

LUCID WAKE

A Novel

By Nick Jameson



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Chapter 1

The Golden Gate Bridge stretches across the water like a gleaming ribbon, its burnt-orange towers rising against the endless blue of the sky. A bird's-eye view sweeps across its length, tracing the roadway southward, beyond the city's edge and into the urban sprawl of San Francisco. The world below comes alive with movement as the perspective descends, weaving through the tree-lined roads of the Presidio, past the vast greenery of Golden Gate Park, then winding down Sunset Boulevard into a neighborhood of tightly packed homes.

A single house stands out among them, its brilliant red front door a beacon amidst the muted pastels of its surroundings.

From the second-story window of that house, Caleb sits unmoving, a closed book resting in his hands. He stares out at the world beyond the glass, lost in thought. He is young, handsome, and well-groomed, but there is an intensity in his gaze that sets him apart—a brooding sharpness that makes the air around him feel charged.

In his lap lies a book titled *Myth or Miracle? Ancient Legends and Their Historical Roots*. Its weight is familiar in his hands, but his attention is elsewhere. Outside, the voices of children at play drift through the air. Two boys have taken up a game of catch on the sidewalk across the street. The football arcs between them, one boy throwing, the other catching, their laughter punctuating the rhythm of the game.

Caleb's gaze follows the motion of the ball until, for a brief moment, the younger of the two boys—the one holding the football—looks up. Their eyes meet. A sudden, sharp jolt of recognition courses through Caleb's body.

A flash of white light explodes in his vision.

The world shifts. A funeral procession moves slowly through a graveyard, somber figures in black carrying a small casket. A man and a woman stand apart, weeping as the tiny coffin is lowered into the earth. The priest's voice weaves through the air, solemn and steady, reciting prayers over the lifeless body below.

Another flash of white light.

Caleb gasps. He is back in his room. Across the street, the boy still stands, his gaze locked onto Caleb's window, his small body frozen in place. His friend's distant shouts barely register. Then, as if broken from a trance, the other boy storms over and knocks the football from his hands, jolting him back into the game. The moment passes. They resume playing, their laughter once again lighthearted and carefree.

Caleb scowls, shaking his head as he flips open his book.

That night, in the dim glow of his bathroom, Caleb stares at his reflection in the mirror, toothbrush in hand. His eyes widen, pupils dilating as another flash of light burns through his vision.

The boy from the sidewalk. The way he had looked at him. The same moment, repeating.

“Goodnight, Caleb.”

His aunt's voice pulls him back to the present. He turns to see her standing in his bedroom doorway, her expression kind but tinged with concern.

"Goodnight, Auntie," he murmurs.

"Any plans for tomorrow?"

"I don't know," he admits. "I might go to the park and read."

She hesitates before responding. "That sounds nice, honey. Just... be careful. And if you have one of your... episodes, promise me you'll call me first. I'll come help."

A flicker of discomfort passes over Caleb's face. He nods. "I promise."

The night wraps around him like a heavy blanket, the darkness pressing in. Caleb lies on his back, still and silent, until sleep overtakes him.

Then, the dream begins.

At first, it is a memory—standing by his bedroom window, watching the boys play outside. But then, the walls of his room shimmer, colors bleeding and shifting like liquid light. The air becomes thick, charged with an unfamiliar energy. Caleb smiles.

He knows he is dreaming.

Outside, the younger boy—his silent observer—grins up at him. Then, impossibly, the wall between them pixelates, breaking apart and dissolving into nothing. Without hesitation, Caleb floats forward, his feet lifting effortlessly from the ground. He drifts down toward the street, joining the boys in their game. The football soars between them, its trajectory mirroring his

own weightless movement. And then, as if drawn by some unseen force, Caleb lifts higher, rising above them, ascending into the sky.

Below, the boys follow, their movements surreal, bounding from car roofs to treetops, then leaping from building to building, chasing the ball as it traces ever greater arcs between them. Caleb watches in wonder, the city unfurling beneath him like a vast, endless dreamscape.

Then, the sky turns red.

Caleb's stomach twists. The color deepens, shifting into a swirling vortex above him. A terrible wind howls, and suddenly, he feels himself being pulled backward, his cape—a cape?—snapping against the force. He turns, straining against the pull, his body fighting forward.

Below, the younger boy has stopped. He looks up at Caleb again, his eyes wide, questioning. His friend shouts something and throws the football high—too high. It arcs, sailing past him, toward the street.

A garbage truck roars down the hill.

Panic seizes Caleb as the boy turns, sprinting toward the ball, oblivious to the danger barreling toward him. Caleb thrashes against the unseen force pulling him backward. His cape stretches, then tears.

The impact comes with a sickening thud.

Caleb jerks awake, his body slick with sweat. His breath comes in ragged gasps. He turns his head toward the window, his heart hammering in his chest.

Outside, the sky is red.

The next morning, Caleb walks through the city, the weight of his dream lingering like a shadow. He rides the bus to Golden Gate Park, letting it carry him through the familiar streets until he arrives at the place from his dream.

He finds a bench at the top of a grassy hill and sits, his book open in his hands, though his mind is far away. Time passes. The sky changes. And then, distant voices pull him from his thoughts.

Down below, two boys enter the open field, their father trailing behind them. Caleb's breath catches in his throat.

It is them.

And their father—Caleb recognizes him instantly. He is the same man from his waking vision, the grieving father at the funeral.

His stomach twists.

Caleb rises and makes his way down the hill.

"Excuse me, sir." His voice is steady, but his pulse pounds.

The man looks up from his newspaper. "Yes?"

Caleb hesitates. "I don't mean to intrude, but... I don't think it's safe for your boys to play here. Cars speed by all the time. One of them could get hurt."

The man frowns. "We come here all the time, son. They're fine."

"Please," Caleb urges. "Would you mind having them play further from the road?"

Annoyance flashes in the father's eyes. "Are you trying to tell me how to raise my boys?"

"Just—please," Caleb begs. "Trust me."

The man sighs, exasperated, then calls his sons over. "Come on, Joseph. We'll play somewhere else."

Joseph hesitates, glancing at Caleb with a curious smile before scampering after his father. As they disappear down the path, Caleb lets out a slow breath.

Moments later, a garbage truck speeds past, its driver—distracted and disoriented—barely avoiding the road where Joseph had just stood.

Caleb's hands tremble as he reaches into his pocket, pulling out a prescription bottle. Clozaril, 100 mg. Antipsychotic.

He tosses it into a trash can and turns away.

Chapter 2

Caleb lies on his back on the psychiatrist's brilliant red couch, hands tucked beneath his head, eyes closed. He exhales slowly, as if sinking into the cushions beneath him.

"Every dream I have is lucid," he says. "I always realize that I'm dreaming... Every single time."

A quiet chuckle escapes his lips.

"What?"

The psychiatrist's voice comes from somewhere beyond his closed eyelids.

Caleb hesitates for a moment, then opens his eyes and turns his head slightly. "Something I just realized about my lucid dreams... I'm not sure what it means, though."

Doctor Francis sits in a sleek black leather chair, legs crossed, a black leather notebook balanced against his knee. His pen moves in short, steady strokes as he takes notes.

"And what's that?" the doctor prompts.

Caleb shifts his weight, his fingers lacing together behind his head. "Even though I always know I'm dreaming, I never take complete control of my dreams. My ability to alter my environment, to grant myself powers—it's always limited. And I can't help but wonder why. Maybe I'm afraid to take complete control, or maybe I just... can't." His brow furrows as he

considers the thought. “Maybe I’m subconsciously acknowledging that there’s no such thing as complete control.”

He hesitates again before adding, “It’s like I’m a living god in my dreams, but maybe even a living deity has restrictions. Maybe there are rules to reality that can’t be ignored.”

Doctor Francis tilts his head slightly. “Like what?”

Another pause. Caleb’s gaze flickers toward the ceiling as if searching for the right words.

“Like the fact that everything we visualize in our dreams, in our imaginations, in our mind’s eye—it’s all limited to what we already know and have experienced. Even when we’re dreaming, even when creativity feels limitless, it isn’t. Even when we lucid dream and shake off the restrictions of waking reality, we’re still bound by our own knowledge. Nothing is truly fictional, not entirely, because everything is based on something. Even the most vivid imagination is just composing from the preexisting.”

Doctor Francis taps his pen lightly against his notebook. “That’s interesting, Caleb. So you’re saying that your powers are limited in your lucid dreams because they’re still based on your imagination... which itself is reliant upon what you know. And you know nothing of being limitless or all-powerful.”

“Right,” Caleb murmurs. “Or of being fearless. I guess that’s part of the same thing. Fear always finds its way into my dreams, and I think... I think that fear is what limits me. Maybe the same can be said for reality.”

Doctor Francis studies him for a moment, then flips back a page in his notebook. “You were telling me last session about when this all started for you. That first dream.” A beat. “You mind talking to me about that again?”

Caleb exhales sharply, rubbing his temples. “I know you don’t believe me, Doctor Francis, but I don’t think it’s a dream. There’s no lucidity.” He turns to meet the psychiatrist’s gaze. “I think it’s a memory.”

Doctor Francis remains composed. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, Caleb. It’s that if I’m going to help you, we have to consider all the possibilities.” He leans forward slightly. “So tell me about the memory again.”

Caleb closes his eyes, the scene playing vividly in his mind. “It’s the first memory I have,” he begins. “I’m a child—maybe five years old. Mom and I are walking down the street in Chinatown...”

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The streets are alive with movement, voices rising and falling in the thick, bustling air. Caleb’s mother grips his hand tightly, pulling him along with urgency. She is anxious, disheveled, her dark eyes darting from one passerby to the next.

Vendors line the sidewalks, their voices calling out over the noise of the crowd. Caleb’s attention is drawn to a stand filled with brilliant, colorful trinkets, but his mother’s firm tug on his hand keeps him moving forward. Above them, in the branches of a nearby tree, a caterpillar completes its chrysalis. Caleb barely notices it as he’s dragged past.

They stop suddenly in front of a small store. The sign above the entrance is written in both Chinese and English:

"SHANGRI-LA: ANCIENT CHINESE MEDICINAL TEAS AND REMEDIES."

Without hesitation, his mother yanks him inside.

The moment the door opens, a bell rings—soft but resonant, carrying a tone that feels otherworldly, as if vibrating in the air long after the sound has ended.

Inside, the store is dimly lit, illuminated by deep red, glowing lights that cast flickering shadows against the walls. The scent of incense curls through the air, thick and sweet. Shelves upon shelves line the cramped space, each filled with aged texts, porcelain figurines, and countless jars of dried herbs and mysterious substances.

At the back of the store, one wall is different from the rest. Instead of shelves, it bears a mural—a detailed depiction of a brain, dotted with small stars. Each star is connected by a thin, deliberate line to a larger star positioned at the forehead.

A man emerges from behind the counter, stepping between two brilliantly red curtains. He is middle-aged, Chinese, dressed in a silk robe with a traditional silk cap. His long ponytail is elegantly woven, his expression perfectly calm. Without a word, he lifts a delicate porcelain cup to his lips, takes a slow sip of tea, then sets it down with a quiet clink.

He bows slightly. "How may I help you today, ma'am?"

Caleb's mother steps forward, her voice tight with desperation. "I need your assistance, sir. I was told you can cure conditions that Western medicine can only suppress. Is that true?"

The shopkeeper's expression remains placid. "In some cases, I can make things go away, ma'am. But I am prohibited from claiming to cure any ailments or afflictions." He folds his hands neatly before him. "It is always a case-by-case basis."

Caleb barely listens. The incense smoke curls around him as he drifts toward the back of the store. Something in the air—something unseen—is pulling him deeper inside.

Behind the red curtains, a small storage room lies shrouded in shadows. A red dragon figurine catches his eye on one of the lower shelves. He reaches for it, but in doing so, his hand knocks a small sack to the floor. It hits the ground with a muffled thud, spilling its contents—countless tiny, red-colored stars that scatter across the floor, shimmering like crushed metal.

Behind the fallen sack, a faint red glow pulses from deep within the shelf. Caleb's small fingers stretch into the space, searching for its source. When they close around something smooth and cool, he pulls it out.

A tin. So brilliantly red that it seems to glow.

As soon as he opens it, the bell from the front of the store rings again—except this time, it's different.

There is no bell in sight.

A figure emerges from an unseen doorway in the back. An old woman, blind, her milky-white eyes staring into nothing. She wears a silk robe similar to the shopkeeper's, and in her hands,

she carries a cane of twisted, gnarled wood. At the top of the cane is a carved brain filled with stars, each star connected by a line to a larger star in the front center of the brain, where the forehead would be.

Caleb stands frozen as she moves toward him. Without hesitation, she places her wrinkled fingers against his temples, leaning in, staring as though she can see him through her blindness.

Then she smiles. A toothless, knowing smile.

Reaching into the tin, she pulls out something strange—a twisted, fibrous root that pulses with a faint, white glow. She breaks a small piece from the end, releasing a soft flash of light, and places it gently in Caleb’s mouth.

He chews. Swallows. And smiles back.

A kiss presses against his forehead. And then—

“Caleb!”

His mother bursts through the curtains. Caleb stands alone, his hands empty, the floor swept clean.

His mother’s voice is sharp with irritation. “What did I tell you about wandering off?!”

She yanks him away, back into the store, back into the waking world.

But something has changed.

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Hours later, Caleb lies unconscious in the stark sterility of the hospital ICU, the rhythmic hiss of the respirator keeping time with the machines that sustain him. His mother sits beside him, her fingers wrapped around his limp hand, her shoulders trembling as silent sobs wrack her body.

A doctor stands at the foot of the bed, his expression weary, his voice heavy with the burden of delivering impossible news.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmurs, eyes downcast. “We don’t know what’s wrong with your son. We’ve run every test we can think of. There’s nothing else we can do.”

Then, a piercing alarm.

A shrill, unrelenting beep fills the room. Caleb's heartbeat flatlines.

Nurses and doctors rush in, moving with swift, trained efficiency. A defibrillator is wheeled into place. One of them calls out the charge. The first shock jolts Caleb’s body, lifting him slightly off the bed. No response. Another.

His mother screams from the doorway, clawing at the hospital staff holding her back, desperate to reach her son.

The medical team falls into a hush, exchanging looks of solemn defeat. The doctor exhales, long and heavy.

“I’m calling it. Time of death, 3:33 p.m.”

Caleb’s mother lets out a primal wail, her legs giving way beneath her as she collapses against the cold tile floor. A nurse kneels beside her, murmuring words meant to comfort, though they do nothing to mend the shattered world she now inhabits.

Inside the room, the doctor reaches toward the heart monitor, his fingers hovering over the wires, ready to disconnect them.

And then—

A single, faint beep.

Another.

The sound grows steadier, stronger.

The doctor steps back, eyes wide with disbelief.

“I don’t believe it...” he whispers.

Caleb’s mother, still trembling, turns her head toward the doorway into her son’s room. Her breath hitches as she sees him—sitting upright, eyes open, as though nothing has happened.

She staggers to her feet and rushes inside.

Caleb’s gaze meets hers, calm, steady. Something about him is different. It isn’t just the miracle of his sudden recovery—it’s his eyes. They shimmer, swirling with shifting hues—multicolored, like a kaleidoscope catching the light.

Beyond the window, unnoticed by all, a butterfly rests on the sill, its delicate wings fluttering softly.

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Back in the psychiatrists’ office, Dr. Francis leans back in his chair, fingers steepled as he studies Caleb from across the office. The soft hum of the fluorescent lights overhead casts long shadows across the desk between them.

“How can this be a memory,” the psychiatrist asks, his voice measured, “if you’re seeing it from multiple perspectives?”

Caleb exhales slowly, his fingers drumming against his knee.

“I don’t know, Doc.” He shakes his head. “But it is. I’m sure of it. I don’t remember anything before that day. It’s like...” He searches for the words. “Amnesia. Or maybe rebirth.”

Chapter 3

Steam curls in the air, thick and swirling, as Caleb stands beneath the steady spray of the shower. The heat envelops him, the water tracing lazy rivulets down his skin. He lets his eyes drift shut.

A flash of white light.

A girl's hand in his. The sunlit walkway of a high school campus stretches before him, her golden hair catching the breeze as she turns to smile at him.

Another flash—

A library. She sits across from him, eyes skimming a book before lifting to meet his. A soft, knowing smile plays at her lips. She puckers them in an air-kiss, her gaze warm, affectionate.

Another blinding flash—

Caleb inhales sharply, his eyes snapping open. The shower still runs, the steam curling around him like ghostly tendrils. He presses a hand to his temple, steadying himself.

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The clink of a spoon against ceramic echoes through the quiet kitchen as Caleb finishes his cereal. His aunt and uncle are in the living room, the television murmuring in the background. His uncle, seated in a wheelchair, laughs at something on the screen.

Caleb lifts the bowl, tipping the last remnants of milk and soggy flakes into his mouth before setting it in the sink. Grabbing his backpack from the chair, he slings it over his shoulder and steps toward the door.

Another day.

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The chemistry lab hums with the low buzz of conversation as students settle into their seats. At the center of the room, Mr. Harvey stands behind a lab table, his hands encased in disposable gloves.

On the counter before him: an innocuous stick of butter, a silver-colored metallic square, a butter knife, a white plastic bucket, a pair of tongs, and an electric water kettle. The kettle hisses, steam rising from its spout.

“Potassium,” Mr. Harvey begins, his tone both casual and knowing, “is one of the most abundant elements on Earth. You gardeners know it helps plants grow. You health nuts know it’s in bananas and avocados. But what’s really fascinating is how volatile it is in its purest form.”

He looks around the room, his lips twitching into a small grin.

“Like some of you, potassium doesn’t like being alone.”

Laughter ripples through the class. A few students throw telling glances at each other. A girl blushes.

Mr. Harvey smirks. “Now, now—don’t be jealous. Some elements have a stronger force of attraction. That very attraction leads to their instability.”

More giggles.

He picks up the soft piece of metal. “When isolated, potassium reacts... aggressively. It doesn’t want to be pure. It wants to combine. It wants to be something more.”

He puts the piece of potassium down before slicing off a small piece with the butter knife, then packs it carefully inside a ball of butter.

“This butter,” he explains, “will slow the reaction just long enough for it to be fully submerged in water before the potassium makes contact.”

A hush falls over the room as he lifts the butter-encased metal with the tongs.

He drops it into the bucket.

For a moment, nothing.

Then— A deep, concussive boom.

Water shoots up and out of the bucket, splashing onto the counter and spilling onto the floor. Gasps fill the air, followed by excited murmurs. Some students clap. Others laugh in amazement.

But Caleb’s attention drifts elsewhere.

Across the room, one student remains silent. Dustin.

His red-and-black dyed hair falls in loose strands over his forehead. He wears a camouflage jacket, his fingers drumming lightly against the lab table. Unlike the others, he doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t react.

He simply watches. Watches the bucket. Watches the water drip.

A slow, knowing grin curves at the corners of his mouth.

And then— He looks up. His gaze locks onto Caleb's.

And for a moment, Caleb isn't sure if it's curiosity or something darker flickering in Dustin's eyes.

A brilliant flash of white light.

The dim glow of a streetlamp illuminates the side of the school building, casting elongated shadows across the pavement. The sign on the door reads "**CHEMISTRY.**" The night is silent—until the sharp crack of glass breaking shatters the stillness. A heavy metal flashlight smashes through a windowpane, leaving a jagged hole. A hand, steady and methodical, reaches through the broken glass, carefully avoiding the sharp edges, and twists the handle from the inside.

Dustin moves swiftly. Small tools glint in his hands as he works the lock on the door. A few clicks, a twist, and the door creaks open. He slips inside, his breath slow and controlled. The flashlight beam dances over the darkened room, settling on a storage cabinet. Another lock, another quick, practiced maneuver—then a snap. The lock breaks.

Reaching inside, he rummages through the shelves until his fingers close around a metal canister. He pulls it out, turning it toward the light. The label stands stark against the metal:

PURE POTASSIUM

DANGER: HIGHLY FLAMMABLE.

Dustin smirks, gripping the canister tightly before disappearing into the night.

Another flash, and it's the next day. The front yard of a dilapidated house stands in sharp contrast to the neatly kept homes on either side. Weeds have overtaken the lawn, and a rusted fence leans tiredly against the earth. Dustin crouches in the dirt, his hands moving with quiet efficiency. He tears open a bag of beef jerky and drops a handful into a small bowl. Next to it, he places a much larger bowl, filling it with water from a battered plastic jug.

His next move is more deliberate. He pulls a rock toward him, its surface rough and jagged, and carefully binds a chunk of potassium to it using a tight wrap of wire. He checks his work, satisfied. Then, he waits.

A faint whistle cuts through the air. Dustin's eyes flick to the neighbor's yard. A small dog—a mutt with floppy ears and a thin frame—trots over from the other side of the fence, tail wagging, nose twitching. Trotting cautiously toward the jerky bowl, he sniffs once, then begins to eat.

Dustin exhales slowly, gripping the rock in his palm. He stands, pulls his arm back, and launches it into the water bowl.

The reaction is immediate. A violent explosion tears through the air, sending dirt and debris flying. The dog yelps in terror, bolting back toward the fence, a high-pitched cry of pain echoing through the yard.

Another flash of white light.

Caleb is back in the chemistry classroom, his eyes following the movement of Mr. Harvey as he locks a metal canister into the storage cabinet at the back of the lab. Caleb's gaze shifts back to the student across the room—Dustin. He's watching Mr. Harvey too, his stare intense, unreadable.

As the students shuffle from the lab into the adjacent classroom, Caleb hesitates. He moves toward Mr. Harvey's desk, clearing his throat.

"I know this might sound strange, Mr. Harvey, but some students might get some bad ideas watching an experiment like that."

The teacher looks up, his expression shifting to one of mild concern. "What do you mean?"

Caleb hesitates. "Not me, of course... but there are some students with... violent proclivities."

Mr. Harvey leans back in his chair, folding his hands together. "I hold onto the key to the storage cabinet. And as you know, that's behind a solid, locked door."

"I know," Caleb admits. "But some students are motivated and resourceful enough to overcome such impediments."

The teacher studies him. "Do you have someone in mind?"

Caleb's jaw tightens. "Yes. But I can't prove anything. I just have a bad... presentiment."

Mr. Harvey sighs. "I appreciate your concern, Caleb. I'll keep an eye out for anything suspicious, okay?"

Caleb nods, but the weight in his stomach doesn't lighten.

The bell rings, signaling the end of class. Students spill into the hallway, voices filling the space as they go their separate ways. Caleb steps out, eyes immediately locking onto Dustin, who's walking ahead.

Caleb quickens his pace.

"Hey, Dustin!" he calls, his voice cutting through the air.

Dustin turns, his expression darkening. "What?!"

"I know what you plan to do."

A few students slow their steps, sensing tension. Dustin blinks, his face carefully neutral. "What the hell are you talking about, weirdo?"

Caleb steps closer, lowering his voice. "Your neighbor's dog."

For the briefest moment, shock flickers in Dustin's eyes. Then he recovers, masking it with irritation. "I... I don't know what you're talking about, you psychopath." He scoffs, turning on his heel. "Leave me alone, loony tunes."

Caleb's temper flares. "Me? You're the psychopath!"

Dustin stops, spine stiffening. Slowly, he turns back. "What the fuck did you just say, crazy?"

"You're a pyromaniac," Caleb snaps. "You're violent. You're going to hurt that poor little dog."

The crowd around them thickens, eager to see the confrontation unfold. Dustin's expression twists with fury. He closes the distance between them, standing inches from Caleb's face.

“At least I’m not some sad little freak whose crazy mommy jumped off a bridge after she escaped from the loony bin.”

The words strike like a hammer. Caleb’s breath catches in his throat. His fists clench at his sides.

“That’s not true, asshole.”

Dustin sneers. “I’m the asshole? You’re the one everyone’s uncomfortable being around. You’re the crazy kid with no friends, the freak who thinks he can predict the future.”

Caleb’s heart pounds. “Shut up.”

Dustin laughs coldly. “Or what, pussy? Look around. Everyone here hates you. Especially the girls. They’re scared shitless of you.” He smirks. “You’re never going to get laid, you pathetic little loser.”

A teacher approaches, his voice sharp. “That’s enough, boys!”

Dustin ignores him, voice dripping with venom. “You’re going to die a sad little psycho, all alone in some asylum.”

Caleb snaps. His hands fly forward, shoving Dustin hard. Dustin hits the ground with a grunt. The teacher lunges between them, his palm pressing against Caleb’s chest.

“Come with me, Caleb!”

Dustin grins up at him, triumphant, making a shooing gesture with his hand. “Bye-bye, crazy.”

The teacher’s voice is firm. “Caleb! Now.”

Caleb hesitates, breathing hard, then turns and follows—unaware of Brittany watching, concern and intrigue in her eyes.

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Mrs. Blankenship sits behind her desk, fingers steepled. “You’ve been in here a little too often this year, Caleb.”

Caleb’s eyes remain downcast.

“One more incident like this, and I’ll have no choice but to suspend you again. And that could lead to expulsion. You have too much potential for that.”

Caleb swallows. “He instigated the fight.”

“According to Mr. Gonzalez and several students, you started it.”

“I just wanted to talk to him,” Caleb protests. “Then he got in my face. He made fun of my dead mother.” His voice wavers. “For Christ’s sake.”

Mrs. Blankenship sighs. “I’ll talk to Dustin. But you shoved him, Caleb. We can’t allow that.”

He exhales sharply. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What were you trying to accomplish, anyway?”

A long beat. Caleb hesitates, then says quietly, “I had good reason to believe he was planning an act of violence.”

Mrs. Blankenship leans forward. “What good reason?”

Caleb meets her gaze, debating. Finally, he looks away. “I... can’t say.”

“How is therapy going?”

Chapter 4

Caleb lies on the psychiatrist's brilliant red couch, his body sinking into the leather as if he's trying to disappear into it. Across from him, Doctor Francis sits, ever the picture of professionalism, taking notes with methodical precision.

"I want to talk a little bit more about your mother," the doctor says, his voice even, measured. "And that Chinatown... incident. If you don't mind."

Caleb exhales sharply, a smirk playing at the edge of his lips. "You're the doc, doc."

Doctor Francis doesn't return the smirk. "I did some digging since our last session." He glances briefly at his notepad before continuing. "Your mother died when you were six years old. Three months after you were checked into St. Mary's Medical Center for 'medically unexplained physical symptoms.' That part of your story checks out. But I couldn't find any record of you ever flat-lining."

Caleb's eyes darken. He shrugs, folding his arms across his chest. "That's the way I remember it. Maybe they left that part out because they didn't understand it. Doctors tend to be arrogant. They're uncomfortable admitting there are things beyond their understanding."

Doctor Francis allows a pause before responding. "Some doctors, perhaps. The best possess humility. An open mind." He sets his notepad aside, interlacing his fingers in his lap. "Did you

ever talk to your mother about this Chinatown memory? Or about your lucid dreams?”

Caleb shakes his head. “No. I didn’t get the chance.”

He hesitates for a moment before adding, “The first dream I ever had was about her, though. I dreamt that she had dreams like mine. My first dream was experiencing her lucid dream.”

His voice lowers. “A vicarious dream within a dream that becomes reality.”

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In a dream within his dream, Caleb is at his childhood home. His mother’s bedroom is chaos. Clothes lie scattered across the floor in careless heaps, tangled with other debris—empty beer bottles, crushed hard liquor containers, prescription bottles long since drained of their contents. A cheap clock radio plays a somber classical piece, the kind of music that hangs in the air like a ghost.

She lies on the bed, fully clothed, unmoving, save for the slow rise and fall of her chest.

And then—

She’s somewhere else.

A blank, white void. No walls, no ground, no sky. Just white.

She stands still for a moment, blinking, and suddenly, out of the nothingness, a university materializes before her. Cal Tech.

She’s inside before she has time to question how.

A woman stands at the front of a classroom, writing an intricate equation across a whiteboard, her wrist adorned with a bright blue beaded bracelet. She pauses, contemplating the symbols before circling her solution with a self-satisfied smile.

Caleb's mother claps.

The white void returns, except now, a child stands before her, the same bright blue bracelet encircling their small wrist. The child crouches, scooping something unseen into their hands—until a snowball forms, solid and cold.

A man and a woman materialize nearby. The child's laughter rings through the emptiness as she hurls the snowball, starting a playful battle.

Clap.

The scene changes again.

The same man and woman—now younger—in a bar. Flirting. Laughing. Drinking recklessly. She playfully shoves him, and he teases her with outstretched hands before she bolts toward the door, giggling. He tosses some cash on the bar and chases after her.

Outside, the night wraps around them in its intoxicating haze. The woman sprints ahead, still laughing, still oblivious.

She doesn't see the truck.

It's red. Brilliant red.

Caleb's mother, watching from above, throws out a hand as if to command time itself to stop.

It doesn't.

The truck barrels forward, inevitable, and she has only a fraction of a second to react. She dives from the void, slamming into the woman and shoving her clear. The impact was fated for the other woman, but was absorbed by his mother instead.

She gasps awake, jolting Caleb awake in turn.

-

Back in the doctor's office, Doctor Francis listens, his expression unreadable.

"That's interesting," he murmurs. "My records indicate that she did die in a pedestrian accident. Hit and run. Unsolved homicide. They never found the driver. The circumstances... why she was in the street... that remains unknown."

He turns a page in his notes. A brief flicker of emotion crosses his face.

"Mary Louise Holloway. Diagnosis: Paranoid Schizophrenia, Unspecified Type. Substance Use Disorder."

In his own mind's eye, Dr. Francis is on the streets of San Francisco watching Mary Louise Holloway stagger down the sidewalk, her hands clutching her head, fingers gripping at her tangled hair. She mumbles to herself, words lost in their own labyrinth.

Pedestrians give her a wide berth, stepping aside cautiously as she weaves past, bouncing off walls, off a trash can, off a pole.

At the corner, a man presses the pedestrian signal, watching as the red hand blinks: **Do not walk.**

She doesn't stop.

She tears past him, voice rising—a frantic burst of noise that makes him jump. His mouth opens to shout, but before the sound can escape, before he can tell her to stop—

The truck hits her.

Brilliant red.

The man claps a hand over his mouth as the vehicle speeds away.

-

Back in the psychiatrist's office, Doctor Francis leans forward slightly, his eyes unreadable. "It's possible you filled in the blanks of the circumstances of your mother's death in a heroic manner out of love for her, right?"

Caleb doesn't hear the question. His eyes are closed, his mind on his mother. And the aftermath.

-

He's back in his childhood home. A six-year-old boy sits on the front step, his small frame wrapped in flimsy pajamas. In his arms, he clutches a stuffed bear, worn and frayed from too many nights of squeezing it tight.

Tears streak his face.

Beside him, an ashtray overflows with cigarette butts. Empty beer bottles glint in the dim porch light.

Then—

Police lights. Red and blue paint the scene in alternating flashes. A uniformed officer and a woman from social services approach.

Caleb doesn't move.

He doesn't need them to tell him. He already knows.

The rescued woman—now lying on the pavement—turns and vomits. The man helps her up, throwing her arm over his shoulder as she regains her balance. His gaze flicks to Mary Louise, her lifeless body sprawled across the asphalt.

Then he hears sirens.

Panic flares in his eyes. His hand instinctively pats his coat pocket—checking for something. Something important.

Without a word, he turns and, with the woman still leaning heavily against him, disappears into the shadows of a nearby alley just as the police arrive.

-

Returning to the present, his mind reels. The question that Dr. Francis had asked him echoes into the front of his mind.

“How can I fill in the blanks,” Caleb says, his voice quiet but firm, “when I dreamt the circumstances?” He blinks, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

Doctor Francis doesn't respond immediately. Instead, he regards him with quiet scrutiny.

“How do you know that?” he asks finally. “About the man and the woman she saved? Was that in your dream too?”

Caleb nods. “Yes.” He exhales slowly. “And I’ve been seeing what’s coming ever since.”

Doctor Francis considers him. “So why don’t you go around saving people all the time?”

Caleb lets out a hollow laugh.

“I *do* save people,” he says. His expression darkens. “But they usually aren’t grateful. Because they don’t realize they’ve been saved. To them, it’s more like being accosted, because they never see what they avoided.” His voice turns bitter. “So *gratitude* is the last thing that they experience. They’re much more likely to be irritated. Or angry. Or assume that I’m nuts.”

Caleb closes his eyes, pressing his fingers against his forehead as if trying to contain a sudden, piercing headache.

“And I don’t always see things in time to intervene,” he admits. “Like with my uncle...”

The memory crashes over him.

-

A storm rages in the mountains. Rain lashes the steep hillside, turning the earth to slick, shifting mud. A crack forms at the base of the hill, deepening with each passing second.

Caleb’s uncle—much younger then—hikes along a narrow trail in the same treacherous terrain. His boots sink into the mud with every step. He has no idea what’s coming.

The crack widens. The ground beneath his feet gives way. In an instant, the hillside crumbles, taking him with it.

The image shifts—Caleb’s uncle, present day, confined to a wheelchair.

-

Back in the psychiatrist’s office, Caleb rubs his forehead, his voice tight with frustration.

“And even when I do know in time,” he says, “I’m the one who always gets into trouble. Or hurt. Or embarrassed.”

The past unfolds again.

-

A schoolyard. Four boys have cornered a younger, smaller boy, their voices cruel, their gestures taunting.

Caleb—twelve years old—runs up behind the ringleader and shoves him hard. The boy spins around and, with a sneer, pushes Caleb to the ground. The other three join in, kicking him, their attention no longer on the smaller boy—who takes the opportunity to escape.

Another memory, a short time later. Caleb—still twelve—stands before his teacher, saying something that makes her eyes go wide with fury. The classroom hushes. A few students whisper. Others snicker. The teacher storms over, yanks Caleb from behind his desk by the collar, and drags him out of the room.

Another.

Caleb, drenched, stands next to a community pool, still fully clothed in formal attire. A group of girls in bathing suits point at him, whispering, laughing.

And another.

He walks home, a heavy textbook in his hands, his backpack slung over one shoulder. Then—*splat*. The first egg hits him. Then another. He shields himself with the book, sprinting away as the laughter follows him down the street.

His voice is soaked in melancholy as he summarizes what it is to be the unsung savior:

“I put myself at risk in every possible way. I get beat up. I’ve been badly beaten many times. I get scolded and sent to detention. I get shamed and humiliated. I lose friends. People laugh at me and call me names. I just reinforce my loser, crazy-person reputation. It’s always been that way. I actually *am* the loser because I’ve *lost* everything.”

A tear slips down Caleb’s cheek. He keeps his eyes closed, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m sorry, Caleb,” Dr. Francis says gently. “That has to be hard.”

Caleb exhales. “You have no idea. And compounding the issue is the fact that the reliability of my dreams isn’t one hundred percent. Sometimes, I think it’s just fear or fantasy. What I dread may happen. Or what I want to happen. Psychology is a part of my dreams, just like everyone else’s, I imagine. But what choice do I have? I have to act if there’s the possibility of the things I see coming true. Because they have.” He lets out a hollow laugh. “I can’t just leave people in potential jeopardy. I have to take the risk. And trust me, I tend to pay the price one way or another. It’s a fucked-up catch-22 all the time. Excuse my French, doc.”

Dr. Francis gives a small nod. “You’re fine.”

Caleb swallows. “I went to a friend’s birthday party once...”

-

A backyard decorated for the occasion. Streamers flutter. Balloons bob in the breeze. Caleb sits with a group of boys around a table stacked with presents.

Everyone laughs, enjoying themselves. Everyone except him. His gaze locks onto a particular box wrapped in brilliant red paper.

Dread curls in his stomach.

The birthday boy reaches for it.

Panic surges through Caleb’s chest. Before he can think, he shoots up, lunging across the table and snatching the gift from the birthday boy’s hands. He turns and runs.

The birthday boy catches up, tackling him to the ground. They wrestle for the box, tearing at the wrapping paper—

A remote control car. Nothing more.

Laughter rings out around them. Caleb sits on the ground, breathless, humiliated, while the other boys shake their heads in disbelief.

He dreamt about that moment the night before it happened. In his dream, that same red-wrapped present holds a hidden bomb. And in that dream, he sets it off.

In reality, he only manages to destroy what little social standing he has left.

Self-fulfilling prophecy, he thinks bitterly.

Another memory.

A park. He sits at a picnic table with his aunt, eating lunch.

An elderly woman walks past, a small dog trotting beside her.

Caleb freezes. His heartbeat hammers in his ears.

The dream comes rushing back—

A small dog. A snake. A fatal bite.

He leaps from the table and runs after the woman, yelling for her to stop.

She turns, startled. Seeing a frantic boy sprinting toward her, she quickens her pace, trying to escape.

“Lilly!” he calls to his aunt, desperate.

She catches him by the shoulders, trying to calm him down, but he won’t stop. Tears blur his vision. He *can’t* let it happen.

His aunt takes one look at him, then at the retreating woman. Without another word, she takes off after her.

When she finally catches up, she speaks quickly, her voice low and urgent. The woman listens, nodding, glancing at Caleb.

Then she changes direction, walking away from the path she had been about to take.

Lilly continues forward, cautious.

And then— A rattlesnake, curled up on the pavement, its scales gleaming in the sun.

A family approaches from the other side.

Lilly raises her hand, calling out a warning.

They stop.

She turns back. Caleb stands there, watching.

Animal control comes later to remove the snake.

-

In the psychiatrist's office, Caleb's voice wavers.

"My aunt didn't know if she believed me," he admits, "or if she was just trying to make me feel better. But she ran after that woman anyway. And lo and behold—there was the snake."

Dr. Francis remains silent, watching him.

Caleb exhales, rubbing at his temples again.

"I never know if I'm crazy," he whispers. "Or if I'm right."

Doctor Francis finishes a note on one side of his black leather notebook, then glances at the other, reviewing his records.

FATHER: JACK HOLLOWAY. WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN.

He looks up at Caleb. "What about your father? Do you have any memory of him?"

A flood of images—indistinct but weighted with meaning—stirs in Caleb's mind.

His mother and father, Mary Louise and Jack, sit in an office, listening to a psychiatrist whose words have long since faded from memory. His mother cries, her hands resting protectively

on her pregnant stomach. Jack, sitting beside her, places a reassuring hand on her shoulder, his face lined with concern that runs deeper than he'll ever admit.

At home, Mary Louise sits at their kitchen table, an open pill bottle nearby, speaking softly—though her words blur into the void of recollection. Jack takes a swig from a beer, his expression distant, as if already half-gone.

And then—the night it all unravels. Jack carries a large suitcase toward the door. Mary Louise cries hysterically, trying to block his path. He pushes past her, not looking back as he walks out. She screams after him, her words broken and incomprehensible, then collapses to the floor. The front door remains wide open, her sobs echoing through the empty space.

Were these her memories?, Caleb wonders.

Finally responding, his voice is quiet but firm. “No, no memory. I never met him. I think my mom mentioned him once, not long before she died. She said he couldn’t handle her diagnosis. That he broke her heart. That he killed her.” He hesitates, then adds, “That she’d never be alive again. He left before I was born.”

Doctor Francis exhales slowly, rubbing his face as he absorbs Caleb’s words. “I’m sorry, Caleb.” A pause. Then, with a forced attempt at lightness, he says, “How’s school going?”

Caleb shrugs. “Pretty well, all things considered. My grades are good. I got accepted to Berkeley, like I told you before. If I don’t get thrown out, I might even graduate this year and actually go.”

Doctor Francis smiles. “That’s awesome. Just remind yourself to stay disciplined. Don’t get drawn into trouble, even if it means

not being able to help someone. If you don't graduate, you won't be in as good of a position to help people in the long run."

Caleb nods. "Right... probably good advice."

Doctor Francis studies him for a moment. "Anything else going on? Any love interest?"

Caleb closes his eyes.

A memory surfaces—Brittany.

She passes him in the school hallway, their eyes meeting, a shared smile lingering between them. Later, on the track during PE, he runs past her, then slows down, letting her catch up. She returns the gesture, falling in step beside him before sprinting ahead with a playful grin. He laughs, chasing after her, the two of them running together.

"There's this one girl..." he admits.

Doctor Francis leans forward. "Oh yeah? Tell me about her. Is she pretty?"

Caleb's lips part slightly, as if searching for the right words. "She's... breathtaking." He lets the word settle before continuing. "She moved here from Wisconsin at the beginning of the school year. She doesn't have many friends, so she hasn't been influenced by what people say about me. She's charming. Bright. Super sweet..." His voice lowers. "But I started talking to her for another reason, which I'm sure you can guess."

Doctor Francis nods. "You've had dreams about her?"

“Waking visions, usually. Starting with the first time I saw her. I *think* they’re about her, at least. It’s like I feel her in my heart during the visions, but I don’t actually see her in them.”

Doctor Francis studies him. “What are the visions of?”

Caleb’s stomach tightens. “A stalker. Someone dangerous...”

Flash. On a darkened street in San Francisco, a young woman passes by, oblivious to the silent presence following her. She ducks into a bar, greeting friends with a smile. He lingers outside, watching her, then turns and walks away.

Then another woman. And another.

A window view. A man watching a woman through binoculars as she moves inside her bedroom.

A computer screen. A bound woman, helpless.

A violent scene flickering across a television screen.

A woman sitting on the floor beside a bed, naked, her lip bleeding. Crumpled bills thrown at her feet.

A hand flexing, muscles tightening beneath inked skin. Tattoos of skulls, flames, guns, and knives. One in particular stands out—a skull in flames, a dagger piercing its crown.

Doctor Francis’ voice cuts through the images. “How do you know he’s dangerous?”

Caleb swallows. “The sense I get from the visions. His habits. The way he follows women. *How* he watches them, like a predator. The type of porn he watches. The movies he’s into. Something he did to a prostitute. His tattoos...” His voice grows

hoarse. “It’s like he’s working his way up to something. And I think it’s an assault on Brittany.”

Doctor Francis notes the distress tightening Caleb’s features. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Caleb admits. “I never see his face. And I’m afraid to act on it. I’m afraid to tell Brittany, too, because she doesn’t think I’m a freak yet. If I tell her and she freaks out, she might report me. And I can’t afford to get into any more trouble.”

Chapter 5

The next day, Caleb sits in the high school library, the quiet weight of detention settling around him. A few other students sit at separate tables, heads down. Mr. Walker, the older, kind-eyed teacher supervising detention, sits at a table with an open book, a folded paper sign in front of him that simply reads:

DETENTION.

Caleb meets his gaze briefly. The man gives him a small, understanding smile. Caleb nods in return, then turns his attention to the book on the table in front of him.

Ancient Prophecies and Prophesiers.

Opening the thick text, he flips through its pages until an illustration catches his eye—a stunning woman floating above a contingent of armor-clad warriors. A brilliant golden halo surrounds her head. Her hands, glowing with the same golden light, stretch before her as if guiding the soldiers below. Their armor shimmers with the same radiant energy.

At the bottom of the page, a single name is inscribed:

Cassandra, Princess of Troy.

“You interested in the Cassandra myth, Caleb?”

Caleb starts, not having heard Mr. Walker approach.

“I don’t really know it,” he admits. “But I’m interested in prophesiers.”

Mr. Walker smiles. “She’s one of the most famous.”

As Mr. Walker begins to tell the tale of Cassandra, Caleb closes his eyes, the teachers’ words coming to life in his mind.

-

Cassandra lies awake in her resplendent bedchamber, troubled. Clad in a luxurious silk dressing gown, she closes her eyes.

A blinding flash—

A terrifying horde of soldiers in black armor descends from the mountains, assembling in front of the gates of Troy. An enormous siege weapon takes form.

Flames erupt as the city burns.

Another flash—

Cassandra sits up, gasping. Without hesitation, she bolts from her room, running through the palace corridors, across the courtyard, and into the large barracks. Two guards open the heavy doors for her without question. She runs past rows of sleeping soldiers until she reaches the Trojan military captain’s chambers.

She shakes him awake.

Moments later, the Trojan army prepares for war.

Beyond the walls, the enemy sets their siege weapon in place. A massive soldier, torch in hand, prepares to light the pitch-covered projectile. He lets out a blood-curdling cry.

From the open Trojan gates, the army pours forth, charging.

The captain raises his spear, prepared to strike. Cassandra closes her eyes.

With inhuman force, the spear flies through the air, striking the enemy soldier square in the chest. The sheer impact sends him hurtling backward—straight into the siege weapon.

And in that moment, destiny shifts.

The torch slips from his grasp, tumbling into the barrel of pitch. An explosion erupts, sending flames roaring into the night, consuming the siege weapon in a hungry inferno. The blast hurls enemy soldiers from their feet, their cries lost in the roar of destruction. Some, their bodies engulfed in flame, run shrieking into the darkness. High above, the Trojan citizens lining the ramparts erupt in cheers, their voices rising in a chorus of ecstatic approval.

Far away, Cassandra stands on her balcony, bathed in daylight. On a distant mountaintop, Apollo watches her in silence. When night falls, he drifts into her bedchamber, his presence as inevitable as fate. She does not flinch at his approach. Instead, she reaches for his hand and leads him toward her bed.

The Trojan Horse looms, its wooden form towering against the sky. Cassandra pleads with the king, her voice urgent, but he only shakes his head, dismissing her warnings. The great structure is dragged through the gates, welcomed as a tribute to victory. As the wheels grind against the stone, Cassandra closes her eyes. In her mind, she sees the truth.

The horse—a gift of deception—will bring doom upon them all.

Fire flickers in the darkness, licking at the edges of the Trojan Horse. Yet as quickly as the flames rise, they vanish. A man clad in ornate, priestly robes stands motionless, his eyes closed. The fire obeys his silent command and extinguishes itself.

Night falls. From the belly of the horse, Greek soldiers pour forth, blades glinting in the moonlight. Troy, lulled into false security, is unprepared. Cassandra's vision comes to pass. She is taken, bound in chains, her warnings ignored until it is too late.

She is locked away in the hold of a ship, a spoil of war claimed by King Agamemnon. Chained to his bed, she lies beside him, silent in resignation.

Agamemnon growing tired of her constant muttering, Cassandra is gifted to his soldiers. The men, hungry and cruel, fall upon her. She is beaten, violated, discarded. Shackled to a wall, her body is left dirty and unkempt, her mind slipping between visions and reality. Her eyes dart wildly as she whispers words no one cares to understand. A soldier, half-awake, listens for a moment before rolling over—indifferent to her suffering. Barely surviving the trip back to Mycenae, she's enslaved to servitude in the palace.

"Some say Cassandra is more than a tragic figure," Mr. Walker continues. "She's a seer, a woman whose mind glimpses events before they come to pass. Her abilities, some claim, extend beyond mere foresight—she can alter reality itself. It is whispered that, from her chamber, she once grants Trojan warriors unnatural strength, turning the tide of battle in their favor.

“Legends speak of how she enchants Apollo before her powers fully emerge. After their union, she ceases to sleep, her mind forever burdened with knowledge of what is to come. Her greatest warning—the Trojan Horse—goes unheeded, sealing her people’s doom. In the aftermath, she is taken by Agamemnon to Mycenae, where her story splinters into competing versions.

“Some say Clytemnestra, consumed by jealousy, kills Cassandra herself, unable to bear the sight of her beauty and power. Others insist Agamemnon, at his wife’s urging, turns Cassandra over to his men again, relegating her to a permanent plaything, condemning her to unspeakable torment. She endures abuse beyond measure, her sanity eroding with each passing day. Unable to distinguish past from present, her prophecies from reality, she descends into madness. And yet, one soldier later confesses that the words she mutters—words they all ignore—come to pass. But her legend doesn’t end there.

“One tale tells of how, amid her captivity, she seizes an opportunity. A drunken soldier slumps beside her, his belt weighed down by a dagger. With trembling hands, she reaches for it, slits his throat, and takes his keys. The metal clinks softly as she unshackles herself. Gripping the bloodied blade, she creeps through the barracks and slips into the night.

“In one version, she disappears into the wild, a phantom of vengeance. It is said she lures men from the sea with her voice, as a siren would. They come ashore, drawn to the sight of her standing alone on the beach, her beauty undiminished by suffering. She leads them into a cave, seduces them, and when they succumb to sleep, she slits their throats. With bloodied

fingers, she traces patterns across her face, smiling as she exacts her revenge.

“In another version, Cassandra does not escape for long. Hunted by soldiers and dogs, she finds herself trapped at the edge of a towering cliff. Below, waves crash against jagged rocks, mist rising into the air. With her pursuers closing in, she does not hesitate. Rather than submit to further torment, she leaps into the abyss.”

Caleb leans forward, hanging on to Mr. Walker’s every word. “Wow,” he breathes. “So, what *really* happened to her?”

“It depends upon who you believe. The Myceneans preferred the latter version, the surviving Trojans the former.”

Caleb smirks. “I like the former one better. More poetic.”

Mr. Walker nods. “Perhaps. It fits nicely with the myths of the sirens. But the second one is... understandable. She chooses death over endless suffering.” His gaze grows distant. “I wonder if I would have the strength to do the same.”

He catches himself. Caleb is young—too young for such thoughts. Mr. Walker quickly adds, “But hers was an extreme situation. It’s nothing like anything you or I would ever face.”

Caleb studies the illustration of Cassandra in the book before him, tracing the golden halo encircling her head with a fingertip. “Do you think it’s all nonsense?”

Mr. Walker strokes his chin. “It’s improbable. But who’s to say how much of it is myth and how much is truth? Most legends have a kernel of reality buried beneath the exaggerations. The human mind is capable of so much more than we understand.”

Caleb nods in agreement.

Mr. Walker continues, “If someone were constantly experiencing visions, it would take a toll. Whether those visions came true or not, it would be overwhelming. They might mutter to themselves, lost in thought. They might neglect themselves, become outcasts. People would call them mad.”

A flicker of memory crosses Caleb’s face.

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A dirty, cluttered living room. A boy—Caleb, no older than six—stands in the doorway. His mother sits on the couch, rocking back and forth, whispering to herself. A map of San Francisco lies open on the table before her. Her finger traces the streets, over and over, as she murmurs words only she can understand.

-

Back in the library, Caleb stares into the distance, lost in thought.

Mr. Walker’s voice pulls him back. “In some cultures, those we dismiss as mad are revered. They become medicine men, oracles. Science likes to claim authority over truth, but it disproves itself constantly, uncovering new gaps in our knowledge. So who’s to say what’s real and what isn’t? Is measurability the sole criteria for demonstrating reality?”

Mr. Walker wanders over to a nearby aisle, scanning the shelves with a thoughtful gaze. After a few moments, he plucks a book from its place and carries it back, setting it atop another on the desk. The title on the cover reads: **The Oracle at Delphi.**

“Check this one out,” he says, his voice carrying a note of enthusiasm. “I think it would make an excellent topic for the mid-term assignment you’ll be receiving next week.”

Caleb looks up at him, curiosity flickering across his face. Mr. Walker winks, placing a single finger over his lips in a gesture of secrecy, as if sharing a private discovery.

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That evening, Caleb sits at his desk, the fading light from his bedroom window softly illuminating the pages of *The Oracle at Delphi*. His fingers trace over the text as he turns the pages, absorbing each word with quiet fascination.

One legend of the Oracle at Delphi purports that the oracles exist in a perpetual trance-like state, never fully awake—as if forever suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness.

It is claimed they never sleep, having summoned the power to recuperate while conscious.

Most are insane or fraudulent, but a select few are the genuine article—born with special abilities that they are taught to develop. The greatest among them actually generate the ability to alter their environments.

These most powerful oracles are said to reach the height of their powers through special dreams in which the gods visit and bless them as they sleep. Learning to control those powers is another matter, as the gaining of their greater abilities often ushers in a gradual loss of control, inviting their demise.

The words linger in Caleb’s mind long after he reads them, weaving through his thoughts like an invisible thread.

Chapter 6

Later that night, Caleb lies on his back in bed, his breath steady as he drifts into sleep. His dreams carry him far beyond the walls of his room.

A memory surfaces—a flashback of the Shangri-La store. An old woman with a cane emerges from the back room. Blind, with milky white eyes, she yet looks down upon young Caleb as though she can see him clearly; and not just see him, but see *into* him. She smiles as she peers at the little boy clutching the bright red tin in his hands.

As Caleb returns her stare, her eyes suddenly transform into those of a young girl.

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The setting changes.

The girl sits on the porch of a simple home in a rural Chinese mountain village, the air alive with the hum of nature. A butterfly, streaked with brilliant red, glides past her. She smiles, her laughter light as she chases after it.

“Don’t run too far this time, Hong!” her mother’s voice calls from behind.

Hong barely heeds the warning, her bare feet moving swiftly down a winding path, over a wooden bridge that spans a quiet river, and into the woods. The butterfly dances ahead, pausing on a stone as if waiting for her. She reaches out, but before her

fingers can touch its delicate wings, it lifts again, drawing her further toward the base of the mountain.

There, partially hidden by red-flowered vines, is a narrow opening in the rock wall. The butterfly disappears inside. Without hesitation, Hong follows.

Inside, the cavern slopes downward, and she slides along the rocky surface, landing in a small iridescent pool. She wades to the edge, climbing out to take in her surroundings.

Strange, exotic plants fill the cavern, their colors so vivid that they seem to belong to an alien realm. A waterfall cascades down the far wall, feeding the pool. Behind the waterfall the outlines of a structure move with the shimmering, falling water.

Laughing, she jumps through the water to find a small temple, similar to the one her father sometimes takes her to at the top of the Trail to the Clouds. But this one looks even more ancient.

Above the temple's entrance, an engraved symbol stands out—a brain spotted with small stars, each connected by a thin line to a larger star at the center of the forehead. Caleb realizes that the symbol is identical to the one on the mural in the Shangri-La store. The same symbol adorns the head of the old woman's cane. Her name, he now knows, is Hong.

Hong steps inside. The temple consists of a single square room, its walls overgrown with vines bearing glowing white flowers with brilliant red centers. In the middle of the space, a stone fountain bubbles with clear water. She approaches, standing on tiptoe to cup some in her hands, sipping it eagerly. The cool liquid soothes her throat, filling her with a sense of peace.

Wandering the room, she inhales the floral scent around her, giggling softly. In one corner, a young vine has just begun to bloom. Carefully, she plucks it from the earth, its glowing white roots intact, and slips it into her pocket.

As she exits the temple, the butterfly she chased sits atop a flower above the entrance, watching her go.

She roams the cavern, sampling the strange fruit that hangs from twisted branches. It gushes with a strange sour sweetness, soon inducing sedation. The urge to sleep fast overtakes her, and she curls up on a wooden mat woven from fibrous dead vines, settling into a deep slumber.

-

In the depths of her dreams, the cavern floods with water, lifting her mat, cradling her gently as it carries her through a hidden passage. Slowly, it sweeps her out of the cavern, the vines parting to reveal the open sky.

She awakens on the shore of a tranquil lake, a Buddhist temple standing in the distance. A monk watches her from a short distance away. His face is serene, kind. He extends his hand, and without hesitation, she takes it.

He leads her home.

Time passes in rapid flashes. Generations come and go, yet Hong ages only gradually. The villagers begin to notice. A woman, suspicious and resentful, whispers to others, stirring unease. Over time, their fear turns to malice.

Determined to expose Hong's unnatural longevity, the woman travels to the capital, bringing word to the Empress.

-

Hong awakens suddenly, a sense of foreboding pressing down on her chest. The night is unnervingly silent.

Then comes the distant thunder of hooves.

A contingent of mounted soldiers rides hard from the palace, making their way toward her village.

Realizing the danger, Hong gathers what little she can. Among her belongings, she tucks away the brilliantly red-colored tin containing the glowing root, the tin having been a present from her now deceased father, given to her to celebrate the new year. Slinging the pack over her shoulder, she creeps silently into her granddaughter's room and kisses her goodbye. Though her granddaughter is only twelve, Hong doesn't appear much older.

Stepping outside, she gives one last look to the simple clay and straw dwelling that's housed so many generations of her family, most of whom are now deceased. Then she flees.

Through the forests and rice fields she runs, her feet carrying her toward the bustling harbor. As night falls, she reaches the docks, where a ship stands moored, its ropes creaking in the salty breeze.

With a final glance at the world she is leaving behind, she slips aboard, hiding in the shadows of the cargo hold. The ship sets sail, its massive sails billowing as it carries her across the turbulent sea.

She awakens to a strange stillness. Crawling out from her hiding place, she emerges into the blinding light of day.

The ship has docked.

Before her, a new world stretches out—San Francisco, still young, still forming. Her journey has only just begun.

-

Caleb bolts upright in bed, his heart pounding. He throws off the covers, the dream still vivid in his mind, lingering like an echo of something real.

Chapter 7

At school the next day, Brittany pulls into the parking lot, stepping out of her car and heading toward the campus. Unbeknownst to her, a figure watches from the shadows.

Black boots. Dark jeans. A tattoo inked onto the back of his hand—a skull wreathed in flames, a dagger driven through its crown.

-

Soon thereafter, Mr. Walker stands at the front of the classroom, his students seated in a U-shape around him. On the whiteboard behind him, the assignment is written in bold letters:

MID-TERM ESSAY ASSIGNMENT: YOUR STRONGEST CONNECTION TO ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY. WHAT DOES THE MYTH MEAN TO YOU AND WHY?

He turns to the class, his eyes full of meaning.

“Let’s begin. I want no less than fifteen single-spaced pages on any of the ancient Greek legends from the textbook. And I would advise you to choose your subject carefully, because you’ll be graded based upon how well you’ve convinced me of its personal impact. The more the story truly resonates with and relates to you, the greater your ability to convince me. How does it connect to you and your life?”

His voice carries an air of finality as he continues, “We’ll be making a trip to the library tomorrow so that you can search for and check out a book or two on your chosen subjects.”

Dustin sits at the center of the U-shaped formation of desks, barely listening. His focus drifts leftward, settling on Brittany. She absentmindedly scribbles on her notepad, her blonde hair falling over her shoulder as she writes. Dustin’s gaze lingers—hopeful, yearning—until she glances up, not at him, but across the classroom at Caleb. The subtle shift in her expression, the glimmer in her eyes as she acknowledges Caleb’s presence, sends a cold pang through Dustin’s chest.

He follows her gaze. Caleb, seated directly across from Brittany, quickly looks away, flustered. A shy smile tugs at Brittany’s lips before she returns to her notes.

Mr. Walker’s voice fills the room once more. “For the final ten minutes of class, you are free to roam around and discuss the possibilities with your fellow classmates.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Brittany looks back at Caleb. This time, Caleb holds her gaze. A nervous smile plays at the corners of his lips. Brittany rises from her seat, making her way across the classroom, passing Mr. Walker on her way to Caleb’s desk.

“Hey, buddy,” she greets, her voice light and teasing.

Caleb swallows hard. “H... hey.”

She tilts her head. “You’re kinda cute when you’re nervous, you know that?”

Caleb exhales a short laugh. “It’s your fault.”

“Oh yeah?” She grins. “How’s that?”

“If you didn’t have to be so damn gorgeous, I might be able to control my nerves around you.”

She giggles, a faint blush creeping into her cheeks. “Whatever... You’re kind of a smoothie, aren’t you?”

Caleb smirks. “Oh yeah, that’s me.”

“You have every reason to be,” she says, studying him. “You’re intelligent and, dare I say, good looking.” She giggles again, but her voice softens as she adds, “All you have to do is get over this mysterious thing of yours. You ever gonna tell me about it?”

Caleb hesitates. “I’m sure you’ve heard about it from everyone else.”

“I’ve heard a few rumors. But people are narrow-minded, presumptuous, and judgmental. I want to hear it from you.”

He glances away for a moment before meeting her eyes again. “Someday, maybe... when I’m sure you know me well enough not to turn into one of the judgmental ones you speak of.”

She smiles flirtatiously. “I suppose I’ll have to keep trying, then.”

Her hand rests lightly on his. “You can trust me, Caleb.”

Across the room, Dustin sits rigidly at his desk, watching the exchange. Fury smolders in his eyes. His hand drifts to the pocket of his coat, fingers pressing against something inside. Caleb glances toward him, his expression shifting. Awareness flickers in his eyes. Dustin immediately looks away.

-

That night, Caleb sits at his desk, the glow of his laptop screen illuminating his face. His fingers tap rhythmically against the keys as he works on his assignment, his document titled: *The Predictive Powers of the Oracle at Delphi: Delusion or Extra-Sensory Perception?*

His phone vibrates beside him. A text from Brittany appears on the screen:

I'm having trouble choosing my legend.

Caleb smirks, typing back:
I'm sorry. How can I help?

A moment later, her response arrives:
What legend do you think applies to me most?

Hmmm... Is this a test?
Maybe 😏

He chuckles.
Well, then, that's easy: something with Aphrodite, obviously.

LOL. Because she's the Greek goddess of love and beauty?

Nah. Because she's the Greek goddess of pleasure and procreation.

🙄 *How dare you! LOL. A smoothie with a sense of humor. I'm in trouble!*

You have no idea.

*OK flirt. Get some rest. See you tomorrow.
Looking forward to it.*

😏

Caleb closes his laptop and makes his way to the bathroom. As he brushes his teeth, he gazes at his reflection, his eyes dark with thought.

Then, something strange happens.

His vision blurs, and suddenly, the mirror vibrates. A golden aura begins to glow around his head, growing brighter, pulsing with an otherworldly energy. A ringing sound—high-pitched and unrelenting—fills his ears, building, rising in intensity. It becomes unbearable. He squeezes his eyes shut, hands pressing against his ears in a desperate attempt to block it out.

Then—silence.

He opens his eyes. Everything is normal.

Exhaling sharply, he spits out his toothpaste and rinses his mouth before going to bed.

-

Caleb drifts into sleep, and soon, he's dreaming.

A lush forest surrounds him, pristine and untouched. Mist weaves through the canopy above, swirling in intricate patterns before sinking toward him, funneling uphill. He watches as it glows, turning into a luminous path leading forward.

With a small smile, he follows.

The path leads to a densely misted hilltop. The fog engulfs him, thick and impenetrable. He raises a hand in front of his face but can barely see it. Then, the mist begins to rise, forming into clouds. When he looks forward again, he finds himself overlooking a breathtaking river valley. Far in the distance, the

land ends in a sheer cliff, from which a radiant white light shines upward.

Suddenly, the sky darkens. The distant rumble of thunder reaches his ears. Looking up, he watches as the clouds condense, darkening further. Rain begins to fall—soft at first, then harder. Blue lightning strikes to the left. Red lightning to the right. The downpour becomes torrential.

A deep rumbling fills the air, different from the thunder. Caleb's heart pounds. The ground beneath him trembles.

The hill crumbles away.

He falls, sliding downward, helpless, into the river below.

Caleb swims toward the right shoreline, his muscles aching as he pulls himself out of the river. The rain pounds down, relentless, as he begins walking along the bank. Something to his right catches his attention—plant life, growing at an impossible speed. Shoots shoot up, leaves unfurl, and soon the vegetation thickens into an immense, impenetrable thicket lined with thorns.

Just as the growth ceases, a deep, guttural sound reaches his ears—a snort, a scrape of hooves against the earth. Caleb squints into the dense thorns, his pulse quickening as he makes out two glowing red eyes. A breath, heavy and hot, emerges as a crimson-tinged vapor before the monstrous bull bursts through the thicket and charges straight at him.

Caleb spins and runs, feet splashing through the mud before he throws himself back into the river. The icy water closes around him as he swims frantically to the other side. Gasping, he

clammers onto the left bank and turns back. The bull remains on the right side, staring at him with a furious intensity, pacing, mirroring his movements along the riverbank.

He has only just begun moving again when a low, menacing growl comes from his left. His breath hitches. The same dense, thorny growth lines the bank here as well, but within it, another set of glowing eyes—blue this time—watches him from the shadows. The rumble turns into a roar, raw and deafening, before an enormous blue bear explodes from the thicket, charging toward him.

Caleb has no choice. He plunges back into the river, wading deeper, heart hammering as both beasts prowl the banks on either side. With each step he takes, they follow—relentless.

Trapped.

The rain continues to pour, and the river's current, once manageable, begins to quicken. It tugs at his legs, pulling stronger, faster. Caleb's stomach clenches as he realizes he's being swept toward the cliff's edge. Below, the white light burns brighter, growing, expanding.

Panic surges through him. He fights against the current, arms slicing through the water, but he's powerless against its force. The river seizes him, dragging him helplessly toward the edge—

And then he goes over.

Blinding white light consumes him.

-

Caleb wakes with a gasp, coughing, his hands pressing against damp sand. Disoriented, he sits up, blinking away the glare of the light. Before him, looming and ancient, stands a temple—the same temple from his dream, the one he saw when the Chinese woman was a child. His gaze lifts to the engraving at its pinnacle: a brain dotted with small stars, each connected by thin lines to a larger star at the forehead.

Beyond the immediate shoreline, there is nothing—only endless light encased in mist.

Slowly, Caleb rises to his feet and approaches the temple's massive doors. He presses his hands against them, pushing.

They won't budge.

He tries again, shoving with all his strength, but the doors refuse to move.

Frustration flares—but then—understanding dawns.

A look of recognition flickers across his face. He exhales, stepping back, and smiles.

With a slow, deliberate wave of his hand, the doors swing open—without him touching them.

Inside, an immense library stretches before him, its towering shelves fading into the distance. A brilliant red carpet lines the center aisle. To his right, a massive sign reads **FICTION**. To the left, **NON-FICTION**. The ground-level stained glass windows cast colorful patterns onto the floor. And at the farthest end of the library, where the shelves meet the back wall, is the same familiar stary brain engraving, the **FICTION** and **NON-FICTION** aisles coming together, with one word looming over it:

TRUTH.

The books lining that wall glow, radiating pure white light.

Caleb steps forward, his footsteps silent against the carpet. As he walks, he reaches out and waves a hand toward the shelves. Books lift themselves, fly toward him, and enter his mind. He absorbs them effortlessly, their knowledge flooding through him, his head pulsing with a white glow.

Faster and faster he moves, laughing as more books stream toward him, knowledge surging through his veins—until suddenly, one strikes his head and falls to the floor.

It ignites on impact.

Caleb's laughter dies. He stares at the burning book, his stomach twisting. Then, from deep within the library, a low rumbling sound begins.

It grows.

The shelves tremble. The books begin to shake, dislodging one by one. And then, all at once, they fly at him—hard, fast, ablaze.

Caleb waves his hands, deflecting them at first, but they come faster and harder. He turns and runs, sprinting down the aisle toward the back wall, toward the symbol beneath the word

TRUTH.

As he runs, he glimpses the stained glass windows on either side of him. Each window depicts legendary wars from religious texts. Through the right-side windows, the great red bull appears, ramming the glass, matching his pace. On the left, the massive blue bear does the same.

The beasts slam into the glass harder, cracking it again and again, the fractures spreading. They're breaking through.

Caleb's eyes lock on the etching at the end of the library—the brain, the stars, the lines connecting them. He pushes forward, sprinting as books pelt him, their flames searing his skin.

The small stars within the engraving begin to glow. Their light pulses, then shoots down the lines into the larger star at the forehead. It grows brighter—blindingly so.

Behind him, the beasts shatter the windows.

They charge.

Caleb reaches the engraving and, with a final desperate motion, waves his hand at the glowing star.

It crumbles.

A fissure splits through the stone, revealing an opening just large enough for him to dive through. The creatures lunge—

And he's through.

Blinding white light swallows everything.

Chapter 8

Caleb jolts awake with a scream.

His chest heaves, his body drenched in sweat. He sits upright in bed, heart pounding as his room trembles. The walls shake. The bed vibrates.

An earthquake?

He forces himself to breathe—inhale, exhale. Slowly, the shaking subsides. The tremors stop.

His bedroom door bursts open. His aunt, wide-eyed and alarmed, rushes to his side, taking a seat on the bed and grabbing his arm.

“Caleb, are you okay, sweetie?!”

He struggles to steady his breath. “Yeah... yeah, Auntie. I’m okay.”

“That was some earthquake, huh?” she says, her voice still laced with concern.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “Some earthquake.”

She reaches out, pressing a hand to his forehead. “You’re covered in sweat. Are you sure you’re alright?”

His thoughts are too far out there. He can’t share them with her.

“Yeah,” Caleb says. “It just scared me.”

She studies him for a moment before nodding. “Okay. I think it’s over. Hopefully, there won’t be any aftershocks.”

She smiles at him, though the worry remains evident in her eyes. “Try to get some more rest.”

“I will, Auntie.”

She kisses his forehead, then leaves the room. Oddly, the spot where she kissed him is sore, as though something has tunneled through his forehead into his brain, and is nesting there.

Caleb lies back down, rubbing the sore spot while staring at the ceiling, his body tense. The terror hasn’t left him.

Hours pass. He tosses and turns, glancing at the clock. **3:33 a.m.**
Time stretches, minutes bleeding into hours. **7:00 a.m.**

The alarm blares.

Caleb sits up, his gaze drawn to a book resting on the very edge of the windowsill. His breathing slows.

The book... it seems to vibrate slightly.

He blinks. Tunnel vision sets in as he focuses, watching as the book quivers, then shifts—just a fraction, but enough.

His stomach twists. His pulse spikes.

Closing his eyes, he forces the fear away.

When he opens them, the book is exactly where it’s been.

Shaking his head, Caleb gets out of bed and enters the bathroom. As the door closes behind him, the book slips from the sill and hits the floor.

A short time later, Caleb sits at the kitchen table, eating breakfast. The small house is quiet except for the murmuring television in the living room, where his aunt and wheelchair-bound uncle sit. His aunt, Lilly, flips rapidly through the pages of the morning newspaper.

“How are you feeling today, sweetie?” she asks, her voice warm.

“Fine, surprisingly...”

She looks up from the paper. “Why surprisingly?”

Caleb hesitates before answering. “Because I didn’t sleep at all after the... earthquake.”

Aunt Lilly frowns. “I’m sorry, honey. You must be exhausted.”

“No, not really. That’s the strange part. I feel as energetic as ever.”

Lilly peers over the paper, studying him. “That *is* strange...”

Noticing her suspicion, Caleb narrows his eyes. “What?”

“You’re still taking your meds, I hope?”

He smiles, lying convincingly. “Yes, of course, Auntie. Why?”

She nods, satisfied. “Well, I just know how much you hate them, and they can make you drowsy, that’s all.”

“I got over all that, I promise.”

“I know, I just worry about you, that’s all. The curse of love.” She winks at him.

Caleb softens. "I love you too, Auntie."

A moment passes in comfortable silence before Aunt Lilly speaks again, flipping another page. "Speaking of strange, there's no mention of last night's earthquake in the newspaper. It happened early enough that it should have made the press."

"Maybe it's on the news." She turns to Caleb's uncle. "Do you mind if I check, George?"

"Have at it, sweetheart."

She grabs the remote control from George's armrest and begins flipping through the channels, but her frustration quickly becomes evident.

"I still haven't figured out how to operate this newfangled remote since they supposedly upgraded everything last month. And I can't remember which channel I used to watch for news. I stopped watching. Too depressing." She turns to Caleb. "Do you happen to remember, sweetie?"

"I'm not sure..."

As she continues struggling with the remote, accidentally flipping to the last channel and opening the settings menu, her exasperation grows. Meanwhile, Caleb's gaze locks onto the television screen. His eyes narrow, focus intensifying, as if something inside him is activating.

Lilly finally finds the channel menu and starts scanning. At that moment, Caleb's vision tunnels into the screen. For a moment he thinks that he can see the components of the TV behind their encasement. Then the image on the television begins to

pixelate. Suddenly, the local news comes on. His vision returns to normal.

“That’s strange,” Lilly mutters, staring at the screen. “I didn’t find the station... Damn screwy thing.”

Caleb stares in shock. He did that. He has no idea how, but he *willed* the channel to change. He sits frozen for a moment, trying to process it, before turning back to his plate and continuing to eat, though his hands tremble slightly.

Maybe I’m still asleep, he thinks.

On the screen, a reporter touches her earpiece, listening to incoming information. “Just in: Very early this morning in the Sunset District, several residents near Robert Louis Stevenson Elementary School report experiencing earthquake-like tremors around 3:30 a.m. However, neither the National Earthquake Information Center nor the U.S. Geological Survey has reported any seismic activity anywhere in the San Francisco area. As of yet, the cause of the reported tremors remains unknown. Fortunately, no one was injured, and only minor property damage has been reported.” The reporter turns to her co-anchor. “A good mystery is always a good thing so long as no one was hurt, right, John?”

“Right you are, Anna.”

Caleb goes rigid. The glass of milk in his hand nearly slips from his grasp. He hastily chugs the remainder, some of it dribbling down his chin and onto his shirt. Without another word, he grabs his backpack, slings it over his shoulder, and places his dishes in the sink.

“Have a good day, Auntie, Uncle!” he calls over his shoulder, his voice tense.

“You too!” they reply in unison as he hurries out the door.

Behind him, the television drones on. “In international news, the war in Syria escalates again today as local rebels fighting the Assad regime take the small town of—”

-

Sitting in English class a couple of hours later, Caleb’s eyes drift toward Brittany. She leans over her desk, taking notes, and for a brief moment, his gaze lingers on her cleavage before flickering to the front of the room.

Mr. Walker stands at the whiteboard, listing Greek mythological figures and the legends associated with them. He speaks as he writes, though Caleb barely hears the words.

“Today we’ll begin diving into perhaps the two most famous works of Ancient Greek literature and their legendary figures: Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.”

Caleb’s eyes shift to the books in Mr. Walker’s hand. A sudden tunnel vision effect takes over, drawing his focus closer and closer to *The Iliad* until the world around him blurs. A faint snap echoes in his mind as he peers into the book. Then, clarity returns.

He smiles. “Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Walker, but what if we’ve read it already?”

The teacher turns, intrigued. “You’ve read this already, Caleb?”

“Yes, sir. Well... sort of.”

Mr. Walker's brow furrows. "What does that mean?"

Caleb hesitates. "Let's just say I know it."

"But you didn't read it?"

"I... absorbed it. Like osmosis."

Laughter erupts across the classroom. Some students chuckle genuinely, while others mock him. Dustin and Brittany, however, remain silent—one watching him with malice, the other with curiosity.

Mr. Walker, his concern barely veiled, gives Caleb a measured look. "Right... that sounds like a neat trick. You'll have to tell me about it sometime."

Another round of laughter ripples through the room, whispers passing between students.

Mr. Walker clears his throat, redirecting the lesson. "Anyway... *The Iliad* is, as I'm sure many of you know, concerned with the Trojan War..."

Caleb's gaze shifts from Mr. Walker to Brittany, who sits hunched over her notebook, scribbling furiously. He admires her—or rather, a particular aspect of her. She always seems to be working so diligently, her earnestness making her even hotter.

She's even more gorgeous when she's focused like that.

His vision tunnels, narrowing on the way her shirt clings to her frame, on the subtle movement of fabric revealing just a little more than before. Then, something strange happens. The fabric of her shirt seems to stretch downward, an unnatural shift that makes his breath catch. More and more of her is revealed—but

before the illusion can continue, Brittany stiffens. As if sensing something is amiss, she yanks at her shirt and looks up.

Caleb jerks his gaze away, feigning interest in Mr. Walker's lecture. The teacher drones on, his words a meaningless hum as he writes notes on the board. Caleb pretends to listen, but his eyes flick to the clock. **11:10 AM.** Mr. Walker fills the left third of the board before moving to the center. Caleb's vision tunnels again, honing in on the completed notes. A silent snapshot echoes in his mind.

Another glance at the clock. His perception wavers. Time begins to accelerate. At first, the change is barely noticeable, but soon it speeds up. Mr. Walker's movements blur, his speech a rapid murmur as he fills the board from left to right, erases, then starts again. Each completed section triggers another mental snapshot. The world moves too fast, too erratic.

Across the room, Brittany watches him. Her eyes are wide, filled with an unsettling mix of fear and curiosity.

From her perspective, Caleb looks frozen. He barely blinks, barely breathes. When he does move, it's sluggish—like time itself has thickened around him. He sits like that for what feels like ages.

Then, suddenly, his head turns toward her.

Slowly.

Too slowly.

The moment their eyes meet, Caleb snaps back to real-time. His chest tightens as he forces a smile, but Brittany recoils, turning away—as if she's seen something she isn't ready to understand.

A sharp pang strikes Caleb’s stomach. He glances at the clock again. **11:55 AM.**

The bell rings, and students hurry from the room. Only Brittany and Dustin remain. Dustin lingers, watching Brittany as she sits staring at her notebook, her face flushed crimson. Caleb hesitates, then approaches her cautiously.

“You just going to hang out here then?” he asks, trying to lighten the mood.

Brittany swallows. “I... I’ll talk to you later, Caleb.”

The words hit like a quiet dismissal. Caleb hesitates, then nods solemnly and leaves the room. As he steps into the hall, he catches Dustin watching him, his gaze dark with something unspoken.

-

Outside, the school hallway bustles with movement as students filter toward the communal lunch pavilion. Caleb walks among them, but he feels their eyes on him.

Some new rumor about me must be circulating, he thinks. Maybe someone saw me altering reality, and didn’t know what to make of it, and told everyone I was psychotically tripping...

Some watch him out of curiosity, others—like Dustin—watch with intent. Brittany follows from a distance, her expression unreadable, though her unease is palpable.

Lockers bang shut as students grab their lunches. Caleb pulls a paper bag from his own locker and makes his way to the

pavilion. Dustin hovers on the periphery, fingering a lighter in his pocket, his gaze never straying far from Caleb.

Caleb sits alone at a table, scanning the crowd for Brittany. She's somewhere in the sea of students, but he can't see her. Instead, he locks eyes with Dustin.

A flash of white light.

In his mind, he sees Dustin move behind a pillar, small firecrackers in hand. One by one, they land near Caleb's table. The first makes him jump. The second has him scrambling from his seat. The third triggers a yell, and the fourth lands on his lunch, setting it ablaze. Laughter ripples through the crowd—a chorus of cruel amusement. Mortification burns in Caleb's gut.

Another flash.

Reality reasserts itself. Dustin shifts ever so slightly, as if preparing to move. Caleb knows what's coming.

He closes his eyes.

Dustin reaches into his pocket. The first firecracker is in his hand. A spark. A small explosion.

A scream of pain.

Caleb's eyes snap open. He watches as Dustin shoots out from behind the pillar, clutching his injured hand, and bolts toward the bathrooms. A grin twitches at Caleb's lips—but it falters when he sees Brittany staring at him. She isn't watching Dustin—she's watching *him*. Trying to understand. Trying to connect the dots.

Most of the students have scattered, wary of the explosion, but Brittany remains still. Caleb approaches her. She doesn't move, doesn't back away.

But her eyes hold something close to fear.

"Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Brittany hesitates, then says, "I don't know... but I think you do."

Caleb stiffens. "What do you mean?"

She glances toward the bathrooms where Dustin fled. "Did you have something to do with that, somehow?"

"I..." He meets her eyes, searching for words. "I don't know what to say, Brittany."

Her expression hardens. "Well, when you do, let me know."

She turns on her heel and walks away, putting distance between them. Caleb watches her go, a dull ache settling in his chest. He's not sure what just happened. Not really. But Brittany isn't the only one searching for answers.

Chapter 9

That night, sleep eludes him. He tosses and turns, glancing at the clock each time he rolls over. **1:11 AM**. Then **2:22**. Then **3:33**. Frustrated, he sits up and walks to his bookshelf. His fingers trace the spines until they find last year's yearbook.

He flips through the pages, searching for Brittany's picture. When he finds it, his breath catches. He stares, drawn in, consumed.

A flash of white light.

In his mind, he sees Brittany in a yellow hoodie, leaving school, getting into her car. Then—black boots, heavy against pavement. A pickup truck, old and rusted, following her home. The tattooed hand gripping the wheel. The stalker.

More flashes.

Brittany arriving at her house. A figure creeping behind her. A cloth damp with chemicals. A struggle. A scream. Darkness.

A dimly lit basement. Brittany bound to a bench, gagged. Footsteps descending creaking stairs. Laughter—cruel, taunting. A hand reaching out, touching her, tearing fabric. Her muffled screams.

More darkness. Then the woods. A grave half-dug. The stalker, shrouded in black, tossing a shovel aside. Brittany's lifeless body falling into the pit. Her face—pale, frozen in terror.

Caleb gasps, snapping back to reality. He's still staring at her picture, his chest tight with emotion. He reaches out, brushing a finger over the image—his touch gentle, reverent.

Then, another flash.

A street sign. A house. *Her* house.

He knows her address.

Without hesitation, he throws on warmer clothes, grabs his keys, and slips out of his room.

-

The house stands before him, dimly lit in the early morning gloom. From his parked car, Caleb scans the quiet street, watching, waiting. The radio plays softly. The clock reads **4:44 AM**. He exhales and leans back. Time blurs.

When he looks again, the clock reads **6:06 AM**.

A light flickers on in an upstairs room. Brittany appears, stretching, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She walks out of view.

Caleb's focus shifts to the flowers on her windowsill—wilted, lifeless. His vision tunnels. The petals unfurl, colors deepening, as if reversing time itself.

She's safe. For now.

Caleb turns the key in the ignition, and his car rumbles to life. As he pulls away from the curb, Brittany appears at the window, her gaze scanning the street. She leans forward, eyes narrowing as she watches the car disappear into the distance. Something about it makes her suspicious. As she straightens, her attention

shifts, landing on the flowers that have been left behind. Cautiously, she reaches out, brushing her fingers against the delicate petals before leaning in to take a deep breath, inhaling their scent.

-

Just after noon the same day, the school courtyard buzzes with the usual lunchtime activity. Students gather around the communal pavilion, chatting in small clusters. Caleb spots Brittany sitting alone on the rock wall, her yellow hoodie standing out against the muted tones of the school grounds. Their eyes meet, and without hesitation, he starts toward her.

“You mind if I join you?” he asks, pausing beside her.

She hesitates, uncertainty flickering across her face. “Sure.”

He sits down, pulling out his sack lunch.

“You finally going to tell me what the hell is going on with you?” Brittany asks, watching him carefully.

Caleb exhales slowly. “I don’t want you to think I’m crazy.”

She smirks. “I already think you’re crazy, Caleb, so you might as well tell me.”

He gives a small, nervous chuckle. “Okay... but please don’t run away.”

“I can’t make any promises,” she says, “but I’ll try.”

He swallows, his voice lowering. “I see things before they happen.”

Brittany’s brow furrows. “What kinds of things?”

“Bad things, mostly. I think I’m supposed to stop them.” He hesitates, shifting uneasily. “I’m more sure of that than ever now because... I think...”

He trails off, searching her face, unsure if he should continue.

“What?” she presses. “What is it? You can say it.”

He takes a deep breath. “For now, all I feel like I can tell you—because I have to—is that I think you’re in very serious danger.”

Brittany stiffens. “From what?”

“Not me!” he says quickly.

“Okay... then what?”

“Who,” he corrects. “Someone is stalking you. And they mean to abduct you.”

A flicker of terror crosses her face.

“I am really sorry, Brittany. The last thing I want to do is scare you, but it’s better than letting it happen.”

Brittany bolts upright, grabbing her things. Her hands tremble as she clutches her bag, her gaze darting around as if expecting danger to leap out from the shadows.

“Please, Brittany,” Caleb pleads, watching her retreat. “You have to believe me. I would never upset you unless I thought it was absolutely necessary.”

She turns, hurrying away.

“I think it might happen today!” Caleb calls after her. “Please, just this once, let me follow you home to make sure you’re safe.”

She spins around, her face flushed with panic and anger. “Stay the fuck away from me, Caleb!”

A few students nearby snicker, whispering among themselves. Caleb lowers his head, sinking back onto the rock wall, his eyes stinging as he watches her disappear.

Chapter 10

The school courtyard empties as the bell rings. Students pour out of classrooms, heading toward the front entrance. Caleb's eyes find Brittany across the courtyard. She's closer to the main exit, a broad semi-circle staircase leading to the main parking lot, and when she notices him watching, she turns sharply, hurrying down the steps. Caleb follows, keeping his distance, his steps quick but measured.

Shit, she thinks that I'M the stalker! His heart nearly implodes.

In the parking lot, students move toward their cars or linger in conversation. Brittany is among the first to descend the steps. A man stands just outside the lot, dressed head to toe in black—except for a yellow jacket with “CAMPUS SECURITY” printed on the back. As Brittany reaches her car, the man turns and walks away, disappearing down the street.

Caleb reaches the steps just as Brittany opens her car door. She glances up, sees him, and immediately jumps inside, starting the engine. His stomach clenches as his gaze flicks to the street. A beat-up pickup truck rolls into view, stopping at the curb—the same truck from his vision. It sits idle for a few moments—until Brittany pulls out of the lot. Then it follows.

Heart pounding, Caleb leaps down the steps, dodging students and ignoring their protests as he sprints toward his car. He barely registers the startled yells as he tears out of the lot, swerving around obstacles, weaving through traffic, going halfway up the sidewalk to avoid a delivery truck.

-

Speeding down the street, Caleb's eyes lock on the intersection ahead. The light turns yellow. His vision tunnels. A flash—

Green. He flies through it. Another flash of white light.

A blaring horn snaps him back. A semi barrels toward him. Caleb yanks the wheel, narrowly avoiding a collision. He accelerates, but the next intersection is clogged with a fresh accident—cars piled up in a confused mess. No time. He veers back onto the sidewalk.

Ahead, a woman pushes a stroller. Caleb's breath catches. Another flash—

The stroller's brakes engage. The woman frowns, bending to inspect them. Caleb's car shoots past, barely missing her.

With renewed determination, he presses down on the accelerator.

-

Brittany reaches her front door, keys in hand. Footsteps pound behind her. She turns just as a figure lunges forward, dressed all in black. A ski mask conceals his face. In one hand, he holds a damp rag.

She screams.

Before he can reach her, something slams into him with incredible force. He flies past her, crashing into the side of the house with a sickening thud. Brittany's breath comes in ragged gasps as she stares down at the unmoving body.

The stalker lies crumpled on the ground, unconscious.

Brittany's breath catches as she looks up. Caleb stands in the driveway near the back of her car, a good twenty feet away. One of his arms is stretched out in front of him, his palm facing her, his eyes wide with amazement.

He's sweating and breathing heavily, his face contorted in a grimace of pain. His hands fly to his head, gripping it as if something inside is splitting apart. Slowly, he stumbles toward her. Brittany remains frozen in shock, staring at him, trying to process what she's just seen.

"How the... What the... How the fuck, Caleb?" Her voice barely makes it past her lips.

Caleb's expression tightens. "Call the police."

She swallows hard. "This... Is this the guy you warned me about? Did you... push him?"

"Please, Brittany. Call the cops."

"But—"

"Tell them he works at your school."

Her mind struggles to catch up. "He does? Who is he?"

"Tell them he ran at you and slipped and fell into the wall."

"I don't understand how—"

Caleb turns away, his tone urgent. "Please, Brittany, just do it."

A ripple of fear courses through her. "What if he wakes up?"

“He won’t,” Caleb says, his voice calm, certain. “He’ll be unconscious for a while. Trust me.”

Without another word, he runs to his car, which idles at an odd angle, half-hanging over the curb. He hesitates just long enough to glance back at her, offering a small, uneasy smile before getting in and driving off.

Brittany stares down at the unconscious man, still bewildered. She looks around, but no one else has seen what happened. Trembling, she pulls out her phone and dials.

-

Later that night, Caleb lies in bed, staring at the ceiling. He turns onto his side and checks the clock—**1:23 a.m.** With a sigh, he grabs his phone from the nightstand and turns it on.

A message from Brittany appears.

Brittany: *"Thank you, thank you, thank you. I don't know how to repay you. I have no idea what's going on with you, and I'm still freaked out by the whole thing, of course, but I'm SO sorry for not believing you and for the cruelty of my words and actions. Please forgive me!!!"*

Caleb: *"Don't worry about it. I'm just happy I could help. And I don't blame you for not believing me. I wouldn't have believed me either if I were you. I don't believe it myself. It's unbelievable."*

Brittany: *"I hope you'll forgive me and try to explain it all to me. I owe you a BIG one!"*

Caleb: *"One date and we'll be even 😊."*

Brittany: *"I think it's worth two! 😊😊"*

Caleb: *"I'll take it! Did the police say anything?"*

Brittany: *"They took my statement, told me they may need to bring me into the station later, and took the guy away. That's pretty much it."*

Caleb: *"OK."*

Brittany: *"Talk to you tomorrow!"*

Caleb: *"I look forward to it, as always."*

Caleb turns off his phone and places it back on the nightstand. His hand drifts toward a small photo near his clock. He's cut it out of the yearbook. It's of Brittany. He stares at it, his thoughts spinning.

In a flash, he sees something—something impossible, yet so vivid it feels real.

Brittany and Caleb, sitting on the steps of their school, kissing. Laughing together over Italian food in a dimly lit restaurant, wine glasses clinking between them.

Rolling across the bed in a hotel room, the sunset casting golden light through the window, tropical waters glimmering in the distance.

Sitting in a packed auditorium at UC Berkeley, fingers intertwined as they listen to a professor lecture.

Watching the sunrise on a beach, a fire crackling beside them, Caleb lowering to one knee, a ring in his hands.

Brittany, lying in a hospital bed, holding their newborn child.

The images flicker away, leaving him breathless. His eyes well with tears.

Snapping back to reality, he moves to his desk, opens his laptop, and starts typing. The clock beside him jumps forward in bursts—2:00 a.m., 3:00, 4:00, 5:55.

The ringing of the phone cuts through the silence. Caleb stops typing, turning instead toward the window, watching as the first hints of sunrise paint the horizon.

A soft voice breaks the quiet. “Caleb?”

He turns to see Aunt Lilly standing in the doorway.

“Good morning, Auntie.”

She gives him a kind smile. “Good morning, sweetie. What time did you get up?”

He hesitates. “I... I’ve been up for a while.”

Her brow creases. “Why? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says, brushing it off. “My sleep’s just been a bit... erratic lately.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry, honey. So... your school just called. It’s been canceled for the day. Apparently, someone who works there has been arrested in connection with some local crimes. The staff is being questioned, and the grounds are being searched.”

A long pause stretches between them.

“Hmmm,” Caleb says, utterly unconcerned. “Okay.”

Aunt Lilly studies him, her suspicion barely concealed. “You didn’t know anything about this, did you?”

“No, Auntie,” he answers smoothly.

She doesn’t push. “Okay. Well... I’m going to get ready for work. Call me if you need anything today.”

“I will.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

She lingers a moment, then walks away. Caleb turns back toward the window, watching as the first raindrops begin to fall.

Chapter 11

The sound of the doorbell rings through the house.

Caleb rises from where he's been assisting his uncle, stretching and massaging his arms. He walks to the door and opens it.

Brittany stands there in the pouring rain—no umbrella, no protection from the downpour. She's soaking wet, her hair plastered to her face. Tears streak down her cheeks.

She doesn't say a word. Caleb steps aside, making room for her to enter.

Dripping onto the tile, she stands motionless, just staring into his eyes. A shiver runs through her. Then, without hesitation, she leans in and presses her lips to his. A soft kiss—hesitant, searching.

She pulls back slightly, meeting his gaze. Then, with more certainty, she kisses him again.

Caleb freezes for only a second before his hands move to her hips, returning the kiss.

Her voice is barely above a whisper. "Take me to your room."

Caleb smiles and takes Brittany's hand, leading her up the stairs. In the living room, his uncle watches them with quiet satisfaction before turning on the television.

-

A short time later, Brittany and Caleb lie naked in bed, their bodies partially covered by the sheets. Brittany rests her head on Caleb's chest, the top of her head nestled beneath his chin as he gently strokes her hair.

"Tell me more," she murmurs.

Caleb exhales, his fingers still weaving through her hair. "I've had lucid dreams for as long as I can remember," he begins. "And trouble for just as long. At first, I thought nothing of it, but then my dreams started blending into reality. That's when things got complicated. Relationships, my first job—every aspect of my life. Sometimes, though, those complications have a silver lining. Sometimes, they're even for the best."

-

Years earlier, Caleb sits in a dimly lit room across from a psychic. The small space is decorated with mystical imagery—paintings, sculptures, mirrors, and artifacts that hint at magic. Incense smoke curls through the air, hovering over the round table where Caleb listens to the woman explain her craft.

Demonstrating her knowledge and technique, her face shifts through various expressions as she mimics the 'tells' people unconsciously give away. Her hands move fluidly as she coaches him, illustrating her points with exaggerated gestures, informing him as to how to extract the information needed to con the customer.

Sometime later, an older woman sits across the table from the same psychic mentor, her face flushed with emotion, her eyes locked in deep anticipation. When the psychic finally delivers her verdict, the woman breaks down, sobbing. The psychic

reaches across the table, taking her hand in a show of sympathy. Caleb sits in the corner, his expression hard, his head shaking almost imperceptibly.

Next, a middle-aged man sits across from the psychic, gripping a picture in his hands. He listens, his initial concern fading into a tentative smile before giving way to a full grin. Meanwhile, Caleb watches, his features dark with anger.

His voice echoes in his mind, recounting the experience.

“I’m fascinated by prophecies and seers ever since I learned it’s possible to glimpse the future. Not everyone believes it, though—and I don’t blame them. I work for a fraud once—one of those con artists people assume all psychics are. She teaches me how to read people, how to ask the right questions to trigger their tells, and how to feed them just enough information to keep them hooked. The trick is to be specific enough to sound truthful but vague enough for them to fill in the blanks themselves. She makes a living off the gullible and the grieving.

The longer I stay, the more it eats away at me. Until finally, I have to act.”

He takes a deep breath, remembering the moment everything changes. “It all starts, like most of my problems, with a dream. But this one isn’t about the future—it’s about the past.”

-

In his dream, Caleb sees a family gather around their dining table—a father, mother, and a little girl no older than four. The table is covered in food, the parents laughing at something their

daughter says. She beams, delighted by their amusement. Her father dishes food onto her plate, the atmosphere warm, loving.

A sign in the center of the table reads: *Happy 4th of July.*

Moments later, flashes of multicolored light reflect off the sign. The girl turns toward the front door, her smile widening. More bursts of light flicker through the windows. She jumps up and down, clapping her hands, tugging at her father's arm, pleading to go outside. Amused, her parents give in. As they move toward the door, the mother grabs a large box of fireworks.

Outside, the neighborhood cul-de-sac is alive with celebration. Families light small fireworks, children run around with sparklers, their laughter ringing through the night. The scent of grilled hamburgers and hot dogs lingers in the air as adults sip beer and chat amongst themselves.

Later, the mother tucks her daughter into bed, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead before retreating downstairs to the den, where her husband sits watching television. She finishes a glass of wine and curls up beside him. Within minutes, both drift into sleep.

In the little girl's room, the fireworks outside continue, their dazzling colors spilling through the half-drawn blinds. Stirred by the light, she climbs out of bed and peeks outside. In the distance, beyond the neighborhood, a grand fireworks display illuminates the sky, much bigger than the one on her street. Her eyes widen in wonder.

Without hesitation, she pulls on a coat and quietly slips out the front door, leaving her sleeping parents behind.

A small, dirty car sits idling on the side of the road, its back bumper caved in. Inside, a woman sobs, her fingers gripping a photograph of another little girl. The vehicle is packed with clothes and garbage—the telltale signs of someone living in their car.

The young girl passes by, drawn to the fireworks. The woman, noticing her, steps out of the vehicle. At first, the girl recoils, sensing something is wrong. But the woman speaks softly, her voice trembling with emotion. The girl hesitates, then points toward the fireworks. The woman nods, smiling, and holds out her hand.

After another moment's hesitation, the girl takes it.

The woman leads her to the car, opens the passenger-side door, clears away the clutter, fastens the seatbelt around the girl, and shuts the door.

Caleb's voice returns, filled with grim certainty.

“This family is picture-perfect—the kind you'd see in a commercial. They have it all—the love, the warmth, the stability. But then their daughter wakes up and sees something bigger, brighter. She wanders outside, completely innocent. And she walks straight into the arms of someone who isn't.”

-

Years later, an older version of the girl's mother enters the psychic's office. Caleb, sitting quietly in the corner, recognizes her instantly.

She speaks with the psychic, growing more distressed with every word. Eventually, she breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably.

Caleb watches, sorrow settling into his bones before it curdles into anger.

As the woman leaves, he follows her outside, catching up just before she reaches her car. He speaks gently, carefully. She listens, eyes widening. Then, suddenly, she grabs his hands, her desperation giving way to hope. Without warning, she throws her arms around him, embracing him tightly.

Tears stream down her face as she reaches into her purse and offers him money. He refuses. Instead, she kisses his cheek, smiling through her tears, before climbing into her car and driving away.

Inside, the psychic fumes. Her face reddens as she gestures angrily, scolding him for interfering. Without a word, she shoves a wad of cash into his hand and points toward the door. Caleb collects his belongings and walks out.

Months later, the psychic opens an envelope addressed to *The Young Psychic*. Inside is a neatly folded letter. The words **Thank You** are written in bold ink. Ten crisp hundred-dollar bills fall into her lap.

She hesitates, staring at the money. Then, stuffing it into her pocket, she glances toward the window. Outside, a *For Lease* sign hangs in the glass, swaying slightly in the wind.

-

“The day after I’d had the dream about her abduction, the abducted girl’s mother comes in to see my boss for a reading,” Caleb explains to Brittany. “She’s older, but I recognize her face immediately from my dream the night before. She pays my boss,

who puts on her show, pretending to see visions. Of course, she has no clue where the child is, so instead, she offers the woman something she thinks she'll accept: closure.

"She tells her that her daughter had been frightened by the fireworks, had run away, and had been hit by a car. The driver, panicked, put her in the trunk and buried her.

"The woman bursts into tears, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably. When she leaves, I follow her outside. I tell her about my dream—every detail, even things she hasn't told my boss about the night her daughter disappeared. I tell her not to believe my boss's story—that I think her daughter is still alive. I even write down the license plate number, as I recall it from the dream.

"She tries to pay me, but I refuse. She's ecstatic. She hugs and kisses me and drives away.

"When I come back inside, my boss is furious. She questions me, demanding to know what I've told the woman. When I answer honestly, she explodes, berating me. Who do I think I am? How could I give this woman false hope after all these years?

"I try to explain, but she won't hear it. She fires me on the spot.

"Later, I have a dream that my former boss receives a letter addressed to me. It's from that woman, thanking me for helping her find her daughter. Inside is a thousand dollars in cash, with a promise that she'll come thank me in person as soon as she has the chance.

"And you know what my boss does? She destroys the letter, pockets the money, and promptly vacates the property."

-

Caleb lies in bed, Brittany resting against his bare chest, tracing soft patterns along his skin with her fingers.

“Wow,” she murmurs. “That’s quite a story.”

“My aunt and uncle don’t know what to make of any of this either,” he says. “They don’t know the whole story—I don’t think they’d understand, and I don’t want to worry them—but they’ve seen enough of my ability to predict events that sometimes I think they’re beginning to believe it’s real. Like with the rattlesnake thing at the park.” He sighs. “But I’m wrong often enough that they still doubt it. And they’re in touch with my therapist, too, who assures them that it’s just a matter of intelligence. That I’m knowledgeable enough to predict how things will unfold if I have enough information—like an investor predicting the market.”

She lifts her head to look at him. “That’s what your therapist says?”

“He says it’s my illness that makes me think I’m in touch with something else. That it’s a fixed and false belief. That my intelligence fills in the gaps, making my delusions appear legitimate.” He exhales. “It’s only a more convincing delusion than most. Nothing more.”

Brittany studies his face. “No one thinks it’s possible you’re not sick?”

“No one.”

“I don’t think you are.”

She sits up, cups his cheek, her gaze locked onto his. He tries to look away, but she won't let him.

"You're not sick," she whispers.

She leans in and kisses him softly before resting her head back against his chest.

"Any recent dreams?" she asks.

Caleb hesitates. "I would say you're going to think I'm crazy, but I guess we're past that now. For better or worse."

"What?"

"I haven't slept in a while."

She frowns. "Haven't slept well, or at all?"

"At all."

She props herself up on one elbow, concern flickering across her face. "For how long?"

"A week, I think."

Her concern deepens. "That's not possible, right? You should be dead..."

"I know. But it's true."

She doesn't respond right away, resting her head against his chest once more. Her fingers twitch against his ribs, her eyes shifting back and forth, betraying her apprehension.

Caleb speaks again after a moment of silence.

“I’m still having my waking visions. And their accuracy appears to have increased.” He pauses. “But it’s more than that. Ever since this one really odd dream I had... I come out of the visions feeling refreshed. Like I’ve actually slept.”

Brittany shifts against him. “That’s weird.”

“It’s like I’m in REM sleep while having them.”

A long pause. Then, timidly, he adds, “But that’s not even the weirdest part.”

Brittany sits up again, her face unreadable but her posture tense. “What’s the weirdest part?”

Caleb hesitates. “I don’t know if I should say.”

“Please.” She kisses his hand, her lips warm against his skin.

“You can trust me.”

He searches her face, uncertain.

“Well...” He exhales. “Things have gone beyond the mental, it seems.”

Something shifts in Brittany’s expression. Her attempt to conceal the fear creeping in isn’t entirely successful.

“See?” Caleb says. “I’m scaring you.” He shakes his head. “We’ll talk about it some other time.”

“No.” She grabs his hand. “Please, just tell me. I can take it, I swear. I *knew* you were too far away from that guy...”

He watches her for a moment before finally speaking.

“Yes. It seems that I’ve gained some... *abilities*.”

Brittany stiffens. Her fingers tense against his.

Before she can respond, her phone rings. She jumps, startled, then begins searching the floor for it. Finding it in her pants pocket, she answers.

“Hello?” She pauses. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

A beat.

“Just hanging out at a friend’s. Doing some studying.”

She winks at Caleb as she says this, though her smile is uneasy.

“Okay, I promise I’ll be home soon. Love you too, Mom.”

Brittany ends the call and glances around the floor, searching. Spotting what she’s looking for, she picks up her bra and slips it on.

“You have to go?” Caleb’s voice is quiet, reluctant.

“Yes, unfortunately.” She sighs, then smirks. “But not until you tell me about these abilities of yours.”

Caleb hesitates. “Some other time, I promise.”

She stretches out over him, pressing her lips to his in a lingering kiss before pulling back, holding his gaze expectantly.

He exhales, defeated. “Fine, you win.”

Brittany grins victoriously and gets up, slipping on her shoes before scanning the room again. “Give me the short version while I get dressed...” She frowns. “Where’s that damn thing?”

Caleb smirks. “Missing your shirt?”

She shoots him a look and smiles. “Very funny, Mr. Psychic. Where are you hiding it?”

“I’m not.” He nods toward the bed. “You flung it under there when we first came in.”

Brittany grins flirtatiously. “Is that your ability—knowing where girls fling their clothes during sex?”

She drops to her knees and peers under the bed. The shadows are thick, obscuring her view. Just as she reaches forward, her shirt begins to slide across the carpet toward her on its own.

Her breath hitches. She yelps, stumbling back and scrambling to her feet. The shirt rises, hovering at eye level.

Her pulse pounds as she backs away. It follows, floating through the air, tracking her movements until she’s pressed against the bedroom door.

Caleb’s voice is calm, matter-of-fact. “No, it’s a bit more than that.”

Brittany freezes, her eyes darting between him and the levitating shirt. Her fingers fumble blindly behind her until they find the doorknob. She twists it open in a single, swift motion, snatches the shirt from the air, and bolts.

Caleb doesn’t move. He remains on the bed, his eyes brimming with tears as he listens to the rapid thud of her footsteps down the stairs, the sharp clatter of her crossing the tile, the front door wrenching open and slamming shut. A moment later, the distant sound of her car starting, backing up too fast, and peeling down the street. He lies back, staring at the open bedroom door, feeling the fullness he’d had in heart voiding.

Chapter 12

Later that night, Caleb lies in bed, staring at the ceiling. His eyes are swollen, raw from crying. He turns onto his side, reaches for the photo of Brittany on his nightstand, and traces the edges with his thumb.

A flash of white light.

A vision:

Dark city streets, blurred figures moving through the night. Caleb runs, mumbling to himself, gripping his head. His gaze stays low, avoiding the faces around him.

He collides with a woman. Startled, he looks up and meets her eyes. A guttural yell tears from his throat—something incomprehensible, desperate. His breath comes in shallow gasps. His pace quickens. His hands claw at his hair, fingers tangling as he tugs at the strands.

Another flash.

A stark, sterile room. White padding lines the walls. Caleb sits on a simple metal-framed bed, rocking slightly, mumbling under his breath, shaking his head. His muttering escalates, growing frantic. He pounds his head against the wall, harder, harder—

A pair of hands reaches for him.

“Shhh...” A soothing voice. “It’s okay, Caleb. I’m here.”

Brittany.

She pulls him toward her, cradling him against her chest. Her warmth envelops him as she begins to hum—a gentle, peaceful melody. His body relaxes. His breathing slows. She rocks him, her voice a soft lull against the chaos.

Caleb wakes with a start. His chest rises and falls in uneven breaths. He sits up, runs a trembling hand through his hair, and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

He needs to move.

Pulling on his discarded clothes, he leaves his room and heads downstairs.

The living room is dimly lit by the flickering glow of the television. Caleb sinks onto the couch, wide awake despite the late hour. The clock above the screen reads 3:33 AM.

The murmur of voices drifts from the screen, a late-night news broadcast replaying.

“...fears of rising hostilities between the proxy forces of the U.S. and Russia today as Aleppo sees some of the bloodiest fighting in years. Reports suggest advanced military-grade weaponry, though both governments deny involvement...”

Caleb’s gaze fixes on the screen. His body tenses.

The world around him blurs.

Another flash of white light.

A university campus.

A young man in his early twenties walks toward a large cafeteria, his movements brisk but hesitant. Leaning against the wall outside, a suited man in his forties observes him, waiting.

The older man steps forward. “Good day, son. May I speak with you for a moment?”

The young man hesitates. “Um... sure.”

The older man gestures toward a nearby bench, and they sit.

The vision shifts.

A small, windowless classroom. The same young man now sits among a group of trainees, all in their twenties or early thirties, serious-faced, focused. An instructor at the front of the room scribbles technical schematics onto a whiteboard.

A different room. A waist-high table. A detailed map of the border between Iraq and Syria is spread across it. The young man studies it, tracing his fingers over the terrain, discussing strategies with his peers.

A practice session. The young man stands before a full-bodied training dummy, his instructor nearby. Without warning, he moves—swift, efficient. A hidden blade appears in his grip. He lunges, striking precisely, slashing at arterial points with chilling accuracy.

A final flash of white light.

Caleb gasps, yanked back into reality. His eyes dart to the television screen. A commercial for orthopedic products plays.

His pulse pounds in his ears.

-

A few hours later, the light of dawn leaks into the kitchen. Caleb sits at the breakfast table, staring at the bowl of Cheerios before him. The cereal has gone soggy, untouched. He stirs it absently with his spoon, watching the ripples in the milk.

Beyond the doorway, the television murmurs in the living room. His aunt and uncle sit together, absorbed in the morning news. Caleb remains still, his mind elsewhere.

Aunt Lilly studies Caleb's face, her expression soft with concern.

"You okay, Caleb? You look... sad and distant. Want me to make you some eggs? Or maybe some French toast?"

Caleb shakes his head, his voice subdued. "No thanks, Auntie. I appreciate it though."

She frowns, watching him carefully. "What's wrong, honey?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he plucks a single Cheerio from his bowl and rolls it between his fingers, examining it as if it might somehow hold the answers he's searching for. He comes near to crushing the disintegrating O, realizing that the most precise pressure is needed to roll it without collapsing it.

Aunt Lilly sighs. "Your uncle tells me you had a visitor yesterday, and that you were upstairs for quite a while. Did something happen? Want to talk about it?"

Caleb looks up briefly but gives a small shake of his head. "No thanks. I'm going to head out."

He pushes back his chair and grabs his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder.

"It's raining out," Aunt Lilly calls after him. "Please take an umbrella."

Caleb reaches into the closet by the front door and pulls one out before stepping outside.

-

The rain comes down in steady sheets as Caleb hurries toward his car. Just as he reaches for the door handle, headlights flood his rearview mirror. He turns to see a car pulling up behind him, blocking him in.

Brittany.

His heart leaps, though he tries to suppress his excitement. He steps away from his car as she rolls down her window, a smirk playing on her lips.

"What, you didn't know I was coming?" she teases.

"No... no clue."

Brittany tilts her head. "So you haven't reached omniscience yet, then?"

Caleb grins, unable to hide his joy.

"Well," she continues, "something to look forward to, I suppose. Or is that a curse?"

"Good question," he muses. "Probably a gift and a curse, like most things. Everything's a double-edged sword. Nothing cuts both ways. Greatest strength is greatest weakness. Light is meaningless without darkness. Good necessitates evil..."

She studies him, a glimmer of admiration in her eyes. “A philosopher to boot. Well, you need a ride, or can you fly to school?”

Chuckling, Caleb slips into the passenger seat.

Brittany raises an eyebrow. “You gonna lock your car?”

He hesitates, glancing from his car to her, silently seeking permission.

She sighs. “I suppose I have to get used to it. Go for it.”

Caleb focuses on his car. His vision tunnels, the world pixelates slightly. A soft click echoes from his vehicle as the door locks.

Brittany stares at him, only mildly disturbed this time. Without a word, she leans over and presses a quick kiss to his lips, then shifts the car into reverse and pulls out of the driveway.

The rain drums softly against the windshield as they drive toward school. The silence stretches between them, filled with exchanged glances and a mutual search for a comfortable rhythm.

“So...” Brittany finally breaks the silence. “What are the limits to this thing? To your... powers?”

Caleb exhales, turning his gaze to the rain-streaked window. “I’m not sure. This... telekinesis is a recent phenomenon. But from what I’ve gathered so far, it takes a lot of energy, focus, and emotional investment—especially if it involves more than just locking a car door. My heart usually pounds afterward, and I feel drained. Almost... disoriented.”

He falls quiet for a moment, lost in thought.

“And when it involves serious repercussions in the lives of others, it almost feels like...” He trails off, struggling to put the experience into words.

“Like what?” Brittany prompts.

He hesitates before answering. “Like... a divine mandate I can’t ignore. Like a responsibility. It sounds kinda lame, but it’s like that line: ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’ I feel like I’ve been chosen. Like... I’m trustworthy or something.”

Brittany glances at him. “Like something greater—what, God?—knows you won’t abuse the power?”

Caleb considers this. “I’m not sure I can abuse it. But I don’t care to try. I mean, I’ve played with it a bit...”

A brief flash of memory surges forward—Brittany’s shirt being tugged down in class, time bending and warping around him.

“But I don’t think I could ever use it against anyone... anyone undeserving, at least.” His voice drops lower. “Technically, I used it against that guy who was going to rape and murder you. But that was different. That was clearly justifiable.”

The car lurches as Brittany suddenly slams on the brakes. She pulls over to the side of the road, throwing it into park.

Her eyes are wide. “What?! Rape and murder me?!”

Caleb turns toward her. “That’s what I saw. It’s why I tried to get you to let me follow you home.”

Tears well in her eyes. Before he can say another word, she breaks down, shaking.

Caleb pulls her close, wrapping his arms around her. “It’s okay,” he murmurs. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

She clings to him for a moment before pulling back. Without hesitation, she kisses him—deep, desperate, grateful. Then she leans against the seat, breathing unevenly.

After a moment, she whispers, “Didn’t you say before that some of your visions don’t come true though? How did you know that one would?”

Caleb frowns, considering. “I feel like I have to act if there’s even a possibility of it coming true. But...”

“But what?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Now that you say that, I realize something. The dreams I’ve had in the past that I thought were prophetic—but didn’t come true—they all have something in common. They’re about me. My fears, desires, insecurities. My own psychological baggage.

“But when they involve other people—when they’re about avoiding tragedy and free of my own psychology—they always come true. It’s like... I’m channeling something. Like I’m given temporary power and the imperative to intervene when it really matters.”

Brittany stares at him, wide-eyed. “Fascinating. Truly.”

Caleb checks the time on his phone and sighs. “I still have to graduate high school, though, gorgeous.”

She lets out a small laugh, her expression relaxing. “Right. Okay.”

Smiling, she flicks on her turn signal and pulls back onto the road. As she drives, Caleb reaches over and gently wipes away the lingering tear streaks from her cheek. Brittany catches his hand, presses it to her face, then kisses it.

And in that moment, for the first time in a long while, she feels safe.

Caleb hesitates for a moment, glancing at Brittany. "I have a feeling... you mind if I turn on the radio for a minute?"

"Of course not," she says, settling back into her seat.

The radio clicks on, filling the car with the grim voice of a commentator. "...the city of Aleppo remains under siege today as the death toll skyrockets. Thirty-four confirmed civilian deaths in yesterday's fighting alone, with the dead and wounded still being pulled from the rubble as I speak."

A flash of white light consumes Caleb's vision.

-

A desk. A solemn, sterile office. The young man sits across from a CIA case officer, his features aged by experience. The officer's voice is steady, deliberate.

"You'll be sent in as a privately hired former intelligence officer offering weapons, equipment, supplies, and logistical support. If questioned by your FSA contacts, say you were hired and financed by a western consortium of 'freedom sympathizers' and 'democracy advocates.' Due to recent geopolitical fumbles and tensions, we no longer have an official presence there. That part is critical."

The young man nods. “Understood, sir.”

The officer’s gaze sharpens. “I cannot emphasize that point enough. Understand that if you’re killed or captured, we will be forced to disavow you. Our government has no official presence in the country. Even a strong hint of such a presence could trigger an international conflict—possibly even war.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do not, under any circumstances, directly engage the enemy. This is priority one. You must be willing to accept this risk. I’ll understand if you don’t.”

The young man exhales, then meets the officer’s gaze. “I accept the risk, sir.”

Another flash.

-

The safe house is small, the air thick with tension. Weapons and equipment cover the table in front of the same young American man. Communication devices line the lower walls. Above them, maps—worn and marked with circles and arrows, charting the latest troop movements—are taped in place. A dozen men, young and armed, stand around him, their faces set with quiet determination.

The door in the back of the house opens, and four women enter, each dressed in traditional Sunni attire. They carry trays of food and drink, placing them on a table in the corner. As they turn to leave, three of them keep their eyes down, moving swiftly and without a sound. The fourth, however, glances up. She’s young,

strikingly so, and as she passes, her gaze locks onto the young man's.

For a moment, the air between them shifts. A silent exchange—a fleeting glance, a slight smile. And then she's gone, disappearing into the kitchen.

The young man lingers, his thoughts briefly straying, until a voice pulls him back.

-

Caleb blinks hard, the vision dissolving. Rain taps steadily against the windshield. He rubs his chin, narrowing his eyes, trying to make sense of what he's just seen.

Brittany reaches over and turns down the radio. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. But it has to do with the war in Syria and our involvement there, which was officially downgraded not too long ago, as I'm sure you're aware."

She shakes her head. "I haven't been following it, honestly. Too depressing. You think you're supposed to intervene somehow? In Syria?!"

Caleb lets out a breath. "I don't know... I can't just fly off to Syria. I couldn't gain entry even if I wanted to. Maybe I'm supposed to go to the CIA or something, but to do what..?"

"The CIA? Seriously?"

"Well, I'm having visions of a U.S. spy who's involved there, and, like I said, it's not like I can intervene from thousands of miles away, so maybe I'm supposed to help him by flying to Virginia or getting a message to them..."

Brittany hesitates. “Are you sure? Maybe you can intervene from thousands of miles away. I can’t believe I’m saying this because this all still seems completely surreal, for obvious reasons, like I’m going to wake up at any moment or something...”

Caleb chuckles, interrupting her thought.

“What?” she asks.

“Oh, you know, the whole ‘how can you ever really know you’re not dreaming’ philosophical conundrum. Sorry, what were you saying?”

“What was I saying..? Oh, I was saying maybe you’re only beginning to learn what you can do. Maybe you’re only starting to develop your capacity. Maybe by the time you need to intervene, when you understand this vision, you will be able to act from that far away.”

He considers it. “Maybe...”

“Speaking of maybes, maybe that whole ‘if you believe it, you can achieve it,’ manifest-your-reality thing is what’s most important.”

Caleb’s eyes sharpen. “Like the quantum physics enigma, where you can actually influence physical reality with your observations and thoughts?”

“I was thinking more like ‘confidence is king’; like you create your own limits with your fears and uncertainties, but sure, that too...”

“They may be the same thing.”

She tilts her head. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe the extent to which I, and perhaps others as well—perhaps everyone eventually—can affect physical reality is based on the extent to which we believe we can.”

Brittany lets out a breath, staring at him. “Like this is the next stage in human evolution? Like you’re the first X-Man? The first mutation that grants the advantage because you actually believe you can alter reality? Like self-mutation?”

Caleb grins. “That’s an interesting thought.”

His grin widens. “Or a real-life Jedi.”

“The Star Wars thing?”

“Yes, the Star Wars thing. One force of energy binding everything and connecting all beings that some can learn to tap into and harness. It seems like it fits, and it’s clearly a spiritual, metaphysical concept. And if these abilities fit anything, certainly it must be something metaphysical—something that has always been there and always will be; something beyond space and time. Something that a select few are spiritually sanctioned to wield.”

The car slows, stopping at a red light near a covered bus stop. Caleb’s gaze drifts outside. An older woman, moving gingerly, collapses her umbrella before easing onto the bench, setting her purse beside her. As she peers into her purse, her umbrella slips from where she had rested it, falling unnoticed to the ground.

Behind them, the public transit bus approaches. The woman looks up, noticing its arrival, and reaches for her umbrella. Her fingers grasp at nothing but air.

Caleb's vision sharpens. The edges of his perception narrow. The handle of the umbrella lifts slightly off the ground and nudges into the woman's grasp. She clutches it without hesitation, unaware of anything unusual.

Brittany sees it. She turns slowly, her expression shifting, studying Caleb as if seeing him for the first time.

She shakes her head, still trying to process what she just witnessed. "It's so hard to believe... You really did shove that guy from like twenty feet away."

Caleb nods, his expression calm but reflective. "Your attacker? Yeah... Not only did I feel that divine mandate I mentioned, but I was also very emotionally invested, which made me incredibly focused. The combination of the two brought this force out of me in spades."

She looks at him, her eyes moistening. Without thinking, she reaches over and takes his hand, holding it tightly.

As the traffic light turns green, they drive off. The quiet hum of the car fills the space between them. They pass a church, its white steeple piercing the sky. Brittany's gaze lingers on it for a long moment before something shifts in her expression—something clicks into place.

"Or maybe you're the Second Coming," she murmurs.

Caleb lets out an uneasy scoff. "What, of Christ?"

"I mean... I don't know how to make sense of what I'm seeing," she admits. "The movies and the Bible are the only lenses through which I can comprehend this thing."

Caleb turns to her, his face reddening slightly with discomfort.

“You’re philosophical, moral, and very spiritual, like Christ was,” she continues. “And it’s not a stretch to call what you do miraculous.”

He exhales sharply, rubbing his face, fingers threading through his hair in an effort to relieve tension.

“Maybe only a few people in history are born with abilities like yours,” Brittany muses, as though speaking more to herself now. “Maybe they’re meant to be saviors of mankind... to save humanity from itself, or from an impending apocalypse. Like God has given you the ability to intervene for the sake of mankind’s survival.”

Caleb lets out a breathy laugh. “Maybe from the right, potent enough stimulus, the mind plugs all the way into the Meta Mind, the individual consciousness becomes fully realized within the Universal Consciousness, and they thereafter may rearrange the construct of reality—like seeing and mentally manipulating The Matrix, or using the Force in Star Wars. In my case, it was some mysterious plant handed to me by an... apparition in a tea shop in Chinatown.”

“A what?” Brittan laughs uneasily. “A Chinese ghost gave you these powers?”

“Maybe that’s just one of the ways to plug all the way in,” Caleb continues, not having heard the question. “Or maybe it’s the only way... maybe we’re being tested by something, by God, by Total Consciousness, and I was given a glimpse to see what I’d do with it... Or maybe God considers me a... *candidate*, or something.”

“A candidate? A candidate for what?”

“For a type of leadership role. For leading humankind into the next stage of its evolution. Like a *prophet*,” he adds with an uneasy chortle. “But I like the X-Men and Jedi references more.”

Brittany grins. “Of course. Less pressure.”

Her words seem lighthearted, but something flickers across Caleb’s face—pain, a hint of hurt he tries to mask. She notices.

“Not that I blame you,” she adds quickly. “Or think you couldn’t handle the pressure. I certainly wouldn’t want that responsibility. That’s all I’m saying. But maybe that’s part of why you’re chosen—because you’re resilient. Because your suffering makes you patient, compassionate... and gives you perspective on plight.”

Chapter 13

The next day at school, Caleb and Brittany walk hand-in-hand along the covered walkway toward the lockers. Across the courtyard, Dustin stands watching them, his expression dark with jealousy.

Without hesitation, he storms toward them.

Before Caleb even has time to react, Dustin shoves him hard.

The impact sends Caleb crashing into the lockers, his body hitting metal with a violent clang before he crumples to the ground.

Brittany gasps. “What the fuck, Dustin!”

Caleb groans, already pushing himself up. “It’s okay, Brittany.”

Both she and Dustin stare down at him, caught off guard by his reaction. Instead of anger, Caleb’s face holds something else—sadness, or concern. Even... *understanding*.

He sits up, resting his back against the lockers, and looks at Dustin with something resembling compassion.

“I get it, man. Trust me,” Caleb says softly. “I’ve been lonely and yearning for love most of my life.”

Brittany kneels beside him, placing a supportive hand on his shoulder.

Dustin hesitates, his fists clenched, his jaw tight.

Caleb doesn't move to stand. He just looks up at him with quiet empathy, his voice steady. "I can understand why you'd see me as the enemy. You probably think I'm a loser and don't deserve someone like her. Maybe you're right. Maybe I don't deserve her. But I'm not your enemy, Dustin. I'm more like you than you know. Misunderstood. In pain. Isolated. Needing love so badly that I lash out in frustration."

Dustin's face contorts with something between confusion and disbelief.

"You deserve more, man," Caleb continues. "Much more than you've had. You're fighting for life from a bad position. You've had none of the advantages others have had. But don't give up hope. You'll have what you want eventually, I promise. And if you let go of your pride... I can help you. I want to be your friend."

For a moment, Dustin looks like he might attack again. Brittany instinctively moves to put herself between them.

But Dustin doesn't even acknowledge her. His gaze is locked onto Caleb, his entire body tense, a battle waging inside him.

Then, in a sudden burst of fury, he turns and slams his fist into the locker above Caleb's head before storming off.

Caleb exhales, slowly rising to his feet with Brittany's help.

Mr. Gonzalez, the same teacher that intervened during the last altercation, arrives, watching the scene unfold, ready to act.

Caleb places a reassuring hand on the man's shoulder. "It's okay."

The gathered students, who have been staring in stunned silence, continue watching—watching all of it.

The bell rings.

Caleb turns to the crowd, his expression calm, almost serene. “Good morning, everyone,” he says simply.

Then, hand-in-hand, he and Brittany walk away.

-

Later, in the school library, Caleb and Brittany move between the towering shelves, searching for books for their midterm essay assignment.

A few of their classmates watch them, whispering. Caleb notices but pays them little mind.

He scans the shelves, running his fingers over the spines of books on mythology. As his eyes pass over them, something strange begins to happen. A sensation—like flashes of knowledge snapping into place. He absorbs the material—faster and faster.

Too fast.

He squeezes his eyes shut. The rush of information is overwhelming.

Brittany’s warm hand cups his face. “You okay, babe?”

He opens his eyes. They’re slightly dazed, but as soon as he registers what she just said, a small, genuine smile tugs at his lips.

“You just called me ‘babe’?”

She hesitates. “Yeah... Sorry. Too soon?”

“No, not at all.” He pulls her close. “I love it. And I love you.”

He kisses her forehead and wraps his arms around her.

Over her shoulder, he sees movement—Dustin, alone in the back section of the library. The only student in an area irrelevant to their assignment.

Caleb watches as Dustin stops in front of a shelf labeled *Trades and Skills*.

For a brief moment, their eyes meet.

Pain. Confusion.

A flash of white light.

-

Dustin sits cross-legged on his bed, flipping through an automotive magazine. Papa Roach’s *Last Resort* blares from his stereo. His room is a mess—clothes strewn everywhere, empty beer and energy drink cans littering the floor. Posters of hard rock bands, motorcycles, and classic cars cover the walls.

He takes a slow drag from his joint, blowing smoke rings into the dim light.

The muffled voices start low, their argument slipping through the thin walls of the aging, disrepaired domicile. Dustin has grown accustomed to the sounds, to the rising tension that always threatens to snap. He lies still, listening, his fingers tightening into fists at his sides.

“I’m not an idiot, Brad! I know when you’re high on that shit!”
His mother’s voice—sharp with anger.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, bitch!” Brad’s reply is slurred, defensive. “I’m just stressed from work. My nerves are fried!”

“It’s your brain that’s fried!”

“I don’t have to take this shit from you! I put food on the table for you and your little loser kids. If I choose to get lit every once in a while, I have the right!”

Dustin squeezes his eyes shut as his mother’s voice rises. “I can’t have you around my babies anymore. They need a role model, not another drug addict!”

Brad’s laughter is cruel. “A role model? Are you fucking serious? You’re lecturing me about role models?”

A scuffle follows. Dustin shoots up, heart pounding. He hears them moving now—feet dragging across the floor, something hitting the wall. Then his mother’s voice, raw with fury: “Get the fuck away from me!”

Brad growls, his voice thick with rage. “You’re going to apologize first.”

“Fuck you!”

Something shatters. Dustin’s stomach clenches. He grabs his headphones, jams them onto his ears, and cranks the volume up. It’s a temporary barrier against the violence brewing in the next room. But the noise bleeds through, seeping into his chest, curling in his ribs like a fist.

“No! No! Don’t touch me!”

His breath catches. He rips the headphones off and bolts from his bed, crossing the small home in a few strides. He pounds on the door.

“Let me in, Brad!”

Brad’s voice is a growl from the other side.

“Fuck off, you little shit.”

“Open the door.”

“You can’t order me around, punk.”

His mother’s voice, desperate: “Stay away, sweetie! Take your sister out for some food!”

“No. Not this time.” Dustin plants his feet, his voice low and firm. “Open the door.”

Brad sneers. “You should listen to your mommy, you little shithead.”

The fight continues inside. Another thud. A cry. Dustin has heard enough. His foot slams against the door. The lock splinters, and the door flies open.

The room is a wreck—broken glass, overturned furniture, the stench of sweat and cheap beer, and something else lingering in the air... a toxic fume. His mother lies on the bed, Brad pinning her down, his belt raised. Blood trickles from her split lip.

Brad turns, his eyes black pits of rage. “You little—”

Dustin lunges, slamming into him with all his weight. They tumble to the floor, limbs tangling, fists flying. Dustin lands a punch, but Brad is bigger, stronger. His knuckles crack against Dustin's jaw. The room spins. The dresser looms behind him, rushing closer—

Crack.

Pain explodes through his skull. The world blurs. From the floor, he sees Brad's shadow looming over his mother, sees her hands shielding her face, sees the belt whip through the air.

Then—nothing but white light.

-

Blinking back into reality, the school library comes into focus. Caleb moves towards Dustin, who squints at the titles on the shelf, as if struggling to translate them.

There's something so nice about a neat row of books, Dustin thinks. So orderly. So unlike real life

He senses Caleb approaching from behind. Slowly sliding his hand into his pocket, he furtively retrieves something.

The switchblade in his hand glints under the dim light. He flicks it open, tracing the tip along the spines of the books, leaving faint scratches in his wake.

A flash.

-

The same blade punctures a cheap beer can, the fizzing liquid spilling out as he shotguns it down in the solitude of his

backyard. The flames of a makeshift fire pit lick the edges of discarded junk, consuming whatever he feeds it.

Another flash.

An empty San Francisco street. His breath curls in the cold night air. The BMW in front of him gleams—sleek and perfect. Too perfect. He flicks the torch lighter, holding the flame against the car's emblem, watching it warp and catch fire. The blaze spreads quickly, consuming the cabin, the night alive with flickering orange and red. He turns away, satisfaction curling at the edges of his lips as the car erupts in flames behind him.

The cross on the church steeple looms against the night sky, distant yet oppressive. He stares up at it, the pain in his chest unfurling like a slow bruise. Tears burn in his eyes. The whiskey bottle in his hand feels heavy. Too heavy. He rips a napkin from his pocket, soaks it in liquor, and stuffs it into the bottle's mouth. The lighter clicks once, twice, then the flame catches. He watches it dance before hurling the Molotov at the old wooden doors. Fire spreads hungrily.

Then the sirens. Dustin runs.

Flash.

Back home, Dustin slumps against the front door. Above him, the eviction notice flaps in the breeze. He lets out a slow breath, fingers fumbling in his pocket. The glass pipe clinks as he pulls it free. He unwraps the small piece of crystal narcotic, breaking some off and dropping it into the top hole of a bulbous pipe before engaging his torch lighter and heating it the bottom of the pipe, gradually producing a little cloud that begins leaking

up and out of the bulb. Sucking in the acrid smoke, he lets it settle in his lungs. Everything blurs. Time stretches unnoticed.

Flash.

Dustin paces in front of a convenience store, nerves jittering under his skin. He doesn't notice the man watching from the unlit corner of the parking lot. Doesn't see the way the eyes follow his every move.

One deep breath. Then another. He steels himself and pushes through the doors.

The revolver is already in his hand, cold and heavy.

The clerk's eyes go wide.

Dustin raises the gun.

"Open the register."

His voice tears through the store, raw with desperation and fury. "You know what to do, motherfucker! Everything! All of it! Right fucking now!"

The terrified clerk scrambles to comply, his hands trembling as he stuffs cash into a paper bag. The moment he finishes, Dustin lunges forward, yanks the bag from his grasp. Without hesitation, he turns and steps outside, shoving the revolver into his waistband.

"Freeze! Hold it right there, asshole!"

The voice cuts through the night like a blade. Wide-eyed, Dustin freezes, his gaze locking onto a man standing a short distance

away, a handgun leveled at his chest. He hesitates for only a fraction of a second before instinct takes over.

He runs.

Gunfire erupts behind him. The deafening blasts shatter the glass storefront, bullets ricocheting off the brick walls. He raises his arms instinctively, trying to shield himself as he bolts, his pulse hammering in his ears. Then the shots find their mark. A searing pain rips through him, knocking him sideways before his body crumples to the ground. The paper bag falls from his grasp, and bills scatter into the wind.

A shadow looms over him. Through his fading vision, he sees the man standing above him, gun still raised, finger tight on the trigger. Each breath comes harder, shallower. His chest rises and falls, the effort agonizing, his blood pooling beneath him. His eyes flutter, the world around him blurring, then fading into an endless white.

Another flash.

-

Caleb continues to approach Dustin. Time is distorted. The fluorescent lights of the library flicker in a odd, suspended cadence. Dustin, still sweeping the tip of his switchblade along the spines of the books, stops at one of them, jabbing it slightly a few times.

Caleb instinctively stops in response, Dustin pulling the book from the shelf. **Motorcycle Mechanics 101**, it reads. Timidly flipping the book open, Dustin begins perusing its pages, flipping them to random sections with his blade, feigning indifference.

Flash.

-

Dustin's hands are stained in grease, the scent of oil thick in the air. Wearing a blue uniform, he leans over a motorcycle, his expression one of intense focus. The metal parts gleam beneath his touch, every turn of the wrench precise, every adjustment deliberate.

Flash.

He enters a small apartment still wearing the uniform. From the fridge, he grabs a bottle of beer and moves into the living room. A young woman sits on the couch, her smile warm. Her hand rests on her stomach. She's pregnant.

Another flash.

A toddler stands between him and the woman on the front lawn of a modest home. A "For Sale" sign, now marked *Sold*, sways in the breeze. He looks down at the child, then at her. She smiles. He smiles back.

-

Again Caleb blinks himself back into the present. Dustin has the book in his hands, having stopped on a page of interest, using the tip of the blade to point to different parts of the diagram that he's studying.

"Do you like motorcycles?" Caleb's voice cuts through the silence.

Dustin turns, his eyes narrowing. "Yeah... what's it to you?"

Caleb doesn't flinch. "I know you think I'm a lunatic, and so you won't want to believe me, but I hope you do."

Dustin scoffs. "What are you babbling about, jerk-off?"

Caleb's voice stays calm. "If you stick with this pyro thing, this hatred of everything and everyone, your circumstances are going to become dire. Tragic. But if you go that route—" he gestures to the book in Dustin's hands, "you'll be happy someday."

Dustin studies him, his face a mix of anger, disbelief, and something else—intrigue. Slowly, his grip on the blade shifts, his body tensing, prepared to strike.

"I told you already, I'm not your enemy," Caleb says, his tone unwavering. "It only seems that way to you right now because you're not at peace. You're confused. Angry. You don't actually want to hurt me. Search your heart. I'm not making fun of you or mocking you. I sincerely want to help you. Because you need it, like we all do sometimes. But your case is different... it could still swing drastically either way."

Unbeknownst to them, Brittany quietly approaches the aisle, her presence hidden just beyond their view. She listens intently.

Dustin takes a slow step forward, still holding the blade in a way that promises violence. Caleb doesn't move. Doesn't flinch. His gaze remains locked on Dustin's.

"And you need to make your mother's boyfriend leave."

Dustin freezes. His breath hitches, his body goes rigid. His eyes widen in disbelief. He stands directly in front of Caleb now, every muscle coiled tight.

"You have to make him understand that you're going to call the police every time you hear any sign of abuse, any time you see, smell, or hear any sign of narcotics use. Tell him you're going to document and photograph everything—every bit of evidence. Tell him you don't care if he kills you. He will never be able to stay with your mom. You'll make sure of it.

"Keep repeating it until he believes you. Defend yourself, your sister, and your mother if he gets violent, but don't attack him. I know you think you hate the police, but that won't last. Just keep calling them. That's why they're there. To protect. He isn't strong enough to put up with the calls and reminders forever. He'll leave eventually. I promise."

Dustin raises the switchblade, the steel gleaming under the library's dim light. He moves it from side to side in front of Caleb's face, watching him, testing him. But Caleb doesn't flinch. Doesn't react at all. He holds Dustin's gaze with an unshakable calm.

"Then pour all of your natural mechanical talent and energy and anger into this motorcycle interest," Caleb continues. "I see a future for you there. A good future."

Dustin stops moving the blade. His eyes narrow, his expression unreadable. Then, with a scowl, he presses the button. The blade retracts. He shoves the knife into his coat pocket and pushes past Caleb, brushing his shoulder as he leaves the aisle. The book is still in his hand.

As he steps into the open, he nearly collides with Brittany. She smiles awkwardly, quickly dropping her gaze. Dustin ignores her and keeps walking toward the library's exit.

Once he's gone, Brittany steps into the aisle. Caleb remains where he is, his back to her. He looks down the row of books, then rapidly glances in every direction, his breath quickening. His lips move, whispering under his breath.

She moves closer, listening.

"747 cc. 45.6 cubic inches. 4 stroke. Liquid cooled. Inline four-cylinder. Trochoid oil pump type. 5-speed manual transmission. 2000 Nighthawk..." The words tumble from him faster and faster. "Adhesive. A substance that is capable of bonding material together... Chamfer. To bevel the corner of a board... Kiln. A heated chamber for drying lumber... Alternating current... Edison Screw... Final circuit..."

His whispering turns frantic. His hands clamp over his ears as if trying to block something out.

Brittany hesitates, then places a hand on his shoulder.

Caleb goes still. Slowly, he turns to face her, his breathing ragged. She places her other hand on his chest. He exhales sharply. His breath slows. His eyes flicker open.

Brittany smiles, but her concern is evident. Caleb glances at the bookshelves, a look of terror in his eyes. Then, he closes them again.

He shakes his head. "Sorry, but I have to go."

He turns quickly, weaving through the narrow aisle, moving as if he can outrun the moment. Behind him, Brittany's voice rises in concern.

"Are you okay?"

He doesn't stop. Doesn't turn around.

"Yeah," he says, the word clipped, barely believable. "But I'm going home early."

"What, right now?"

"Yeah." He forces some lightness into his voice. "But don't worry... I'll be fine. I just need to walk home. I need the fresh air and exercise."

Brittany hesitates. "Are we still meeting later?"

He keeps moving, eyes straight ahead, every step widening the space between them.

"Yes. See you soon," he shouts over his shoulder as he bursts through the front doors of the library, Mr. Walker's protests lingering in his wake.

Chapter 14

The streets of San Francisco bustle around him as Caleb moves at a brisk pace, passing rows of street-side shops, his mind racing as fast as his steps. His hands hover near his ears, pressing against them every few seconds, as if trying to block something out.

He reaches a street corner where two middle-aged men stand in deep conversation. They stop talking as he approaches, their attention drawn to his agitated presence. The pedestrian signal flashes its permission, but Caleb doesn't move. Instead, he clenches his eyes shut and takes a series of deep breaths, shaking his head as if trying to clear it.

One of the men nudges the other, nodding toward Caleb.

"He looks unstable," he mutters.

The other shrugs. "Yeah. So what?"

They resume their conversation, voices growing more animated.

"Anyway, it's clear to me that this is a case for intervention," the first man says. "The Syrian people need us to stop dragging our feet and be decisive. We pulled our support at the worst time. I mean, look at Afghanistan and Iraq. Look what happens when we don't see things through."

The second man scoffs. "I'll tell you what happens: people have more self-determination. They don't make decisions based on the pressures and manipulations of invading forces hiding their

hegemonic motives behind false facades like 'freeing the people' and 'securing democracy.'" He lets out a sharp laugh. "Democracy. Ha! When oligarchs buy the politicians of the people, democracy is dead. A mere pretense used to placate the morons and conceal the fact that it's a *plutocratic republic!*"

The first man rolls his eyes. "Goddamn, you're one of the most naïve people I know. All that education, all that idealism, and no grip on reality! If no great global force like ours steps in, they stay under the autocratic yoke their entire lives."

"So what?" the second man shoots back. "You want us to play world police? To invade and install whatever brand of 'democracy' our plutocrats string-up and hide behind, confusing and distracting the uneducated and gullible with parades of American supremacy led by megalomaniacal sociopathic clowns? Where does it end? Do we decide who's 'uncivilized?'"

"Sometimes you *have* to intervene..."

"And just who's worthy of intervention? Resource rich nations with weak militaries, perhaps? While our corporations secure their resources and leech off entire populations? More neo-imperialism?"

"Better that than leaving people to the slaughter." The first man's voice sharpens. "Capitalism isn't perfect. The rich are too rich, yeah. But look at our quality of life. I think it's our country's God-given duty to save those that can't save themselves. Especially considering it's us or the Russians! Would you rather they remain a *Russian* puppet state?"

"I'd rather the strings were cut altogether." The second man's voice drips with sarcasm. "If you're going to invade, make sure

the majority actually supports it and knows you won't stay a second longer than necessary. But that's not how it works, is it? The corporations behind our nationalist hawks make sure resource and commercial access deals are locked in before the first boots even hit the ground. Usually in exchange for putting the amenable foreign 'leader of the people' into office. And that's before you even consider the covert operations. You don't actually think we pulled out of Syria, do you?" He gives a knowing look. "That's just the public face of things."

The first man smirks and shakes his head.

Then, without warning— a blinding flash of white light.

-

The musty scent of a small room fills Caleb's senses. The low murmur of voices, the static of a radio, the soft clatter of equipment.

He's hovering over a table at which a man in military fatigues is seated, a map covering the surface of the table. He brushes crumbs from a bread roll that he's just finished off of the map.

A woman's presence stirs behind him. A gentle touch on his shoulder, and she places a cup of tea on the edge of the map.

He looks up, catching and returning her warm smile before watching her return to the kitchen.

Turning around, a dark-skinned, bearded man wearing headphones and monitoring a communications array scowls at him, disgust and suspicion spreading across his countenance. Removing his headphones, he stands up and strides towards the kitchen where the woman went.

From the kitchen, an argument ensues. Caleb strains to hear, but it's distant, and in an unrecognizable language.

Soon thereafter, the dark-skinned man reemerges from the kitchen and glares at the young American man at the table studying the map, who pretends not to notice. Finally, he turns and meets the other man's gaze. Locking eyes, a battle is fought with their looks before the dark-skinned man finally approaches, seating himself across the table from the young American.

Playing chicken with their eyes, the American finally looks down. He circles an area on the map.

"Here," he says.

Another flash of white.

-

Caleb's back on the street corner, the argument between the two middle-aged men echoing on behind him. Short on breath, his head spins. He slaps his hands to his ears to keep from hearing.

The two middle-aged men sense his unease, staring lasers into his back. His pulse spikes. A wave of paranoia washes over him.

Then he moves—bolts across the street without thinking.

A blaring horn. Tires screech. A car stops inches from him.

The driver shouts, his voice furious and distant, but Caleb barely registers it. He stumbles back, then presses forward, running blindly across the intersection.

The first man shakes his head, disgust curling his lips. “You say we have a homeless problem? I say we have a *crazy* problem. A fucking weirdo epidemic, if you ask me.”

His companion turns to him, expression sharp.

“Who asked you, you old jingoistic jackass? You think America spreads democracy and justice like the good little conservative pawn and you have the gall to call *that* poor kid crazy?”

The first man chuckles dryly. “Wow. It’s not every day you get hit with the jingo insult.”

They stare at each other in deadpan silence as the city swirls around them.

-

Caleb hurries home, his pace frantic and unsteady. His body tenses with each passing second, every sound and movement around him pressing in, overwhelming. At the street corner, he pauses within a group of pedestrians, though careful to maintain his distance. A quick glance at the faces surrounding him—strangers, indifferent and disconnected—before his gaze drops to the pavement.

The rumble of a public transit bus draws his attention. As it passes, an advertisement flashes along its side—a serene, harmonious scene of people of different races smiling together. The caption reads: **Love Knows No Difference.**

A blinding flash of white light.

-

The safe house is dimly lit, the air thick with tension and longing. The young American man steps into the kitchen, where the young Sunni woman stands at the sink, washing dishes. He lingers in the doorway, watching her, his admiration evident. Sensing his presence, she turns slightly, casting him a knowing glance over her shoulder, her eyes flashing with a desire as undeniable as the warmth that spreads between them.

He approaches, their bodies drawing close, a silent understanding passing between them. His hand finds its way to her waist, tentative at first, testing the boundary between them. She responds by placing her hand at the center of his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart. He slides his other hand to her opposite side, closing the space between them, and she leans forward, resting her head against him. They remain that way, wrapped in each other's embrace, the only sound the water flowing into the sink of dirty dishes.

Later that night, dressed in black, the young man slips out of the safe house. He hugs the shadows, moving with the stealth of a ghost, evading light, using vehicles and buildings as cover. At last, he reaches a door and taps lightly. It opens just a crack, revealing the Sunni woman's cautious eyes.

In the quiet sanctuary of a modest bedroom, they come together. The night cloaks them in secrecy, candles flickering on the nightstands, their glow casting fleeting shadows across the walls.

The next time he leaves the safehouse, eyes are on him. Approaching her domicile, he doesn't bother to knock or wait at the door this time, stepping quickly inside. The Sunni woman

awaits him, a small smile playing at her lips. They meet in a slow, lingering kiss, as though time has no claim over them.

Then, in a single, solemn motion, he withdraws a small black pistol from behind his back and places it in her hands. He speaks softly, guiding her through its use, his words lost to the silence between them. She listens, nodding in understanding. When he finishes, she raises the weapon, levels it forward, aims and pulls the trigger. *Click.*

-

The roar of the bus backfiring on the other side of the intersection jolts Caleb back to the present. His body tenses, his breath catches in his throat. He stares as the bus rumbles away, his mind still tangled in the web of visions. His heart pounds as he hurries across the intersection, desperate to escape the echoes in his head.

Chapter 15

Night settles over the city by the time Caleb lies beside Brittany in bed, the warmth of her skin against his own offering a fleeting reprieve. His head rests against her bare chest, her fingers threading through his hair in slow, soothing motions. Her other hand holds a paperback—*Artemis: Pure Hunter*—though her focus remains divided, distracted by the restless energy coursing through him. Beside her, a hardcover book on the Oracle at Delphi lies abandoned.

“Are you feeling any better?” she asks softly.

Caleb hesitates. “I’m not sure. I’m worried.”

She shifts slightly, angling to see his face. “About what, exactly?”

“That I’ve lost control. And worse... that this may not even be real. And that, if it’s not, it may be turning into a nightmare.”

Her hand stills in his hair. “I promise you, it’s real.”

He sighs. “You *have* to say that.”

Brittany frowns. “What do you mean?”

“If you’re a hallucination, you wouldn’t try to convince me otherwise. And if you’re real and actually care, you wouldn’t distress me by pointing out that it’s impossible to prove. So you promising me that you’re real is... the definition of an empty promise.”

She pulls back slightly, a hint of offense flickering across her face. “Hey!”

“I just mean logically speaking. It has nothing to do with you.”

A brief silence. Then, with a sigh, she concedes. “Okay then...”

“Fuck...” Caleb groans, rubbing his temples. “I can’t even work on the project, I’m so damn worked up.”

“Why don’t you give it another shot?” she suggests.

“Fine.”

Reluctantly, Caleb pushes himself upright, grabbing the Oracle at Delphi book from the bed. He pulls on pajama bottoms and moves to his desk, settling into the chair with a weary sigh. Pressing two fingers to his carotid artery, he feels for his pulse—a grounding ritual. Then, with a deep breath, he opens the book at random.

The page reveals an illustration: the Oracle envisioning a soldier with a spear through his heart.

A blinding flash of white light.

-

A battlefield. An American soldier leads his squad through the Syrian streets, rifle poised. A shot rings out, striking him through the heart. The squad erupts into chaos, bullets tearing through the air.

Another flash.

Caleb clenches his teeth, flipping to another page.

The next image: an immense war elephant trampling Greek soldiers beneath its massive feet.

Flash.

Russian soldiers speed through the war-torn streets in a military jeep, their voices sharp, urgent. Gunfire shatters the night, bullets clanging against the vehicle's armored frame. They round a corner—only to be obliterated by a charging tank.

Flash.

Caleb shuts his eyes, rubbing his forehead as the visions pound against his skull. Gritting his teeth, he turns the pages again. Another illustration. The aftermath of battle. Streets littered with corpses, buildings consumed by fire. A lone soldier stands triumphant over his slain enemy, his sword embedded deep in the man's chest.

Flash.

A Syrian village. A man screams as a bayonet tears into his belly. Blood spurts from his mouth, his resistance fading into death. The soldier holding the rifle surveys the carnage—the burning homes, the bodies strewn across the dirt, the wails of the dying.

Flash.

-

With a frustrated growl, Caleb slams the book shut and hurls it across the room. It strikes the far wall with a loud thud. Brittany jolts upright in bed, startled.

“Caleb?” she asks, concern creeping into her voice.

But he barely hears her, his mind consumed by the visions—the echoes of war and fire and death refusing to let him go.

Caleb retrieves the book and slams it closed onto his desk, frustration coursing through his veins. He closes his eyes, pressing his fingers into his scalp, raking them through his hair as if that might somehow calm the storm raging inside him. But when he opens his eyes, the book has opened to an illustration—a violent eruption, lava spilling over the ruins of an ancient city, consuming everything in its path.

Flash.

-

He’s somewhere else. Somewhere in America.

A mother clutches her two children beneath a dining room table, rocking them gently, humming a tune meant to soothe—though the fear in her eyes betrays her.

Outside, a siren wails, rising and falling in the distance. Through the window blinds, a searing light pierces the room, growing impossibly bright, accompanied by a deep, guttural rumbling that rattles the very air.

The brightness intensifies, the sound swelling until it swallows everything.

Caleb jolts back into himself—into the dim confines of his bedroom. Heart pounding, he closes his eyes and makes a violent sweeping motion with his arm, his whole desk flipping and crashing into the wall.

Brittany gasps, bolting upright in bed.

From the hallway, Aunt Lilly's voice rings out. "What was that?!"

Footsteps approach—first ascending the stairs, then drawing closer down the hallway. The bedroom doorknob rattles, but the lock holds firm.

Brittany ducks under the covers.

The knocking turns frantic.

"It's okay, Auntie," Caleb calls, trying to keep his voice steady. "I just got frustrated and threw something."

A pause.

"Everything's okay. We're both okay, I promise."

On the other side of the door, Aunt Lilly hesitates before responding. "Alright... well, why don't you two come on out? It's time for dinner. I assume Brittany is staying?"

Caleb looks towards Brittany, waiting for her answer. Finally poking her head out from the covers, she gives a small, apprehensive nod.

"We'll be down in a minute," he says.

-

The kitchen smells of warm spices and home-cooked comfort. Caleb and Brittany sit at the table as Aunt Lilly serves up steaming portions from the stove, placing a plate in front of Brittany with a kind smile.

"Thank you, ma'am," Brittany says.

“Lilly is fine, sweetie. And you’re very welcome. You’re welcome to eat with us anytime.”

Brittany smiles. “That’s very kind of you, *Lilly*.”

Aunt Lilly dishes out another plate for Caleb, setting it before him with a fond touch to his shoulder.

“Thank you, Auntie,” he murmurs.

She kisses the top of his head before walking into the living room, where Uncle George sits, eyes fixed on the local news.

Caleb glances between his food and the television, his expression tight. He picks at his meal with his fork, absently pushing it around his plate. Brittany watches him, concern deepening in her gaze.

His movements grow more erratic—his fork stabbing at the food without real intent.

Brittany reaches across the table, placing a gentle hand over his. The motion stills him, but he doesn’t look at her. A moment passes. Then, finally, he takes a small bite, chewing slowly, his ears tuned to the news anchor’s voice in the background.

“And in national news,” the broadcaster drones, “the Republican-controlled Senate signs off on the House’s ‘Working Americans Act’ today. While Republican leaders hail the act as a victory for working-class Americans, claiming it will make the American Dream more accessible, Democratic leaders decry the act as archaic and regressive, arguing that it echoes a past marred by racial fear and prejudice. They claim the act will drastically restrict the ability of foreigners to enter and remain in

the country on work visas, a move they condemn as fundamentally un-American...”

A flash of white light.

-

He’s back in the small kitchen in a Syrian safe house. The young man steps inside, only to be met with a playful ambush—the young Sunni woman laughing as she pounces on him. Their laughter melts into a kiss, a long embrace that speaks of deep affection and unspoken fears.

The young man reaches into his pocket, about to say something, but she places a finger over his lips, silencing him. Moving toward the sink, she bends down, pulling out a small radio. She plugs it in, and soft Arabic music fills the room.

Taking both his hands, she places them on her waist, swaying them gently in time with the music. They dance together in the cramped kitchen, caught in a fleeting moment of happiness.

Restlessness fast overtakes him. Moving toward the CD player, he shuts off the music. When he turns back to her, his expression has shifted—serious, urgent. He pulls a folded document from his pocket and holds it out to her.

A U.S. visa.

Her eyes brim with tears as she takes it in, understanding instantly. Ecstatic, she throws herself into his arms.

Flash.

-

Caleb blinks hard, his mind reeling as he returns to the kitchen table. His hand drifts to his chin, lost in thought.

Brittany leans in. “What?” she whispers. “You saw something, didn’t you? What was it?”

Caleb’s voice is hushed but heavy with weight. “The Syrian Civil War... it could turn into World War Three. Countless will die, if— if humanity doesn’t wipe itself out completely first. And it all seems to stem from this... this one relationship. An American spy and a Syrian woman. A secret, risky romance.”

Brittany’s eyes widen. “Really..? That sounds interesting.”

Caleb scoffs. “Interesting?”

“Sorry! Poor choice of words.”

Caleb shakes his head. “If you could see what I’ve been seeing...”

“Tell me,” she pleads.

He exhales sharply, rubbing his temples. “Countless will die.”

Brittany hesitates. “Sorry, I guess I didn’t realize...”

“But what am I supposed to do about it?!” Caleb’s voice rises in frustration, as though addressing an unseen presence. His hands clench into fists. “Why are you doing this to me?! Why are you showing me all this?!”

Aunt Lilly’s voice cuts through his spiral. “Caleb? Sweetie, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Caleb looks from his perch in the kitchen to his aunt in the living room. He says nothing, but distress is written all over his face.

The look on *her* face, the mix of trepidation, confusion and love, has marked his entire life.

The flickering light of the television screen catches his attention—an advertisement for the U.S. Army. His breath catches in his throat.

With a sharp intake of air, he clamps his hands over his ears and squeezes his eyes shut. A slow shake of his head grows into a frantic, desperate thrashing. Brittany, alarmed, reaches out to calm him, placing a hand on his shoulder, but this time it has no effect.

Aunt Lilly springs from her seat, heading toward the kitchen, but before she can reach him, Caleb shoots to his feet with such force that Brittany nearly falls out of her seat, her half-finished plate falling to the floor and shattering. Without a moment's hesitation, he bolts out the front door, vanishing into the night.

Chapter 16

The streets of San Francisco stretch ahead, their lights bleeding into the darkness. Caleb runs blindly, mumbling to himself under his ragged breath. He keeps his head down, avoiding the eyes of strangers—but when he collides with a woman, his head snaps up. Their eyes meet. He lets out a sharp, unintelligible cry, his agitation spiking. His pace quickens, hands gripping at his hair, tugging, pulling, as if trying to tear something unseen from his mind.

He doesn't see the intersection. Doesn't register the oncoming traffic. Cars screech to a halt, horns blaring. Pedestrians gasp, some shouting warnings. Tires skid, metal crunches—two vehicles collide in a desperate attempt to avoid hitting him. Caleb doesn't react. He keeps running.

A police cruiser, stationed at the opposite corner, flares its lights and activates its siren. The red and blue strobes illuminate the chaotic scene as the vehicle lurches forward, following the erratic figure sprinting down the street.

-

Inside the police cruiser, the officer grabs his radio. The flashing lights reflect off the windshield, sirens wailing through the night.

“Control, be advised, possible ten-fifty and fifty-one-fifty at the corner of Ortega and 44th. Car twenty-two on the scene.”

The cruiser pulls sharply to the curb beside Caleb. Before it has fully stopped, the officer is out, feet pounding against the

pavement as he gives chase. His hand hovers over the grip of his pistol.

From the left, Brittany appears, breathless, desperation in her voice. “Officer! Officer, it’s okay! He’s just—”

“Miss, now stop right there,” the officer orders, cutting her off. His attention remains locked on the erratic young man ahead.

-

In the kitchen of Caleb’s house, Aunt Lilly and Uncle George wait, nerves strung tight, their eyes locked onto the silent phone on the counter. When it rings, Aunt Lilly snatches it up immediately.

“Hello?!” she says, her voice taut with urgency.

A beat.

“Yes, this is she...”

Her face crumples. A trembling hand covers her mouth.

-

In the psychiatric emergency ward of the hospital, two psychiatrists and an orderly stand outside a locked restraint room. A small window gives them a view of its interior—white padded walls, a simple metal-framed bed. On it, Caleb is bound, thrashing violently against the restraints. His mouth moves, but his words are lost through the thick door.

One of the psychiatrists shakes his head. “I simply don’t understand it. It makes no sense. How can he possibly be this

resistant to that dosage of Haldol and Thorazine? I've never seen anything like it."

His colleague considers the possibilities. "A drug overdose interfering with the pharmacological effects?"

"Not at this level of administration. Not for this long."

Silence stretches between them.

"There's a girl in the lobby," the second psychiatrist finally says. "She says she's his girlfriend... claims she can calm him down."

The first psychiatrist exhales heavily. "I hate seeing someone restrained this long. It feels barbaric."

"It *is* barbaric," the first admits, "but him lying unconscious on the ground with brain or spinal cord damage because he just propelled himself headfirst into the wall would be *more* barbaric... and you know that."

A reluctant nod. "I know... The girl?"

"It's worth a try." He turns to the orderly. "Jason, go retrieve his visitor. And I want you to go in with her. Intervene if necessary. It's risky either way, but he's been doing this for hours. I'm worried he's going to tear a muscle or damage his neck. We need to try to calm his down somehow..."

Inside the restraint room, Caleb thrashes on, mumbling incoherently. His movements are erratic, desperate. His eyes, unfocused, dart wildly. The walls seem to close in. His breathing shallows. And then—

The blinding white light sends him back to Syria.

-

In a dimly lit bedroom, the young American man lies asleep beside the Sunni woman. She traces lazy patterns along his arm, perfectly content. Reaching for the candlelit nightstand, she picks up the visa he gave her. She turns it over, where there's a photo of him in uniform taped to the back. Written in permanent ink at the bottom of the photo:

“SO I CAN STAY CLOSE.”

Flash.

-

The young American is sprinting through the war-torn streets of Syria. His breath burns in his throat. The house is ahead. His shoulder slams into the door, sending it crashing inward—

Empty. The space where she should be is littered with signs of a struggle.

He drops to his knees.

Flash.

-

Dressed in black, rifle in hand, he presses himself against a bullet-riddled wall, listening intently to the static of a walkie-talkie. Voices crackle in the regional dialect. His body rocks back and forth, tension winding tighter.

Then he stills. Listens. Moves with purpose, checking his clips, cocking his rifle and sidearm. His heart hammers, but his hands

are steady as he slips around the corner and weaves his way through the ruins of the war-torn city.

Flash.

-

Crouched behind wreckage, the young American peers through his scope at the building across the street. His eyes sweep over windows, the entrance, the road. A large white van is parked nearby. Something is wrong. His pulse spikes.

The door to the building swings open.

Four men step out, each dragging a woman by the hair, their arms bound, their mouths gagged.

One of them is her.

Moving quickly to the van, they open the back doors and start shoving the women in.

Without thinking, he takes aim and fires. Two of his targets fall instantly, one falling into and closing the back doors of the van with the weight of his body.

The remaining captors take cover behind the side of the van. The young man drops his rifle and draws his pistol, sprinting into the open and hurling himself across the hood of the van. He fires point-blank, dropping one enemy. The last combatant, crouched near the back tire, unleashes a barrage from his AK-47. Bullets tear into him—his torso, his neck—pain erupts.

As the combatant empties his clip, the young American staggers, slumping against the van. Even leaning against and supporting

his weight with the van, it takes all of his strength to make it to the back, streaking the side of the van crimson with his blood.

His hands fumble with the latch. The back doors swing open and she falls into his arms, the other three women bewildered, looking around for the best escape route, panicking, then fleeing in three different directions. Weakly, he cuts his lovers' bindings before collapsing into her arms in turn.

Then—

Gunshots.

One. Two. Three.

The other three female captives crumple mid-flight, lifeless bodies hitting the dirt.

Consciousness fading, the young man reaches up, fingers caressing the cheek of the love of his life, leaving streaks of red across her light brown skin. He smiles weakly.

And then, in a heartbeat, blood bursts forth. Her head snaps back. The light leaves her eyes as she slumps forward, falling dead upon her lifeless lover, their blood intermingling.

Everything goes black.

Chapter 17

The orderly opens the door tentatively as Brittany pushes past him before he can slow her down, her urgency undeniable. She barely registers his attempt to restrain her as she moves directly to Caleb's side. He thrashes against his restraints, his body tense with agitation, his words nothing more than a jumble of unintelligible sounds. But the moment she places a hand on his arm, everything changes.

Caleb stills. His mumbling softens, his body losing its desperate fight against unseen forces. The orderly, who first tries to pull Brittany away, hesitates—then steps back, watching in quiet astonishment. Brittany climbs onto the narrow hospital bed beside Caleb, lying next to him as though her presence alone can call him back to reality. She strokes his hair, her touch gentle, her voice low as she hums a tune only she seems to know, as though summoned out of thin air to suit the moment.

Against the stark sterility of the padded white room, her brilliant red sweatshirt stands out—a beacon in the dim light.

-

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of Aleppo, Syria, a sniper scans the streets from his vantage point atop a building. Below, the aftermath of violence sprawls across the dust-covered ground. The young man who fights so desperately to save the young Sunni woman now lies motionless, a bullet hole clean through his forehead. The woman's body lies draped over him, lifeless.

The sniper approaches, his boots crunching against rubble. With practiced efficiency, he rolls the woman off the young man's body and begins his search. More military vehicles arrive, their presence sealing off the area. The sniper rifles through the young man's pockets, finding nothing. Shifting his attention to the woman, he methodically searches her clothing.

From a hidden pocket inside her shirt, his fingers close around something—thin, folded paper. He pulls it free, unfolding it with care. It's a visa. As he flips it over, his breath hitches. There, scribbled in careful handwriting beneath a photograph of the young man, are the five words: *So I can stay close.*

The sniper looks down at the young man, then back at the picture. He exhales through his nose, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his expression. When another soldier approaches, the sniper meets his gaze, then wordlessly reaches for a rag from the man's waistband.

He crouches beside the body and, with uncharacteristic gentleness, wipes the blood from the young man's face. The photograph is placed next to him, carefully aligned. Again, the sniper compares the picture to the man before him. The resemblance is undeniable.

Slowly, he rises to his feet. He holds the picture up to his compatriot, pointing to an emblem stitched onto the dead man's uniform in the image—the U.S. stars and stripes.

A silent understanding passes between them. The other soldier gives a single nod.

-

Back in the hospital ward, Caleb stirs in his fitful sleep, his body trembling. A quiet moan escapes his lips, his head shaking violently, as if warding off something unseen. Brittany holds him tighter, murmuring softly, her embrace grounding him. His shaking slows, then stops.

-

Outside Aleppo, the sniper moves away from the scene, still holding the picture. With a practiced motion, he pulls a walkie-talkie from his hip and speaks in his native dialect.

The words travel up a chain of command. A superior officer answers, seated at a cluttered desk. The transmission is brief; the superior wastes no time in picking up a phone. Across the city, in a dimly lit room, another phone rings. A general answers, his tone curt as he exchanges words with his subordinate.

The conversation ends with the soft click of the receiver being placed back in its cradle. Orders are issued. Another call is made. This time, a different language fills the air. Russian.

Behind a polished desk, a man with a severe expression listens, his fingers tapping against the nameplate that bears his name: **Mikhail Petrov.**

Beside the name, the symbol of the Russian flag gleams under the dim overhead light.

-

Across the ocean, televisions flicker in living rooms across America. The steady voice of a news anchor fills the air, weaving a story of rising tensions and political denials.

“In international news today, there is considerable alarm over accusations made by the Russian government that the United States has violated the conditions of its pact regarding Syria. Russian officials claim to have irrefutable evidence of an American soldier aiding and actively fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army...”

The words stretch across time, replayed on different screens in different homes, as evening turns to night. Reports continue, growing graver with each update.

“...Iranian forces invade Iraq. Saudi Arabia responds by reinforcing its northern defenses. Reports suggest movement into Iraq is imminent. What begins as an accusation spirals into a global crisis, with experts warning that the situation mirrors the earliest days of past world wars...”

Another news report follows. Another escalation. The words carry weight, foretelling a grim future.

“...Turkey pledges its support to Israel, vowing to deploy troops should Russia refuse to withdraw. Both governments align themselves with the U.S., citing Russia’s violations of international law...”

Scenes of troop movements fill the screen—armies mobilizing, conflicts igniting. The images blur together in a montage of war: tanks rolling forward, explosions shattering the night, soldiers falling. Then, in the final flashes of destruction, nuclear fire blooms against the horizon.

-

Caleb wakes with a gasp.

The vision dissolves into darkness, leaving only the reality of his sweat-soaked skin and the erratic pounding of his heart. He sees nothing beyond the brightness of the hospital light above him.

Terror fills his face. He passes out again, and when he comes to he's in his psychiatrists' office, unsure how he got there. And *when*. He's stretched out on the leather couch, his breath still uneven, his thoughts untethered. Across from him, Dr. Francis watches him closely.

"What's wrong, Caleb?" the doctor asks, his voice calm but concerned. "You look frightened."

Caleb swallows, glancing around the room, disoriented. "I... I'm not sure," he admits, struggling to piece together his thoughts. "What was I saying?"

Dr. Francis leans forward slightly. "You were about to tell me about what you've been reading lately."

Caleb furrows his brow. His thoughts feel scattered, elusive. "Right..." He hesitates, then shakes his head. "I've been having these experiences. Different from before. Beyond just lucid dreams."

Dr. Francis remains patient. "What kind of experiences?"

Caleb exhales, rubbing his temples. "I don't think I should tell you everything. You already think I'm crazy."

The psychiatrist tilts his head slightly. "It's not that simple, Caleb. I think you're sick."

A bitter smile tugs at Caleb's lips. "It's okay, Doc. Let's not argue about that again. We see things differently."

Dr. Francis nods. "As you wish."

Caleb leans back, staring at the ceiling. "What I want to talk about... is that these experiences make me think."

Dr. Francis waits. "Think about what?"

Caleb's voice drops to a whisper, as if uttering the thought aloud makes it all the more real.

"The nature of consciousness. And its role in what we call reality."

The doctor studies him. "Go on."

Chapter 18

Still lying on his back on the leather couch in Dr. Francis' office, Caleb's eyes are closed, his breath slow and steady. Inside his skull, his brain pulses with electrochemical activity, neurons firing in synchronized bursts, the hemispheres of his mind communicating in ways unseen but deeply felt. Beneath it, his heart beats with steady rhythm, emitting a powerful electromagnetic field, its waves blending seamlessly with those of his mind.

Opening his eyes, the world seems to shift, everything in fluid flux, as though reassembling itself from floating fragments. Shapes coalesce, scattered particles merging into solid form. A rush of sensation overtakes him, pulling him inward, deeper still. Within his mind, new wavelengths emerge—one after another, shifting like the channels of an unseen cosmic transmission. Then, suddenly, they align, vibrating in perfect harmony.

The world wavers more forcefully, pixelating at the edges of his perception. Now he's in his bed at home, but somehow the sudden change in his location is less concerning than it was before. Staring at the ceiling, the weight of something unseen pressing on his consciousness. Sleep eludes him. Again, he glances at the clock. The minutes crawl by, then hours. Resigned, he sits up, walks over to his desk and begins reading of the Oracle at Delphi once more.

Outside, darkness stretches on, the night unbroken. The pages turn—page 33, then page 222. By the time he looks up again,

the first golden light of dawn seeps into the sky. Memories surface—visions of a time long past, yet deeply ingrained. He is a young boy again, cradling the glowing red root in Shangri-La, his small hands trembling with wonder. An old blind Chinese woman smiles at him, her presence comforting yet otherworldly. Then, just as quickly, she vanishes, and his mother enters the room.

A flash.

Now he's running down the aisle of a temple from the dream that haunts him. The structure warps in front of him, a gaping hole tearing through its back wall. Through it, truth and fiction intertwine, a luminous white light pouring forth. He doesn't hesitate. He leaps through.

Flashing back to his desk, his mind hums with an energy he does not fully understand. Around him, his possessions stir, lift, shift, then settle. The motion is fluid, but not swirling as before. It's controlled. He exhales slowly, serenity washing over him. Looking back down at the book, a page turns. A pencil hovers in the air, orbiting his head like a halo. As he focuses, his awareness expands—drawn inward and yet outward all at once.

Deep inside, where his thoughts dissolve into something vaster, a bright, glowing white light pulses. The light is not his alone. Across existence, others burn just as brilliantly—people, beings, lifeforms—each connected, forming a constellation of illumination. They are all part of something greater, lines of light linking them to a singular, magnificent source at the center. From that radiant core, an assortment of sacred texts emerges—holy scriptures, ancient beliefs, wisdom manifest.

Chapter 19

Across America, families sit in their living rooms, watching news of the Syrian conflict unfold on their televisions. Their faces reflect a spectrum of emotions—worry, sorrow, anger. And as their feelings take shape, the images on the screens shift to mirror them: rising tensions for worry, fallen bodies for grief, escalating violence for rage.

The web of glowing lights appears once more, connections forming between every point, strands of white crisscrossing until all darkness is driven out. The luminosity converges into a sphere, pulsing with energy. It contracts, folding in upon itself until it becomes a single, infinitesimal dot—then, in an instant, it explodes outward in a cascade of brilliant, multicolored light.

The birth of a universe.

But even as it expands and accelerates, seemingly without end, time comes to a crawl until the expansion slows, more and more until it ultimately begins to contract once more, collapsing in on itself. The cycle repeats—birth, death, rebirth—an endless pulse of creation and destruction, every destruction begetting creation a new creation, even as none of it is ever truly *new*.

Meanwhile, the city of San Francisco carries on. Its people move through their daily lives, unaware of the glowing lights within them, the lines extending from their hearts and minds, guiding them forward on paths unseen.

In another memory, Caleb stands before Brittany's would-be rapist, a silent force propelling the man backward, sending him crashing against the side of her house. This time, Caleb sees it—the synchronization of his brainwaves, the beams of white light streaming into his heart and mind from all directions.

And then—war.

The conflict in Syria ignites a chain reaction, pulling global powers into the fray. Armies clash by land, sea, and air, escalating into something catastrophic. Nuclear fire tears through cities, reducing the world to ruin.

What remains is an apocalyptic wasteland, Earth rendered barren and void.

In the silence that follows, Caleb's voice emerges—disembodied yet resonant, his thoughts spilling forth.

"I think there's more to consciousness than most people realize," he says. "I think consciousness itself may be reality—the fundamental reality, the basis of everything. What we call God. And I think that we all have access to that Super Consciousness, that One Being conducting consciousness through any biochemical apparatus sophisticated enough to receive and translate it. And I think that we're all an inseparable part of that same... competition of consciousness, and that we collectively compete in the creation of our shared reality."

After a pause, Dr. Francis' voice enters the space, questioning.

"What do you mean?"

Caleb continues. "Look at our brainwaves. Each one corresponds to a different state of consciousness. When I'm focused, my

brainwaves shift. When I meditate, they change again. When I sleep, they move into yet another pattern. And each state has its own benefits and abilities, right?”

“Right,” the doctor acknowledges.

“So what if there’s a resonance beyond them all?” Caleb presses. “A state where we can synchronize completely—where our consciousness aligns with something greater? What if we could think, meditate, and dream all at once? Focus, clear the mind, and rejuvenate simultaneously? What if that unlocks something... more?”

Dr. Francis hesitates. “I don’t think that’s possible, Caleb.”

“You don’t *think* it’s possible,” Caleb counters, “but you don’t *know*. I have reason to believe it is.”

Dr. Francis’ tone remains skeptical. “What reason? By what method?”

“There’s a reason our brainwaves are distinct,” the doctor continues. “They exist in different states for a reason.”

“I know,” Caleb admits. “But I think most of those reasons are based on limitations—limitations we can overcome. Maybe we can evolve beyond them.”

“How?”

Caleb considers his response. “A combination of things. Some people might be born with a greater ability to compress their brainwaves. There might be plants, compounds, something hidden in nature that enhances this ability. There might be breakthrough experiences that unlock it. And maybe, just

maybe, we can train ourselves to access it—like strengthening a muscle.”

Dr. Francis hesitates. “You’re saying there may be? So this is all theoretical, right?”

Caleb sidesteps the question. “Have you heard of Samuel Avery?”

“No,” Dr. Francis admits. “I can’t say that I have.”

“I find his work fascinating,” Caleb says. “I ‘accidentally’ stumbled upon his book in the back of a bookstore recently, called *The Quantum Screen*. He essentially aims to unite the field of physics with our understanding of consciousness, using the one to illuminate the other and, in the process, solving the enigmas of physics and creating a new paradigm for both.”

Dr. Francis exhales thoughtfully. “Hmmm... That sounds like heavy reading, especially for a high school student, Caleb. I just hope it’s not making you—”

“He proffers that reality isn’t something that exists outside of us and our consciousness,” Caleb interrupts, “but within it.”

“Ummm...”

“I’ve had similar thoughts and feelings,” Caleb continues after a brief pause. “Like this is all one thing—Spirit—and we exist inside of it, inside of God, as most people would say. There is no separation. There is no Spirit and us; nothing above or outside of us. We exist entirely within it. All of *existence* exists entirely within it. It *is* existence.”

Dr. Francis shivers slightly. “That’s an intriguing concept. I just got the chills thinking about it.”

Caleb doesn’t hesitate. “You sensed the truth of it.”

Dr. Francis pauses. “Hmm... I’m not sure about that. Actually, it sounds a lot like the ancient spiritual concept of non-dualism. It’s from the Vedas, I think—the holy Indian texts that influenced Hinduism, Buddhism, and other traditions.”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” Caleb admits. “But it doesn’t surprise me. The truth is there and always has been. Every life form, every group of people may arrive at that truth and describe it a bit differently. I heard it was in the Kabbalah too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“So what if this is the basis of it all?” Caleb presses on.

“Collective consciousness as God, willing Its reality through life—through Its manifestations. What if what’s real is ultimately a matter of what life as a whole *believes* is real, with all of life continually creating that reality, projecting belief into being relative to the force of that belief, like a movie made real relative to how much the maker believes it reflects the truth? What if reality is collectively self-deterministic, made as we go?”

Dr. Francis exhales. “It’s definitely an interesting idea, Caleb. I’m not sure where you’re going with this, though, and I worry that you might be—”

“What if this is how reality is created and how it is maintained,” Caleb cuts in, his voice rising with intensity, “like every piece of the total consciousness coming together in a kind of competition to will the basis of reality, and that all our actions

take place after this existential vote? If this is the case, it seems to imply that reality itself can be edited.” He lets that sit for a moment before adding, “Nothing is ever fixed. Everything’s forever malleable.”

Dr. Francis’s tone shifts—gentle, but firm. “I really don’t think you should place too much stock in this idea, Caleb. I don’t think it’s good for you. It could make you more symptomatic.”

Caleb ignores him. “And what if we only believe that actions are required to produce physical results because we’ve convinced ourselves of the separation between things? Between our minds, our consciousnesses, and our bodies—and the so-called outside world?”

His words pour out now, each more certain than the last.

“What if it’s a sort of self-imposed limitation we’re not even aware that we’re imposing? What if our consciousnesses are inseparable from the things around us? What if knowing and accepting that it’s all one thing grants us greater power within that one thing—like that refrain: ‘The number one way people give up their power is by not realizing they possess it?’”

Dr. Francis sighs, frustration creeping into his voice. “What if it’s not that way at all, and you’re laying the groundwork for a debilitating delusion, Caleb?”

But Caleb doesn’t listen. “I think what we call reality is produced by us—when we are a singular entity—when we are God—before we decide to become a *we* in the first place. When we’re a boundless, purely energetic consciousness, before the existence of space, time, and matter.” His voice softens, almost reverent. “I think we will space, time, and matter into being

because they provide the framework for the Spirit's limitless experiences of existence as limitless forms of life. That's their entire purpose—limitless existences, for the innate value of existence itself. That is the point of life."

Dr. Francis considers this. "Interesting... I like that."

"The Big Bang is the means," Caleb continues. "The original energy, expanded into space, time, and matter, is the mode. Limitless perspectives and experiences of existence are the motive. And this probably isn't the first iteration of the existential cycle. It will likely all collapse and explode back out, resetting the stage for life to evolve, suited to new environs."

Dr. Francis exhales slowly. "That's quite the vision..."

Caleb leans in, his voice barely above a whisper. "So, if this is how we set the stage—as a singular entity—what if we have the buried, unrealized capacity to reset the stage as we see fit? Maybe this requires our collective will—a collectively conscious choice, like a spiritual democracy. Or maybe people can individually develop the ability to tap into and guide the collective will toward results." He pauses. "Maybe this is happening already, and we're not even aware of it—being guided by the invisible, divine hand of total will."

His next words land like a declaration. "If having faith in this is what it means to have faith, then I have faith in spades. I believe. And maybe tapping into this... force—taking the divine hand by the hand—is how those who drive our evolution will lead the species."

Dr. Francis sits in silence, absorbing Caleb's words. The weight of them hangs between them, vast and ungraspable, stretching

beyond the confines of their conversation—reaching toward something infinite.

He is at a loss for words.

“Maybe,” Caleb continues, his voice steady yet filled with a reverent intensity, “when all my brainwaves are firing in perfect synchronicity, harmoniously condensed and focused, I can harness the collective will—what all life chooses in that moment—and act on life’s behalf. Maybe I can focus my heart and mind on something and, so long as it’s not something that goes against the collective will—and especially if it is in accordance with that will—I can metaphysically affect that something with just my thoughts, channeling the Super Consciousness. What if everyone has this power and just doesn’t know it? Perhaps they just need to *believe it*—or find some other way to wake up their mind to the level necessary to tap into this power.”

Dr. Francis considers this for a moment. “Okay, let’s say you *can* do this. What would you do with that power?”

“I help people.”

“How, exactly?”

“Well, like with this fighting in Syria, for example.” Caleb’s tone shifts, his voice gaining an anxious edge. “I have a feeling it’s going to escalate out of control. I’ve been having visions of the U.S. and its allies being drawn into the war directly, countered by Russia, who paints us as an international bully. They’ll drum up the formation of a new set of Axis powers, fracturing humanity into a new Axis and Allies, setting the stage for World

War III.” His breathing grows shallow as his words rush together. “I can see it in my head.”

His agitation mounts. “We might not survive it. The planet might not survive it.”

Sweat beads on Caleb’s brow. His distress is palpable as he suddenly sits up, his breath coming in short gasps.

“Calm down, Caleb,” Dr. Francis says gently. “Calm down, it’s okay.”

But Caleb still isn’t listening.

“I feel like I might be able to stop it... like I *have* to do everything in my power to stop it.” His eyes are wide now, searching, pleading. “If you had this power, you’d use it, right?! You wouldn’t just sit back and let everyone die, would you?!”

Dr. Francis sighs, his voice calm but firm. “But you *don’t* have that power, Caleb. I know you mean well, but there’s no war coming. And even if there *were* a World War III, you can’t save the entire world by yourself. You know that, right?”

Caleb swallows hard. His hands tremble as he wipes the sweat from his forehead. Slowly, he closes his eyes, willing himself to breathe. He passes out.

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When he awakens, he’s tied down again. The walls of the emergency psych ward loom around him, sterile and confining. He lets the air fill his lungs, lets the tension drain away, imagining his mind to be perfectly focused, like a knife so sharp that it can penetrate the very meta-fabric of the universe.

Finally, he knows what he has to do.

Flash.

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A university campus stretches before him, bathed in the golden glow of midday sun. Students drift across the quad, caught up in the rhythm of their lives, oblivious of the future. A young man strides forward with quiet determination, his gaze momentarily falling on the recruitment officer leaning casually against the cafeteria wall.

I wonder who he is?, the student wonders.

The officer is about to step forward and introduce himself to the candidate when his phone rings. He answers, his voice clipped, professional.

“Roger here.”

A woman’s voice crackles through the line. “Change of plans, Roger. We’ve decided to go with the Yale candidate. Pack up and head out.”

Sharing a look, the young man passes Roger. A silent acknowledgment. A nod. It’s as though they already know one another, even as they’ll never meet.

“Understood,” Roger says, slipping his phone back into his pocket. He lingers for a beat, watching the young man disappear into the cafeteria. Then, with a knowing smile, he turns and walks away.

A final flash.

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Caleb opens his eyes, a slow smile spreading across his face. He's alone. The silence of the cold, sterile white room presses in around him, but it doesn't matter. A brilliant red sweatshirt lays across his lap, its color vividly contrasting against the white.