his head and understand, and then opened the door and ushered the kids inside. Sam was back by then with the laptop, and followed the group in as Clint gave him the update on the surveillance equipment. He scanned the kitchen, finding another camera. Judging from the direction it was pointing, he showed Sam a place to sit down at the corner of the dining room table – clear from the camera’s view – and told him to boot up his computer.

“Show me your daughter’s room. That’s the next priority.”

Charlie led Clint up to Caitlyn’s room, the girls in tow to distract her from what was going on. As they chatted to her about clothes and boys and the like, Clint scanned the room for bugs and cameras. All clean.

As they left Caitlyn’s room, Clint whispered to Charlie “Where’s your garage?”

Charlie took him to the garage through the laundry room, which Clint walked through and scanned for cameras as well. When he cleared the garage, he came back inside to talk to Sam.

“There are two cars in the garage. Do you remember how we searched ours for tracking devices?”

“Yep.”

“Think you can check his?”

“No problem. Is the garage clear?”

“It is,” he answered briefly. This was no time for long answers.

“Leesha, you go with Sam and run communication. Lexi, I need you here with Charlie.”

“Check.” Both girls headed in the direction they were given.

Clint sat down next to the computer and brought up the internet. As it was loading, he turned to Charlie. “Was that your wife you tried to call?”

“Yes,” Charlie answered with tears in his eyes.

“No answer?”

“No.”

“Did it go straight to voice mail?”

“No.” He had no more words.

Clint tried to look reassuring. “That’s good, Charlie. That means her phone hasn’t been turned off. Whoever took her has probably grabbed her phone and won’t let her answer it. But if it’s still on, I can track its location through its cellular signal.”

He turned back to the computer and punched in a few commands. “Give me her cell number.”

Charlie recited it to him. There was no life left in his voice. No hope, just fear.

As Clint turned back to the computer, he glanced first at Lexi and nodded towards Charlie, hoping she’d get his unspoken message. She did.

“Charlie, here, have a seat. There you go...” she said as he sat down numbly. “I’m going to get you something to drink while Clint works, and then I’m going to go back up and check on Caitlyn.”

“Caitlyn. Yes. Good.” Charlie said back.

As she took Charlie a glass of orange juice, she looked back at Clint and he nodded his approval. She went back upstairs to check on Caitlyn, knowing that Sam would project to her when they needed her back downstairs. For now, her job was to keep Caitlyn safe.

Leesha came back into the dining room. “There’s a device on both vehicles. Sam wants to know what you want him to do.”

Clint never looked up from the computer. “Tell him to remove the one from the Suburban and put it on the convertible. Take the original one from the convertible and put it in the freezer, close the lid. When you’ve told him, come back here. I need your help.”

“Got it. Be right back.” And she was within fifteen seconds.

“Now, Leesha, I need you to go upstairs and pack a bag – a change of clothes for everyone. Charlie, where do you keep your luggage?”

“In the master closet, to the left of the door.” He was a total zombie.

Leesha ran off without any further direction. He could hear her run upstairs and hoped that Caitlyn wasn’t paying too close attention. Hopefully, he thought, Lexi was keeping her entertained.

Sam came back in, avoiding the camera in the kitchen, and looked over Clint’s shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“I’m locating... There! There she is! Charlie, I’ve found her. We can go and get her.”

“How did you do that?” Sam was astonished.

“Her cell signal. Tell the girls we are ready. We need them down here. Bring Caitlyn.” Clint turned then to Charlie. “Charlie, I need you to trust me, and just follow these instructions. We are going to get Amber and Ellie back. I need you to take Caitlyn and meet us at this address. Do not call us. Do not try and call your wife again. The less they know about what is going on the better. Can you do that?”

Charlie could only nod in agreement. Words were beyond him.

“Good.”

“Here come the girls,” Sam warned.

“Charlie, try to act normal. We’ll call you when we get them clear. I promise, this is going to be okay. Trust us, okay?”

“Okay.”

The girls appeared, Leesha first. Clint whispered to her to put the suitcase in the back of the SUV. She did as he requested.

As Lexi appeared around the corner with Caitlyn, Clint gave Charlie a piece of paper. “Meet us here. I need the keys to the convertible. We’ll see you soon. It will be okay.”

He nodded, and turned to Caitlyn. “We’re going on a little trip, Princess. Hop in the front seat, we’ll pick up Mom and Ellie when we get there.” The kids could tell he was doing all he could to sound normal. Lexi followed Caitlyn out to the garage to get her strapped in.

Charlie turned to follow them, then paused. He pivoted back and reached for his briefcase on the floor next to the laundry room door. Pulling out four files, he handed them to Sam, then turned to Clint and Leesha. “Thanks guys. I pray you are safe. Please bring them back to me,” he said, fighting tears.

“We will, Charlie,” Sam promised. Once he was gone, he turned to Clint and said, “What next?”

“You and Leesha take the convertible, Lexi and I will take the Jeep. Follow us. I’ve got a plan.”

“I see that...” *I’m trusting you, man.*

Chapter Forty-six

They raced through town as quickly as traffic would allow, bobbing in and out of spaces to pass cars in their way. Sam was behind the wheel of the fancy red foreign car following Clint in the Jeep.

Leesha was quiet. She knew Sam and Clint were communicating between the cars.

“Where are we going, Clint?”

“We’ve got to set a decoy. If Blevins is tracking the cars, he’ll be watching the activity of the car on his radar.”

“Why did you have me switch the trackers?”

“Because Blevins will know if Charlie goes out to try and get Amber and Ellie, he’ll be in the family car. They can’t all fit in the convertible.”

“Okay. Makes sense. So he’s watching this car, thinking it’s the Suburban.”

“Right. And now the Suburban is off his radar screen.”

“So how do we keep this one in motion while we are trying to get his family back?” Sam asked as the two cars pulled up to a railroad crossing. The lights went on and the arms went down, preventing any traffic from crossing the tracks.

Great. Just what we need. A delay...

“Sam,” Clint got his attention back. “Get out. You and Leesha climb in here.”

What?

But he didn’t question him. He nodded to Leesha to get out and they were climbing in the back of the Jeep within seconds. Lexi was in the front, watching some sort of digital radar map of the area, lit up with all kinds of activity Sam didn’t understand at a glance.

Clint turned towards the back seat, then looked out the back window. So far there was no traffic behind them. “Leesha, we don’t have a lot of time. When this train passes, I need you to move the convertible and stash it in an empty car. I don’t care what kind of car, but be as discreet as possible.”

“Okay,” she answered, and stepped back out of the Jeep, more for concentration than for control.

The train breezed past, and as soon as it cleared the road and blocked the view of the oncoming traffic, she watched for an opening in the train. The fourth car that was coming had its side door open and was empty inside. Leesha looked back towards the convertible, lifted it swiftly and moved it gently into the car. In a split second, it was gone from view as the train continued on its course.

Leesha had no sooner gotten back into the Jeep and Clint threw it in reverse to head back the way they came. “Do you think anyone saw that?” he asked Leesha.

“I don’t think so.”

“I was watching,” Sam added. “No one could have possibly seen her do that. We’re clear.”

“And the car is still in motion. Decoy mobile,” Clint said.

“Well planned!” Lexi said, patting Clint on the arm. “Now, we’re heading to Louisiana Street – right here on the map,” she said as she turned the laptop screen to Clint so he could see.

Clint passed the navigation device to Sam. “Punch in the coordinates.”

“Got it,” Sam said as he took it from him. Once he had done it, he handed it back to Lexi to put into the cradle.

They raced back across town and in about ten minutes were in a very shady, worn-down neighborhood. Rusted cars were lined up along the street, stray dogs running wild and houses without air conditioning lined the yards with their windows wide open. Clint slowed as they approached the house they were searching for.

“I don’t see her car,” Leesha said as she caught first sight of the house.

“It’s in the garage,” Sam said. “They’ve got it hidden. Clint, take a circle around the block. If we’re going to get them out, we need to figure out our best escape route.”

“Right.”

Clint drove slowly around the block, trying to determine the best place to position the Jeep for the escape. As he drove by each house, Sam peered inside to see which neighbors were home, in case they needed to worry about noise control. There was an alleyway to the back that intersected the block, and would allow them a parking position right next to the house, if needed.

Once back in the front of the dingy little house, Sam looked into its walls to draw a floor plan and report to the group what was going on inside the house.

“The girls are being held in this back bedroom. Both are bound to kitchen chairs and gagged.”

“How horrible...” Lexi’s eyes filled with mist.

“Lexi, keep yourself together,” Sam warned her. “I’m going to need you to help me get them out of there. Can you do that?”

She nodded her head, and then blinked a couple of times to regain her focus.

“Leesha, there are two guys in the front living room. According to their conversation, they are waiting for Blevins to call with his arrival time. They think he should be here within the hour.”

“Are they watching the girls?” Clint asked.

“No, they’ve got the door closed and padlocked shut from the outside. The door looks like it is rigged for this sort of business.”

Lexi and Leesha shared a look of terror between the two of them.

“All right, here’s the plan. We need to get in and out as quickly as possible and get as much distance between us and this place before Blevins shows up.” Now it was time for Sam to take charge, and the three of them nodded in agreement, waiting for their assignments. “Clint, I need you to park the Jeep at the back corner of the house – over by the air conditioner unit. That’s the best place for Lexi to get into the bedroom where the girls are. Lexi, we’re going in together – we’ll free them as quickly as we can and get them back out into the Jeep.”

“What do I do?” Leesha asked.

“You’re our muscle. You’re the only one that can physically affect anything, so I need you to knock on the front door and hold these guys at bay until we’re out. Can you do that?”

“Of course. Anything you need.”

“They’re going to see you, Leesha. There’s really no way around it. I need to help Lexi free Amber and Ellie. It’s a two man job. Otherwise I would help you cover the front.”

“It’s okay, Sam. I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Piece of cake. And it’s not like Blevins isn’t going to figure out who did this anyway. He already knows about us, who we are, where to find us.”

Lexi shuddered again.

“I know, Lex,” he turned to his sister. “We’ll have to deal with that sooner rather than later. But we’ve got to concentrate on this job right now. We don’t have time to worry about anything else.”

“Right.”

“Okay, guys, I’m going in,” Leesha climbed out of the Jeep.

“Wait until the Jeep disappears and you can knock on the door.”

“Got it. Good luck.”

“You too,” Lexi called back.

“Leesha,” Sam had one final thought, “I’ll keep my mind open for you. Let me know if you need any of us to back you up.”

“I’ll be fine. Just go.” She turned toward the front of the house and watched the Jeep round the corner.

Chapter Forty-seven

Clint pulled the Jeep around the back alley and Sam heard Leesha knock on the door. He listened for the door to open and Leesha begin a conversation with the two nervous men who appeared at the front door.

“Okay, she’s in,” he said to Lexi. “Let’s go.”

“Take this,” Clint said, handing his knife to Lexi. She gave him a weak smile of thanks.

They hurried out of the Jeep and Lexi followed Sam up to the back wall, covered in dingy old siding. He studied the wall carefully, then showed Lexi where the flooring was and where all of the metal plumbing ran through the walls. “Here’s the best place for us to go in. You ready?”

She nodded to him, then took his hand.

This IS weird. Tingly.

Lexi stepped forward, moving her foot up over the concrete foundation and stepping onto the floor that Sam pointed out. She glided through the house as if it were thin air. Sam followed her, and though his eyes could see into the room, he still marveled at the ability to walk right through a wall his mind knew was there. Once he set his second foot down on solid ground inside, they went straight to work.

Walking up behind Amber and Ellie, both still struggling to free themselves, she put her invisible head between the two of them and whispered. “Hi. My name is Lexi. I’m here to help you, but I need you to be very quiet. I don’t want them to know we’re here. Can you do that?”

Both of them jumped in their chairs at the sound of her voice, then nodded their heads in pure fright. Lexi continued, “My brother Sam is here with me. We’re going to appear. Please, please be quiet. We’ll have you out of here very shortly.”

And with that, she took off the veil of invisibility from them, which made their eyes pop open in disbelief. Sam put his finger in front of mouth to motion “Shhh.”

They both went to work, Sam took Amber, Lexi went to Ellie. First the gags came off, then the duct tape that bound them to their chairs. No one said a word until the two of them were entirely freed. It took them less than two minutes to have them free and standing upright.

Lexi turned to Sam. “I don’t think I’m strong enough to get everyone out at once. I need to do it one at a time.”

He nodded, understanding. “I’ll stay here with Amber and fill her in. You go ahead and take Ellie first. Clint can get her strapped in.”

Lexi turned to Ellie. “Ellie, I need you to trust me. Take my hand and just follow me. We’re gonna walk out of here to our Jeep out back. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered back. She was shaking with fright, probably no older than seven or eight years old, but Lexi could see she was desperate to trust someone who promised to help.

“It’s going to feel a little tingly. Here take my hand and follow me.” Lexi stepped down first, and then helped Ellie down the giant step onto the back lawn. Clint was already standing there, ready to help when they appeared. “Ellie, this is Clint. He’s going to get you into the car. I’m going back in to get your mom.” Lexi looked her straight in the eyes. “I’ll be right back, I promise. And I’ll have your mom with me. Trust me?”

“Yes,” she nodded and turned to Clint to get helped into the car.

Lexi hopped quietly back into the room and reappeared next to Amber. She jumped again at the strange sight, though Sam had told her a little of what was going on – what little he could say in such a few seconds. “Ellie is safe. It’s your turn. Ready?”

Amber nodded, tears streaming down her face. “Yes, I’m ready.”

Lexi took her hand and led her out the same way she took Ellie. Once outside, and with her daughter back in sight, she collapsed on Clint, who was hefting her into the back of the seat to rejoin Ellie. She grabbed Ellie and began to cry silently.

Lexi turned once again to go and get Sam, and in the haste to get out of there, didn't even reappear in front of him. She just grabbed his hand, making him disappear and led the way back out of the house for the last time.

Once they were outside and climbing back into the Jeep, Clint projected to Leesha: "We're clear. We've got them."

Leesha thought back to him. "Great. Just give me a few seconds and I'll be back out the front door."

What is she up to?

He turned to Clint. "Pick her up at the front door."

When Leesha appeared through the front door, her steps were quick, but she had a smirk on her face. She climbed into the back seat with the other girls – Lexi was at one window, and Ellie was sitting on her mother's lap in the middle. Amber's arms were locked around her daughter, both were openly sobbing now with relief.

Clint threw the car into gear and sped off.

Sam turned around from the front seat. "What did you do with the guys?"

"Well, I tried to just distract them at first, but they got impatient and tried to get rid of me. So I ended up moving them into the back corner and immobilizing them."

"How did you get out?" Lexi asked, still curious about anyone else's ability.

Leesha smiled largely. "I gave them a dose of their own medicine. They're locked in the back room."

Sam laughed. "The room we just came out of?"

"Uh-huh. You should have seen their faces when I opened the lock and they saw the room was empty. As if I didn't blow their minds already, controlling them into submission without even touching them... Then I lifted them and threw them into the room they thought they were keeping captives in!"

Lexi and Sam looked at each other and nodded. Sam answered Lexi's thought. "Yep. She totally has the coolest power!"

Once they were safely clear of the neighborhood, Clint dialed Charlie on his cell phone. "Charlie? Yeah. We've got them. Are you there?"

He paused, listening to the other end.

"Good. We'll be there in about seven minutes. Yes, yes. They're fine. A little rattled, but no one is injured. Take a deep breath, Charlie. It's over. We'll see you shortly."

The reunion at the bunkhouse was filled with tears, hugs and kisses. Both Leesha and Lexi were wiping away their own tears as they watched the family reunite and hold each other tightly.

Clint whispered to Sam to watch over the group and slipped away to talk to Bernie about arranging a flight for the family. Sam, Leesha and Lexi hung around the perimeter of the main room, letting the Rowe family settle each other's nerves and give updates on what happened on each end.

Once Clint slipped back in to join the group, the Rowes had quieted considerably, and were ready to fire questions at the kids. Charlie wanted a detailed summary of where they went

and how they rescued Amber and Ellie. They took turns filling him in on the nuts and bolts, but since their girls were so young, they didn't want to frighten them with the scary details.

Amber finally asked the question that was burning in her mind. "How is it possible that you are able to do what you did? Disappear? Walk through walls? Control people?" None of it made sense to her, and she looked to the four teens for answers.

Sam looked at Charlie, then back at Amber. "I think your husband will have better answers for you." He then projected into her mind: "And the answers may scare the girls."

Her eyes widened in surprise, realizing what he was doing. She nodded in understanding. He projected to Charlie, "You're going to have to fill her in."

Charlie's eyes turned down in shame as he thought back, "I will."

Clint cleared his throat, "Um, guys, this isn't over yet. When Blevins finds out you're gone, he's going to be seriously pissed. We need to get you out of here and safe from him. I've talked to Bernie. He's got a pilot and a jet ready to take you somewhere away from here. Is there family or somewhere you can go to where you can't be found?"

"My mother's got a beach house on the coast of South Carolina," Amber said. "We could go there."

Charlie nodded his approval. "You're right. Dr. Blevins knows nothing about your family. And the area is heavily populated. We'd easily blend in with the crowds and other tourists."

"I'll let Bernie know. He said the jet will be ready in ten minutes."

Charlie stood up to face the kids. "There's no way I can ever repay you for what you did today. You saved the lives of my wife and daughter."

Sam shook his head. "Charlie, there's no way of knowing..."

"I know, Sam. I know what he's capable of," he took Sam by the shoulder and lowered his voice, which cracked just the slightest. "He would have killed them, Sam. Thank you. I can't thank you enough."

Sam met his eyes. "Just get your family to safety. Contact us when you know it's safe. We've got more questions for you, but they can wait. Your family comes first."

Leesha approached Charlie and took his hand. "Charlie, we won't stop until we find him. We've seen first-hand what he's capable of. He won't get away with this."

"I promise you that," Lexi chimed in. "We won't rest until there's justice."

Clint came back in the door to let the Rows know the jet was ready for departure. There were more tears as the group hugged their goodbyes. With one final wave, Sam, Lexi, Leesha and Clint waved at the Rowe family as they boarded the plane and taxied out onto the runway.

Leesha and Lexi watched the plane take off, and both sighed in relief, thinking the danger was over and they could relax for a minute.

Clint, on the other hand, moved in a flurry as soon as the plane was in the air. He bolted through the door and started rummaging in his duffel, looking for something. The group followed him into the bunkhouse, all bouncing curious expressions off each other.

"Okay gang, let's go!" Clint said, a small toolbox in his hand.

"Go where?" Leesha asked, perplexed.

Dude, we just got everyone out of harm's way!

"We're going back."

“Back where?” Lexi shot back, then a knowing expression hit her face. “Back to the kidnappers?!”

Clint nodded.

“Why?” all three of them shouted in unison.

Clint calmed for just a minute, in an attempt to explain his rationale, but he knew their time was limited. “Look, I’m not comfortable knowing this creep is out there, watching us – probably watching our families.”

“I agree with you,” Sam started, but still skeptical. “What are you suggesting?”

“We know where he’s going next. He’ll be at the house any minute now to take care of what business he thinks he has there.”

“Yes,” Sam started, “and he’s going to be seriously pissed when he finds his plan didn’t work out the way he wanted. You’re not saying we should confront him now, are you?”

“No. NO! No, we’re not going to talk to him. But this may be the only time we know exactly where he’s going to be and when. I want to take advantage of it,” Clint said, waving his toolbox in the air.

“What’s that?” Lexi asked.

“It’s the newest tracking product on the market. If we plant a couple of these on him, we’ll know where he is at all times! I’ll sleep a whole lot better knowing where he is, and where he’s not – specifically if he’s not anywhere near any of you or our families.”

“Well, I agree with that in theory,” Leesha nodded her head in thought. “But it’s not like we can just walk up to the man and drop a tracer in his briefcase...”

Clint looked at Lexi. Instantly she understood.

No!

“No. Absolutely not,” Sam shook his head.

“Sam, he’s right. It’s the only way,” Lexi pleaded with him. “You saw what he did to Charlie’s family. I can’t think of him going after Mom and Dad in the same way. I can’t, Sam...”

“And Sam, we’ll all be there to protect her. We’ll get you close enough so you can see him, hear him, hear his thoughts at all times. You’ll know what moves he’ll make. You can direct Lexi where to go and what to do. And if worse comes to worse,” Clint turned to Leesha, “we’ll just have our muscle take care of him. I’d rather not – I mean, I’d rather him not know what is going on. That the tracking devices are planted in secret... But if we need protection, we’ve got it covered.”

Sam thought about it for a minute, trying to come up with some argument against sending his sister in to do the dirty work.

“Sam. We don’t have a lot of time,” Clint prodded. “It may be our only chance.”

“I know. You’re right,” he sighed. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Forty-eight

When he arrived at the dingy little house, he saw the goons' car in the street. Of course they didn't think to hide their car... Why would they? At least they had the presence of mind to stash the lady's car in the garage, he thought, passing by the window in the garage door.

All was quiet inside. He stepped in the front door, half expecting to be greeted by the men. They were supposed to be here waiting for him, but he saw no signs of activity at first glance.

"Hey! Guys?! Where are you?" he barked into the empty house.

Then he heard it. Someone, maybe two people, were banging on the bedroom door. He figured it was the captives until he heard the male voices shouting from behind the locked door.

What the?

He grabbed the key to the lock from his keychain, and as he stepped towards the door, he noticed the other key – there were only two, one for him and one for the goons – lying on the hall floor about two feet from the door jamb.

He slid his key into the padlock, unlocked it and stepped into the windowless room. The two guys came rushing towards him, relieved to be free of their cell.

"What the hell happened here?" he demanded of the two. "How did you end up in here? And where are the girls?"

Bub, the smaller but smarter of the two, spoke first. "We don't know, boss. First, this teenage girl comes to the door. Says she needs to sell us something, and when we try to get her to leave, she pushes us against the wall. Thing is, she never touched us! We couldn't do anything to fight her. She just stood there, and we was powerless against her."

The stupid one, he could never remember his name, spoke next. "Yeah, just like that. We stood there for like two, maybe three minutes. Then all of a sudden she rips the key off Bub's belt, opens the door, and the room's empty!"

"We don't know what happened boss. We never saw anyone else come in. We never saw anyone leave. We would have seen them, honest!"

"Yeah, boss."

As the realization of what happened hit him, the fury took over his forehead like a blinding migraine. He paced back and forth from the hallway into the kitchen and back. "And how did you two idiots end up in the detention room?"

Bub's face, still white as a sheet, was now slicked with the sweat of fear. "She picked us up and threw us into the room. 'Cept again, she never even laid a hand on us. Just flung us onto the floor, closed the door and locked it. I don't know how she did it. Honest Abe, boss."

He continued to pace, seething with anger. All he asked was for these two imbeciles to do one little thing for him, and they can't even do that right.

The kids did this, he was certain. While he was proud that their abilities were getting stronger, he was just as furious that they were using them against him. How dare they... He was their maker. He should be their ruler. They would NOT do this to him again.

He was going to have to be smarter from now on. That meant trusting fewer allies in his work, and definitely weeding out the weak staff members on his payroll. He knew exactly where he should start, with regards to that...

He turned back to the hired thugs. "Show me exactly where you had the women."

They led him back to the room, and entered first, walking towards the chairs and discarded duct tape. As their backs were to him, he quickly pulled out his gun – silencer already attached – and put one slug in the back of each head.

The only sound to be heard was that of the two bodies as they hit the floor.

He spent the next fifteen minutes wiping the place clean of any trace of him – finger prints, patterns from his shoes, clothing fibers, anything he could think of. Since his gun was untraceable, he didn't worry about the bullets he left behind.

Satisfied that he cleaned the inside of the house, he grabbed his briefcase and went out to check the exterior. There were footprints in the dirt and around the garage, so he set his briefcase down and grabbed a broom from the garage to sweep them away. He left no clue behind. There was to be no way anyone could trace him to this house or the bodies that lie within it.

Picking up his bag, he headed for the car. Once inside, he grabbed his laptop and booted it up to check his GPS tracker. It didn't take him long to find the Rowe Suburban, heading northwest, about half way to Las Vegas.

They may think they can blend in there, he thought to himself, but he would catch up to them. Starting his car, he set his navigation for destination - Las Vegas.

Chapter Forty-nine

The Jeep pulled up in the neighborhood just as Blevins' car was coming down the street. Sam saw him first, spotted him in the rental car. "There he is!" He pointed to the metallic tan sedan pulling up to the curb across the street from the house.

Already knowing the lay of the neighborhood, Clint knew just where to park in the alley so they were close enough to monitor the house's activity, but far enough away to be seen by anyone inside. They quietly got out of the Jeep and huddled together to discuss their plan of attack.

Clint handed Lexi three flat black devices, about the size of a dime.

"They're so small! They don't look anything like the boxes he had on our cars," Lexi stared at the little button-sized objects.

"Yeah, he's about two years out of date," Clint said. "The good news is these are more advanced, so he can't detect them with the old tracking software he's using. He'll never know we've planted them on him."

Sam grinned, but said nothing, still very worried about what they were about to do. Instead, he focused on the activity inside the house. "Okay, guys, he's grilling the two men. Oh, he's pissed. I'd hate to be in there right now."

Clint turned back to Lexi. "Listen, I know the car's a rental, but I want you to go ahead and put one of these on the front fender of the car. We can at least track his mobility while he's in the car – even if it is only for the next day or two. It may come in handy to know where he is so we can get home safe."

"Okay," Lexi nodded. "And the other two?"

"I'm hoping you can manage to get at least one in a briefcase or duffel bag. It would be nice to have one in something we know he'll always have with him. Hey, you can't pick pockets, can you?" he grinned.

"No," she smiled back. "But wouldn't that be handy?"

"Yeah. What I'd do to get my hands on his wallet right about now... Anyway, Sam will keep a look out, keep you updated on where he is and what he's doing. We may just have to wing it."

"Where do you want me?" Leesha jumped in.

"I want you to position yourself behind that privacy fence in the next door neighbor's yard," he pointed to the location. "From there, you can see us and the front door at the same time. Sam can communicate to you if we need you to step in and flex your muscle. Hopefully we won't need to, but if we do, I think that's your best spot if you need to get to him quickly."

"Right. I'm on it," and she ran off in the direction Clint pointed.

Once she was safely crouched at the end of the fence, Sam turned his attention back to the house. Lexi disappeared from sight and began to head towards the car.

"Lexi?"

"Yes, Sam..." she was starting to sound annoyed by her brother's protectiveness.

"Keep talking to me."

"I will, big brother. Don't worry. I've got this."

Lexi headed to the car across the street and proceeded to attach one of the tracking devices into the front right wheel well. Peering into the back seat, she caught a glimpse of a black padded bag in the back seat. "Jackpot! I found his computer case, Sam."

Sam relayed the information to Clint, who then instructed: “Tell her not to place a device inside the computer. The electronics can sometimes interfere with each other. See if she can find a padded handle or pocket to slide the device inside – somewhere where he won’t find or feel it as he reaches in.”

Sam projected the information back to Lexi and she reached into the backseat window to place the second device under the shoulder strap’s padded handle. “Done!” she announced cheerily.

Suddenly, Sam’s attention snapped back towards the house. He looked inside the walls and flinched as he saw Blevins draw the gun. “Lexi, fall back! Leesha, get over here!”

“What? What’s going on?” Clint demanded, stunned at Sam’s change of direction.

“Shhh. Let me listen.”

Leesha ran over to the boys, and Lexi appeared next to the three a split second later. Both looked perplexed, but stayed quiet as Sam looked like he was deep in concentration.

Shit! Do I tell them what I just saw?

Sam grappled with his conscience for a few more seconds, and then finally decided they were all in this together. He looked at the three of them and leveled with them. “He just shot the two kidnapers.”

None of them spoke. They just stood there looking stunned. The minutes ticked on... Finally, Leesha broke the silence. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” he said, his focus now back inside the house. “He’s in there now cleaning the place of prints and evidence.”

“Man, I think we should get out of here,” Clint said.

“No! We’re not done! I’ve got one more device...”

“Lex, no. You’re not going back there,” Sam said.

“I agree,” Clint crossed his arms. “It’s way too dangerous. He’s got a gun, Lexi.”

“And he’ll have the same gun when he comes after us,” Lexi protested. “Let’s at least give us half a chance to be able to track him. It may be our only head start in protecting ourselves. Our families.”

Sam squared his shoulders, ready to fight. “Lexi...”

But Leesha didn’t let him go any further. “Sam, I’ll go with her. I’ll be right next to her. If anything goes wrong, I’ll protect her.”

Sam turned to her. “I don’t like it Leesha. Why don’t we just immobilize him like we did the other two earlier? That way we know he can’t hurt us...”

“Because he’ll know we’re here, watching him. If he realizes that, he’ll suspect we’re up to something. We need to get these devices on him in a way that allows us to track him without his knowledge,” Clint said, then turned back towards the house. “Where’s his briefcase?”

“It’s inside with him. It’s too dangerous.” Sam continued to watch. “Wait. Here he comes...”

“What’s he doing?” Leesha asked, already at Lexi’s side, ready to go.

“He’s checking the outside. He just set his briefcase down, and headed into the garage.”

“This is our chance! Come on, Leesha!” Lexi grabbed her hand and they both disappeared from sight.

“Lexi!”

“Sam,” she whispered, just a few paces away, “just let us know if something looks strange...”

Sam growled in frustration as he heard the two pair of footsteps run away from him. Clint grabbed his shoulder and said, “I know man. Tell me what’s going on…” and he crouched down to wait out the storm, frustrated that he couldn’t do any more to help.

Sam listened to their footsteps as they rounded the house, then tip toe around the garage corner where the briefcase sat as Blevins swept the driveway. He saw the case tilt slightly away from the wall where it rested, and the opening widen ever so slightly. He knew Leesha was watching Blevins closely as Lexi tried to maneuver the tracker inside the case without him hearing them or seeing his case move.

Sam didn’t know if he breathed once since they ran away from him, because as he saw the case rest back against the wall and heard their footsteps retreat back to where he was standing, he finally exhaled in relief. Finally he heard Leesha mentally give the “All clear!” signal, and he relayed the information to Clint, who stood up and seemed to shake his head clear.

I think he was as worried as I was...

The girls popped back into vision, and turned to Sam for an update. “He just put the broom away. Heading to the car... Why is he just sitting there?”

At this point, the group decided the best thing to do was wait until Blevins cleared the neighborhood before they headed out. They didn’t want to risk crossing paths with him and being seen.

Clint climbed into the Jeep to check the tracking devices on the laptop. Lexi followed him, curious to see if her work was fruitful. Sure enough, all three devices gave a clear signal.

Sam and Leesha stood there, waiting for him to move. “He’s looking at his laptop. I can’t make out the screen at the angle he’s holding it... Wait. He just grabbed his navigation device. Loading it... Las Vegas. It looks like he’s headed to Vegas!”

They heard the car start, and Sam told Leesha when it was out of the neighborhood. It was then when they both exhaled their final sigh of relief and climb into the front seat of the Jeep. Lexi and Clint were both still looking at the information on the laptop screen in the back.

Sam looked back and reported that Blevins was headed to Las Vegas. Both Clint and Lexi shared a knowing smile of success.

“Ironically,” Clint said, smirking, “that is the same direction the convertible is heading!”

Chapter Fifty

The group finally settled back into the bunk house for the night. They contemplated going back home to check in with their families, but quite frankly they were all beat. Physically and mentally beat.

Emotionally, however, the four kids seemed to be soaring. Once the fear and shock of what they just went through faded, and they realized what they accomplished as a team, the chatter in the Jeep on the way back escalated into a celebration of cheers, squeals and glory stories.

They decided to stop by the grocery on the way back to the house – Leesha offered to cook a Mexican spread to go along with the fiesta mood they were all buzzing with. The girls were in the kitchen setting out the ingredients, while Sam and Clint were setting up the computer so they could constantly monitor Blevins' mobility.

"I can't help but feel a little cheated. There's no justice," Sam said. "I mean, he got away, clean."

"For now, but he'll never be too far ahead of us. We'll track him down. He can't hide forever," Clint said, pulling up the GPS grid on the computer screen.

"So where is he now?"

"He's still headed northwest, toward Vegas. If he takes a turn east, we'll see it," Clint assured Sam, showing him how to read the tracking radar. He knew Sam was still worried about the families they left behind, and the group all agreed that they would drop whatever they were doing in an instant to fly back home and protect what they loved.

But for now, the kids just wanted to relax and revel in their accomplishment. They covered a lot of ground over the weekend, and Sam knew it would take a bit of time for all the information they gathered and work they had done to completely sink in.

He stashed the charts Charlie gave him into his duffel. He glanced at them earlier – most of the documentation was information they'd already gathered, with the one exception of the actual medications that were administered to Lexi, Leesha and Sam. None of the kids had the medical background to know what to do with that information. Sam knew they may need to get help from a medical professional for direction on that. But for now, that could wait in lieu of a little R&R and celebration.

Clint walked down to tell Bernie that the group was back and was going to settle in for the evening. Sam saw him walking back towards the bunk house with a baseball he evidently found in the hanger. Sam stepped out on the front porch to meet him.

"Feel like playing a little catch?" Clint asked, smiling.

"Sure, man," and they spread out along the front of the house to lob the ball back and forth.

Sam could hear the girls inside chatting animatedly about the day's events, downloading every exciting detail over and over from each other's perspective. He reflected that, while they had certainly gotten a lot done to this point, there was a lot more work ahead of them.

They needed to find the other seven babies – now teenagers – that were infected in the nursery. Thanks to Sam's digging in the hospital records, they had a pretty good list to start from. He wasn't exactly sure which babies were in Blevins' care at 2am on the night of the 15th, but with the short list they had, they could certainly narrow it down and start their search.

From the prison logs, the name Sara Milligan kept coming back into Sam's head. He couldn't figure out why, but he had a sense she was involved in this somehow. She would need

to be located and interviewed. If she was still somehow connected with Blevins, they would have to tread lightly on that one...

Lexi kept reminding him that they needed to follow up with Charlie and make sure the Rowe family was tucked away and safe. Sam marveled at how quickly – and easily – the four of them bonded with the family, and banded around them to protect their safety.

And then there was the biggest challenge – finding and approaching Blevins. They certainly had a lot of questions for him, but knowing how dangerous he had already proven himself to be, Sam knew the job would not be an easy one.

Sam shook his head and pushed all of this into the back of his mind. *Tonight we celebrate. Enjoy new friends, alliances...*

He caught the baseball and quickly threw it back to Clint. They stood there, throwing the ball back and forth, chatting easily like they had been together all their lives. Their friendship was growing – it was strangely mixed with undying trust and just a twinge of jealousy – but it was a bond that was true.

Sam lobbed the ball back to Clint and was getting ready to ask him what time he wanted to leave the next morning when the blast hit his forehead and Clint hit the dirt, screaming in pain. He curled up in a ball, writhing and groaning, rolling back and forth.

Sam ran over to see what was wrong, but he already knew. He glanced at his watch, knowing they would need to start a new set of documentation, and heard the door slam behind him with the frantic sound of two sets of footsteps running toward them.

“Clint!”

“Oh, Clint...”

Each girl took one side of him to steady him and Leesha started talking slowly and calmly into his left ear. “Breathe slowly... In and out. Deeper, if you can, Clint. It’ll help the burn...”

Lexi knelt on his other side, lifting him to a sitting position and rubbing his back to try and distract him. They all knew this one would be the most painful, but the shortest in length. But it was hard to watch, each of them reflecting on how painful it was for them during the first set of their flashes.

It took about a minute and a half for this one to run its course. Sam heard Clint’s mind clear first, then Clint turned to each of the girls – his face drenched in sweat – and nodded. “Thanks.” He was still out of breath.

“Are you okay?” Leesha asked tentatively.

He nodded. “Uh-huh. Wow. That pretty much sucked.”

They all laughed.

Lexi looked down at him. “What’s in your hand?”

It looked like a mangled mess of rubber, leather and red twine, squishing out from between the fingers of his clenched fist.

Leesha laughed loud and hard. The others stared at her in wonder. She looked down again and said, “It looks like I’m not the only muscle any more!”

Clint’s eyes popped open when he realized what she meant, then his smile widened so far you could see every one of his teeth.

Sam smiled at him, and reached down to help him to his feet. “Welcome to the club, man. Now let’s go and see what you can lift.”

A Sample From Book Two: Brute Justice

Chapter One

As much as he wanted to be like the others, there were times when Clint regretted that wish with his whole being. The burn ravaged his body, leaving him crippled and curled in agony, his teeth clenched, holding back screams trying to escape his sweat-covered face. He knew the torture would only last a few minutes, maybe more, but while it ran its course the fire was excruciating.

Just hold on...

He tried to calm himself, distract his mind, yet his legs quivered as they fought the flames coursing through his veins. It felt like fishhooks coated with gasoline, tearing through his muscles and ripping his body to shreds. He bit his lip, trying not to make a sound, but the tears streaming down his face told another story.

It was a good thing he was home alone. While Clint thought of his father as his best friend, he wasn't ready to share this experience with him. Not only would his dad worry about the pain Clint was going through, but he'd most certainly overreact to the cause of it. They had endured enough emotionally over the years after losing Clint's mother to cancer. He didn't want to cause his dad any more stress or heartache.

He felt his muscles relax, the cooling relief spread from his core to the outermost parts of his body. Relief, at last.

It's over.

He sat up from the living room floor, his clothes drenched with sweat from the torture. The flashes, or so they had been dubbed, were phasing his body, transforming it. They were changing the structure of his genetics – specifically his muscles – and leaving him with strength beyond a normal human's ability. He'd learned from the first two episodes not to hold onto anything or brace his body against something not completely solid.

For the first flash, in Arizona, he was lucky to have the crew there with him. Sam, Lexi and Leesha – his newest teenage friends, and more importantly teammates – were there to witness and help him through the experience. All three of them had been through the flashes themselves. Lexi was still experiencing the final stages of hers.

Clint had the misfortune of holding a baseball during his first one, which he squished through his fingers like modeling clay with his super strength. During his second flash, at home in the back yard, he tried to brace himself against the wooden rail of the deck and proceeded to crumble it to splinters under his grip.

I'm still not sure Dad bought my story on that one...

So now, when the breathtaking pain took over his body, he found the best thing to do was find a clear space on an empty patch of floor and ride out the fire. Shaking his head to clear it, he stood up and walked over to the counter to log the start and end time, then reached for the phone to update Leesha.

It wasn't as if Leesha were the leader of the group, she just had a way of organizing the team's research into channels that made sense. Plus, she was the first of the four to flash and

realize her power – telekinesis – so had the most history and experience with the medical transformation they were all going through.

His cell was already buzzing before he picked it up.

New text message, from Leesha:

911! Dixons in trouble. Meet me there NOW.

Shit! What does that mean?

He grabbed his keys and helmet and ran out the door. The Harley sped down the street, Clint steering it like a motorcross professional. He felt his heart pounding in his chest, not knowing what he was headed for.

He got there in less than six minutes – a trip which took closer to fifteen on a normal day, when one would obey all the traffic laws. He pulled into the neighborhood and saw Leesha waiting for him. She was pacing beside her compact car parked on the far end of the block.

“What’s up?”

“There are two gunmen in there, holding the family hostage.”

“Blevins? Again?!”

“Looks like.”

“What does he want?”

“Charlie’s files.”

“They’re not going to hand them over, are they?”

“No. But you and I need to get in there. Are you...?”

“Yep. Just now.”

“Great. Sam and Lexi can’t do anything to them.”

“Let’s go, then. Come on!”

“How do we get in?”

“Hop on the bike, I’ll drive us around the back.”

Clint cut through the yards, not caring who saw or what they thought of it. What mattered, the only thing that mattered, was getting the Dixons out safe. He pulled up in the back yard and cut the engine.

“Stay low. Follow me,” he told Leesha.

She nodded.

Bobbing and weaving under the lower level windows, Clint and Leesha worked around the back, along the side, and up to the northeast corner of the house. Each time he reached a new window, he slowly raised his face to the bottom of the pane, checking to see if he could catch a glimpse of the family.

Finally at the first window along the front, he saw them. Two men with guns were standing in front of the doorway, dressed in dark clothes and ski masks. Lexi was pinned in between her parents on the small couch. She kept glancing over nervously at her dad, who had a gash above his right eye, blood trickling down his temple. Sam was sitting in a chair facing the window.

Sam caught a glimpse of the top of Clint’s head, then his eyes darted back, not wanting to give away the rescue attempt.

“Sam, we’re here,” Clint whispered, knowing Sam’s heightened senses would hear him.

“Did you not hear the cycle?”

“Uh, man... Been a little busy in here,” Sam projected mentally into Clint’s head.

Thank God for Sam's ability to communicate like this. At least I'll know what's going on before we barge in there.

"How many?" Clint asked.

"Just the two."

"Guns?"

"Just the pistols in their hands."

"Any backup coming? Blevins?"

"I don't think so. They haven't had any phone calls."

"Okay, chill man. We're coming in."

"Hurry."

Clint turned to Leesha. "Can you control them through the window?"

"Uh, yeah. I think so."

"Both of them?"

"How far apart are they standing?"

"About four feet."

"No problem."

"Leesh, they've got guns."

"Of course they do. I'll hold them at bay. You just get your ass in there and take care of the guns."

"Okay. You ready?"

She shifted around him, took a closer stance next to the window. She'd need to see clearly for her telekinesis to work effectively. "Go!"

Clint stood up and approached the front door in a dead run. He checked the knob. Locked.

I'm not messing around here... Clint kicked the door in and heard Mrs. Dixon scream in fear. All of this had happened so quickly, she didn't notice the thugs were frozen.

He grabbed the first pistol, a ten millimeter Glock, and snatched it from the hand of the guy nearest him. In a flash, he hit the release button and the magazine dropped out. He put it in his back pocket, cleared the chamber of the last bullet, then wrapped his fingers around the barrel and crushed it like it was an empty toilet paper tube.

The next guy held an older model Smith and Wesson revolver. Clint opened the cylinder, dropped the bullets on the floor, then bent the empty gun in half.

Putting a hand on each chest, he pinned them against the wall and yelled back at Leesha. "All clear, Leesh! Get in here!"

By now, both Sam and Lexi were standing, obviously wanting to help. Leesha stepped through the front door and resumed her stance in front of the two red-faced men.

"How are you doing this?!" one of the guys choked as he fought against Clint's stiff arm. "You're just a..."

"Kid?" Clint smirked. "Yeah, I'm kinda strong for my age."

"I got 'em Clint," Leesha said.

He nodded, let loose. "Sam – rope? Duct tape?"

"Yep." Sam took off toward the garage.

"Lexi – chairs?"

"Got it." She was back in a few seconds with two dining chairs in her hands. She set them in front of the frozen men.

Sam came back with a roll of duct tape and a spool of heavy-duty nylon rope.

Clint grabbed the first man and nodded at Leesha. She released him and let Clint take over. He forced the man into the chair, used the tape to pin his ankles to each chair leg, and tied his arms behind his back. Once the second guy was secured, he ripped off the ski masks. When they tried to protest, he put a strip of tape across their mouths.

Clint finally relaxed enough to look at Sam and Lexi to see if they were okay. They both nodded their thanks. He then swiveled around to Marcy and Dan Dixon, the twins' parents, who were still huddled together on the couch, their faces white.

"You guys okay?" Clint's tone softened considerably.

Dan nodded, but had no words. He held Marcy tighter. Her face was blotched and streaked with tears. His was covered in a mix of sweat and blood.

Sam turned to face the first guy, and without warning, reached back and clocked him with a right hook.

"Sam!" Dan shouted as he watched his son wince and examine his hand.

"Sam, I got this," Leesha said, a little quieter. She put a hand gently on his shoulder. "Why don't you let Clint and me take the lead on this. You've been through enough today. You okay, Lex?"

Lexi nodded. "Fine, Leesh. Thanks for coming."

"How'd you text me?"

"They never saw the phone," she grinned. "I'm glad you brought help. Hey, Clint."

"Hey, yourself."

Dan finally stood. "I'm calling the police."

"No, Dad!" Sam interrupted. "Let us handle this."

"Really Dad, we got this now," Lexi assured him.

"Lexi-"

"Dad, seriously," Sam insisted. "Mom? You okay?"

"Um, yeah." She looked at the two men in her dining room chairs. "I want them gone, though."

"In a minute, Mrs. Dixon," Leesha said, then focused back on the thugs. "Who sent you?"

They glanced sideways at each other, unable to speak.

"The doc," Sam confirmed.

The blonde man's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"How do you get a hold of him?" Leesha continued.

Silence, to all except Sam. He heard their thoughts, then reached down to grab the cell phone from the belt of one. He flipped through the settings, paused, then leaned toward Clint to show him the screen. Clint punched the number into his own phone.

"Got it," he confirmed. "It's clearly a disposable phone – no name attached to it, but it's gotta be him. I'll trace it here in a bit, see what I can find out."

Leesha turned to Clint. "So what do you think? Should we just call him, tell him we've got his goons?"

Lexi smiled wickedly, catching on. "What do you think he'll do when he finds out they've failed him?"

The two guys sat there, wide eyed. They looked at each other, then back to the group. One shook his head violently while the other one just blinked back tears.

"You guys ready to talk?" Sam barked.

They both nodded.

Sam and Clint reached forward to rip the tape off. Big pink bars of raw flesh marked where the tape had been placed over their mouths.

“What are you guys gonna do with us?” the blonde was the first to speak.

Sam’s face got even redder, his forehead beading with sweat. “Shut up! You’ve asked enough questions today. Now it’s our turn.”

“Easy, man,” Clint said. “Step back a minute.”

“Step back? Dude! He’s been holding my family at gunpoint!”

“And I’m pissed about that too. But calm down just a minute. Tell us what happened.”

Sam took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. “Dad went out to get the newspaper. They followed him back through the garage, led him into the kitchen where the rest of us were.”

Leesha took her hand and gently tilted Dan’s face so she could see the gash above his eyebrow. “What happened here, Mr. Dixon? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“He’s not fine! That bastard clocked him with the butt of his gun when Dad tried to get them out of the house,” Sam yelled, more in the direction of the men than anyone else.

“What did you want me to do, son?! Stand back while they muscled their way into our house? I wasn’t going to just let them point guns at my family...”

“I know, Dad, but come on...” Sam sighed in frustration and turned back to Leesha and Clint. “They said they were sent to retrieve Charlie’s files.”

“Why would you assume the files were here, instead of my house or Leesha’s?” Clint asked the men.

“His best guess. There are two of you here, plus he’s seen you gather here to work more often than anywhere else.”

“What do you know about the files?”

“Nothing. We were just told to come here and get Rowe’s files from you.”

“And he told you to come with ski masks and guns?” Lexi butted in.

“He said to use force if necessary. We decided the disguises might be smart.”

“Why?”

“We don’t do any job for him in the open anymore. Not after the Phoenix fiasco.”

They know about Phoenix? Um... Play this right. “What happened in Phoenix?”

“He had two of our associates help him deal with a problem. The job went south and our buddies ended up dead.”

“Who killed them?”

“Dunno. No one said. But I heard rumors of some strangers involved.”

“Did you know them?” Leesha looked incredulous.

“Yep. I wouldn’t say we’re friends. But we ran in the same circle, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” Leesha paced back and forth, eyeing both of them. “And you really don’t know who killed them?”

“Not a clue. I don’t know anything about the job. Just assumed it got ugly.”

“Oh, I can tell you who killed your friends,” Sam said, emphasizing the word friends with a hint of sarcasm. “I can tell you, ‘cause I watched it go down.”

“Who did it?”

Sam almost sneered. “The good doctor, that’s who. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“You couldn’t have.”

“He did,” Clint said. “Shot ‘em both in the back of the head.”

“How’d you guys get away?” The sweat was starting to pour down the temples of the pudgy, dark-haired intruder.

“He never saw us,” Clint answered. “Just like you never saw us until it was too late. Now look... You’ve got a couple of choices here. But my best advice, if you don’t want to end up like your buddies, is to disappear.”

The sound of clicking behind him made Clint turn around. Lexi had her phone in the air.

“If you don’t,” she smiled sweetly, “we’ll show him proof of how good you are at your job.”

Oh man, she’s good.

“So what’s it gonna be? Will you leave here, leave our families alone?” Clint prodded.

They were both silent for a minute, thinking. The blonde raised his head finally. “Yeah. We give. We’re out of here.”

“I don’t want to see your face again,” Clint pushed. He picked up the mangled Glock. “You take this, remember who you’re dealing with. You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us. Clear?”

“Yeah. Clear.”

“Who are you, anyway?” the pudgy one asked.

“That’s none of your business,” Leesha spat. “And frankly, the less you know, the better off you are.”

“So here’s what’s gonna happen,” Clint said. “I’m going to untie you, nice and easy. Any crap from either of you and I tie you back up and we call the doc.”

They nodded.

“You’re gonna walk out to your car and get the hell out of here. I don’t care where you go, but you better disappear. I’m not kidding. Completely gone. Got it?”

“Uh-huh. We’ll go. You won’t hear from us again. My word.”

Clint huffed slightly, but took his knife out and expertly released both men. Leesha stood guard, but both Lexi and Sam were right beside her. A unified front.

Once clear, the men quickly walked out the door. By the time they hit the sidewalk, they were in a full sprint.

Clint watched them drive off, took a deep breath and turned to face the rest of the group. “Um. Sorry about the door, Mrs. D.”

She looked up from her husband’s wound, which she was dabbing with a tissue. “Would someone please explain to me what just happened here?!”