

# Autumn's Ravage

Book 1 of The Dream Cane Series ©

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## Prologue: The Ripostes Scroll

It is only a fable, a legend some say, one that you swear never to repeat. In the 1950's a Tibetan preist stumbled and fell. He broke his leg in so many places the other priests feared for his life. Soon infection set in and they were left with no choice. The preist was reluctantly carried down from their mountain monastery and admitted to a western style hospital. The preist's leg was operated upon; steel pins were inserted to hold the compromised bones in place. To fend of the raging fever and escalating infection, the Preist was given powerful drugs that rendered him unconscious. One night a young nurse heard noises from his room; she entered to ensure his wellbeing. The preist was babbling uncontrollably as the fever from the infection crested. What she heard that night is now legendary. The nurse eventually shared her knowledge with her only son upon her deathbed. He wrote the information in a sealed envelope, only to be opened upon his death. His dutiful wife read the letter only when informed he would not return from the war. The letter has long since vanished but the legend endures.

There are seven realms in this world. We live on Earth, within our galaxy and the fifth realm. High in the cloud-covered mountains of Haitden, deep within the third realm, lays the majestic Monestry of Light. This is a place of deep spiritual connection, a place of enlightenment. Monks of the third realm study ancient practices outlined in the Ripostes Scroll, which some say, allows them to travel between realms. These monks protect the light and all that is good across the seven realms. The monks have eradicated the forces of darkness from the third realm. Darkness exists within the other realms. It tries to establish a foothold, a sanctuary where it can prepare an attack on the third realm. Dark powers are relentless, seeking any, and all opportunities, to corrupt and destroy the Scroll. They feed upon fear, in the hope that one day, they can rule the seven realms.

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## The Fourth Realm

### Chapter 1: A Stranger in Town.

The Town of Autumn, The Mine District, The Fourth Realm.

“Jealousy is the tribute mediocrity pays to genius.”

The sign was made from weathered wood and was illuminated with an old electric lamp that had seen better days. Placed at the side of a narrow road it read, “Welcome to Autumn.” Autumn was a small mining town, isolated by its northern proximity, far away from the bright lights of the city. Its inhabitants were hard working, proud and tough. The wind howled through the tall pine trees as he pulled his dark hood closer to his face. He could see his breath billowing into small clouds supported by the frigid air. The narrow road cut a path through the thick trees. The Sun was fast retreating, giving way to the darkness, and the crisp light of the emerging Moon.

The cold air stung his rugged face, his beard stubble offered some protection but he shivered. He needed a warm meal and a steaming cup of coffee. He pushed his cold hands deep into his black trench coat pocket and looked downwards at his mud-covered boots. He pushed his foot forward and began his trek into town. His senses were alert and he could hear noises in the Forrest either side of the road. No vehicles passed him that night as he approached the outskirts of the small town known as Autumn. Autumn wasn't a large place; it consisted of a few streets leading into

Main St. It originated as a meeting place for for miners, loggers and trappers. Autumn had a general store, a bank, a diner, a small hotel and the Sheriffs office. The nearest city was a three hours drive, due south.

Autumn was a rough place to live and the folks around these parts were described as hardy. Winter was brutal but the people survived and they knew the conditions and how to live off the land. The local log mills had all closed years ago but one solitary copper mine still operated. This mine provided about half of the employment for the residents of Autumn.

He'd walked about three miles as the dark night approached and the evening grew colder. His legs pumped in a steady rythem as he tried to distract his mind. He was dressed in black, all black, wrapped with a long thick heavy coat. Ahead he could see buildings, lights and the start of the town. This spurred him onwards and his pace picked up. It wasn't long before he paused in front of a building spilling welcoming warmth and light onto the cold street. The red painted sign announced "Autumn's Diner." It looked like a good place to get a warm drink and some food. Two wooden steps, and a white door, stood between him and much-needed sustanace. He approached and pushed the door open with his large cold hand. He walked in and was greeted with a rectangular room. Wooden booths with red padded benches lined a center aisle. At the end of the aisle was the kitchen surrounded by stainless steel serving doors. He flicked his eyes to the right and left surveying the scene before him. As the door slammed shut behing him a gust of cold night air thundered through the small diner.

Kaylee was a day away from her nineteenth birthday and liked her job at the diner. Everyone had told her to move away from Autumn while she was still young but she had not listened. She waited tables at the diner and was quite content in her life up north. The slower pace of life suited her. The bright lights of the city didn't seem to draw her like some. She heard about her "moth to a flame" classmates, and never really got excited about their stories of success. If the truth was told, the slower nortnen pace matched her slower mind. Kaylee was a very cute girl but she would never win the scholarship award and the city would eat her alive. In the town of Autumn she was a catch; she was beautiful with her shoulder length blonde hair, sparkling green eyes and waitress slim figure that came with walking on her feet all day. She had an infectious laugh, positive friendly disposition and a naivety that customers adored.

The men would tease her and she wouldn't know it. It was part of her charm. With her million-watt smile she would laugh and graciously slide the coins from the table and into the tip jar. Kaylee approached the stranger with her usual smile. "Hi, welcome to Autumn's Diner, table for one?"

People turned to examine the man that stood before them. He was dressed in black from head to toe. His large frame could not disguise the fact that he was muscular. His dark boots were muddy and his long black lether trench coat soaked by the evening rain. He wore a black hoody pulled up hiding his head and most of his face. His firm square jaw protruded slightly, lifted enough where Kaylee could just make out his eyes deep within the dark shadown cast by the hood. He nodded his head as she drew nearer. "One," he said pulling his hands gloved in black leather from his pocket.

Kaylee couldn't see much of this man but she knew from his height and the size of his body that she hadn't served him at the diner before. "Over here please," said Kaylee waving him to a booth half the way down the aisle on the right hand side. She slid a menu onto the table top and watched him settle in. He peeled his wet leather gloves slowly from his strong large hands. He tucked them into his coat pockets while looking around the diner to take stock of the inhabitants. He

snapped his belt open with ease and pulled his arms from his wet heavy, leather trench coat. As he turned to push his coat onto a brass hook Kaylee's eyes fell to the area at the top of his shoulders. His black cotton hoody shirt clung to his muscles across his shoulders and back. 'He's big,' raced through her mind as Kaylee sized him up. When he turned her eyes involuntarily fell to his stomach. He wore loose fitting black jeans, a black leather belt with a plain silver buckle. His hoody was baggy but it was obvious that his mid section was narrow and lean, giving him that unmistakable 'V' shape that she found so attractive. Grinning like a foolish schoolgirl she recovered quickly. "We have a mean Sheppard's pie tonight on special and the Bangers and Mash seem to be popular too."

The stranger slid into the open booth facing the door with his back to the kitchen. He reached back and pushed his black hood away from his face. Kaylee stifled a gasp of approval. Her eyes widened as she studied his face. He had messy long black hair, an unusual streak of white tucked behind his right ear. His jaw was large and square covered in unshaven stubble. His cheekbones were high and pronounced. His eyes were deep with a puffy swollen look. He squinted trying to adjust to the bright light of the Diner. He wasn't a pretty man, in fact he looked unkept, rugged, just the way Kaylee liked them. She was so smitten with his deep-set green eyes she forgot to ask him for his order. He took matters into his own hands.

He tilted his head and a strand of wet dark hair fell onto his forehead distracting her. "Can I get a black coffee while I take a look at the menu please?" His voice was deep and she seemed mesmerized. She pulled herself together.

"Sure, I'll get that for you right away." She knew she was grinning like a schoolgirl but she couldn't help it. As she walked back towards the kitchen to get the coffee she looked across at Annie, the owner of the diner. Annie was grinning at Kaylee who waved her hand like a fan to signal his hotness. Annie laughed, smiled and nodded her approval. Annie looked at the strangers back, broad shoulders and long dark flowing hair. She knew he wasn't from these parts and she knew he wouldn't be welcome. Kaylee adjusted her hair in the reflection of the glass severly door. She tightened the belt on the back of her waitress uniform that made it hug her figure tighter. She poured the strangers coffee and hurried out to serve him.

Kaylee didn't look at Annie she concentrated on the hot cup of coffee in her hand. She approached the stranger's table and out of the corner of her eye had noticed that Kyle and Brian had taken the booth across the aisle from the stranger. "Two large regular coffee's Kaylee love when you have a minute," shouted a boystrous Kyle. Kaylee liked to flirt with Kyle. It was obvious that he had a thing for Kaylee and she always got a nice tip. Kaylee liked Kyle but she didn't want to start anything with him in a serious way. She'd kissed him at school but they were kids back then. Kyle was loud, boystrous and not too bright. He always tried to show off around Kaylee but he liked to show her how clever he was. Unfortunately this came at Kaylee's expense. Kyle liked to put Kaylee down or tease her about being stupid. He thought it made him look clever, but it backfired. She just got annoyed at him thinking he was immature.

Kaylee concentrated on the hot black coffee, she nodded at Kyle but turned her back on him as she set the cup down upon the strangers table. "Have you decided?" He lifted his gaze from the menu and flashed his green eyes. Kaylee got an opportunity to study his rugged face. He smiled and nodded.

"Kaylee. Two coffees please over here, we're freezing!" Kyle was insistent.

“I’ll take your suggestion. I’ll try the sheppards pie please.” The stranger folded his menu placing it on the table in front of him. Kaylee ignored Kyle and wrote the order and table number onto her small notepad. She leaned over to retrieve the menu catching the stranger’s eyes as he looked at her body. Kyle was getting more adjitated.

“God damn it Kaylee are you going to serve the regulars or what?” Kaylee was caught cold not knowing how to respond. Annie saved the day by arriving with two large coffees.

“Keep it down Kyle, I’ve got your coffees.” Annie placed the coffees onto the table in front of the boys and leaned in. “Don’t start any trouble tonight, she’s only got one pair of hands and you just needed to wait your turn.” Annie delivered Kyle her sternest stare. She threw a couple of small packets of cream across the table, “You hear me?”

Brian folded first, “Yes,” he said, reaching for the cream.

“I’m looking at you!” said Annie quietly.

Kyle lifted his head, “Yes,” said Kyle reluctantly. Annie wheeled away empty handed with a smug look on her face. Her eyes caught the emotionless gaze of Great Beara native Indian elder. Great Bear clutched his coffee mug tightly absorbing the warmth seeping through into his weathered wrinkled fingers. His long grey hair fell upon his shoulders braided in the style of his elders. Annie smiled but Great Bear remained emotionless, his cloudy eyes welled with watery tears. He sat motionless but observed every detail of the scene unfolding before him.

Kaylee picked up the strangers menu and walked briskly to deliver his order to the kitchen at the back. Kyle and Brian drank their coffees in silence. Occasionally Kyle would glance at the large frame of the stranger seated next to them across the aisle.

The Diner had an awkward silence, which was thankfully broken by the front door delivering another icy blast of outside air. A portly figure stumbled in wearing the unmistakable dark green uniform of the Sheriff. Sheriff Jones was well known in Autumn as the man who was supposed to represent the law. He grew up in Autumn and married a fiery red headed lass called Jean. In his younger days Sheriff Jones was a good-looking man who fit his uniform well. After a series of infidelities, and an illegitimate son, Jean had reached her limit. Jean headed to the big city and the Sheriff headed to the bottom of a bourbon bottle. The Sheriff drank, crashed the police cruiser, fought and piled on the weight. He became belligerent and lost the respect of the town. He was the law and acted as if he were above the law. Sheriff Kevin Jones was a shadow of his former self. He was the town drunk, a joke. The only person this town had to uphold the law and he had trouble upholding his own weight. It’s not good to have the town drunk carrying a loaded gun.

There had been an accident at the mine the week Jean had left the Sheriff. Two miners had been killed in the accident, which the Sheriff was summoned to investigate. It was the hardest week of his of his life. He lost his wife and his only brother that week and it damn near killed him. Kyle was still young when the Sheriff visited his house. He remembered his Mother crying and stroking his hair. His Father had died in a mining accident and wouldn’t be coming home from his shift in the pit. His Uncle, the Sheriff had been crying too. He had promised his Mother that he would look after him.

The Sheriff drank constantly and always carried a flask with him. Tonight was no exception as he entered the Diner with a red nose and the smell of liquor on his breath. “Whew it’s a cold one out there and the winds picking up,” he announced to the Diner as if everyone was interested. He

slammed the door closed to keep the wind out and strutted down the center aisle looking for a booth. The Sheriff normally sat near the kitchen away from the door. He glanced at the patrons nodding his head at the boys and smiling at Kyle. Looking at the boys he missed the large frame of the man sat opposite them. He noticed a couple of the guys from the mine, a few men from the town, the old Indian and Annie propping up the final booth as usual. The Sheriff headed for the booth with Annie and sat in his usual place. Annie had a black coffee poured before his considerably sized derriere had planted itself on the fake red leather seat. Annie pushed the steaming cup in his direction. "Thanks Annie it's a real cold one tonight."

Ten minutes passed with the quiet hum of conversation reverberating around the Diner. Kaylee arrived at the stranger's table with a plate full of steaming hot Sheppards Pie. She grasped the plate with a towel, "Careful with the plate, it's really hot." She pushed his meal towards him and flashed him a warm welcoming smile. The stranger reached for his knife and fork but Kaylee loitered. She twisted her golden locks with one hand and tilted her head to one side. This was a move she knew from experience caught the attention of the male gender. Kyle watched intently from the booth opposite, his blood boiling. "I don't think I served you before are you new around here?"

The stranger stared at his meal. The Diner had fallen quiet as if everyone had decided to follow this conversation. He continued to stare at his meal cutlery placed within his hands at the ready. He nodded without looking at her, "Yup." He scooped a large helping of Sheppards Pie and forced it into his mouth so he couldn't continue the banal banter.

Kaylee wasn't taking the hint. She wanted him to notice her. She wanted him to want her. "So do you work at the mine or are you passing through?"

The stranger swallowed, turned his head and stared at the fresh-faced teenager. She straightened her back and leaned in closer. He noticed her perfect teeth and deep blue eyes. "I'm passing through," he said under his breath, trying to make this conversation end.

Kaylee probed more, enjoying flirting in front of Kyle. "So what do you do for a living Mister?"

The stranger was starting to get angry but how could you make a scene with the Sheriff sitting behind you and an innocent kid as wholesome as apple pie? "I'm a logger and I'm just passing through, that's all."

Kaylee was having too much fun. Most of the men that came to the Diner were fat, stupid and crass. It wasn't often she got a chance to speak to a real hottie. Besides if she flirted with him in front of Kyle, well that was a double bonus. She would have paid the stranger a tip to do that. Kaylee's back was facing Kyle the entire time. She had tightened her uniform where her firm buttocks pressed against the flimsy thin uniform. Kyle's eyes drank in the shape of his dream girl while his ears listened to her fawning over a man who seemed to spurn her conversation. His blood continued to boil; Brian noticed his agitation. Brian pushed his right arm forward letting it rest on Kyle's left forearm. "Easy there. Calm down, she's just winding you up." Brian flashed Kyle a look to emphasize his words.

Kyle stared at his coffee mug listening intently. His face had turned red and he was tapping his wet boot on the linoleum floor.

Kaylee leaned over the stranger's table pointing her rear end at Kyle. "The nearest logging outfit up here is operated out of Dawson's pass and that's not open for another three weeks. You planning on hanging around for a few weeks before moving up North."

The stranger leaned his face within inches of Kaylee's face and looked into her deep blue eyes. He smiled and then let the smile fall from his face. "You have a lot of questions. I don't like inquisitive women. If it's all the same to you, I'd like to just eat my pie in peace and get on with my business. Like I said, I'm just passing through."

Kaylee stood her ground. Her nose was almost touching the handsome stranger's face. Her rear end stuck out taut against her uniform. She had rested her chin on her elbows. She knew Kyle was about to blow but she didn't expect what happened next.

Kyle knew his uncle, the Sheriff, was sitting at the rear of the Diner. This was the Dutch courage he needed to show Kaylee the kind of man he was. He leapt to his feet and pushed her aside in one fast movement. Kaylee was precariously balanced to begin with so the push sent her tumbling to the floor giving Kyle full access to the stranger's large frame. Kyle loomed over the seated stranger, "Don't like inquisitive women," he shouted loud enough to get everyone's attention. "Who the hell do you think you are coming in here and being rude to the staff when they're trying to be friendly."

The stranger remained calm but slowly lowered his fork to the table. He dropped his hand underneath the table. Kyle was incensed at the lack of response. Kaylee had regained her feet, "What the hell are you doing Kyle?"

"Shut it. I'm trying to teach this scruffy logger here some manners. You! Kyle reached down to his belt and withdrew a knife. In one swift movement he pointed the knife at the face of the stranger. "Apologize to her for being so rude!"

The commotion had caught the attention of the Sheriff who was now standing in the aisle in front of the kitchen. Kyle had noticed this out of the corner of his eye. It served to give him more courage and conviction. Great Bear had been watching this escalation from the beginning from his vantage point he could see Kaylee flirting and the effect it was having on Kyle. The wise old man sat silently observing every movement, every shift in weight and every last detail. The stranger sat motionless until Kyle started to move the blade closer to his face. The stranger's movements were quick and decisive. Within a second he had swept his boot into the aisle. His strong leg had kicked the weight out from underneath Kyle. Kyle crashed onto the floor in a heap. The stranger had leapt from his booth leaving a backpack placed upon his seat. He jumped onto the floor causing the Sheriff to advance and withdraw his gun. The stranger was tall, strong and athletic. He sprang to his feet powering himself upwards with his stocky legs. With one of his large hands he had grabbed the back of the collar of Kyle's leather jacket. He lifted Kyle powerfully off the floor leaving his feet dangling in thin air. Kyle had managed to hold on to his knife. He lifted the blade and readied to use it. Kyle was too slow. The stranger had withdrawn his knife, a blade much larger and longer than the one Kyle held. The handle of the stranger's blade was made from the bone of an Elk. It protruded from his grip with a large bulbous rounded knob. Lifting Kyle off his feet had disoriented the precocious teen. What happened next stunned him.

Kyle pushed his blade forward towards the stranger who anticipated his move. With a powerful downwards blow the knob of the stranger's large blade thundered into weak wrist of the teenager. Kyle howled in pain and dropped the blade; it scurried across the Diner floor resting at the feet of

the Sheriff. Kyle dangled like a rag doll now realizing the enormous size of his potential victim. Standing at six feet seven inches tall with a massive bulking frame the stranger lowered his large blade to his side. "Put the gun away Sheriff," he said using the kid as a human shield.

Great Bear studied the knife and had the chance to study the man standing before him. "I used this knife in self defense against an unprovoked attack. In fact, I didn't use the knife at all. I only used the butt of the handle to disarm this jealous little kid. Put your gun away, all I want to do is go back to my coffee and my meal in peace."

Sheriff Kevin Jones had sized the hulk of a man standing before him. He didn't fancy his chances against him and he didn't want to discharge his weapon in the drunken state that he was in. He nodded at the stranger and slowly returned his weapon to his holster. The stranger threw Kyle at the feet of his uncle. "I'm going back to have my meal in peace. I suggest you get this bag of hormones out of here." The stranger resumed his seat resting his blade on the seat beside him.

Sheriff Jones was motionless and clueless. Annie took the lead. She kicked the blade to the back of the Diner and raced towards the downed teen. "Get up and get out. Now. You can't come in here causing trouble, now out." She grabbed his jacket and lifted him to his feet ushering him down the aisle towards the door.

It took a moment for all of this to sink in but eventually Kyle came to his senses. He pushed his frame against Annie stopping her in her tracks. He was about to protest when he felt a presence behind him. It was Brian, "Come on Kyle, let's get out of here." Brian grabbed his friend's jacket and pushed him towards the door. Sheriff Jones shook his head in dis-belief. He knew deep down, he was incapable of resolving this conflict in his state of sobriety. Kyle was being pushed towards the door but he managed to catch a glance of the stranger's large shoulder and made eye contact with Kaylee cowering in a booth near the door.

The boys disappeared through the front door of the Diner, the cold rasping air announcing their departure. Silence descended over the Diner as the stranger scooped a fork full of food and pushed it into his eager mouth. Annie returned to her seat after safely stowing the grounded knife. She looked across the table at the deflated Sheriff. She reached forward and steadied his shaking hand. "It's ok Kevin, no more drama tonight. I'll have a word with Kaylee and you need to talk to Kyle, deal?"

"Deal," the Sheriff looked shaken.

Kaylee pulled herself together and headed back to the kitchen. As she passed the stranger, he pushed his hand into the aisle, stopping her progress. She sheepishly looked at his brilliant green eyes. "A warmup on the coffee please. It's gone cold while we were having all that fun."

"Certainly," Kaylee headed to the back to retrieve the coffee pot.

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## Chapter 2: A Young Man's Wounded Pride.

The Town of Autumn, The Mine District, The Fourth Realm.

"The wild, cruel beast is not behind the bars of the cage. He is in front of it."

Kyle and Brian stumbled outside into the parking lot and the crisp cold evening air. They looked at each other and burst out laughing, "You're a complete plonker Kyle! You can't tell me that you didn't see the size of that bloke in there?" To accentuate the point, Brian pointed to the Diner's door, his hand still visibly shaking.

"He was big wasn't he?" Kyle doubled over in laughter, relieved to be out of the fray. "Sheriff Jones, my Uncle Kevin, what a disaster; absolutely useless that drunken fool. Kind of blown it with Kaylee now though? What do you reckon?"

Brian stopped laughing, "You best leave well alone mate. I don't think she's into you; she's more into the large tips you've been leaving. Listen, here's what we'll do. The night's a bust now and I think you should stay out of the Uncles way for a bit. He was not pleased with you pulling a knife and we don't want to run into the big guy any time soon. I picked up a case of beer this morning and it's still sitting in my truck. I have my tent and a couple of sleeping bags. In fact, I have my camping gear stowed in my truck from the fishing trip last week. How about we drive up to Archers Point, hike up to the river and pitch the tent on the bluff. We can start a fire, cook up some beans, and drink some beers. I think it best if we lay low for a while, and let this thing blow over. What do you say?"

"Sounds good. They took my knife what have you got in the truck?"

I have my knife on me. There's a camping knife and a couple of rifles with some ammo. We should be fine. I have a couple of large backpacks from the fishing trip with Jeff. We have enough to keep warm and we'll start a fire. You're in deep trouble and Uncle Kevin will need some time to cool off and sober up."

"Cool off - yes. I wouldn't hold out much hope for the sobering up part. You're right, let's go. It's pretty damn dark; if we're lucky we'll get a high Moon."

The two boys headed off to the truck and commenced their journey North. Brian had grown up in Autumn and knew the roads like the back of his hand. Brian used to travel these routes with his Father who took him hunting and fishing. Brian was very familiar with the route to Archers Point; he'd been there less than two weeks ago. The Point offered a great place to park the truck near a roadside rest stop. From there a simple fifteen-minute walk into the woods on a safe trail would lead them to the bluff. The bluff was an outcrop of rock overlooking a spectacular scene of the valley stretching out below them and the rapids of the river far below. It was a quiet peaceful place where tourists didn't venture and hunters wouldn't go. Only a few locals knew of this place and it was far more popular in the Summer. In Winter, no one would be at the bluff. It would be a perfect hideaway for a few days to let the tension die down. Brian hated the city and despised the town. He loved the woods and for him this would place him in his element. He loved being outdoors and he was trained in survival techniques. Brian knew the terrain, the weather, the animals, and the dangers, of staying in the woods.

Back at the Diner the stranger had completed his meal. He caught the attention of Kaylee and motioned for the cheque with a writing gesture. Kaylee rang up his meal and delivered the itemized bill with a renewed respect and efficiency. The stranger reached into his pockets and pulled out some bills. He folded that leaving a reasonable tip and placed them on top of the paper cheque. He reached for the glass salt-shaker and used it as a weight to keep the bills anchored. He stood to retrieve his long black coat. As he pulled on his trench coat his eyes came to rest upon the old Indian - Great Bear. Great Bear's expression never changed but he had been watching the stranger since he had walked it. The stranger smiled and nodded his head as a mark of respect to

the old man. He grabbed his backpack and headed for the door. Before entering he'd seen a hotel sign a couple of buildings down on Main St.

The truck's headlights struggled to illuminate the last part of the journey up to Archers Point. They passed the Native Indian lookout and parked the truck against the rock face out of sight. Brian organized the backpacks ensuring an equal distribution of weight and the necessary safety equipment. It was pitch black. The sky was cloudy and the air was freezing cold. The boys were dressed in waterproof mountain gear, sturdy boots, wool hats, insulated jackets with hoods, carrying large backpack with sleeping bags, a tent, rope, lighters and other survival gear.

"You ready?" said Brian shining the flashlight into Kyle's face.

Kyle pushed the bright beam away, "Yes, did I tell you it's really cold?"

"Yup."

"Well it is. Don't know why I let you talk me into this hair brained idea!"

"Cos you went and pulled a knife on a guy that was three times the size of you, cos you weren't thinking with your head on your shoulders and you did this in front of Uncle Sheriff! Maybe that's why. Take the rifle and place it over your shoulder, don't worry it's not loaded. I have rounds in my backpack if we need them. Mine's not loaded either", a small lie Brian had to tell. "Now come on let's get going before it gets too late. I want to get a good night's sleep and not freeze my butt off."

It wasn't long before the noise of the river signaled their arrival on the stone bluff. Brian started to take over. "This is the best place to make camp. We have to get a fire going and start to get some warmth, plus it will keep any curious critters away that we don't want to entertain. I'll pitch the tent; it'll be quicker if I do that. Leave the backpack and rifle here, take your flashlight and go to the fringe of the tree line over there. Brian pointed to the clearing. Find some wood, branches and large twigs. Gather some up and bring them back to me. I'll get the fire going but you have to gather some more until I tell you to stop. We'll have to have enough to see us through the night."

Kyle wasn't in the mood to argue. He knew Brian was an expert at this and followed his instructions without complaint. The air was still cold and his gloved fingers were starting to smart. He used his flashlight and managed to gather a few branches and a decent amount of wood. When he had returned Brian had a light stand erected and was completing the tent. Brian had worked quickly like a man totally at home in the wilderness. He let the branches fall to the ground and looked at Brian for approval. "Yes, this is good. I'm going to need about three more loads of this size ok?"

Brian nodded and went in search of more wood. When he returned Brian had completed the erection of the tent. A lantern was lit inside and the area in front of the tent was illuminated. He could hear the rushing water of the river below. Kyle nodded his head, for a minute he was impressed with his friend. Brian was stooped over a pile of wood as he lit the brush, dried moss and ferns to ignite the makeshift fire. Brian dropped his second load and scurried off to find more wood. When he returned the pungent smell of crackling burning wood assaulted his nostrils in the most delightful way. The soft warm glow of the fire pierced the brutally cold night's air. He moved closer dropping the wood on the pile he had gathered. "Can't beat a good fire," said Brian rubbing his hand together to accept the warmth. Brian had stayed here before. The fire was surrounded by a group of large rocks and he'd placed stones within the hearth to retain the heat

as the night wore on. Two rounded boulders were close to the fire's hearth. "Come sit, this is the best way to get warm." Brian pointed to a dark rounded stone elevated from the damp ground.

Brian let out a sigh of satisfaction, "Ahhhhh." He looked up at the night sky. The clouds had moved on leaving a brilliant sky full of stars. Cold nights delivered the clearer skies. This night offered a high Moon casting its brilliant blue light onto the bluff. This far North the heavens were clear with no light pollution to talk about. "So," said Brian inquisitively, "perhaps you can tell me what you thought you might do with that knife and that monster of a man back there?"

His words hung in the air suspended with tension. Their eyes met across the flickering fire before they both burst into laughter. "Yup, pretty stupid eh?"

"The art of love is largely the art of persistence," Brian threw a can of beer at his friend.

Kyle caught it, snapped the top open and took a much-needed gulp. "Oh that's good. What are you saying that I'm in love with Kaylee and that's why I acted all stupid?" Kyle thought about his own words. He knew what he felt and he couldn't figure out a way to defend his position.

"I'm not even going to waste time on that one. You've been besotted with her since you were both eight years old. She plays you like a puppy dog. Trouble is I can't figure out if she really likes you or not. With you it's obvious." Brian leaned back and took a long drink from his can. The fire's heat felt good warming his face.

Brian was always the smart one at school; Kyle couldn't understand why he hadn't taken his good grades and headed for a successful career in the city. "Yes, I'm being persistent like you suggest."

"Then you admit it you are smitten with the girl."

"You win, you've successfully proven that I like women and one in particular. And what about you my educated friend? You don't seem to spend much time chasing the ladies or is that not your game?"

"Come on Kyle, there's not much to chase in Autumn. But a concerned man like you need not worry. I won't be asking to share your sleeping bag. I do have my eye on a young lady but unlike you I can't seem to pluck up enough courage to do anything about it."

"Really say more, who is she?"

"Yeah right, like I'm going to tell you so you can rush in like a bull in a china shop and help me."

Kyle tipped the can of beer to his lips, "It's Bethany from the Grafton Hotel." Bethany was a sweet girl but she was often mistaken for a man. Unfortunately Bethany was not graced with delicate feminine attributes.

"Wow, you nailed it first time." Sarcasm dripped from his mouth underlined by the tone he used and the facial expression as he sneered at his teasing friend.

"No, come on now, tell me straight and I swear, I won't interfere or help." Kyle crossed his heart with his near empty beer can. Brian drank the last of the contents from his can and walked over to the tent, he opened the canvas flap and retrieved another beer can. He carefully stored the empty

can inside the tent and walked back to the warmth of the fire. Kyle stared at the dancing flames and watched the embers rise, flicker like a firefly and extinguish in the cold night air. Raising his eyes to meet Brian's, Kyle tried to look serious, "The suspense is killing me!"

Brian fumbled with the pull ring located on the top of the can, with cold fingers he managed to open the can and listened to the noise of the pressurized escaping air. He took a large gulp of the frothy beer and summoned up courage to speak, "Jenny Aldridge from the garage on Main Street. There I've said it now, it's out, fancied her for years and never had the guts to tell her." Brian looked down at his muddied boots and waited for the laughter to commence.

Kyle leaned towards the fire and the dancing flames, "Wow, Jenny Jenny Jenny." Brian stared at Kyle with a defiant look. Kyle could see the serious look of conviction etched onto Brian's face and the rifle leaning at his side. Kyle smiled at his friend, he realized that it had taken real courage and trust for him to make that statement and declare his interest in the girl, "Jenny's really cute, good call, a nice all round package, brains, class, beauty and a rocking body. You've got to tell her man!"

The two friends talked into the night until Brian could hardly keep awake, "I'm naffed, I'm going over there to take a leak and then I'm turning in."

"Yeah me too."

Brian wobbled over to the edge of the woods and relieved himself. Unsteady upon his feet and his senses dulled from the beer he thought he saw a subtle shift in the light coming from the woods in front of him. He blinked and the light pattern looked normal again. He'd thought he'd seen something move but he'd not heard any trace of a sound. He shook his head, zipped up his pants and headed back to the fire.

Kyle was finishing his last can of beer; he headed to the edge of the bluff intent on peeing over the edge into the rushing river below. "Kyle no; don't do that, trust me. Go where I went." Kyle gave him a puzzled look. "If you pee down the bluff you'll scent the entire rock face with an unfamiliar scent. Animals scent their territory and the rapids below offer a great fishing ground, the Bears come here and they'll smell your beer-loaded pee from a mile away. We don't need unwelcome visitors tonight." Kyle nodded begrudgingly, he needed to pee badly so he walked to the forest's edge, and he smirked at how clever his friend was. Brian offered one more insight, "Besides you're so stupidly drunk and in love you'd slip on your own pee and roll right over the edge, Kaylee would never get to experience the pleasure that is Kyle."

Brian began to stow the guns and bags inside the tent. He turned his back to the clearing as he loaded the fire with enough wood to see them through until morning.

Kyle unzipped his fly and began to relieve himself, for a split second he thought he saw something move in the forest ahead of him. It was so fast and obscure, like he never saw anything, perhaps it was a trick of the light? Was it a shadow passing through the woods? His foggy alcohol saturated brain struggled to explain the changing density of the light, he couldn't make sense of what he thought he'd seen. Kyle blinked his eyes, perhaps that would bring into focus the movement; he needed to re-adjust his senses. The moment he blinked his eyes closed, a large dark mass lunged forward slashing his body with enormous power and catching him totally off guard. Kyle had no time to react, his senses flared, screaming at his body to defend himself. His head was immediately severed from the powerful blow; his chest was brutally savaged splattering blood onto the trunks of nearby trees. The ferocity of the razor like blow meant Kyle could not make a

sound to warn his friend. As Kyle's body dropped to the ground it made a sound, causing Brian to turn his body to look over his shoulder, he laughed at his clumsy friend. Thinking his drunken friend had stumbled, he turned his head to see large razor sharp claws strike his face and ravage his vulnerable body. He shouted a loud chilling scream, it would be the last sound he would ever make but the forest was empty, his final lament was short and unheard. The forest animals had panicked they had moved away fearing the strange scent they smelled. A pack of Wolves had crept silently to safer lower ground led by their cautious leader, bears fearing no creature of the forest hid in caves or followed the bank of the river to safety. No animals approached, their curiosity overridden by fear when their sensitive nostrils identified this chilling scent.

The Moon was high and the crisp cold air enveloped the eerie silence, the wind had died down and the forest was still. A mighty primal roar echoed through the woods, it emanated from the top of the bluff, but no person heard it and no animal dare respond to it.

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### Chapter 3: Suspicious Minds.

The Town of Autumn, The Mine District, The Fourth Realm.

"Suspicion is a heavy armor, and with its weight, it impedes more than it protects."

Brian and Kyle had stumbled out into the cold Friday night air; they entered Brian's battered pickup truck and headed North away from the town of Autumn. It was now the following Wednesday and no one had heard from the boys. Brian was a sensible lad with a quick brain and large vocabulary, at an early age he'd secured a job in the accounting department at the mine. He was a model worker, a conscientious punctual employee who had a natural inquisitive mind and a strong desire for continuous improvement. Brian had impressed his manager and was being considered for a promotion, his work was exemplary and he'd cleaned up the accounting practices to a point where the mine had received its first clean audit in years.

Brian's Father had called the Sheriff late on Sunday night raising the concern that Brian had not come home after his camping trip. Annie had told him that she'd seen the two boys pull away on Friday night. The Sheriff lay in a drunken stupor on Sunday unable to answer his phone and passed out slumped across his couch and an empty bottle of bourbon. When Monday morning arrived Brian did not show up for work, this was highly unusual and the manager of the accounting area of the mine became concerned. At 11am the manager received a call from Brian's Father inquiring if Brian had made it into work. The situation escalated with another call to the Sheriff and the absence being reported to mine security. Monday came and went with no sign of either boy, news had spread across the small community and word of the altercation at the diner was now common knowledge.

Sheriff Kevin Jones pulled his police cruiser into the parking lot at Autumn's diner, it was Wednesday morning at 10am and his head pounded from the bourbon he'd consumed the night before. The town was abuzz with gossip and innuendo but the Sheriff knew that Brian was an expert; the boys were probably holed up drinking beer and laying low after the altercation. As with most small towns, the story of the altercation had moved through many forms with each storyteller embellishing details adding to a growing tale. The story now described in vivid detail the epic battle that played out in the Diner; Kalee's honor had to be defended against the sheer

size of the brutish stranger that attempted to defile a sweet innocent girl from Autumn. Kyle was being described as a true hero, a young man who intervened to protect one of Autumn's daughters; someone had to stand up to this outsider. It was a David and Goliath tale, with a small penknife against an oversized hunting knife resembling the size of a sword. The town grew concerned about the missing boys and the blanket of suspicion fell onto the muscular stranger staying at the hotel.

Sherif Jones gripped the steering wheel of his police cruiser, his head pounded as he let out a large sigh, he'd noticed the distinctive markings on the side of the trucks parked near by. The black shield with its distinctive insignia represented the men employed by mine security. Although they only had jurisdiction on mining company property these goons felt and acted like they owned the entire town. The Sheriff was the law in these parts but his inability to remain sober had provided the mining security group the motivation to expand their reach and their influence. Brian's Father had invited the sheriff to a meeting at the Diner, he wanted to coordinate efforts, and organize a search party. He shook his head at the prospect of a meeting with mining security, they would take over and act like they were in charge, and he detested that. It reminded him of what a mess he was and how much the town's people had lost faith in him.

One last deep sigh and he was on his way to the door of the Diner. Inside the Diner the search party had organized into sectors and had assigned teams, roles and responsibilities. Brian's concerned parents felt relieved that mining security had assigned a team to locate one of its valued employees. They suspected that Brian would have headed North to one of his favorite spots at Lovers Leap, Cranberry Hill, the Old Saw Mill, Archers Point or Wolf Run. They told the security team and a plan was devised to search each location, they would search until they lost the light that would give them all day. The Sheriff was disappointed to learn that he would be coordinating the stay at home team. He would stay at the Diner and track the activities; the security team felt that he wouldn't get in the way at the Diner.

Tom Janz was was the head of mining security, he had a bad feeling about this track, his instincts were telling him the boys were dead but his job was to find out why and if necessary who had done this deed. Tom had watched the weather and had been monitoring the transient community make their way North for the commencement of logging season. There was always a spike in activity around this time, petty thefts, bar brawls, stabbings and the occasional property destruction. A few years ago three people did go missing in the area causing a minor news sensation and unwated attention to the town and the logging trade. Three women had disappeared and the police were clueless, the missing girls were not classified as mining staff or from mining families, but Tom suspected a transient logger getting his sick kicks before starting a long season. Autumn was nestled in a remote beautiful place surrounded by dense forest covering rolling hills and raging rivers. Its natural beauty kept people there but it was also just as easy to lose people in the woods where they would never be seen or heard from again. Tom suspected the killer hid the dead bodies of the girls in the vast wilderness and they have never been located to this day.

If it were a couple of girls that had gone missing he would have immediately suspected foul play. This one was strange, two young men with one expertly equipped to survive. Perhaps they had run into trouble, bears, Wolves, or something else like a broken leg or a hunting accident. It didn't add up and now he suspected foul play, he didn't hold the same optimistic feeling that Brian's Father demonstrated.

His suspicions were confirmed four hours later when the boy's truck was located at Archer's Point. Brian's Father knew the route into the bluff and the location Brian always used to pitch his tent. It wasn't long before the gruesome discovery was made. The boy's bodies had been

scavaged by Wolves but the damage to the bodies upset the hardest of cops, and mine security workers. Brian's Father was restrained and the crime scene was quickly cordoned off for detailed analysis. The Wolves had been opportunistic but the original damage had been committed by something far larger and much stronger. Sheriff Jones arrived to look at the carnage trying not to compromise the crime scene. Investigators quickly established the cause of the demise of the two young men; astonishingly the verdict came back as a large animal. Criminal experts were brought in to examine the remains, measure the wounds and trace the blood spatters, they concluded a large animal had killed the boys. The shape of the tears on the flesh, the prints left in the muddy soil and the evidence painted a clear picture of what had happened. The Wolves had come later but they had not changed the scene enough to disguise the sequence of events. The experts all agreed on what had happened, the arguments were around what had done this to the boys? It had to be a large animal but the only creature native to these forests that could cause this type of carnage was a Bear. The only issue with this was the torn flesh, the scratch marks, the footprints and the size of this creature did not match any bear profile that the experts had ever seen.

To avoid panic the residents of Autumn and the local press were told the boys had unwittingly aggravated a large bear who had turned on the boys. It seemed plausible to most but Brian's Father couldn't believe this version of the story. He wasn't allowed to look at the crime scene until the investigators had concluded it was an animal and not a crime committed by humans. Once he was allowed to see his Son's remains there weren't much left. The bear story played on in the local newspapers and coffee shops but there were still a few in Autumn that could not forgive the stranger. Rumours circulated that the stranger had followed the boys to the bluff; he'd killed them both and was fortunate that a bear and a pack of Wolves had stumbled across the bodies and covered his tracks.

The stranger kept a low profile in the town acutely aware of the accusations, and he felt the cold distrustful nature of the town's residents towards him. The hotel staff had changed their demeanor growing cold and distant, his belly rumbled demanding a hearty sized hot meal. He headed towards Autumn's Diner, it would soon be noon and it would be nice to eat something tasty, and experience a change of scenery. Three days had passed since the boy's bodies had been found in the woods; a few brave men had set off into the woods to kill the Bear. They had returned empty handed, but mildly satisfied that their actions had addressed their frustration and feelings of helplessness. The anxiety had reached fever pitch but it seemed to be dying down a bit, he felt the town returning to normalcy. The mine security guys had demanded to talk with the stranger but the hotel manager had provided an alibi for him the night of the unfortunate massacre. The stranger had stayed in his room undisturbed. The Diner was no longer set up as the command center with the Sheriff and the search party long since gone.

As the stranger approached the diner two large men blocked the pathway on the street leading to the door. He recognized the matching insignias emblazoned upon their jackets. The stranger went on the charm offensive, "Good day mine security personel, how can I help you today?" he said with a beaming smile.

"We're watching you Mister, we don't want you to cause any trouble. You can't afford to step out of line one inch, do your hear me?" The two men pushed their shoulders together blocking the way forward.

"Well now, I'm glad you're watching me, that makes me feel a lot safer as I've heard there's a big bear on the loose."

“Dave Melanger won’t tell us the name you used to check-in at the Grafton Hotel, he says he values his guest’s privacy. He did tell us you paid a deposit in cash and we know you always pay your Diner bills with cash. Seems like you’re going out of your way to keep your identity unknown, you know, not leaving any trace that you were here.”

“Wow that’s good, come up with that yourselves boys? You know I was here, the whole town knows I am here; I’m six foot six inches tall, it’s pretty hard to hide. Besides, I have nothing to hide; perhaps you boys would be better guarding the mine, apparently there’s a big bear up there.” The stranger stepped into the road, rounded the two security men and entered the Diner.

He headed for the empty booth he’d occupied that fateful night. The old Indian man was sitting in his usual seat, he watched the stranger settle; two elderly ladies whispered to each other while glancing at the tall man with looks of disapproval, Kaylee approached him with some apprehension.

“Coffee?”

“What no smile today? Sure, black please.”

Kaylee pushed the menu towards the stranger, she failed to mention the specials and turned to go and prepare the coffee. Annie watched the interaction from the back of the Diner. As Kaylee approached the kitchen she mouthed the words, “Be nice.”

Kaylee delivered the coffee and took the stranger’s order. He was enjoying his meal when two young men burst into the Diner and headed for the booth occupied by Great Bear. The boys rushed to his side in an excited state, “Tell him, tell him what we saw.”

The stranger chewed his chicken dinner but his ears were trained to the conversation occurring behind him at the old man’s table. “Calm down both of you, you’re making a scene,” the old man scolded the boy’s in a gentle way lifting his finger to his lips and asking them to tone down the volume with his falling hand. Kaylee arrived at the table.

“Hi boys, what’ll be?” Kaylee knew the two boys from school, and they were twin brothers from the Waishee tribe. Kaylee flashed a smile, which distracted the boys.

The eldest brother was impatient and wanted to talk with Great Bear, he took control of the proceedings, “Just coffee please, two coffees please Kaylee.” Kaylee wheeled away to fulfill the order. “We were rounding the corner at Parkson’s Heights and heading downhill past the well. We slowed to turn the steep corner and at the right, at the side of the road as clear as day...”

The young man stopped as Kaylee approached, she set the two coffees down and let a few packs of cream tumble onto the table. “Enjoy,” she said, acutely aware that the boys had stopped talking and would not resume until she had left. As she moved away she smiled to herself. The younger brother seemed fixated upon her but hadn’t dared to meet her eyes.

“As clear as day, there he was - the White Wolf! He was big and proud. He didn’t run and we slowed the truck right down to get a good look at him.” Great Bear leaned in listening intently. The younger twin could not contain himself.

“It was right there, he was real, he was in great shape as his coat shone and he was larger than most Wolves. It’s not just a legend, the White Wolf exists uncle, we saw him as plain as day, and

you have to believe us. He stood his ground and looked right at us. Even though we were inside the truck, headlights on, he was not afraid, he just stood at the side of the road. He was majestic, spiritual and proud. We saw him, both of us!”

Great Bear raised his cup to his mouth and sipped cold coffee, his eyes narrowed as he weighed the expressions of the excited twins. They were telling the truth and he felt a nervous shiver shoot down his spine. “I believe you boys, I was about your age when I saw the White Wolf, and I know he exists. I don't need to tell you what this means and I don't want to talk about this here. Finish your coffee then go home and never mention this to anyone. I will discuss this with the tribal elders, and we'll decide what to do. You boys have been blessed; few have been lucky enough to see this majestic creature. Remember you will never get a chance to see the White Wolf, it decides when to show itself to you, and there's usually a good reason why it does. Drink your coffee and warm up.”

It was Annie who eventually cleared the coffee mugs away and continued to serve the stranger. She refreshed his coffee and cleared his meal away. He was ready to pay when the Indian twins left the Diner with Great Bear. Annie brought the cheque, “Where did Kaylee disappear to? I miss her cheery smile.”

Annie stopped in her tracks and turned to face the stranger. “Listen Mister, this is a small town and we all know each other around here. We try to be polite and friendly but we've been burned badly in this community. We're leery of strangers like you, transient workers passing through. I know you didn't have anything to do with those boys the other night and I saw what happened in here. Kyle was out of order and you stopped short of giving him what he deserved, I think you're an honorable man but you can't blame the girl for what she feels. She doesn't trust strangers and why would she? Pretty girls have a tendency to go missing around these parts, especially at this time of year, with people passing through. Annie smiled sarcastically and pushed the cheque closer to him, suggesting he pay and leave.

Kaylee had been in the back for the last fifteen minutes, she had changed from her Diner uniform into a costume. The stranger stood to leave as Kaylee emerged from the back door to the kitchen, “What do you think?” she inquired of Annie. The tall stranger stared at the pretty site before him. Kaylee was wearing a wig adorning her with long shiny black hair and tan coloured Autumn leaves woven into the wig like a crown. She'd expertly changed her appearance with a smouldering orange eye shadow, thick mascara and blood red lipstick. Large balls of entwined twigs swung from her ears and a delicate silver band hung loosely from her neck. She wore an off the shoulder cream colored delicate gown cinched at her small waist by an orange belt. She balanced steadily upon high heels and oozed a quiet confidence. Annie's mouth hung open. The stranger stopped and stared, besotted with her beauty. “I'm going to be the best Autumn princess ever.” Kaylee glanced down the aisle of the Diner, catching the tall stranger standing and gawping at her. She looked beautiful; it was a shame Kyle couldn't see her dressed as the Autumn princess. Kaylee's short temper started to strain, “I'm not dressed like this for your amusement, haven't you somewhere you need to be?”

Annie tugged her hand, “Kaylee.”

The stranger turned quickly and left the Diner. “Creep,” said Kaylee watching the door to the Diner close.

Annie tugged her hand again. “I'm closing in about an hour and will join you at the church ok?”

Every year the town of Autumn re-enacted the town's fable. The town's folk would gather at the church hall and watch the fable of the Autumn princess. It was every Autumn girls dream to play the princess and you could not perform this role for more than five years in a row. This was Kaylee's first year, she was so excited and her parents would be proud. The short play symbolized the relationship the town has with its surroundings and the bountiful gifts the land offers the town. The towns folk give thanks for what they have and rejoice in another year. It is a time of joy and mutual support. This year would be difficult without Brian and Kyle, but the town was strong, and decided to proceed with the tradition. Kaylee needed to make her way over to the church; she needed to drive the short distance before the play would commence.

After the celebration she would drive home, change and drive back to to church hall where the younger inhabitants of the town would hold a dance. It was a bit lame but she wouldn't miss her chance to be congratulated as the Autumn princess and she'd heard that Taylor was coming to the dance.

Kaylee scurried out of the Diner causing Annie to smile, and recall the time her sister Amy, had played the Autumn princess.

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## Chapter 4: Autumn Princess.

The Town of Autumn, The Mine District, The Fourth Realm.

“Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower.”

Kaylee was flooded with a feeling of relief for she'd managed to pull off the towns Autumn play flawlessly, she'd been a huge success, remembering her lines and graciously accepting the standing ovation offered to the cast from the appreciative crowd. She had floated through the crowd with the utmost grace, accepting the congratulations and flattering comments in a way that she had seen many times in her dreams. It was a magical afternoon where her hard work had paid off, and she'd impressed the audience and a specific young man named Taylor, who had sat mesmerized, transfixed by her beauty in the third row. Kaylee had tried to locate Taylor within the audience, but it wasn't until the final scene that their eyes had met for a fleeting second, and she nearly fluffed her lines as her heart skipped. Taylor had circulated within the reception after the play, but Kaylee was inundated with well wishers and excited audience members, she'd not been able to speak with Taylor, but she'd caught him staring at her twice from across the room.

The time had come for Kaylee to leave the reception and change into her new blue dress, if Taylor was a little shy now then wait until he saw Kaylee in her figure hugging dress with matching high heels. The Autumn princess was a great look but impractical for her to attend the party at night, she wanted to dance and convince Taylor that he should make her his girl. Kaylee would have a fifteen-minute drive home, she'd allowed forty minutes to change her dress and her makeup; it would be tight but if she hustled she would make it. Her plan was to return to town and attend the after party, which she knew would go late into the night. As Kaylee slipped into the driver's seat of her new truck a leaf fell from her costume and nestled upon the gravel in the church parking lot. Kaylee was still lost in the play, the adulation and applause, the admiring looks and the desire burning in Taylor's eyes. A woman knows when the hook is in she can see a difference in how a man acts, sounds, talks and walks. When he's fallen but hasn't yet realized it

is the most special time, the most perfect time when all of your senses are alive and tingling with anticipation. Kaylee was floating on air; she had felt this special feeling and couldn't wait to make her entrance wearing the sexy dress she'd bought months earlier. Her mind raced as she rehearsed what she would say, what words she would use, and how she would say them to Taylor upon their first meeting, how could she sound sophisticated, sexy and irresistible?

She placed her truck into reverse and moved her foot from the brake to the accelerator, in a split second she thought she saw movement in the mirrors of the view from her rear window.

Instinctively she stomped on the brake sending the truck into a hard stop and thrusting her back hard into her seat causing her head to hit the restraint. She frantically scanned her mirror and then her side mirror to see if she had hit anyone or anything? The shape of a man appeared to her right through her side window, he was dressed in black with a hood covering his head and his face, she blinked her eyes and brought into focus the shape before her. It was the stranger from the Diner, he turned his head to stare at her through the passenger window, he caught her eyes briefly in his annoyed stare before hurrying away into the shadows, as the approaching darkness started to close in on the town of Autumn.

Shaken and annoyed with her lack of concentration, Kaylee thrust her palms forwards banging her steering wheel in a display of frustration, causing the whole truck to shake. She glanced out of the passenger window but she was alone the stranger had gone. "Damn it Kaylee, get your head out of the clouds and focus," she scolded herself, as she often did when she was irritated with her behavior. The drive home was uneventful as she drove with extra caution taking note of the fading light, and the slickness of the dark road surfaces due to an earlier sprinkling of rain. She pulled in to the driveway of her small rented house on the outskirts of town; the driveway was not long but it cut a path through dense trees. Kaylee navigated the short narrow drive before it opened up into a circular area that she used to turn her truck around. It was dark approaching the house with the truck's headlights and a small outside lamp, affixed to the wall of the house, offering the only source of illumination.

Surrounding the small house was dense woodland forest - dark and wet - offering protection for the creatures that lived within, it made Kaylee nervous and she usually hurried inside. She positioned her truck as close to her door as possible and turned the engine and the truck's lights off. She sat for a second and surveyed the darkened clearing before glancing at the truck's dashboard as the illuminated clock informed her she was already five minutes behind her planned schedule. Kaylee took a deep breath; she reached for the door handle and gave it a firm pull while pushing the door open with her elbow. Kaylee stepped out of the truck and caught something moving in the forest to her right, she heard grunting sounds a loud guttural noise emanating from just beyond the tree line. It frightened her and she remained planted to the spot where she had stepped from the truck. She gripped her purse containing her house key tightly while weighing up her options; should she confront or run? The sound came again, this time it sounded comical, a deep wrenching sound that reminded her of a teenage boy being sick on too much alcohol.

This was clearly a joke designed to spook her and the boys were probably having a laugh at her expense as she quivered at the side of the truck. Now she was getting angry, this type of prank wasn't funny and she was in too much of a hurry to take this seriously. Kaylee faced the noise and yelled into the darkened woods, "So you think this is funny huh? This is how you sick little boys get your kicks, well I hope the beast that is out there comes after you while you hide in the woods and frighten people ... idiots!"

Kaylee felt better as she rummaged through her purse looking for her house keys. A solitary lamp, affixed to the side of the house, now lit the clearing. Kaylee heard another grunt and managed to raise her chin to the unexpected sight that unfolded ahead of her. Tree limbs shook

and the sound of rustling undergrowth held her rigid with fear and rooted to the spot. Her legs felt like steel poles and her heart started to pound as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She could see a dark rounded shape start to emerge from the brush moving towards her from the shadows.

Kaylee's eyes widened as her mind struggled to paint the picture she saw before her. This was not a childish prank, a large fur covered mass emerged from the darkness, Kaylee instinctively moved backwards but was blocked by the side of the truck. She could see the two front legs covered in brown matted fur leading to large rounded shoulders supporting a thick muscular neck. The head of the animal was long and pointed, it had large powerful jaws like a Bear but its snout was longer and its sheer size meant this was not a Bear. Kaylee gasped as the animal snorted and approached, what should she do? Run?

She had always been told to avoid eye contact, make no sudden movements and calmly walk away in a non-threatening way. Her heart was pounding so hard she could hear blood racing through her ears, her breathing was loud and shallow, and she felt sick and faint, too weak to run. She glanced quickly at the approaching animal, it was close and she decided to calmly walk towards her house entrance and relative safety. Kaylee had turned her body slightly and had managed to take two steps before the beast lunged forward swiping savagely with its powerful front paws. The blow landed on the intersection of Kaylee's neck and shoulder, it knocked her to the floor and opened up a deep fatal wound instantly. She fell to the floor and the beast took advantage of her defensely position. It was so quick, the kill was over in a matter of seconds but the beast dealt Kaylee a couple more blows before savagely attacking her throat with his powerful teeth. Warm blood dripped from his mouth and he licked the scent from his blood-covered nose. Within seconds of the attack the beast was gone, leaving the beautiful Autumn princess in a pool of her own blood.

Taylor Reeves was disappointed that night; he had waited for Kaylee to return to the dance at the church hall, he'd been sure that she would. Kaylee had looked so sweet he couldn't resist staring at her and he was certain that he'd caught her eye. Perhaps she was tired after the play? He knew she wasn't working because the Diner had been closed for the night. Perhaps she had a boyfriend and was out with him, enjoying herself somewhere else while he waited her, "Loser," he said under his breath. It wasn't until morning that Kaylee's body was discovered.

Annie had raised the alarm the following morning; when Kaylee had failed to show up for work she had become worried about her employee and friend. Sheriff Jones had taken a coffee with him from the Diner as he made the short drive out to Kaylee's house and he was hoping to find a simple answer that would explain her absence from work. What he found sent chills down his spine, placing images into his head that prevented him from getting a good nights sleep for a week. Kaylee's body remained intact, it was in better condition than the two boys, but a large animal had brutalized her, deep claw scratches were visible and she suffered puncturing bite marks. What a way for such a sweet girl to meet her end, but the Sheriff was suspicious; could this be a clever convenient way to cover up the tracks of a killer? Perhaps there was a psycho out there killing for the thrill of it, and what better way to cover his tracks by making it look like some large predatory beast had mauled the victims?

It was a small town and word spread quickly, the general store ran out of ammunition, and guns were flying off the shelves. This one was close to the town spreading fear and panic across its inhabitants. When Charlie Smythe started to share his observations the night of the killing the town's gossip machine kicked into high gear. Charlie had seen Kaylee enter her truck and almost reverse into the stranger with her truck at the rear of the church parking lot. The stranger had been angry waving his fist and raising his voice at her through her truck's window; Charlie implied anger as a motive on the night Kaylee was murdered. While the fanciful story had not been

validated and the connection to the actual murder was loose, this story seemed to resonate with the town's people, and they seemed to like it and believe it. In a small town rumour can become fact quickly, and the innocent stranger was vilified using the weapons of fear and ignorance. The stranger could feel the rising tensions, the sideways glances, Mothers protecting their children in his presence, and the cold reception he would receive in this normally hospitable town. The whole atmosphere of the town changed to a chilly, anxious, fear laden place.

The stranger was hungry and the only place he could eat was Autumn's Diner. He entered the Diner and scanned the booths; it was almost full with familiar faces and new ones. The old Indian was ever present, as were the two gossiping ladies but the Diner was fuller than he had ever seen it. He walked towards the kitchen looking for an empty booth when he was met in the aisle by Annie, armed with a fresh steaming pot of coffee she smiled and waved him to a booth at the back near the kitchen entrance. Like the old days in a saloon from a cowboy movie the buzz of conversation stopped and an eery silence descended upon the Diner as people watched the stranger enter and take his position at the back. Once he was seated the conversation resumed followed by guilty glances and the occasional head turns. Annie approached the stranger's table as he flipped back his black hood to reveal his unkept shevelled appearance.

"Coffee?" inquired Annie with a smile.

He was situated in the last booth, at the back of the Diner, and was probably the most private booth and the most difficult to observe from the rest of the Diner. The stranger nodded, glancing down at his empty coffee cup. Annie started to pour the black steaming coffee from her glass pot as she slid into the empty seat across from the stranger. "You ok with me being here?" the stranger inquired keeping his eyes pinned on the steaming coffee.

He lifted his eyes to meet Annie's stare, "I know you didn't do it, but I'm the only one in town that thinks that way. Tell me I'm not wrong. I saw how you looked at Kaylee the other night; it was the same way that I looked at her. She looked cute and naïve, like a little kid. I could see that in your eyes, in your expression, you thought she looked nice."

The stranger leaned in and whispered, "I didn't do it Annie. I didn't do anything. Kaylee and the boys, it wasn't me. I liked the kid, she was cute and young but I wouldn't harm her, that's not me."

Annie looked at him hard as if trying to penetrate his eyes and reach down deep into his soul searching for the truth. Tears welled in her eyes as she thought of Kaylee's infectious smile and captivating laugh. "More coffee over here Annie love, please..." Annie turned her head.

"I'll be back for your order but I'm a little busy today, short staffed." Her voice trailed off where she struggled to hold it together. Annie took the pot and attended to the needy customer. Folded at the side of the table was a previously read, dog-eared, newspaper. The stranger reached for it flattening it out across the table in front of him. The Northern Light newspaper reported the news around the local area; it covered the comings and goings, weddings, births, deaths and anything of local interest. The existence of a murderous beast or serial killer was big news and this little paper was not going to let this opportunity slip by. The headline screamed, 'AUTUMN'S SAVAGE,' in reference to the three inhabitants brutally savaged. The town of Autumn had seen something similar to this many years ago but the old wounds from those memories were being reopened by these recent events. The article theorized through the possibilities, a rogue Bear, a murderous serial killer on the loose characterized as the inevitable transient logger having his fun or a town's person familiar with the terrain and the people. The article played upon all of the fears including

the beast living among us. No wonder the residents of the town were on edge, casting suspicious glances at anyone that they felt deserved it. His eyes fell upon the dark printed headline, 'AUTUMN'S SAVAGE,' as he caught movement in his narrowed eyes. Annie had returned.

She sat at his booth looking at the newspaper, "It's the same headline they used the last time this happened, people around here will recognize the significance of that headline. When those girls went missing last time," Annie shook her head, "the people around here still refer to that time as Autumn's Savage, I think it was this newspaper that started this horrible term." Her voice was shaky, and she paused, waiting for a response, but nothing was offered. There was an awkward moment of silence before Annie regained control, "So you want me to take your order or what?"

The stranger lifted his chin slightly, "Sheppard's Pie please. Annie do people around here seriously think I ripped those poor people apart?"

Annie paused weighing the magnitude of the question, "Yes. Yes they do and you haven't won them over with your sparkling personality, have you?" Annie turned away and walked towards the kitchen to place the order.

Greg Welch entered the Diner looking for Annie, he was a fit man just shy of sixty with a shock of white hair. Greg was the town's pastor and had performed blessings on the bodies of Kaylee and the two boys. He was angry and upset at the waste of young life and firmly believed a Bear had not caused the devastation seen on these young bodies. Greg came to the back of the diner where he saw the stranger holding his coffee cup with both hands; was he the one? The town's people certainly thought he was. Annie returned from the kitchen and saw the pastor standing in the aisle with a large pile of flyers. "Hi Annie, can I leave a few of these with you? It's about time we stood up to this and demanded some answers, some assurance."

Annie looked at the familiar flyers, it reminded her of many years ago when a similar route was taken by the town's people. The flyers announced a meeting at the church hall tomorrow night to discuss the recent tragedies and to understand the course of action being taken. Greg would invite the Sheriff, and everyone hoped he would be sober and coherent. The security team from the mine would be there and the church hall would be packed with interested onlookers; some would remain quiet and observe, while others would be angry, demanding, and outspoken. The Sheriff would be on the hot seat and the mine security team will ask probing questions that may be difficult to answer.

Annie smiled politely, "Sure Pastor Greg, I'll put a couple of flyers up around the Diner, I'm positive it'll be a full house."

"Thanks Annie," the pastor handed over a few flyers before leaving to distribute the rest.

The next day the parking lot in front of the church hall was a busy place with cars jostling for a spot and people filing into the hall expecting answers. Pastor Greg had some help from the men at mining security that seemed to be manning the door and ushering people inside in an orderly manner. Sheriff Jones was already inside the hall pacing at the front of the stage like an annoyed caged animal. The quiet buzz of expectation filled the hall as the stranger approached the entrance, "Where do you think you're going?" said a bulky man with his arm outstretched blocking the entrance. The tall stranger sized up the man wearing a black shirt matching a dozen more black shirts inside. Mine security was out in force today so he smiled.

"I was wondering, like the rest of this town, what was going on and what was being done."

“Well you can keep wondering, this is for locals only, get it?” Three sturdy looking guys with black shirts quickly appeared behind the man in the doorwell.

The stranger smiled, nodded and turned away. “I hate that guy,” said the man backing up his colleague in the doorwell, “don’t let him in and don’t let him return.”

When the doors closed the gloves came off and the meeting turned prickly very quickly. Sheriff Jones was on the hot seat, Pastor Greg tried to keep it civil and the mine security guys kept the peace. “Can you at least tell us if it’s a Bear or a person killing these kids,” James Johnston’s question was directed at the nervous looking Sheriff and met with overwhelming applause.

The Sheriff had not drunk in three days, he knew he had to be alert and on the top of his game if he were to keep his job through these events. “I believed it to be a Bear,” he was not allowed to finish.

“Believed, that suggests you’ve changed your mind?” A middle-aged fiery red head shot the question at the stumbling Sheriff unable to operate at this speed.

“We’ve employed an expert who’s measured the bite marks and the wounds.” The Sheriff paused considering his next words carefully. “The evidence suggests that it’s not a Bear,” the room gasped, “it’s far larger than a Bear, perhaps four times larger.” This fell on the audience in a hard way; they couldn’t comprehend what the normally drunken Sheriff was trying to tell them. A small man with a blue coat situated at the back of the ball rose to ask his question, “What animal from around these parts is significantly larger than a Bear?”

The question was directed at the Sheriff and all eyes were trained upon him as they waited expectantly for the answer. Great Bear, the wiley old Indian stared at the floor in front of him but strained to hear the answer. He knew the answer but was not about to share his wisdom with a room full of people uneducated in the ways of his tribe.

The sheriff looked at the man with the blue coat, and with outstretched hands and a shrug of his shoulder replied the only way he knew how, “I really don’t know?”

A slim blonde haired woman rose during the noise and the howling emanating from the crowd. Her blonde hair was immaculately groomed and her cream blouse and white pearls added a touch of class to the proceedings. The crowd fell silent out of respect, for the had elegant lady was Brian’s Mother who wanted answers, “My Son has died a horrible death, can you tell me with some certainty that an animal did that to him and not some perverted drifter?” She remained standing as she finished her question. The Sheriff stepped forward to answer but was quickly dismissed by a wave of her hand, “I want to hear from an expert not the town’s Sheriff, no offence.”

A slim short man dressed in a black shirt rose and walked to the stage where he took a microphone. “Good evening Mrs. Brennerman, my name’s Thomas Ivon and I work for the parent company of the mine. I was asked to inspect the bodies and attend the meeting today. There is no doubt that the three victims were killed by the same animal, and in my opinion no doubt that they were indeed attacked by a very large animal. The victim’s wounds are all similar but there is a mystery. I can’t place the animal from any of the measurements that I have taken and I’ve seen attacks on our workers from every type of predator, Bear, Wolf, Dog, Mountain Lion, Puma, all types of killers and scavengers, but never like this. You see these poor people,

your Son ma'am," he said respectfully, "were not killed for food, they were killed for sport and no other reason." The hall burst into life with an outraged roar and people pointing and waving their fists at the slim framed man with the grey hair. Thomas walked to the front of the stage where the Sheriff took the opportunity to sit down and let this man bear the brunt of the crowd's frustration. "It is an animal but non like we've ever seen, this animal is very big and very powerful."

Tom Janz watched a large, powerfully built miner, rise from his chair with all eyes upon the gentle giant. "What makes us safe? What about our families, children, fellow workers? Will this beast strike again? What about Autumn's Savage?" His questions were met with approval as the crowd burst into unanimous applause.

The crowd was starting to get visibly agitated and the Sheriff was useless. Tom Janz was a commanding man with great presence and respect in this community. His black security shirt was freshly pressed and fit his toned body with precision. "I think what Thomas is trying to say is a message we don't want to hear. This is not a drifter killing people and covering his tracks to make it look like an animal, this is a different type of Autumn's Savage," silence fell across the hall. Our town is under attack, we are being savaged but this is different. Tom moved away from the wall and closer to the crowd, "This is not a who done it, this is a what done it!" He stared at the room in a defiant way, inviting a question, or a response; nothing was offered.

Thomas could not stand the awkward silence and the palpable tension in the air, "The animal that did this is still out there, we need to find it and kill it before it does this again."

Brian's Mother had sat down resuming her crouched position. The man in the blue coat, spurred on by some 16 years old whiskey rose to ask another question, "So what is the Sheriff and you lot," he said pointing at the black shirts, "doing to kill this beast."

The Sheriff panicked and threw a desperate glance at Tom Janz. Tom approached the stage in a cool, deliberate, assured manner of a confident leader. His black shirted staff watched, the crowd needed calming and the Sheriff needed an answer to spare his blushes and ineptness. Tom took a deep breath, "You deserve the best, and the citizens of this resilient town deserve the best solution we can offer. Our expert here, Thomas, believes this is an animal, admittedly it is a beast of an animal larger than we have ever seen. Who knows what animal these thick dense woods is hiding? Clearly there are things out there that we don't know about, but I can tell you one thing, it's picked the wrong town to mess with. If it's a beast then it needs to be hunted, located and exterminated. I'm a security guy and I know when you need a job doing you go and get the best person for the job." Tom straightened his back to appear taller, he knew he had the crowd but now he needed to sell them on the plan. "Some of you are mighty fine hunters, Moose, Deer, Elk, Fox, Wolf and even Bear, but it's different when you're hunting something you've never seen before. We need to call in the specialists. The mine looks after Autumn and we would like your permission to call in the finest hunters in the land, professional hunters, Barnes & Colder, from the big city."

Tom waited for the reaction. A few shouted "Yes," some punched the air and a steady applause echoed around the hall. The Sheriff smiled at the crowd trying to act as if he knew of the solution and was part of the decision. Tom smiled and nodded to the appreciative crowd as the black shirts prolonged the applause. Tom spoke above the noise, "It's settled then, we'll hire Barnes & Colder immediately to eradicate this beast and stop the Autumn's Ravage." It was a popular solution, but a few in the crowd remained unconvinced, as in their minds the hooded stranger was the most likely cause of the deaths, and not some large fictitious beast.

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## The Fifth Realm

### Chapter 5: Reading is for Freaks.

Westtown, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 2014, The Fifth Realm.

“Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.”

It was a cool crisp morning as the Sun rounded the clouds to make a welcome appearance in the morning sky, as Dan glanced over his shoulder, knowing the door to his house would inevitably slam closed. He could hear his Mother’s scolding tone reverberate through his head because she’d told him countless times to hold onto the door handle, or the whole house would shake, when door slammed. It really got on her nerves. He’d meant to close it properly, but this morning he was in a rush, and Dan needed to get to school early. He wasn’t a keener because he didn’t enjoy school; he just needed to get inside the school building, to the safety that it provided. Dan lived in New Jersey, U.S.A. He’d moved to this location two months ago after his Mother had finally ditched her controlling abusive boyfriend. He loved his Mother unconditionally but she had lousy taste, or as she would say, lousy luck, in men. Using the assistance provided by the children’s aid society, she’d managed to relocate to another part of the country, in the hope of escaping this man, and starting a new life. Starting at a new school is always tough, but breaking into a tight community school, where everyone seemed to know each other or was somehow related, was even tougher.

From the first day Dan was labeled an outsider, he was a quiet shy boy; he didn’t make friends easily, and was considered a loner. He always had a book in his hand, and enjoyed escaping into other, more exotic, worlds. Dan loved to read, an activity that is sadly classified in today’s world as being squarely in the realm of a geek, and considered just plain weird. Other kids would pick on him and tease him relentlessly. Some would try to take his book from him and throw it in the garbage or worse still destroy it. Dan learned to sneak away into unused classrooms or the relative safety of common rooms patrolled by teachers. The walk to school was short, at a brisk pace he could get to the school gates in sixteen minutes.

At the half way stage he would pass a series of storage buildings, this was the difficult part that left him exposed. He couldn’t avoid it but it afforded the bullies an opportunity to hide between the small buildings and generally get into trouble. Some used this area to smoke but generally they would hang out and harass kids on their way to school. Dan had been teased relentlessly; he was called a weirdo and a freak. One kid, Brian Betchley, had taken an instant dislike to Dan. Brian was a slow learner and had suffered from word blindness, dyslexia. His reading capabilities were weakened and his progression through the school curriculum had been slowed. When Brian saw the shy new kid with his face constantly buried in a book, it was akin to waving a red flag in front of a raging bull. Brian decided to charge, and charge he did. Every day Brian would tease Dan, eventually persuading his cronies to join in with the abuse.

Dan had avoided the gang for the last few days by leaving for school earlier, a ploy that seemed to be working. It was another crisp morning and Dan could feel the strain in his calf muscles as he

quicken his pace to a fast walk. He glanced upwards where he saw a flock of small birds, dark against the blue grey sky. They swooped together like one amorphous mass turning, darting and diving in unison. They reminded Dan of Moby Dick and a large whale gliding gracefully through the water. The birds were majestic, hypnotic and a distraction. Life can be an interesting experience. Just when you marvel at its beauty it can offer you an ugly contrast. When Dan returned from his upward gaze he was confronted by the contorted face of Brian Betchley, complete with four of his misguided friends

“Well what do we have here lads? Looks like freak-boy here is leaving earlier to try to avoid our morning chat.” Brian grabbed Dan roughly by the hair slamming him into a brick wall face first. The warm feeling of blood trickled down his chin from a cut under his lip. “But I so enjoy our morning meetings. By the way freak-boy, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll tell the school you tripped and fell. I will re-arrange your face if that cut of yours comes back to haunt me, understand?”

Dan nodded; his voice had deserted him. The boys laughed at the trembling mess before them. A mousey looking kid pushed himself forward, “What’s he got for lunch today?”

Brian took a while to register the question, “Well that’s a good question, let’s take a look shall we?” Brian quickly wrestled away Dan’s backpack and threw it towards the boys. They rifled through his belongings until they found his lunch, neatly packed by his Mother earlier that morning. Brian had Dan pinned against the wall while the boys threw his sandwiches on the floor and stomped upon the brown bread exterior. The apple was thrown over the roof of the storage building; the chocolate bar was deposited in the pocket of one of the boys. “Guess you’re going hungry today freak-boy.”

To compound the situation the mousey kid tipped the contents of his backpack onto the ground. Lying on the top of the contents pile was his book. “Call of the Wild” by Jack London, was embossed in large gold letters. The mousey kid reached for the book as Dan struggled to retrieve it first. He was pushed firmly into the wall, an inescapable restraint. “What’s that crap?” bellowed Brian.

“Some stupid book about a Wolf, I think.”

“It’s not a Wolf, it’s a ....” Dan was slammed into the wall again, and the mousey kid smiled as he gleefully ripped pages from the spine of the book. He let them race away carried upon the strong wind; Dan could see pages strewn across the street in front of him. More pages were removed, further liberated by the swirling wind. He watched a page caught in an updraft, behaving in a similar fashion to the flock of birds earlier.

The ripping sound of the book’s fabric spine brought his attention back to his book, “Only freaks read this type of crap, you hear me?” Dan felt a strong punch land deep within his gut causing him to double over in pain, it was followed by a slap to the back of the head; the boys ran away in the direction of the school. Lying on the ground Dan managed to regain his senses and tried to focus his eyes. The street scene before him was predominantly dark grey with asphalt accents. In stark contrast was a bright yellow shape, the shape of a long jacket worn by a tall girl standing across the street. She paused as Dan stumbled to his feet and began to collect his belongings, he started to re-pack his bag, when he glanced upwards in her direction, she’d gone, disappeared around the corner on her way to school, but she’d seen everything.

Dan wiped his wet chin startled to see his red blood smeared across his fingers. He was now aware of a stinging sensation from a deep cut below his lower lip; the wound was not closing to stem the flow of the blood. The wound never closed and the concern of teachers forced Dan to accept he needed treatment. Four stitches and an ugly white scar was the result of his morning's run in. As Dan received treatment the wheels of justice were turning in the background. Jenny Smithe had reported the incident when she got to school, she felt sorry for Dan, and had talked to her teacher as soon as she'd hung her long yellow jacket in her locker. When Dan arrived at school sporting an injury, the teachers were ready and waiting. Jenny had identified the boys responsible, and they would be spoken to, or worse, receive a temporary suspension. This backfired as it would allow the boys more time to harass frightened kids on their commute to school. Once Dan's protective Mother got involved, the situation escalated, and she spoke with the principal, she spoke with Jenny, and she came to a swift decision. Dan was pulled from the school and they soon moved to Westtown, PA. Westtown seemed a world away from New Jersey, as people were friendly and welcoming. The bullying had given Liz everything she needed to move to a new safer environment. She worked quickly with Children's Aid and they moved to a new town and hopefully a new life. Liz liked the vibe of Westtown it seemed a slower pace of life where people cared for each other and got to know each other. She and Dan settled in quickly. She expected Dan to raise a fuss about another move but strangely he complied effortlessly. Children's Aid introduced her to Gyanesh, a kind Indian from an immigrant family about to open the biggest gamble of his life. He had poured his savings into a new business venture. He'd renovated an old café centrally located on the main street and turned it into a nice Indian restaurant. The menu was varied and fresh, he felt the people were looking for a change from the normal fried breakfast grill that was so popular. People's tastes were expanding and there was a large immigrant community open to new tastes.

The local paper was supportive taking pictures and writing a nice launch piece highlighting the menu options and linking Gyanesh to the community. It worked as a palpable buzz was being generated prior to opening day. Curious passers by peered in the window as renovations progressed. Local printers excelled with the menu and the business was taking shape. Liz was dying for work; she was a likable person with a pretty face and a warm personality. Liz was also a hard worker. She believed in earning her wage and never slacked off. The Children's Aid people had arranged for her to meet with Gyanesh in the restaurant. She approached the burgundy colored door at 9.57am just in time for her 10am meeting. It was a cool morning and her hands were very cold. She'd been waiting down the street, staring at the door for the last twenty minutes. Her hands were so cold; she decided to rub them together furiously so they would be warm for the initial handshake.

As she entered the restaurant she was greeted with the sight of workmen, power tools, painters, and noise. "Watch yourself!" shouted a slim Indian man from across the payments counter. Gyanesh rushed over to greet the pretty woman whom had just entered his fledgling business. "Are you Liz?"

Liz managed a nod of the head, her senses being assaulted with the frenetic action.

"Good, come with me to the back room. It's a bit quieter."

Gyanesh motioned towards the back of the restaurant and confidently strode off in that direction. As if attached by a rope Liz followed dutifully. They entered a small room at the back that had a desk and a laptop; it was setup like a small office. Gyanesh took a chair leaving only one chair for Liz to choose. She hesitated but his hand gesture urged her to sit. "So, Audrey sent you about the waitress job yes?"

“Yes.”

“Tell me, have you waited tables before? Do you know the routine?”

Liz was flustered, she needed this job badly and she was blowing it with short answers. She needed to engage with the man and show off her friendly personality. She was cold and needed to warm up for the sake of the interview and physically. “I have plenty of experience, I’m good with customers and I can learn the cash in cash out technology quickly. I really need this job and if you give me a trial I’m sure you’re going to like my work.” Liz smiled, gained great eye contact and sat up straight. Gyanesh leaned back and his posture relaxed, she knew she had him. When you work and watch people all day, for years at a time, you soon learn to pickup their vibe. Whose fighting, whose cheating, whose lonely, whose about to do a runner by leaving the restaurant without paying. It becomes obvious who is a big tipper and whose struggling to make ends meet. You can tell who is in love and who has fallen out of love. Liz knew that Gyanesh liked her and was warming up to the idea of her working in his restaurant. He explained his philosophy and what he was trying to achieve with his new business. In many ways he was taking a gamble. Would this traditional community be open to and embrace a new menu option and new tastes? It would help to have a waitress with an honest face, a friendly attitude and a local accent. Once the clients had been eased in then they could feel comfortable to experiment with the new food and tastes. This would be essential to the launch of the business. Once people tasted the food, Gyanesh was confident they would like it and return. He would turn them into advocates through great food with great service at a reasonable price.

Liz was warming to Gyanesh also. He seemed nice, honest and hardworking. “I would need you to start in a week. Saturday is our opening day but Friday will be our training day and dry run for family and friends. Can you start Friday?”

Liz managed to blurt out a relieved “Yes,” she could not hide her smile. Gyanesh smiled back. He thrust out a hand towards her.

“Then welcome aboard.” Liz shook his hand gratefully.

Gyanesh rose abruptly. “Bindi come here quickly!” he shouted.

A slim petite Indian lady dressed in an exquisite green silk sari arrived at the door to the small office door. “Gyanesh why do you shout so, I’m only down the hall?”

“Bindi I would like you to meet Liz Proctor, Liz has agreed to be our waitress and will start on Friday.” Bindi smiled as she sized Liz up. “Oh I’m sorry, Bindi is my wife and will run this place with her normal efficiency.”

Bindi pulled a playful face at Gyanesh. She extended a hand, “I’m pleased to meet you Liz and I’m looking forward to seeing you work with the customers.” There was a slight hesitation in her voice. It hinted to Liz that Bindi was not quite sold and needed to see her in action.

Liz shook her hand warmly and confidently. “Thank you. I’m very experienced and love working with people. Gyanesh has explained his vision and priorities for this business. I know he expects superior courteous service and I will not let you down.”

“Good we’re counting on you. Why don't we see how it goes in the first two weeks and we will have a chat then yes?”

That wasn't as positive as her experience with Gyanesh. This one was more business like, more calculating. She wouldn't be persuaded with a pretty smile. Liz knew she had to learn the menu, the systems and the routine quickly. Her tableside manner would be impeccable and she would get this job. Bindi's shoulders dropped, just for a second she seemed to relax. Bindi turned to her husband.

She stared at him coldly and spoke in Hindi. “She's a very pretty women, slim and fit. She should be able to hustle quickly and she has a grace about her, a nice smile yes?”

“Yes.”

“Good for the customers but not good for my husband to be distracted, understand?”

Gyanesh looked at Liz, smiling in ignorance with deep blue eyes and a slightly disheveled desperate look. “Understand.”

Bindi reverted to English. “Good. Talk to Liz about the salary, the hours and the tips. Lets make sure we all know the rules and there are no mis-understandings.” Bindi smiled at the both before shuffling off to supervise the workers.

“She's really nice, she just wants everything to go well.”

Gyanesh spent the next twenty minutes explaining how the restaurant worked and the potential for her to earn some good money.

When Friday came Liz was early. It started with a training session but the systems, order entry screens, cash and card systems were all modern and very simple to use. She took a menu home to study the dishes and asked for a couple of pronunciation tips. It was relatively simple and she felt confident. She tried to focus as her mind wandered to Dan. Where would they live? She was working the system to get him into a local school. It would be better if this job had some more certainty but she would work hard and make sure she made it through her evaluation period. Bindi would be convinced of her value.

She respected Bindi. Having a woman like that paying attention to all of the important details boded well for the business and she needed some stability. If it were her business she would act the same.

Dan was not going to school; arrangements had been made for him to drop out of New Jersey so he would not be bullied any more. The new school had accepted him but he needed to start in a week. Liz had patiently explained her predicament. Dan needed to go into a Children's Aid home for a week, two at the most. He seemed calm when she told him this. She guessed it was better than having to face Brian Betchley. Liz was patient in her explanation; she had picked the right time and concentrated on using a calm voice. Her strategy had worked soliciting the calm reaction of understanding and support that she had hoped for. Dan knew that his Mother would try everything in her power to make this work. He knew it would eat away at her knowing he was in a home and away from her. He also knew that two weeks was a slim shot. He tried to hide his anguish and concern. Group homes were a hard place to survive but he would have to manage. His Mother needed support she was trying her best.

Liz didn't have a formal education; she'd never given it much thought and she'd never really regretted that fact until recently, she'd dropped out of high school early - enticed by the lure of quick money to be earned in the service industries. She'd realize her decision was shortsighted at a later date, but her decision and her circumstances meant she needed to be self-sufficient at an early age. Dan knew his Mother would do anything she could within her means to secure a stable job and a safe place to live. To achieve this within the next two weeks would be a stretch for the most qualified and connected of person. Liz knew nobody locally and Dan felt like he was a definite handicap. He was determined to make the best of this situation. He knew he could be a royal pain but he needed to support his Mother. He would do the best he could to get by and not complain. He needed to remain positive and calm and wait patiently for his Mother to get situated.

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## Chapter 6: A Mother's Love

Westtown, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 2014

“Mothers are the necessity of invention.”

The Indian restaurant opened with the right amount of local fan fare. Gyanesh and Bindi were pleased with the local press response and the verdict bestowed by the local food critics. Normally biased and a little closed-minded the critics raved about the food, the variety and the service! Liz was especially pleased about the service comments and hoped that this would ease some of Bindi's initial concerns. Gyanesh had been busy in the kitchen and Bindi had been welcoming the patrons and seating them efficiently. She had watched the operation with an eagle's eye. Liz made a point of being punctual; she arrived early and often would stay late to help with the cleanup and close routine. Bindi was never warm but she had a professional air about her that Liz had come to respect. Liz felt that this could work. She had easily adapted to the job and was becoming quite knowledgeable about the menu, the food and the combinations. She had devised ways to suggest to the patrons to order alcohol with their meals. This would elevate the check amount and of course the tip. At the end of the week Bindi had praised her efforts and she received a much needed pay cheque with an envelope containing some extra cash. The cash represented her share of the tips and she was grateful.

Most of the money went on the rent she was paying for the motel room close to her work. In her off hours she would scour the paper looking for a place to rent. It would need to be within walking distance of her work but the pickings were slim. That area commanded a rent rate she could ill afford. Bindi had named the restaurant “The Spice of Rajasthan” and thankfully it seemed to be off to a good start. Liz was hoping to get some words of encouragement where she could source a place to rent but Bindi seemed to be sticking to her original two-week evaluation period. Liz could not commit to any landlord without knowing that she had a job. She knew she would have to break her promise to Dan and it was breaking her heart. What could she say to him? How would he take it?

Occasionally there would be food left at the end of the day. Bindi knew that Liz was just managing to scrape by. After Bindi became more comfortable with Liz she would offer the left over food as a supper that she could take home. “It's good that you try the menu items so that you can answer the customers questions.” Liz would smile gratefully but both women knew it was

charity. Liz would accept gracefully. By the second week Gyanesh was sneaking food items into her take home bag that were freshly cooked. She would graciously thank him pretending not to notice. She would not turn away the food; she needed the help.

It was Thursday of the second week and Liz felt sad. She would not be able to keep the promise she made to Dan. She'd made a good start in her new job but Bindi was hard to read. Would she get to keep her job? She felt tears welling up in her eyes as she darted to the back door. She was embarrassed to be seen like this. Bindi heard the sniffles and suspected the worse. She pushed her way through the heavy steel door. "Liz you okay? Did Gyanesh say something?"

Liz was horrified. "No, no," she said hurriedly wiping away her tears. "Gyanesh has been wonderful I'm not upset because of your husband." Bindi sat next to her on the cold concrete step.

"Tell me your problems perhaps we can solve them together." Liz peered into Bindi's deep brown eyes. She was genuine, warm and caring. Bindi was really trying to help. Liz opened up, she talked about the rough start that Dan had, and she described the bullying and his foster home experience. Liz explained to Bindi the promise she had made to Dan and how she would feel breaking that promise and letting him down. She couldn't hold back her tears.

"It's okay, you're a good Mother, you work hard and try to do the best you can for your family, I admire that."

Liz raised her eyes and studied Bindi's face carefully. It really looked like she meant it; she was not patronizing her. She managed a half smile, "Thanks, that means a lot. He's a good kid, I just wish I could give him more."

"He has a lot, a Mother that loves him and will fight for him. Some kids don't have that you know?"

"I guess you're right." Liz had stopped crying. She realized she was doing everything she possibly could.

"I like you Liz and you know that this restaurant," Bindi waved her arm at the building behind her, "this business, well its all we have. We have to make it work, we are in too deep to turn back now. It will make or break us financially and quite frankly as a couple. That's why I have been so strict with you. I wanted to make sure we hired the right person. No offense but anyone can wait tables." Liz stiffened as the ultimate truth was delivered expertly. "But we weren't looking for a waitress we wanted an ambassador, a person that extended the experience and philosophy that we were trying to create." Liz diverted her gaze to the stained concrete below her. She knew at that moment that she was either going to get this job or be released. "I like you Liz, I like your attitude and your work ethic. I think you're honest and hard working. What's more important is that you get what we are trying to achieve here, that's why I'm comfortable offering you this job full time."

Without thinking Liz lunged forward wrapping her slender arms around Bindi and hugging her tightly, "Oh thank you, thank you. You will not regret this." Bindi had thrown her a lifeline. She needed this badly and she had worked very hard to listen and pay attention to what was required of her. She released Bindi from her hug and stared into her eyes. She mouthed the words, "Thank you," but no sound escaped her lips.

Liz started to cry again but this was different. It was a feeling of relief and yes, possibly a small amount of happiness. Bindi smiled. She reached out and held Liz's hand. It was a gesture to tell her not to go and that they would continue their chat. "I have a proposal for you to consider, one which makes sense and I think you will like.

Liz raised her chin in anticipation. Bindi had a glint in her eye; she was about to deliver words that could radically change Liz's fortunes. She waited enjoying the look of expectant anticipation washing across her pretty face. "I think I have a way for you to keep your promise. Above the store we have two small apartments. The one that faces the main street is the nicest. It gets the sun. Gyanesh's Grandfather lives in that one. He's from the old country and totally lost here in the States. His English is poor but he's low maintenance, doesn't interfere with our business and is exceptionally kind. He reads a lot and has a sharp mind. He's a bit wobbly on his feet and walks with a cane." Bindi could see the look of confusion crawling across Liz's face as she tried to reconcile how this old relative could help her keep her promise to Dan. "I'm rambling on, let me get straight to the point. The other apartment is smaller and facing the shade but it's available. I would make the rent reasonable and you could make it comfortable. There's a small room that you could make into a second bedroom for Dan. Your commute to work would be a flight of stairs that would be handy for the both of us. I wanted to see if you worked out before I offered you this option. If you're not interested I would fully understand."

Liz shuffled nervously; "No, No," she said raising her hand, "of course I'm interested. Providing I can afford the rent it sounds ideal."

"On the evening shifts, if it made you feel better Dan could visit with Raj. Raj could keep an eye on him while you work and make sure Dan is safe from any trouble. I'm sure Raj would appreciate the company and having Dan in the company of an adult and so close to you when you're at work can only help in your argument to get him back, no?"

Liz couldn't dispute the appeal of having Dan so close. If it were slow she could actually pop up and check in on him quickly. He would be so close. "If I can afford this it would be wonderful."

Bindi smiled. "The apartment comes with a small kitchen and bathroom, it's not opulent but I'm sure you can make it cozy and it's safe. There's a separate entrance so you can come and go as you please. Oh and one more thing, the school is right around the corner, a ten minute walk."

Liz felt her heart soar. "Can we make this work? You know how much I earn?"

Bindi squeezed her hand. "We'll make it work. You're part of our family now."

Family, that sounded good to Liz. She had never been part of a family but she liked how this sounded and how it was beginning to feel. A wave of relief flushed through her and she burst into tears again, tears of joy. "I'm looking forward to my meeting with the Children's Aid counselor tomorrow. Can I tell her I have a job and a place to live definitely?"

"Sort of," Bindi responded with a mischievous face.

"Sort of," repeated Liz with her heart pounding?

"Well, normally before you accept a place you go to check it out, it might be a right dump!" Bindi pulled Liz's hand motioning her to stand before the two ladies went to inspect the apartment.

Liz loved the place. It was old, ceiling molding, hard wood floors and red brick walls. A couple of worn rugs were supporting a tired looking couch. The apartment was furnished but it didn't look like a home. There was no personal touches, no touch that a woman would bring.

“Gyanesh has been using this place as an office while the work crews ripped the restaurant apart. He'd sleep here sometimes when he needed to make sure they stayed to complete the work. As you know it came down to the wire and you have to ride these guys. The furniture's not great but you can bring in your own or replace them in time.”

Liz remained silent until she had walked through every room. She inspected the apartment but she tried to feel the vibe. Did it feel right to her? She trusted her intuition above all else. Her heart was floating. She turned to an anxious Bindi. “What about Gyanesh?”

“My husband makes certain decisions. He decides how the restaurant is to look, what the name shall be and what the menu should contain. He has total control over that because he's damn good at what he does. When it comes to the business side of the business, keeping the books, dealing with our suppliers and renting the apartment, that's what I'm good at and it's my decision. Besides, I've already told him that's what we're doing and he's agreed.”

Beaming a broad smile Liz simply said, “It's perfect.”

A day later Liz was signing release documents and handing over copies of her rental agreement to the counselor at the Children's Aid society. She'd met her conditions of release. Bindi had furnished Liz with an official letter confirming her employment at The Spice of Rajasthan. The counselor was a portly woman with a booming voice. She inspected the documentation thoroughly. “So you got the job then?”

“Yes,” nodded Liz.

“And you found an apartment above the restaurant?”

“Yes.”

“How convenient. So if I wanted to visit you in say a week or so you could let me have a look at the place?”

Liz stiffened up, “Is that normal?”

The portly counselor shifted her weight and leaned closer to Liz. Establishing direct eye contact she paused and began to talk in a stern manner. “We would want to put Dan in harm's way would we? Restaurants can be busy places with lots of people coming and going. Not to mention the hot stove, kitchen and dangers a professional cooking environment can pose.”

Liz's face felt heaving. The light smile she'd been wearing all day faded quickly. She'd moved too quickly, she hadn't thought about the dangers. Strangers and grease fires flashed through her mind. A voice surged upwards through her body like a coiled snake rising. “Say something, quickly,” she thought.

“The restaurant is new and modern, it's state of the art. The kitchen is brand new with high-end equipment. The owners have spared no expense and I have participated in their nightly cleanup

routine. Gyanesh conducts a safety check each night and the kitchen has all of the safety features required to pass a state inspection. The apartment is not connected to the restaurant it has a separate entrance and exit. It has a sturdy door and is alarmed with the restaurant's monitored security system. In many ways it's better than most apartments. We share a complex with Gyanesh's Grandfather who lives in the apartment across the hall. This is another reason why Gyanesh will ensure the safety of the inhabitants that live above his business. I'm very happy with this arrangement and I'll be working downstairs while my son is being supervised by Raj, Gyanesh's Grandfather. Most single Mothers would kill for this type of arrangement.

Liz was in fighting mode, a Mother fighting for her Son. She'd raised her voice and unwittingly leaned forward to match the aggressive posture the counselor had adopted. The counselor leaned backwards, like a large cat backing away from a fight. "It sounds good, and so you wouldn't mind if I visited you both in a weeks time then?"

Liz picked up on the word "Both." If she played her cards right and kept cool she would be going home with Dan. "Both" of them going home together. "That's fine with me, you'll have to come between shifts." Liz immediately regretted her words, why did she say that, it was stupid.

The counselor cracked a half smile, "We'll arrange a suitable time, and I'm assuming I can arrange this by contacting you at the restaurant number?"

"That would be fine," said Liz without the consent of Gyanesh or Bindi.

"By the way I was meaning to ask you a question about Dan. How did he get that scar again under his lip?"

Liz's inner voice ringed through her body as she talked to herself, "Remain clam, she's just trying to get a rise out of you." Liz took a deep breath and steadied herself, "The reason we moved here to Westtown was to escape the bullies that preyed on Dan at his previous school. One of those bullies was responsible for the beating he received and the scar that resulted from that. It's all in the files I'm sure. There was a witness; a little girl and I spoke with her personally. That's when I decided to get Dan out of that toxic environment to start a new life. Like I said, it should all be in the files."

"Oh, I'm sure that's what it says," drawled the counselor trying to make something from nothing. Liz forced a smile. Liz signed some papers and before she knew it she was waiting in a small dull room as they collected Dan. Dan charged into the room dropping his large gym brimming with clothes and launched himself into his waiting Mother's arms.

"You came, you really came!" Dan was close to tears. He hugged his Mother tightly squeezing her to prove to himself that she was real. "I said I would. Wait 'till you see our place its right above where I work. We're finally getting our act together kiddo!"

Liz often referred to Dan as kiddo when she was happy. Today he had never been more proud of his Mother. She had lived up to her promise and managed to win him back. The time Dan had spent at the group home had dragged, and he was ready to leave. The kids had been cool, they'd left him alone and he had felt safe. He'd polished off a few books and escaped into lands far away. He'd followed orders and kept a low profile. It was his way of existing but he'd dreaded this day as he played it through in his mind.

It was a tall order to get a job and find a place to live in two weeks. He'd rehearsed his lines for the conversation with his Mother. Dan knew she would be devastated and ripped apart with guilt; he'd planned some careful phrases designed to make her feel at ease and reassure her. Today's news surpassed his wildest dreams and he quickly forgot his well-rehearsed lines, as he held on tight to his Mother's arms.

She pulled him away, lowered her eyes to his level and stared at his face for a second. "Let's get out of here kiddo, let's go home. Get you bag we need to leave before they change their minds."

Dan didn't need to be told twice, in one swift movement he'd swooped his bag from the floor and was heading out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 7: The Dream Cane

Westtown, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 2014

"The young man knows the rules, but the old man knows the exceptions."

Dan skipped along the sidewalk dragging his large bag behind him. He looked like a spring rabbit leashed to a large heavy steel ball. When they arrived at the Restaurant he skipped right past it. Realizing that his Mother had stopped he turned to see why she wasn't following him. She smiled and playfully pointed at the large glass window. Dan ran back dragging his bag. "Is this the place?"

"Yup this is it kiddo. You ready for the tour?" There was a small opening at the side of the restaurant that led to an entrance elevated by a stone step. The entrance presented a large burgundy door. At the side of the door was a weathered steel speaker with two black buttons protruding from the housing. The black buttons were inset with white plastic writing. '2A' was written on the top button, '2B' on the bottom button. "This is our button. You press this when you don't have a key on you. I will hear it ring and can talk to you through this speaker and open the door. Got it?"

Dan looked at his Mother with the blank expression of disbelief. "I'm nine years old, I watch movies!"

"So you've seen these things before, I get it, but I just wanted to make sure you knew. Let's go inside. Liz inserted the brass key and pushed the heavy door open. It led to a small square entrance and a narrow set of wooden stairs. Dan bounded up the stairs as if his bag were made from the lightest of cotton wool. He stopped at the top before dropping his bag. '2B' seemed to glow a brilliant white against the dark coloured paint covering the door. Liz used the same key and gently opened the door to her new life. Dan leapt inside rushing forward into the new apartment and his new home. He dropped the bag inches within the door well and proceeded to explore every room. He didn't remember to ask where he would be sleeping, at the time he didn't care. He would have slept on the floor if he had to, as long as they were together.

He couldn't believe his eyes when he finally made his way to the second, smaller bedroom. He stopped suddenly taking in the scene before him. He felt a presence behind him and turned to see

his Mother smiling at him. "You like?" All Dan could do was nod. "You finally have your own room. I know it's not that big but ..."

"It's perfect," interrupted Dan.

"What do you think of the rest of the apartment?"

"It feels like home," he said flopping down on his bed.

Liz smiled, "Yeah we've finally got a home. The furniture is a bit old, but we'll make do. I'll have this place looking better in a day or two."

"Mum it's great, just great."

Liz pushed the gym bag into his new room using her foot and motioned for him to come out. "Join me in the living room." She patted the couch. Dan sat, sinking into the worn cushions. "We're renting this place from the people who own the restaurant below, they're my employers. We have to treat this place with respect and be careful. No leaving taps running or the stove on, you hear me?"

Liz looked serious; she didn't break eye contact. "I understand Mum."

"Good, I'm counting on you." A small dull coloured brass key protruded from her raised hand. "This is yours, please don't lose it." Dan reached forward and held the key. "My next shift starts at four and goes till eleven. What you have to understand, is that I wouldn't have been able to get you back with me, if I left you at home alone, for hours on end, while I worked. Do you get that?"

Dan thought hard, "No, not really."

Liz breathed deeply, "I have to work to earn money, it pays for food and rent, so we can live, but I can't leave you alone, unattended is what they call it. You can't come with me to the restaurant so I have no choice. If you want to live here with me, then I don't want any fuss. Gyanesh is the nice man who gave me the job downstairs; he runs the restaurant with his wife Bindi. Gyanesh's Grandfather is called Raj; he lives next door in apartment '2A'. When I'm working the late shift you'll need to come home from school, get changed, and go and visit Raj. On weekends you'll go to Raj's place and wait for me to come and pick you up, after my shift. I'll leave your dinner at Raj's so you'll have something to eat." Liz could see the panic in Dan's eyes brewing. "I'll only be downstairs, and I'll come upstairs and check in on you throughout the evening, to see if you're alright. It's going to be fine, I promise. You can read a book or watch TV or do your homework, you two will be best buddies."

Dan didn't like the idea but he was smart enough to realize she had no other options and this was the only way she could get him back. "I'm just glad to be with you."

"Don't get too comfy next week, you'll soon start at your new school. I called this morning and they told me that you've been accepted and you could start mid-year. They were extra accommodating because of our special circumstances." Dan pulled a face. "I have a good feeling about this place, everyone's been so nice."

It was another school. Adults are always nice to begin with but kids can be cruel from the start. It's always hard breaking in to a new school. This would be no different, but he needed to do it.

He wouldn't allow himself to undo all of his Mother's hard work. For the first time, in a long while, she seemed happy. Her face glowed with optimism, a feeling that had been missing from her life. Dan knew he would have to make this school work out. He liked the apartment and he didn't want to move again. "Okay, unpack and relax for a bit, we have a couple of hours before my shift starts. I'm going to take you over to Raj's in about ninety minutes, so be ready. I'll spend a bit of time with you both but then I'll need to head down to the restaurant. Dan, listen to me carefully." Dan snapped his attention back to his Mother. "I know this won't be easy for you but I need you to make this work, be nice to the kind old man, you hear me?"

"Sure." It seemed to him like the pressure was on to make a lot of things work out. Dan was starting to get a little stressed out. He nodded reassuringly to his Mother and sought the refuge of his private room. The bed had an unfamiliar odor. It had the faint smell of a man's fragrance. Dan kicked his shoes off and dumped the contents of his gym bag into a couple of deep wooden drawers contained within a worn wooden cabinet. He stretched out comfortably upon his bed and dived into the latest book he was reading. Dan loved to escape to other places and other worlds; books afforded him that chance. He lived his life vicariously through the characters depicted in the books. The latest book to envelop Dan was a book called *2Promises* by Phil Armstrong. He'd followed the lead character Beth to Brussels, Belgium, as the climax of the book was about to unfold. He settled in thinking he could finish the book within the hour. *2Promises* had touched upon life in India, which would be useful information when he needed to make small talk with Raj. His mind wandered to the old man, would he be senile, coherent, intelligent, wise or clueless? Would he be able to learn from this man as a wise sage or would he grow frustrated at his inability to communicate relevant information to a nine year old? Lost in the book, Dan glanced at the bedside clock; it was almost time to go. He'd managed to finish the book and thoroughly enjoyed it. A tap at his door caused his eyes to widen, "Come in."

Liz pushed the door open, "You ready kiddo? We have to get going, I need to introduce you to Raj and get ready to start my shift."

"I'm ready, just let me grab a sweater." Dan moved from the bed to retrieve his favorite black wool sweater from the drawer.

Liz moved closer placing a hand on his small shoulder, "You really okay with this? You know I'm trying hard to make a good life for us both?"

Dan smiled sympathetically, he hugged his Mother tightly, "I'm fine, and I know you are. I'm proud of you Mum and I love you." It was just what she wanted to hear.

They gathered their things and headed to the apartment door. Dan could see the door of apartment '2A' across the hallway. The door was freshly painted in a rich wine color. Liz approached and pressed the small white button at the side of the door. The faint sound of a chime could be heard inside signaling their arrival. Dan was nervous; butterflies fluttered within his stomach. "Come in, the door's open."

Liz looked at Dan; they both exchanged glances before she reached for the handle and gently pushed the door. Liz led the way with Dan staying close behind. They entered into a larger apartment walking into a living room decorated in earth tones. A large patterned rug splashed with vibrant reds, browns and gold covered the wooden floor. Two large chairs and a sofa surrounded the rug. The apartment was dark accented with a few soft light sources in the form of elaborately sculptured gold table lamps. The walls had framed pictures of times gone by and moments of happiness. In one corner of the room was a TV standing dark and silent. A large wall

was covered in wooden shelving crammed with an assortment of books, but arranged neatly indicating some level of organization. Facing the door was Raj seated in a large comfy chair. The door snapped closed behind them as Dan peered curiously around his Mother's legs.

Raj was a man of small stature, dressed in a beige tunic with darker chocolate colored pants and a shock of ruffled wavy white hair, a grey white beard and bushy eyebrows. He had kind large brown eyes and weathered skin, with a few moles and some dark skin blemishes that showed his age. He wore large silver rimmed glasses with thick lenses perched low upon his nose. His right hand shook slightly whilst his left hand grasped a cane. Raj offered a salutation, "Ah visitors, welcome, come in please," Raj waved a hand then struggled to adjust his weight. He tried to stand to formally greet his visitors. He managed to push himself to his feet using his sturdy cane for support. Raj wobbled initially but soon steadied himself.

Liz approached him and offered a hand; Raj shook it vigorously. Liz talked quickly her nerves fueling her speed. "Thank you so much for doing this, I hope it's not too much of an imposition? I would like to compensate you in some small way." Dan peered from behind his Mother's protective body. He was unsure about this and unsure about this man that stood before him.

"Dear lady it is my utmost pleasure," said Raj shaking and then releasing Liz's hand. "I would cherish the time to get to know this fine gentleman, that alone is adequate compensation." Raj's eyes came to rest on the shy impish figure hiding behind his Mother's frame. Dan felt the old man's gaze fall upon him and for the first time he made direct eye contact. "And you must be Mr. Dan?"

Dan nodded unsure of his next move. He wanted to run but he knew how important this was to his Mother and their future together. He had to make this work. It wasn't in his nature, he would rather have hid, but he stepped out in a show of bravado. He offered his hand boldly, "Hi I'm Dan."

Raj approached, unsteady upon his feet. He took the boy's little white hand and wrapped it within his large leathery skinned hand covered in veins, wrinkles and brown blemishes. Raj stooped and gently shook Dan's hand. "It's my pleasure to meet you Dan, I'm Raj. I'm looking forward to getting to know you."

Dan glanced at his smiling Mother, "As am I," spilled from his mouth. This seemed to wrap his Mother in a blanket of relaxation. Her body visibly relaxed from her tense stance. She smiled at Raj.

"Well, I think I'll leave you two men to chat. I have to get down to my shift as they're expecting me. I'll try to pop up and check in on you during my shift, is that alright?"

Raj responded instinctively, "Sure."

Dan tried to reassure her, "You don't have to Mum, I'm sure it's going to be alright."

"Me too, but I worry and I'm doing it more for me. Maybe for the first night then I will stop worrying. My shift is over at 11pm, so I'll come and get him then?" Raj nodded. "He hasn't started his new school yet, so he doesn't have any homework tonight."

Dan started to fidget, he noticed Raj was getting unsteady as he moved his weight onto his other foot; he needed to sit. "Mum stop worrying and go."

“You’re right, I don’t want to be late. I’ll pop up when it gets quiet.” Liz waved sheepishly and slipped out of the door. Standing in the hallway she let out a long, heavy, deep sigh. She didn’t know if this was the right thing to do. She felt racked with guilt, but relieved at how well Dan seemed to be handling it. Liz scurried down the stairs on her way to the restaurant.

In the apartment stood an old man and a young boy, each unsure of the situation they were in. They stood and sized each other up. The silence was broken by Raj, “Can I get you anything to eat or drink young man?”

“No, I’m good, thanks.”

“Well then, lets take a seat.” Raj waved at an open chair as he shuffled back to his familiar chair. He fell into it heavily as his knees gave way refusing to support his small frame anymore. “Ahh that’s good, I’m not as strong as I used to be Dan. Getting old is no fun but it comes to us all.

Dan nodded in agreement and settled in a cozy, oversized chair. The two stared at each other unsure of where to begin, it felt awkward for both of them. Dan tried hard but the best opening he could think of was his premeditated opening line, “So I guess you come from India?”

“Indeed. I was born in Patna, a long time ago. Patna is in the North of India, and slightly to the East. My parents moved me to Delhi when I was young, but I returned to Patna latter in life. Now I find myself here in the United States of America with my family.”

“You sound like you wish you were back in Patna?”

“You are a perceptive young man, what’s your story?”

“I’m a kid, I don’t have much of a story. I follow my Mum around. My Dad took off and my Mum has lousy taste in men. She tries to protect me and I get picked on a lot ‘cos I’m weird.”

Raj leaned forward, “Who says your weird?”

“Everyone. Mainly kids at school. I move around a lot so I don’t have any friends. I don’t seem to mix well and I’m kind of shy, well kind of weird really.” The word hurt; it was worse that they fell from his own lips.

Raj recognized Dan’s downwards glance, the dejected look, and the defeatist tone creeping into his voice. Feeling worthless, valueless and adrift was not an unknown concept to him lately. When you look different, sound different and act different, then you are different. In today’s society different can be hard, and in some circumstances, dangerous. Raj longed for the long hot peaceful days of Patna; he fit in there. Even today with all of the modern progress and the rapid changes happening across India he would still fit in more.

“Dan, being shy doesn’t make you weird. Being different make you weird in some people’s eyes, but the best people in the world are different, and that’s what makes them the best.”

Dan paused to think about Raj’s words. “I get picked on a lot ‘cos I read, I’m quiet and I don’t speak up much.”

There was a moment of silence before Raj’s response came, “Me too.”

Dan raised his eyes and a wide smile crossed his face. Dan flicked his eyes towards the crowded bookshelves, "I can see that. I just love books, they allow me to learn and escape, plus it makes the time fly by."

When Dan had entered the apartment, Raj had noticed a white scar running under his bottom lip; the only blemish on a handsome kid's face. "How did you get that scar?"

Dan rubbed it with his finger, as if to remind him of its existence. "I got beat up on my way to school. That's why my Mum moved us here."

Raj nodded, as if to recognize Dan's pain. "There's nothing wrong with reading, it's becoming a lost art. I have a lot of time on my hands and a lot of books."

"Do you think I could borrow one, I've just finished the book I was reading?"

"Sure, go to the shelves and pick one, you're welcome to borrow anything."

Dan approached the wall of books and browsed. He was unsure of his selection. His small fingers caressed the spine of the books as if trying to absorb the plots. Finally he selected a book, 'Jamaica Inn,' a classic by English writer Daphne du Maurier. He returned to his chair holding the hardback. Raj smiled. Dan stared at him and inquired, "Aren't you going to ask what I selected?"

"No. You can tell me but only if you wish to." Raj leaned forward placing his hands upon the shaft of his wooden cane. It was a beautiful cane made from dark polished wood. The base of the cane had a shining silver tip wedged into the brightly colored rug and barely visible. The cane was smooth and the dark wood glistened. At the top of the cane a ring of butterflies were carved into the wood circling the shaft. Below the handle was a bright silver collar engraved with a long forgotten language. A series of words and symbols wrapped around the collar, they appeared dark against the polished silver. Above the collar was a large silver knob. The knob was a brightly polished silver honeycomb. Inset within each silver honeycomb was a brilliantly crimson red polished jewel.

"I just finished reading 2Promises by Phil Armstrong, I liked that book a lot, and some of the plot is set in India."

Raj nodded, "Yes, it's up there on the second shelf, I liked that book too."

They exchanged a mutual smile. "I'll tell you which book I chose, but only if you promise not to tell me anything about the plot. I hate people who spoil things without giving the reader a chance to let the story unfold." Dan glanced towards the window, he could see the light fading and the autumn leaves racing past the window upon the wind; he gripped the book harder.

"I know what you mean," Raj spoke with an assured confidence of an older gentleman. He had the faintest tinge of an Indian accent and some of the phrases he would use sounded like they were lifted from a book written in another age. "I promise you, I wouldn't spoil your enjoyment." Raj clasped the cane tightly bringing the palms of his hands together.

Dan perched upon the edge of the chair and presented the illustrated cover of his selected book for inspection. "It's Jamaica Inn." The book was heavier than Dan had expected and slipped from his fingers crashing to the floor landing at the feet of Raj. "So sorry, I'm always too clumsy."

As Dan leaned forward to retrieve the wayward book a small ringing noise caught his attention. He stopped suddenly caught in his stooped position remaining motionless. The ringing noise continued until Dan had quickly located the source. Raj had positioned his cane pinned between his knees. His hands were resting, palms down upon his thighs, and his eyes were transfixed upon the events unfolding before him. The silver knob topping his cane had separated and was floating, spinning wildly, about three inches above the cane, rotating in thin air. The red honeycombs shone like hot coals, sending shards of bright crimson light onto the walls like a 1980's disco ball. A strange ringing noise accompanied the spinning ball as it levitated well above the cane's silver collar.

"How'd you do that?" inquired Dan, still maintaining his awkward pose.

Raj diverted his eyes from the glowing orb and looked at Dan, "I'm not. You are."

Dan sat on his haunches positioned at Raj's feet watching the spinning orb. The book lay on the floor with the orb garnering all of his attention. "I'm not doing anything." The orb suddenly fell silent and its spinning motion started to slow. The glow within the orb started to subside and it gently floated downwards towards its silver base, the collar of the carved cane. Raj had not moved with the cane still pressed between his knees. His palms were still pressed upon his thighs. When the orb finally came to rest a strange noise could be heard. It was the type of noise that could be heard when a vacuum-sealed door is closed; a small hiss. Raj's face was in pure shock.

"That was cool!" How did you do that?" questioned Dan sitting on the rug in front of Raj.

Raj was quiet for a moment, his demeanor had changed, and he looked like his brain was working overtime. He was clearly confused and at a loss for words.

"Did you know your cane could do that?" quizzed Dan impatiently. "Come on Raj tell me how you did that, that was so cool!" Dan was excited but he needed answers. His best guess was a magnetic trick, but he couldn't figure out the light source.

Raj grasped the ball, fixed to the top of his cane, with both hands. He realized how close Dan was to him, sitting right at his feet. "I don't know where to begin, and I don't know if I should explain this to you. The real reason, if I'm being honest, is I don't know if I can trust you?" Raj looked deeply into the large green eyes staring up at him, and he caught the look of disappointment sweep across the young man's face.

"Now just a minute. You don't know if you can trust me? My Mother was forced to leave her nine-year-old son with a man she doesn't know. I agreed to come here so she can keep her job and earn a living. This is the only way she can keep us together, so we aren't separated with me living in group homes. I don't know you, you could be any kind of weirdo but I have to trust you, I have no choice. So if you want to talk about trust, you should start by asking my Mother and then me." Dan stared at Raj; he was so close, it was the first time that he'd noticed Raj was missing a tooth in the front of his open mouth. There was a large gap and it was very distracting.

Raj was stunned by the response from this nine-year-old boy. His face had changed from curiosity to defiance. He showed a steely confidence, and maturity far beyond his age. This kid had been through a lot in his young life; he was a survivor with a fire in his belly and his heart.

“You’re right, please accept my apologies. I’ll explain what just happened, but it’ll take some time, and I need to start at the beginning. I’ll need to tell you a story, but it’s not fiction, it’s not a novel, it’s real life. If you’re patient, and don’t interrupt, then I’ll be happy to explain everything. Once I tell you, there will be no going back. The secret I’ll share with you will bond us together for life. Are you sure you want me to continue, because this is your only chance of going back?”

Dan pretended to think about it, knowing his curiosity had been peaked and his intellect would not allow him to leave an event like that unexplained. “I’m in, as long as that was not some lousy magic trick.”

Raj stared at the boy incredulously. “That was not a lame magic trick, and I am no magician. I’m serious, if we do this, then we’re in this together.”

Dan hadn’t a clue what he was opting in for, but the serious look upon Raj’s face seemed genuine. “Okay, tell me the story. You said it was a long one so I’m going to get comfy.” Dan grabbed a cushion from the couch and used it as a pillow for his head as he stretched out on the floor at Raj’s feet. “Okay, I’m ready when you are.”

Raj gripped his cane tightly and took a deep breath. “When I was a little boy growing up in Patna I had a simple life. My Grandfather owned a sweet shop he made Indian dessert delicacies such as boondi laddoo and kalakand. People would come from miles around to buy his sweet desserts and he would make them all by hand. These sweets or mini deserts are traditional where Indian families would enjoy them after their meals.

One day my parents had to travel somewhere, I can’t remember why or even where they were going to. I was about seven years old, so a little younger than you, and my Grandparents were looking after me for a few days, until my parents returned. I thought it was wonderful; tell me a kid who wouldn’t want to live in a sweet shop for a couple of days?” Dan fluffed his pillow and got settled in. “One day after work, my Grandfather came to see me. It was late, and I was almost asleep. It was Winter in India, and the evenings were starting to get cool. I snuggled up tightly below the blankets on my bed.

I could hear my Grandfather coming; he’d finished work for the day and the store was now closed. I could hear a clunking sound on the wooden floor as he tapped the silver end of his cane to support his weight. Standing all day had weakened his knees and he needed his cane to assist him with his balance. I remember it as if it was yesterday, but it’s a little over seventy years ago. Am I boring you or do you want me to continue?”

“Keep going, sounds like we just started and we have seventy years to catch-up.”

This was a smart kid, too smart for his own good. “Okay. So I heard the tap of his cane and he came into my bedroom. He sat on my bed and looked at me and smiled. To this day I’m not sure why he came in. I think it was the cold and Grandmother asked him to check in on me, to see if I needed more blankets. But that night something happened that neither of us expected. Once he sat down on my bed a brilliant red light filled the room with dancing specs, which rotated around the walls and the roof. A whirring noise coupled with the lights woke me up. I saw my Grandfather and I saw this ball, glowing and rotating, as it floated above my bed. I was scared and confused.

It wasn't until later that I came to fully appreciate what had happened that night. You see the cane selected me, as it has selected you. The cane is attracted to a certain type of person. Most people are the same, dull and bland. When someone is different they are often called freaks or weird." Dan flicked his eyes towards Raj, as if the very mention of that word incensed him. "Let's talk about this. When someone is different they exude a different kind of energy, they make different choices. They may wear different clothes or choose a different hairstyle. They laugh too loud or act too quiet, perhaps their mind works too quickly or they see the funny side of everything. When the masses Zig they seem to be ..."

"Zagging" said Dan, in a knowing way.

"Precisely. They don't, and never will, fit in. They never make the popular choices, and they often see things others can't. Many can visualize the future, and in their minds, they live in the future. Certain things can consume and fascinate them, yet other things come so easy to them, like reading for you. These types of people are extremely bright; they're articulate but often choose to spend time alone. My Grandfather called them pratibhasali's, a rare type of being. Unfortunately today, they're singled out, called weird and freaks, because they don't readily conform. It's a shame, when you look at most of our brilliant people in our history, none of them would be described as conformists. Van Gogh, Mozart, Hemingway, Gandhi, Wells, etc. These were all wacko's, freaks, criticized and rejected." Dan shifted his body to face Raj. Raj looked at Dan pausing to give him permission to speak.

"Please tell me your going somewhere with this. If this cane is a weirdo meter then I already know I'm a weirdo, I'm told that I'm weird every day of my life." The anger had subsided from Dan's voice; this was sounding more like a plea.

"Patience, I'm leading you somewhere with this." Dan seemed to like this answer and settled back into his pillow. "I have never liked the labels that society uses to describe these types of people today. They use mean spirited words like different, weird, and freak. These are derogatory words, used to label a person because they're non-conformist and make different choices. But if you dig deeper they're different in so many ways. They're wired differently, they see the world differently and they're each unique. Their bodies vibrate at a different frequency and they exude a different type of energy. They exude energy they don't drain it from others. I'm probably going on a bit too much, yes?"

"I'm following along, keep going."

'Smart kid,' thought Raj. "You're much further ahead than I was. The cane is a weirdo meter but it only reacts like that when it meets a very specific weirdo. Although I don't like that label, it's negative. We're not weird, I like to refer to our kind as special; we're both very special. We're so special that after my Grandfather passed away I've never met anyone like me before in my entire life. If I had not remembered vividly the way the cane reacted when I was young, I'd be starting to doubt my memory and would be thinking it was trick. A few years after the cane came to life my parents got work in Delhi, and we moved away from Patna. I was forced to put and end to the adventures my Grandfather and I had experienced. It was very hard for me to move away. I liked growing up in Delhi but when I was a teenager we received word of his failing health. The whole family raced back to Patna but we were too late. We attended his funeral. My Grandfather was such a special man and we were very close.

When he passed away he left me this cane in his will. A Maharaja commissioned it many years ago and somehow it found its way to Patna. It's been passed down from generation to generation. No one knows for sure how old it is. Once you own it you have to treat it with respect and secrecy. For I know what this cane is capable of. It can take a lifetime to find someone worthy of this cane and that's why I was so shocked when you activated the cane. When I leave this world the cane has selected you as it's next owner." Dan raised his head and glanced at Raj. "My Grandfather left me this cane for a good reason, he knew I'd activated it and the cane had chosen me. You see, the cane picks its new owner, and this choice must be respected. But Dan, this is no ordinary cane. The person who commissioned this cane selected the finest of materials. They sourced the hardest of mahogany wood, the most talented carvers, the purest of silver and ..." He placed a drawn out emphasis on the word, 'and'. "He used the finest quality of red rubies known to man. The rubies were mined in Mysore, in the South of India, and selected because they vibrate at a certain frequency. Everything and everybody vibrates but when the cane comes near an individual with the same exact vibration the orb starts to glow, float and spin. It's extremely rare to get an exact match and you Dan are an exact match.

The Maharaja who had the cane made selected the rubies to match the vibration of his one true love. He could have chosen any woman and he could have had many wives but he was different, a weirdo for his time. He chose to take one wife and only one wife. He loved her dearly and she worshipped him till the day he died. One day she misjudged a stone step and took a tumble within the palace. She fell down a steep set of hard stone steps leading to a courtyard. She broke her leg badly and they didn't know if she would survive the fall. The Maharaja was devastated and called for the finest physician in India to reset her bones and the finest archaka priest to pray for her recovery. After two days the physician reported to the Maharaja, his wife would survive, recover, and be able to walk again. The only trace of this accident would be a long scar upon her leg and a severe limp.

The archaka priest had been summoned from as far away as Srinagar. He was a special priest. The priest blessed her and consulted with the Maharaja about the construction of a special walking cane to assist his wife. He patiently explained that she would not be able to do the things she'd done prior to the accident. This would sadden her and may change their love for each other. He needed a way that the two of them could go on adventures together, despite her injuries. He devised a plan and explained it in detail to the Maharaja. At the time it would have been impossible to construct such a cane with such quality, but he was a rich and powerful Maharaja. The priest organized the construction of the cane to exact specifications. The priest hand selected the crimson rubies and interviewed the craftsmen, the wood carver and the silver smith. Each part was made separately so the craftsmen never saw the finished cane. They never knew what they were making or the power that the assembled cane would wield. Once the cane was complete the priest conducted an ancient ritual."

Raj stopped speaking, gaining Dan's attention. "You okay?" inquired Dan.

"No my throat's dry, Could you do me a favor Dan, and get me a glass of water from the kitchen, then I'll be able to continue. There's a plate of sandwiches on the table bring them in also."

Dan leapt to his feet and did as he was asked. He sat crossed legged on the floor munching on the peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches while waiting for Raj to resume. Raj took a long drink from the glass of water. "Where was I?"

"The priest was about to conduct an ancient ritual," said Dan, his mouth full of sandwich.

“Ah right, good.” The kid was paying attention; in fact he was hanging on every word. “So the priest asked for the Maharaja and his wife to sit within a circle of Sage. He entered the circle with the cane and started to explain them both why he had gone to such lengths.” A small knock at the apartment door distracted their attention as they both looked towards the opening door.

Liz stepped in hurriedly; she absorbed the scene before her. Raj was still sitting in his chair holding onto his cane. Dan was sat at his feet munching on a plate of sandwiches. A book was lying on the floor between the two of them. “I just got a quick break in traffic so I thought I’d pop up and see how things were going? I’m sorry if I was disturbing something?”

Dan jumped in first. “It’s going good Mum. Raj has tons of books and he’s loaned me a new book to read. He’s been telling me about the old days in India and his childhood. It’s pretty fascinating stuff although it makes you appreciate what we have over here and how lucky we are today.”

That hit the mark perfectly. “He’s no bother then?”

Raj played along, “No bother at all,” he said with a large reassuring smile”

Liz felt relieved; the scenarios running through her head had evaporated when she saw the two of them together recounting the old days and making a book connection. “Right, well I better get off in case someone notices I’m gone. Be back at 11ish after my shift,” and with that, she was gone, as abruptly as she’d arrived.

Raj looked at Dan, “The priest was holding the cane and entered a circle of Sage to join the Maharaja and his wife. He was about to explain something.”

“Yes, thanks.” Raj took another sip of water, it only took a few seconds, but they were excruciatingly long for Dan. Soon Raj resumed, “The priest explained to them that their lives would change due to her injury. He feared that they’d stop doing things together which would cause them to fall out of love. Her limp was severe and would over time get worse, although she could walk; her pace was slow and labored. The priest had designed a cane for her to walk with. The cane would not increase her speed or alter her situation in any way, except support her weight, and increase her stability. They both looked at the priest confused.”

The Maharaja spoke, “Any walking cane could do that and we didn’t need the exact specifications and cost delivered by this special cane?”

“The priest nodded respectfully. He then blessed the cane. The Maharaja’s patience was being pushed to the limit. It was time to explain why the cane was made so precisely and why it was so special. The priest explained that the cane was built to harness the power of their collective energies, their soul and their love. He’d hand picked the crimson colored rubies that would vibrate at their precise frequency. It was the same frequency that their bodies resonated. During the day the wife would be hampered by her injury, she was destined to remain a cripple. During the night when they entered a dream state they would be unencumbered, free to explore unattainable realms together with unlimited adventures. They could be happy, vibrant, healthy and together. The priest completed the ritual by smudging the cane with a piece of burning sage. The couple was asked to hold the cane and the silver orb became energized, fiery and glowing, it reacted violently to their body frequencies, as it does today. During the day the cane never left her side she would hold onto the cane as a walking aid. In the evening, during the privacy of their palace quarters, they would both hold the cane. In a room with no windows the orb would glow its crimson light and they would be transported to other worlds together. Their earthly bodies

would simply fall asleep. In these other worlds they were free to have adventures using their new personas living through their fit and able bodies. The priest warned them that their bodies in the other realms were mortal.

The vibration frequency was the key to the canes activation. This frequency denotes a pure heart often mirrored by strong love. It was rare that an individual poses this imprint. Very few people resonate at this level and the cane is attracted to them, it selects its new owner. You could say the cane is programmed to find such a person. If you come close to the cane your vibration will activate the crimson rubies and they will start to resonate and glow as they have done countless times.”

Raj lifted the cane slightly, “It’s called a Dream Cane.” He stopped to peer at Dan; Dan was listening intently. “There’s only one of its kind in the world and it’s very, very, special, just like you. We have to keep this safe and we have to keep this a secret. Many people with bad intentions would kill, lie and cheat to study how this works. It only can work with two people, it was engineered that way, and both have vibrate on the same frequency, the frequency of the pure heart.” Raj pointed to his heart and then to Dan’s heart. “Yes we are weird and special,” he said letting the cane rest and beaming a smile with a noticeable gap. Raj took his hand of the cane and gripped it with his legs. “If we both held this cane we’d be transported to another world. We can’t choose our adventure; the cane knows what we need to learn. Outside of this world exist many realms that we can’t see or touch because we don’t resonate with them. That doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

Dan interrupted, “Parallel universe theories and the like.”

“Yes something similar to that. Except these worlds are very different, they have their own rules, and when you’re transported into them you will take on new personas, new bodies and new capabilities. You are set to go on an adventure but sometimes its dangerous, you understand?

“I get it, so if you get killed you wake up, like game over in a video game?”

“No, not exactly my young friend, there are certain rules. If you get killed on your adventure, you never wake up. In these other realms you are mortal, you can die. The difference is that you can accumulate and retain powers from the more missions you complete.”

“That’s like picking up powers between levels in a video game. But you don’t die for real in a video game!”

“Exactly! Except this is real and you could die! My Grandfather and I went on many missions, I had to start slow and build my powers and my courage. I was afraid and didn’t want to die. Eventually my family had to move away, I missed our adventures so much, it broke my heart. I can’t tell you the fun we had, it changed me as a person. It made me a better man, fearless and patient. The worlds we saw together. The trick is to find out as quickly as you can why you are there and what you have to do to complete the mission. Each mission is unique, as unique as the world you find yourself in. If any one of the two is wakened from their sleep in the real world then the mission is over for the night. You can’t do more than one mission per night and if you don’t finish the mission you pick it up again in the same realm in the same spot the next time you both grab the Dream Cane. You can both remember everything but remember it’s dangerous to discuss it here on Earth, as no one will understand and they’ll think you’re crazy, weird.” Raj winked at Dan. “There’s one last thing that I need to tell you. If someone or something tries to wake you here on Earth you will see crimson butterflies, they will flutter around you. This is

consistent in every realm you enter. It's your signal to tell you that whatever you are doing, wherever you are is about to come to an abrupt end. You'll be returned to your world and wake from your sleep normally. To the outside person it looks as if you have just woken from a deep sleep. It always happens at the most inopportune time! Do you understand all of the rules?

"Yes, I've played video games that are more complicated." Dan smiled. "I do have a question as I'm curious, what happened to the Maharaja and his wife?"

"They went on many missions each night. They got stronger, wiser and more powerful. They fought battles together, defeated evil forces, found treasure and visited many realms. They loved their many adventures. They remained in love until he died from old age. It's said she met a palace entertainer one day whom accidentally activated the cane. They remained friends for a few years until she eventually died from a bad cold. She willed her walking cane to the entertainer and there's where the known chain ends. I know my Grandfather owned it but I don't know where he got it. He willed it to me as I will to you.

Dan had polished off the sandwiches. "So can we go on an adventure now?"

"Yes, but not tonight. I haven't gone on a mission since I was a kid, I'm just as excited, as you are, probably more, but trust me; we'll need more time to do this right, it's not a video game. Your Mother will return from her shift soon and she'd wake us; we won't have enough time to do our mission justice. When you see me tomorrow we can go on our first mission and visit our first realm. Dan if you mention any of this I'll put it down to your fanciful imagination. You can't talk of this to anyone not even your Mother.

"Are you kidding? She won't let me play video games never mind let me go on a real life adventure. I'm not going to mess this chance up; I just want to make sure what you're saying isn't some fanciful tale. But I know what I saw, the cane certainly reacted to me, there's no denying that."

The rest of the evening was spent discussing Raj's previous missions experienced with his Grandfather. The irony was not lost on Raj, an older gentleman and a young male. The cane was repeating its pattern except this time he was the older gentleman. The stories were captivating for Dan albeit the details dulled by the passage of time. Raj had not been able to freely discuss his adventures with anyone for a very long time. As he talked about the missions his memories came flooding back and his excitement grew. This time slipped away and it wasn't long before they both heard a soft knock at the door. "Come in" said Raj, raising the volume of his voice slightly. Liz opened the door and stepped in.

"Ready to go kiddo, Mum's dead tired and my feet are killing me?"

Dan was lying on the rug at Raj's feet, his head propped with a cushion as a pillow. He leapt to his feet and casually tossed the cushion onto the vacant chair. Dan turned to face Raj, "Thanks for the stories Raj. See you tomorrow?"

"You sure will," Raj turned his head to face Liz, "He was no problem Liz, and I enjoyed having him around, having some company."

Liz stopped Dan at the door, "Haven't you forgotten something?" She nodded in the direction of the floor.

Dan followed her eyes, “Oh, thank you.” He scurried to retrieve the book, “Jamaica Inn,” he said approaching the door for the second time.

“Come on then. Thanks Raj, see you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here Liz.”

Liz closed the door to apartment ‘2A’ and usher her son into their apartment across the hall. Once the door was closed she turned to face her son. “How was it really?”

Dan wasn’t expecting the question. “It was great Mum, you shouldn’t worry. Raj is a cool guy who loves books and reading. He told me of his life and his old country, India. He’s a really neat guy, I like him.”

There was a momentary pause as Liz tried to judge the validity and sincerity of his words. She quickly realized he was sincere. “Good, well get ready for bed, it’s getting late.” Dan moved slowly towards his room his head was filled with crimson butterflies and the details shared with him that night. He’d made a new and exciting friend. He was brimming with anticipation of the adventures to come. Liz closed the drapes to her apartment. She looked down on the street below. During the night it had rained, and the asphalt shone like a calm lake mirroring the soft yellow streetlights. Liz absorbed the quiet serenity below offered by the late hour. It was dark outside with most of the high street shops closed for the night. A faint rumbling of a heavy garbage truck could be heard in the distance as the stress of the day ebbed away from her tired body. Her mind wandered. She thought about her shift, the couple that seemed to be breaking up and the older couple still so much in love. She thought about Dan and about Raj sitting in his chair resigned to while away his remaining days in that apartment. She felt relief that the two of them had hit it off and that Bindi and Gyanesh seemed to like her. Could she finally allow herself to feel pleased? A small smile of satisfaction dared to encroach across her face and she felt herself exhale as she watched a solitary pigeon pick at the sidewalk below. Her smile soon subsided as her mind moved to next week and the introduction of Dan to his new school. ‘I hope he fits in,’ she thought, letting the drape close the night out.

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## Chapter 8: XXXXXXXXX

Westtown, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 2014

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The day had dragged for Dan. He couldn’t wait for the clock to say 4 o’clock and time to go visit Raj. He’d tried to distract himself with ‘Jamaica Inn,’ but he just couldn’t concentrate. He tried to stay out of his Mother’s way, as his impatience would become evident. Liz had a busy day, she needed to sort some financial things out with the bank, run some errands and buy some new flat shoes for her job. Her feet were painful at the end of a long shift. Dan took the opportunity to go for a walk and explore the place, checkout his route to school and bunker down within his room. It was still a blustery wet Autumn day and not too great on the weather front.

Liz had prepared lunch and Dan ate alone as Liz ran her errands. He was bursting with excitement. Should he go and visit Raj now? He’s right across the hall. What should he wear for

this adventure; will they be in the jungle and hot? What if they were in a cold place; perhaps it's Winter? Dan scolded himself, 'Don't be silly we're not going to walk into the new realm wearing Nike sneakers, Levi red tag jeans, a Philadelphia Flyers sweatshirt, and expect to blend right in.' He concluded that he was fretting over nothing. Raj hadn't told him what to wear? Should he sneak out a large kitchen knife with him to arm himself? How could he do that without being noticed? Besides, Raj would have kitchen knives!

Dan let out a long exasperated sigh. "I'm definitely over thinking this," he mumbled under his breath. He placed his chin upon his palms using them to prop up his heavy head while sitting at the dining table. From his current vantage point he could see the wall clock - 3.35pm. In another ten minutes he'd go to his room and change for his visit with Raj. It was then that the irony of the situation struck him. Two days ago he was dreading the impending visit with Raj; today he couldn't wait.

"Dan are you ready to go?" Liz raised her voice with a tinge of impatience. She couldn't be late, she needed to get going and Dan didn't seem to share her urgency. To her surprise, Dan opened the door to his room and was fully dressed, changed and ready to go.

"I'm ready let's go."

Liz grabbed her keys, her purse and her coat as quickly as she could gather them. She pushed Dan by the shoulders through the opened apartment door. She turned to lock the door while Dan walked towards apartment '2B'. Dan knocked gently upon the door waiting to hear the familiar sound of Raj's voice. He expected a cheery greeting delivered from his comfy chair but was surprised to see the door open. Raj was standing at the entrance waiting to greet the young man. "Come in Dan, nice to see you." Raj moved aside awkwardly hanging on to his cane for balance.

Dan seized the opportunity to move past Raj and enter the apartment. "Hey, aren't you going to say goodbye?" Liz pulled a face at Raj to indicate a mock scolding.

Dan halted in his path. "Oh, sorry Mum. I'll be good, you go to work and don't worry; Raj will look after me."

Raj smiled reassuringly at Liz, "He'll be fine, go, don't worry."

Liz smiled and reached forward to ruffle Dan's short hair. "You be good." She used her strict tone, more for show than for real. She turned and hurried down the stairs on her way to work. Liz didn't stop to turn around; she didn't want to be late.

Raj closed the apartment door and clicked the lock into place. "How are you kiddo?"

"Good, I've been counting down the hours. The afternoon's dragged on and I'm ready for an adventure." Dan took his chair next to Raj as he studied Raj's cumbersome movement towards his comfy chair. He shuffled his weight using the sturdy cane to support his ungainly frame. When Raj settled in his chair he turned to Dan and smiled.

"Let's give your Mother some time to settle into her shift. Then we'll begin. It will also give me some time to educate you a bit more on our journey before we start." Dan nodded in appreciation. "We won't know what our mission is or what realm we are transported into. We will always go back to the same realm until our mission is complete. Each realm is different and we will meet different characters in each realm. The rules are different for each realm, do you understand?"

“Not really, but I’ll learn as I go I suppose.” Dan shrugged his shoulders and inched closer to Raj perching on the edge of the large comfy chair.

“Okay. Let me tell you a few things, although it’s been a while since I’ve managed to enter a realm. Some realms feel like Earth, you know, trees and grass with buildings and people. Some are set in the future with advanced technology; some are set in the past with swords, horses and castles. Some realms are not like our world at all. The animals can talk, in some realms nobody talks; you just hear voices in your head. The plants can be different and it’s all a bit like a dream. I need to tell you one more thing; this may weird you out. When we get to our assigned realm we may not look like we do now. We’ll look different and be dressed differently. You may possess skills you didn’t know you had. But that’s half of the fun, you’ll see.” Raj had a glint in his eye clearly excited about the prospect of leaving his aged body behind.

“Sounds good, I can’t wait,” gushed Dan barely noticing the changed expression upon Raj’s face. Raj flinched in pain, a worried look clouded his eyes as a sharp pain shot through his ribs and bounced around the inside of his rib cage like a large basketball. He doubled over unable to conceal the pain. The sharp jabbing sensation soon dulled and made way for a crushing sensation. Raj felt as if a large anvil was crushing his chest and suppressing his ability to breathe. Dan finally noticed as was shocked at the pale color and strained look of distress that Raj was exhibiting. “Are you alright?” he inquired with panic streaking through his voice. “Do you want me to call emergency services?” Dan didn’t know what to do; he wished his Mother were here she’d take charge.

Raj waved his hand around feebly, “No. No. Don’t call anyone, this isn’t serious, happens all the time.” Raj fell back into his comfy recliner and gasped for air. “Don’t be alarmed, it’s heartburn.” He thumped his chest with his fist in a gesture meant to convince Dan. “I put way too many spices in my curry for dinner, way too many.” Dan wasn’t buying it but Raj was insistent. “Get me a glass of water from the kitchen will you?” Dan scurried off to fulfill the request. When he returned Raj was replacing the lid upon a plastic container of pills. He tilted his hand and let a large white pill enter his mouth as he motioned for the water. Dan offered him the glass and Raj seemed to gulp the water greedily. “Thanks, that should calm me down a bit, thanks.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Dan stared at the frail old man before him.

Raj’s entire demeanor changed, “I said it was heartburn didn’t I. Of course I’ll be okay.” Raj stared at his slippers unable to meet Dan’s critical stare.

Dan broke the awkward silence; “You were talking about the different realms, if you’re still feeling up to a mission tonight?”

Raj flashed him a look; he maintained a determined stare, so serious that Dan had not seen Raj like this before. “Don’t trifle with me boy, we’re going on a mission tonight.” Raj’s lower left eyelid twitched with the stress. “Okay kiddo this is how it’s going to happen. I’m going to grasp the Dream Cane with both hands firmly around the top here, holding the butterflies. I want you to slide forward onto the floor here in front of me.” Raj nodded his head in the direction of the empty space in front of his shins. Dan shuffled forwards, quickly positioning his body as instructed. “Now listen to me very carefully. In a moment I will ask you to hold the Dream Cane with both hands. Our energies will combine and the Cane will start to react. The ruby encrusted ball will shoot crimson light into the room and your head will start to spin; you may feel dizzy. Do not let go of the Cane. This is important, whatever you see, whatever you are feeling, don’t

let go of the Cane; you must grip it hard with both hands. Do you understand?" Dan nodded feeling his throat dry and the ability to form words drifting away from him. "Good, well here goes. Let me hold the Cane first, then I'll look at you, and you must hold on to it." Dan responded again with an excited nod.

"Do we know where we're going?" asked Dan feeling nervous for the first time.

"There are seven realms, Earth is known as the fifth realm. We could enter any realm, but it could also be in the past, present day or the future, we just don't know. Remember, when I look at you, grip the Cane with both hands and don't let go for anything."

The End ...

"The moment you stop believing in fanciful things, the world stops being fanciful."  
- Phil Armstrong