



# Atop the Bell Tower (Spire #1)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** What if the person you loved most was the key to unlocking a power you never wanted?

Ethan Hernandez thought his sophomore year at Summit State University would be filled with late-night study sessions and cozy mornings with his boyfriend, Jason Havelock. But after a chilling Halloween carnival incident, Ethan's world is turned upside down. Haunted by relentless migraines, cryptic dreams, and a growing flood of voices in his mind, Ethan discovers he has a power he never asked for—and can barely control.

Jason, desperate to help, turns to Dr. Robert Bellamy, a brilliant but mysterious psychology professor with a dark past whispered about on campus. As Ethan's abilities intensify and the danger around them grows, the couple's bond is tested like never before. With secrets lurking in every corner and betrayal threatening to tear them apart, Ethan and Jason must decide if love is enough to overcome the cost of power—or if it will destroy them both.

Meanwhile, campus reporter Asako Kato investigates the strange disappearance of a graduate student, uncovering unsettling links to Dr. Bellamy. As her search for answers deepens, she is drawn into a dangerous web that entangles her fate with Ethan and Jason's.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

# Page 1

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Ezekiel Asmodiaus adjusted his fedora and pulled the collar of his wool trench coat snugly around his neck. While the October chill might not bite at him like it would others, he felt the effect suited him. In his years—more than he cared to count—he had grown impervious to the chill. Glancing at his antique timepiece, a reluctant tight-lipped grin crossed his lips.

Almost showtime.

Taking a position just beneath the shadow of the thicket, the bell tower loomed over the courtyard, its lone brass lion watching from the center of the fountain over the empty benches and trimmed hedges. Tonight, he and the lion were watchers, morbid spectators in the unfurling of centuries of planning. Someone in his position might have given up decades ago, but he was patient.

He knew the chess pieces were set and now he simply needed to watch.

While the lively noises of the Halloween carnival echoed in the distance across campus, he heard the muted brittle crunch of a tree branch nearby. Someone's footsteps were approaching. These steps were tentative. He pushed himself further into the darkness as a young woman stumbled into the light of the courtyard. As the girl emerged further into the light, her blonde hair gleamed silvery under the lamps, her torn white T-shirt hung just above her knees. Fresh dirt clung to her nails, as though she had just clawed her way out of a grave.

“No one. No one here,” she said, speaking rapidly with a hoarse voice .

Usually, this courtyard buzzed with frenetic university students bustling from class to

class. Yet tonight, the courtyard was empty save for this young woman and Ezekiel. She lumbered about, trying to gain her bearings. He watched as she meandered the courtyard, rubbing her eyes. She was clearly dazed, unsure of her current location.

He grimaced inwardly as he watched her wipe her hands against the stained garment. He felt for her, wished to intervene but knew he could not. Instead, he watched as she continued to wander, rubbing her eyes. She looked up and seemed to notice the time on the bell tower clock. Her head tilted as if calculating the time when she spotted water in the large fountain and ran toward it.

She cupped her dirty hands, taking in greedy gulps of water. Desperately, she plunged her hands under the water, splashing it onto her face. This seemed to clear her mind, but just as she came to, her face contorted. She gripped the sides of her head, her mouth gaping, taking on the frightening appearance of a Dali painting. A piercing sound drilled into her skull. She clawed at her head, a silent scream wrenched from her throat.

“No one here. No one here,” she babbled.

Ezekiel held his breath. If only he could change what was coming. But he did not control her fate.

She glanced around the empty courtyard when the bell overhead gonged a loud and sonorous sound. Her eyes darted to the top of the bell tower, and her plan became clear. Quickly, she ran from the fountain and toward the tower.

Now it begins.

He looked at his watch, a timepiece that did far more than simply tell the hour. Ezekiel swallowed hard as he watched the hour hand tick closer to zero, a silent reminder that her time was running out.

The girl disappeared from sight only momentarily. He looked up to see her emerge onto the ledge. Each clang of the bell pushed her closer and closer to the edge. It roared through the courtyard. She cradled her head in her hands, crying out in terror. His chest ached, and a fleeting wish of reprieve for the girl swelled inside of him.

But he knew what was next.

As the bell gave its final clang, the girl's hand fell from her face as she looked into the distance, mesmerized by the view, and leapt from the ledge.

Ezekiel watched as the girl fell succumbing to the impending ground below. Her eyes closed, and her hair gently fell behind her. He glanced at his watch as the time struck zero when a single lifeless thud echoed across the courtyard at the base of the bell tower.

Suddenly, a shockwave blew through the campus, as he vanished into the night.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:18 am*

THE LIGHTS OF the carnival blurred against the crisp autumn evening. Colors kaleidoscoped as the motion of the Ferris wheel ascended. Leaning back in the rickety seat, Ethan Hernandez traced lines of the glow with his eyes. The cool breeze ruffled his wavy black hair as the Ferris wheel car neared its apex, the looming university bell tower was visible in the distance. He closed his eyes for a moment taking a mental picture.

“You okay? You’ve been kind of quiet tonight?” Jason said nudging him gently.

Ethan opened his eyes turning to meet Jason’s. In the flickering light of the carnival below, Jason’s auburn hair caught an angelic glow, freckles dotting his concerned face.

“I’m good,” Ethan replied. “Just a lot on my mind.”

Jason Havelock smiled weakly, “Don’t clam up on me now, you know I’m allergic to shellfish.”

Grabbing Ethan around his shoulder, Jason pulled him closer. He felt Ethan lean in towards him, the faint zest of his green apple shampoo roused Jason’s senses.

Ethan chuckled lightly, though the sound was anything but convincing. Something heavy settled in Ethan’s chest. “I know. Sorry to be a downer. I really am enjoying myself. The masked killer with the chainsaw in the corn maze must have given me the jitters.”

“You’re not a downer, I still have the heebie-jeebies from that corn maze,” Jason said

tiling his head. His blue eyes narrowed slightly, “Besides you’re kind of my favorite person, even if you are a moody little hurricane.”

This time Ethan’s laugh was genuine, he nestled furthered into Jason’s shoulder. He took a breath and tried to relax. The Ferris wheel creaked as it came to a stop at the top giving them a clear view of the twinkling carnival lights below and the tree line of the campus beyond that. There was a scent of fried dough and caramel apples in the air, sounds of students laughing and music playing.

“Look at that,” Jason said gesturing at the sprawling lights. “Feels like midterms are months away.”

Ethan’s gaze followed, taking it all in. The heaviness in his chest eased slightly. “Yeah,” he murmured. “It does.”

Jason turned to him, his expression soft. “You know I —”

A loud metallic screech cut him off. The Ferris wheel rocked violently, the sudden motion nearly throwing them forward. Ethan grabbed for the edge of the seat as his heart pounded in his chest. Fear and adrenaline clawed through him cold and primal.

“What the hell?” Jason said, instinctively grabbing Ethan to steady him. The carnival lights below flickered as panicked voices rose from the ground.

Another violent shudder coursed through the Ferris wheel, jolting hard making Ethan’s stomach drop. Their seat tilted at a sickening angle, giving them an unobstructed view of the ground far below— too far below. The machine groaned in protest, its rusted gears grinding and shrieking sounding ready to snap. The gondola swayed wildly on its hinges, the metal creaking and groaning with each unnerving jerk of the Ferris wheel. The swing threatened to send Ethan and Jason tumbling out to the ground.

Ethan's head swam as hot sticky oil erupted in his stomach. Then, a jolt of adrenaline sent a sharp spike of pain through his temples. "I— Jason, I don't feel—" Ethan started, but words failed as a piercing migraine tore through his skull. A vice-like grip tightened around his brain sending waves of nauseating pain through him. He clutched his head, his legs became jelly.

"Ethan!" Jason's voice cracked with urgency, he placed his hand on Ethan's shoulder trying to steady him. "Look at me. Look at me, Ethan. Breathe. It's going to be okay. We are going to get down from here."

Ethan's breathing shallowed, coming in quick jagged gasps. The migraine blossomed in his head sending exquisite pain through his entire body. He felt his nervous system light up with fire.

Again, the gondola of the Ferris wheel jerked violently as Ethan's stomach lurched.

Tightening his hold, Jason whispered, "Ethan, focus on me. Just me. Breathe, okay? In and out. In and out. You're safe."

Ethan's eyes fluttered open, meeting Jason's steady gaze. The voices dulled slightly, as he focused on Jason's voice. Ethan nodded tentatively, forcing himself to take a slow deep inhalation.

The carnival crew scrambled below working furiously to stop the ride. Their shouts were barely audible over the grinding metal. With a groan, the Ferris wheel slowed, and the jerky movement settled into an uneasy stasis.

Jason kept Ethan close as the wheel lurched back into motion, descending slowly. "We're almost to the ground, just keep deep breathing." His voice was soft but steady. "I've got you."

Ethan nodded, breathing unevenly. As they reached the ground, his headache dulled to a hum yet the whispers of the pain ebbed at the edge of his mind.

They stepped off the Ferris wheel, and Jason pulled Ethan close, keeping a protective arm around him.

The ride operator ran towards them, “Are you okay?”

Jason shot him a dark look, saying nothing. Instead, he guided Ethan down the platform and past the growing crowd of carnival goers. The crew swarmed around the ride as another attendant corralled the lingering crowd to step back, a few of them with their phones out recording video.

Jason pulled Ethan through the commotion, his jaw tight with concern. “We’re going home,” he said.

Ethan didn’t protest as the noise of the carnival faded. He felt a flicker of gratitude for Jason’s steady presence. Yet something lingered inside of him. Something terrible had just happened. He could feel it.



### CHAPTER TWO

JASON PULLED HIS car into the parking lot of their university apartment building. Ethan had spent the ride home huddled in the passenger seat knees pulled against his chest. He cradled his head in his hands his eyes closed, as Jason surveyed him concerned.

“We’re home, babe,” Jason said softly. Ethan looked so small, so fragile. His already petit frame appeared even more delicate as he fought the throbbing in his head. What was there for Jason to do? How could he help him? He’d been quiet the whole ride home, falling further into himself. Something Ethan was no stranger to, yet Jason had thought they’d seen the last of this quiet boy a few months ago.

Ethan groaned as Jason gently roused him. “Want me to carry you up the stairs?”

Considering it for a moment, Ethan opened the passenger side door and got out of the car. Each step he took marshaled another jolt of pain in his head.

Soon they were up the stairs and in their modest one-bedroom apartment. The space was neat and tidy, decorated with movie posters and second-hand furniture.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Jason asked, his concern growing.

Ethan pulled his large blue hoodie with the university’s lion mascot over his head. He winced in pain as he pulled his head through, “I’ll be fine. My head just hurts. Probably just from the stress of the semester coupled with tonight’s little Ferris wheel fiasco.”

Jason gave a small grin, “Ferris Wheel Fiasco— sounds like a great punk band name,” he said nervously.

Ethan chuckled lightly then winced as a stabbing throb was produced behind his right eye. Jason always loved to banter when he was nervous.

“I’m going to bed. Maybe I can sleep it off,” he murmured.

Jason kissed him on the forehead and wished him goodnight. “I’ll go to bed soon. I need to finish some homework before class tomorrow.”

Ethan disappeared into their room and Jason grabbed his backpack from beside the door and took a seat at the desk positioned opposite the bedroom door. He grabbed his Bluetooth headphones and played music softly as he pulled a large statistics textbook from his backpack.

The small apartment was dimly lit by the single lamp light as he poured over the textbook. He enjoyed the feeling of losing himself in statistical equations for a moment. Or, at least that’s what he told himself.

Jason and Ethan had agreed to move in together about three months ago. They dated for nearly a year before taking the leap. Ethan was Jason’s first boyfriend and it had taken some time before Jason felt totally comfortable living together. Ethan had been the one to suggest the arrangement having grown tired of living in the dorms.

The two quickly fell into a comfortable rhythm. While Ethan was tidy and attended to keeping their space clean, Jason was handy and able to fix things and build the newly acquired furnishings. Ethan was particularly impressed after Jason had easily assembled a bookshelf for Ethan’s growing library of books. Indeed this was the first home that Jason could call his own and he was grateful he made it with Ethan. After completing the set of problems assigned by his statistics professor, Jason put away his

coursework, extinguished the lamp, and retired to the bedroom.

A tingling sensation of thrill shot through him as he pulled his shirt and pants off. He climbed into bed next to Ethan and pulled him close. If you had asked Jason what the best part of living with his boyfriend was, he would say — this. Getting cuddled in next to someone he loved was something he would not trade for anything in the world. As he pulled Ethan closer, he felt his eyes become heavy with sleep.

Jason jolted awake, his heart hammered in his chest, he felt the bed shifting beneath him. It wasn't subtle, the mattress trembled, a low rhythmic vibration running from the headboard to the edge of the bed. Jason bolted upright, his pulse spiked. He reached for Ethan and shook him gently awake but froze as the vibration ceased the moment his hand reached his boyfriend's shoulder.

"Ethan," Jason whispered, his voice trembling. Ethan stirred sluggishly, a faint groan escaped his lips.

"What's wrong?" He said, his voice thick with sleep while muffled by his face buried in the pillow.

Jason hesitated for a moment, the question seemed stuck in his throat. What had he just experienced? Was it a dream? How could explain something he didn't understand?

"I...thought I felt something moving the bed," Jason said finally. He paused then added, "It was vibrating."

Ethan pulled himself up slowly, turning his head towards Jason. He furrowed his brow, "Vibrating? This better not be one of your dirty jokes," he said yawning.

"No, it felt like. I don't know how to describe it. Like, there was an earthquake or

something.” Jason rubbed the back of his neck, all too aware of how absurd it sounded saying it out loud.

Ethan sighed, then winced as he pressed a finger to his temple, “It’s probably just your nerves, Jase. Halloween jitters from that corn maze, or something.” His voice was hoarse, and he winced once more as he squeezed his eyes shut. “Can you turn off the lamp? My head is still killing me.”

Jason nodded and reached over flicking off the lamp. The room fell into a thick darkness, as he heard Ethan quietly snoring. He slid back against his pillow, lying down.

His unease refused to let up.

The apartment felt too quiet now, he could hear every creak and groan. He stared at the ceiling, willing his ears to detect anything that sounded out of place. His muscles became taut waiting for something to emerge from the darkness and seize him or Ethan.

A faint creak came from the direction of the door and just beyond that was the living room. Jason’s eyes snapped toward the bedroom door. For a long moment, he refused to breathe. He strained to hear. Another creak followed, then a soft scraping sound — like wood dragging against wood.

Jason sat up again, his pulse quickened once more. “Did you hear that?” He whispered.

But Ethan gave no response, his breathing steady but shallow just across the bed. Jason swung his legs out of bed, his feet hitting the cool floor. He padded cautiously towards the doorway. The cool air of the living room hit his skin as he stepped out of their room. There was a dim glow of a street light just outside which cast a long

shadow across the floor.

He crept out of the bedroom, his eyes struggling to adjust to the darkness. He rounded through the living room into the small kitchenette off to the side. The space was eerily quiet, still even Jason detected the faintest movement. A barstool sat slightly askew at bar on the wall opposite the sink. He could have sworn he tucked it in, Ethan was particular about the kitchen.

Jason's stomach tightened as he took another step forward. A soft breeze brushed past him, as the skin rippled on his exposed chest. He stopped in his tracks, where had that draft come from?

The hairs on his neck stood on end as another faint creaking sound came from behind him. He whipped around, his heart pounding.

Nothing but shadows.

"Jason?" Ethan's voice called weakly from the bedroom, startling him.

Quickly, he was back in the bedroom, his earlier bravery evaporating. Ethan was sitting up now, his face was pale in the street lamp light that crept in. He rubbed the sides of his head, his expression tight with pain, "What's going on?" he asked, his voice worried but exhausted.

Jason hesitated at the doorway. Should he tell Ethan? But what was there to tell? He hadn't seen anything, just heard some creaks and groans. The barstool askew was hardly newsworthy. Finally, he forced a smile and said, "Nothing. It was nothing. Go back to sleep, babe."

Ethan looked unsure but fell back on his pillow with a groan. Jason sat at the edge of the bed, his eyes drifting towards the darkness in the living room hallway. Eventually,

crawling back towards his pillow, he struggled to sleep the rest of the night.

### CHAPTER THREE

Asako Kato

ASAKO KATO DRAINED the remains of her stale coffee as she sat in her cubicle. Her office was located in the Summit State University campus newsroom, this place had become her second home spending hours researching and writing about campus happenings. Her face was illuminated by the soft glow of her laptop screen. It cast sharp shadows across her cluttered desk. Her fingers flew across the keyboard with percussive precision, the title blasted across the top of the page on the computer monitor read, Halloween Night Horror: Ferris Wheel Malfunction At Campus Carnival.

Was the title a little heavy-handed?

Sure, but her editor wasn't exactly known for his subtlety. She hoped the clickbait title would get him off her back. He had recently become obsessed with the clicks and engagement metrics of the campus newspaper, The Lion's Ledger, colloquially referred to as "the Ledger" by students, faculty, and alumni. After the switch from print media to an online publication, the editor struggled to make the digital shift forcing by a loss of readership.

Her hands paused briefly, hovering over the keys as she reread the draft. It was solid—fact-based, compelling with just a hint of sensationalism. The article was sure to garner a few clicks by the campus readers. She typed her final paragraph as her thoughts drifted.

Something about this evening felt off. Not only the Ferris wheel, but the energy on campus had a static to it. A kind of buzz her journalist intuition recognized as “there’s more to this story.”

She dismissed the thought.

Satisfied with the piece, she clicked ‘ send’ on the draft and leaned back in the dated office chair. Her eyes shifted to the corkboard that hung above her desk. There was an array of newspaper clippings, handwritten notes, and printed emails chaotically sprawled across it. At the center was a photo of Naomi Halston, smiling stiffly for her university ID. Just beneath the note read, Missing Graduate Student, Psychology Department, no leads.

Asako reached for her leather-bound notepad — a graduation gift from her mother, a stationery enthusiast. While other journalists for the Ledger had gone digital with their tablets and laptop computers, there was something grounding for Asako about paper and pen. She flipped through the pages of handwritten notes, “Missing. Presumed Dead?” she said reviewing her last entry. Naomi had been gone for weeks, with no sign of foul play — or any sign of her at all, in fact. She had been reported missing by her roommate and the campus police had all but given up. Noting it as a likely runaway case.

Asako was not convinced.

There was something to this story that she couldn’t articulate.

Asako had visited Naomi’s roommate days after she was reported missing. Naomi lived in the graduate housing and shared a two-bedroom apartment with an engineering graduate student from Russia. The roommate was not exactly friendly when Asako showed up unannounced and was quite indifferent about Naomi’s disappearance.



“She hasn’t been home for a whole week and I’m worried she has skipped out on her part of the rent,” the roommate said, taking a deep drag from her cigarette. She had met Asako on the front stoop of the graduate student condo where she had held a glass of clear liquid in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. The roommate did not strike Asako as the type of person to worry much about anything.

“Was she acting weird? Anything out of the ordinary?” Asako asked.

The roommate frowned and shrugged her shoulders, “Who am I to say what is ‘weird’ or ‘out of the ordinary?’ But she did seem a little, how do you Americans say, ‘frustrated.’” she said with a thick Russian accent.

“How so?”

The roommate took a deep pull from the clear liquid in the glass. “She came home from class one day complaining about her professor. She said he was quite impossible to please. Something with her research wasn’t going according to plan.”

Asako scribbled furiously in her notepad, “Do you know what she was researching?”

The roommate shrugged indifferently, “I am a real scientist. She was studying ‘feelings’ or something. Psychology belongs in the liberal arts. It is not a true science.”

Asako had suspected she had gotten everything she was going to get from her.

Naomi Halston had beaten the odds to be at Summit State University. A child of the foster care system, a dynamic undergraduate student, and a doctoral student in psychological science with a passion for helping children in the foster care system. Naomi had even been short-listed for a prestigious fellowship with the university. Her pen scratched across the notepad as she underlined, No family, no connections.

This is where the story got more interesting.

No parents. No siblings — not officially anyway. Asako dug deep into her background and found very little. A few whispers of an unstable childhood, with some reports of emotional outbursts and behavioral issues. Or, at least, that was what Naomi's former foster brother said when Asako found him on social media. But he admitted they were both young and his memory wasn't so reliable after years of substance use.

Aside from things just not adding up, Asako felt a strange kinship with Naomi. Her own sister, Izumi Kato, had been similar to Naomi— volatile, misunderstood, and ultimately forgotten by the system. After one too many fights in school and rows with the system, their parents lost custody of Izumi.

Asako's family did their best to stay in touch with Izzy as she moved from foster home to foster home. Letters and birthday cards were sent. The occasional phone call was made. For Christmas one year Izzy had requested the hottest toy of the year and their parents scoured the city to find it. She eventually ended up in a residential treatment facility somewhere in California.

Her parents seemingly forgot about Izzy and their lives moved on. Rarely mentioning Izzy at the dinner table, her name strangely missing from their mom's famed Holiday Family Newsletter. It wasn't a conscious choice, Asako had realized. But forgetting Izumi just seemed to happen.

Although forgetting Izzy was not an unusual occurrence, In school, she was rarely called on by teachers, even with her hand raised high in the air, nearly brimming with the right answer, she was overlooked. Even her friends seemed to forget her. She was often chosen last by their friends to be on teams at recess, no matter how loudly Asako argued with the other kids on her behalf, Izzy was left out. When Asako's large extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins came to visit them they would go

for ice cream and Izzy would lag behind unnoticed. Her absence was only realized when someone counted heads.

“It’s like I’m invisible,” Izzi had said once, her tone was light and her face was strategically neutral as if not to convey any of her care one way or the other. They sit on the edge of Asako’s bed, swinging their legs. Asako didn’t know what to say, so she stayed silent. But the comment stayed with her all this time.

Before Izzy left, strange things started to occur. There were times when Izzy would vanish entirely, even when she had been right there. Once, during an argument with their mother, Asako swore she had looked right through her.

The last time Asako had seen Izzy, the family visited her at a group home. Izzy looked thinner, her hair cropped short and uneven. She’d smile brightly, but her eyes seemed to have dulled. She’d talk about dreaming of traveling, of being anywhere but there.

A few months later, her case worker called to tell them she had been transferred to a treatment center in California. A year after that, another call. The final call. Izzy had died, but no details, no service, no closure. Just a gaping void in Asako’s life. Her chest tightened at the thought.

Her eyes darted back to Naomi’s photo. There was something hauntingly familiar in the girl’s eyes. Maybe a distant sadness? Asako couldn’t shake it. Could Naomi have dealt with similar struggles as Izzy?

Asako flipped through her notebook, scanning her notes of the potential leads. A psychology graduate student, Research Assistant in Bellamy’s lab, and roommate reported her missing. All details she had endlessly poured over. What was missing?

She circled psychology and Bellamy and scoffed to herself.

She tapped the pen on her chin. The questions nagged at her. Asako was going to need to work over her source yet again. She grimaced at the thought. The leads had dried up and her editor wasn't happy about spending resources on an investigation of a story that fizzled nearly a year ago.

Her computer chimed with an email from her editor.

Great title! Can we get a quote from witnesses? -B

### CHAPTER FOUR

SHE SIGHED HEAVILY and rolled her eyes. Of course, he would want a quote. Asako flipped off the desk lamp and jiggled the mouse off her computer activating the screensaver. If she was lucky, she could get across campus and see if anyone was still around from the Halloween carnival. But it was late and she had her doubts.

She exited the student union, the glass door closed behind her with a thud. Her breath curled in front of her into pale clouds, the night air was brisk. She glanced at her watch the glow reading 10:30 PM. She pulled her wool coat tighter, cursing under her breath.

Her fingers tightened around her notebook as she trudged across campus. The frost-covered grass crunched beneath her feet as she made the ten-minute walk from her office to the nearby rugby field where the Halloween carnival was being held.

As she arrived, the large stadium lighting was extinguished one by one, plunging areas into pockets of darkness. Just a few lights remained, casting hard white beams across the remnants of the event. The sickening smell of fried food and burnt sugar lingered in the air, though the throngs of students had dispersed hours ago with the temperature plunging.

She quickened her pace, her boots clicking on the concrete. Spotting several unsavory-looking attendants making their way down the main path surrounded by booths on each side. Their laughter was sharp and brash as their cigarettes glowed between their fingers.

“Excuse me,” Asako called out, her voice firm.

One of the carnival workers turned, his silhouette illuminated by the faint glow of a nearby floodlight, a rough-looking man turned around pulling a cigarette from his lips. Asako recoiled internally, the man was rough-looking, older than she expected. His face was weathered by years of outdoor labor. He exhaled a plume of smoke from his lungs, but it seemed mixed with breath and condensation creating an eerie haze around his face.

“I’m with the Ledger, the campus newspaper,” she said stepping closer. “I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the Ferris wheel thing that happened tonight?”

The man’s eyes narrowed to slits, he looked Asako up and down. She scrutinized him in return, taking in his grease-stained jeans, scuffed work boots, and a battered jean jacket — entirely too thin for this weather. He looked out of place on a university campus, like he belonged at a truck stop on the interstate somewhere down south.

“I don’t talk to reporters,” He grumbled, flicking his cigarette to the ground. It hissed as it hit the damp pavement.

Asako trailed after him, “Just a brief comment about the incident tonight for the article. I’m covering the story, it’s not like anyone got hurt.”

The man scoffed, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets, and continued towards his car, “Tell that to the kid who hurt his head.”

Asako froze for a moment, then jogged to catch up, “Head?” She repeated.

“Yeah,” he said, not breaking his stride, “Some kid drug his boyfriend off the ride. The kid complained about his head the whole time,”

Asako's pen hovered over her notepad as her mind raced. She mentally reviewed her notes. There were two names she had jotted down from the tip that had come from the Ledger's anonymous tip line, Jason Havelock and Ethan Hernandez. The tip hadn't mentioned anything about anyone being hurt.

"Do you know what happened?" She asked.

"Hell no! Why should I know that? I just work here." He said shooting her a look over his shoulder. He approached a beat-up car park beneath a flickering parking lot streetlight.

He pulled the keys from his pocket and unlocked the car. The door creaked on its hinges and he climbed behind the wheel. Jamming the keys into the ignition, the engine sputtered before rumbling to life.

Asako stepped closer, she shivered as a frigid breeze cut through her coat, "Wait," she said raising her voice over the rumbling of the engine. "Before you go — off the record. What caused the malfunction?"

He surveyed her dubiously as he rolled down his window. Asako held her breath, thinking he might refuse to answer. Surprising her, he shrugged, blowing into his hands to warm them.

"A power surge," he said finally. "Shot through the whole damn place. Nearly blew one of our generators."

Asako frowned, she gently bit the tip of her pen. "A power surge?" She repeated. "Does that happen often?"

The man nodded, "Never. It was weird as hell. Never seen anything like it before. We work hard to make those rides safe. It's how we make our living. The Ferris wheel

just locked up, like it had a mind of its own.”

He shifted in his seat, adjusting the heater vents. “Look I don’t know what kind of freaky stuff goes on at this college, but that was not normal. You ask me, you should be talking to the campus maintenance staff, not us.”

Asako thanked the man and she stepped back from his car. He rolled up the window and drove off. She watched as the red tail lights of the car pulled away, her mind churning with the details.

A power surge. Someone with a head injury. Two names from her notes — Jason Havelock. Ethan Hernandez.

She stared at the notepad and underlined the names. Something about these names on this night scratched her intuition. Asako turned and walked towards campus, the campus bell tolling in the distance.



### CHAPTER FIVE

Richard Bellamy

DR. RICHARD BELLAMY stepped out of his car into the morning buzz of Summit State University. He clutched his leather briefcase in one hand and a paper cup of coffee in the other. He breathed in the frosty morning air as he took another sip of the unsweetened coffee, making a mental note to buy creamer on his way home. He clicked the fob and his white BMW gave a chirp, one of the few luxuries he allowed himself. He exited the faculty parking lot, his reserved parking spot only a few minutes walk to the Henderson Psychology Building —a perk of being dubbed an Anita Sibley-Palmer Endowed Professor of Psychological Sciences.

The Sibley-Palmer endowed professorship was a highly coveted title awarded to only a few faculty on-campus for major contributions to their fields of study. Anita Sibley-Palmer had been a major donor to Summit State University and her estate had funded many projects on campus. The university's performing arts center was preparing an unveiling of the Sibley-Palmer Center for the Performing Arts.

To the chagrin of his colleagues, Bellamy was sure to note in faculty meetings he was one of five endowed professors across campus and the only one in the Department of Clinical and Neuropsychology. He enjoyed the surge of superiority when he was able to shoehorn it into a conversation. Alongside a handsome travel budget, the title provided him with a dedicated parking pass to the most exclusive faculty lot on campus with a few other added benefits.

He reached the large promenade of the sprawling campus which was alive with

motion. Students crossed pathways in clusters, bikes weaved in between them, and the hum of excited conversations mingled with the occasional bark of a student on a motorized scooter jetting across campus. If Bellamy had to describe the students in a word, it would be, “fine.” Bright enough, but they lacked the ambition he had grown accustomed to during his time at Harvard. He missed the ferocious intellect and near-cutthroat attitude students brought with them to his lab. He had taken it for granted. Mediocrity had become his new normal.

There were many things that he missed about his time in the Ivy League. But his research had taken interesting new directions and the Harvard board of trustees had grown leery of the press he was bringing to the school. Not to mention growing concern about Bellamy’s relationship with his research assistants. There were whispers of “inappropriate boundaries” with students. Bellamy knew what they said in their hushed gossip. They had suspected him of a romantic tryst with an undergraduate. Quietly accused of sexual impropriety with his subordinates.

The thought was laughable. What sexual favor could a feeble psychology undergraduate give to Bellamy that would be worth throwing away decades of his career?

Nothing.

Bellamy held himself above everyone including sniveling, overprivileged Ivy League students. Why would he settle for sex with a student, when women threw themselves at him during his lecture tours? There was no shortage of women ready to take Bellamy to bed.

He resisted them easily, there was only one woman for him.

A magnificent woman.

A perfect woman.

But she was gone now.

Bellamy sighed as he tugged the lapels of his tweed blazer and made his way across the central quad. Rays of golden sunlight glinted off the windows of the Summit Spire, the campus bell tower standing proud and handsomely at the heart of it all. A group of students had gathered at the base of the spire, their laughter rang through the quad. A nearby student in a hoodie handed out flyers for some ridiculous sustainability effort, his voice lost among the throngs of other students.

Summit State University, or SSU as the students called it, was a small but dynamic and growing respectable institution. Located between Boulder and Denver, Colorado, it straddled both urban and suburban landscapes. The campus offered a unique blend of accessibility and retreat.

As Bellamy traversed his walk to the Henderson Building a few students waved at him — a rather half-hearted gesture from those who recognized him as their professor, yet never dared speak to him directly. He didn't wave back, instead, he focused his mind on the day's tasks ahead.

The Henderson Building sat at the eastern edge of campus, it was a modern structure with large glass walls that seemed perpetually smudged from the students. Bellamy swiped his ID badge at the entrance and stepped into the familiar cool air of the lab wing. A scent of industrial cleaner was detectable in the air, but after 15 years on the faculty at SSU, Bellamy hardly noticed. He walked down a long corridor before reaching the entrance to his lab, the words Bellamy Neurocognition Lab were written on a handsome brass plaque at the eye line of the door. Stepping into the lab, the familiar faint hum of the equipment greeted him. A sound he preferred far more to the chatter of excitable undergraduates. He made his way through the lab towards the back where his office lay.

Pulling his phone from the inner breast pocket of his tweed jacket, his thumb scrolled through his inbox past the usual administrative hoopla. Emails from the faculty senate inviting him to give a talk to early career researchers and new faculty on seeking federal grants, prospective students asking about potential space in his lab next year, and an assortment of other emails. One email caught his eye, Dean Kerrigan: Request for Meeting.

Bellamy's steps slowed as he reached his desk, he clicked open the email. The message was brief, the tone clipped.

Dr. Bellamy,

Please come to my office at your earliest convenience to discuss recent concerns.

Best,

Regina Kerrigan, PhD

Dean of Henderson College of Health & Psychological Sciences

Bellamy dropped his briefcase on his desk. The fluorescent lights above cast a hard shadow across his face. He felt his jaw tighten.

“Concerns,” he uttered to himself, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. He imagined Kerrigan sitting in her overstuffed leather chair, her sharp ugly features twisted into a perpetual sneer. Dean Kerrigan was no fan of Bellamy, but the feeling was mutual.

Bellamy considered ignoring the meeting request. He had lectures to prepare and students to manage. Not to mention the mounting pile of data from his latest experiment to review. A meeting with Kerrigan was the last thing on his mind. But Bellamy couldn't shake the tone of the email — maybe it was Kerrigan herself that

made him hesitate. Usually, it was the Dean's administrative assistant who contacted the faculty to arrange meetings. This email came directly from Kerrigan herself.

He sighed then tapped out a reply.

Dean Kerrigan,

I will stop by your office after my morning lectures.

Dr. Richard Bellamy, PhD

Anita Sibley-Palmer Endowed Professor of Psychological Sciences

He pressed send and his phone made a whooshing sound as he slipped the phone back into his pocket. His fingers drummed on the suitcase and he considered what the "recent concerns" could pertain to. Was it a recent grant proposal he had submitted?

No.

Kerrigan wouldn't bother herself with such a triviality. Perhaps it was the department's budget. Or, no it couldn't be related to the missing graduate student. The campus police had questioned him and his lab assistants already. They had likely closed that case, right? The thought forced a tight knot into Bellamy's chest.

He heard the main entrance of the lab open and two graduate students chatting as they entered.

"Morning, Dr. Bellamy," one of them said. Her voice was bright, nearly painful in its cheer. Bellamy snapped to reality giving a curt nod already dreading the inevitable droll of questions about timelines and data errors that would follow. He heard the students make their way to their workstations.

Rounding his desk, he took a seat. The office smelled of coffee and old books, a scent that usually calmed him. His office walls were lined with certificates and diplomas from his work around the world. Bookshelves were positioned behind his desk and were lined with books, their spines neatly aligned.

He reached for the paper cup and took a last sip. He grimaced. Cold. Typical. He tossed it into the trash and turned his attention to his lecture notes. The email lingered, a nagging reminder of the university's waning patience with him — his research. Bellamy's time might be running out.

### CHAPTER SIX

Ethan Hernandez & Jason Havelock

THE MORNING SUNLIGHT peeked through the blinds of the bedroom window, casting slanted shadows across Ethan and Jason's shared bedroom. Jason stood at the edge of the bed adjusting his gloved hands, his backpack slung over his shoulder. He watched as Ethan lay curled on his side, cocooned in the blanket. His face was partially obscured by the blanket, and lines of tension on his forehead were visible.

"You skipping class today?" Jason asked, working to keep his voice neutral, but the concern leaked through.

Ethan groaned as he shifted under the covers, "I slept like shit," he snapped, his tone more harsh than he intended. "I'm sorry. My head is killing me," he continued. Rubbing his temples, he tried to dull the ache in his head. The migraine was threatening to flair up once more. "It's just a headache. It'll pass. Gonna try and sleep it off."

Jason hesitated, it was unlike Ethan to skip class. Academics were his top priority, so it was strange to see him cast it off so easily. The air in the room felt heavy. Should Jason tell him about last night? The shaking bed, the creepy sounds, the barstool askew?

No.

He had enough to worry about.

Jason reached down and brushed it gently across Ethan's exposed calf peeking out from the beneath the blanket, "You want me to bring you anything to eat—?"

"I'm fine," Ethan said cutting him off.

Jason's hand lingered before he withdrew it, "Sorry. I'm just worried."

Ethan sat up and threw the blanket back. His face was pale, his hair was in disarray. His normally warm brown eyes were dull and glassy, sitting sunken in on his face. Ethan winced and pressed his palm to his forehead, trying to abate the pain. "Just go to class, Jason. I'll be fine."

Jason's lips tightened, but he nodded. "Okay," he replied softly. "Just...let me know if you need anything."

Ethan gave no response, lying back down, he pulled the blanket over his head. Jason lingered for a moment, then turned and left. Ethan heard the front door click shut.

Spending the morning in bed, Ethan drifted in and out of fitful sleep. Just as he would fall off into something restful, the dull throb in his head would jerk him back from the edge.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered to himself. Ethan was not used to being this vulnerable, this helpless. Having been a foster kid since he could remember, he was used to relying on himself. Lying in bed felt like giving up, but the migraine came out of nowhere last night. It was debilitating. A pang of guilt shot through him at the thought of making Jason worry.

By late morning, Ethan's frustration had outweighed his pain. He pulled himself up and sat on the edge of the bed. The clock on the nightstand read 11:47 AM.



“I can’t stay like this. I have to do something.”

Ethan stood up, but dizziness overtook him as he braced himself against the edge of the mattress. He had classes and lab work, everything was piling up. His determination grew as he stepped away from the bed and fought the dizziness.

Ethan dressed quickly and moved to the bathroom. He brushed his teeth and surveyed himself in the mirror ignoring his rumpled appearance. Normally, he was careful to maintain rigid hygiene and grooming, a habit picked up in living in filthy foster homes, but now he was just glad he could stand upright. The pain in his head ebbed on-and-off, as he splashed water on his face. He grabbed a coat off the rack adjacent to the front door and stepped out into the chilly morning air.

The walk to the campus health center felt endless despite his and Jason’s campus-based apartment. A living space they were lucky to obtain. Ethan occupied himself with the thought of the two of them moving in together so quickly after starting to date. After sharing rooms with his foster brothers was reluctant to sharing a living space again. While in the dorms, his scholarship had afforded him his own room. Yet when a one-bedroom apartment came open and dorm life had grown tedious, he and Jason agreed to try it out. Much to Ethan’s surprise, he and Jason were complimentary cohabitants. Jason was tidy enough and part of Ethan didn’t mind cleaning up after him. Made them feel like a real couple and the apartment felt like a real home. Something Ethan had previously not had.

He reached the campus health center and was greeted by a disinterested receptionist. His head was pounding again, a steady drumbeat making it hard to focus as the receptionist droned on with her questions. After completing the appropriate paperwork, Ethan took a seat in the lobby.

Eventually, his name was called, and his vitals were taken by the medical assistant who quickly exited the exam room to another patient. Ethan sat on the exam table, the

paper crinkled beneath him. The fluorescent lights flickered, sending little shards of ache through his eyes and up to the crown of his skull. There came a knock on the door and a large middle-aged man with a receding hairline and glasses perched on the tip of his nose stepped in.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Alberts,” he said carrying a laptop. Ethan watched as he took a seat on a stool with wheels, he perched the laptop on his lap and began clicking through screens, having yet to look up at Ethan.

“What brings you in today?” The doctor asked as he continued to click on the laptop with the enthusiasm of someone filing their taxes.

“It’s my head,” Ethan said, his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat, “I have this awful migraine. It seems to be getting worse and I’ve been able to sleep.”

The doctor sighed and continued typing. He set the laptop aside and made eye contact with Ethan for the first time, he pulled his stethoscope from around his neck placing it in his ears.

“Lift your shirt,” the doctor sighed.

Ethan thought it strange, complaining of a headache but the doctor clearly wanted to check his heartbeat. Ethan did as he was instructed, slid off his coat, and pulled up his hoodie revealing his thin torso.

The doctor placed the stethoscope on his back and then on his chest. The chill of the metal forced a wince out of Ethan.

Stop moving kid.

“I’m sorry. It’s just cold,” Ethan said

“Mhmm...what’s that?” the doctor said pulling the stethoscope from his ears.

Ethan frowned, pulling his shirt down, “You said stop moving, I was just replying the stethoscope was cold.”

The doctor gave him a blank look, “Did I say that?” Shrugging he grabbed his laptop and started typing again. “Okay, kiddo. It sounds like a headache caused by stress, lack of sleep, or staring at screens too long. You probably need to cut back on the caffeine and get some rest.”

Ethan clenched his jaw. He would rest if it wasn’t for this damn headache. “This feels...different. Not just stress-induced. The pain — it’s sharp, like a spike poking through my head. Other times like a vice squeezing my brain. My vision is blurry for no reason. It’s...” Ethan trailed off, unsure how to put the rest into words.

The doctor glanced from the computer screen, raising an eyebrow. “Blurry vision, sharp pain...well let’s just hope it’s not a tumor, right?” He chuckled as he peered over his reading glasses back to his computer screen.

Kids these days stare at their phone screen for hours on end and they think it's brain cancer when their head starts to hurt.

Ethan froze, and his stomach dropped, “A tumor? Cancer?” he whispered.

The doctor waved him off, “Did I say cancer out loud? I just mean it’s definitely not a tumor.”

Ethan's brow furrowed. Did he say cancer out loud? He was sure he had heard it.

Alberts flipped his laptop screen closed, “Look, it’s probably just a tension headache mixed with some mild insomnia. I’m going to prescribe something to help you sleep.

It's a mild sedative. Take it easy for a few days, drink more water, take the pills, and you'll be fine."

The doctor scribbled out a prescription on the pad and tore off a thin sheet of paper.

"Here you go," the physician said, handing it to him. "Take one before bed. Should knock you clean off your feet. Give your brain a break."

Ethan took the slip of paper and muttered, "Thanks." The prescription felt thin in his hand, weightless. All of this just because of a headache? He pocketed the prescription and made his way out of the clinic.

Had he heard the doctor right? Ethan wasn't sure, with the pounding in his head, it was hard to tell what he heard and what he thought. On his way out of the building, Ethan nearly collided with someone's shoulder.

"Sorry," he said.

"Mr. Hernandez," a familiar voice replied snapping Ethan out of himself.

It was Dr. Richard Bellamy in the hallway. The older man was dressed well in his tweed blazer and polished shoes, his greying hair combed neatly — a stark contrast from Ethan's disheveled state.

"Oh hi, Dr. Bellamy. Sorry about that," Ethan murmured.

Bellamy surveyed Ethan, giving him an appraising look. Ethan felt Bellamy's sharp blue eyes scanning his unkempt hair, the dark circles under his eyes, and his hunched posture.

"We missed you in this morning's lecture, Mr. Hernandez," Bellamy said with

authority.

Ethan straightened instinctively, though wincing as he did. “Sorry, Dr. Bellamy,” he said, sounding hoarse. “I wasn’t feeling well today.”

Bellamy tilted his head, his gaze lingered on Ethan’s face. “I see,” he said slowly. “I hope it is nothing too serious. You don’t look yourself today.”

Ethan gave a weak smile, “Just a headache. Jason took notes for me today. I went to the health center. They gave me something to help me sleep.”

Bellamy nodded, “Good thing you have Mr. Havelock. You two are quite a pair.” His expression conveyed nothing. “As well, sleep is essential, especially for someone in your position.” His tone was measured, almost deliberate. “I trust you’ll be back in the lab later this week?”

There is work still to do.

Ethan's eyes snapped to Bellamy’s who continued appraising him. “You and Mr. Havelock show a great deal of promise. I look forward to writing your recommendation letter, but that can only occur if you take care of yourself.”

“I’ll be back to the lab soon. I know there’s a lot of work to do,” Ethan said.

Bellamy's eyes narrowed slightly and then stepped forward towards Ethan placing his hand briefly on Ethan’s shoulder. The gesture felt both paternal and calculated, “See that you do. We have some exciting developments in the lab. I want you to be a part of them.”

Undergraduates would kill for the opportunity.

Ethan smiled weakly, “I understand. Jason and I are lucky to work with you.”

Bellamy pulled his hand back and his eyes met Ethan’s. “Yes, well, I look forward to your return.”

With that Bellamy walked into the building. Ethan stood there for a moment, dazed. The encounter was unsettling, he couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Ethan’s head swayed, the migraine threatening to emerge in full force once again. He rushed towards the direction of the campus pharmacy to fill the prescription hoping for some relief.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Richard Bellamy

BELLAMY EXITED THE student union with a fresh cup of coffee in hand, as he reflected on the strange encounter with his lab assistant, Ethan Hernandez. A rare exception to the droll mediocre undergraduates he had come to expect from this university. Ethan was the other half to Jason — a romantic match made in the confines of his sterile lab. It would warm Bellamy's heart if that part of him hadn't died alongside her.

The soft rustle of leaves accompanied him as he strode across the campus's central quad. The air nipped at his face and contrasted with the stiffness in his fingers grasped around the warm paper cup of coffee. Students shuffled in his clusters as the Summit Spiral chimed the change of the hour. After finishing his morning lecture notes, he made his way towards the Henderson building, towards Dean Kerrigan's office.

Bellamy adjusted the strap of his leather briefcase with his free hand. He inhaled deeply as he approached the steps of the Henderson building. Despite appreciating the crisp Colorado autumn afternoon, his gaze lingered critically at students milling around. Their hoodies, ripped jeans, and phone screens dominate their attention. The amount of distractions in this world — too many to count. If they only knew what those devices did to their attention spans.

Summit State University was no Harvard. Not by a long shot. The campus had its charms, but it lacked the history, the gravitas, and the fierce sense of ambition of his

alma mater and former teaching institution. After finishing his doctoral work in clinical psychological science at Harvard, he was awarded a prestigious post-doctorate and eventually a tenure-track teaching position. Before he was surrounded by Nobel laureates, cutting-edge researchers, and Pulitzer prize winners — true leaders in their fields. Here he dealt with small-town politics and middling academic standards.

Recently, the university instituted a “College-For-All,” campaign aiming to make college tuition free for anyone able to gain admission to SSU — which wasn’t difficult. The university accepted anyone with a pulse and fledgling GPA. Bellamy thought the whole campaign undermined the notion of merit-based academics. It removed the stakes. If students did not have to work hard to gain admission, what was the point of seeking “higher” education? Thankfully, Bellamy had distanced himself from those efforts through a series of multi-million dollar grants that afforded him the power to have his courses taught by graduate teaching assistants.

He paused to glance at the Summit Spire before entering the Henderson building. Something ached in his chest. The frame of the spire against the clear blue sky nudged a sting of regret inside him.

He ignored it, as he always did.

Bellamy reached the administrative wing of the Henderson building. He wanted to divest himself of this meeting with the dean as quickly as possible. Lecture notes, grant proposals, and data analysis, all occupied his mind as he walked down the carpeted corridor to the dean’s office suite.

He entered and the door clicked shut behind him as he stepped into the reception area. It was a plush, well-furnished office space. A young administrative assistant glanced up from her computer and offered a practiced smile.



“Dr. Bellamy?” she asked brightly, though her eyes showed no real interest. “Dean Kerrigan will see you soon. Please take a seat.” She gestured towards the large leather sofa adjacent to her desk.

Bellamy nodded, offering little in the way of acknowledgment. He scanned the room, his gaze settled on a large oil painting of the college’s founder— Jonathan Summit. He sneered inwardly, that couldn’t possibly be his real name. Finding a seat, he lowered himself with a sigh and set his briefcase beneath him.

The leather sofa was stiff, unyielding — much like the conversation that awaited him within Kerrigan’s office. He imagined the double doors of her office, perched on her overstuffed leather chair, her face glowering. The assistant returned to her typing, the rhythmic clatter filled the otherwise quiet lobby. Bellamy closed his arms, his irritation rising. He stared blankly at the wall ahead of him, his thoughts wandering to the email subject line, “Recent concerns.”

Regret stung him again, this time he couldn’t dismiss it. He glanced at his hands, faint wrinkles beginning to set in. He wondered— not for the first time— where had things gone wrong?

The dean’s office door creaked open slicing into his thoughts. A voice from inside, sharp and nasal, called out, “Dr. Bellamy, please come in.”

He leapt from the chair, grabbing his briefcase, and coffee. Stealing himself he entered Dean Kerrigan’s office.

Dr. Regina Kerrigan sat behind an expansive mahogany desk wearing a sharp expression. Sharp enough to cut glass. Her gray hair was pulled back into a severe bun, and her piercing green eyes gave her the air of a bird of prey ready to strike.

“Dr. Bellamy,” she said, her tone clipped. “Please have a seat.” She gestured towards

the two chairs positioned in front of her desk.

Bellamy sat, his back stiff as a board. His throat had suddenly gone dry.

“Let’s skip the pleasantries and get to it. Shall we?” Kerrigan said reaching for a stack of papers on her desk, she pulled out a glossy-covered academic journal. “This,” she said, as if presenting smoking gun evidence in a court trial, “is what has donors in an uproar. They’re calling my office in a frenzy.”

Bellamy’s stomach sank. He recognized the edition of the journal, which contained his most recent scholarly publication, *Retrocognition & Temporal Perception: An Investigation into Neuropsychological Basis of Nonlinear Memory Recall and Temporal Displacement*.

The article was indeed provocative. He had to call in a favor with the journal’s editor for it to see peer review and he pulled more strings to have it published. He had expected pushback, people rarely understood innovation at first. They often resisted it. But he hadn’t anticipated it so quickly, nor did he expect the dean to catch wind of it so soon. Bellamy figured it would be like any other new academic theory — it would be debated at academic conferences, papers would be written in rebuttal, but it would eventually enter the academic discourse.

“Psychic time travel, Richard?” Kerrigan continued. She flipped open the journal with a flourish, “This is not science. It’s barely pseudoscience. This is an embarrassment to the university, and, frankly, it’s beneath you.”

Snapping open the journal, she read aloud one of the more speculative claims Bellamy made, “If retrocognition represents the mind’s ability to access memory-like imprints of future events, this suggests that human consciousness operates, at least in partial, outside the constraints of linear time.”

Bellamy's mouth was dry as he spoke “Dean Kerrigan, with all due respect —”

Kerrigan’s hand flew up in a sharp gesture, “I’m not interested in a debate of the merits of your research, Richard. I’m telling you that your work and time here is under scrutiny.” She threw the journal on her desk and leaned back in her chair, “When I brought you on, it was because no other university would look at you. I did this as a favor to you . The agreement was you’d keep your nose clean and bring grants and good press to the university and in return, we’d allow you to pursue your research— no questions asked, and leave you alone. But this, this is...”

She jabbed a finger at the article, “Is how you repay us?”

Bellamy felt his face go flush, he held his tongue. He was not accustomed to having his research excoriated nor was he used to being spoken to so directly.

“I wouldn’t call my work unconventional, Dean Kerrigan.”

Again, she held up her hand, “I don’t want to hear it, Richard. This university is working to rebrand itself as a serious research institution. This has no place here.”

Bellamy summoned his courage, “My work is groundbreaking. Uncharted waters. I’m a leader in my field. I have brought this university millions of dollars in grant funding — private, government, and military contracts.”

“Uncharted waters? This reads like the ramblings of a mad man, you’re losing your grip, Richard. It is turning us into a laughingstock!” Kerrigan snapped. “And it’s not just this research. There’s also the issue of Naomi Halston.”

The air rushed from Bellamy’s lungs. He stiffened at her name.

“Yes, Richard, I’m talking about the graduate student who worked in your lab— the

one who disappeared and our campus police department is currently investigating. There are rumors that the city police are going to get involved. The university attorneys are keeping them at bay for now. There has been no link to you, but the optics are terrible.”

Bellamy balled his fist as they sat in his lap, “I had nothing to do with that. Naomi was —”

Kerrigan interrupted, “I don’t care about your excuses. Considering your history at Harvard, these crackpot theories, and the disappearance of that girl — if a journalist finds out about this, it will jeopardize more than our donors.”

Bellamy's fist clenched tighter.

“I will be convening an inquiry into your research activities. There will be a faculty panel conducting the investigation. Your funding is at risk, and if you’ve implicated the university in any way, the piggy bank is going to slaughter.”

Bellamy sat stunned, his breath shallow.

“I mean it, Richard. If you have so much as used a university-purchased Kleenex wrong, I’ll pull your lab’s funding and you won’t be able to rub two pennies together.”

The room felt warm, the air thick as Bellamy absorbed Kerrigan’s threat.

“Your job may have the protections of tenure,” Kerrigan added, she leaned forward lacing her voice with venom, “And I can’t fire you. But I can make your remaining time at this institution wildly unpleasant. Do you understand?”

Nodding stiffly, Bellamy stood.

“Good,” Kerrigan said leaning back. “Now get out.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DOOR TO Bellamy's lab swung open. He stormed in, fury buzzing in his chest like a nest of angry bees. The air hummed with the sound of the equipment, but Bellamy found no peace in the sound now. Instead, it gnawed and chewed at his nerves.

"Who does that bitch think she is? How dare she," he muttered. He tossed his briefcase on a nearby table. "That second-rate glorified middle manager and third-rate academic wouldn't know innovation if it bit her in the ass."

His voice rose, echoing off the sterile lab walls. Bellamy had long since been secretly derisive of Kerrigan's scholarly identity as a cultural sociologist.

Pacing the room, his mind raced. The inquiry would likely be filled with jealous colleagues aiming to interrupt his research. With the potential for his funding being frozen — everything was in jeopardy. It was falling apart all around him and just when he was on the verge of discovery. He could feel it in his bones, something big was about to happen. His research was just about to blossom into something that would launch him to new heights. But how could proceed without resources? Frozen funding meant no lab or teaching assistants. He'd have to go back to teaching his courses himself. No more lavish excursions to academic conferences. He'd be reduced to another mindless academic grinding away in the machine of the university.

No, this could not stand.

His thoughts were interrupted by a faint noise. He turned quickly, spotting Jason Havelock hunched against a workstation in the corner. He wore headphones and looked completely absorbed in his task.

Bellamy hadn't realized anyone else was in the lab. His irritation roared inwardly.

"Havelock!" He barked startling Jason.

Pulling off his headphones, "Hi...hi, Dr. Bellamy." Jason said, cautiously. He stood, the stool scrapped against the linoleum floor.

"What are you doing here?" Bellamy snapped, though he was well aware of the answer.

"Just processing survey data, sir," Jason said his voice wary. He rubbed his eyes, fatigued from staring at a computer screen. "I'm coding the open-ended responses from the recent semi-structured interviews the doctoral students conducted."

Bellamy shot towards the screen, there were rows of text highlighted in various colors. Jason clicked a line, dragging the mouse to assign a proper code.

"The responses are about what you expect." He said with a hint of sarcasm.

Bellamy frowned, folding his arms. "How long is that going to take you?"

Jason's eyes darted from the computer screen back to Bellamy, "I'm about halfway through. It's a lot of redundant answers to code — 'stress from school, 'weird feelings,' the usual."

Bellamy's lab had recently embarked on a research project examining the link between stress and dreams. He hypothesized that with the proper amount of stress

induced on the subject, he could induce déjà vu. A potential stepping stone towards retrocognition.

“Fine. Continue,” Bellamy said waiving his hand. Without another word, Bellamy stalked to his office and slammed the door. The frosted glass rattled.

Jason's eyes searched the room. He frowned and putting his headphones back, he returned to his work.



### CHAPTER NINE

Jason Havelock

JASON LEANED BACK in his chair, his spine unfurled with a series of small and satisfying cracks as he stretched. The quiet hum of the equipment filled the lab. The glow of the computer screen illuminated the darkened space. He rubbed his eyes, briefly glancing at the equipment wondering what they were for. Jason had never seen anyone use it including Dr. Bellamy.

The look on Bellamy's face popped into his brain like a jump scare. Something had him upset this evening. Jason yawned and checked his phone — no texts from Ethan today. His thoughts lingered on Ethan for a moment hoping he was getting rest and that his migraine had receded. Concentration was in short supply today as Jason wrestled with coding the survey responses. It was tedious work, taking it one monotonous line at a time.

A creaking sound broke the stillness, just as Jason returned his headphone to his ears. Glancing up, he was startled as a figure appeared in the doorway. The jitters from last night in the apartment had not quite subsided. Jason relaxed when he noticed Mr. Archie, the building's janitor. Pushing a cart loaded with cleaning supplies, Mr. Archie gave a look of mild surprise.

"I'm sorry to disturb you young man," Mr. Archie said warmly as he leaned against the cart. He was a tall, wiry, elderly black gentleman with a slow but deliberate gait. There was warmth in his demeanor that set Jason at ease. His grey-flecked hair was cropped short and neatly trimmed and his eyes were framed by a pair of simple wire-

rimmed glasses. He wore a sharply starched blue uniform with an embroidered name patch.

“No, problem, Mr. Archie. I’m just finishing up for the evening,” Jason said standing up.

Mr. Archie chuckled, “You almost gave this old man a heart attack.” He patted his chest, “This ticker ain’t what it used to be. What in the world are you still doing here at this hour?”

Jason smiled sheepishly and shrugged, “Sorry, I get that a lot. I’m just finishing up some coding. Bellamy was in a mood today.”

Mr. Archie shot a look towards Bellamy’s office. The glass was dimly lit, Bellamy likely still in there pouting. “Yeah? Boss got you burnin’ the midnight oil.”

Jason packed his knapsack, shoving a notepad and his headphones inside, “I’m burnin’ something...myself...out.” He muttered.

Mr. Archie shot him a glance as he shuffled around the lab grabbing a small waste paper basket from under a research assistant’s workspace, “Don’t work too hard young man. You have a long road ahead of you.”

Jason nodded politely as he donned his winter coat. Zipping it up, he threw his knapsack over his shoulder.

“Say, young man. Where is your other half? The two of you are usually here together,” Mr. Archie said squeezing the trigger of a large spray bottle onto an empty whiteboard. He began wiping in a large circling motion.

Jason stepped towards the lab door, “Ethan, is home sick. Some kind of bad

headache. I'm headed home to make him some dinner."

Mr. Archie smiled, "That's good. You need to take care of each other. The two of you make a fine couple. Handsome. Smart. Polite. The world ain't ready for you two."

He snickered as he finished wiping the board off.

Mr. Archie had long grown accustomed to Ethan and Jason as a pair, often referring to them as the 'dynamic duo.' With the two of them frequently putting in long hours of data analysis in the lab, Jason felt comfortable around Mr. Archie. There was a sort of quiet wisdom that he carried.

Jason turned to leave, bidding Mr. Archie goodbye.

"One more thing, young man," Mr. Archie's tone shifted to something more grave. "Be careful walking home alone. That young lady — they say she went missing 'round this time."

Jason gave a polite nod but inwardly dismissed the warning. Naomi Halston, Jason thought. Everyone knew about that poor girl, she was a graduate student in Bellamy's lab, but Jason knew surprisingly little about her. Of course, the doctoral students had little to do with undergraduate research assistants — often leaving notes on his and Ethan's workspace about tasks to complete. Her disappearance was certainly strange, but Jason was a broad-shoulder former lacrosse player. If someone tried anything, he knew he could handle himself.

"Thanks, Mr. Archie, I'll be careful," Jason replied placatingly.

"Be sure that you do, young man. Your partner-in-crime," Mr. Archie said, his eyes narrowed slightly, "that other young man needs you now more than ever. The two of you have a long journey ahead of you."

Jason smiled and gave a quick nod leaving the lab. His head was swimming from staring at the computer, lack of sleep, and now the janitor's cryptic warnings. As he reached the exit of the buildings, Mr. Archie's words ping-ponged in his head, now more than ever.

Jason stepped off the last step of the building and into the chilly night air. The campus was still, and the pathways were empty. Jason walked towards his apartment just a few minutes from the lab. He quickened his pace and his pulse beat just a bit faster than usual. Mr. Archie's warning refused to leave his head.

Shortly, Jason was home, his body relaxed as he opened the door and walked in. The cozy one-bedroom had a glow with the one-lone lamp on. The scent of Ethan's spicy cologne lingered faintly through the space. This grounded Jason after a strange evening. He set his bag down softly on the sofa so as to not disturb Ethan.

Peeking into their bedroom, he glimpsed Ethan curled underneath their blankets. His face was soft with sleep. Another wave of calm ebbed through Jason as he watched his boyfriend gently sleeping. The moon cast a faint glow through the bedroom window. Jason spied a prescription bottle on the nightstand, carefully he padded into the room and picked it up, turning it over in his hands.

Relief, again ebbed through him as he realized Ethan finally got some help. Just for a moment, Jason stood there watching, his chest tightened with love and worry. It didn't seem fair. Ethan looked fragile, just as Jason had started to decrypt Ethan's inner world.

Early in their relationship, Jason learned that Ethan had an independent streak in him. He chalked it up to Ethan's time in the foster system. Whenever times got stressful or hard, he watched as Ethan clammed up, erecting a wall around himself. Only recently had Jason begun learning how to slowly scale those walls. Jason learned it best to let Ethan come to him for help. All though, Jason was never too far away, space was

something Ethan valued.

Jason having grown up in a very close-knit family, his sister always in his business meant it took some time to get used to Ethan's distance. Learning to interpret Ethan's moods also took some time. Jason prided himself on his extraversion, but Ethan's aloofness was a shift. While he was never uncaring, there was a shyness to Ethan that, if Jason was honest, was incredibly attractive. He liked trying to decode Ethan. It felt like peering into Ethan's private little world reserved only for Jason.

Jason's mind drifted back to the day they met. SSU freshman orientation was a sunny day in August. The campus was bustling with freshmen moving into the residence halls, signing up for clubs and Greek life. Jason's said goodbye to his parents as they pulled away having helped him move into his dorm room. He held the door for Ethan as he tried to balance a box in his hands.

"Need some help?" Jason said, cheerfully.

Ethan eyed him from under his jet-black curls his rail-thin arms struggling to hold the box, "I think I got it. But..erm...thanks."

Later that afternoon as students met out in the central quad, Jason sat with his new roommate and some other other freshman recently introduced. They joked and watched the other students conglomerating under the manicured trees, everyone preparing for the 'Welcome Weekend' barbecue. He spotted Ethan standing alone surveying the crowd with hesitation. Jason bounded towards him, waving emphatically.

Ethan recoiled slightly as Jason approached him, "Come sit with us."

Smiling tentatively, Ethan agreed as the two of them made their way back to Jason's friends, they were approached by a dowdy-looking graduate student with a clipboard.

“Hello, my name is Julia. I’m a graduate research assistant for Dr. Richard Bellamy, a psychology professor on campus. Would you be interested in participating in a research study about student stress? There is a \$50 stipend for your time.”

Ethan and Jason watched as the graduate student pulled a flyer from the clipboard. They both accepted it. Days later they showed up to the experiment and were attached to machines that hummed and beeped and they both consented to an oral swab. After which they were both given a crisp fifty-dollar bill for their time.

Jason looked around campus for Ethan, but he was a ghost. At least until one day, Jason received a phone call from Bellamy’s lab offering him the rare opportunity to be an undergraduate research assistant. A rare opportunity — low pay, but valuable experience. With dreams of graduate school, Jason accepted the position with relish. His name on an academic publication would come in handy for his applications to elite graduate schools.

Much to Jason’s surprise, Ethan had been offered the same opportunity. Soon the two of them were paired up by Bellamy’s senior graduate assistant to work on simple data analysis tasks. After a few weeks of late nights, Jason summoned the courage to ask Ethan out. Reluctant at first, Ethan accepted and the two of them soon found themselves in each other’s orbit indefinitely.

Those early days had been thrilling. Jason and Ethan worked late together sharing ideas, hopes, and aspirations. Jason had learned that Ethan wanted to go to medical school and Jason divulged his hopes to be a psychologist like his father. Jason watched as Ethan’s shyness melted away. Soon, Jason couldn’t imagine his life without Ethan.

Taking the final bite of his sandwich, very much an unsatisfying college student dinner, Jason finished the last bit of his homework. He sighed as he glanced at the clock .

Midnight.

Grabbing his laptop and stuffing it in his bag, his gaze fell on Ethan's laptop neatly perched on the desk beside him. A seed of worry sprouted in Jason's stomach, he hoped Ethan wouldn't fall far behind in his coursework.

No, he wouldn't let that happen. Quickly he snapped open Ethan's laptop and fabricated enough responses to their Economics homework to keep from raising too many red flags. Both of them being psychology majors, their courses were nearly identical anyway.

Satisfied, he shut the laptop and stretched with exhaustion. He padded to the bedroom, Ethan hadn't moved a muscle from where he lay earlier. Removing his shirt and pants, he slid under the covers and beneath the blankets. He pulled Ethan close to him who stirred slightly but not waking.

Jason wrapped his arms around him, holding him firmly. The weight of Ethan pressed against his chest competed with the heaviness of the day. Mr. Archie's warning, Bellamy's mood, and Ethan's migraine all cluttered his mind. He pulled Ethan just a bit closer, kissing the top of his head.

I won't let anything happen to you. Not now. Not ever.

But he lay there, his eyes wide open in the dark. A fear gnawed at him. Everything felt connected somehow, but exhaustion kept him from connecting the dots. Even with heavy lids, sleep came slowly. Soon, though, Jason drifted off into a restless sleep.

### CHAPTER TEN

Janine Farmer

DETECTIVE JANINE FARMER was a serious woman, a practical woman. After working for the Denver Police Department, she thought she had escaped the corruption of the city police when coming to work for Summit State University. Her superiors proved otherwise, but that's a whole different story.

A third-generation law enforcement officer, police work was as natural to her as breathing. She had no real intimate relationships to speak of, nor did she care to spend much time with her family. Farmer had a few close friends, former police officers themselves— who spent their days in the bars in Aurora — a Denver area suburb. She found work for the university dull at times, but the paycheck without the threat of another bullet wound helped her remain steady.

As a university police officer, her jurisdiction was comprised of all three square miles of Summit State University, if you included the newly acquired Sibley-Palmer University Medical Center. The 15,000-student campus worked much like a small town and so did the university police department.

While the department was small with three alternating patrol officers for routine matters, Detective Farmer was the only dedicated police detective on campus. Her duties included higher-stakes incidents than what the duty officers often responded to. While her fellow patrolmen responded to noise complaints on Greek Row, traffic and parking violations, or emergent campus issues— Farmer's duties were more concentrated. She collaborated with city law enforcement on cases concerning the



university, investigated sexual assaults all too common on campus, robberies, unlawful entry to campus facilities, and now the disappearance of Naomi Halston.

While the city university had expressed interest in taking over the case, university trustees and other powerful figures above Farmer's pay grade had intervened, placing their trust in her efforts. Publicly, the university officials stated they had full faith in SSU PD and Detective Farmer, but she knew it had more to do with optics than anything else. She didn't care either way, she took the case seriously despite the political pressure.

Stepping into Bellamy's lab, she took in the surroundings and wrinkled her nose at the sterile cleanser smell reminding her of a hospital.

"Hello, Dr. Bellamy?" She called out, but the lab was silent, draped in darkness save for the glow of the office light shining through frosted glass. She made her way across the lab, her hand resting on her firearm instinctively.

Tapping on the glass of the door that read, Dr. Richard Bellamy, Sibley Palmer Endowed Professor of Psychological Sciences, she called out once more, "Dr. Bellamy are you in?"

She opened the door and found Bellamy sitting at his desk hunched over his laptop, flipping through emails.

"Detective Farmer," he said snapping the lid of the laptop shut but not before Farmer was able to see the blurred faces of what appeared to be military soldiers. Gruff men in uniform, stern, and practice faces. Looking to be long since retired.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. I figured you'd be on campus, thought I'd drop in," She said. Farmer had been a detective for several years on the Denver Police Department, she knew the element of surprise was to her advantage when she came around with

more questions to ask. Not to mention, being a university police, she didn't need probable cause to enter university property.

Bellamy removed the glasses perched on the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes, "Not disturbing me at all. I was looking up some old funding sources..." But stopped himself, his exhaustion making him more loose-lipped than usual. "To what do I owe this late-night visit?" He continued, glancing at the clock: 8:45 PM.

She moved closer, her gaze sweeping the cluttered office. Her eyes lingered briefly on a framed diploma, then stacks of research documents piled haphazardly on Bellamy's book desk, "I had a few follow-up questions about Naomi Halston."

Bellamy shifted uncomfortably in his seat, "Of course. Please sit," He said gesturing to a chair across from his desk.

Farmer remained standing, crossing her arms. Her eyes were fixed on him. "You mentioned in our last conversation that you hadn't seen Ms. Halston outside of the labs in weeks prior to her disappearance. Is that still your recollection?"

Bellamy nodded thoughtfully, his teeth clenched in his mouth. He leaned back in his chair, trying to appear at ease with the question, "That's correct. Naomi was one of the senior research assistants. She was working on her dissertation research on data derived from a larger study we are conducting here in the lab. She was a bright young woman, exceptionally dedicated. Our interactions were strictly professional. A real shame about her disappearance. "

Farmer tilted her head slightly, "Strictly professional. Interesting."

The air in the room thickened, she pulled a notepad from her pocket and flipped it open. "We've had a few new developments in the case. I have an eyewitness report seeing a woman matching her description entering the Henderson Building late at

night on the day she was reported missing. Alone. Say around 9 PM, but our review of the security footage doesn't show her leaving."

A bead of sweat formed on Bellamy's temple. He grabbed a tissue from the desk and dabbed at his forehead, then cleaned his glasses.

"Hm, well," he began, his words measured. "The lab has multiple exits. It's possible she left through one of the side doors not covered by the cameras. It's not uncommon for students to work late, especially Naomi. She was well into her dissertation research. I had reviewed a few drafts of the first chapter."

Farmer didn't respond. She flipped to another page in the notebook. "Were you in the lab around that time that night?"

Bellamy's throat was dry, he cleared it, "No." He said almost too quickly. "I wasn't. I was on my way to give a lecture at the University of Notre Dame."

Farmer's mouth tightened, her eyebrow raised. "And no one else was working in the lab that evening?"

"As I said in our previous interviews, Detective Farmer, my graduate students make the schedule for themselves. They're each given a key with access to the lab. We provided your agency with the building schedule, if they're on that schedule, then they were here. If they're not on that schedule...well, you get it." Bellamy said, his neck started to sweat.

Farmer scribbled something in her notepad, "Is there anyone who could have been in your lab that wasn't on that schedule?"

"You would have to ask them. I don't supervise the day-to-day operations of my lab. That is Naomi's job. Or, well, it was." Bellamy responded, his voice trailed off.

“I see. Well, Dr. Bellamy, if you happen to remember anything else — anything at all — I’d appreciate a phone call.” She handed him a business card. “We’re trying to piece together Naomi’s movements that night. We’ve been able to account for everything up until about 9 PM that night.”

Bellamy took the card and forced a smile, “Of course, Detective. Happy to assist any way I can.”

Farmer nodded, turning to leave. She paused in the doorway. “One more thing,” she said, glancing back at Bellamy. “Naomi’s roommate mentioned she had been acting strange leading up to the day of her disappearance. Quiet. Distracted. She even told a friend she felt like someone was watching her and that she’d received some distressing news.”

Farmer exited the lab and gave the door one last glance over her shoulder. Was Bellamy telling the truth? Was his relationship with Naomi “strictly professional?” After the initial report of the girl’s disappearance, Farmer followed the few leads to interviews with Bellamy and his graduate students. It struck her as strange that his students were not very forthcoming. They hadn’t lied exactly, but their version of detail was thin at best. She knew that Bellamy bullied his students into signing Non-Disclosure Agreements, even extending to university officials.

The students had been reticent to share any real information and she had hit several dead ends. Only recently when after interviewing Naomi’s roommate had she made any headway with the girl’s state of mind and a name from her past. Otherwise, the details were slim and university administration was pushing Farmer to close the case.

She exited the Henderson building and stepped into her university-issued police cruiser, she had an early start tomorrow, and she had an off-campus interview to conduct.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Richard Bellamy

BELLAMY SAT FROZEN in the moment. He stared at the detective's card. His pulse hammered in her ears. The walls were closing in fast. His career was teetering on the brink. Naomi's disappearance, the inquiry into his research, and his funding slipping further away every day.

How much did Farmer know? How he wished he could read her mind, just a peek into the stoic detective's brain would let him know how many steps ahead he needed to be.

Bellamy tossed the card onto his desk and stood. Pacing the room, he felt the facade of everything he had built beginning to crumble. That girl's disappearance had been an unfortunate complication. One he hadn't anticipated. But he couldn't let it derail his work. No, in fact, he needed to increase the speed of his work. He was so close to something extraordinary. Pausing at his window that looked out onto a darkened campus, somewhere Farmer was piecing it together. He clenched his fists, forcing himself to calm down. Bellamy knew he needed to compose himself, and get ahead of this. There was too much he could lose.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Ethan Hernandez

ETHAN'S EYES FLITTED open, the soft morning light spilled into the room. He blinked a few times and he became aware of his body. For the first time since yesterday, the pain in his head reduced to a dull ache. But the sharp blinding spikes of pain weren't far from memory. He exhaled a long breath, and a small flicker of relief buzzed through him.

He turned his head, Jason slept and snored gently, laying half beneath the covers. His hair was tousled against the pillow looking serene, calm. Ethan's chest tightened and warmth spread through him at the sight of Jason sleeping peacefully.

I got lucky with this one. He's so damn patient with me.

Ethan knew how guarded he could be. At this point, it had become a reflex, vestiges of his time moving around from home to home. A new family every six to eighteen months. The way Ethan had figured, he had spent Christmas day from ages four to seventeen with a different family every year. He had been deemed "oppositional" by psychologists and received a diagnosis of "selective mutism" from another. Ethan was no stranger to therapists or psychiatrists. But he felt no real need for psychological intervention, it wasn't a mental illness that plagued him — it was the fear of getting attached then only to be rejected or abandoned. His mother had died of a rare type of brain cancer at an early age and he never knew his father. His case worker had said they met at a bar and there were even attempts to track down Ethan's father, but no such luck. With no extended family for Ethan to be with, he went into

the system and aged out. At eighteen-years-old with his high school diploma — cobbled together from three different high schools and one large box and one large trash bag of his belongings he moved into the SSU dorms.

Despite his troubled history with families, Ethan was a brilliant student. Studies had come easily to him, excelling in subjects with little effort throughout high school. He would have graduated valedictorian of his last high school had he been there long enough. Yet, there was drama when he transferred and the assumed valedictorian's parents raised concerns that a new transfer student didn't earn the right.

It didn't matter to Ethan.

He wasn't interested in hollow accolades anyway. However, his stellar grades and foster sob story— a dreadful characterization made by his case worker—made him a prime candidate for several generous scholarships now funding his undergraduate studies. Ethan had hopes to become a neurosurgeon someday and help those afflicted by the very cancer that took his mother. His memory of her was hazy at best, he remembered her beautiful amber-brown eyes and a warm smile. There were fragments of her lovely singing voice lulling him into a restful sleep, but the moment Ethan tried to grab onto the memories, they would fade.

Quietly, Ethan slipped out of bed. He stretched and tested the limits of his newfound energy. He felt a little stronger, a little lighter. Then a rush of gratitude sparked in him. He needed to thank Jason for everything. It may have been only a day or two, but Jason deserved an 'act of service' as the psychology blogs called it — a resource Ethan often consulted when navigating new challenges in his relationship with Jason.

In the kitchen, Ethan flipped through their humble pantry, and a small smile tugged his lips. He found a jar of Nutella and the idea struck him. Nutella crepes — Jason's favorite. With vigor, he set to work. There was a sprightliness to his movements, he hummed quietly to himself as he gathered the ingredients and tools necessary. While

in foster care, Ethan had learned to cook for himself, his foster parents being too tired or disinterested to prepare meals for him and his siblings. The smell of melting butter wafted through the house as it sizzled on the pan. Letting the pan warm, he prepared a makeshift crepe batter left over from the pancake mix he found. Quickly he mixed that together to the right consistency and ladled the first crepe onto the heated pan.

While he waited, he grabbed two large oranges from a fruit bowl near the stove and squeezed them into a carafe, setting them on the table with care. He set two plates, napkins, and silverware neatly as a place setting on the table. Setting the carafe of fresh orange juice in the middle. He moved with agility back to the stove and removed the crepes from the pan. In just a few minutes, he had a small stack of freshly prepared crepes on a plate.

In the next room, Jason stirred gently to the redolence of a sweet breakfast being prepared just on the other side of the wall. His eyes opened as he noted the bed was empty beside him. A sleepy grin crossed his face as he realized Ethan was up and around.

He swung his legs off the bed and stretched, elongating his arms. His nearly 6'1" frame was lean and strong, a testament to his years of lacrosse practice and early morning workouts. His fingertips brushed the ceiling and he yawned rolling his broad shoulders, he scratched his toned stomach and padded towards the kitchen.

Jason tousled his hair as he stepped to the doorway of the kitchen, watching Ethan move and humming to himself. A quiet joy blossomed in his chest as he watched Ethan move so fluidly and assuredly about the kitchen. He glanced at the perfectly set table a fresh carafe of orange juice and a handsome place setting awaiting their breakfast.

It was so Ethan, detailed, and thoughtful.



He watched as Ethan turned, crepe pan in his hand to set the final crepe on the stack.

Just then Ethan gasped with a start, dropping the pan, “Jason! You scared me —” Ethan’s words were cut off by a sharp smash from across the room as the orange juice pitcher shattered without warning. Glass shards sprayed on to the place setting and scattered across the table and on the floor. The juice spilled from the table onto the floor in bright orange rivulets.

Ethan froze for a moment, his shoulders tensed, grabbed the pan from the floor tossing it into the sink. Then dashed towards the table, mumbling, “I’ve got it. I’ll clean it up.”

“Wait, Ethan—” Jason stepped forward barefoot but something tensed his leg muscles, momentarily keeping him in place. Jason fought against the unseen force holding him in place, he flexed his legs willing them to move forward, but it was as if he was glued down on the spot. As if something invisible was keeping him stationary.

Ethan was already scooping up the glass shards with his bare hands before Jason was ambulatory again, able to take the few steps to the table.

Grabbing Ethan’s hands, “You’re bleeding,” Jason exclaimed. The blood welled up from small cuts on Ethan’s fingers.

“It’s nothing, it’s fine,” Ethan mumbled, palming the glass shards, his hands trembled. He stood up and walked over to the trashcan depositing the broken glass inside.

His hands continued to tremble, as the throbbing in his head began again. The dull ache materialized into something sharper.

“It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s just glass,” He rambled.

Jason reached up to a cabinet above the refrigerator grabbing the first aid kit, as Ethan ran his hand under the faucet of the sink. Grabbing a towel, Jason dabbed at the small cuts that formed in the palm of Ethan's hand. Quickly, he cleaned and bandaged the wound, "I'm sorry to startle you." Jason said, his voice quivering.

Ethan stood despondent, his gaze mechanical. By the time the mess had been wiped and swept up, Ethan felt his energy depleted.

The crepe lay on the plate near the stove forgotten.

"I just need to lay down," Ethan said quietly, retreating to the bedroom before Jason could interject.

Jason stood in the kitchen dumbfounded, it had all happened so quickly. What exactly, Jason was unsure. He heard the bedroom door click shut, as he stood rooted in place. Then glanced at the uneaten crepes still sitting on the counter. He picked up a fork and took a small bite. The sweet, nutty flavor bit at his tongue.

Something about it tasted hollow.

Jason felt a heaviness in his chest, gravity pushed inward until a hole opened up. Ethan was suffering and no matter what Jason did — no matter how hard he tried—he didn't know how to fix it.

He swallowed the bite and set the fork down, wiping a tear that formed in his eye. Jason sighed, he felt his throat go raw. What can I do? Is this my fault?

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Asako Kato

ASAKO KATO STOOD casually against the wall, her well-worn notebook in hand, scribbling idly while her ears strained to hear muffled conversation behind the frosted glass doors of the SSU PD reception area. A modest space, practical even, much like the department itself. The station was tucked in a corner in the far northeastern corner of campus, housed alongside other auxiliary and maintenance departments on campus. This building rarely saw students in the halls and Asako had grown used to the strange looks from the maintenance and facilities staff as she passed them. Asako had taken to loitering at the university police department and was known to most of the duty officers who had learned to largely ignore her.

Blurry figures were visible behind a long counter with a frosted glass partition separating visitors from the officer's workspace. Asako saw the familiar etching on the glass with the university's lion mascot and the words, "Summit State University Police Department" in bold letters. There was a small window in the glass to communicate with the receptionist, feeling much like a barrier, which Asako felt was intentional.

The air smelled of stale coffee as she shifted the weight onto her other leg she continued leaning against the beige walls, her chunky boots scuffing it lightly. Her eyes danced across the framed photographs of the university landmark, the Summit Spire prominently on display. There were plaques recognizing the department's service to the campus and adjacent to it a large community bulletin board littered with outdated flyers for safety seminars, bike registration, and reminders of the campus's

no underage drinking policy.

Asako's parents wanted her to major in something sensible and become a doctor, lawyer, or an accountant. Coming from a reserved traditional Japanese family, they struggled to understand her ambitions to be a journalist. The qualities necessary for such a job seemed at odds with the qualities her parents tried to cultivate within her sister. They were quiet, polite, but distant. Meanwhile, Asako was extroverted, nosey, and oppositional, always asking "why?" as a child.

In high school, while her cousins were gaining recognition as honor roll students, Asako was busy investigating rumors of the "mystery meat" in the school lunches. While in eighth grade, she skipped class to ingratiate herself with the grizzled lunch ladies, to learn about what the actual ingredients were used in the school cafeteria. She befriended them with her curiosity and effervescent personality, her relentless questioning led her to learn the school district had contracted with the same food distributor as the local jail to save a few dollars.

Afterwards, she wrote an excoriating exposé on her Tumblr about the quality of ingredients the poor lunch ladies had to work with. Parents were up in arms, leading to the principal and school board convening a special meeting where they agreed to hire an outside nutritionist to consult on the menu and change food distributors.

During the meeting, Asako and her family sat front and center, where the group of concerned parents referenced her article. While she beamed with pride as a budding investigative journalist, her parents were mortified. They quietly chided her for drawing attention to the family and discouraged any more unsanctioned undercover journalism.

Her legs ached as she ambled to the seating area consisting of four metal-framed chairs with thin, worn cushions. A small table in the center held a stack of untouched copies of the Ledger . She found her favorite seat and plopped down, the metal chair

groaned in protest. While impatient, Asako knew sometimes a lead presented itself, but other times you had to be willing to sniff it out. Scrape together bits of information to form a larger picture like a puzzle. Besides Naomi Halston wasn't just another story to fill the Ledger's page with. There was something off about the disappearance, something nobody else seemed to intuit. A girl with all that she had going for her, does not simply up and disappear. Maybe it was Asako's way of avoiding the truth of her sister, the two stories seemed so similar.

But how?

The door swung open, Detective Janine Farmer stepped out, her eyes sharp scanning the lobby. A momentary frown crossed her lips as her gaze caught Asako.

Snapping her notebook shut, Asako jumped from her seat and stepped towards Farmer who looked to be leaving the station.

"Kato," Farmer said, her voice flat. "Do you ever quit?"

Asako flashed her best innocent smile. "Just doing my job, Detective Farmer. You got a minute?"

Farmer sighed and brushed past her and out the station's glass door entrance. "No comment."

"I haven't even asked my question yet, Detective," Asako said with mock indignation.

"Before you do, like I said, 'No Comment,'" Farmer said striding through the hallway, towards the exit.

Asako lengthened her strides to match Farmer who was at least a foot taller than

Asako's short, petit frame," Come on Detective" Asako pled. "Just a quick update on Naomi Halston. Anything you can share? Leads? Suspects? Whereabouts? Anything?"

Farmer's brow scrunched slightly, "We do not comment on on-going investigations." She said, her voice firm but not unkind. "You need a better hobby, Kato. Are there any college boys...or girls your age, you're interested in?" Farmer continued, trying to distract Asako.

Asako jogged ahead stepping between Farmer and the exit, "It's both, and no, I'm on the clock."

Farmer stopped on her heel, giving her a disapproving look, but a thin smile flashed on her face. She put her hands on her waist.

"Come on Detective. People want answers. Her friends, her professors, her classmates — don't you think they deserve to know what happened to her?" Asako said.

Farmer looked thoughtfully for a moment and then her jaw tightened, "Fine. Follow me to the parking lot. And this stays off the record."

Asako nodded eagerly.

Farmer stepped around her and through the exit, Asako followed. The two of them started towards the parking lot of university vehicles, "We are looking into her background. Her time in the foster care system, her case history, people she's connected with. I'm on my way to interview a former caseworker, Sylvia Clearwater."

Asako's pen flew across the sheets of paper in her notebook. "Sylvia Clearwater. Got

it. You got any contact information—?” She asked without looking up from her notepad. The gravel of the parking lot crunched underfoot as the cool air hit Asako. She fought tension as her hand stiffened from the chill.

Farmer gave her a deadpan look. “Why? So you can spook her before I can interview her?” Not a chance Kato. That’s all I can say.”

“Hm,” Asako said, “Fair enough.”

The two of them arrived at a nondescript white sedan, Farmer pulled a key ring from her trouser pockets, “This is off the record. If I see anything tied back to me, you won’t be able to get so much as a horoscope for your little student publication. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” Asako said, snapping her notebook shut and smiling. “Thank you, Detective. The free press is humbled by your generosity.”

Another small smile donned Farmer’s lips before giving a sardonic scoff, “Whatever you say, Kato.”

Asako watched as Farmer pulled away in the university-issued sedan. She could barely hold herself together with the anticipation at this new lead. Her mind was already at the computer scouring the web with this new information, as her body rushed back to her office. Asako’s boots clattered against the sidewalk as she clutched her notebook tightly.

Sylvia Clearwater, Sylvia Clearwater, Sylvia Clearwater she thought as if committing it to memory.

She blew through through the entrance to the bullpen of the Ledger newsroom, and slid into her cubicle. She flipped open her laptop and fingers flew across the keyboard

commencing a rapid-fire search.

Clearwater foster care

Denver County records

Missing person connection.

The screen was filled with articles, documents, and public records. Her mouth watered at the potential new breadcrumbs. “ There’s always a trail,” she muttered to herself, a grin tugged at her lips.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Richard Bellamy

BLEARY-EYED, BELLAMY ambled into the lecture hall, a portfolio of his lecture notes under his left arm. While he could recite these lectures from memory, he hadn't slept well the night before, so better not chance it. Students were quietly chatting, and a few surreptitiously watched as he took his place at a podium at the head of the class. He cleared his throat and the students quieted down. This was one of the few live lectures Bellamy delivered during the semester, the class was in full attendance.

He gazed out on the sea of young eager faces, the rows of seats climbed upward towards the back of the lecture hall. While most of his students sat a wrapt attention, he noticed a few screen-gazers. Bellamy dismissed them in his mind but did take satisfaction that his lectures filled the largest lecture hall on campus. Introduction to Neuropsychology was a course students scrambled to get into each year, the course filled within the first five minutes of its opening during the semesterly course registration. This cavernous classroom was his sanctuary, while his research was under attack and that meddlesome Detective Farmer was sniffing around, here he was the absolute authority. His words were unquestioned here, no one dared argue or debate him.

Bellamy grabbed the lapel microphone and attached it haphazardly to his necktie, "Now," he said, his voice booming through the lecture hall. As you have discussed with my teaching assistant, the limbic system plays a critical role in emotional processing, regulation, and decoding."

A light illuminated behind him as the projector hummed on, a slide show depicting diagrams of the brain showed on the large screen to his back. Teaching assistants acting as synchronized stagehands were essential in the theater of Bellamy's class.

“The amygdala, in particular, is essential for detecting and responding to emotional stimuli— fear, pleasure, anger. These emotional responses are hardwired into our brains. They are survival mechanisms key to us interpreting threats in our surroundings.”

He reached for the clicker and skipped to the next slide, “Without these processes, our ability to make decisions, to form memories, or to navigate and interpret social interactions would be severely impaired—.”

An enthusiastic hand shot up, “Dr. Bellamy, I have a question,” a voice piped up as Bellamy was cut off. Taken aback, he tried to focus his eyes on the sea of students. A young blonde girl, brimming with energy, was at the edge of her seat. Likely a freshman attending her first lecture.

Bellamy cleared his throat, and called on the young girl, “Go ahead.” He stepped from behind the podium and towards the girl who was seated three rows back.

The student smiled shyly as she felt the lecture hall of over a hundred student's eyes all shift to her, “So, like, I've seen a ton of stuff on social media about being an ‘empath,’ and people act like it's a superpower. Is that real, or just, like, some social media psychology?”

Lips curling into a slight sneer, Bellamy moved further from behind the podium and towards the front row of students. They shifted uncomfortably, “An empath?” he repeated, condescension dripping from his tone. “Let me guess, perhaps, you saw this on one of your scrolling video sites — how do you young people call it, Tickle Tockle?”

The class snickered.

The blonde girl's posture went rigid, "Yeah, and a few other places. People say they can feel other people's feelings. Sense their emotions. Is there any science behind that?"

Bellamy clasped his hands behind his back, "What is your name my dear?"

The girl's lips were a thin line, she swallowed hard, "Alex."

"Well, Alex," Bellamy said, launching into professor mode yet again, he slowly paced the front of the class, "The phenomenon of self-diagnosed empaths is not so clear. What you're referring to is a pseudoscientific label people slap on themselves in order to feel special or above everyone. The truth is humans are indeed social creatures. We are naturally attuned to each other's emotions as a result of thousands of years of neurobiological evolution. Emotional sensitivity is an ability that we all have. We can intuit one another's moods because of our communal, tribal nature. It is an evolutionary mechanism and not a superpower."

Bellamy paused, his eyes scanned the room, he let the theatrical silence fill with weight—a trick he had picked up from his years as a lecturer. "So, no, you are not an empath. Nor a psychic. You are not a superhero with magic powers. You are a healthy human with functioning mirror neurons. Congratulations."

Some students chuckled softly at Bellamy's flippant tone.

"Now as I was saying—" Bellamy started but was interrupted by Alex once more.

"Excuse me, professor, isn't that closed-minded though? Are there studies about heightened sensitivities to emotions and thoughts? Aren't there people able to influence the behaviors of others? It's not a superpower, but it's also something,"

Alex finished.

Bellamy froze, and the room suddenly felt hot again. A familiar sweat returned to his forehead. The buzz of the projector suddenly became pronounced. He reached for a handkerchief from his back pocket and dabbed at the bead of sweat forming on his brow.

“Heightened sensitivities? Yes, in very rare and exceptional cases,” he said, offering a tight smile. “But your generation’s obsession with turning seemingly innocuous human processes into labels is hardly scientific. Tell me, then, what are your credentials in assessing the validity of neurobiological claims made by those on social media?”

Alex was unfazed, “None, but I Googled your name. Weren’t you, yourself discredited after making claims about these types of sensitivities? There are articles discrediting your claims and theories as “pseudoscientific psychological mysticism.”

The lecture hall grew tense.

The corner of Bellamy’s mouth twitched, he ambled back behind the lectern, gripping it tightly. His knuckles whitened, his jaw tight. Bellamy scanned the room, he noted a few students offering stiff smiles, and one student coughed in the far back seats.

“All I’m saying, Dr. Bellamy, is you have made similar claims as these people on social media and even your ideas have been rejected. It just seems ironic for you to be so dismissive.”

A nervous thrill shot through Bellamy, while he was unaccustomed to being challenged so outwardly, something shifted in him. “Ah, I see. The great danger of internet half-truths parading as facts. We have access to limitless information and suddenly we are experts. If you must know, my work is theoretical in nature.

However, unlike your so-called social media empaths, my work is predicated on empirical neuroscience and settled science.”

The student opened their mouth to retort, but Bellamy cut them off with a gesture, “I see we are not interested in today’s prepared lecture. No matter — let’s discuss this further. If you’re truly interested in the broader potentialities of the human brain then pay attention because I’m going to show you something you won’t find on social media,” Bellamy said smugly, he made a cutting gesture to his teaching assistant who quickly shut off the projector.

Turning to the whiteboard, he began writing quickly.

Extrasensory communication.

Brain regions: Broca’s Area and Wernicke’s area

“The extrasensory communication, or as you more commonly refer to it as “telepathy,” is a theoretical ability to send and receive thoughts without speech. This relies on heightened neural connectivity in the language centers of the brain,”

The dry-erase marker flew across the marker board, as Bellamy wrote.

Spatial Awareness Manipulation

Brain regions: Temporal and parietal lobes and prefrontal cortex

He turned glancing across the classroom, the students sat in awe, “A hypothetical ability to alter other’s perception of space and visibility. This is rooted in the brain’s ability to process and interpret spatial awareness.”

Bellamy continued scribbling, fighting through a hand cramp,

## Emotional Influence

Brain regions: Amygdala and insula.

“Next, referencing what Alex asked about, you’ve heard referred to as an “empath,” is a heightened ability to influence or perceive emotional states. This is tied to the brain's emotional regulation and social processing.”

He felt a familiar fire in his belly, something he had not felt in ages,

## Enhanced Pattern Recognition, Anticipation, and Recall

Brain regions: Prefrontal cortex and hippocampus

“The fourth potential is known commonly as precognition and retrocognition. Using an advanced form of pattern recognition, there is potential for predictive and reflective cognitions. In other words, seeing past and future events.”

The lecture hall was in complete silence, but the tension was replaced with an excited, hopeful stillness.

“And, finally, and perhaps most controversial—”

## Object Manipulation

Brain regions: Parietal lobe and cerebellum

“Consisting of a capacity to exert unseen force or influence on objects without physical interaction, tied to the brain’s motor control centers.”

Bellamy stepped back from the whiteboard and admired his scrawling and then

turned to the class, “What I am describing is hypothetical or theoretical potentialities, supported by speculative theory. There is nothing supernatural or magic about this. There are studies that have and continue to study these potentialities. In no way does this support your social media pseudoscience. These concepts may exist at the fringes of neuroscience, but often new more speculative claims do. That is until we have empirical evidence supporting the claims.”

Alex remained quiet, her expression unreadable. She seemed to be taking it all in — as did all the students. With his superiority restored, he moved back to the lectern, his words crisp and deliberate, “Now let’s continue with the remainder of the lecture.”

As he returned to his prepared lecture, the student’s jab lingered in his mind. Was he willing to sacrifice his career, his reputation, and his funding for these speculative claims?

Yes, he had to. She needed him to. It was for her sake he was willing to put it all on the line.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ethan Hernandez

LYING IN BED had become tedious for Ethan, the room was shrouded in semi-darkness. The faint smell of musk clung in the air — a stale reminder of his sweat-stained sheets. The throbbing migraine had wrung him dry, he felt bedridden and restless. Ethan ached for motion, every part of him wished to rip off and launder the bedding, scrub every surface of the apartment, and feel the meditative hum of cleanliness. It was among the few things that brought him solace over the years — small rituals amid chaos. While in foster care, Ethan was subjected to a litany of chores forced on him by his older foster siblings. Yet, the cleaning brought him a sense of peace, something restorative about the smell of cleanser, gleaming table tops, and freshly mopped floors helped him feel a semblance of control.

Yet, now a sliver of sunlight crept into the room revealing his room in disarray. Clothes, books, and sneakers kicked off littering his floor. His outside matched the inside — jumbled and untethered. His phone buzzed somewhere nearby, the persistent hum a reminder of life beyond the walls of his bedroom. Likely a classmate asking about the group project due next week.

Ethan ignored it.

His head was a swirling storm of noises and images— whispers, dreams, emotions he could not call his own. All punctuated by sharp, invasive spikes driving deeper into his skull. Being startled by Jason reignited the migraine and the sedatives from the campus health center did nothing to quell the pain. After the failed breakfast, he took



another pill and clawed his way back into bed, willing sleep to take him. Earlier he heard Jason whisper through the door on his way out, he was headed to the gym and would be back much later.

Jason.

Ethan ached inside at the thought of Jason's quiet patience, his concern. The image of worry etched on Jason's face. The burden that Ethan felt threatened to overwhelm him and Jason. He wanted nothing more than to express to Jason the mental static in his head — the constant shifting of channels like someone frantically flipping through radio stations. But the words wouldn't form in Ethan's' mouth. How could he articulate something he barely understood himself?

Instead, Ethan did what he knew best, he retreated inward, rolling the confusing sensations over in his own head to make sense of them.

Closing his eyes, he tried to sift through the chaos, but the voices blurred together, and nonsensical phrases swam around in his head.

Am I losing it? Is this what crazy feels like?

Eventually, sleep pulled him under.

The dream came again.

A girl stood atop a tall tower, her figure was hazy against a backdrop of swirling mist. A bell gonged loudly. Her wavy brown hair hung limply over her hollow eyes, and her cracked lips moved frantically but the sound was muffled by the bell. Ethan strained to make sense of her words, willing himself closer to the girl, but the distance stretched further and further in front of him.

Her movements were violent and frantic. She gestured wildly as if to warn him of something. There was an urgency in her presence, but the message dissolved before he could discern her meaning.

“Don’t...trust...”

The words floated to him. Faint. Fractured. His breath quickened, “Who? What are you trying to say?”

The girl's eyes darted behind her, fear reached her wide eyes.

“He will take you,” she croaked, “He will take you and use you up. Like he took me.”

Ethan stepped closer, desperate, “Who will? Who’s trying to take me?” The girl flinched as he reached for her. His hand passed through her incorporeal form.

“None of us are safe,” she rasped, her voice trembled as tears formed in her wide eyes. “He will take us...use us up.”

Ethan’s stomach dropped, and her lips formed one last word, “Jason...”

And then, like a wisp of smoke, she vanished.

Ethan jolted awake, his heart beating. The sound of the girl’s voice echoed in his head, but the words did not linger. He sat up, the bed damp with sweat, and his head spun. Ethan could not stay here, not like this.

Grabbing a towel from the wardrobe, he stumbled to the bathroom. He moved sluggishly, his head swam. Stepping into the warm water, it pelted his wiry frame. He let the water rinse away the sweat, the heat soothed his aching muscles.

The steam billowed around as he closed his eyes, letting the water cascade down his back. He breathed in the scent of the shampoo, it further calmed him. His mind drifted, and for a moment, he felt the tension leave his shoulders. Breathing in the steam, he felt his eyes soften under his lids.

With his body relaxed, his mind soon followed. But then, there she was again.

The girl emerged in the dark void of his mind, her ragged features illuminated by an unseen light. Her blonde hair was matted, her T-shirt smeared with dirt, and her lips moved with the same message.

“Don’t...trust...him.”

Ethan inhaled sharply, trying to focus. “Who are you talking about? What are you saying?”

She looked at him as if surveying him. He stared back, this girl was different, but how? Was this the same girl from the dream? The nightmare? Who was she? What was she warning him of?

Her face filled with sorrow. “He’s dangerous. He’ll take you like he took me.”

Taking a deep breath, Ethan allowed his senses to tune in to her. He felt something open in his mind, he stepped towards the girl. “Who is in danger?”

“You all are in danger. Danger. Jason is...”

But before she could finish, she dissolved again, leaving him alone in the void of his mind.

The water turned cold, snapping Ethan back to the present. His eyes flickered open,

he shut off the stream and stepped out of the shower. His mind was a whirlwind. Drying off, he reached towards the mirror, staring at his reflection — pale and hollow-eyed.

His lips parted, and the words came unsought.

“Jason is...danger.”

His voice was barely above a whisper, but the words sent a chill through his body.

Was the girl saying Jason was dangerous? Ethan had known Jason for a year. As far as Ethan was concerned, Jason was the other half of himself. Two pieces of the same lost soul, but as Ethan thought about it, he knew very little about his partner. Jason had not introduced Ethan to his family, nor did he know much about his life before university. Was there something about Jason the girl wanted Ethan to know? If so, why was Jason dangerous?

Did this mean that Ethan was in danger?

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jason Havelock

JASON ENTERED THE lab, he dropped his gym bag by the door and removed his winter coat. Sunday afternoon was threatening snow, and Jason could sense the impending weather change.

The lab was quiet save for the hum of computer terminals in the graduate student workstations. He walked over to his own station and booted up the computer. Then walked to the lab's ancient coffeemaker, grabbing the carafe. Soon he had filled the machine with water and added fresh discount coffee, switching it on. The machine gurgled to life and filled the lab with a fresh aroma.

Since leaving Ethan to rest at the apartment, Jason had taken peace in these smaller tasks. From lifting in the gym to now awaiting the drip, drip of the coffee. He did what he could to distract himself from the hole open in his chest threatening to pull himself inward. Quickly, he prepared himself a cup and returned to his workstation.

He recounted a few hours more worth of data analysis he had to do for Bellamy's newest research project. Sitting down in the rickety office chair, he stared at his computer.

What if something is seriously wrong with Ethan?

Jason stared at the screen, waiting for the data analysis software to boot up. While Bellamy was able to secure millions of dollars in funding, it certainly didn't go to

technology in his lab.

Ethan's pale face flashed in his head, his boyfriend curled on their bed clutching his head as another migraine tore through him. Jason had felt stress before — state lacrosse championships, college applications, Freshman year finals week, asking Ethan on a date— but this was different. This was heavier.

The stakes felt higher.

He rubbed his temple as he tried to focus, but every line of the transcripts felt meaningless. Jason struggled to care about the endless lines of written dialogue from research participant interviews. He didn't care about what he could read. The parts that snuck through might as well be hieroglyphics.

Ethan was suffering.

He had no family, no friends other than the ones they shared, and no one to call to notify him of his condition. Ethan had told Jason about his foster families, but none of them sounded ready, able, or willing to support Ethan through this. What was going on with him? Ethan couldn't, wouldn't explain what he felt beyond calling it a "migraine." Jason barely understood what it was, let alone explain it to anyone else.

"Jason."

The sharp, familiar voice brought him back. He looked up to see Dr. Bellamy standing a few feet away, arms crossed, his gaze piercing. Bellamy looked exhausted, his normally impeccable appearance was blemished. His shirt was untucked and rumpled, his tie was pulled loose from his neck. There was a deep weariness in his gaze.

Jason straightened, "Sorry, Dr. Bellamy. I didn't hear you come in."

The professor's eyes narrowed slightly studying him. His eyes appraised Jason with a precision that made Jason rather unsettled.

"Here on a weekend?" He said finally, taking a step towards the coffee pot.

Jason relaxed slightly, "Yeah, I have some data analysis, I need to catch up on. I know you want the coding done by the end of next week."

Bellamy tore open a sugar packet and stirred the coffee thoughtfully, "I suppose I did say that. Well, I appreciate your diligence. But that is unlike you, Jason. You're usually on top of it all. What's going on?"

Jason hesitated, his eyes averted Bellamy's stare. The gravity of the hole in Jason's chest threatened to collapse inward, "It's personal, sir." He finally muttered.

Bellamy took a sip of his coffee and stepped closer. "Sometimes personal matters are precisely what needs addressing. This way we are able to refocus our concentration on the task at hand. Is this about Ethan?"

Jason noted the unusual warmth in Bellamy's voice. He was not accustomed to this level of interest in his personal life from someone Jason admired.

Nodding, Jason spoke, "He's not doing well, sir. He's been really sick." The flicker of vulnerability made Jason a bit unsteady.

Bellamy's expression didn't shift at the mention of Ethan. He simply nodded, inviting Jason to continue. The neutrality in his expression was oddly disarming.

Jason sighed, "He's been having these migraines. Really bad ones. I don't know what to do. He doesn't really have a family. He grew up in foster care, so there is no one to call. And...I haven't exactly told my family about us yet." He paused his voice

dropped. “I don’t think they would honestly care, but I just got out on my own. My mom has a way of getting a little too involved and I hoped I could keep them out of it a little longer. It’s complicated.”

“I see.” Bellamy’s tone was measured, and Jason noted a shift in his demeanor — a researcher engaging a subject. “Are these migraines new?”

“They’ve gotten worse since a thing happened a few days ago.” Jason waved his hand vaguely. “There was an incident on a Ferris wheel. We got stuck at the top during the malfunction, it freaked him out. But this isn’t just anxiety. He’s...different now. Weird things are happening.”

Bellamy tilted his head, “What sort of ‘weird things?’”

Jason hesitated. Saying it out loud sounded ridiculous and he wished he could take it back, but the professor’s inquisitiveness was magnetic. He could see why Bellamy was such a respected researcher. “It is hard to explain and honestly I’m not sure I even can. Talking in his sleep...other things...”

Bellamy stayed silent leaning against an adjacent counter, watching Jason.

“Objects moving...glass pitchers of orange juice exploding randomly. Like I said, it doesn’t make sense,” Jason said, smiling nervously.

Bellamy’s lips quirked slightly, though not in mockery. He seemed interested. “Fascinating. Migraines can have an unusual neurological effect, especially if triggered by acute stress — trauma. But this...” He paused, his fingers tapped rhythmically on his knees. “This sounds like something else. Perhaps the stressful event activated something. Some type of neurological potential. Have you all been to see a physician?”



Jason blinked, “Potential? Like a psychic or something?” He laughed, ignoring the latter question, “No offense, but that sounds a little woo-woo, Dr. B.”

Bellamy didn’t flinch, “I’m surprised at you, Jason. Nearly a year and a half in my lab and your mind still remains closed to the potentials of the human brain?”

Jason frowned slightly.

“Many conditions— psychological and otherwise manifest in ways we can’t easily explain. Latent abilities, heightened under stress, are far more plausible than you might think. Take the Ferris wheel incident for example, if Ethan truly perceived you or he were in danger even for a split second this could have lit up a very specific combination of regions of the brain to activate some type of latent potential. Under stress the brain releases a myriad of neurotransmitters that coupled with specific brain region activation could result in interesting neurophysiology. Do not dismiss this so quickly, Jason. It warrants further exploration.”

Jason folded his arms, skeptical. “With respect, Dr. Bellamy. Ethan hasn’t said a word about any kind of ‘potential’ abilities. He’s been to the doctor who said that it was stress-related. He needs rest.”

Bellamy’s intensity lessened, and his gaze softened. Yet, something inscrutable flickered in his expression, “I’m not suggesting you abandon practical care. On the contrary, Ethan’s well-being is more important than ever. And sometimes, understanding what lies beneath can lead to solutions you might not be expecting.”

Jason looked away, his frustration mounting. “I just want him to be okay,” he said quietly.

“And that,” Bellamy replied, his voice gentle but firm, “is precisely why he needs help beyond what you can give him. Take him back to the doctor, and get a full

neurological workup. If these incidents persist, both of you come to see me. Together. We might be able to find some answers.”

Jason nodded reluctantly. The professor’s invitation lingered in the air between them. Somehow Jason felt reassured by the option, but there was an intensity in Bellamy’s eyes Jason couldn’t shake.

Bellamy took a sip of his coffee, “Good. You’ll let me know when he’s on the mend. I’d like to have a chat with him.” He said walking away from Jason’s workstation, towards his office.

Jason turned towards his computer, his mind abuzz. One thing was for sure, Ethan needed to go back to the doctor. They had to figure out what was going on.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Asako Kato

ASAKO'S PHONE CHIMED as she entered the Turner Student Union, she stomped hard knocking the snow from her boots. She had a full day planned. First coffee from the campus coffee shop, Thanks A Latte, and then up to her cubicle for a full day of research on Sylva Clearwater and Naomi Halston.

She was getting close to break in this case she could feel it.

As she walked through the busy student union, students bustled to and from. The Turner Student Union was the newest addition to campus with its modern open-concept lobby adorn with couches, armchairs, and communal tables where students gathered between classes. The whole space was flooded with natural light from the endless blue Colorado sky.

Asako passed the information desk staffed by eager student employees ready to assist with directions to class, campus events, resources, and directions.

The scent of the fresh coffee drew her closer and closer to her second favorite place on campus Thanks A Latte —the first being her cubicle in the Ledger newsroom . A cozy and stylish coffee shop located just off the main lobby of the union, Asako lived for a dark but sweet cup of coffee.

“Hi, Asako! The usual?” Eddy said. He was a handsome barista with a tight blue T-shirt with a stylized SSU Lion emblem. His shirt revealed a sculpted physique and

dreads that were pulled back and away from his face. He wore round black-framed glasses that accentuated his tan complexion.

“You know me too well, Eddy,” Asako said leaning on the counter. A feeling rose in her stomach as she watched Eddy reach for a ceramic cup and expertly prepare her medium Americano. She reveled in the clicking and clacking of the portafilter as he loaded it with dark earthy coffee grounds. Tamping it down gently, he inserted it into the machine.

“Working on any big stories?” Eddy asked, as he casually looked up. The machine hissed and soon a dark, rich liquid streamed into the cup.

Asako hesitated, she wasn’t in the mood to get into the details. At least, not before the coffee.

“You could say that,” She said distractedly, pulling the phone from her pocket and checking her email. Her heart dropped, an email from her editor.

Eddy chuckled softly and moved to the hot water spout. He topped off the espresso and gently set it at the end of the bar. “Hopefully this will get those journalistic juices flowing. Want your blueberry Danish too?”

“What?” Asako said, looking up from her phone. “Yeah, please.”

Asako stared at her phone, the email reading:

Subject: Ferris Wheel Story

Feedback: “Get an eyewitness quote”

Eddy glided to the other side of the bar and grabbed a large pair of tongs and pulled a

glistening blueberry danish from the display case setting it on a plate.

Eddy gave her the total and she mindlessly pulled her Student ID from her back pocket and paid the tab.

“Enjoy!” Eddy chirped.

Asako grabbed the coffee and pastry and made her way to a table, “Thanks,” she mumbled, her mood souring.

Sitting down, she sighed heavily. More of this stupid Ferris wheel story. Her editor was a dog with a bone. She sipped the coffee and grimaced. Then, looked up from her phone, grabbing three packets of sugar she dumped the into the cup and stirred, re-reading the email. Her editor loved the story but wanted an eyewitness quote and would not be deterred.

What was the deal with the “eye witness quote?” After interviewing the carnie, she sent off her draft and said no quote was available. Asako was surprised the editor was still pushing the Ferris wheel story, it was practically old news. Printing it now, it would just get buried under an avalanche of finals coverage, student protests, and the basketball team making it to the state finals.

Taking a bite of her blueberry Danish, she pulled the notepad from her leather tote. She wanted to get on with the Naomi Halston story, but she couldn’t brush her editor's demands so easily. The campus newspaper wasn’t just a job, it was her lifeline. The check it provided covered a large chunk of her scholarship and tuition. This meant relenting, no matter how silly the story seemed. Rifling through her notepad she found the page with Ethan Hernandez and Jason Havelock underlined.

There wasn’t much to the story, but she supposed the bit about a student being seen leaving with a head injury was likely what kept her editor nipping at her heels for a

quote. Otherwise, the story was a fluke — some mechanical failure during the campus. A few students had been trapped on the Ferris wheel briefly before carnival staff could get them down. No one was seriously hurt, but there was buzz on social media about the whole event. Students claiming “administrative neglect,” a few posts hinted that the SSU administration had hired a third-rate company to manage the rides. Asako found this hard to believe, she spoke to the ride operator and he seemed genuinely shocked by the malfunction. She had left out the quote from the carnie, just seemed like the ethical thing to do.

Pulling out her laptop, Asako pulled up the campus directory and typed in Ethan’s name: His profile photo popped up: a standard ID photo of a young man with thick black hair and a guarded expression. Asako tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at the photo. A twinge of recognition nagged her.

“Why do I know him?” She murmured, clicking on the profile to see if anything rang a bell. “Did we have a class together?” The profile was light on personal information — email address and a link to the campus-based instant messaging feature. She couldn’t place him, Ethan seemed familiar.

But nothing sprang to mind — no shared courses, no overlapping clubs. There was something familiar about his face, the expression, and wavy jet-black hair. She shook off the thought and typed in Jason’s name.

His profile loaded just as quickly. Jason’s photo were nearly the opposite of Ethan’s. Short auburn hair, a dusting of freckles, and a big, warm smile. His photo looked like he was smirking at a joke made by someone off-camera. Asako frowned, scrolling through Jason’s profile. No information jumped out, but it didn’t matter. She wasn’t here to make friends. Opening the university messaging system, she drafted two identical messages:

Subject: Ferris Wheel Story — Campus Newspaper.

Hi Jason/Ethan,

My name is Asako Kato and I'm a reporter for the Ledger. I'm writing about the Ferris wheel incident from earlier this semester. I understand you were there present during the malfunction and I'd like to get a brief quote from you about your experience. It would help me complete my story.

Let me know if you'd like to meet in person, or feel free to reply here. Thanks for your time.

Best,

Asako

Her mouse hovered over the 'send' button, she felt a wave of fatigue wash over her. Leaning back in her chair, she stared at the screen, willing some part of her to ignite with interest in the story.

But nothing came.

The Ferris wheel story wasn't what she wanted to write — she could remotely care less. But for now, it would have to do. She closed her laptop and returned to her coffee and Danish. Part of her doubted Jason or Ethan checked their campus messages. Asako had been in several classes where professors complaining about students not checking their campus messenger or email. It wasn't much but at least she was one step closer to being done with this damn story. She took another sip of her Americano which was lukewarm by now, something about Ethan's photo continued to niggle at her.

Why did he look so familiar? There was something behind those dark, guarded eyes. She dismissed the thought, Naomi Halston was her priority, and Asako could not lose

focus.



### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ethan Hernandez

ETHAN HESITATED AS he stepped to the door of Bellamy's lab, his eyes traced the brass plaque . His first full day back on campus felt daunting after spending the last few days in bed. While his migraine continued at a dull ache in his head, he knew he had to keep moving. Rotting in bed was no longer an option and he would just have to live with the whispers swirling in his head.

Jason greeted him with a smile as he entered the lab, he moved from the ancient coffee pot as Ethan pulled off his backpack and coat hanging it on the coat rack adjacent to the lab's entrance.

"Hey stranger," Jason said with a tight-lipped smile. "Glad you made it in today, how are you holding up?"

Ethan nodded grimly, "Better." He lied, forcing a smile. He avoided Jason's eyes, the vision still fresh at the edges of his mind.

The two settled into their workstations, and Jason debriefed him on the progress of their data analysis. Ethan's head hummed trying to take it all in.

"Where's Bellamy?" he asked, as Jason turned to his computer typing away.

The keyboard clicked softly underneath his hands, "He said he had some important meeting. He won't be in the rest of the day."

Ethan noticed an edge to Jason's remark. He continued working as Ethan logged onto his desktop. The air between them thickened. Jason seemed distant today, but part of Ethan understood. He hadn't exactly been pleasant company lately.

Jason's phone buzzed on the desk, and Ethan caught a quick glance as Jason angled the phone away.

"Everything okay?" Ethan asked, feigning casualness, typing in his password.

"Yeah, all good," Jason said without looking up.

Ethan pressed enter on the computer's login screen, "Your sister texting you?"

Jason reached for the mouse of the computer and scrolled down a wall of text, "Um. Yeah." He said, noncommittally.

Ethan's stomach twisted. The explanation was plausible, but something didn't sit right with him. Jason's voice was calm but clipped. He seemed to rehearse. Ethan shook his head, trying to focus. Bringing up the data, he felt his eyes glaze over.

His thoughts drifted back to the girl from his dream, her sunken eyes, her raspy voice: "Don't trust him."

Hot oil erupted in his stomach, he felt it creep up his throat. Ethan's hands hovered over the keyboard. This is just in my head. My mind playing tricks on me. But even as he thought it, he couldn't shake the growing unease.

Later, that afternoon, the two of them packed up. The tension between Ethan and Jason seemed to have intensified.

Jason pulled his coat on, zipping it up, he said, "Did you get that message from the

Ledger reporter? Asako...Kato?

Ethan frowned, searching his memory. “Yeah, I got an instant message and an email. She doesn’t seem to get a clue.”

“Yeah, she’s asking about that Ferris wheel thing. Wants to know if we have anything to say about it?” Jason said slinging his bag over his shoulder.

Shrugging, Ethan grabbed his gloves from the pocket of his jacket as the two of them exited the lab and into the hallway. “What’s there to say? We were stuck. We almost died. End of story.” He said, his tone sharp.

Jason raised an eyebrow. “I was just thinking what if it’s connected?”

They exited the Henderson building, their feet crunched the ice on the sidewalk. Ethan rested his hands on his backpack straps as they walked towards the direction of their apartment. “What do you mean?”

“I just mean, the Ferris wheel, your migraines — it’s all around the same time, right?”

Ethan looked thoughtful for a second, his head twinged with pain as he passed a group of chattering students, “You think being stuck up there triggered this? That’s ridiculous.”

What was Jason playing at? How could being stuck up at the top of the Ferris wheel trigger his migraines?

As if hearing, Ethan’s thoughts, Jason responded, “I don’t know, Ethan. But maybe it’s worth considering. We could have died, or at least, that’s what it felt like.”

Ethan turned away as they kept walking, “I don’t think so. It doesn’t explain...everything else. Why would this headache persist if it was from the Ferris wheel?”

Jason nodded, sensing he was treading on sensitive territory. Ethan felt Jason eyeing him curiously. Should he tell Jason about the visions? Should he tell him about the voices he heard? They continued walking in silence, Ethan felt a distance growing between them.

The two of them trudged up the metal stairs slick with ice, making it to their front door. Neither of them had uttered another word. They entered the apartment, and Ethan was exhausted. He slumped onto the couch kicking off his snow boots. Jason hung his coat and backpack on the back of a kitchen chair.

“Hungry?” He asked, slicing the tension, but before Ethan could answer, Jason busied himself in the kitchen, his phone lighting up again as he leaned against the counter. Ethan watched him from the couch, he caught the subtle way Jason shielded the screen from view. His thumb moved quickly to lock it.

“Okay, what’s with the phone?” Ethan blurted out, unable to stop himself.

Jason turned, startled. “What?”

“You’ve been dodgy all day! You’ve hidden messages. Who are you talking to?” Ethan stood from the couch. Part of him felt ridiculous, but the pressure had been building for the last few days. He couldn’t stop himself, he was a runaway train.

Jason's face darkened. “Nobody, Ethan.” He turned away towards the stove.

Ethan advanced on him, “You’ve been acting weird since Sunday. You’re acting...secretive. It’s not like you.”

Jason turned back around, stepping forward. His voice was steady but firm, “You’ve not exactly been an open book either, Ethan. You’re not telling me anything. You’re shutting me out, and I don’t know how to help you. What am I supposed to do?”

“What am I supposed to say, Jason? I have a headache that feels like a knife is being jabbed into my eyes over and over again. That I want to claw my fucking brain out of my head. I don’t know what you want me to say!” Ethan’s voice rose. The frustration, the paranoia, the voices — all of it bubbled over. Tears stung his eyes as he choked out, “I don’t know how to explain what’s happening to me.”

Jason’s expression softened. He reached out to Ethan.

But Ethan shook his head and retreated to the bedroom, “I just need to be alone,” he murmured, closing the door behind him. Throwing himself on the bed, he wiped his eyes. Ethan knew it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t Jason’s fault. But how the hell was he supposed to say what he was feeling? It all sounded crazy.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

HE WAS GOING mad. His throat was raw, his eyes burned with tears. Soon he fell into a troubled sleep.

An hour later, Jason slipped into bed. The mattress dipped under his weight. Ethan lay on his side, facing the wall, his breath slow but uneven. Jason hesitated, watching the curve of Ethan's back under the thin blanket, he slid in closer. He rested a warm hand on Ethan's hip, his fingers gently spreading over the fabric.

"Ethan," Jason whispered, his voice low, rough with emotion. "I'm sorry."

There was no response, but Ethan's shoulder slackened. Jason pressed onward, his chest met Ethan's shirtless back.

Jason's fingers gently traced circles on Ethan's exposed shoulder. Slowly, Jason's lips brushed the sensitive space where Ethan's neck met his shoulders. He kissed Ethan's neck softly at first, testing the boundary. He was rewarded with Ethan's head in response, tilting slowly in his direction.

Then, Jason's kisses became more deliberate, trailing Ethan's neck. With his hot breath against his skin, Ethan shivered quietly, a soft moan escaping his lips. Jason's hand gently slipped under the blankets and around his waist, pulling Ethan closer to him.

"Jason," Ethan whispered, his voice shaking. Jason continued lightly kissing him and breathing in his scent. Ethan rolled onto his back, turning to face him.

Jason didn't wait — he cupped Ethan's face with both hands and kissed him deeply. Ethan felt Jason's lips connect with his, allowing himself to slip away. Ethan reached and tangled his fingers through Jason's auburn hair pulling him close. Their mouths moved in sync.

Hot. Hungry.

Jason shifted, leaning over Ethan. Their lips never disconnected, Ethan felt Jason's entire weight rest on him, the pressure further relaxing him.

Their legs became tangled as Jason's dick pushed against his jeans. He felt Ethan's own member pressing into him.

Jason pushed his hips deep as Ethan let out a moan. Reaching down Ethan unbuttoned Jason's jeans. Kicking off his pants they ground into one another kissing. Ethan breathed deeply, as Jason's mouth began searching his body frantically. Kissing every inch of his chest, Ethan arched into Jason's lips as the lean muscles of his stomach flexed.

Ethan tugged at Jason's shirt, his fingers fumbling before Jason pulled it off entirely tossing it to the floor. Their bodies pressed together, skin against skin, Ethan shuddered as Jason kissed down his chest to just below his navel. Linger only a moment, Jason tugged at Ethan's boxers sliding them down his legs, revealing his cock. Hungrily, Jason took Ethan into his mouth.

"Jason," Ethan said again, his voice breaking. Waves of pleasure ebbed through him as Jason's mouth slipped up and down.

"I'm here," Jason murmured, his tongue flicking the tip of Ethan's penis.

His eyes narrowed in pleasure, and Ethan's body quivered. For the first time in days,

Ethan felt open and free.

Jason continued sliding up and down, and Ethan's breathing became rapid. Taking him right to the edge, Jason felt Ethan's body tightened as if ready to explode.

Then abruptly, he stopped, Ethan relaxed but his cock throbbed.

"We're not done, just yet," Jason said, his voice low.

Jason kissed back up Ethan's chest and met his mouth hungry. Sliding down his boxers, their cocks met, rubbing against one another. Jason leaked as Ethan clawed him closer.

The two were tangled as one.

Jason reached into the drawer of the nightstand producing a small bottle of clear liquid. Expertly, he snapped open the lid and squeezed a generous amount of lube onto his hand. Taking two fingers, he gently caressed Ethan's entrance as he moaned, then taking the remaining lube, rubbed it onto his cock.

Slowly, he teased Ethan's hole, but tired of waiting Ethan clutched Jason's ass inviting him in. Ethan felt Jason gently thrust into him, his entire body lit up with pleasure, as his hand pumped himself. Jason's head fell to the side of Ethan's, breathing ragged into his ears, he said, "I love you."

Ethan felt the pleasure blossom in his chest, as Jason thrust slowly in and out, as if wishing Ethan to feel every elongated stride.

"I love you too," Ethan whispered.

Their breath became deep and in sync. Jason's thrusts became more rapid and more



aggressive, and Ethan stroked himself faster.

“I’m so close,” Jason moaned.

Ethan's eyes were closed, as the pleasure emanated through him like strobing lights, “Me too.”

In unison, Ethan shot an endless stream onto his chest, as Jason pulled himself free of Ethan, and an orgasm viciously tore through his body. Jason shuddered, convulsed until he fell sweaty onto Ethan’s chest.

Later, Ethan lay sprawled across Jason, their body still tangled, warn from the encounter. Jason’s fingers lazily traced patterns along Ethan’s spine. The touch soothed Ethan, it grounded him. Ethan’s head rested against Jason’s chest, the steady thrum of his heartbeat calmed him.

Ethan let out a relaxed exhale. He felt as if he could melt right into Jason.

“I need to tell you something,” Ethan said softly, breaking the easy silence.

Jason tilted his head, brushing a stray strand of hair from Ethan’s forehead. “What is it?”

Ethan hesitated, then cleared his throat, “I’ve been having dreams. About a girl. She’s...warning me of something. I don’t know what it means. She’s trying to warn me of danger.”

Frowning, Jason, hand stilled. “What kind of warning?”

Ethan shook his head, biting his lip, “I’m not sure. Honestly, I don’t know what any of it means. I feel like I’m losing it.”

Jason pulled him closer, pressing a kiss to his temple. “You’re not losing your mind,” he said, his voice firm and reassuring. “If you’re losing it then so will I. We can be crazy together. They’ll make us roommates in the asylum. Imagine how much we will save on rent.”

Ethan chuckled into Jason’s chest. Closing his eyes, he let Jason’s steady presence wash over him. Then for the first time in days, he fell into a deep tranquil sleep.

The next morning came early, sunlight peaked through the blinds as Jason climbed out of bed. Ethan stirred and groaned softly. Jason leaned down and brushed a kiss on Ethan’s forehead.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

“COME ON, STORMY” Jason murmured. “Shower with me before I head to class. You need to get to your appointment.”

Ethan yawned and stretched. The corner of his mouth twitched upward. Jason’s gentle prodding felt good. He followed Jason to the bathroom, both of them still naked from the night before. Giving Jason’s rear end a playful swat.

“Hey, don’t start something you can’t finish,” Jason said warningly. He stood with the shower door open, his hand gauging the temperature of the water. The bathroom was filled with warm steam. Jason stepped into the shower first, and Ethan followed.

Ethan leaned into Jason as the water cascaded over them washing the sweat from the night away. Grabbing the body wash, Jason lathered it in his hands and gently washed Ethan’s hair. The sensation of Jason’s fingertips gently scratching Ethan’s scalp sent tingles through his body all the way to the tips of his toes. His hands gently roamed Ethan’s skin, washing under his arms, his chest, down to Ethan’s cock.

Jason slid his hand up and down Ethan’s shaft slowly, the tingling sensation became full waves of pleasure. Pushing Ethan’s back gently against the cool tile, his hand continued to roam Ethan’s skin. He rinsed the suds off, as Jason leaned in for a kiss. Their mouths met one another fervently, and their movements again became tangled.

Ethan’s hand slid down Jason’s broad chest as he clutched his ass again. Smiling, Jason whispered, “My little hurricane is feeling spicy this morning.”

Instead of responding, Ethan gently pulled Jason against him, his other hand sliding down to Jason's erection, he began stroking slowly.

Jason moaned with desperation.

Again, Ethan's hand traveled to Jason's developed backside, his fingers gently coming closer to Jason's hole. Ethan's finger circled it, as he pumped Jason slowly, deliberately. Jason flattened his back and arched towards Ethan's finger.

His head fell to Ethan's shoulder as he continued slowly tugging Ethan. Soon, Ethan was pumping faster, and Jason's head began to swim. He moaned with ecstasy as the warm water washed over them. Ethan's finger continued to tease Jason's hole, pushing slowly inward.

"You're gonna make me cum," Jason moaned.

Ethan's hand moved more vigorously now, his finger swirling in a clockwise motion, applying slight pressure.

Jason's body shuddered, "Oh god. Oh fuck." He said, spilling onto the shower floor.

Looking up, the water tumbled across his face as a lazy smile appeared.

Ethan's lips formed a grin, his cock harder at the sight of Jason's afterglow.

"You're turn," Jason growled. He grabbed Ethan's shoulders twisting him around, he reached for his cock and pumped with slight pressure from the base to his tip. Within seconds, Ethan's body jerked and buckled emitting a long stream.

"Wow, you shot hard," Jason snickered.

Ethan just grinned once more, letting the warm water rinse him off.

Afterward, Ethan lingered under the water as Jason towed off and dressed for the day. As Ethan stepped from the bathroom, he was met at the door with a final kiss from Jason.

“Text me as soon as you're done with the scan. You're not in this alone. The only walls I want you building are the ones in our future home.”

Ethan nodded, smiling tentatively. “I promise.”

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After completing the intake paperwork, Ethan waited anxiously in the quiet lobby. Soft rock music played over the speakers, a collection of old magazines with celebrities on the coffee table in front of him. Scoping one out, he reached for the magazine, when his name was called.

“Mr. Hernandez,” she called from the clinic door. He looked up and steeled himself. Jumping up from the seat, he bound towards her.

“Hello,” he said feigning a smile.

The MRI technician greeted him and guided him through a maze of hallways until they reached the scan room. Soon he had removed all metal items from his pockets and was laid on the platform slowly moving towards the bowels of the machine. Thankful he had worn soccer shorts and one of Jason's old lacrosse T-shirts, he took his position.

“You're doing great,” the MRI technicians said, their sound tinny coming through a small intercom. The machine whirred and gave a rhythmic clunking sound. “Just stay

still we will be through this quickly.”

Ethan focused on his breathing, he let the sound of the machine become distant in his awareness. Pulling him from his concentration, the technician’s voice came over the speaker again, “Hang on, Mr. Hernandez. I just need a few more readings here. Something is up with the machine.”

Ethan’s chest tightened.

Is something wrong with the machine?

This isn’t normal.

Something isn’t right.

Oh god, I’ve only been back from vacation for a week.

Ethan could hear the technician’s thoughts, his heart fluttered in his chest. Her unease radiated towards him from the control room. Her thoughts pressed against his own,

Okay, Emily, stay calm.

Shortly, the platform began moving again, exiting the large machine. Ethan sat up, his palms slick with sweat, “Is everything okay, Emily?” he asked, his voice shaky.

The technician’s eye snapped to Ethan’s, then gave a tight-lipped smile, “I can’t discuss the results, Mr. Hernandez. The doctor will review everything and contact you soon.”

Ethan nodded, but the technician’s rehearsed line only heightened his anxiety. What did she see? What went wrong? What wasn’t normal?”

Catching the city bus back to campus, Ethan's mind raced. He pulled out his phone and texted Jason:

Ethan: Finished my scans. Everything is fine. Headed to campus.

As he typed out the text he caught himself, No, if I'm going to get through this I need Jason.

He finished the text: Finished my scans. Everything fine. Headed to campus...I'm scared.

And hit 'send.'

Within seconds his phone chimed,

Jason: Glad you got them done. You're not alone stormy, I'm here and I love you.

He smiled at the text and replied:

Ethan: I love you too.

Back on campus, Ethan tried hard to push through the day, he attended his lecture in a half-daze. The sound of his professor's voice became a dull hum and the anxious whispers pushed from the outer realms of his mind. Eventually, the buzz of the students around him became unbearable, their scattered emotions crashed into him like waves. Nauseating feelings of excitement, stress, and annoyance colonized his head.

On his way from his final class of the day, Ethan's vision blurred and his headache crept back in. The feeling pulled at his eye sockets, sharp and insistent. As he walked the pavement between buildings, he gripped the strap of his backpack as the pain sent

waves of pain through him fast and insistent. Reaching the door of the Henderson building, he turned on his heel.

“I can’t do this today,” he said to himself. The walk back to the apartment was a blur. His thoughts swirled with the technician’s cryptic words, the tension in her thoughts, and the unresolved suspicions of Jason’s evasiveness all chewing on his conscience.

Something isn’t right.

As he unlocked the door and stepped inside, the quiet of the apartment offered little solace. He dropped his bag by the door, his legs trembled as he sank onto the couch. He rested his head in hands, he tried to block out the noise — the voices, the pain, the nagging feelings that whatever came next would change his life.



### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Richard Bellamy

RICHARD BELLAMY SAT in the large, cavernous conference room, his fingers gripping the long glass top table. His sleepless eyes strained in the dim overhead lighting. Having not slept properly in days, his stomach roiled. Bellamy's appetite was nil and the only thing he had ingested today was a large cup of black coffee.

His eyes searched the room as thoughts of his time on the tenure and promotion committee came to mind. Meetings that decided the fate of his junior colleagues occurred in this very conference room. At one time, he had sat at the head of this table and led a committee of senior colleagues through meticulous and sometimes contentious examination of faculty dossiers. Junior faculty spent five years amassing publications in prestigious academic journals and compiling teaching evaluations to submit for the possibility of tenure and promotion. Deciding the fate of junior faculty was a duty Bellamy relished, he reveled in the power of it.

But, now, perhaps it was ironic, that he awaited his fate in the very same room where he determined the fate of the colleagues that sit before him. Their expressions ranged from neutrality to outright contempt. Life as a faculty member was not without its perils, Bellamy was a well-regarded and highly published public intellectual and academic. A reputation he had garnered through hard work and political machinations. While his colleagues did not respect his work, his reputation exceeded that of Summit State University.

This did not come without jealous colleagues.

Bellamy adjusted his tie, the atmosphere was oppressed, suffused with a quiet hostility that Bellamy had not anticipated nor was he acquainted with. While he had his dissidents and rivals, even having picked up a nemesis or two, Bellamy felt he was generally liked on campus. Yet, the panel before him today — a semi-circle of faculty, administrators, and university officials would suggest otherwise, and at the center of this inquiry was Dr. Larry Hazelton, a rival of Bellamy's and a weasel-faced Associate Professor from the Department of Neuroscience.

Hazelton's eyes gleamed barely concealing his glee at the firing squad Bellamy had been hauled before. He rifled through the stacks of papers, his demeanor smug. Bellamy swallowed hard at the thought of Hazelton being at the center of this orchestrated campaign to systemically dismantle his career and discredit him.

"Dr. Richard Bellamy," Hazelton began, his voice dripped with faux cordiality, "we appreciate your attendance to these proceedings. I trust you have reviewed the findings of our committee." He finished gesturing to a large three-ring binder before Bellamy. "We have reviewed your recent publications, laboratory activities, and use of university research dollars."

Bellamy forced a tight smile, but his teeth ground together. His jaw ached. "Of course, Dr. Hazelton. Thank you for your thorough inquiry into my work."

Hazelton nodded in response, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "I understand you have prepared a statement for the committee before we render our findings?"

Bellamy nodded and glanced at the dark-haired woman seated beside him, Dr. Pamela Royce. A faculty advocate provided by HR — young, bright-eyed, and wildly inexperienced. Bellamy barely acknowledged her. Dr. Royce, a new Assistant Professor in the College of Education, had only recently been hired on at Summit State University, wore a pantsuit that severely needed tailoring, and her over-drawn lipstick stained her teeth. More accustomed to wearing overalls and working with

elementary school students, Dr. Royce was very much out of place in these stuffy proceedings. Bellamy thought of her as nothing more than a glorified intern. He felt HR's commitment to appearance outweighed their commitment to substance.

Royce cleared her throat, glancing nervously between Bellamy and the panel, "Dr. Bellamy has cooperated fully with all the university's requests and maintains that his research adheres to the highest academic standards —"

"Adheres to standards?" Hazelton interrupted, scoffing. He held up a printed copy of one of Bellamy's papers, a title bold, almost accusational in its appearance: *Retrocognition as a Viable Neuropsychological Phenomenon*. "This is the work we're discussing, yes? The same paper has garnered complaints from donors and government agencies— who I might remind you serve as substantial funding sources for this university. This paper qualifies as 'pseudoscientific psychological mysticism' per external peer reviewers. Dr. Bellamy's work has led to questions about this university's reputation as a credible research institution. The university president and Dean Kerrigan are committed to enhancing the national research profile of our university and tripe like this has no place here."

Royce cleared her throat, "While we concede that Dr. Bellamy's work is... 'theoretical' in nature, it does..." She said, losing her gumption as she searched for the words.

Bellamy leaned forward, his voice sharp, "It is theoretical work, Larry. Speculative? Yes. But it is grounded in established neuropsychology."

Royce peered at Bellamy, a vein bulging from his neck.

Hazelton raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise, "Established? Tell me, Richard, how exactly does hypothesizing time travel as a potential function of the developed hippocampus contribute to science? This isn't science. It's science fiction, and last I

checked, you're not a professor in the SSU Creative Writing program."

A murmur rippled through the room. Bellamy's cheeks burned, but he withdrew maintaining his composure. Royce shifted uncomfortably beside him.

Hazelton was not done, "And then there's the matter of your laboratory practices. The committee has reviewed multiple accounts from former doctoral graduate students alleging you pressured them into unethical experimentation, overworked them without proper documentation and oversight, and forced them to sign non-disclosure agreements extending beyond the standard university intellectual property protocols."

"I won't dignify that allegation with a response," Bellamy snapped, his voice cracked, "My research was approved by the Institutional Review Board, a committee many of you all sit on, I might add." Bellamy finished, brandishing an accusing finger across the panel. Some of them looked abashed.

Smirking, Hazelton continued, "Be that as it may, the accounts are troubling. But then, of course, there is the matter of Naomi Halston."

Hazelton was winding up for the pitch. The air in the room grew electric. Bellamy's stomach churned. He glanced at Royce, who hesitated before speaking, "Dr. Bellamy has already been interviewed by campus police regarding Ms. Halston's disappearance. He has fully cooperated with—."

"Perhaps," Hazelton interrupted, again, his voice sharp. "But the timeline is damning, wouldn't you agree? Ms. Halston, a graduate student under your supervision, disappears. Security footage placed her entering the Henderson Building late that night, but no record of her leaving. The last known interaction she had was with you."

"I wasn't even in the building that night!" Bellamy shot back in retort. His voice rose.

“Convenient,” Hazelton countered. “And yet, several of your students have noted your change in demeanor. You’ve become paranoid, erratic, even hostile in the weeks since her disappearance. As I understand it, you’ve canceled several of your public talks around the country all to be on campus.”

“That is conjecture and has no bearing on the assertions put forth today!” Bellamy barked, his composure cracking. “This is a witch hunt, plain and simple. You’ve been trying to undermine me for years, Larry. Now, in a disgusting play, to further destroy my credibility, you use this tragedy to do it.”

Hazelton leaned back in his chair, he appeared indifferent to Bellamy’s barbs. “The committee has reviewed all of the evidence, Dr. Bellamy,” he said, his voice taking a tone of finality, “We’ve reviewed your research, your lab protocols, and your conduct. While we await further detail into Ms. Halston’s disappearance, this panel finds your methods questionable, your work lacking quality academic merit, and your general conduct concerning. Considering these findings, we believe you to be a liability to the university and have recommended funding all projects under your direction to be immediately frozen pending a comprehensive review.”

The words struck Bellamy like a punch to the chest. He stared at the faces of the panel, searching for any glimmer of support. He glanced at Royce, she looked down avoiding his gaze.

“You can’t do this to me,” Bellamy said, “This is my life’s work. This is all I have left.” His voice broke.

Hazelton stood, gathering his papers with deliberate precision. “The university has a reputation to uphold, Dr. Bellamy. We cannot afford to associate our credibility as an institution with your unscientific speculation and scandal.”

Royce murmured something about appealing the decision and gave Bellamy a tight

smile scurrying away.

As the meeting adjourned the panel dispersed, Bellamy remained seated, stunned into silence. His mind raced, his research was stalled, his funding gone, and the police were circling closer every day.

Hazelton was last of the panel to exit the conference room, as he strode lazily towards the door, he sneered down at Bellamy, whispering “You’re lucky I didn’t bring forth the accusations made of you at Harvard. I’d say you got off easy.”

He took his leave from Bellamy.

As the door closed, Bellamy sat alone in the sterile conference room, he felt his hands trembling. The walls felt as if they were closing in. Always thriving under pressure, Bellamy felt this was different. This was annihilation and could not go unpunished. “I’m too close, they can’t take it away.” He muttered to himself, his fist clenched, his knuckles white.

“Too close.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jason Havelock

CARRYING THE TRASH bag outside and down the metal steps, Jason regretted not wearing more layers. He was dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt with SSU Lions emblazoned on the back, a pair of black mesh soccer shorts, and his house shoes. He approached the apartment complex dumpster spritely. His breath was visible.

“It’s cold,” he shivered. Opening the dumpster’s lid he tossed the bag into the can. His thoughts flickered to Ethan asleep in their bedroom. After returning from the MRI scan, they had a quick dinner and Ethan did his best to tell Jason of his fears. There was still more to the story, Jason could feel it. Something seemed to trouble him and it troubled Jason too. What if the headache was indicative of something serious? Ethan had mentioned the first doctor joked about a tumor or cancer.

Jason flipped the lid of the dumpster closed, he grunted as his muscles tensed. He turned his back towards the apartment but stopped dead in his tracks.

A low, guttural sound sliced through the frigid night air. Jason stood still, frozen, and not just from the cold. His breath hitched, and the air around him seemed to grow heavy, as a shot of adrenaline shot through his extremities. The icy air seemed at arm's length now. A long shadow stretched across the pavement. Emerging from the darkness was a creature unlike anything Jason had ever seen. It had scaly, reptilian skin as its body shimmered in the dim street light, a grotesque mix of sinewy muscle and jagged spines along its back. The monster growled deeply, as it blinked its golden-yellow eyes. It stared at Jason as if recognizing him, baring razor-sharp teeth.

Jason's heart pounded, adrenaline now surging through his veins. "What the hell —?"

Immediately, the creature lunged.

Jason dove to the side, his house shoes slipping on the icy pavement, narrowly avoiding its snapping jaw. Large jagged teeth were visible as it lunged once more, Jason stumbled back, hitting the ground hard. The monster whirled around to face him. Without thinking, Jason turned towards heading toward a large cinderblock positioned beneath the dumpster which ordinarily kept it from rolling away.

The creature roared and swiped at him with a clawed hand. Jason deflected the blow and stumbled towards the cinderblock. Panic swirled in his chest, but immediately something deeper— primal, protective — rose within him.

Ethan.

The creature roared, its jaw snapping dangerously. With all of his strength, Jason grabbed the cinderblock and swung, just as the creature lunged toward him. Jason felt a heavy thump, as he struck its head. The reptile screeched in pain, stumbling back. Seizing the opportunity, Jason swung again with desperate precision, landing a solid hit on the creature's head again.

The monster let out a final piercing screech before its form dissolved. Jason watched in disbelief as the beast disintegrated into an iridescent, golden-yellow mist. The particles briefly swirled before completely vanishing.

He breathed heavily, standing motionless as the chill of the night air returned to him. Dropping the cinderblock, his mind raced.

What the fuck was that?



Jason felt the cold air snap at him, as the adrenaline drained from his extremities.

Later, Jason sat on the couch, lit by the flickering glow of the television playing at a low volume. A forgotten half-empty mug of tea sat cooling on the coffee table. He leaned back, rubbing his temples, but the knot of tension in his chest refused to let. Every time he closed his eyes, those glowing gold-yellow irises and jagged teeth flashed across his mind.

He had taken a long hot scalding shower, scrubbing his skin until it tingled. Tried meditating, even lighting one of Ethan's lavender candles, but nothing seemed to work. His muscles still felt tight, and his heart thudded faintly as if were still running from the creature.

Resigned that he wasn't going to sleep, he let Ethan doze in the next room and settled in the living room. He put his favorite buddy comedy on the TV and distracted himself by endlessly scrolling Reddit's memes and conspiracy threads, but nothing would bring him sleep.

He scrolled aimlessly, he clicked until a headline caught his eyes:

Doctor won't help. My son's headaches are out of control.

Jason clicked the post, his pulse quickened as he read.

U/worriedmom95 | Posted 18 months ago | r/MedicalMysteries

Hi all,

I'm a mom of a 19-year-old son, and I'm out of ideas. I'm not sure where to start, but I'm desperate.

A few months ago, my son started complaining of severe migraines. We thought it was stress, he was in college, pulling all-nighters, partying with his friends — normal college kid stuff — when he started to call me about migraines. He said it felt like his brain was being stabbed or squeezed. His vision blurred and he complained of dizziness. Then, eventually, he started hearing voices. They were whispers at first, he said they were indistinct. He couldn't make out what the whispers were saying. The voices were of people that I nor his dad could see. He became really withdrawn and scared. He doesn't want to talk to anyone, even me.

He is home now from college, and I've taken him to see several doctors. They just gave him painkillers, ran some basic tests, and said it was stress. One doctor even suggested schizophrenia, I guess he's in the age range for the first psychotic episode.

But I know my son. He's not making this up and we don't have a history of that mental illness in our family. He doesn't use drugs and I'm not convinced he's schizophrenic. Neither was the psychiatrist we eventually took him to see. The psychiatrist said that it likely isn't schizophrenia because my son knows that the voices aren't there. Like he's not hallucinating.

Okay, now, here's the part that really scares me: Weird things have been happening around him. He says he can read my thoughts, we've tested it out so many times. And he can! He can read his dad's mind and even his little sister's. One night while we were all asleep, his sister started screaming. She claimed there was a giant spider hanging over her bed. She's terrified of spiders, it's like her worst nightmare come true!

Sadly, he's taken to staying up in his room. He will come down occasionally and have dinner with us, but he has to wear headphones with white noise. He said it's the only thing that blocks out the thoughts.

He's terrified and honestly, so am I. He says he can hear the neighbor's awful

thoughts about us and that something big is building up, but he doesn't know what.

We're scheduled for an MRI next week, but I'm worried it won't help. That we will be dismissed by the doctors again. I've been searching all over the web for anything like this — an explanation for the symptoms — anything. Please, if anyone has experienced something like this or knows what this could be, I'm begging for advice. I just want my son to be okay.

Thank you in advance for any help.

Edit 1: Just to clarify, we've ruled out epilepsy and other seizure disorders. The voices aren't auditory hallucinations — he describes them more as thoughts that don't belong to him. Sometimes their words, sometimes their images, even sometimes they're noises.

Edit 2: Thank you for all of the responses, I'm trying to reply to as many as I can. A few of you asked if he's been exposed to any chemicals or toxins — nothing he or I can think of. His environment hasn't changed, and he doesn't take drugs. I'll look into the resources you've all shared.

Edit 3: For those asking about MRI results, we're still waiting. I'll update you as soon as we know something.

Jason's stomach dropped. The symptoms mirrored Ethan's. The similarities were too glaring to ignore. Does he hear voices too?

Could he hear Jason's? Does he know about the text messages? Well, of course, he knows about the text messages that's what their fight was about, but does he know who they're to?

He reread a single line, his eyes narrowed,

“He said it felt like his brain was being stabbed or squeezed. His vision blurred and he complained of dizziness. Then, eventually, he started hearing voices. They were whispers at first, he said they were indistinct.”

Jason closed his laptop and sat back, he needed to make sense of all of this. Could this be connected to the thing he saw outside? The mother in the post said her daughter was confronted by her worst fear. His hand trembled as he rubbed his eyes, exhaustion was nearing.

His gaze drifted to the closed bedroom door. Ethan was asleep inside. Jason thought of the iridescent mist left as the monster seemingly evaporated. The flash of the glowing light erupted in his mind.

“No way,” Jason whispered to himself, shaking his head. Yet the question remained, it gnawed at him. He grabbed his phone from the coffee table punched out a quick message and then laid back on the sofa his mind adrift.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Asako Kato

ASAKO SAT AT her cluttered desk, her fingers impatiently drummed on the surface. She grabbed her mouse and scrolled through her emails again. No response, not one. Was he getting her messages? Why wasn't he responding?

Waiting wasn't her strong suit. Asako thrived on the action, on chasing leads and now his lack of response to her messages was gnawing at her patience.

"Fine," she muttered. She spun her chair to face her laptop. "If they won't give me the story, then I'll find one for myself."

She shifted her focus, after having spoken to Detective Farmer, the name Sylvia Clearwater had rolled around in her head for days. She had dug through the bowels of the internet and found only a few mentions of her but nothing substantive. Google had provided so few details Asako actually felt further behind than when she had first gotten the name. But as any good reporter does, she needed to keep at it. She stared at the computer screen and thought through the search terms, while in this day and age, Google had everything.

Maybe she needed to widen her search.

Clicking open the university library webpage, she searched for the digital newspaper archives. Soon, she found herself in a database of hundreds of thousands of newspapers archived from all over the state and the country.

She typed: Sylvia Clearwater into the search bar. The poorly optimized search engine took a few seconds to load. Then a few pages of news articles dating back ten and fifteen years ago populated.

She clicked the top article,

## Loving Children Who Need It Most: Sylvia Clearwater's Lifelong Mission

Byline: Jessica Rayford, Staff Reporter

Denver Chronicle

In her modest home nestled in Aurora, on the outskirts of Denver, Sylvia Clearwater — affectionately known to her closest friends and foster kids, as “Sil” — sits surrounded by frames of smiling children, her living serving a veritable shrine to decades of advocacy and compassion. For over 25 years, Sil has worked tirelessly as a caseworker, mentor, and advocate for some of the system's most vulnerable children.

“I always say the same thing when people ask why I do this,” Sil begins with a warm smile, her hazel green eyes crinkling at their corners, “Because every child deserves to feel loved, no matter what they’ve been through.”

Sil’s journey into social work began in the 1990s, fresh out of Summit State University after completing an undergraduate degree in Social Work, she joined the Department of Family Services. It was here she found her true calling. Often, she found herself taking an interest in working with children deemed “special cases.” These were the children other caseworkers dreaded — those who had been labeled, “troubled,” “oppositional,” or simply “too much to handle.”

Sil saw it differently.

“They weren’t difficult,” she says, her voice shaking with emotions. “They were hurting. And if you took the time to listen, you could hear them, you would realize how much love they had to give.”

She often saw in these children what others could or would not, “These kids had their struggles, but they were gifted. Every one of these children was brilliant! Academically gifted, artistically talented, and some really bright kids. They just needed someone who would help them point those gifts in the right direction.”

### Going the Extra Mile

Her dedication extended beyond the scope of a normal caseworker. Sil didn’t just find placements for the children on her caseload, she cultivated relationships that lasted well into their adulthood. Several of the children, now grown adults, described her as a second mother, someone who never gave up on them even well long past when everyone else had.

Many of the children that she supported went on to have bright careers and families of their own. Claiming Sil was in part due to their success.

But her work wasn’t without challenges. “Some children needed more than a home. They needed understanding. There were certain kids — kids who were...different in ways that were hard to describe — who required extra attention and care.”

Sil’s voice trailed off momentarily before she added, “They were special. In a way that sometimes scared people.”

When pressed, Sil is careful not to reveal specifics citing confidentiality. However, her compassion for these children is palpable. One of her former charges, a young Japanese girl named Izumi, was a particularly memorable case. “She was bright, inquisitive, and imaginative. While others seemingly forgot her, I always

remembered her. She was so full of life.” Sil recalls, her expression softening. “But the world wasn’t always kind to her.”

Izumi, as it turns out, was one of many children on Sil’s caseload who seemed to carry a deep burden far beyond their years. Though Sil wouldn’t elaborate, its clear connection to children like Izumi and others was far more profound than that of a typical caseworker.

## The Path Forward

Now semi-retired, Sylvia — or Sil, as she prefers to be called, isn’t showing signs of slowing down. She spends much of her time volunteering with local adoption agencies, doing private casework on special cases, and lending her expertise to families welcoming children with unique challenges in the home.

Reflecting on her career, Sylvia grows thoughtful, “You know, I’ve seen kids who are misunderstood their whole lives suddenly thrive when they felt safe. And some of those kids had gifts — gifts that most people wouldn’t or even try to understand.

When asked what she means by “gifts,” Sil waves off the unique question with a chuckle. “Oh, just things that make them who they are. Special. Unique. We are all a little extraordinary in our own special way, aren’t we?”

## Editor’s Note:

If you are inspired by Sylvia “Sil” Clearwater’s story, the agency encourages readers to visit their website for resources on supporting foster children.

Asako sat back, pulling her reading glasses from her eyes. The article referenced her sister, Izumi. She felt her throat constrict, her eyes watered. Sil Clearwater was Izumi Kato’s caseworker. How had Asako not known that? There was a lot about Izumi,



that Asako had either forgotten or simply did not know. Her parents had shielded her from much of the latter part of Izumi's journey through the system. Now, it stared her right in the face. Her determination to find Sylvia Clearwater — Sil Clearwater hardened.

For starters, now knowing her proper name would help with online searches. Asako snapped out of her nostalgia and opened a new web browser, searching Sil Clearwater . Immediately more results populated than before, clicking around, Asako read similar accounts from the news article. Apparently, Sil was a beloved caseworker across the state of Colorado. Scrolling through the search results, she clicked on a link to a Facebook, it was a photo. Sil stood with other caseworkers around a cake, the caption read: 35 years of service! Happy Retirement!

Asako looked at the photo, Sil radiated warmth, her face had deep lines with crow's feet highlighting her bright hazel eyes. Her long, silver-streaked black hair was tied in a loose braid draped over one shoulder. She wore a simple blouse with a shawl draped charmingly around her, and a tasteful turquoise pendant hung thoughtfully from her neck.

Scrolling through the few comments, Asako stopped. Her heart jumped at the name on a comment:

Ethan Hernandez: Congratz Sil, you're amazing! You deserve everything!

"There he is again," She whispered — Ethan Hernandez knew Sil Clearwater. Did that mean he knew Naomi Halston? Asako's sister, Izumi? His name seemed so familiar, did Izumi talk about him? Were they in a foster placement together?

She clicked on Ethan's profile, but her excitement deflated instantly — the profile was marked private. No posts, no information, just a profile picture of Ethan standing arm-in-arm with Jason, dressed in knit caps. She recognized the backdrop of the

photo as SSU's Holiday Market — an annual holiday market hosted on the square during finals week.

Asako tilted her head, studying the photo. “Cute,” she said begrudgingly. The couple looked so normal, so unassuming. Some might call her “jaded” in the romance department, but the photo of the two standing together melted her heart a bit.

“It’s the 21st century, there has got to be more on these two,” she said, switching her search to Jason.

She found even less on Jason. A few lacrosse scores and an old high school article about Jason’s high school team making it to the state championships. She noticed Jason’s last name was misspelled — Instead, Havelock was spelled Havelook.

She scoffed, “Amateurs.”

Asako was growing tired of this game. How could two college students have so little about themselves on the internet? She gave Ethan’s name one more try, Ethan Hernandez Summit State University . Scrolling, she stumbled upon a university PR article highlighting Dr. Bellamy’s lab. The headline read: SSU Professor Awarded Prestigious Grant for Study on Neural Stress Response.

Asako skimmed the article, Bellamy’s team had recently published a paper on the effects of stress on emotional neural functioning, and among the co-authors listed were Jason Havelook and Ethan.

She scoffed as she noticed the name was misspelled again. “Our own PR team, can’t release a press release without typos?” She muttered. There were two other unnamed members of the research team.

Asako grabbed her notebook and scribbled down a note. Ethan and Jason both

worked in Bellamy's lab. Naomi Halston worked there too.

Two connections.

Ethan and Naomi had the same case worker.

Ethan and Jason shared work in the same research lab as Naomi.

"This is more than a coincidence," she said to no one, flipping through her notes on Naomi's disappearance.

Decision made, she shut the laptop with a sharp click and grabbed her coat. Bellamy's lab was her next stop.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ASAKO ALWAYS HATED the smell of the Henderson Building. It had a faint air of industrial cleaner, the sharp scent hitting Asako's nose as she stepped through the glass doors. The sleek sterile interior did not match the gothic exterior.

She slowly ambled down the halls, her snow boots clacking on the linoleum floor. She found the door with a handsome brass plaque, Bellamy's Neurocognition Lab, knocking her entered.

A frazzled graduate student looked up from a stack of papers, her dark-rimmed glasses slipped down her nose, "Can I help you?"

Asako's eyes searched, workstations with computer terminals were positioned throughout the space. There were bulletin boards with posters presented at research conferences stapled up. In the back were filing cabinets and a door with a darkened frosted glass window, Bellamy's name etched on it was closed.

"Yes, hi," Asako said, flashing a smile. "I'm with the Lion's Ledger, the campus newspaper. I was hoping to—"

"We aren't allowed to talk to the press. We signed NDAs, besides Bellamy's shutting the lab down, so there's nothing to say."

Asako looked surprised, "I'm sorry what?"

The graduate student's eyes searched the space as if looking for any potential

eavesdroppers, “Bellamy’s research funding was frozen. We are all out of a job. He’s closing down the lab. There was a huge hearing. All the graduate students were interviewed.”

A new lead. A new story. Asako had to stop herself, she could not get distracted by this new story fresh for the grabbing. No. She had to focus on Naomi Halston.

“Everyone is out of a job?” She replied. “What about Jason Havelock and Ethan Hernandez?”

The graduate student sighed and adjusted her glasses, “Yeah, them too. The undergraduates, the graduate assistants, the teaching assistants. It was all grant-funded. I guess I’ll have to take out loans to live next semester.”

“Is Jason or Ethan in today?” Asako asked, crossing her fingers.

The graduate student shook her head, “No. They’ve both been out a lot lately. You could probably catch them at their apartment. They live on campus.”

Asako perked up, pen poised, “And where would that be?”

The student blinked, realizing she might have overstepped, “Uh sorry, I don’t know their exact address.” She quickly changed the subject, “But they’re great guys. Super cute together. They met here, actually. They were recruited as research participants. Most of us were. We jokingly call ourselves “Bellamy’s Brain Bunch” because we participated in one of his research projects. The joke goes he scans our brain and likes what he sees and then we get a job offer.”

Asako’s eyes narrowed as she wrote, “Interesting.”

“I probably shouldn’t have said anything,” The graduate student looked nervous

again, she swallowed hard. “But, doesn’t matter now...since he’s closing down the lab, right?”

Asako gave a disarming smile. “Of course, we will keep that all off record. Thank you for your time.”

The graduate student looked relieved and waved tentatively.

Back outside, Asako tightened her coat against the crisp air. The mention of Jason and Ethan’s absences, Bellamy’s funding freeze, research subject to research assistant pipeline — all deepened her curiosity. She glanced at her watch. It was too late for a house call tonight, but tomorrow morning, she’d pay Jason and Ethan a visit. So many things that seem related, but she just needed to find the golden thread. It was right in front of her if she could just pull it together.

“Just a matter of time,” she murmured, setting down the icy steps, towards the Ledger office.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ethan Hernandez & Jason Havelock

“PLEASE HAVE A seat, Dr. Trent will be with you soon,” the medical assistant said, wrapping up a cable after taking Ethan’s vitals.

Ethan sat on the exam room table, the tissue paper crinkling beneath him. The brown-haired medical assistant, gave both Ethan and Jason a smile, wheeling the equipment out of the room. Jason sat on the chair facing Ethan, his back against the wall. He too shifted uncomfortably, both from the hard-backed chair and the sterile exam room’s muted colors.

“I’m really nervous,” Ethan said, his hands trembling.

Jason pulled the chair closer to Ethan, grabbing his hands, “I’m here. Also, remember this is a good thing. They took photos of your brain, they’re gonna tell us what’s going on.”

Ethan nodded. He hoped it was good news, something that would explain the increase of voices, images, and sounds threatening to overwhelm his inner world.

“I still can’t believe you can hear people’s thoughts. That’s gotta be crazy. What do most people think about?” Jason asked, his finger gently caressing Ethan’s hand.

“Mostly anxious things— what others are thinking about them, how they look, how others look. Some people have dirty thoughts— a lot of people have sex on the

brain,” Ethan said thoughtfully.

Jason smirked, “So you can read my thoughts.”

Ethan nodded but this time smiling, “Actually, I can’t. It was weird at first, but now, it’s not so bad.”

There was a small knock at the exam room door, “Hello, Mr. Hernandez, I’m Dr. Miles Trent.”

He was a tall man, with a no-nonsense demeanor. He stepped into the room cradling a laptop in one hand and shook Ethan’s hand with the other.

“Nice to meet you. This is my boyfriend, Jason,” Ethan said, gesturing toward Jason who gave a small tight-lipped nod.

“Good to meet you two,” Trent said, perching the laptop on a counter in the corner. He adjusted the screen for Ethan and Jason to see. Jason watched Trent’s expression, searching for any hint of reassurance. Ethan sat stiffly, his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

Dr. Trent cleared his throat pulling a pair of reading glasses out and perched them on his nose. “Thank you for coming in today. I’ve reviewed your MRI scans, Ethan. I want to start by saying there are no signs of a tumor or structural abnormalities in your brain. As far as I can tell you have a perfectly healthy 22-year-old brain.”

Jason let out a small, relieved sigh. Ethan didn’t move. He stared at the screen, his jaw tight.

“However,” Dr. Trent continued, “your scans do show some unusual activity. The activity levels in your limbic system— the part of your brain responsible for



processing emotions and memory— are very high. Particularly, in the amygdala and hippocampus. They're showing inordinate amounts of overactivity."

"What does that mean?" Ethan asked, trying to recall his anatomy and physiology class.

Dr. Trent adjusted his glasses once more, "It means your brain is reacting as though it is in a heightened state of emotional and instinctual processing. Ordinarily, these areas are active when you're experiencing strong emotions forming memories, or responding to threats. However, in your case, the activity levels are far beyond what we typically see, even in those situations. It's as if your brain is perceiving things that aren't physically there."

Jason frowned and chimed in, "Like hallucinations?"

"Not exactly," Trent replied, "It's more like your brain is overreacting to stimuli — or even inventing stimuli that it believes is real. This could explain the migraines and your feelings of disorientation."

Ethan swallowed, and a lump formed in his throat. "Have you seen this before?"

Dr. Trent hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "Not exactly, no. But you occasionally hear of cases like this on the fringes of neuropsychiatry — claims of psychics or individuals with heightened sensitivities. Much of it is untested theory and only really explored by fringe researchers. In most medical discussions, it's still considered pseudoscience."

Jason stiffened, his tone sharp, "Are you saying this isn't real...that Ethan is faking it?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all," Trent back peddled, "What you're experiencing is

very real to you, Ethan. The scan shows that. Your brain is responding to something. It's just that we don't really have the medical science to explain. Frankly, your case is quite rare and I'm unsure how to support you."

"What can you do for him now?" Jason asked.

Ethan looked dejected.

Dr. Trent sighed, "We have a few options. I'd like to forward your case to some of my colleagues at the medical school. You're SSU students, correct? You're aware that the Sibley-Palmer Medical Center has now been absorbed by the university. They're bringing on some top-notch researchers who I'd like to take a look at this--"

"No. I've had enough of 'brain research,' we are, or were rather, research assistants for Dr. Richard Bellamy. I've had my fill of brain scientists," Ethan said flatly.

"Yes, well. Dr. Bellamy is a divisive figure in this field. The researchers I'm referring to are much more...sensible in their approach. But, we can hold off on that for now, but our options for treatment are few. I'm going to prescribe you a low-dose antipsychotic medication. It's going to help regulate your over-reactivity in the brain. Essentially, we are going to calm down some of your amygdala and hippocampus functioning, so you can experience a little relief."

Ethan flinched, "Antipsychotic? So I'm crazy?" His lips pressed into a thin line, staring down at his hands.

Jason watched, "Is there any alternative?" His eyes searched Ethan.

"For now, this is the best course of action," Trent continued, "We'll monitor your response and adjust as necessary. If you experience worsening symptoms, let me know immediately. And consider what I said about me bringing in some colleagues to

consult.”

Trent scribbled something on his prescription pad, tore off a sheet, handing it to Ethan. “In the meantime, try to rest and avoid stressful situations as much as possible. It’s likely that stress is exacerbating your symptoms.”

It was a quiet ride home. Jason gripped the steering wheel tight as he navigated the streets back to their apartment. He stole a glance at Ethan, who just stared out the window. The prescription folded neatly in his hand.

“Hey, Stormy. You brooding over there?” Jason asked finally.

Ethan nodded faintly. His expression was distant. The word antipsychotic replayed in his mind, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. It wasn’t the relief he had hoped for. It was like a label, a judgment. Something was wrong with him, and no one knew what it was.

As they pulled into their apartment lot, Jason reached and placed a hand over Ethan’s knee, “We’re going to figure this out. Together.”

Ethan forced a smile, but the gnawing sense in him wondered how and when.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Asako Kato

ASAKO STOOD IN front of the second-floor apartment door, her knuckles raw from wrapping on the door. She hovered just inches from the wood. She had already knocked three times, each time louder than the last, but to no answer. Her sharp ears picked up no shuffling, no murmurs of conversation, not even the faint hum of a TV.

Something told her there were people behind that door, but she couldn't get their attention. Sighing heavily, she glanced at the thin railing of the iron staircase beside her.

Again?

Are they always this elusive?

She frowned and pulled out her notebook and jotted a note to herself. 3rd visit, still no one home. Are they avoiding me? She underlined the last part.

Pulling her phone out, she glanced at it scrolling through a list of unanswered emails to Jason and Ethan. She was convinced they were hiding something. Chewing the cap of her pen, Ethan's name had sparked a familiar itch in her mind.

Why does it feel like I know him?

The closest thing she'd been able to piece together was her sister's and Ethan's

caseworker were the same person, Sil Clearwater.

Her editor was getting antsy about posting the Ferris wheel story and had confronted her just this morning about stonewalling the article in favor of the Halston disappearance, but now she was convinced they were connected.

She hadn't worked this hard since reporting the campus box-office embezzlement scandal last year. After receiving a tip from a disgruntled senior theatre major that the campus box office was skimming money from ticket sales.

She was in her office, the cluttered newsroom was quiet save for the hum of her laptop.

"Hey, you, uh, you Asako Kato?"

She turned to see a scruffy-looking guy in a black hoodie standing awkwardly near her cubicle. His messenger bag was hung low over one shoulder as he shifted nervously.

"I might be, who's asking?" She said, tilting her head, her eyes looking over glasses.

The guy glanced around as if someone would be ready to attack him, "I'm Kyle. Theater major. You're a reporter, right?"

"So what if I am?" She said, more clandestine than she meant.

The guy glanced around again, scratching the back of his neck, "I think...I think the box office is skimming money."

Asako's eyebrows rose, "You think or you know?"

“I know,” Kyle said. “The Dean of Fine Arts—Dunham— he’s in on it. His son too, runs the box office, they’re working with one of the theater professors — Professor Hargrove. I’m telling you they’re laundering ticket sales and pocketing the cash. I worked there last semester. I watched them do it.”

“Laundering ticket sales?” She repeated, “And why are you just coming forward with this now? They did not cast you as Atticus Finch in this season’s production of *To Kill A Mocking Bird*?”

Asako laughed at her own joke.

Kyle’s eyes darkened,” It’s not exactly easy to accuse people who are in charge of giving me grades.”

Asako considered his answer. What followed was three months of reconnaissance work, she saw every play, musical, third-rate magician, and senior theater production that semester. She never wanted to hear the soundtrack from *My Fair Lady* ever again. Eventually, she was able to befriend one of the ticketers, and after a long night of drunk musical theater karaoke, the ticketer spilled the whole thing. She printed the story the next day, leaving the ticketers name out of it, of course. Both the Dean of Fine Arts and box office manager were immediately dismissed and the theater professor mysteriously retired at the end of that year.

Asako’s thoughts were interrupted by a faint sound of sirens in the distance growing louder. She paused, tilting her head in the direction of the sound. Sirens were like a dog whistle to reporters and they meant one thing — breaking news. Leaning over the railing, she squinted toward the horizon beyond the apartment complex. The piercing sound wasn’t fading, it was coming closer. It was coming towards campus.

Quickly she descended the spiral staircase, her heavy boots clanking against the metal. She nearly slipped at the base on patchy ice. The crisp afternoon air bit at her

cheeks, but her focus became laser-like. She reached her car as she saw the blinding blue and red flashes of emergency vehicles streaking past the main road leading towards campus.

Her pulse quickened. She gripped her car door handle and fumbled for her keys. A buzzing sound came from her phone in her jacket pocket. Without looking at the screen, she answered it, her tone clipped, “Asako here.”

“Asako, it’s Brian,” her editor's voice came through, “Anything on that Ethan-Jason lead, we need to get this to press ASAP.”

“Nothing yet,” she said, her voice rising with irritation. “But something’s going down on campus. I just saw police and EMS heading towards the Spire. I’m on my way over now.”

“Campus?” Brian asked, his interest piqued. “Do you know what’s happening?”

“Not yet, but I’m on my way now to find out,” Asako said, sliding into the driver’s seat, and cranking the engine. “I’ll call you when I get there.”

“Be safe, and for God's sake, get an eyewitness quote while you’re on the scene,” Brian said.

Asako smirked and disconnected the call.

She peeled out of the parking lot and quickly caught up to the emergency vehicles, weaving through light traffic. Asako’s heart raced, she had never been this close to a breaking story. A thrill shot through her as her mind buzzed with the possibilities. Were the dorms on fire? Was there an accident in one of the labs? Or was it something else entirely?

The closer she got to campus, the more chaotic the scene became. Flashing lights bathed the streets in red and blue as a crowd of students gathered near the university's iconic bell tower. Asako parked haphazardly along the curb, hoping parking enforcement was not out today. SSU parking officials were merciless with their citations.

Whatever, I'll bill it to the Ledger .

She ran in the direction of the students, grabbing her phone and notebook as she approached.

"Excuse me, press...coming through. Excuse me, reporter coming through," she bellowed as the crowd of students parted. She slipped through the throng of onlookers. The bell tower loomed ominously in the background, its shadow stretching across the quad in the afternoon Colorado sunshine. Police cars and fire trucks surrounded off the area. Yellow tape was being rolled around the quad beneath the bell tower.

Asako ran toward an officer who was pulling the yellow tape down the parameter.

"Excuse me, officer, what happened?" Asako said, trying to catch her breath.

The officer continued pulling the tape, "Please keep back, this is a crime scene. Please step back."

"I'm with the press," She said, pulling a press badge from her inner pocket.

The cop looked at it unimpressed, "I don't care if you're the Pope, you're not getting over this line."

Asako watched as the cop continued pushing onlookers back, the officer wore a thick



winter coat with the Denver Police Department insignia. Where was SSU police? She needed to find Detective Farmer. Her instincts surged like adrenaline. Something big just happened and it happened at the base of the bell tower.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:19 am*

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jason Havelock

JASON'S PHONE CHIMED,

R\_Bellamy: I'm glad to hear it is nothing serious. The offer still stands if he wants to have a few sessions with me.

J\_Havelock: Thanks, Dr. Bellamy. I'll bring it up. He went to bed, I think the meds hit him pretty fast.

R\_Bellamy: They do that. Have a good night. Keep me posted.

Jason clicked his phone off and tossed it aside, while he lay sprawled on the sofa. He had homework he needed to do, but the weight of the day clung to him. Ethan had shuffled off to bed, the image of him cradling the prescription bottle made Jason's stomach twist.

He grabbed his phone and scrolled through the messages. After confiding in Bellamy a few days ago, Jason had been exchanging messages with him on the university's instant message app Roar . In a way, he felt guilty, details of Ethan's health weren't his to share. But he had no one else to turn to, Ethan had no family, and Jason's family didn't even know they were dating or living together, much less his boyfriend battling an illness. There was so much swimming around in his head, it felt nice having someone to express things to. He didn't have to convince Bellamy of anything, the professor just knew things. It was Bellamy who encouraged Jason to

stay committed to Ethan's health. After all, Bellamy researched stuff like this and offered multiple times to meet with Ethan. There was lingering doubt in Jason as to bring this up to Ethan, something told him that Ethan wouldn't appreciate him talking to their professor about something so personal. Not to mention, Jason wasn't exactly clear on what Bellamy would do in what he called "sessions" with Ethan.

This was the man who promised them recommendation letters if they produced solid work in the lab. Who was Jason to argue with that? Besides, now that the MRI was complete and the doctor had offered no real answers or solution — Bellamy was starting to look like a viable option.

"Fringes of neuropsychiatry," Jason muttered to himself reaching for his laptop. Dr. Trent's words had ping-ponged around in Jason's head since they left the clinic. If there was a way to describe Bellamy's more recent research, "fringe" might just do it. While Jason and Ethan had participated in more mainstream and scientifically sound research as members of Bellamy's lab, there were rumors of Bellamy's more theoretical work being provocative. Ethan and Jason hadn't yet had time to discuss that Bellamy's research funding was frozen by faculty, effectively closing the lab down — leaving them jobless.

Jason's parents funded his education and provided a generous living allowance while Ethan's academic scholarships provided more than enough to pay his way. The jobs paid very little in the way of compensation, such that neither Jason nor Ethan relied on it for financial stability, but it did provide a doorway to graduate school recommendations and research publications, which was an absolute must for ambitious undergraduates.

Jason opened his laptop, the glow of the screen illuminated his face and cast a long shadow across the apartment. His fingers hovered over the keyboard considering what to search: "Dr. Richard Bellamy." He navigated the professor's university profile, scrolling through a long list of accolades and publications. Bellamy's work in

neuropsychology was well regarded and his numerous publications were highly cited. Exploring the intersections of emotion, cognition, and brain function, Bellamy was once considered a pioneer in neuropsychology and brain functioning.

Jason's scrolling slowed as he reached older articles in Bellamy's bibliography. Titles like "Neural Correlates of Telepathy: An Exploration into Cross-Brain Communication" and "Emotion and Energy: The Role of the Limbic System in Psychic Phenomena" piqued his interest. He clicked one skimming the dense academic language that described experiments but much of it was foreign to Jason with just his current undergraduate training. The article was filled with images of the hemispheres of the brain and tables with complex statistical analysis.

But, he could feel himself leaning in, Jason was onto something.

He stared at the screen, scratching his chin. Bellamy had spent decades researching fringe theories examining the brain's untapped potential, all interspersed with more mainstream psychological scientific inquiry. The way Jason figured it, Bellamy used his mainstream research to then gain access to research subjects to test his more fringe theories. It was rather ingenious and certainly added to Bellamy's polemic reputation.

Curious, Jason broadened his search. After some digging, he stumbled on an archived article from the Science Gazette dated 1974. The title read Mind Over Matter? Dr. Richard Bellamy Claims Telekinetic Potential in Human Brains. Jason scrolled through the article when one passage caught his attention,

"In a hotly contested paper, Emotions and Energy: The Role of the Limbic System in Psychic Phenomena, Bellamy recounts the details of experiments in controlled laboratory settings. Using advanced stress induction techniques, Bellamy and his team claim to have observed subtle, measurable movements in small objects, such as metal pins and glass beads, when the subject experienced stress induced at a precise

volume. “The limbic system, particularly the amygdala, plays a central role,” Bellamy explains. “It’s where emotion and instinct meet, creating a kind of ‘energy bridge’ between thought and matter.”

With proper stress-induction, Bellamy claims that primal functions within the amygdala can be antagonized to yield observable psychic phenomena. But, he is not without his critics, many arguing that such results could easily be attributed to micro-vibrations or human error. Further, some have argued the ethics of his “stress induction.” It is unclear what type of stress at what frequency and for what duration the subject needs to be exposed to produce observable psychic potential.”

Stress certainly triggered Ethan’s migraines, Jason was certain of that. Closing his laptop, he considered Dr. Trent’s prognosis from earlier in the day and Bellamy’s research. This is potentially something that Bellamy has been postulating for years.

Jason glanced towards the bedroom yet again, Ethan needed help. More and more, Jason was convinced that Bellamy was the one who could give it to him.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Asako Kato

ASAKO PEERED AROUND the crowd that had formed at the base of the bell tower. She couldn't see much, she was blocked by the yellow tape that cordoned off the base of the tower, several uniformed officers stood nearby, their radios squawking occasionally. Something big happened, but what? Irritation flurried in Asako's chest.

She pushed her way through the throng of onlookers, finally spotting Detective Janine Farmer near the end of the cordon, a small notepad in her hand speaking to a group of officers all wearing Denver Police Department coats. She looked grim, her demeanor sharper than usual. Asako tried to lip-read the detectives whispered conversations. She pushed herself to the front of the crowd the tape grazing her chest.

"Detective Farmer!" she called, her voice sliced through the murmurs of the crowd of concerned students. Farmer did not seem to notice Asako, or she was ignoring her altogether. Asako was not deterred.

"What happened? Is this about the missing girl?" She said, her voice raising.

She heard students begin chattering in low whispers.

Farmer turned, her eyes narrowing on Asako. "Kato, not now,"

"The people have a right to know!" Asako pressed, she pulled out her phone clicking the voice record feature, "Was she found? Is it Naomi Halston?"

Farmer sighed and uttered something to a uniformed officer who nodded. She stepped towards Asako, “Ok, Kato. Do you want to play in the big leagues? Follow me,” Farmer said, raising the yellow tape up.

Students stepped away, parting behind Asako.

“You’re not gonna like what you’re gonna see, but since you want to so bad. I’m going to show you.”

Up close, Farmer looked tired, as she tilted her head in the direction of the commotion. Asako took no time, she stepped under the yellow tape and followed Farmer.

Asako was scribbling furiously on her notepad and trailing beside Farmer, “What happened?”

“You’ll see,” Farmer said, “Just this way.”

Asako and Farmer walked through the gaggle of officers, EMT, and forensic technicians, Asako’s boots clacked as they walked off the pavement that circled the Spire and onto the hardened ground into a small wooded area that encircled the Spire. A narrow dirt path meandered through the trees, flanked by tangled underbrush and shrubbery. A small canopy of towering maples and pines formed around the base of the Spire. Soon they came upon a large blue tarp.

“Brace yourself,” Farmer said, crouching down beside the blue tarp. She pulled back to reveal Naomi Halston’s lifeless body. Her blond hair was dirty, her face was colorless, and her lips cracked from the harsh dry cold air.

Asako put her hand over her mouth in horror, “Oh my God. What happened?”

Farmer pulled the tarp back over Halston's face, "We're calling it a suicide. She jumped from the top of the Spire. " She said, pointing directly up. The Spire soared dozens of feet in the air, the pink-purple dusk sky behind it.

"How? What? I don't understand." Asako said, struggling to put words together.

She's been out here for a few days, hidden under the canopy of trees. The groundskeeper found her and reported it just a bit ago.

Asako looked dubious, as she wrestled with the oily feeling in her stomach, "How has she been out here all this time and no one has reported the body? Students walk these trails every day."

"Good question," Farmer said. "But, it doesn't matter, the university considers the matter of Naomi Halston closed."

Asako looked at her incredulously, "You're kidding me. There's not gonna be an investigation?"

Farmer shrugged and crossed her arms.

"Detective Farmer, this can't be it. She's been missing for weeks. Last seen with Dr. Richard Bellamy who is now under investigation by the university and you're telling me this whole thing is being ruled a 'suicide?' This is such an obvious cover-up!"

Farmer's expression hardened, "Kato, don't start with the conspiracy theories. We will notify Ms. Halston's next of kin. The case is closed."

Her tone of finality ripped the wind from Asako's sails. Grinding her teeth, Asako stepped closer, lowering her voice, "Is it? Or is that just what your bosses want you to say? A student's death tied to the bell tower, body found on campus, a noted



professor under investigation. This kind of press will tank the university's reputation. Donors would bail faster than the crew on the Titanic."

Farmer's lips thinned, her eyes darting briefly toward the gathering students, local news stations were setting up vans just out of view of the crime scene.

"Listen," Farmer said, her tone low and warning, "I got a job to do, kids to feed, so my hands are tied. But, if you want to chase this story and take on the 'powers that be' then fine. I'm getting pressure to close this case up with a tidy bow. The university president is pushing hard for us to clean this up quietly. Turns out the Denver PD's commissioner is buddy-buddy with the university president and they're not pushing a deeper investigation."

Asako's heart raced, "Okay, but unofficially? What do you think, detective? This is a girl's life. She was a foster kid, she had no one."

Farmer exhaled sharply, then pulled a small notepad from her pocket and scribbled something down. She tore the page off and handed it to Asako.

"Sil Clearwater. I gave you the name, but I take it you weren't able to find much on her?" Farmer said holding the paper to her chest.

Asako nodded, "She's basically a ghost."

"Yeah, that's because she's doing some private work for some powerful people who don't want her to be found. I was able to find some information on her, but that took some digging. Rumor was she helped government agencies find kids to do some wild experiments on. She won't return my phone calls, but maybe you'll have better luck. Even went to her house, but no one was home. This is the last bone I'm throwing you, you got me, Kato?" She finished handing Asako the note.

Taking the note, Asako's eyes widened, as she stared at the name and contact information. "Thank you, Detective. I owe you one."

Farmer smirked humorlessly. "You owe me nothing because this does not tie back to me. Got it?"

Asako nodded and made a beeline out of the clearing. The face of Naomi Halston still lingering in her mind. Sil Clearwater had to tie all of this together, she just had to. She might not talk to Detective Farmer, but Asako had one card left to play, she felt cheap even considering it, but if she wanted to get Naomi Halston justice and find out what happened to her sister, Izumi.

She was going to play it.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ethan Hernandez

ETHAN'S BODY WAS sprawled in the familiar position. He slept restlessly, the new medication induced slumber was anything but restful, and his brain felt wide awake. The wind howled outside his bedroom window, he swore he could feel a draft blow over him. Ethan was atop the bell tower, he could see the lights of campus twinkling against the midnight blue sky, and heavy snow clouds threatened to blanket everything.

Beyond the campus, the lights of Denver glimmered. His eyes flickered at the scene before him when he realized he wasn't alone. The girl stood beside him, her hollow eyes peering out into the horizon. The girl and he were separate but the same, her thoughts and feelings threaten to over take him. Yet, he could sense her yearning to be free.

"Who are you?" Ethan asked, his voice trembling.

Her lips moved, but her words were disjointed, again he could not make out what she was saying — only feel what she felt. Fear, anger, and worry, all overwhelmed him. The girl's head bobbed back and forth as she looked out from the ledge. "Be wary of doctors...not all heal...there is danger..."

Ethan tried to step forward, but his legs stood frozen, "What are you saying? Who is in danger? You? Me?"

The girl didn't answer. Instead, she turned to the edge of the tower and gazed down into the darkness below. Her ragged hair blew as an icy draft whipped around them. She stepped forward and gave an unreadable expression over her shoulder.

"Wait! Don't!" Ethan pled. He reached for her.

But it was too late, she stepped forward, her form dropping into the shadows below.

Ethan's scream ripped him out of his sleep. He jolted upright, his breath came in jagged gasps, his heart pounding like a drum. Distant sirens wailed outside. A crown of sweat had formed on Ethan's forehead.

"Jason!" Ethan's voice broke as he called out.

Bursting into the room, Jason leaped on the bed, grabbing Ethan.

"She's dead, she jumped," Ethan choked, tears streaming down his face. "She jumped. She jumped from the tower."

Jason embraced him tightly, his arms enveloping Ethan's small form. "Who? Who are you talking about?"

Ethan shook his head, his body trembling, "I don't know. I don't know who she is, but she was in my dream. She was trying to tell me something. The voices, the images...it's all connected."

Jason stroked Ethan's hair gently, his own heart aching. "Tell me everything. I'm here."

Between gasps and sobs, Ethan recounted the dream. The strange muffled voices, the flashing images, the warnings. "She said you were "danger," Ethan finished, trying to

catch his breath.

“Me? I’m dangerous?” Jason said, pulling back.

Ethan wiped his eyes, “I don’t know. None of it makes sense.”

“Ethan, listen to me. I think we need to do something. Something different,” Jason said, grabbing Ethan once more, and pulling him tight.”

Ethan let Jason’s large frame anchor him. While all the thoughts and images threatened to consume Ethan, he took comfort in Jason’s inner quiet.

“Did you hear me?” Jason asked, kissing the top of his head.

Ethan nodded, too exhausted to protest, “I did. What did you have in mind?”

“We need to see Bellamy,” Jason said, holding his breath.

Ethan sat up, looking Jason in the eyes, his head tilted inquisitively.

“Please don’t be mad, I’ve been telling him about your condition. There was no one else to talk to and he just sort of got it. Besides I did some digging, he worked with the government on psychic phenomena before. He knows about the brain. If anyone knows what’s happening to you, it might be him.”

Exhaling slowly, Ethan nodded, again,” So that’s who you’ve been texting? I thought you were talking to your secret boyfriend.”

Jason smiled warmly, “Technically, you are my secret boyfriend. My parents don’t know about you yet. They still think I’m seeing a sorority girl.”

Ethan chuckled, he missed his life before all of this. It all seemed so far away. The jealousy he felt when they attended frat parties and sorority girls would shamelessly flirt with Jason — it all felt so benign compared to this.

“Christmas break is coming, we need to tell your family,” Ethan said. “Unless you’re embarrassed of me.” He sniffed and pouted playfully.

Jason scratched his head, “I’m proud of you! I’m more embarrassed, I’ve not told them anything. They’re gonna love you, but seems like I should have had a conversation with them before introducing them to my boyfriend.”

Ethan nodded, “I understand. That should seem like a piece of cake compared to what we’ve been dealing with.”

“Speaking of which, what do you say? Can we give Bellamy a try? I did a deep dive on his research and he has published some interesting stuff on this topic. He’s gotta be able to tell us more than what Dr. Trent did,” Jason said, hopeful.

Ethan looked warmly at Jason, his heart swelling. Jason brought forth feelings of comfort and determination; he was more than his boyfriend. He made sense of the chaos, he anchored him in stormy oceans. Ethan wanted to move beyond these feeling of fear and anxiety, he wanted things to be normal. Ethan ached to visit Jason’s family for Christmas break, to see the town where Jason grew up— to meet old friends, old rivals. He wanted to climb into Jason’s life and learn the contours of what made him who he was. Ethan imagine Jason walking through his childhood neighborhood with his friends as they pushed their bikes home after a long summer afternoon.

So much of what Jason represented was what Ethan missed— they were two puzzle pieces that fit together. Ethan wanted to be part of Jason’s world — not just the present but the past too. What kind of dinners did his mother cook? Was his father

talkative or quiet? Exactly how sarcastic was Jason's little sister? Ethan imagined a comfortable, cozy home where the family sat around a dinner table laughing while playing tabletop games.

He wanted to return to their home after a long visit with Jason's family, taking a lazy Sunday afternoon picking out furniture and decorating their apartment. Jason had become Ethan's reason to fight back. He needed to fight back — not just for himself, but for them. Ethan couldn't spend another moment in this bed, letting the dreams, the voices, the images pull him back. Whatever this thing was, Ethan needed to learn to conquer it, he refused to let it consume him.

Ethan straightened a little, his eyes meeting Jason's warm gaze. He wanted to reclaim his life, he wanted to build something with Jason that was strong and loving. The first step was confronting this thing in his head.

“Okay, I'll do it. I just want this to stop.”

### CHAPTER THIRTY

THE NEXT MORNING, Ethan and Jason woke early for the first appointment with Bellamy.

“I text Bellamy, he’s waiting for us in the lab,” Jason said, stepping into the doorway of their bedroom.

Ethan pulled a hoodie over his head and gave a tight-lipped smile, “Ready.”

Soon, they were on campus walking through the familiar doors of the Henderson Building. The campus was quiet and fresh snow had blanketed everything, Ethan felt a strange mixture of hope and worry emerging as they entered the hallway and walked towards the lab entrance.

They entered and heard classical music playing quietly from Bellamy’s office at the back of the lab, his door was ajar.

“Hello, Dr. Bellamy,” Jason called out.

A rustling sound came from Bellamy’s office and he poked his head through the door frame, “Just back here gentlemen, please come in.”

Bellamy was well groomed in his sweater and tweed jacket, and reading glasses were perched at the edge of his nose. Jason and Ethan entered his office, and they were mildly surprised to see him packing his office scattered throughout, books were in haphazard stacks. Bellamy’s diplomas were pulled from the wall and propped against



it.

Bellamy scurried towards the door, removing boxes and pulling two chairs together in front of his desk, “Please come. Have a seat. Can I get you some coffee?”

Jason and Ethan took a seat and glanced at each other, “Are you packing, Dr. Bellamy?” Jason asked.

Bellamy took a seat across from them at his desk, he looked around wistfully “Oh just taking some things home. I’m going to be reducing my time on campus, and spending more time at home. I figured I’d take a few things with me.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your funding, Dr. B,” Ethan said, giving a mournful look to Bellamy.

Bellamy leaned back in his chair, “Yes, it is unfortunate. I’m sorry I’ve had to let you all go and right in the middle of some very important research. Hopefully, you all will find employment otherwise. I’d be happy to write you letters of recommendation, if you still want them, that is. But that’s not why we are here today,” Bellamy said interrupting himself, “Tell me. How are you feeling Ethan?”

Ethan hesitated, his fingers gripping the edge of the chair, “Where to even start?” He exhaled a shaky breath and began. He recounted it all, from the stabbing pain at the Ferris wheel, the voices and images that invaded his head, and the warning from the dream of the girl. All of it.

Bellamy leaned forward, his elbows resting on his desk, fingers steeped in front of his mouth, “So you can hear other’s thoughts? Can you hear what I’m thinking now?”

Ethan concentrated, but nothing came. “It doesn’t work like that exactly. They just come without warning.”

“Interesting, and the dreams. What do you make of those?” Bellamy inquired.

Ethan shrugged, “I don’t know. She doesn’t respond to me, the girl talks at me, she doesn’t talk to me.”

Jason shifted, “There is something I haven’t mentioned.”

Ethan glanced at him, and Bellamy turned his chair slightly towards Jason.

“When Ethan sleeps, things happen. I haven’t said anything because I didn’t want to add to the stress,” Jason said, putting his hands up in defense. “Ethan has been through so much already.”

Bellamy reached into his top drawer pulling out a notepad and a pack of cigarettes, “What sorts of things happen when Ethan sleeps?”

He wrote a few notes to himself and revealed a cigarette lighter from his pocket.

Jason and Ethan shared a look.

“You don’t mind, do you? It’s been a stressful semester for all of us,” Bellamy mused, lighting the cigarette. “Besides, they help me think.”

He lit the cigarette, as Jason continued, “The night of the Ferris wheel thing, the bed shook and things moved on their own in the house. Then a few nights ago, I was throwing the trash and was attacked by some sort of monster.”

Bellamy’s eyes snapped in Jason’s direction, cigarette puckered in his lips. “A monster?”

Ethan’s jaw clenched, a hole threatened to open inside of him.

“Yeah, a reptile thing. I fought it off and then it sort of evaporated into a gold light. Like fireworks or something, it was really strange.”

Bellamy took a deep drag of his cigarette, “Telepathic projection,” he whispered mostly to himself.

“The images you described, Ethan. What did they contain?” he continued, grabbing for an ashtray.

Again, Ethan shifted uncomfortably, “Th-They’re...” he cleared his throat, “They’re just images of like photographic stills.”

“Do you see these things in your dreams? That is when you’re not having the dream of the girl.”

Ethan tried to think back, “Yeah. The images are usually conjured after feeling something really, really intensely.”

Bellamy studied Ethan intently, his expression unreadable, “Interesting,” he murmured, taking another drag of his cigarette. He leaned back in his chair.

Ethan struggled to decipher his meaning. Reaching over, Jason placed a steadying hand on Ethan’s knee. “That’s everything, Dr. Bellamy. He’s been through hell these last few weeks. We need answers.”

Bellamy finished his cigarette, taking it from his lips, he grounded it into the ashtray. “Now, what I can tell you is purely theoretical. I have been able to replicate very simple psychic phenomena in my university lab and in my own personal research. But, what you are describing is something beyond anything I’ve been able to reproduce in a controlled lab setting.”

Bellamy took the familiar air of a professor about to deliver a prestigious lecture, “Based on the results of your MRI, it is likely you had a stress-induced activation of some type of latent ability. While this exceeds any of the theories I have put forth, it seems they’re similar.”

He delivered the same lecture offered to his class the previous day, then said, “In my private writings, I think of them as enhanced neurological attunements. As if your brain is more finely attuned to neurological potentials. There are many mysteries about how this came about. Some argue that it is the next step in our brain’s evolution, while others say that it is something we are capable of, we just need the proper stress to activate it.”

Bellamy concluded, grabbing another cigarette and lighting it.

Jason and Ethan were stunned.

It was Jason who shifted first, “you’re saying that Ethan’s brain has activated some — attunement? Like a latent psychic ability?”

Bellamy made a gesture, cigarette in one hand, lighter in the other, “It would seem so?”

Smoke wafted around them.

“Is there anything we can do about it? I don’t want this. I didn’t ask for this,” Ethan croaked.

Bellamy looked at Ethan through the haze of cigarette smoke, “There’s no putting that rabbit back in the hat,” Bellamy said. “You need to learn to harness it and make it work for you. There is one thing that is strange about your case though Ethan.”

Ethan's eyes went round, "Oh, this is strange enough?"

"Yes. In most cases of attunement I've read, an individual only demonstrates one potential — telepathy, spatial manipulation, precognition, empathy, or telekinesis. You are describing at least two, possibly three — telepathy, telekinesis, and precognition. This could explain the incessant migraines you're experiencing. If all these latent attunements tried to manifest at once, your brain is likely working hard to organize all the new input."

Gripping the edge of the chair, Ethan shot Jason an apologetic look.

"So, he needs to learn to manage them?" Jason said, cutting the silence.

Bellamy pulled the cigarette from his lips, "Indeed."

"Can you help him?" Jason asked, "Learn to manage these, these...attunements?"

Snapping upright, Bellamy pulled the cigarette from his mouth, "Only if, Mr. Hernandez, is interested in the help."

Ethan felt the hole opening up inside, "What choice do I have?"

Bellamy came from around the table, "Listen, Ethan," he said, crouching down to meet him eye-to-eye. "This may seem like a curse, but I assure you, once you learn to master these abilities, you may be able to help a lot of people. Here's what we are going to do."

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Asako Kato

ASAKO CROUCHED BEHIND a decorative shrub near the entrance of the psychology building. The frigid ground pressed into her knees.

“I’ve got you now,” She muttered. After hours of staking out Bellamy’s office, her patience had paid off. And not a moment too soon, her 25-year-old knees were starting to protest, this amateur sleuthing was taking its toll. Leaning forward through the shrubbery, she caught sight of the two of them.

Asako watched as a handsome broad-shouldered Jason with stylishly tousled auburn hair looked concerningly at Ethan, his jet black wavy hair equally artfully disheveled. They moved in unison, possessing a natural rhythm. Asako tilted her head, surveying them for a moment, Jason was just a bit taller than Ethan, the couple looked perfect together. While Jason portrayed a quiet confidence, Ethan seemed softer and understated.

They looked annoyingly perfect together. It made Asako ill.

Pfft — I could have a boyfriend or girlfriend if I wanted one too.

A pang of something — jealousy? Longing? Whatever it was rose in her watching an obviously perfect-for-each-other couple make their way inside the Henderson Building, they looked like they belonged on a glossy university campus brochure. Where was this envy coming from? She frowned at her reaction. Ethan and Jason had

become the center of her world for the last week. Following and tracking their every move had become her full-time job — or at least that's what she told herself.

I seriously need a personal life.

Jason held the door open for Ethan, murmuring something softly that made Jason smile as he briefly glanced in her direction. Asako couldn't hear the words, but something told her she needed to work on her incognito-mode. She waited for them to disappear inside before stepping out from her hiding spot, she brushed her coat and made her way towards the building.

“All right, love birds,” she whispered, steeling herself. “Let's see what you're up to.”

Adjusting her scarf, she made her way inside. Through the glass double doors, her boots softly clacked on the linoleum floor as she worked to keep a distance while trailing them.

They seemed deep in conversation when they came to the entrance of Bellamy's lab.

“Dr. Richard Bellamy,” she quietly sneered. Journalists at the Ledger had tried to get interviews with Bellamy, but he refused them. Why be interviewed by a lowly campus newspaper when you're featured in the Washington Post or New York Times?

She watched as they entered, “I thought Mr. And Mr. Perfect were unemployed.” She said. “What are you doing back here?”

Quickly, she pulled her notepad and scribbled a note to herself. She occupied herself in thought, staring at the yellowing announcements and research flyers on a bulletin board just down from the lab entrance. She slipped into a shallow alcove near the corner trying to stay out of sight, Asako wasn't going anywhere. She had trailed them

for days and now she had them cornered.

Glancing at her watch, her stomach gurgled with hunger.

“Damn it,” she muttered.

She sighed and stared longingly at the lab door. Asako figured if she was going to commit to this, she needed sustenance. Having passed a vending machine on the way in, she scurried back to the entrance of the Henderson Building and spotted the machines.

Digging through her small cross-body bag, she pulled out a few coins and made a selection from the meager offerings of the vending machines. Finals week was approaching and the graduate students had raided the vending machine during late-night study sessions.

Deciding on a pack of peanut butter cookies, she sighed knowing she'd be picking out the peanut butter from her teeth all night. She pressed the buttons with more force than necessary, making her selection. The machine hummed to life, the metal coil wound and pushed the pack of cookies forward as her stomach gave another growl of protest.

She watched it hungrily when the cookies tipped and teetered...and wedged between the glass and their spot on the top row shelf.

She froze, staring at the traitorous machine.

“Are you kidding me!?” she hissed.

Digging back into her bag she scrounged for a few more coins and found nothing but lip balm and a questionable slice of gum. Why did the campus have a coin-operated



vending machine anyway? Everything had moved to student ID last year.

She gazed at the machine with malice, her stomach now roaring. Looking up and down the dimly lit hallway, she stepped forward and shook the vending machine.

“Give. Me. My. Dinner.” She muttered through gritted teeth, hitting the machine after every word. But her assault yielded nothing. The cookies mocked her from their position.

“Great. Just great.” Asako didn’t make it a habit of hating inanimate objects, but this vending machine was pushing the depths of her benevolence.

Again, she scanned her surroundings getting down on her hands and knees, pushing open the machine’s dispenser door, she reached her hand up and in towards the cookies but they were just out of reach. Then suddenly a flat palm gave two good whacks on the glass and the cookies fell to the bottom.

Asako looked up at Jason as he gave her a small crooked grin, “That top row always gives people trouble.”

Asako stood up brushing her knees off, “Thanks.” She said, her brow furrowing as she opened the cookies. Popping one in her mouth, “You’re Jason Havelock, right?” she said. “I’m Asako—”

“I know who you are,” Jason said, cutting her off. “Why are you following us?”

She chewed thoughtfully and then swallowed hard, taken aback by Jason’s pointed demeanor. Despite Asako’s doggedness, she wasn’t accustomed to such a straightforward introduction. But being a reporter meant that you chased the story no matter what, even if a handsome Hallmark holiday rom-com boyfriend of a foster kid was standing in front of you trying to throw you off the trail.

“At first, I needed a quote for the Ferris wheel, but then...” She trailed off.

Jason held up his hands, his gaze hardened, “We have no comment, now stop coming to our apartment. Leave us alone. We have nothing to say to a reporter.”

He turned on his heel and started in the other direction.

“Where’s Romeo? You leave him in there with Bellamy?” Asako called out. “Or, is it about the missing student? Naomi.”

Jason stopped. His back stiffened at the name.

Asako felt a thrill rise in her, she knew she was onto something, “She was your coworker in the lab wasn’t she? Is that what your boyfriend and Bellamy are talking about?”

Turning, Jason stepped towards her defiantly. While Asako didn’t feel threatened, she was unsure what he was going to do.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, reporter. Leave. Us. Alone.” He said, his voice tightened.

For a moment, Asako felt her vision grow hazy, Jason seemed to flicker in and out of her sight.

Asako shook her head, her blood sugar must be getting low. She reached for another cookie, then collected herself, “I know that Naomi Halston and Ethan Hernandez had the same case worker when they were in the foster care system and I know you three worked in the same lab before she disappeared. Before she was found dead this afternoon.”

Jason stepped back, his face immediately softened, “What?”

Asako felt Jason’s armor crack just a bit, “She was found dead in front of the bell tower. Today. I saw the body myself.”

Jason was shocked, “I had no idea.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” Asako said, her tone less pointed.

Jason put one hand in his coat pocket, his other scratching the back of his neck. Then he sighed, “Maybe we should talk. You want something real to eat?” He said, pointing to the cookies.

Asako’s eyes flitted between him and the cookies, “What did you have in mind?”

‘I have some time to kill,” Jason said, as he pulled his phone from his pocket checking the time. “Let’s go to the union, I could use some coffee and you look like you could use a snack. It’s on me.”

Asako eyed him suspiciously, but she was not going to turn down an exclusive interview, “Okay, fine, but I get a least one official quote.”

Jason shrugged, smiling, and made his way towards the exit.

Asako had to admit, it was a nice smile and it annoyed her, “What about Ethan?”

“Oh, he’s going to be in there awhile,” he said, his eyes gazing down the long hallway toward Bellamy’s lab.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ethan Hernandez

ETHAN WATCHED AS Jason left Bellamy's office hesitantly.

"I'll wait around on campus, just text me when you're ready to go," He said before closing Bellamy's office door.

"Okay, this will be painless, I promise you," Bellamy said. "Besides, since I have the time, it seems prudent to get started right away."

Now that Bellamy's lab was effectively dead in the water, Bellamy had encouraged Ethan to start their first session right away. By establishing a baseline of Ethan's attunements today, Bellamy could then tailor the next session to more specific exercises.

Ethan shifted uncomfortably, the smell of old papers and stale coffee started to make him feel slightly nauseous.

"Let's begin with something easy," Bellamy said, stepping up from his desk. He milled about his office as if looking for something, "I know it's around here somewhere."

Looking through old boxes, he dug beneath books and papers that he had previously packed.

Ethan eyed him surreptitiously, he wanted to trust Bellamy. But, truth be told, he wanted to be free of these attunements— as Bellamy called them. He ached for normality again. But if what Bellamy had said was to be believed, Ethan was no longer normal.

If he ever was. The foster care system had taught Ethan that normal was rewarded. Children who stayed out of sight kept out of trouble, and kept it all inside were rewarded with loving families. He had learned that displays of emotions, of vulnerability were dangerous. So he kept it all tucked away inside, but now, while he worked hard to keep his feelings and thoughts inside, the world threatened to break in.

“Ah! Here it is,” he said, producing a small hand-held tape recorder and another strange device covered with dials and a blinking light, connected to a crude headset of wires and electrodes.

“This is an EEG machine,” Bellamy explained. “Old-school, I know, but very reliable. Our lab had access to more modern equipment, over at the medical school, but with my funds frozen...” he stepped towards Ethan, “...that’s not possible. Besides, I expect they will have suspended my credentials with the hospital by now.”

Ethan remained seated while Bellamy gently placed a headset on his scalp, the electrodes cool against his skin. The scent of a spicy aftershave mixed with cigarette smoke wafted towards Ethan. Bellamy stepped away, flicking a switch, as the tape recorder began whirring. A low hum filled the room as the EEG machine pinged to life, its needled danced on the graph paper.

“Let’s start with something simple,” Bellamy said, taking a seat across from Ethan. He produced a stack of cards placing them on the edge of the desk beside them. “Each card has a symbol, I’ll hold up a card away from you. Then, I want you to tell me what you see.”

Bellamy picked the first card up from the stack, then placed it back down — cutting the deck of cards in half.

“Okay, let’s begin,” he said picking up the first card.

Ethan furrowed his brow and nodded.

“Star?” Ethan murmured feeling something flicker in his mind.

Bellamy frowned, “No guessing, Mr. Hernandez. Close your eyes, and take a deep calming breath. Allow your mind to focus on the opposite side of the card. Imagine looking through my eyes. What do I see on this side of the card?”

Ethan inhaled calmly, his eyelids became heavy. He allowed them to close. Again, he breathed, “Wave.”

“Good,” Bellamy said, his tone devoid of emotion. He picked up another card. “Now this one?”

Ethan inhaled and then exhaled slowly, “Square.”

Bellamy set the card down, “Good.” Then reached to the bottom of the deck, pulling a card and holding it away from Ethan.

“Once more,” He said.

Ethan’s eyes remained closed, but he looked puzzled, “This card doesn’t have a shape. It has...it has written. A name.”

“Go on,” Bellamy said, his tone remaining even.

The needle on the EEG jumped wildly, Bellamy watched it with fascination.

“It’s a woman’s name. It starts with an N.” Ethan’s heart began beating.

The EEG blinked wildly.

“Focus, Ethan. What do you see? Focus, boy!” Bellamy said.

“It’s her name. The girl from the dream. Naomi. Her name is Naomi.”

Suddenly, the desk lamp began flickering, and Bellamy’s pen cup started vibrating. Bellamy looked on, his eyes growing round.

“Focus!” he bellowed,

“Naomi Halston,” Ethan said, his eyes flitting open. He watched as Bellamy studied him, a grin formed on his lips.

“Absolutely fascinating,” He said in awe. Bellamy flipped the card over, revealing it to Ethan. “It was a tower.”

Ethan’s heart sank.

“It seems you may have some precognition, Mr. Hernandez,” Bellamy said, placing the cards on the edge of the desk beside him.

Ethan rubbed his eyes, the halo of a migraine formed at the edges of his awareness, “What do you mean?”

“Among your many talents, precognition is among them. It is a formidable skill indeed. Think of it as enhanced pattern recognition. You may very well be able to see

the future and possibly the past. But we must do more tests.”

Ethan was overwhelmed, this was all too much. First, a telepath, telekinetic, and now a precognitive ability? “I thought you said that people with this usually only have one attunement. I have three?”

Bellamy reached for the electrodes, removing them from Ethan’s head. “Yes, it is very unusual to have even one attunement. But, to have three, it’s something quite miraculous. I wouldn’t have believed it myself if we hadn’t received such sad news today. Ms. Halston was found dead at the base of the Summit Spire this afternoon. It seems you intuited that based purely on the shape present on that card.”

Ethan looked dubiously, “How can you be so sure?”

Bellamy moved across his office, placing the EEG into a box and grabbing a horizontal device with a set of three light bulbs.

“When you described the dreams, I suspected these were visions of the past,” Bellamy said, setting the row of lights down beside Ethan on the ledge of the desk. “I knew of one other precognitive in my work. A previous research subject.”

“That’s in the past,” he said, waving away the comment. “This is a light bar — it is used in trauma-focused psychotherapy in order to activate bilateral stimulation. It is intended to activate both sides of your brain,” Bellamy said changing the subject, clicked the light bar and each of the light bulbs lit up in succession.

Bellamy stood once more turning the lights off. The office was now lit by the desk lamp and the light bar. “Now, I want you to allow yourself to relax and simply focus on the lights.”

The lights blinked one after the other, and Ethan took more deep calming breaths.



“I’m going to ask you a series of questions, just allow the answer to simply float to the front of your mind. Don’t try to recall them, allow them to float to the shore of your mind, like a message in a bottle,” Bellamy said, his voice soothing.

Ethan allowed his head to grow heavy. He breathed in and out, he felt relaxation overtake him.

“Good, just let your eyes follow the light,” Bellamy continued.

Soon, Ethan was entranced by the lights, his vision hazy.

Bellamy’s voice came through the haze of the lights, “Tell me about your mother,”

A beat of silence passed.

Then Ethan spoke, his voice was flat, “She was beautiful and brilliant. She had an easy smile.”

“What was her name?” Bellamy said, his voice sounded distant.

“Monica. Monica Hernandez.”

Bellamy shifted in his chair, leaning forward towards Ethan. “What happened to her?”

“She died. She died of cancer, but I think she died of a broken heart.”

“Go on.”

“I can see her lying in the hospital bed. Crying. She’s calling for him, but he won’t come.”

“Who?”

Tears formed at the crease of Ethan’s eyes, “My father.”

“Where is your father?”

“She doesn’t know. He left her. They were only together for a year. He left after I was born.” Ethan said, his voice remaining flat.

Bellamy breathed softly, “Let’s go back further. When was the last time you saw your father?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Then use your mother’s memory, when was the last time she saw him.” Bellamy hissed.

Ethan grimaced, his mind fought him. These were details he wished he didn’t have to recall.

“October 31st,” He replied, his leg started bouncing, “It was 22 years ago, Halloween night. He simply disappeared.”

“Interesting,” Bellamy said. “Anything else you can remember?”

“The last time she saw him, he..he seemed different. Like, he wasn’t all there,” Ethan muttered, his leg bouncing faster now. His body was betraying his growing unease. “She said he looked at her like he knew he wasn’t coming back. Like he was saying...goodbye.”

Bellamy leaned forward once more, his fingers laced tightly together. His eyes

flickered to the light bar, “Different how?” Bellamy probed, his tone gentle.

Ethan’s head twitched, he struggled to produce the memory, to call it in front of his mind. “She said he was cold. Not in a mean way, but more like...like he wasn’t real. Like he was just...passing through.”

Bellamy’s lips tightened, and a glimmer of intrigue flashed in his expression. “Passing through?” he echoed, keeping his tone neutral. “What did she mean by that?”

Ethan shook his head sluggishly. “He was gone before she could ask. She said he never even looked back...not even for me .”

Bellamy’s eyes narrowed, and he scribbled something else on his pad. “And do you remember anything about him? Any stories from your mother?”

Ethan swallowed, “She used to say he was complicated. He was kind and charming, but also distant. He wasn’t like other people.”

“Not like other people?” Bellamy inquired his pen in mid-stroke.

Ethan’s breathing hitched, and Bellamy thought he might break out of the trance. “No...just that he had this way of looking at her like he saw things she couldn’t. Things no one could.”

A heavy silence fell between them.

“Let’s try one more thing, I want you to try and recall your father’s memories.”

Ethan’s head bobbed, “I can’t. It’s blocked. He’s pushing me out. There’s a wall. There’s a door. It’s locked. I can’t.”

Immediately, Ethan's eyes shot open and the three light bulbs exploded, sending shards of glass across Bellamy's desk and to the floor. Ethan and Bellamy were both startled as a piece fell at their feet.

Bellamy's lips twitched into a faint smile, "That was interesting. Quite interesting indeed. I'd like to see you for another session." He said, clicking the tape recorder off.

"I'm exhausted," Ethan said.

Bellamy stood from the chair, groaning quietly, "Yes, I imagine you would be. This exercise is quite tiring— precognitive abilities use a great deal of your mental energy and if not properly harnessed can be quite maddening."

Ethan looked at him puzzled.

He stepped towards a bookcase, pulling a broom and dustpan from behind it, and began sweeping the shards of glass scattered about his office, "The last precognitive attuned I worked with tragically jumped to her death from a very high place."

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Jason Havelock

JASON AND ASAKO walked in silence towards the student union. Their shoes crunched on the frost walkway that cut across the central quad. The dusk sky shaded purples and pinks as the sharp winter air stung Jason's cheeks. He caught Asako's sideways glances from the corner of his eye. He tried to ignore them, but Asako's nosey energy practically buzzed in the air around them.

Ethan had warned him about her when they first entered the Henderson building. She had been crouched down behind a shrub near the entrance, her thoughts so loud Ethan had picked up on them as they approached.

"She's determined," Ethan had said, "Like a dog with a bone, that one."

Jason smirked remembering, he glanced at her now.

Well, she's definitely not subtle.

Jason studied her for a moment, the words "walking chaos" came to mind. Her scarf was askew and her hair was pulled back in a loose messy bun, her glasses fogged as they slipped down the bridge of her nose, but behind those glasses were sharp eagle eyes.

It was kind of endearing .

“How’d you know it was me?” Asako finally asked, breaking the silence. Her demeanor was casual, but Jason had a probing tone when heard it.

Smirking, Jason shrugged, “You’re not exactly covert. I could see you from behind the bush.”

Asako stopped short, her cheeks flushed. “ I was observing . It’s called investigative journalism.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jason muttered, jamming his hands into his coat pocket. He tugged his jacket tighter. Having a telepathic boyfriend definitely helped, but he was not going to tell her that.

They reached the student union and walked through the breezeway, their steps echoed through the corridor. After grabbing their coffees — Jason’s black, Asako’s with enough sugar to manifest a cavity out of thin air — they scanned the seating area. Asako grabbed a blueberry Danish on impulse, and they found a small two-person table tucked in an alcove away from the crowd..

Asako took a sip of her coffee, the plastic fork in her hand poised over the Danish, ready to attack, “So,” she started feigning nonchalance, “that Ferris wheel incident at the carnival — pretty wild, huh?” She scooped up a bite of the Danish and crammed it in her mouth, watching Jason closely.

Jason leaned back, his hands wrapped around the warmth of his coffee cup. “Yeah. Wild.”

“I talked to one of the carnival attendants that night,” Asako said, gesturing with her fork. “He said it was a mechanical issue. Something with the power, the whole place glitched out.”

Jason raised an eyebrow but said nothing, having learned from Ethan's brooding, that silence often made people over-explain.

Asako took another bite, her eyes narrowing. "But here's the thing — power glitches don't make Ferris wheels nearly fall apart in mid-spin. I mean, what are the odds? It's almost like something else was going on."

Jason sighed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "You think we know something about that?"

Asako leaned forward, Danish tucked in the corner of her cheek, "You were there, Jason. You and Ethan both. Right in the middle of it. Now...Ethan's sick, missing classes, hiding out..."

Jason took a sip of his coffee and looked away. "Ethan isn't feeling well. It's got nothing to do with the Ferris wheel or the carnival."

"Maybe," Asako said, chewing deliberately. "But, then, there's Naomi Halston. Also connected to Bellamy's lab. Also dead."

"We didn't even know her. She was in the lab before we started. Besides those graduate students don't talk to us undergraduates. If you wanna know about her, question Bellamy," Jason said, his jaw clenched. It was clear his patience was starting to fray.

"Look," Jason said, glaring at her. His auburn hair caught the light, and his features looked sharper, more angular, "Ethan is going through enough right now without your conspiracy theories. Whatever you think is going on, it's got nothing to do with us."

Asako opened her mouth to retort, but just as she did, something strange happened.

Again, for a fleeting moment, Jason's figure wavered like a mirage in the desert. Asako blinked, her heart skipping a beat. As she refocused, he was sitting there, perfectly solid, staring at her with a mix of frustration and unease.

"What?" Jason, asked, noticing her surprised expression.

Asako shook her head, "Nothing. I think I need real food — blood sugar is lower than I thought."

Jason stood, clearly done with the conversation. "I need to get back to Ethan."

Asako put her hands up in defense, "Wait. Please."

Jason eyed her suspiciously but sat down again.

"Look, I'll turn off the journalist-mode. I realize I can get a little intense," she said earnestly, as she grabbed her coffee, "I found a connection between Ethan, Naomi, and...my sister." She finished and took a long gulp of her scalding coffee, immediately regretting it.

"Shit! That's hot. Did they use boiled lava in this Americano?" She said examining the paper cup and looking back towards the coffee kiosk.

Jason's blue eyes scanned her as she regained her composure, his piercing blue eyes watched, "What's your deal?"

"Look, my sister was committed to the foster care system when I was really young. She would have been Ethan's age, I don't remember. But, when I was doing some digging on Naomi Halston, I found a link between her and my sister. Dug deeper — found a connection between the three of them."



“Which is?” Jason asked, his tone lingering.

“They had the same case worker when they were in foster care, Sill Clearwater. I’ve tried finding her and she’s basically a ghost online. But, there were a few mentions of Ethan and my sister’s name in an article interviewing her. I did get her contact information and reached out, but nothing yet. I’m planning to try again but..” She said, gesturing towards Jason.

“...you’re busy stalking me and my boyfriend?” Jason said, finishing her sentence.

Asako sat, her mouth gaping, “When you put it like that...”

Jason shifted in his seat, he drained the last of his coffee, “ So what do you want from me and Ethan?”

“Does he ever talk about his time in the foster system? Do you know much about his past?” She asked, her fork hovering over the last bit of Danish.

Jason hesitated, he tapped his fingers on the paper coffee cup nervously. He glanced away, his gaze fixed on a group of students sitting a few tables away hunched over textbooks. “Not really,” he admitted, “It’s not something he likes to talk about.”

Asako crammed the last bite of Danish in her mouth, “So you don’t know much, then?”

Jason frowned, his presence became guarded, “I know enough,” He said defensively. But even as the words left his mouth, he wasn’t so sure. Did he know enough?

Most of what Jason knew was piecemealed together, fragments of Ethan’s story. An occasional mention here and there — Ethan had once said he had been shuffled through at least five different foster homes from four until high school graduation. He

rarely gave details and Jason never pressed. The system, the instability, no real family to speak of — it wasn't something Ethan liked revisiting.

His mind drifted for a moment. Ethan mentioned offhandedly, spending Christmas in a different home nearly every year. His tone was light, rather dismissive — as if it was something all kids endured. “He’s been through a lot,” Jason said finally. His tone was firm but Asako sensed his sadness. “I think it’s easier for him to just leave the past in the past.”

Asako studied him for a moment, and she softened, “I get that,” she said quietly. “But sometimes the past doesn’t want to stay there and sometimes it's the key to what happens next.”

Jason’s stomach tightened, Ethan’s walls had never made it easy for him to share about those times. Their new apartment was the first real home Ethan ever had — Jason knew that. If he was going to build something real with Ethan, maybe he needed to start scaling those walls. Maybe, he needed to know.

“All I’m saying is, consider asking him about those times. I need to know if he knows anything about my sister’s death. If there is a connection to Naomi’s disappearance. There is something that connects them all. I can feel it,” Asako said, her voice tense.

“I’ll think about it,” Jason said, standing.

Asako reached into her crossbody bag, pulling a business card out, “Here, take this. If you want to talk more, let me know. I won’t bother you two anymore.”

He eyed the card as he took it from her.

Asako could feel him on the fence, she just needed to pull him over to her side. Jason zipped his coat and gave Asako a tight smile before stepping away.

Asako watched him before calling out, “How well do you know him, Jason?”

Jason paused his back to her, he didn’t look back. “Better than you ever will,” he said quietly, before walking away.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Richard Bellamy

THERE WAS A soft knock on Bellamy's office door. Ethan remained seated, slumped in the chair across from Bellamy. He seemed to be processing everything that occurred in his first session.

Bellamy adjusted the knot on his tie and glanced at the door.

Jason stepped in hesitantly, his gaze immediately softened, "Is Ethan ready?"

Bellamy beckoned him in, he sat perched on the ledge of his desk. He watched as Jason crossed the room to Ethan's side. Jason rested his hand gently on his shoulder. Ethan's eyes were distant, red-rimmed, and glassy. Bending over, Jason whispered something in his ears and Ethan nodded faintly.

"It was a difficult session. He's going to be tired tonight, I pushed him a little further than maybe he was ready to go. But we made some good progress, especially for our first session."

Jason glanced at Bellamy, "Is he going to be okay?"

Bellamy stood up, pulled his glasses from his face, and rubbed his eyes, "He'll be alright, just needs something to eat and a good night's sleep. Nothing to worry about."

Jason exhaled, relieved but unconvinced. He turned back to Ethan, offering him a

hand.

“Jason, before you go,” Bellamy said, stepping towards the bookshelf. His voice took a fatherly tone. “Take this,” he said, hooking a finger around the spine of a thin, weathered book, and pulling it off the shelf. Bellamy offered it to Jason, “When you have time, read through it. It might answer some questions about what this looks like longer term.”

The title gleamed faintly from the dim lamp light: *Voices Within: A Discussion of Telepathic Phenomena*.

“What’s this?” Jason asked, flipping through the book's yellowed pages.

“Something to help you understand what Ethan might be going through,” Bellamy replied. “It’s some of my earliest work and there are only a few copies. It’s not widely circulated— more a personal project. Dated, perhaps, but it may provide some clarity.”

Jason nodded and then shot a concerned glance towards Ethan, who was standing by the door still in a daze, he seemed to be swaying. Bellamy studied the couple a beat longer.

“Okay, now off you go, get some rest. Text me in the morning,” Bellamy said, and both of them disappeared out of the office doorway. Ethan was a few steps ahead as Jason’s hand hovered protectively near Ethan’s lower back.

Bellamy’s stomach churned with anticipation. Tonight had gone better than he could have imagined. A real stroke of good fortune, considering Bellamy’s luck as of late. He witnessed the most powerful display of attunement possibly in his entire career.

What are the odds?

Bellamy took a seat at his desk, he heard the lab entrance close, satisfied the two boys had shown themselves out.

Bellamy was alone again.

He reached down to the bottom drawer of his desk, and pulled out a bottle of amber liquid and one glass tumbler from the drawer.

Sitting the the glass tumbler, he poured generously into the cup.

He sipped the whiskey slowly. Kicking his feet up on his desk, he leaned back in his chair. A new precognitive. One with far more raw potential than even Naomi. He ran his fingers along the edge of the desk, the wood cool to his touch.

Ethan was fragile, vulnerable — a mind stretched thin. Bellamy was confident that Jason would watch over him. He was so committed to Ethan. A love like that is rare. Bellamy sipped again, remembering a time when he had loved that deeply.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

DR. WINONA CHAVANEL was beautiful as she was brilliant. They had met in Harvard during their doctoral studies. Winona—or as Bellamy called her— Win, was a sharp intellectual with a warmth that drew others towards her. While Bellamy had favored work as a researcher, Win established herself as a formidable psychotherapist. She loved helping those around her grow and develop a deep sense of compassion for themselves. Often, she teased Bellamy for his ambitions, dubbing him “the great philosopher king of psychological sciences.”

Her preference for humble and personal connection is among the many things Bellamy fell in love with. The two of them married shortly after completing their PhDs. They settled into their careers with Bellamy taking a full-time position at Harvard and Win establishing a therapy practice in Cambridge.

Life was comfortable, Win would accompany Bellamy on his lectures, taking them across the globe. Eventually, Win yearned for something more than a high-profile career, and Isabelle Bellamy was born just a few short years later. A bright and curious child, Win loved Isabell with her whole being. While unsure how to relate to a young daughter, Bellamy loved her in his own way. Often quizzing her on some arbitrary bit of facts — biology, psychology, history, anything to stimulate Isabelle’s intellectual growth.

Bellamy’s enthusiasm grew as she showed academic prowess that rivaled his own at her age. Win nurtured Isabelle’s emotional side while Bellamy tended to her education. Much to Bellamy’s surprise, Isabelle began demonstrating a precognitive attunement. First, it was small predictions — a spilled glass of milk, an impending

rainstorm, but her premonitions grew into full-scale predictions. Initially, both of her parents marveled at her abilities, simply viewing them as a curious extension of their own psychological and neuroscientific inquiries. But as Isabelle grew older, her visions grew more profound — and distressing.

The turning points came when Isabelle, at just 12 years old, predicted Win's terminal illness — a rare form of lymphoma — years before any symptoms appeared.

One evening, she climbed into Win's lap, while the three of them sat reading, soft classical music played, "Mom, I'm worried about you." Isabella said,

Win set down her book, a recent monograph on the emergence of trauma-focused therapies, "What do you mean, dear?" Win said, pulling Isabella into her lap.

Bellamy sat correcting manuscripts of a future research paper, his glasses perched at the tip of his nose, he continued revising, but listened intently.

Isabelle held a book in her hand, flipping the pages mindlessly, "I'm worried you're going to get sick and die."

"Oh, darling, eventually, we all die," Win said, her tone nurturing but forward.

Isabelle frowned, tears forming in the corners of her eyes, "But, Mommy, you're going to die before me or Papa."

Bellamy sat the paper down in his lap, "What are you saying, darling?"

It was then that Isabelle's preoccupation with her mother's health started. Some nights she would wake up screaming in terror, describing vivid unchanging images of her mother's decline. Bellamy and Win did everything they could to comfort her, but the visions brought such anguish. When Win finally agreed to be examined by the doctor,



if not simply to calm her daughter's anxieties, she was diagnosed. As Win fell ill, Isabelle fell into despair, blaming herself for being powerless to stop the inevitable.

Around this time, Bellamy's career began to fall into disarray. Obsessed with his daughter's premonitions, he spent hours in the lab trying to replicate studying the precognitive attunement. Eventually, resorting to more precarious methods of inquiry. After his research was reported to the university, a major controversy erupted at Harvard. It was leaked to the press, that he was doing experiments on his own daughter, trying to understand the limits of her abilities. Critics accused him of ethical violations and alleged he had pushed the boundaries of human experimentation without proper oversight.

The fallout was swift, Bellamy was forced to resign, his reputation in shambles. Win's illness worsened, and she passed away within a year of Bellamy's resignation. The loss devastated him and Isabelle both. He became focused on rebuilding his career, leaving his daughter to fall further into ruin. She would spend days in her room struggling with the visions invading her mind until it became so overwhelming, she experienced a psychotic break. Eventually, she was institutionalized, her mental health fragile as glass.

One Christmas, Bellamy visited Isabelle at the state hospital. It had been years since she was committed, but time had done little to soften the cracks in her mind — or his heart. He carried with him a small gift: a thin, neatly wrapped package containing a book she loved as a child, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and alongside it an idea. A theory that had consumed him for months prior.

They sat across from each other in the stark, sterile visiting room. Isabelle's hair once thick and dark like her mother's, hung in limp strands around her hollow face. Her eyes were dull, likely due to the medication. She barely registered Bellamy's presence. He gazed upon her as a mere shell of the vibrant child she once was.

“I’ve been working on something new,” Bellamy said, keeping his voice optimistic. “A theory. Something that could change everything for us.”

Isabelle didn’t respond, her gaze remained fixed on a crack in the linoleum floor.

Bellamy leaned forward, his fingers gripped the edge of the table. “I believe,” he said carefully, “that with your abilities properly channeled, you could send your mind back in time. You could warn your mother. You could help her get treatment earlier before it’s too late.”

Her head lifted slightly at the mention of her mother, but her expression didn’t change.

“Think about it, Isabelle,” Bellamy pressed. “If we recreate the right conditions — an environment that amplifies your abilities then you could go back to that moment. You could save her. You could save us.”

For the first time that whole visit, Isabelle’s eyes met his. Her dead eyes sneered at him, her voice was sharp and raw. “I can’t do that. It doesn’t work that way.”

Bellamy frowned, his scientific mind unwilling to accept those conditions, “Of course, it does. We just need the proper circumstances. If you come home with me —

“

“You’re not listening!” Isabelle snapped, “Just like you didn’t listen when I told you she was sick. It doesn’t work like that! Time isn’t...linear. I don’t experience it the way you do . It’s not a straight line — it’s a flood. It’s everywhere, all at once.”

Her hands trembled as she gripped her chair. Bellamy reached for her instinctively, but she pulled away.

“Don’t,” she screeched, flinching, “you think this is something I can control?” She continued her voice cracking, raspy. “You think I haven’t tried to change things? I can see every version of her death. I’ve seen it a thousand times, and I can’t stop it. I couldn’t then and I can’t now!”

Bellamy pulled back, stunned. He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. Isabelle escalated, “It doesn’t work like that, it doesn’t work like that, it doesn’t work like that you selfish motherfucker!”

Quickly, she was on her feet, shaking the table. Drawing the attention of the hospital staff who quickly moved to them.

“I’m sorry,” Bellamy said quietly, his words were drowned out, as she continued.

“It doesn’t work like that. It doesn’t work like that...” Her whole body was trembling, a burly-looking hospital attendant and nurse approached her cautiously, “Okay, Ms. Bellamy, calm down.” The nurse produced a large syringe, expertly injecting Isabelle.

“This Ativan will help relax you,” the nurse said.

Bellamy watched on with horror, clutching the small wrapped package.

Isabelle was placed back in her chair, “It doesn’t work...” she said, her words drifting off, as her eyelids dropped.

A few months later, Bellamy accepted a position at Summit State University. He threw himself into his theory, developing the conditions for what he believed could reproduce the retrocognition. While simultaneously rebuilding his career, one academic paper, lecture, and grant at a time. But his attempts to rebuild were interrupted by a phone call that should have shattered whatever remaining hope he

had.

Isabelle had jumped from the tallest window of the state hospital.

Bellamy didn't cry when he heard the news. He simply sat at his desk and stared at the photo of his family — Winona's bright smile and Isabelle's sweet, mischievous grin — seemingly mocking him now.

"I'll find another one. I'll set things right."

He reached into the top drawer of his desk, pulling out the unopened Christmas gift — A Wrinkle in Time. Indeed, there were many wrinkles, but he intended to straighten them out.

Bellamy drained his glass, the whiskey had relaxed him. Ethan's current state reminded him of Isabelle. That boy was on the edge and Bellamy needed him if he was going to test his theory. Perhaps, his doting boyfriend, Jason, wouldn't be enough supervision. His mind made up, he stood up from his desk, extinguishing his desk lamp. Bellamy was going to learn from his mistakes. He was going to keep an eye on Ethan, if he was going to invest in this boy, then he needed to protect his investment.

He made his way across his office. Grabbing his coat from the rack adjacent to the door, he checked his pockets, his car keys jangled securely.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Ethan Hernandez & Jason Havelock

THE SMALL DINER near campus was deserted. The hum of classic rock and a dishwasher somewhere in the back mingled together. Jason and Ethan sat in a corner booth when a tired middle-aged woman dropped a slice of chocolate mousse pie off, plates of half-eaten burgers and fries between them.

Outside, the night pressed against the window, condensation and frost formed, cold and dark.

Jason leaned and examined the pie, resting his elbows on the table. “This looked much more appetizing on the menu.”

Ethan let out a hollow chuckle. He stared out the window, his stomach roiling.

“So, what happened in there?” Jason asked, slicing off a piece of not-quite-thawed-enough pie.

Ethan shrugged, “He tested me for precognitive attunements. And then asked me about my mom and dad.”

Jason pulled the fork slowly to his lips, “Oh. How was that?”

Asako’s words had echoed in his head since their coffee: How well do you really know him, Jason? He struggled to admit it, but the more the question lingered, the

more uneasy he felt. The truth of it was — he didn't know much about Ethan at all. Not much about his past, at least.

Jason knew who he was now — kind, intelligent, with a sharp sense of humor, hardworking, and caring. He was thoughtful and attentive in a way that made Jason feel seen and understood. But when it came to anything before SSU, Ethan was sealed up tighter than a bank vault.

Jason picked at the slice of pie as he watched Ethan. He thought about all the times he'd tried to ask Ethan about his childhood. The answers always came in short, but polite deflections. "It wasn't great, but I got through it." Or, "I don't really dwell in the past." Ethan had a way of turning the conversation away from himself and back onto Jason.

Jason wondered if he should have pushed more. Ethan wasn't fragile exactly — surviving these migraines and the news of these attunements showed him a lot of Ethan's resilience. But Jason had seen glimpses of Ethan's mood shifting like a cloud passing over the sun. He'd grow quiet, and distant, his gaze would fix on something Jason couldn't see. When Jason asked if anything was wrong, Ethan would simply shake his head, smile weakly, and deflect.

Jason and Ethan rarely fought, which at first, Jason thought was a good thing. Disagreements were usually resolved quickly, and Ethan often capitulated before things could escalate. Jason chalked it up to Ethan's childhood — years of having new households, new rules, and new people. Compromised must have been second nature to him by now. But, thinking back, Jason couldn't help but feel uneasy. Was his tendency to acquiesce less about keeping the peace and more about self-preservation? Had he learned to give in to avoid conflict?

The more Jason lingered on the thought, the more he realized Ethan must carry so much inside. And do it alone. He knew Ethan had spent most of his younger years

having no one stable to rely on.

Jason remembered passing comments about “coping mechanisms” and “boundaries,” Jason realized how much time he must have spent in therapy. But what Jason didn’t know — the gaps between those brief glimpses — seemed vast and impenetrable.

Jason sighed, taking another bite of the pie. The icy mousse is crunchy and cold. Ethan wasn’t going to open up without Jason’s help. Now more than ever Ethan was carrying the weight on his back and Jason wanted to be there to help hold him up. If Ethan wasn’t going to let him in, maybe Jason would just have to keep knocking until he opened up.

“Your parents?” Jason repeated.

Ethan’s eyes looked dark, and tired. “Yeah, it was honestly a lot.”

Jason fidgeted at the awkward pause as if waiting for him to say more, “Like he asked you to remember your parents?”

“It was more like he asked me to recall my parent's memories. He wanted to push and see how far back I could recall other’s memories. I was able to tap into my mother’s memories, but my dad’s were blocked. Almost like a wall had been built around them. It was weird. I blew up the light bulbs on his hypnotizing light bar thing,” Ethan said, taking a small sip from a soft drink.

A bolt of excitement shot through Jason at Ethan’s opening up, but Jason wanted to avoid any missteps, so he waited. Ethan rubbed his temples.

“Did Bellamy have much to say about it?” Jason asked, trying to seem casual.

“Not much. Just that we are making progress. And that I need to have another session

with him,” Ethan said flatly. He continued looking outside noticing a white sedan parked across the street, his head twinged with a headache as he twirled the straw in his glass absently.

Jason’s lips thinned, “We need to take Bellamy seriously. He knows more about this than we do.”

Ethan’s eyes met Jason’s, his face was pale, dark circles under his eyes betraying his exhaustion, “You don’t think I know that? It’s my brain, Jason. My head feels like it’s splitting open every time someone thinks too loud or I’m forced to think someone else’s thoughts.”

“I’m not saying it’s not hard for you, “ Jason said, carefully, “But we’re in this together. Bellamy — well he might be our best shot at figuring this out.”

Ethan slammed his hand on the table, startling Jason. The silverware rattled against the plates. “You don’t get it, Jason! He doesn’t care about helping me. He cares about his research. He views me as some...some kind of specimen and I don’t need to be a mindreader to see that.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond, but a fork on the table suddenly slid across the surface as if tugged by an invisible string. Ethan’s eyes widened and froze, glancing at the utensil.

“I’ve been used by people my whole life! I know an opportunist when I see one. He wants me for something more than to help me control this,” Ethan’s voice escalated, his tone sharp.

The table began to shake, and the plates rattled.

As if reacting to his outburst, a plate on the table shot forward, shattering against the



booth's edge. Jason flinched, feeling a sharp sting on his hand. He pulled back, blood welled up from a thin slice on his palm.

"Damn it, Ethan!" Jason exclaimed, clutching his hands.

Ethan's breath came in short, ragged gasps as he stared at the broken plate and the blood on Jason's hand. "I...I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't mean it," Jason snapped, grabbing a handful of napkins from the dispenser, "But this is why we need Bellamy's help. You have to learn to control this... whatever this is."

Jason cuddled his hand against his chest, the thin diner napkins soaked with crimson blood.

Ethan's eyes flashed with anger, tears welling up. "You think I don't know that? Do you think I want to be this...this lab experiment? I can't even have dinner with my boyfriend without something happening."

The table began rattling again, the forks sliding back and forth on the table.

Jason shook his head, his expression hardening, "I can't keep doing this if you won't let me help you."

Immediately, Jason grabbed his coat and stood up from the booth, he grabbed a wad of cash from his pocket, throwing it on the table. "Ethan, what do I have to do to make you realize you're not alone? You can't keep pushing people away."

Jason walked towards the door, and out into the night.

"Jason, wait—" Ethan called after him, but Jason was already gone, the bell of the

door jingled as it slammed shut.

Ethan slumped back into the booth, his head in his hands. The diner was silent now, except for the faint hum of the radio playing another classic rock song. A waitress peered nervously from behind the counter, her wide eyes darting to the broken plate and spilled food.

“I’m sorry,” Ethan murmured, though he wasn’t sure if he was apologizing to her, to Jason, or himself.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Richard Bellamy

THE WINDOW OF the white sedan was cracked as an orange ember appeared to float in the darkness, Bellamy sat in his car pulling a deep drag from a lit cigarette. The night folded around him, glancing at the clock, 9:30 PM. Through the window of the diner, he watched as Jason and Ethan took a seat at their booth. Their face shadowed under the dim light of the nearly empty diner.

Bellamy didn't need to be a brilliant psychologist to interpret their body language. He watched as Ethan peered stoically through the window of their diner booth, Jason watching him concerned. The session with Bellamy had Ethan rattled — Good, Bellamy thought.

He continued to watch, turning over his car's heater every few minutes to stay warm. The outside weather was damp and cold — large clouds loomed overhead promising a wet, heavy snow. Bellamy's stomach churned with anticipation, remembering the incredible potential Ethan demonstrated tonight.

Such raw potential, percolates just below the surface. He hadn't seen this much potential in a while, not since Naomi. He adjusted his rearview mirror as a campus duty officer slowly cruised past him.

The night he discovered Naomi's potential had started like any other. The lab was quiet, the familiar rhythmic hum of computers and equipment idling throughout. Bellamy was leaning over his desk, reviewing data, when the knock first came.

“Come in,” he said mindlessly, he continued pouring over the charts, without looking up.

Naomi entered, her face pale and drawn, her eyes rimmed with exhaustion. She clutched her arms tightly as if literally holding herself together.

“I can’t do this anymore, Dr. Bellamy. I feel like I’m going to crack under the pressure,” She said, her voice hoarse.

Bellamy set down his pen and stood, “Naomi, what’s going on?”

She seemed to crack at the seams with his question, Naomi took ambled over to a chair and collapsed. “The visions won’t stop. I see things — terrible things — people dying, disasters. I can’t sleep. I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

Bellamy moved to her side, placing a hand on her shoulder, “You’re under immense pressure, you’re writing your dissertation, managing my lab, and we are preparing for a huge psychology conference. It sounds like the stress is just getting to you.”

Naomi nodded in disagreement, “No, it’s more than that. These are real images. I can see things happening for they happen.”

Bellamy stalked around his desk, taking a seat in front of her, “Your gifts are starting to show?” He asked.

“I think so, you were right,” She said.

Naomi had been among the very few with who Bellamy had revealed his true scientific aims. She had been a special referral made by a case worker who worked closely with military scientists aimed at researching neurological attunements. Naomi having hailed from the foster care system, required special attention, and when

approached by the caseworker, Bellamy had relished the opportunity to mentor a young woman — perhaps he was making up for the death of his daughter, or it was something else. He treated Naomi as a daughter, offering every resource he had at his disposal as a professor at SSU. By folding her into his lab and becoming her academic mentor, he was able to keep an eye on the precise moment her abilities would manifest. Like clockwork, under the appropriate amount of stress, Naomi now sat in his office experiencing visions.

“Naomi, these abilities are a gift. They come with challenges, but we can work through them,” He said.

Before he could say more, the lights dimmed in his office, the lamp flickering. Her body stiffened, her eyes rolled back in her head. She violently convulsed, her breathing hitched as she slid from the chair to the floor. Bellamy knelt beside her, panic rising in his chest.

“Naomi! Stay with me!”

But as quickly as the seizure came, it went. Naomi opened her eyes, they radiated a rose-gold light, “Papa?” she said.

Bellamy froze. “The voice was unmistakably Isabelle’s.” His throat closed, “Isabelle?”

Naomi — or Isabelle — smiled faintly. “You have to let me go. You can’t fix this.”

Bellamy’s breath caught. For a moment, a brief shining moment, he believed he had done it. But how? He had bridged the gap between life and death. But as Naomi’s body slackened, her own voice returned, weak, and confused.

“What...happened?” She rasped.

Bellamy's expression hardened, helping her up back into the chair. Naomi's head swam, she perched her elbow on the armrest and supported her head. He watched her for only a moment before deciding what to do. He had seen his daughter emanate through her, she spoke to him — as a child. This was the closest he had ever been to proving his theory.

“Stay there child, I'm going to get you some water,” He stood up and moved around his desk. Reaching into the top drawer, he produced a syringe.

Rounding on Naomi, he spoke softly, “It's alright, Naomi. You'll rest now.” With dexterous ease, he slipped the syringe into her arm injecting her before he could protest, and her body went limp.

It had taken everything Bellamy had, he was able to sneak her out of the Henderson building and to the faculty parking lot with little suspicion. As an aging academic, he had lost much of his strength from his days with the Harvard rowing club. Getting her from his car to the makeshift lab he had constructed in his basement was considerably easier. It was a shabby space, dimly lit. The walls were lined with aging medical equipment and hastily scribbled notes. He gently laid Naomi on a cot, her breathing steady but shallow.

Bellamy had converted an old tool benching to a lab table, he pulled a stool up and began jotting quickly.

“Describe what you see,” he said, his voice was yet insistent.

Naomi's eyes fluttered open, her speech slurred. “A boy...a bright light. It's too far away to touch.”

Bellamy scribbled furiously, “And the light? What does it mean?”

She groaned, turning her head, and the room spun. “I don’t know...too loud.”

Bellamy leaned back, tossing his pen onto the workbench. For weeks, he had pushed her, testing the limits of her abilities. Yet, she had only embodied Isabelle once, and her premonitions were inconsistent at best. He reviewed his notes. What was keeping her from accessing the deeper reaches of her attunement?

Grabbing the pen, he underlined: Lorazepam?

To keep her compliant and calm, Bellamy had spent the last two weeks injecting four milligrams every six hours. He hated every time he did it, but it was for the sake of his research. But his supply was running low and his source from the Sibley-Palmer Medical Center refused to provide him more.

Was the medication dulling her senses? Blocking her access to the deeper cognitive reaches of her attunement? He glanced at the framed photo of Winona and Isabelle on the makeshift lab table. His heart ached. If only he could perfect this, then he could be with them again. He could warn Winona to get the treatment earlier, he could help Isabelle before she lost her grip on reality.

One evening, after another fruitless session, Naomi stirred on the cot next to Bellamy. “There’s someone else,” she murmured.

Bellamy looked from his notes, his pulse quickened as she stirred again, “Someone else? What do you mean?”

She moaned, “An attuned. A powerful one. He’s a chess piece in a bigger game — beyond this world.”

Bellamy’s mind raced. A new subject? Untapped potential?

After an exhausting week, Bellamy struggled to keep going at the pace he was keeping. Maintaining appearances at the university and conducting sessions with Naomi at night was taking his toll. Slowly, he had begun tapering her dose down, trying to find the right mixture to keep her calm and compliant while unblocking her abilities. After learning of another attuned on campus, he had become obsessed with expanding her abilities, learning all he could, but to no avail. Calling it an early night, Bellamy left his lab earlier than usual, lumbering up the creaky basement stairs to sleep.

After hearing the door slam shut, Naomi stirred. She was groggy, but aware, she saw her chance. She stumbled to her feet, her mind swimming from the drug, while Bellamy had used restraints, they were easily untethered. He was a psychologist, not a prison guard after all. With a trembling hand, she undid her restraints and made her way out of his house.

She ran to the only place she could think of, campus. Bellamy's modest home was only a block away from the Spire from there she would get her bearings and figure out her next steps. As she arrived to the central quad, the Spire looming above her, her head cleared enough for the voices and visions to bleed through. She knew she had to get to higher ground, something told her she needed to get above the noise. Then her head would be clear enough to decide what to do next.

Pushing through the thick foliage surrounding the Spire, she raced to the top. She could see all of campus, the lights twinkling so beautifully. The Halloween carnival was in full swing, just on the other side of campus. As she stepped out onto the ledge, she felt the sounds dissipate, the silence beckoned her forward. Her head was clear, the seduction of silence was intoxicating.

With just one step forward from the ledge, it could be hers entirely.



### CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

OR, AT LEAST, that's how Bellamy envisioned it happening.

Once she had escaped, he searched for her all over his house. Frantically he drove the neighborhood but found nothing. Each day after the disappearance, he waited with bated breath for the police to knock on his door. But after her body was found and an inside source told him the university wanted to sweep all of this under the rug, he felt himself scot-free. Sure, the university had suspected his involvement so they would make a big fuss about his research. Made a show of disciplining him for his unorthodox research, but he knew how the politics of a university worked. They make a spectacle of him, freeze his funding, and then forget about him entirely, allowing him to return to his true research.

Now as he watched, Ethan and Jason, he noted the tension rising between them. He watched as Jason stood abruptly from the diner booth, cradling his arm.

"A lover's quarrel?" Bellamy said, lighting another cigarette.

He watched as Jason grabbed his coat, and stormed out of the diner. The bell jingled harshly. He glanced back at Ethan through the window, who remained sitting the picture of fragile defeat.

Bellamy watched as Jason emerged from the diner, his jaw tight, his hands shoved into the pockets of his winter coat. The wind was whipping up, his auburn hair, tousled in the cold breeze. Bellamy leaned forward his eyes darting between Jason just outside the diner door and Ethan who remained seated in the booth. He watched

as Jason stepped forward into the night, his tall frame lit briefly by the passing headlights of a campus shuttle. Then, as if darkness itself swallowed him, Jason disappeared.

Bellamy blinked, stunned. He couldn't believe his luck, he scanned the street expecting Jason to reappear, but the boy was gone. A slow grin crept across his face, his mind racing.

He turned his attention back to Ethan, who now stood from the table, helping the waitress gather dishes from the table.

Then it dawned on Bellamy, synapses fired off in his brain.

Reaching for his phone, his fingers trembled slightly at his most brilliant thought all night. He dialed a number, the line clicked, then after a few rings — a gruff voice came on the line.

“Dr. Bellamy,” the voice responded skeptically.

“Colonel,” Bellamy replied, smoothly. “It’s been a long time.”

“The last I heard, you were teaching at some second-rate university out West.”

Bellamy smirked, resting the phone between his ear and shoulder, “Summit State University, actually but that’s not why I called. I’ve got a proposition for you. Something from our old days. Something we only ever thought was a myth.”

Bellamy reached over to his glovebox, opening it. His hand reached in, grabbing a small dark brown weathered leather holster, holding a snub nose revolver. He slipped the holster into his coat pocket.

The colonel's tone softened, "I'm listening."

### CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Asako Kato

“I DEFINITELY SHOULD not be doing this. How far are you willing to go for the story, Kato?” She whispered to herself.

Asako stood in the shadowed hallway of the psychology building. Her stomach roiled and that blueberry Danish was doing cartwheels in her stomach. The eerie silence of the hallway did nothing to calm her nerves, the corridors had emptied out hours ago. The chatter of students begging professors for extensions on homework or extra credit was long gone by now. She clutched her small crossbody bag tightly against her side, her heart hammered in her chest.

The thought of walking away, leaving questions unanswered — Bellamy, Ethan, Jason, Naomi, her sister — she was too close to give up now.

She owed it to her sister.

Taking a deep breath, she remembered the steps from the YouTube tutorial she watched earlier in the student union, How to Pick a Lock in Five Steps Flat. The title had sounded so confident, the narrator’s chipper voice made it sound easy.

Her fingers trembled as she slid the bobby pin from her pocket and approached the lab door. The plaque glinted faintly from the dim hallway lights .

The lab plaque seemed to mock her.

There was a story behind the door of that lab. Asako could feel in her chest, in her bones, it was an itch dying to be scratched. Every instinct screamed at her that something was amiss. Coffee with Jason had only aggravated her suspicions — his furtive glances, the way his jaw tightened when she pressed him for details.

He was holding something back. Jason wasn't just some overly protective boyfriend. No, there was more to it than that. She took a calming breath, staring at the lab's frosted glass door. Inside, were the answers she needed. She just needed to dig deep and find the courage.

The questions rattled in her brain. How was Ethan connected to Naomi? Did she know Asako's sister? That thought was the one that twisted the knife the hardest. Asako had followed lead after lead, but this one felt personal. If Naomi and her sister had crossed paths through Sil Clearwater, she had to know. That woman's name stuck in her brain like a bur in a shoe. Sil Clearwater the apparently elusive caseworker no one knows how to get ahold of, having seemingly vanished from the public eye. Every time Asako thought she was close, thought she had found a thread to pull, it unraveled into a dead end.

But Sil's name popped up over and over again.

And there was Dr. Richard Bellamy, Asako's stomach churned every time she thought of his name. What was his angle? His interest in Ethan wasn't purely academic. That much she knew. Coupled with Jason's cagey demeanor, it was practically confirmed. Was Ethan just another subject in Bellamy's history of questionable experiments?

Her mind reeled with the possibilities. Why was Jason so hard to get a hold of? A boyfriend that protective should have been easy to find, yet every time she tried to reach him, he had slipped through her fingers. What was he hiding and why?

The university's involvement in all of this only made things murkier. Naomi's death had been ruled a suicide, right then and there. But, Asako couldn't shake the feeling that something far more sinister had happened. The administration's swift, almost panicked move to freeze Bellamy's research funding was proof enough that they were aiming to bury something.

But what?

The questions piled up, each one only more infuriating than the last. The connections were there, the pieces sat on the table, but all she had to do was to connect them. This wasn't a story anymore. It was a puzzle and she had to solve it. Not just for Naomi, not for her sister, but herself.

"This is crazy, Kato," She whispered. Glancing down the hallway, she approached the lab door. Her steps softly echo. She crouched by the door handle, glancing over her shoulder once more. The building was dead silent, save for the ventilation system.

"No turning back now, Kato," she muttered. She inserted the bobby pin into the lock, fumbling to get into position. "Alright, here we go."

Whatever Bellamy was hiding, she'd find it. There wasn't just a story behind this door. She wasn't leaving without the truth.

Just as she began jiggling the lock, a raspy voice shattered the silence.

Her stomach fell directly into her ass.

"Miss, what do you think you're doing?"

Whipping around, Asako met eyes with a kindly looking elderly black gentleman. He adjusted his circular spectacles as they glimmered under the overhead fluorescent

lighting. He wore a neatly pressed blue uniform, his namepatch read, Mr. Archie.

He leaned against a thick wooden mop handled, the smell of industrial cleaner stung Asako's nose, "Can I ask what you're doing?"

### CHAPTER FORTY

Asako Kato

ASAKO STUMBLED FOR words, her heart hammering in her chest as Mr. Archie's gaze lingered on her. She wasn't sure which was sharper, his eyes on her or the creases in his uniform. She had barely managed to stammer out a half-hearted excuse about misplacing her notebook.

"Funny thing about these doors," he said stepping towards her and handing her the mop handle. Reaching for his retractable key chain, "They're old, and the lock doesn't always catch." With a quick jingle of his keys, he found the proper key and stepped closer to the lock. The key chain gave a quiet thwip as he retracted them.

Asako blinked at him, her mind scrambling to find the words. Before she could muster a reply, he inserted the key into Bellamy's lab door and turned it with a soft click, he pushed the door open.

"What? How? Why?" She stammered, taking a step back, her journalist instincts overridden by sheer confusion.

Mr. Archie turned to her and gave her a wink, taking the mop handle back from Asako. "Some stories are worth telling," he said cryptically. He looked amused, a faint smile on his lips. He stepped towards the middle of the hall and began pushing the mop back down the hall.

Asako stood frozen at the entrance, the open door beckoned her.



“What you’re looking for is probably on the bookshelf. But that would just be a guess,” Mr. Archie said casually, his voice echoed down the hall, and she heard his keys jingle softly as he disappeared around the corner.

Asako shook her head in disbelief. What had just happened? Had the janitor just opened the door for her and told her where to look? She had seen some strange things in the last few weeks, but this was definitely top of the list.

She grabbed the handle and stepped into the deserted lab. The space was dimly lit, illuminated solely by the screensavers of computer monitors. The office smelled of that familiar industrial cleaner. She quickly scampered across the lab space and towards the back where Bellamy’s office was. She held her breath hoping he didn’t lock the inner door to his office, she reached again for the door handle and twisted it.

Unlocked. She stepped forward into his private office space off the back end of the lab. The office smelled faintly of wood polish and old books. There was a tinge of cigarette smoke as well. Grabbing her phone, she clicked on the phone’s flashlight and began scanning the space. She started with the obvious — desk drawer, and filing cabinets, but found nothing out of the ordinary. Frustration started to bubble up as she rifled through the neat stacks of papers and folders.

“Where are you hiding your secrets, Bellamy?” she muttered.

The bookshelf. How had she already forgotten Mr. Archie’s prompt? She quickly stepped across the office towards the towering book shelves, using the light of her phone she scanned the shelves — they were lined with psychology textbooks, statistics manuals, and old volumes of academic journals.

She ran her fingers along the spines of books. Some books appeared to be untouched, their bindings stiff. Then her hand brushed against a book that felt slightly off as if hollow. She pulled it out revealing a slim notebook tucked behind it.

Her pulse quickened as she flipped it open. The pages were written with small but neat penmanship. She clicked her phone's camera on and started snapping photos of the pages. Each page revealed dry data, case studies, drawings of brains, and handwritten charts of numbers. She flipped through the pages, wondering if her breaking and entering was beginning to become a colossal waste of time. Flipping the page once more, her breath hitched as a note slipped out. This wasn't anything scientific, it was something else. A series of symbols, ancient, and crude, drawn in a pattern that seemed purposeful, chaotic. She clicked her phone's button, the camera grabbing a photo.

Alongside the symbols, written in Bellamy's precise handwriting:

The Five Anchors: Those who embody Mind, Heart, Sight, Will, and Voice shall challenge the cycle. When the final bond is forced, the Watcher shall bow, and the Weaver shall unravel.

Below it, a hasty scrawling in red ink: "Summit dig, 1979: Confirmation of connection to prehistoric worship site? Same symbols found near the campus fountain? Why here?"

Asako's heart pounded as she clicked more photos. Her eyes fell on a photograph paper-clipped to the page, a blurry image of a stone table unearthed during an archaeological dig. The tablet bore the same symbol.

Behind the photo was written, in more hasty scrawl: Local legend speaks of a 'timeless game' played by gods and mortals alike.

Words echoed in Asako's head, "Some stories are worth telling." What story was he talking about? What was it that Bellamy had discovered with this?

As she continued snapping photos, her phone buzzed revealing a message from Sil

Clearwater.

I'm in town this evening reviewing a potential placement. Happy to meet for a late coffee? Are you available in about 20 minutes?

Asako gritted her teeth, this woman refused to answer any messages or phone calls until now. Then only give Asako twenty minutes? She wanted to dive into the notes in the journal, but that would have to wait.

I'll be there. Meet at 24-hour diner near campus, be there in 20.

She replied and then sped through snapping photos of the rest of the notes in Bellamy's notebook. Quickly, she replaced it in the hollowed-out book and set it gently back in its spot on the books shelf.

Every part of her wanted to review those notes, the quote five anchors rattled around in her head over and over again. But that would have to wait. Swiftly, she scanned Bellamy's office to ensure nothing had been disturbed. Then quietly, she closed his office door and made her way out of the lab.

Soon, she was exiting the Henderson building and walking across campus, fat snowflakes had started to fall. They were wet and heavy, she looked up at the sky, large dark clouds hung lower over the campus. Her boots clacked beneath her as she quickened her pace to the diner.

It was at least a fifteen-minute walk from her present location. She knew she had one chance to meet with Sil Clearwater. Asako's last message must have gotten Sil's attention.

Please, I'm looking for answers about my sister, Izumi Kato .

Asako knew it was cheap to use her sister, she felt cheap doing it, but it was the last card she had to play to get Sil's attention. It appeared to have worked.

Asako was nearly jogging now, the cold air stung her lungs. She needed to get her head in the game, so Asako began rehearsing the questions she would ask Sil.

The first one, What happened to my sister?

### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Jason Havelock

JASON SAT ON the couch and held a mug of hot tea in his bandaged hand. Guilt consumed him, he hated the way he acted in front of Ethan. It was starting to get to a boiling point with these migraines and the attunements. Ethan had only had one session with Bellamy and he was already overwhelmed and irritable. Jason propped his socked feet on the coffee table, grabbing the book Bellamy had given him.

He examined the cover it was a plain nondescript book cover, its title, *Voices Within: A Discussion of Telepathic Phenomena*, embossed in faint gold letters.

He flipped through the pages idly, his eyes scanning the words but absorbing nothing. His thoughts kept drifting back to Ethan, their argument, the way Ethan looked at him at the sheer intensity of everything that unfolded at dinner. Jason remembered the taste of fear and worry that crawled up his throat watching Ethan show just an ounce of his abilities. The raw emotion that kicked up in him was somehow connected to his attunements and when escalated, the powers seemed to emerge stronger.

As Jason examined the pages, he froze. His eyes glued to the dedication page:

For Winona, whose wisdom guided me, and Isabelle, who saw more than any of us ever could. My love for you both endures beyond time.

Jason's brow furrowed as the names stirred something in his memory. He couldn't place it, the recollection was hazy. Winona. Isabelle. He stared at the page, the names

ringing a distant bell. Something about Bellamy's past, a rumor that students would whisper about him. He closed the book and set it on the coffee table, he leaned back and glanced at his phone.

No text from Ethan.

This was the hard part of dating his boyfriend, he wanted nothing more than to pull him into an embrace and whisper into Ethan's ear about how sorry he was for their fight. But, Ethan needed time, he needed space.

That's what Jason would give him.

From nowhere it hit him — something a graduate assistant had mentioned offhandedly in his freshman year when he and Ethan first started in the lab. It was a whisper, gossip, conjecture, but something about Bellamy's tragic past.

He lost both his wife and his daughter. The assistant had brushed it aside as idle gossip, but now, starting at the book and its cryptic dedication Jason felt something pulling together. He sat up, grabbing his laptop from the table. Jason's stomach churned. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he typed Bellamy's name into the search bar, he was sure to include Harvard in the search.

At first, it was the same mundane results from his initial search, but he dug deeper—articles, profiles on psychology blogs, and a few mentions of his controversial theories. Jason scrolled and scrolled, past the polished facade, until he found a headline that made his stomach churn.

"The Tragedy of Genius: Controversial Psychologist's Experiments on Daughter Raise Ethical Alarms "

Jason clicked the link, and the page loaded slowly, it taunted him. The article was

dated decades ago, accompanied by a black-and-white photo of Bellamy, his wife, and daughter. As Jason read, his breath caught in his throat.

The administration condemns in the strongest possible terms any misuse of one's position to exploit vulnerable individuals, especially minors. Dr. Bellamy's conduct is under review and Harvard will cooperate with any ongoing investigations.

Jason read on, the article detailed leaked internal memos of Bellamy's experiments involving inducing stress and sleep deprivation in his daughter, Isabelle Bellamy. Jason recoiled when learning that one memo described the use of an experimental neurostimulation device which raised concerns among Bellamy's peers about potentially harming the child.

He leaned back on the couch, running his hands through his hair. He couldn't believe it. Guilt erupted in his chest, he was pushing Ethan into the lion's den. The scientist claiming to help him, conducted experiments on his own daughter. Jason's mind raced back to his first week in Bellamy's lab. He remembered initial tests, the strange conversations about their brain scans, and the odd way Bellamy's assistants singled him and Ethan out. They had been told it was rare for an undergraduate to be offered research assistantships but now Jason wondered — Was it rare, or were they simply chosen?

Jason felt like a fool. In his desperation to help Ethan, he had been expertly manipulated played by Bellamy, who dangled hope in front of him. Every reassurance, every fatherly word of advice from his professor felt like a cruel joke. The texts they exchanged, Bellamy inquiring about Ethan's health were nothing more than a ruse. Jason replayed the moments in his mind — the initial warmth in Bellamy's office, the genuine concern, the cryptic book handed to him with a veneer of guidance and promise of answers. It had all been calculated.

How had Jason not seen it sooner? Bellamy had a way of speaking that drew you in,

and made you believe he had the answers. He is supposed to be a respected researcher and psychologist. Jason wanted so badly to believe that he could help Ethan. He wanted someone to understand that Ethan had no one but Jason. Bellamy wasn't a savior, he was a predator.

He clenched his fists, his nail bit into his palm as anger surged through him. How could he have missed the signs? The long stares Bellamy gave Ethan, the probing questions disguised as curiosity, the unsettling focus and glee on Ethan's abilities. And the books — Jason's eyes drifted to the nondescript books. It taunted him, he knew what was on those pages. An admission of guilt, Jason didn't need to read it to know the awful and vile things Bellamy had done to his daughter all for the sake of "science."

Jason grabbed the book from the coffee table, his instincts screamed he needed to find Ethan. That Bellamy wasn't just eccentric or obsessed, but that he was dangerous. With Ethan's emerging attunements, Jason had played right into Bellamy's sick twisted game.

Jason paced the living room, his anger bubbling into a fury he couldn't contain. He had been so focused on protecting Ethan from himself that he failed to protect him from Bellamy. He stopped pacing and glanced out the window. How far had Bellamy already gone? What was he planning to do to Ethan? And most importantly, how could Jason fix it before it was too late?

I have to protect him.

He stood up from the couch, grabbed his phone, he dialed Ethan's number.

It rang and rang, but went to voice mail.

He tried once more.



Voicemail.

He slipped his shoes back on and grabbed a heavy coat, he needed to find Ethan.

But where would he have gone? As he stepped out of their apartment, he stalked down the steps, his heavy footsteps clanging down the iron staircase.

She jumped from the bell tower.

Then it occurred to Jason, the nightmares Ethan has had for the last few weeks. The girl who has been haunting him in his dreams. She jumped from the bell tower, he walked faster — willing his legs to move. The muscles flexed against the cold air.

“I have to get to the bell tower before it’s too late.”

### CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Richard Bellamy

THE SPIRE LOOMED against the cold, dark sky. It's weather stone bathed in a cold, silver glow. Bellamy crossed the courtyard, the sharp crunch of his polished shoes against the ice cutting through the eerie hush. His breath clouded in the frozen air as he checked his watch, the glow from its face briefly illuminating a tight, satisfied curl of his lips. After trailing Ethan for most of the evening, Bellamy had lost him somewhere near the library. Yet a man of his expertise and instincts would deduce that they would cross paths here, the Summit Spire.

The university's iconic bell tower stood as it always had — a pillar over the campus, the place where it had all begun.

Bellamy paused to admire its stark silhouette. The spire, rose defiantly into the cloudy night sky, carrying it with an ancient weight, nearly as if it had stood through the rise and fall of epochs. Its weather stonework, darkened by time and streaked moss, now bore a ghostly pallor as the snow settled into its crag. Lions, rather than traditional gargoyles, were carved at the corners of the bell chamber high above seeming to keep watch over the campus below.

The surrounding trees were heavy, branches sagging under thick wet snow. The copper roof of the spire had dulled to a deep green patina. It was sharp and angular, its edge rimmed with frost that shimmered faintly under courtyard lamplight. Snow was falling steadily, in heavy silent sheets, blanketing the courtyard in pristine white, muting the world. The bell tower seemed to exist in a pocket suspended from time —

untouched, unshaken, and waiting.

Bellamy could feel it — waiting for him .

He cast his gaze upward, marveling at the meticulous detail etched into the tower's surface. There had been a time years ago when the bitterness of loss and failure consumed him. Winona, dead. Isabelle institutionalized. His career in ruins, all have left him in a chasm of despair. It was in his darkest moment that he had received the note. Bellamy's hand drifted to this coat pocket, brushing the handle of the snub-nose revolver holstered there. It had once been a potential end, a grim finality to his problems. But the note — a cryptic, handwritten letter — had arrived the very day he had resolved to use it.

The sender, anonymous save for the signature that read simply, “an admirer of your work,” had written Bellamy with an opportunity.

A university out west, an institution more than it seems is a nexus of extraordinary power and will soon become a gathering place for the subjects of your study. There is a greater, more ancient purpose dictated for this place beyond the facade of academia. Take yourself there by any means necessary and you will find exactly what you seek.

It had promised answers to the questions of his work. Perhaps it was foolish for a man of science to rest his hopes on something resembling religion, but what choice did he have? The task had been simple, apply for a faculty position and use any means necessary to garner proximity to the university. His work over the years had afforded him several favors that he promptly called in and gained a faculty position easily enough. With his knowledge of the field and academia, he had risen quickly at SSU, giving him a vantage point to watch for those with attunements. He had been able to cobble together a few more answers to the letter's mysterious call, but not much more. It had promised connections between thoughts and reality, the boundaries of the mind and the universe. The threads tying human thought to a

cosmic order. There is a discussion of a spire , not by name necessarily, but the unmistakable description of a focal point, a conduit of power beyond human perception.

While Bellamy had not understood all the note implied, it had rekindled something inside of him — a spark to know more. He abandoned Cambridge, left behind the wreckage of his old life, and arrived at Summit State University. He couldn't explain it but there was something larger looming, he was on the precipice of a great cosmic happening and he was preparing his seat.

A rustle broke his reverie, the crunch of an icy pavement beneath hurried footsteps. Bellamy froze, instinctively slipping into the shadow of the snow-laden trees lining the courtyard. From his vantage point, he saw a figure merging from the opposite side of the courtyard.

The figure paused, glancing up at the spire before moving towards its entrance. Bellamy's breath caught with recognition. Tall stature, broad shoulder, and that unmistakable auburn hair catching the dim glow of the nearby lamplight.

Jason.

Bellamy's pulse quickened as he watched the young man, shoulders taut with tension, slip through the heavy oak doors of the spire. Jason was alone, his steps cautious but with determination, his worry visible.

A predator's instinct took hold of Bellamy. Where there was Jason, Ethan would soon follow. He reached into his pocket, his fingers curling around the revolver's cold grip. The relic of his past, was no longer an object of despair but a tool of strength. Jason's presence here could only mean one thing — he was searching for Ethan.

Slipping silently from the shadows, Bellamy followed Jason into the Spire, the heavy

door creaking behind him.

Tonight, the game would change.

### CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Ethan Hernandez

ETHAN SHOVED THE door of the diner open and stepped out into the night. The air was sharp against his face, his eyes threatened tears. He embraced the bite of air into his skin. His chest heaved with frustration and despair. The argument with Jason played in his mind on a loop. The vision of blood and Jason's wound.

He did that.

Ethan hurt the one person who wanted to help. The only person who stood beside him the last two weeks. Jason was there when he had no one else. Ethan trudged across the street from the diner towards campus, the large evergreen trees positioned at the edge of campus premises stood sentinel as he walked beneath them. He needed to clear his head, but then again, that was the whole problem. The noise in his head made it impossible to focus, to think anything but how to survive from one moment to the next.

The words plagued Ethan, "You can't keep pushing people away." Jason was right, Ethan had pushed people away. That was much easier than letting them in, only for them to leave again. He was letting the walls down with Jason, but tonight, seeing his mother, it brought it all flooding back. With her death, he was left all alone. He had nothing and no one.

Ethan wasn't defeated, he was shattered. Any courage he'd once possessed had now been drained from him, leaving behind a hollow ache. Seeing his mother's death

again had been the death blow to any light that he kept burning. He wanted more than anything to go back— to rewind back to freshman year. But it all seemed like a distant memory now.

He remembered moving into the university dormitories, and his foster parents dropping him off on the curbside. He hauled all of his belongings up the three flights of stairs by himself, feeling a mix of excitement and dread. Part of him felt comforted at the thought of just being another face in the sea of students, but now he was on his own. His foster parents made it very clear their obligation to him had been completed once he arrived on campus that August.

While Jason claims that he saw Ethan first, the reverse is actually true. Ethan spotted Jason playing football with his friends on the common green in front of their residence hall. With a large box in his hand, he watched as Jason's friend threw the football and Jason ran to catch the pass toppling over two girls sitting on a blanket in the green grass. Jason grabbed the balls, muttered a quick apology, and ran back towards his friends. The girls swooned over him, and so did Ethan — although he'd never show it.

Convinced he was alone, Ethan moved about the first few weeks of college like a phantom on campus. He found an easy rhythm to his classes and worked diligently on his homework, setting up shop in the university library. Then came the offer to work in Bellamy's lab, where he and Jason were partnered. Jason had an endearing dopey grin and infectious charm. After working together the two developed a stilted relationship. But eventually, Jason made it his mission to pull Ethan out of his shell. It had taken some coaxing, but by the end of September, Jason was dragging him along to frat parties, late-night pizza runs, and impromptu karaoke sessions in the dorm common area.

One night, weeks after Jason had asked Ethan out for coffee, they all piled into Jason's freshman biology lab partner's beat-up van, the kind that ominously rattled

whenever it hit a pothole. The air inside the van was thick, sharp, and tangy with the scent of cheap weed. They all sat in the back off campus trading sips from a cheap bottle of liquor passing a haphazardly rolled joint around a circle of five of them. The blunt arrived to Ethan, who hesitated at first, unsure, but Jason laughed and handed it to him, “Come on, just one puff, it’s a rite of passage.”

Ethan took it, inhaling, and then coughed embarrassingly. Everyone giggled as Jason gently rubbed his shoulders, sending tingles down Ethan’s back. Later, after they returned to the dorms, everyone had stumbled back to their rooms. Jason and Ethan stayed in the dimly lit parking lot and leaned against the van. The hazy glow of a campus streetlight illuminated Jason’s grin, as Ethan studied him.

“So, what’d you think? First hit was life-changing?” Jason teased.

Ethan chuckled nervously, his inside felt like they would float away, “Tasted like cut grass.”

Jason laughed, then leaned in. “Well, it is a plant,” he whispered, and then before Ethan realized it, their lips had met. It wasn’t grand or cinematic— it was awkward but soft.

It was everything, Ethan knew it would be.

It was wonderful.

Now, sitting in the silence, of the present moment, the air wet, chilled, and heavy — he felt the memory slip through his fingers. Ethan had reached campus, his path was erratic, aimless. He walked and walked, making circles around the quad as his mind reeled. He passed the library, only to turn sharply toward the residential halls.

How much longer would Jason put up with Ethan’s moods? These migraines? The



medicine only kept things at bay and Bellamy looked at him like a hungry predator waiting to seize the moment to strike. The last person Bellamy worked with jumped from a high building, killing themselves. Ethan shivered from more than the cold when he remembered Bellamy's words — a very high place.

The girl from his nightmares jumped from the bell tower. Was that it? Was that the key to all of this? The bell tower? Somewhere high?

Ethan's pulse beat rapidly as the thought solidified in his mind. Before he fully realized it, he was standing in the main courtyard, the Summit Spire towering over him. The moon broke through the heavy clouds, casting a glow over the water in the fountain at its base. The brass lion standing guard in the center seemed to glare back at him, its fierce expression amplified by the pale light.

"I need to see what's up there," he muttered to himself, his voice barely audible over the faint rustle of the leaves.

The air was heavy, charged with a static. It was just curiosity drawing him closer to the tower — it was a compulsion, a magnetic pull he couldn't resist. He was tired of fighting it, he had to know. The bell tower had haunted his dreams for weeks, etched in his head. It wasn't just a place in his mind anymore, it was here, real, demanding his attention.

Why?

He had passed the Spire hundreds of times to and from class. What was it about now that beckoned him upwards? Ethan's feet carried him forward, his toes cold from the night air. He glanced up, the height of the tower almost dizzying as it disappeared into the sky. The faint sound of wind whistled through the openings at the top. It seemed to sing to him, pull him forward.

The Halston girl was found here. The image of her lifeless body flashed in his mind. He could still feel her residual energy, it created a thick and bitter taste in his mouth. The presence of her death pressed against his chest.

The cold metal of the entrance handle sent a shiver up his arm as he turned it. The handle creaked and groaned, as he hesitated for a moment. His heart pounded in his ribs. He glanced back at the courtyard half-expecting someone to call out to him, to stop him, forbid him to enter. But the campus was deserted, no one here.

The lion in the fountain stared at him, unblinking, as if testing his resolve. He swallowed hard and turned towards the door. Ethan took a deep breath, his fingers tight around the handle, "This is it," he murmured. "This is where it all started."

He stepped in.

### CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Asako Kato

ASAKO LOOKED UP and down the deserted street, campus behind her, the faint glow of the diner ahead of her. She waited as a lone white sedan to pull off as she watched someone stalking away from the diner's entrance.

She stepped in the familiar bells chimed her arrival. The diner hummed with quiet conversation, the occasional clink of plates and mugs breaking the quietude. Soft rock played at a low volume somewhere in the background. As she stepped inside her boots gave a crunch against the salt scattered on the floor to combat the snow outside. The warmth of the diner was a welcome contrast from the biting cold just outside. She sighed with relief as her glasses briefly fogged. A waitress stood near the corner booth sweeping shards of a broken plate into a neat pile with a small broom and dustpan. Asako's sharp eyes caught the jagged edges of the glinting light and thought she spotted blood.

Sliding her gaze across the diner, she noticed a lone figure sitting in a corner booth — a woman with one long elegant gray braid draped over her shoulder. She was nursing a steaming cup of coffee and picking at a slice of cherry pie, her movements were slow but deliberate. Somehow she radiated patience, like she'd been waiting for this moment all evening.

Asako made her way over, and her stomach gave a loud growl in protest. "Sil Clearwater?"

The woman looked up, her warm, weathered face breaking into a kind smile. Her voice was gentle but carried a strength.

“You must be Asako. Please, have a seat.” She replied, gesturing to the other side of the booth.

Asako slid into her side of the booth, shedding her coat and scarf, her movements hurried, if not careless. A waitress approached with a glass of water, her hair askew. She pulled a straw from her apron and set the water down in front of Asako. “What can I get you?”

Without hesitation, “A chocolate malt and some fries, please,” Asako said, her stomach reminding her the peanut butter cookies and blueberry Danish from earlier had hardly satisfied her, especially after a day of sleuthing.

Sil chuckled softly, her hands cupping her coffee mug. “A good combination for a night like this.” She said looking out the window. Large snow flakes were falling, blanketing the ground.

Asako smirked, “Comfort food after a day like mine is essential.”

The waitress disappeared and the two women sat in companionable silence for a moment. Asako adjusted herself in the booth, peeling off gloves and rubbing her hands together. She reached into her crossbody producing her familiar notepad and pen.

Sil waited patiently, a faint smile on her lips. Asako felt her eyes observing her, studying her movements, as if she could see right through her.

“Thank you for meeting me,” Asako began, leaning forward slightly, “I’ve been trying to piece together a story, and your name kept coming up.”

Sil nodded slowly and took a long sip of coffee from her mug. “I expected you might come looking. Your sister, Izumi, was part of something...unique. Something I believed in once.” She said, her eyebrow-raising.

“What exactly was it?” Asako added, her curiosity sparked despite her exhaustion.

Sil grabbed her fork and picked off a bite from the cherry pie. “I was a caseworker for a confidential government program tasked with finding children called Enhanced Neuro-Perceptives — ENPs for short. Some researchers call what they have neuroattunements, a kind of heightened sensitivity or extraordinary ability tied to the brain and nervous system.

Asako’s brows knitted together, “Neuro...attunements?”

Sil smiled faintly, “Something akin to psychic powers, or at least that is what some would call it. Other’s called it pseudoscience. The children I worked with didn’t fit neatly into either category. They were...special, but their abilities often brought them immense suffering. It wasn’t easy for them or for those trying to help them.”

“Why would the government care about these kids?” Asako asked, realizing her tone was rather terse.

“These children were being recruited for a specially designed program called Program Attunement Candidates — PAC for short. The idea was to track and study these children to understand their abilities. To help them cope in the face of great pain. Or, so I thought, there were those within the PAC who wished to harness these children for nefarious purposes. Over time, questions arose about the validity of the results of the program and the ethics of the methods. There was an awful man who led the project, Colonel Marcus Durant. He aimed to weaponize these children in the name of ‘national security.’ It was disgusting. Eventually, the program was leaked and investigated by government officials. It was disbanded several years ago.” Sil

finished, sighing heavily.

The waitress returned, sliding the malt and fries in front of Asako. She murmured her thanks and glanced at the food hungrily. Asako reached over and took a fry dipping it in the chocolate malt and shoved it in her mouth.

“This program was aimed at training and weaponizing psychic children?” She said, her mouth full.

Sil frowned tracing the rim of her cup, “You could say that. At the time, I and my colleagues didn’t know that. It was simply a well-funded program aimed at helping a very rare and special group of children. You have to understand, as a caseworker, that the system has very few resources for foster children and even fewer resources for those with this unique set of problems.”

Asako scribbled in her note pad before taking another couple of fries dunking them in the malt and eating them. “So what happened to the kids? What happened to Izumi?”

Sil was silent for a moment, her gaze flickered a look of sadness, “Most of them were left to fend for themselves. Some were returned to the system, some went to the streets. There were a few private agencies interested in taking up the work of PAC. Izumi...was unique even among ENPs. Her abilities were rare and confounded researchers. It dumbfounded all of us, really.” Sil said leaning forward, her eyes bright.

“Your sister had a very unique ability. She could manipulate a person’s spatial awareness — effectively concealing herself. Making herself invisible to others. It made her life hell . It made helping her nearly impossible. She was a troubled girl, this you already knew. Her emotional sensitivity made her concealment unpredictable. Erratic. She would disappear for hours, sometimes days. The last time she was found, well, it was too late.” Sil heaved another deep sigh, her eyes

moistened as she glanced outside.

Asako stared at Sil.

Sil leaned forward, speaking in a whispered hush, “The researchers said, it wasn’t just invisibility. She could make you forget her altogether. At times, anything with Izumi Kato’s name on it became nearly impossible to find. When we kept files or records on Izumi, we had to make multiple copies and keep them stored in separate facilities. Eventually, we learned that if we spelled her name wrong, then somehow her concealment wouldn’t affect the records. It was maddening.”

Sil leaned back and took another deep sip from her coffee, then looking around for the waitress, she gestured for a top-off.

Asako sat in silence, while the waitress scurried to their table filling Sil’s coffee cup. Her sister could make herself invisible to others. Make others forget her? She could warp other’s perceptions of their memories of her. It was by sheer miracle that Asako remembered her at all. This would explain why her parents seemingly forgot about Izumi. Why with each passing holiday, they spoke of her less and less. A pang of grief and anger frothed up inside Asako.

“I don’t know the details of her death,” Sil said, reaching for a sugar packet. “But I have some colleagues who might know some things. We will exchange contact information—”

“You thought you were helping her?” Asako snapped, venom laced her words.

“I did,” Sil said softly. “I truly believed I was. These children didn’t fit anywhere. They were bright, sensitive, and easily overwhelmed by the world around them. I thought...maybe this program could offer them a future. A way to cope with their special circumstances,” Sil’s voice cracked, and tears formed in her eyes once more.

Asako shook her head, unsure whether to feel pity or rage. She pushed her malt away, her appetite vanishing. Then, pulling the malt towards her, she bit her lip. “And Ethan Hernandez?”

Sil’s expression darkened, “Ethan’s case was one of the most difficult I had ever encountered. His mother’s death, his father’s disappearance...he was independent to a fault. Foster families wanted to care for him. Over and over they offered to adopt him, but he refused to bond with them. I always thought he believed his father was still out there somewhere,” Sil pointed through the window, “Ethan thought he hadn’t been abandoned but that something had happened to his father.”

Asako leaned back, trying to process the flood of information. She gestured towards the broken plate she’d seen earlier. “What about Halston?”

Sil grabbed her fork, plucking a cherry off the top of the pie, “Halston was...bright but troubled. She had a strange connection with this PAC scientist, Richard Bellamy. I don’t know the details, but I always found their dynamic unsettling. There were rumors about Bellamy’s own daughter being an ENP, but I never saw proof.”

The conversation trailed off, and Sil reached across the table her hand steady and warm. “I’m sorry about Izumi. Asako. I truly am. If it means anything, I’ll reach out to my contacts. I’ll find out what I can for you. I never intended for this to happen.”

Asako nodded, her throat tight. “Thank you.”

The two women exchanged contact information and parted ways at the door, Sil paying the tab. Asako lingered for a moment staring at the glow of the streetlights. She was dazed by the information she had received tonight. Sil had truly been the key to all of it, but for all those answers there were still so many new questions.

She stepped towards the curb deep in thought. In the distance, the bells from the



Summit Spire tolled, their deep, resonant chimes cutting through the stillness. Something about those bells had made her stomach churn ever since seeing Naomi's body. Asako stepped into the street when a screech of tires broke her concentration. A car stopped inches from her, a familiar voice bellowed from the driver's side window, "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

Asako looked and found Detective Farmer leaning out the window shouting.

Before Asako could respond, a golden light emanated from the direction of the bell tower, catching both of the women's attention. Farmer's expression shifted from irritation to concern as she glanced towards the source.

"What the hell is that?" Farmer muttered.

Asako didn't answer. Her feet were already moving towards the campus, towards the direction of the light.

She heard Farmer call after her.

### CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Jason Havelock

JASON BURST THROUGH the heavy wooden door atop the bell tower, and the frigid ancient hinges groan in protest. His breath was ragged, his chest heaving as he scanned the room. The cold air bit at his skin, he shoved his hands into his pockets, trying to warm them. He looked out of the belfry, to the campus below blanketed in all white. The clouds had gathered and were dusting the tops of the large Douglas fir tree line. The lights twinkled in contrast to the blanketed snow. It would be beautiful, but now it was terrifying.

“Ethan?” Jason called out, his voice echoing against the stone walls. Nothing.

A gust of wind howled through the rafters, rustling the dust and cobwebs that clung to the beams. The faint metallic clang of the bell’s ropes swayed. Jason stepped carefully toward the ledge his shoes crunching against the loose gravel uneven. He leaned over the railing, his eyes scanning all of the campus below, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ethan.

“Where the hell are you?” he muttered to himself.

Before he could process anything, a sharp blinding pain exploded at the back of his head. His vision swam, and he stumbled away from the ledge, his balance faltering. He turned and blinked away the haze of dizziness, and his heart jumped into his throat.

Dr. Robert Bellamy stood there, his polished leather shoes firmly planted, a snub nose revolver gleaming faintly. His face was calm, almost serene, as though he rehearsed this encounter in his head a thousand times.

“Dr. Bellamy?” Jason managed, his voice rasped. “What the hell are you doing?”

Bellamy smiled faintly, a twisted mix of pity and arrogance. “Ah, Jason, Such a loyal companion, so protective. Admirable, really. But you’re in my way. You’re keeping me from my work with Ethan.”

Jason took a step back, his mind racing, “Where’s Ethan? What have you done?”

Bellamy tilted his head, and the corners of his mouth twitched, “Ethan? You’re remarkable boyfriend. Do you even know what he is capable of? What he can become?”

Jason clenched his fists. “I know enough to see you’re obsessed with him. You want to turn him into one of your lab rats. Like you did Naomi Halston. Like you did your daughter.”

Bellamy’s eyes hardened at that last bit, “Watch yourself, Mr. Havelock.” He said stepping closer, the revolver at the ready. “You have no idea what I’ve lost. I’ve had to give up. Ethan is the key back to her. Do you know what it’s like to lose everything? My daughter — Isabelle. My wife — Win.” He sneered, his voice cracking. “Two graves, Jason. Two all because no one understands.”

Jason's breathing quickened. “And what? You think manipulating Ethan. Exploiting him will bring them back?”

Bellamy’s voice dropped to near a whisper, his words as icy as the air around them. “There are legends, Jason. Legends of attunements so powerful they can speak to the

dead, they can alter the very fabric of time. And I've found one. I can see her again. I can hold her again."

Jason's stomach churned, Bellamy's true intentions sinking in. "You're insane."

Bellamy's calm facade cracked, a spark of desperation in his eyes, "No. I'm desperate. Everyone of his kind I find brings me closer. Ethan is the key. Can't you see that?"

Jason lunged, hoping to knock the gun from Bellamy's grip, but Bellamy anticipated the move. The two struggled, Jason's strength fueled by raw emotion, but Bellamy was prepared. He brought the gun of the revolver down on Jason's temple, sending him crumpling to the cold stone floor.

Jason's world blurred, and he struggled to focus. The edge of his consciousness frayed. He fought to stay awake, to get back up, but his body betrayed him. The weeks of exhaustion, worry, and fear — darkness encroached.

Bellamy stood over him, adjusting his tie with a steady hand. I'm sorry, Jason. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Grabbing Jason by the collar, Bellamy struggled as dragged him towards the stairwell. His heart pounded, the thrill of victory gave him strength. But then, a sound froze him — the faint creak of the door below.

Bellamy's grip tightened on Jason as he peered down the winding, shadowy staircase. A figure appeared, stepping into the faint moonlight light that filtered through the belfry.

Ethan.

Bellamy was nearly gleeful, “Two in one night,” he muttered. “It’s my lucky day.”

He heard the stairs creak under Ethan’s feet as he ascended the spiraling iron staircase to the top. The steps were slow and deliberate. Bellamy felt an unnatural warmth rising from the stairwell. He watched as Ethan emerged, Bellamy now submerged into the shadows of the bell chamber. The air seemed to sizzle, seemed to crackle with energy.

Bellamy’s hand hovered over the revolver now tucked into his waistband, “Come to me, Ethan. Let’s finish what we started.”

### CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Ethan Hernandez

THE COLD WIND ripped through the open belfry. In his dissociated state, Ethan meandered to the top of the bell tower, the steps of the spiral iron stair case creaking beneath him. The night air was sharp and biting, with the promise of more heavy snow.

Ethan's thoughts raced, a chaotic cacophony of voices roaring louder and louder the storm raging above. The wind whipped through the open belfry, biting and cold but it did nothing to dull the fire burning inside him.

The anguish threatened to eat him alive.

Bellamy's words rang in his ears, sharp and unyielding, "Many attuned end their life because of the overwhelming nature of their power."

Was this the answer? The end of it all? The pain, the endless barrage of voices, images, and dreams, the isolation that clung to him — if he jumped, would it all stop?

He stepped closer to the ledge, his breath visible in the freezing air. The stones beneath his feet were slick with frost, treacherous. He looked out over the campus, now blanketed in a heavy silence, save for the howling wind. The faint glow of streetlights barely illuminated the snow-covered paths below.

As his hands reached for the cold stone of the ledge something strange happened. The

voices that had been screaming relentlessly for weeks now suddenly softened, receding to faint whispers. The chaos ebbed, leaving behind a moment of fragile clarity.

For the first time in a week, his mind felt...still.

But with the silence came the sharp ache of guilt. Jason. Tonight, he'd hurt him — the one person who had always been there for him, who stood by his side even with the world threatening to gobble him up. Ethan was so close to spiraling into chaos. He'd seen the fear, the hurt in Jason's eyes tonight — the fear of him.

Ethan's hands clenched, trembling as he stared out at the campus below. These powers — this curse— what good are they if they only bring pain? He could feel the weight of Jason's love, steady and unwavering, even now. But was it worth it? Was it worth hurting the man who had shown him what it could be to love and be loved?

The wind howled around him, tugging at his jacket as if urging him forward.

Would Jason be better off without him?

The thought brought a slice of pain to his chest, leaving him gasping for breath. He could sense death lingering nearby, waiting patiently, watching. Its presence both terrifying, but somehow comforting. It whispered a promise of release, of peace, of an end to the torment that consumed him.

Ethan flirted with it, letting the idea wrap around him like a cloak.

One step, and it could all be over. One step and the pain will end. No more voices. No more visions. No more hurting Jason.

His heart ached, all of this threatened to crush him. He closed his eyes, tilting his face

to the sky— feeling the snowflakes melt against his skin.

And yet, in the quiet, a voice — his own— whispered from somewhere deep within:  
Is this what you want? Really?

Ethan hesitated, his toe now perched on the very edge of the belfry. The storm raged on, the bell above him swaying in the wind, it's heavy toll echoing faintly.

He felt a familiar presence. Ethan turned his heart thudding, expecting to see Jason.

A figure stepped into the glow of the tower, sending chills down Ethan's back.

"I thought I'd find you here," Bellamy said, his hand hidden surreptitiously in his pocket. For a moment, the frost in the air seemed to shift to an unnatural warmth. Then a sizzle of golden energy crackled between Ethan and Bellamy, illuminating Bellamy's deranged face.

"What do you want with me? Leave me alone! I can't bring your daughter back," Ethan said. "I can't give you this curse."

A smirk appeared on Bellamy's face, he looked mildly surprised at Ethan reading his thoughts.

"You think it's just you I want? No, you're just the key," Bellamy said.

Ethan looked at him puzzled, "What are you talking about?"

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Bellamy's mouth. He looked amused—and maybe a little impressed. "Oh, you've caught on faster than I thought. Reading thoughts already—well done, Ethan. But you misunderstand me." He gestured to the shadowed edge of the platform, and Ethan's heart clenched as he saw Jason slumped



against the stone wall, unconscious and helpless.

"You're just the key to him."

A maniacal glee spread over Bellamy's face, "You're the key to him," he said, pointing at Jason. "You're valuable to me, but him. He's something really special. "

"Jason?" Ethan's voice cracked as he took a step forward, his body instinctively moving to protect. "What have you done to him? Let him go!"

Bellamy took a deliberate step closer cutting Ethan off, his voice low and coaxing. "Jason... your 'gifted' protector. Ever wonder why you can't hear his thoughts? Why, in his arms, he is silent inside? He's something rare—a natural concealer, a shield. With him nearby, even the most sensitive attuned could live in peace, away from the chaos."

Ethan's eyes widened, horrified. He could feel the truth of Bellamy's words sinking in, each one a blow to his stomach.

Bellamy's gaze was intense, his voice dropping to a soft, almost reverent tone. "With Jason at your side, you two would be unstoppable. Concealed from anyone who sought to do you harm. But without him, you're attunements will tear you apart. You'll live half a life. Or... perhaps, you'll give in to the inevitable and jump."

A jagged flash of gold lightning split the sky, the thunder following close behind as Bellamy circled him, as he pulled the revolver from his pocket.

Ethan felt himself growing weaker, but he forced himself to stand tall. "You're sick."

"Ethan you're simply valuable to me and no one else. Sure, there have been attempts to harness the power, but the government has long since abandoned that. Your kind is

too fragile to withstand even the minor of experimentation. It is true the power is great but it doesn't last long. Your type is much like a fireworks display – brilliant but over quickly. Now Jason...in the right hands would be worth a fortune. Imagine what the power to conceal an entire army or an armada of ships could do. He could disguise weapons of mass destruction in your neighbor's backyard and you'd never know. They're said concealers are a 'once in a generation' gift." Bellamy said, rounding on Ethan.

"I knew of only one other – a young Japanese girl. She went mad though, just like the rest of you, but her madness came because no one noticed, she struggled to be seen by those who were supposed to love her. The curse of concealment I suppose. Now, you are going to come with me and he's going to go to the highest bidder." Bellamy said stepping forward and raising the firearm.

Bellamy raised his hand, and suddenly Ethan's head seared with pain, his powers yanked to the surface. Golden lightening crackled, and large, thick strands of gold iridescent energy popped and sizzled.

The bell overhead swung with a heavy, ominous toll. Ethan doubled over, gasping as the voices and visions struck him with full force, louder, and more chaotic than ever before.

"Embrace it, Ethan!" Bellamy shouted over the din. "Use your pain; let it fuel your power. You're capable of so much more than you know... if you'd only let go. The more powerful you become the easier it is to harness your power for my needs! You can have everything, Ethan. Power, freedom — everything you've ever wanted. Just let go. Let it all go!"

Behind Bellamy, Jason began to stir, groaning and slowly regaining consciousness. His eyes met Ethan's, full of concern and fierce determination.

"Ethan, don't listen to him!" Jason's voice was hoarse but steady. "You don't have to be alone. I'm here."

Bellamy scoffed, glancing between them. "Isn't that sweet?" He turned back to Ethan, his eyes glinting with malice. "But he's holding you back, chaining you down. Without him, you could become something unstoppable, even time itself would be in your hands. Let me help you, and together we'll be invincible."

The bell tolled louder, the storm intensifying around them. Ethan's powers flared, his fear and fury building like a fire inside him. The bell tower quaked with each tremor, dust falling from the rafters as the loose stones rattle. With a final, desperate look at Jason, Ethan knew what he had to do.

He faced Bellamy, his voice shaking but resolute. "No. I'm not your puppet. I'm not a tool. And I'm not giving in."

The air crackled with electricity as Ethan summoned his power, his body trembling from the sheer force. His breath hitched, the sharp intake of air drowned out by the rising howl of wind. Golden iridescent light erupted from his eyes, it cast a long flickering shadow across the stone wall of the bell tower.

He felt the ground beneath him fall away, his feet lifting effortlessly, as gravity no longer had hold of him. Slowly, he rose, the golden light pouring from him in waves.

Lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the spire in stark flashes of white and gold. Thunder followed in deafening bursts, echoing through the campus below. The bell above swayed wildly, clanging in protest against the tremors that rippled through the tower.

The air grew heavy, vibrating with an unnatural, ancient energy. Ethan hovered now, several feet off the ledge, his arm outstretched as commanding the storm. The light

around him intensified, forming a shimmering aura that pulsed with every beat.

Bellamy stood frozen, his eyes wide, reflecting the light emanating before him. His grip tightened on the revolver in his hand, but his body refused to move. The gun felt silly, like a toy paling in comparison to the power he witnessed. This was beyond his comprehension — something both dazzling and terrifying.

The wind screamed through the open belfry, swirling around Ethan. Loose stones and debris lifted from the floor, caught in the unseen vortex of power emanating from him.

“Ethan!” Jason’s voice broke through the chaos, hoarse and desperate. He stood at the far side of the tower, his face pale as he shielded his eyes from the blinding light, “Ethan stop. You don’t have to do this!”

Ethan tilted his head downward, his eyes glowing locking onto Jason. The light flickered for a moment, the human part of him breaking through the storm of power.

“It’s too late, his power is reaching its apex!” Bellamy shouted, pointing the gun towards Ethan. “Stop or you will kill us all!”

Ethan simply surveyed him. Bellamy pointed the gun and squeezed the trigger, his own heart beating. With a wave of his hand, Ethan sent out a shockwave that blasted Bellamy back, toppling to the floor, the gun skittered away.

Bellamy's fury flared, and he launched himself towards Jason. “Fine, if you won’t control yourself then I will.”

He tumbled towards Jason, hands around his neck. Energy crackled around them and the air sizzled.

“No!” Ethan shouted, levitating back towards the ledge. He opened his palm towards Bellamy and closed his fingers as an unseen force pulled Bellamy away from Jason and towards Ethan who was now hovering off the ledge. “You have tortured us, subjected us to your maniacal experiments all so you can see your daughter again. Not anymore.”

The foundation of the bell tower groaned under the strain, cracks forming in the stone as the tower quaked. Dust and debris rained down from below, the entire structure trembling, ready to collapse at any moment.

Bellamy struggled against a force pulling him towards Ethan, towards the ledge. As Ethan dragged him towards the ledge he spotted the gun grabbing it as he slid by, he pointed it towards Ethan whose eyes continued to glow a brilliant gold.

Gold flashes of lighting sizzled and emanated from around him Bellamy squeezed the trigger – once, twice, three times. The bullets stopped in midair Ethan surveyed them with curiosity. Bellamy was in awe at this brilliant display of force. How had he stopped the bullets? This was far more power than simple precognition or a psychic gift.

Ethan was something much more than that.

In one last, defiant surge of energy, Bellamy turned towards Jason and squeezed the trigger. The bullet zipped from the barrel of the gun towards Jason who was mesmerized by the display of Ethan’s power.

“No!” Ethan bellowed, his voice carrying. With a sharp motion of his hand, a force erupted from within, invisible but devastating. The wave surged outward pulling Bellamy from the ledge like a marionette yanked by a string. Bellamy’s eyes widened in terror, his fingers clawing at the empty air as he was wrenched from the belfry.

“Ethan!” he screamed, his voice rising above the storm, but the force was unyielding, carrying him backward like a ragdoll.

The world seemed to slow as he tumbled through the open air. He caught flashes of the towers carving — the weathered stone lions perched on the corner, their stoic faces watching. The wind tore through him, freezing, relentless. His scream turned guttural, raw, a sound of pure fear. Then, the ground rushed up to meet him. With a sickening thud, his body collided with the courtyard below. The impact reverberated through campus, cutting through the storm with a finality.

Jason rushed to the ledge grabbing for Ethan, Slowly Ethan fell from his levitation to the floor of the belfry as Jason grabbed him embracing him tightly. The foundation of the bell tower settled.

“I’m sorry,” Ethan cried.

Jason held him tightly, “No. I’m sorry.”

### CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

#### Interlude

EZEKIEL STEPPED OUT from beneath the foliage, his figure cut a sharp silhouette against the pale frost moonlight. He stood at the base of the Spire, its shadow stretching long and imposing across the central quad. He checked his timepiece, its polished surface glinting briefly before pulling the sleeve of his wool trench coat down.

“The pieces are set.” He murmured, his expensive leather shoes crunched against the patches of old ice clinging stubbornly to the pavement.

A cold breeze whipped through the dark quad, carrying with it a swirl of leaves. The lamplight above him flickered, and eerie shadows danced and wavered.

From nowhere, he heard a voice. “Ezekiel Asmodiaus, I thought I’d find you here.”

Ezekiel turned and peered as a bespectacled elderly Black man sidled up next to him. He wore a wool newsboy cap, a thick black wool peacoat, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

“Archer Calloway,” Ezekiel gave a smile and tipped his fedora, “Or should, I say, ‘the Whispering Void.’”

Mr. Archie chuckled softly, “Come now, Ezekiel, you sound like one of the mortals. No need for the formalities.”

Ezekiel nodded as his gaze returned to the top of the bell tower, “So what brings you out this fine chilly evening.”

“You’re stirring up quite the controversy among our siblings. Some believe you’re up to something.” Mr. Archie replied, his gaze following Ezekiel’s upwards.

Ezekiel was quiet for a moment, “I’m sure you can guess, Archer.” His tone was smooth, he looked upon the top of the tower with interest.

“Oh, but where is the fun in that?” Mr. Archie chuckled, “Besides I like watching you needle your twin sister. How long has it been since I’ve seen you? Twenty, thirty years?”

Again, Ezekiel didn’t respond, instead, he pulled his hands from his pockets and clasped them around his back.”

Mr. Archie took his eyes away from the tower and looked around the courtyard of the central quad, “You still convincing the mortals you’re the ‘groundskeeper?’ I’ve yet to see you rake one leaf around here.”His voice was casual, relaxed, amused even.

Ezekiel smirked. “And I’ve yet to see you actually mopping any floors. Tell me, are you still spying on undergraduate psychology students?”

Mr. Archie scoffed lightly, brushing an invisible speck from his sleeve. “I always have time for wayward siblings, especially when they’re up to something.” His expression shifted slightly, “One question: why did you wait so long to reveal the body of that Halston girl to the mortals?”

“Because,” Ezekiel said, his voice calmed and measured, “timing is everything.” He looked back up at the Spire, its peak shrouded in darkness.



The two stood in silence, a weight of millennia passed between them until a burst of golden-yellow light erupted from the top of the tower.

“The boy,” Mr. Archie murmured, his tone surprised. His composure faltered for only a moment. “He shows potential,” he started, the golden-yellow light reflected in his spectacles, “a lot of potential.” He shook his head unsure. “What are you playing at Ezekiel?”

Ezekiel glanced again at his timepiece, “Right on time,” he muttered to himself.

The spire began to tremble, the air around it thick with energy. The lamps in the quad flickered wildly, and the ice in the fountain cracked, as though reacting to an unseen force.

Above Ethan radiated power, bathed in a golden glow around him. It intensifying by the moment. Suddenly, a cry rang out, and Bellamy was sent hurtling from the top of the bell tower. His screams echoed through the courtyard punctuated by a deafening thud.

Mr. Archie whipped around to face Ezekiel, his brow furrowed in worry, as he let out a low whistle, “I hope you know what you’re doing Ezekiel,” he warned. “You’ve just violated a 10,000-year-old covenant between us.”

He glanced back at the Spire, “Ezekiel, who is that boy?”

Ezekiel smiled faintly, the corner of his mouth curving with satisfaction. “Archer, I’ve done what was needed. What you and our siblings refused to do. I’m changing the terms of the agreement. The trials begin now. Here. I have my anchor. I suggest you find yours.”

Mr. Archie’s eyes shot back to the top of the tower as the bell clanged loudly, its

sound reverberating through the night. He watched as the light around Ethan dimmed and he floated back to the ledge. Jason reached out, pulling him in with a steady hand.

Mr. Archie's eyes widened. "There are two of them? Did he bond with a Concealer? You clever son of a bitch," Mr. Archie breathed out a half-laugh, a mix of awe and disbelief in his voice. "You set all of this up! He conceals the Hernandez boy. How long have you been planning this? She'll be livid when she finds out."

Ezekiel remained silent, his focus on the Spire.

Mr. Archie adjusted his cap, throwing a glance over his shoulder, someone was approaching from behind them. He muttered something then with a gust of frost-laden wind, he evaporated, his presence vanishing as if it had never been.

Ezekiel lingered only for a moment, his gaze fixed on the bell tower. "Prepare yourself, Ethan," he whispered. "Your trials await."

With a flash of light, he too disappeared, leaving the quad in silence save for the approaching footsteps.

### CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Asako Kato

ASAKO ARRIVED AT the spire, her lungs burned as she fought to catch her breath. Pulling out her phone she clicked record on the video.

She aimed the camera upwards as brilliant gold light was slowly dissipating at the top of the tower. Two figures were dimly illuminated, their shadowy silhouettes drawing back inward towards the belfry.

Her head reeled from the sight, the icy wind cut through her coat as her boots crunched along the pavement. She slowed as she approached the tower, noticing two spectators at the base looking up with interest.

One was a tall man dressed sharply in a wool trench coat and fedora, his leather-gloved hands clasped behind his back. While his face was not visible, she saw his angular features as he leaned in whispering to another surprising figure beside him, Mr. Archie, the janitor from the Henderson Psychology building. The very same man who let her into Bellamy's office.

He was speaking in low hurried whispers to the man.

Who were they? They didn't belong here.

Asako aimed her camera phone toward them, when Mr. Archie glimpsed over his shoulder, he looked to utter something under his breath. With a wink, Asako's phone

glitched, the screen became static before powering down.

Asako blinked, unable to reconcile what she was seeing. The two men were magnificent. They seem to exude a warmth contrasting with the frigid night air. The lights from the nearby lampposts glinted unnaturally off their forms, casting them as flickering flames.

Once more the man leaned in towards Mr. Archie and seemed to whisper something that disturbed him. He responded, with a worried frown, and then vanished in a shimmer of white gold light.

“What the hell was that?” Asako muttered, her eyes struggled to refocus from the light. As she did she looked towards the man now standing alone, he too vanished. Leaving a smoky-black deep golden ember. The shadowy ripple seemed to distort the air around him, collapsing inwards with a low resonant hum.

Asako’s breath hitched, and her exhaustion wore on her. She had just seen two figures disappear before her eyes. Certainly, it was a hallucination.

The sound of hurried footsteps broke her trance as Detective Farmer arrived, her breath clouding the air. She fought to regain her steady breath.

“What the hell happened here?” Farmer barked, immediately taking in the scene. The two women moved forward together when Asako’s hand shot towards her mouth in horror. Bellamy’s lifeless body lay in a crumpled heap before them feet from where Halston’s body laid only days before.

Farmer didn’t wait for an answer, she pulled her phone from her inner breast pocket and dialed, “We’ve got a body at the base of the spire. Send back up. Now.”

Soon the distant wail of sirens pierced the silence, growing louder with each second.

Asako stood frozen, still trying to process what she had just witnessed. She glanced up at Farmer, who surveyed the scene. She kneeled beside Bellamy's body assessing it.

Swallowing hard, Asako's voice trembled, "Farmer...there was someone here. Two people. I swear I saw them."

Farmer shot her a sharp look, "Who? Where?"

Asako stammered, "They..."

Just as she spoke, the creak of the large oak doors of the bell tower was heard, Jason and Ethan came ambling out, Ethan's arm around Jason's neck for support.

"...were just here." Asako finished.

Farmer stood from beside Bellamy's body and rushed towards the two young men. She grabbed her phone and dialed again, "Send EMS, we have two injured."

Asako stood frozen as the scene unfolded in front of her. The central quad illuminated in flashes of red and blue as police arrived.

"Don't go anywhere, we need to talk" she heard Farmer shout over her shoulder, she was barreling towards Ethan and Jason.

### CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Janine Farmer

“DEAN KERRIGAN WILL see you now,” the administrator said, with her familiar plastic smile.

Janine Farmer adjusted her collar as she stepped into Dean Regina Kerrigan’s office. The bird like woman sat behind her expansive mahogany desk.

Kerrigan looked up from her laptop, glasses perched on her beak-like nose, “Detective Farmer, please come in and have a seat.” She crowed. A satisfied sneer crept across lips as she gestured across from her desk.

Inwardly, Farmer grimaced. Bile threatened to crawl up her throat.

Kerrigan leaned back in her large wingback chair, surveying Farmer,

“You look exhausted.”

Farmer stifled a yawn, “It has been a long night.”

Kerrigan nodded, “I trust there is progress to report.”

Farmer cleared her throat, taking a steadying breath, “Yes, Richard Bellamy fell and was found deceased at the base of the Summit Spire this morning at approximately 1:30 AM. We have reason to believe that he was stalking two of his research

assistants and current SSU students, Ethan Hernandez and Jason Havelock. Apparently, Bellamy was targeting them for more of his...experiments.”

Kerrigan tilted her head slightly, a pleased smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“After confronting Hernandez and Havelock on the Bell Tower, there was a confrontation,” Farmer continued. “Bellamy’s actions escalated and the incident ended in his fall. Cause of death is being ruled accidental for now.”

At this, Kerrigan stared directly at Farmer who resisted the urge to look away. “And the Halston girl?”

Farmer hesitated, the words caught in her throat, “Based on written evidence secured in Bellamy’s lab earlier this morning, evidence suggests experiments— drove her too—.”

“Suicide,” Kerrigan said, her voice cutting.” “The official account will maintain that narrative.”

Farmer’s gaze looked towards the floor, her brow furrowed. A flare of indignation rose in her chest. “Ma’am, the evidence does not suggest that. Richard Bellamy had a direct impact on Naomi Halston which could potentially be charged as 2nd-degree manslaughter. People should know that.”

“It doesn’t matter what the evidence says, Detective,” Kerrigan said, steeping her fingers under her chin. “What matters is what the Board of Trustees wants the public to know. Bellamy was respected. Eccentric, yes, but an asset to the university. If it becomes public knowledge that he was kidnapping and experimenting on students it would unravel the university’s reputation. We took steps to address his access to resources, but now that does not matter, for obvious reasons.”

Farmer clenched her jaw, forcing herself to remain calm. “You’re asking to bury the truth.”

“I’m telling you to uphold the university’s reputation,” Kerrigan replied sharply. “And you’ll find the university president agrees. Dr. Thorne has taken a personal interest in the Halston girl’s case on behalf of the board. I’m tasked with updating him. It’s in everyone’s best interest to leave the matter where it lies.”

Farmer stood her ground. “And Ethan Hernandez? Jason Havelock? What about them? They’re victims in this just as Naomi Halston was.”

Kerrigan’s face darkened, the slight shift in her demeanor gave Farmer a chill. “Yes, I’m aware of those two.” She reached into the top drawer of her desk producing a slim leather portfolio. “The Board is...curious. Particularly about Mr. Hernandez. Students with this kind of aptitude...don’t come along every day. Thorne believes their movements warrant monitoring.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Farmer asked, her stomach churning.

Kerrigan looked up, her expression unreadable, “Keep an eye on them. Discreetly. If either of them become— shall we say— unpredictable, report directly to me.”

Farmer’s pulse quickened, “You want me to spy on them?”

“Call it proactive safeguarding,” Kerrigan replied. “The board won’t tolerate risks. Not with students like those two. I advise you to cooperate, Detective. After all, I imagine the wrongful death suit from your time on the city police force would be a good reminder of how keeping certain details private can help one’s reputation.”

Farmer stiffened at this. “That case was closed. It was settled.”



Kerrigan smiled again, “Let’s not open old wounds then, shall we?”

Silence hung between them. Farmer’s fists clenched at her side as she stood. She wanted to fight back, but Kerrigan’s threat was clear. “Fine. I’ll do it. But don’t think for a moment I don’t see what is going on.”

Kerrigan looked over glasses. “See whatever you like. Just do your job, Detective.”

Without another word, Farmer turned on her heel and strode toward the door.

### CHAPTER FIFTY

Ethan Hernandez & Jason Havelock

THE WARM STEAM of the shower curled around Ethan, softening the edges of the bathroom mirror. He let the water drum a steady rhythm against his skin, rinsing away the night's events. He tilted his head back, letting the stream flow over his face, his dark hair slicked against his scalp. His body ached with a sore, heavy pain. But, his head, was clear. The voices and the images had all quieted — not even a faint whisper.

For the first time in weeks, he had evaded his migraine. The relentless pounding in his temples had left him. Ethan felt something he had not dared in weeks, hope. While the voices were quiet, his mind was still troubled.

Flashes of the night before played on repeat in his mind — fragments like broken shards of glass. The storm swirling around the bell tower. The golden light that had poured from his body. Bellamy's startled face, the man's shouts drowned out by the hums of power. Ethan's own voice tore through the night "No!" Bellamy's startled face, the scream of fear as he fell to the ground below.

And Jason. Jason's voice called him back to the ledge, grabbed him from the air, and whispered into his ear.

What had he done? How had he done it?

He leaned forward, pressing his palm on the cold tiles, his breath fogging the glass

walls of the shower. That power, felt like it controlled him. Even the surprise apparent on Bellamy's face at Ethan's awesome demonstration. As if he hadn't anticipated Ethan's potential. The memory of the bullets hanging mid-air all sent a chill through Ethan, even now under the steaming hot water. Bellamy's fear had been real, but so was his greed for Ethan's power.

He clenched his jaw at the thought of Jason — a concealer. Bellamy had called him that. The way Jason's presence had soothed Ethan's mind. The way — somehow— Jason was able to block out Ethan's attunement. It all made a sort of sense, but did Jason know? Why hadn't he told Ethan?

The questions lingered in his mind as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair, he breathed in the crisp fresh scent. The one thing he couldn't ignore was how Jason had been there to protect him — even in the face of uncertainty. As Ethan's power — awesome and raw — Jason ran towards him and grabbed him from the air shielding him. Ethan turned off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel from the rack he dried himself. He caught his reflection in the foggy mirror — his brown eyes, though tired, seemed calm and clear.

The faint scent of coffee drifted into the bathroom pulling him back to the present. Jason. Breakfast. Home.

For now, he had that.

Jason moved through the kitchen with ease, he hummed quietly to himself flipping the crepes gently in the pan. The mundane act of cooking grounded him, leaving the stove, he stepped to the counter and squeezed a large orange into a plastic pitcher— smiling at the irony.

His mind flicked to Bellamy's book, still sitting on the coffee table where he had left it. The answer they needed was somewhere in there — or so he hoped. Although after

the brief but intense interrogation from Detective Farmer, he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answers.

Jason heard the water cut off in the bathroom, he smiled at the thought of him and Ethan sitting down to breakfast. Why hadn't the demonstration of Ethan's power last night disturbed Jason? Why didn't the news of his concealment attunement frighten him? Jason supposed he had known all along and while he had no real control over it — it didn't seem to have the same impact on him as Ethan's attunements did.

“That's something we can worry about later,” he muttered to himself. He flipped the final crepe onto a handsome stack of freshly prepared crepes and set them on the table with two placement settings prepared for him and Ethan. As he set the plate down he heard a soft knocking on their front door. Jason glanced at the door and then the bathroom.

“Hey, Stormy. There's someone at the door,” he called out to Ethan.

The bathroom door cracked, “Can you get it? It's probably Detective Farmer here to follow up about last night. I'm almost done getting dressed.”

Jason smiled and stepped towards the door.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:19 am*

THE MICROWAVE PINGED, Asako reached in grabbing the plastic plate, a once-frozen breakfast burrito slouched lifelessly at the center. She grabbed a diet cola from her mini fridge and made her way to the small desk on the other side of her crowded studio apartment.

Her head buzzed with the happenings from last night. The gold lights atop the bell tower, the two figures that stood before her seemingly vanishing into the night, and Bellamy's lifeless body all flashed in her head when she closed her eyes. After the confrontation at the bell tower, Farmer had taken her statement and allowed her to return home after she agreed to a follow-up interview in the coming days. Once she arrived, she collapsed into bed for a few hours, never achieving any restful sleep.

Now, she tore pieces from the breakfast burrito as she uploaded the images of Bellamy's journal from her phone to her laptop. She scrolled through the photos hoping she was able to capture the video of Mr. Archie standing next to the fedora-wearing man.

What were they? Angels? Ghosts?

She racked her brain all morning, unable to construct a reasonable answer. As she clicked on the video it sputtered and fizzed out. The footage was toast.

She clicked past the video and examined Bellamy's journal entries — she zoomed in reading the tidy penmanship. The entries were dense, cryptic, and peppered with diagrams — maps of the campus with hand drawn lines. The lines each labeled, “ley line.”

She zoomed in on a small entry reading, Summit State University: Confluence of energies. Nexus amplification of attunement. Draws ENPs close. Convergence imminent. Cosmic beings parading as mortals?

The entries made no sense, its disjointed notes and inscrutable phrases created more questions than answers. Asako scrolled the diary, her heart pounded as her anger rose. Her eyes moved rapidly over the words, nearly faster than her brain could process them. She was desperate for clarity, when her eyes stopped on an entry dated just a few weeks ago.

Her breath hitched in her throat as she read the name: Naomi Halston.

“That son of a bitch,” Asako muttered, her voice barely hid the fury rising. “It was him this whole time.”

Her hands shook as she continued reading.

Subject demonstrated precognitive flashes. Reliable predictions? Erratic. Connection to external ENP activity? Unsure. Subject suggests presence of precognitive ENP nearby.

The words blurred as Asako blinked back tears, but she forced herself to keep reading.

Subject uncooperative. Heightened stress during session affecting attunement. Sedative medication causing attunement degradation?

Asako’s chest tightened, and her bottom lip trembled, “He drugged her?” she hissed.

She could see Naomi’s face in her mind — the student ID photo of her with a soft smile that hung above Asako’s desk at the Ledger offices. Then, the face of the

lifeless body she'd seen only days ago. She clenched her fists, her nails dug into her palms.

Asako read on.

Subject terminated via...

The words ended abruptly, their brutal simplicity cruel and impersonal. Tears stung her eyes as she filled in the blanks. Bellamy had effectively killed Naomi — or at least, her death served his twisted, sick agenda. Thoughts of Naomi's lifeless body, cold, and still beneath the bell tower, came rushing back full force.

She slumped back in her chair, the glow of the computer monitor reflected her tear-streaked face. Her stomach churned, and a storm of grief threatened to unmoor her. Naomi's fate was not just some random act of violence, she was a casualty of Bellamy's obsession. In his grotesque hunger for control, he had drained her of everything.

Her thoughts turned to her sister, Izumi, a gnawing ache of uncertainty rising in her. How many more had suffered like this? Like Naomi? Like Izumi? Her mind raced with the possibilities. Images of her sister, disappearing for days, always on the edge, nearly unreachable passed in edge of her mind.

"What did they put you through Izzie?" she whispered.

The same system that had failed Naomi had failed her sister too and Asako's gut reeled with the realization. She gritted her teeth her fingers trembling, hesitation rose in her to read further into this madman's diary. But she knew she had to learn more, Asako needed to know how deep his obsession went.

She clicked the mouse, wiping a way the tears in her eyes. The familiar meticulous

handwriting filled the screen, but this time the subject shifted. Jason. The words leaped out at her, stark and irrefutable.

Concealment? Rare. One of a kind? Connection to attuned? Powerful attunement useful to Durant? Potential high-value asset?

A flicker of recognition ignited in Asako, the name “Durant” chimed alarm bells. In her conversation with Sil Clearwater, the caseworker had mentioned Colonel Marcus Durant — a former military scientist overseeing the controversial ENP research. Sil had described him as a man willing to push ethical boundaries in the name of “national security.” He was someone who had used children like Izumi as living experiments to strengthen the military force.

Her stomach churned at the idea. What would Durant want with Jason?

She scrolled on, her eyes scanned the page. The entries were disjointed, fragments of ideas, and plans— much of it difficult to connect. But one thing was true, Jason’s concealment attunement wasn’t just rare — it was unprecedented. Bellamy saw him not as a person, but as a potential return to his funding.

Then the realization hit her like a brick through a window — Was Bellamy going to sell Jason out to Durant?

She sat back, her mind reeling.

It made complete sense, Bellamy’s funding had been cut. Frozen by the university. If there was another precognitive ENP nearby, Bellamy was going to need resources to conduct his research. If Marcus Durant was still researching ENPs, even with private funding, then Bellamy could use Jason as a payday. He’d be back in business and wouldn’t need the university, while Durant was free to experiment on Jason.



Sil Clearwater had mentioned Izumi's attunement was concealment and Bellamy's notes made reference to Jason having something similar. If this attunement was as rare as Sil suggested then that meant that Jason was not just valuable, he was in danger.

Asako's vision blurred as the realization hit her like a tidal wave. Her thoughts raced.

Bellamy had already proven that he was willing to kidnap and drug an ENP, selling Jason to the highest bidder was not out of the question for him.

But Bellamy was dead. Did he have time to set up a meeting with Durant before he died?

Something churned in Asako's stomach, and her intuition screamed.

If Jason's concealment had kept him cloaked from people like Durant and Bellamy they wouldn't know where to look to find him. Bellamy had proven he could track Ethan and if Bellamy had communicated with Durant, he'd have everything he needed to find both of them.

It all clicked into place with a terrifying clarity.

They were coming for Jason because they knew where Ethan was.

Asako let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. The realization pressed down on her. But then her body moved as her mind struggled to catch up.

"Shit," Asako hissed, jumping from her seat.

She grabbed her coat from the back of the chair and shoved her arms in the sleeves. Her fingers fumbled for the zipper. Her boots clunked awkwardly onto her feet as she

half-hopped, half-staggered toward the door, her heart pounded like a war drum.

Yanking the door open, the cold air slapped her in the face as she bolted outside. Asako grabbed her keys from her crossbody, and ran toward the car, “I hope I’m not too late.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:19 am*

ETHAN SPAT THE toothpaste into the basin, rinsed his mouth, and studied his reflection in the mirror. A faint smile fell on his lips — awkward and uncertain, but real. He felt lighter. The burden that pressed on him for weeks seemed lifted. The voices, visions, the unbearable ache appeared gone. Had last night's burst of power been a release? A type of catharsis forcing his attunements into some fragile alignment?

He didn't know. Maybe it didn't matter. What mattered was breakfast with Jason. The thought warmed him, his chest blossomed with affection for his boyfriend. He placed the toothbrush back in the holder, hung his damp towel neatly from the rack, scooped up his soiled clothes from the night before, and tossed them into the hamper.

For a fleeting moment, life felt normal.

With that, he stepped out of the bathroom, excited to join Jason. The savory scent of breakfast greeted him, wafting through their small, modest apartment. The smell of crepes with eggs and bacon cooling on the table was enough to make his stomach growl with anticipation.

"Smells good!" Ethan called, his voice carried lightly. "Is Farmer here yet?" He stepped toward the kitchenette, expecting to see Jason standing by the stove.

The space was empty.

His brow furrowed, "Jason?" he called out, louder this time. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

Then he noticed — the front door, ajar, cold air rushing in and snipping at his bare arms.

His heart sank, “Jason?”

Ethan darted toward the door, poking his head outside. Fresh snow blanketed the ground, undisturbed save for a set of footprints leading away from their apartment. Grabbing the first pair of sneakers he could find, he slipped them on and stepped out into the frigid morning.

The outside world held an unnerving hush. The crunch of snow beneath his feet echoed, he crossed his arms, the cold air invading his bodily warmth.

He followed the footprints to the edge of the iron rod banister overlooking the apartment complex courtyard. He squinted into the horizon when suddenly, the sharp rhythmic thwhipping of helicopter blades shattered the silence.

Ethan’s gaze snapped upward. A helicopter, black and unmarked, ascended sharply, its blades slicing through the crisp winter air. His chest tightened and his pulse roared in his ears.

“Jason!” he bellowed, his voice breaking.

Without thinking, Ethan thrust his hand towards the helicopter, his eyes blazing gold. He felt the familiar surge of energy course through him, his power reaching, pulling, demanding the aircraft back towards the ground. The world seemed to tremble, the snow swirled violently beneath him.

But the helicopter climbed higher, slipping out of the grasp of his power. His outstretched hand trembled, the gold glow in his eyes flickered and faded as exhaustion overtook him. The cold stung his face, his breath hitched.

“Jason...” he whispered, his voice cracking as he watched the helicopter shrink into the distance, a dark speck against the pale morning sky.

Soon came the sharp clatter of boots against the pavement. He glanced towards the direction of the sound, through his daze he spotted Asako rushing towards him, breathless and pale. Her coat flapped wildly around her. She bent over, hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath.

“Ethan...they’re coming for...Bellamy’s notes...” she wheezed, struggling to string the words together between gasps and gulps of air.

Ethan’s eyes narrowed, his chest heaving, “What? What are you talking about? Jason’s gone! They’ve just taken him!” He said pointing to the sky.

Asako straightened, swallowing hard, her face etched with urgency. “Jason’s in danger. Ethan listen to me. They know what you are. They know what he is. You’re both anchors,” she said.

Ethan stared at her, his mind reeled. The word — anchor— reverberated in his head. What did it mean? He looked back towards the sky, the helicopter completely out of sight, his heart hammered in his chest.

“Who took him?” his voice was raw, barely restrained, the air around him seemed to sizzle and crackle with energy.

Asako shook her head, her expression pained, “I don’t know...but I have an idea of who. Besides, Ethan...this is just the beginning. There’s something coming. Something big.”

The weight of her words settled over Ethan. The warmth of hope had drained from him replaced by something hard, resolute. Somewhere in the distance, the campus bell tolled.

If they wanted Jason, they would have to face him. He was only just beginning to understand the power he held.

And soon they would too.