

*This is roughly the first half of my novel, Ms. X.
FYI . . . it is still rough around the edges, and things may change before it's finished.*

Many, many thanks to everyone who has provided encouraging words and positive energy so far.

*Much love to the backers of the defunct Kickstarter.
I'm sorry it didn't get off the ground. It doesn't mean I'm giving up.*

*I'm still hammering out the kinks in the final sections,
and will start pitching this to agents after the summer, because why not?*

Raney's story deserves to fly.

*Hang out with me @MediaPsychMarti on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram
and/or MediaPsychMarti.com*

Ms. X

by Marti Kole

The Dragon

He sat on the wall next to me, perched upright like a human. Big and beautiful, his breath was hot and smelled sweet. Purple and gold scales covered the dragon's body, glimmering in the sun as he breathed in and out with a slow cadence. His legs dangling over the side of the wall, the dragon hummed a little tune as he kicked his feet back and forth in small motions. Little stones fell off the wall in small showers where his hard-scaled heels tapped the rocks, and the pebbles clattered down the side of the wall into a blackness I could not see past. I giggled.

The dragon turned his head to the side and down so he could see me. I was sitting on the wall next to him—cross-legged, my chin in my hands. He huffed a tiny bit of cotton-candy smelling breath into my hair as he boomed out his question. “WHAT . . .” puff, “is so . . .” puff puff . . . “funny?” He finished with a huge puff for emphasis at his irritation.

Chin still planted in my hands, I rotated my head upwards to face the dragon's big purple snout. “You're humming *Puff the Magic Dragon*,” I giggled. I could not see his eyes to gage the dragon's reaction to my statement. His snout was so large and so close it took up my current field of vision.

My face was surrounded in cotton-candy breath as the dragon snorted a laugh. “I suppose I am.” He turned back to look down, watching his legs swing underneath him. The large beast heaved a medium-sized sigh.

Leaning over and reaching up, I put my hand on his enormous elbow . . . well, a purple scale on his elbow. One scale was the size of my palm. “I'm sorry,” I said, and I was sincere. “You're really quite a menacing dragon.”

He huffed. “Apparently not. You're supposed to be running and screaming.”

“I know.”

“It's my MO.”

“I know.”

“I appear in the dreamer's subconscious, representing some insurmountable problem . . .”

“Yes,” I said encouragingly.

“. . . and then they run screaming from me,”

I nodded.

“. . . and in their terror, I chase them over this cliff.”

I nodded again.

The dragon raised his clawed hands to the sky and thrust them downwards in a dramatic motion towards the black abyss below us. “And then they go plummeting over with the wonderful sound of a Wilhelm scream—plummeting to blackness before they wake up in their beds.”

I tried to look sympathetic.

The dragon snapped his head to look at me. “This is what I DO. This is my PURPOSE. I live in the dream realm and remind people they are scared of something in real life, and if they don’t face it, they’ll plummet down a metaphorical pit!”

A crystal pink tear appeared in the corner of his eye. I thought about reaching up to wipe it away, but there was no way to do that without climbing up the side of the dragon, and I decided that wasn’t a great idea at the moment. He wiped it away, and another one appeared after it.

“AND I’M CRYING. DRAGON’S DON’T CRY!!!! We also don’t have cotton-candy breath. And we don’t sit on walls with humans, singing human songs about dragons!!!”

I couldn’t help it. I giggled again.

“NOW WHAT?!?!?!?”

I hesitated. The dragon glared at me. I opened my mouth. “It’s just . . .”

“Yes?” he growled.

“It’s just . . . your voice. It sounds like John de Lancie.”

He did not look amused.

“You know? He voiced the character ‘Q’ on Star Trek the Next Generation, and Lauren Faust based the character of Discord on that character . . .”

The dragon looked confused. “Lauren who?”

“Lauren Faust. She recreated My Little Pony. She based the character of Discord on . . .”

The dragon stood up on the wall this time, wings outstretched . . . wow. I didn’t notice he had wings until he stood up. Anyway, wings outstretched, and roared, “YOU’RE TELLING ME I SOUND LIKE A PONY?!?!?!?!?”

“Well no. Discord is not a pony.”

“WELL WHAT IS HE?!?!?!” the dragon roared.

“He’s uh . . . well, I think he’s some sort of dragon.”

The dragon pondered this information for moment. “Oh,” he said, sitting back down. He resumed his foot-swinging.

I leaned in towards him. “You know, it’s not your fault.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s just that I can lucid dream.”

“Yup.”

“And that means I not only know that I’m dreaming,”

“I know.”

“. . . but that I can often control the dream.”

“I know.”

“And stop things lik-”

“Like dragons driving you over a cliff. I know.” The dragon’s wings drooped a little further as he sighed again. “It’s just—I haven’t ever been stopped before. Not once. I’ve met lucid dreamers, but never any who have actually stopped me. Much less befriended me.”

I looked at him in surprise. “You consider me a friend?”

He sat for a moment, realizing what he’d said. “I guess I do.”

“Cool.”

We sat in silence for a bit longer, watching the small pieces of stone that he was kicking off with his swinging feet fall to the blackness.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose I should be going. Other dreamers to terrorize and so forth.”

“Righto,” I said, standing up on the wall. “Well it’s been awfully nice chatting with—yyyAAAAAAHAHH!” Losing my balance, I tipped sideways and over the edge of the wall.

“ANDREA!!” the dragon cried, leaping to his feet. Headfirst, I plummeted downwards into the blackness, watching the startled dragon’s face get smaller and smaller as the blackness got bigger and bigger until it wrapped around me

**Puff, the magic dragon . . . lived by the sea,
And frolicked in the autumn mist
in a land called Honnah Lee . . .**

**Little Jackie Paper . . . loved that rascal Puff,
And brought him strings and sealing wax . . .
and other fancy stuff . . .**

- Puff the Magic Dragon

by Peter, Paul and Mary

The Mouse

My eyes flew open. There was a stone in front of my face. I blinked. No. No, it was a grey ball of fur—laying on my pillow next to my head.

I looked to my left. The sun hit my eyeballs. It had been up for hours, and its cheery light shone around the edges of the bedroom curtains. I scowled at the dreary brown pieces of fabric hanging like limp rags from the curtain rods. I had bought them on clearance until I found something I liked better. So far I hadn't gotten around to finding anything better. I sighed.

My sighing cued purring next to my right ear and I rolled my head back in that direction. The grey ball of fur on my pillow blinked at me and yawned. I scratched her behind the ears. She purred a little louder and stretched her front paws out, flexing her claws. I mimicked the gesture, admiring my shimmery light purple painted nails. "Sweet kitty," I cooed at her. She yawned. "Mouse, I couldn't agree more," I told her. She flipped her tail around her nose and curled back in a furry ball. Oh, how I envied her. No troubles. No responsibilities. No crappy job. In my next life, I shall be a cat.

Wait. I didn't have a crappy job. I didn't have A job. Better economy, my asshole. The thought depressed me enough to keep me in bed, and I snuggled deeper in the covers.

A sunbeam snuck around the side of the ugly brown curtains and hit me in the eyeball. "I know!" I snarled at the sunbeam. I took a deep breath. "I am grateful for . . ." at a loss, I stopped. I was working through this Law of Attraction book—one of those new age ideas that in order to get new, happy things in your world, you have to vibrationally attract them. One of the activities in the book was to be grateful for five things when you get up in the morning. This was hard for someone with depression problems. "Situational depression" my therapist called it. "My life is fucked up" I called it.

Same thing.

I swung my feet around parallel to the floor and hovered there for a minute. "I am grateful for Mouse," I said, half-hoping she'd give me a pitiful mew or something to beg me to stay in bed. Mouse offered no disagreement or confirmation.

I put my feet on the floor and stood up.

Fucking floor was freezing.

I reached for my house shoes and shoved them on my feet. Purple and fuzzy, they surrounded my toes in warmth and comfort. "I am grateful for house shoes," I stated.

On closer inspection, I realized I could see part of a little toe poking out of the side of the thread-barran house shoes.

I sighed, and sat back on the bed. I immediately stood up again, stretching my arms above my head and running my hands through my long blood-red hair. I'd gotten the energy to get up—I'd even managed the energy to put on house shoes—and I'd befriended a dream dragon. An imaginary accomplishment, but I was listing it anyway. "I am grateful for dream dragons." That was a weird one, but it ticked the list up to three items of gratitude. I only needed two more.

"I am grateful Christmas is in a month." That one was pretty much true. I always liked Christmas.

Squaring my shoulders, I straightened my thin frame and stood tall. I decided I would leave the bedroom today. I would find things to be grateful for, and I would try not to entertain any negative thoughts. I would have an interesting day. Ooooo, I liked that. "I am grateful for interesting things," I added to the list. There. Five.

Feeling better about life in general, I took a step towards the bathroom.

A horrific KA-BOOM shook the building, shattering the windows of the bedroom, and knocking every thing off every shelf and wall. I hit the floor, palms down, cracking my head on the laminate wood. A single gray streak shot off the bed, and cowered under the dresser, hissing. My ears ringing from the sound of the blast, I sat up and examined the tiny cuts in my hands from the window glass. I could feel the blood trickle down the side of my face from a small gash on the right side of my forehead. From outside the broken windows, I could hear cries and screams, and car horns and general panic.

"Well alrighty then," I said out loud, seated amongst all the broken glass. "That qualifies as interesting."

Rattled, I stayed griping the floor for a minute in case any more blasts followed the first one. Time ticked by, and no more kabooming commenced. Broken glass was everywhere. I was bleeding. Ignoring these two facts, I decided instead to check on my cat. I stood up, grateful for the hard-bottomed house shoes (ooooo, does that count as another bit of gratitude for my list?) and shook the glass out of my black and white checkered pajama pants and black tee shirt. "Kitty kitty?" I called softly. I had seen Mouse bolt under the dresser, so I assumed she hadn't been injured, but I wanted to make sure. Walking over to the dresser and leaning down, I saw angry eyes glaring at me. "What are you pissed at me for? I didn't cause the . . ." I stopped. Earthquake? In Harmony? Did we have earthquakes? I guess the New Madrid fault was within range—it threatens to destroy a good chunk of the midwest when it shifts. Made the Mississippi flow backwards or something eons ago. But this didn't feel like an earthquake. Like I'd know what one felt like—but somehow I knew this wasn't an earthquake.

I looked at irritated cat eyes. “Look, fuzzball, you can't run around this room until I get the glass cleaned up. And you might get out of one of the windows. Please come out like a good kitty?”

Mouse was not in the mood to be a good kitty. Five minutes and five thin bloody scratches on my left arm later, her fuzziness was removed from under the dresser and unceremoniously dumped in the bathroom. I slipped inside the room with her and closed the door. There were no windows in the bathroom, so no glass, and a little skylight provided some natural light. An apartment on the top floor had its benefits.

I turned towards the bathroom mirror and inspected the cut on my forehead. It was hard to tell if there was any bleeding anywhere else on my head, as my hair color was a deep red and blood would blend right into it. It was easy to see blood gushing down my face, but I should probably deal with my hands before I used them to bandage my head. I examined the cuts on my palms. They didn't look bad—just surface gashes. I carefully washed my hands, then poured peroxide on the palms accompanied by “OW OW OW OW” noises. I wrapped my hands in a thin layer of gauze, then wiped and peroxidized the gash on my head. It didn't look bad, just bleeding a lot. I think head wounds bleed a lot. Must've heard that on some movie or something. I applied a Star Wars bandaid to my forehead.

I ran a brush over my long hair into the trashcan in case any glass was settled in the strands, and checked for any other bleeding body parts. Looking in the mirror, I decided to add a number six to my gratitude list. “I am grateful I do not look my age,” I told my reflection. If connecting with my high school friends on Facebook taught me anything, it's that we do not all age equally. Somehow I had been blessed with good genetics, and had been pegged as low as a 20-year-old. Few people knew I was actually 38. A lady is allowed to lie about her age and her weight. Rail-thin in my younger years, I'd fluffed up to 140 when I was married. Lately stress and depression had brought me back down to 115. I call it the “I Forgot To Eat Today” diet. It's probably not the healthiest thing in the world.

Exiting the bathroom, I shut the door quickly behind me so Mouse couldn't get out. Searching through the mess, I found my cell phone unbroken on the floor. I added that fact to my gratitude list. “Up to seven—look at me,” I muttered.

“NO SERVICE” my cell phone cheerfully informed me, and I shoved it in my back pajama pants pocket. I crunched across the broken glass-covered bedroom floor and opened the door. Giving an audible whistle, I looked at the wreck that was my living room.

Every picture was off the wall, shattered on the floor. Every item on every table was also on the floor. The little blue Christmas tree I'd spent two hours assembling earlier that week was tipped over against the couch. My big screen tv that I'd hung from the

flimsy little arm on the wall—was actually still holding nicely. I walked over to it and pressed the power button to turn it on. The arm still held firmly to a chunk of wall on one side and the tv on the other as the entire apparatus plunged to the floor at the touch of my hand. “Of course,” I grumbled. That was stupid anyway. The electricity was probably out. I turned and flipped on a lamp. Nothing.

Alright. I’ll do this the old-fashioned way. Leaving my apartment, I walked down the stairs to the front door. I hesitated, then opened the door and stepped out on the front porch.

Out on the street, it was a madhouse. People were running and screaming, arms flailing. Giant fireballs rained from the sky.

Ok, it was none of that, but that’s what I thought I’d see.

Instead, the streets were filled with people—most of them were doing what I was doing . . . staring around and blinking in confusion at the other people staring around and blinking in confusion. The sound of car alarms filled the air. Most of the Christmas decorations on the electrical poles hung firmly, but a few were on the ground. I noticed a piece of sky in the distance that was discolored, and realized there were plumes of smoke rising into the air.

I looked around to see any familiar faces—not sure why I bothered, I didn’t really know anyone on my block, even though I’d lived here three years. Everyone seemed as puzzled as I was, so I decided not to ask anyone anything. I closed the front door and walked back up the stairs to my apartment.

I lived in a little house that had been converted to apartments. I lived on the top floor, a nice couple named—Smith? Smitty? Smi. . . something—lived on the main floor, and the landlord lived in the basement. I knew the Smi-somethings were out of town this week, and the landlord was probably at work, so no need to check on them.

Would any of them check on me if they were home? A question—I guess—that’s not relevant at the moment.

I went back in my apartment and crunched across the living room to the kitchen. No glass in here—no windows. My dishes seemed to be intact as well. I took a bowl out of the cabinet and headed for the bedroom. Back in the bedroom, I shoved on a pair of black jeans, socks, and black lace-up boots. I grabbed a Baja Hoodie and a tee shirt from my closet, putting them on as I crunched across the glass to the bathroom door. Slipping inside the door, I filled the bowl with water and set it on the floor. I pulled back the shower curtain to find Mouse cowering in the bathtub, tail twitching. “Don’t look at me with that tone of voice,” I quipped. “I can’t let you out of the bathroom until I get all the glass cleaned up.” I pointed at the water dish. “Here’s fresh water. You can lay on . . .” I grabbed a clean towel off the shelf and laid it beside the water bowl. “. . . this, and if you need a kitty box you can use . . .” I looked around. “Uh . . .” Mouse glared at

me. “Well, just improvise,” I shrugged. Mouse did not look amused. “Be a good girl, sweet kitty—I’m going to go see why the sky is falling.”

Walking down the steps of the little house, I debated the best way to try and get anywhere. It probably was a bad idea to get in my car. No telling if the roads would be blocked, with everyone freaking out.

Hmmmm. People would be freaking out. Should I go back inside and get my handgun? I’d had a carry permit for going on five years now. Was actually pretty decent with the thing, and nailed plenty a target. My instructor at the gun range had tried to convince me to do tournament shooting, but I wasn’t into that. One of my foster dads taught me to shoot, and I had a natural knack for it. Decided to make it official in my adult years and get a permit. I turned around to go inside and get it, but then spun back around when I remembered it wasn’t inside. I looked to the right and the left sheepishly—wondering if anyone had seen my strange 360 dance. No one had.

Deciding the car was a bad idea, I walked to my bike, chained to a tree by the mailbox. I unlocked the bike and threw my leg over. It was usually a little too cold to ride a bike in December, but the weather had been unseasonably warm lately. Ok, which way to go? I looked again towards the black plumes of smoke rising from the southeast outskirts of the city. Noticing that everyone else seemed to be going in that direction, I decided to head north instead of south. Pointing my bike, I began to pedal.

North Instead of South

Walking in the door of Angel Investigations, I chimed out my usual sing-song “HeIIII-OOOOOO!” greeting. In college, one of my music professors always entered a room like that, and several of her students (myself included) picked up on the fun and melodic habit. Professor Johnson was a pleasant, but professional lady. She never hesitated to offer praise where she felt it was deserved, but was just as quick with criticism and disappointment. Prof. Johnson had the unnerving ability to make you feel like you were three inches tall, and do so with an unwavering smile on her face. McGonagall meets Snape on a good day kinda combo.

I heard Professor Johnson died recently. Cancer, not a snake bite through the neck at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

My word, I have a morbid inner dialogue. Good thing no one else can hear that.

“HeIIII-OOOOOOOO???” I chimed again—adding a questioning uplift at the end this time. “Did the alien attack get you guys?”

Still silence.

I weaved my way around debris and broken furniture strewn across the small lobby. The little Christmas tree originally on an end table was laying on the floor—along with most everything else that was on a table or wall in the lobby. “Hello?” I called, this time minus the singing. My heart increased pace. It was too quiet in here.

“Hello?” a weak voice called from the back. “Raney? Help . . .”

I burst through the office door, concern written all over my face—which turned to exasperation as to what I found on the other side of the door.

“Not funny, you two. I panicked for a second.” I frowned at my friends. Dean was punching buttons on his phone with a furrowed brow, perched on a cardboard box sitting on an arm back chair. Gabriel was picking up books off the floor, shaking glass out of each one before placing it on the top of one of five categorized stacks. He looked at me and grinned. “Sorry. Couldn't resist messing with you. It's just so easy to do.”

Looking at my childhood friend from top to bottom, I took in his sandy blond hair and slightly muscled physique. Gabriel Jones was always one of these guys who looked athletic but didn't have to work out much to define his muscles. I was always taller until he surprised me in a crazy teenage growth spurt, and stayed a couple inches taller than me ever since. Gabriel was dressed in his usual neat blue jeans and wrinkle-free flannel shirt. He wore flannel no matter what the weather. Irritated at the practical joke,

I contemplated punching my friend but decided instead to hug him. Then I punched him. Gabriel feigned extreme pain, clutching his arm and dropping the book he had in his hands. “OOOOowwww!!! You little. . .” but he broke off when he noticed my bandaged hands and grabbed my wrist, looking concerned. “Raney! Did you hurt yourself? Are you ok?” He touched my Star Wars bandaid on my head. I nodded. “Just a few scratches. I’ll live.”

I patted Dean on the head with a bandaged hand instead of hugging or punching him. He appeared deep in button-pressing and I didn't want to disturb him.

“Network down?” I asked him.

Dean McGowan’s dark brown hair fell into his eyes as he leaned closer to the phone screen like that would help. He had rolled the sleeves up of his light blue button-up dress shirt, and I swear he’d pressed his khakis. Maybe that’s why Gabriel’s flannel shirts always looked so neat and wrinkle-free. I’ll bet Dean irons them. “Mmm,” he replied to my inquiry.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I responded.

“Mmph.”

Looking around for a place to sit and finding none, I opted to help clean up the mess. Gabriel had strung lights everywhere in celebration of the upcoming holidays, and what was once festive and pretty was now tangled around piles of papers and books. Walking around the room, I started picking up papers, shaking out the glass, and stacking them on a table in the corner. “So, any buzz on what happened?” I asked, picking up a thick file folder labeled: “Mrs. Vanhusen's Lying Cheating Asshole Husband” before tucking the papers inside and placing it on top of a stack of other case files.

“Nothing so far,” Gabriel said. “Dean's been trying to get on the internet any way he can, but so far everything's down. No electricity, no internet, no cell service.”

“I assume your family is ok?” I asked, directing the question to Gabriel. Dean and his family are . . . estranged. Estranged is a polite way to put it.

Gabriel nodded. “I was over there for breakfast this morning. Mom and Dad weren’t planning on going anywhere until this afternoon, and my sister was still in bed when I left. They’re far enough outside the city I doubt they were hit at all.”

I picked up a pencil cup on Gabriel’s desk, removed the pencils and pens, dumped the glass on the floor, and returned the writing utensils to their home. His name plaque was dangerously close to the edge of the desk. I picked it up and wiped the front off with a sleeve. ‘Gabriel Jones, Professional Private Investigator’ it read in neat serif lettering. I started to set it down and realized there were shards of glass where I was about to set it down. “This is such a fucking mess,” I stated. Looking for a rag or something to wipe

off his desk, I opened a bottom drawer and spotted a box in it. “Ah!” I exclaimed. “I thought I’d left this here.” I pulled out a handgun. Nothing special, but it fit my hand nicely, and it was a nice weight. The Walther PPK pistol had been a gift from the foster dad who taught me to shoot. “Use it to scare off people, not to hurt them,” he’d said. I’d never done either. Injured plenty of targets, though.

I shut the desk drawer, and little shards of glass fell from the bottom of the desk onto the floor. “How in the HELL can pieces of glass get in every crack and crevice?” I inhaled sharply. “BERNARD!” I looked at Gabriel. “Bernard?”

Gabriel shook his head. “He was sitting on this bookshelf when I left last night, and as you can see . . .”

I could see. The bookshelf was now a pile of books and boards.

“That’s why he started with the books,” Dean stated without lifting his head from the iPhone. I walked over to the pile o’ bookshelf.

“Bernard?” I called. Gabriel kept picking up books and shaking glass from the pages. He tried not to look worried. “He’s a tough little guy, Gabriel,” I said, putting my hand on my best friend’s shoulder. “He’s been through worse. Remember the Broke Baker case?”

Dean snorted, but did not look up from his phone.

Gabriel covered his face dramatically. “Don’t remind me!!! I thought Bernard was a goner!!!”

My childhood friend/drama queen Gabriel runs a detective agency called Angel Investigations. Get it? Gabriel? Angel Investigations? He’s also a HUGE sci-fi buff, and he’s a bit tickled that he can use the name Angel Investigations from Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Well, actually a spin-off of Buffy called Angel, but no one really remembers the spin-off. Gabriel and I have been friends for as long as I can remember, and we both devoured every book, movie, tv show and comic related to anything science-fiction or general weirdness growing up. These days geek girls are everywhere. I did it before it was cool.

Gabriel has owned Angel Investigations for—oh, somewhere around ten years now. I love him to pieces, but he’s not very good at it. Still, somehow, Gabriel’s gotten a good amount of clients. I think it has something to do with him being listed first in the Yellow Pages—although a lot of it is search engine SEO stuff that Dean does to put Angel Investigations at the top of the web search results. Most of their clients are crazy, and very few cases have gotten Gabriel’s oh-so-prized ‘SOLVED’ rubber stamp across their files, but it keeps him busy and happy. Dean is also a huge science fiction/comic book geek, and was initially excited about the name Angel Investigations, but later tried to talk Gabriel out of it . . . said the Jesus freaks would think he was a Christian-based

detective agency . . . and then they'd burn the place to the ground when they discovered the Christian-based detective agency was run by a gay man.

We then had to talk Gabriel out of Homo-Loving Detective agency, and listen to his anti-LGBT-asshole-religious-nutbags rant for the rest of the evening. I suggested 'Drama Queen's Detective Agency' which Dean found hilarious, but Gabriel not so much.

The top listing for Angel Investigations in the Yellow Pages still works for the old-timers who still use the Yellow Pages, like the Broke Baker case. He was a baker NAMED Baker (I can't make this shit up) and he had declared bankruptcy. Hired us to prove one of his employees ran off with a bunch of money, but instead we wound up finding the money hidden in a fridge (again, cannot make this shit up) at his bakery. When we reported it to the police, the dude vanished, but not before running off with the cash and leaving all the kitchen and bathroom sinks on, flooding his bakery and causing a huge amount of damage. He had hired Gabriel to try to add credibility to the 'I was robbed' story. Angel investigations was the one who wound up being robbed—the guy didn't pay the boys any money, and they reported Mr. Baker to the police. When Gabriel and Dean opened the door to the bakery for the cops to show them the evidence, they all got splashed in the overflowing flood—knocking Gabriel down and soaking him from head to toe—and his backpack. His backpack where Bernard was. Gabriel was inconsolable until Dean and I got Bernard all dried out and back to his normal fluffiness.

Oh—I should mention—Bernard is a teddy bear. My full-grown adult best friend has a teddy bear.

Not just any teddy bear, mind you. Bernard is an anthropomorphized furry ball of attitude and sass. I created this monster years ago when Gabriel was in a state after a bad day at school. Back in the days when Gabriel and I were kids, boys who liked boys and girls who liked girls stayed quiet about such inner dialogues except to close friends and family. They waited until college before 'coming out.' Gabriel played by the rules, and never told anyone but me about his crushes. But children can ferret out children who are different, and Gabriel was often bullied and beaten up. In the fourth grade, he received the name 'Gay Boy Gabriel' from some idiot jock, and the horrible name stuck with him through the entirety of our grade school and high school days. The kids soon shortened it to 'GBG' so the teachers wouldn't realize what it meant, and they would yell: "GBG has STDs!! GBG has STDs!!" even though the miserable little brats probably had no idea what an STD was.

One day, after a particularly bad instance of bullying that not only included that charming little ditty, but a wedgie incident in PE class that ripped the band off Gabriel's underwear, I sat with Gabriel on the floor of his bedroom after school. He was quiet, and just stared at the floor. I went in the kitchen and made him a peanut butter and honey sandwich—his favorite—and set it on the floor beside him. He just sat there in a lump. I grabbed a brown teddy bear off the bed, and sat the furry little guy in front of me. Gabriel continued to stare at the floor.

I hopped the bear a few inches in front of me, and sat him on the ground. Gabriel didn't move. I hopped the bear a few inches closer, and sat him down again. Gabriel moved only his eyeballs to the right slightly to look at the bear. I hopped the bear a few inches to the right, towards the plated sandwich. Gabriel's eyes followed the bear. The three of us sat quietly for a moment, then in one fell swoop, I grabbed the bear and made him pounce on the sandwich. Gabriel jumped, then leaped for the sandwich. "Too slow!!!" I cheered, and sat the bear on my lap, making his paws clasp the sandwich above the bear's head in triumph.

Gabriel giggled, and loudly called the bear's name— "BerNARD!!! Give me back my sandwich!" I made Bernard shake his head, and do a little dance, still holding the sandwich. Gabriel dove for the sandwich, and I had Bernard jump on the bed, drop the sandwich, and flip off Gabriel.

Ok, a teddy bear has no fingers to flip off anyone, but I could do an arm-against-arm motion with a paw raise that simulated flipping off. Gabriel fell on the floor laughing, and I continued the charade, having Bernard look over the side of the bed at Gabriel on the floor, with a paw over Bernard's face shaking his head in silent teddy bear laughter. Then Bernard threw the sandwich at Gabriel, and hit him square in the face. Gabriel and I laughed so hard we cried, and . . . well, a character was born.

Bernard became our comic relief—our way of cheering each other up when we were down, or a way to just let loose and be silly and childish and funny. Bernard had a major attitude from the start, and his MO is stealing stuff and brandishing attitude whenever needed—usually with one of us yelling "BerNARD!!!" at him when he's caught. The little brown bear also usually watches movies with us, and is a huge Superman fan. When Dean and Gabriel started dating, Dean bought Bernard a Superman suit from Build-A-Bear, and I knew Gabriel had found the perfect match.

"BERNARD!!!" Gabriel had lifted a dictionary and found the stuffed bear underneath. Dean looked up from his phone.

I leaned down and picked the bear up. "He doesn't appear to be . . . oh oh." I looked at Gabriel, extreme concern on my face.

"What?!" Gabriel cried, grabbing the bear from me and beginning to examine him. Dean even looked concerned.

"He's PISSED you left him here last night. Says you should've taken him home." Gabriel's face was close to the bear, examining him for damage. I took one of Bernard's paws and punched Gabriel in the face.

"Ow!" Gabriel winced, then hugged his bear. "Glad you're ok, Bernard. Seems like he's his old self." Dean grinned and returned to his phone. Gabriel took off Bernard's dark brown neck bow and shook it to remove any glass shards, then brushed the bear off and set him and the bow on an empty shelf. The shelf crashed to the ground.

“You’ve got quite a bit of clean-up to do here, my boys,” I said. Gabriel sighed.

We spent a few hours cleaning up, moving broken furniture and other items into the lobby in a neat stack of debris. Five garbage bags later, you couldn’t tell anything had happened in there. Well, except for the stacks of books because of lack of bookshelf, empty holes in the walls where pictures and shelves had fallen, and the glaring lack of a window.

“Do you think we’ll have to worry about looters?” Dean asked, frowning at the window.

“Well, you guys are on the second floor,” I commented. “They’d have to scale the wall to get to you.”

Gabriel stuck his head out the window and looked down. “Yeah, and that doesn’t look fun.” He leaned back inside and turned around, surveying the room. “Besides, there’s nothing in here to steal. No money, nothing of value. If they want the couch in the lobby and the coffee maker, they’re welcome to it.

“Coffee maker broke when it was knocked off the table,” Dean reminded him, returning to his arm chair.

Gabriel sighed. “Of course it did.”

“Hello?” We heard a familiar female voice from the lobby. Gabriel grinned and kept silent. I whacked him on the arm with the back of my hand. “Hel-LO?” the voice called a little louder. I opened my mouth to answer, but Gabriel clamped his hand over it. We began scuffling like two kids fighting over a candy bar.

Dean continued the joke. “Clove? Help . . .” he called weakly. On the floor now scuffling with Gabriel, I threw a book in Dean’s direction. Gabriel’s sister Clove walked in the door, directly in the path of the book.

“HEY!” she recoiled. She crossed her arms, pretending to look cross. “Very funny, guys.”

“They did the same thing to me,” I said from the floor. Gabriel was sitting on my torso, holding Bernard on my chest who was taunting me. “I tried to stop them from being mean to you, but . . .” I gestured helplessly with the one arm I had that was free. Bernard pounced on it.

Clove Jones looked around, brushing a strand of her unnaturally-white hair out of her face. It was a stark contrast to her outfit— which was entirely black. Black skirt, black shirt, black boots. I bought her a tee-shirt last year that says, “I’ll stop wearing black when they invent a darker color.” She wears it all the time—although today she’d opted

for a lacy pull over. “You guys did a good clean-up job,” she complimented. “Except for the broken window and missing bookcase, it doesn’t look like anything hit nearby at all.”

Dean sat forward in the arm chair, looking excited. “Something hit somewhere? Do you know what happened?” Gabriel rolled off me and sat resting against his desk. I removed Bernard from my arm and put him in my lap, sitting cross-legged next to Gabriel and listening intently. Clove nodded, pulling up one of the other arm chairs usually reserved for clients.

Clove and Gabriel beat the snot out of each other when they were children, but when she hit the angst-ridden teenage years, Gabriel became a fierce protector of his little sister. Her real name isn’t Clove. She earned that nickname in college for her love of clove cigarettes.

Another piece of her bleached-white blond hair fell out of her ponytail and in her eyes. She shoved it behind her ear as she began. “All I know is what I’ve heard from the crew at the coffee house. Electricity is out all over the city, and several cell towers were damaged, so phones are down. Emergency buildings are running on backup generators, and police officers are providing information to groups of people in person.”

Dean looked impatient. “AND??!”

“Aliens!” I cheered, holding Bernard’s arms upwards in a gesture of triumph. Dean and Clove looked in my direction, mildly irritated.

“Aliens!!” Gabriel agreed, duplicating Bernard’s triumphant upward arm gesture.

The silence in the room was deafening.

“Not aliens?” I said sadly, lowering Bernard’s paws.

“Not aliens,” Clove said solemnly. Gabriel dropped his arms too.

Dean looked grim. “A bomb?”

Gabriel got uncharacteristically serious. “A terrorist attack?”

“A suicide bomber?” Dean suggested.

Gabriel and Dean then traded suggestions rapid-fire.

“A car bomb?”

“A dirty bomb?”

“A downed airplane?”

“A pipeline explosion?”

“Aliens?” I threw in again. Disapproving stares again.

“If you idiots would give me a chance,” Clove sighed. We all leaned forward. Clove paused for dramatic affect. “It was a meteor.”

We all leaned back with a unanimous “Oooh.”

Clove continued. “It hit the atmosphere above Harmony, burst into a fireball, and what was left crashed into pieces on the outskirts of the city. Most of the meteors hit-”

“Meteorites,” Dean corrected.

“What?” Clove looked irritated.

“When a rock is in the atmosphere, it is called a meteor,” Dean schooled. “When it hits earth it’s called-”

“-a meteorite. Yes, I got it, Professor Tyson,” Clove teased.

“Actually,” Dean said, “It’s Dr. Tyson. Neil deGrasse Tyson has a doctorate in . . .” Clove’s piercing glare silenced him. “Sorry. Continue.”

Clove continued. “Most of the METEORITES hit outside the city. The largest number of them landed on—and destroyed— Montgomery Stadium.”

“Signs from the gods an evil corporation shouldn’t have branded our football stadium,” I muttered. The small group nodded in agreement.

“Wait, don’t you work for Montgomery Inc.?” Dean asked in my direction.

I wrapped my arms around Bernard and rested my chin on his head. “Officially, I’m independent contract, so no. Technically, I DO work at their headquarters, so yes. Albeit part-time. Albeit I don’t want to. If a meteorite took out that building I’d be quite pleased.” I realized what I said and amended. “An EMPTY building. Empty.” I gestured to Clove to continue.

“Hundreds of people have been hurt—some really badly,” she said. “Cuts from shattering glass and debris, and also burned eyes from those who saw the thing hit.” The boys and I winced at the idea of burned eyeballs. “Death reports are coming in— a family was killed in a car accident, a man was speared in the head with a piece of plate glass window. . .” she paused, then finished sadly, “. . . and a hotel by the stadium collapsed.”

“Damn,” I said. “This close to Christmas, there’s probably a lot of people who were staying there.”

We sat still, pondering this in silence.

A minute later Dean broke it. “Ah! I have internet!” Clove leaned over and Gabriel and I jumped off the floor. We all crowded around the tiny screen. Dean had a cell phone video someone had shot from a moving car on his screen. We watched as the shaky video showed a fireball streaking across the sky through the front car window. The fireball plummeted towards the ground, smoke in its wake, becoming brighter and brighter until the whole screen was white. Then there was a horrific BOOOM!!! and the picture came back. The car was stopped, pulled to the side of the road, windows shattered. Other cars were also pulled over. Someone was screaming. The video ended.

“Well, that was somewhat horrifying,” Clove said matter-of-factly.

“How’s this for horrifying?” Dean said, focused on his phone screen. We all leaned in again.

“I am— well, I was— on the second floor of the hotel,” a voice was saying. The video was black, except for a couple of specks of light. “I can move, but I can’t see a thing other than what my phone will light up,” the voice continued. “I can feel blood running down my leg into my shoe, but I can’t tell how badly I am injured. I can crawl around, but I can’t find a way out of here.”

I inhaled. “O-my-god that’s someone trapped in one of the buildings that fell.”

Dean nodded. “They’ve been recording on Facebook live for a half hour now. No one knows where in the rubble they are. Rescue crews are trying to get to them, but the whole thing could crash in at any second.”

Clove looked grave. “And the whole thing would be streamed live.”

Gabriel reached across and put his hand over Dean’s phone. He gently pushed it down, looking Dean kindly in the eyes. “Sweet man, put the phone away. We need to keep the battery as long as we can anyway.”

Dean clicked off the video, clapping his left hand over Gabriel’s hand still on the phone. Dean has a steady demeanor, but a soft soul. His face stayed firm, but I could tell he was deeply rattled by the thought of someone trapped alive. He leaned down to bump Gabriel’s forehead with his own in a gesture of affection, then stood up and walked out the door.

Family Fuzziness, Frozen Pizza, and Poker

Since the sun was going down, we all decided to stick together and congregate somewhere there was food. This was difficult without electricity. Knowing I had a whole closet shelf of candles, I suggested peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at my house, and the group agreed.

Gabriel's phone was dead, but Dean's had power, and he texted Gabriel and Clove's parents to let them know the plan. They texted back, saying they had power and frozen pizzas. The vote was amended to head to Gabriel and Clove's parents' house. I thought of Mouse in the bathroom—now dark without light coming through the little skylight.

Gabriel read my mind. "Would you like to run home and grab Mouse, pack a bag, and come to Mom and Dad's for the night?" he asked me.

"Thank you! Yes, that's perfect," I said.

"It's dark and creepy out with no streetlights," Clove said. "Let me drive you, and you can leave your bike chained up here."

Details sorted, the boys and girls parted ways on the sidewalk, and I opened the door to Clove's little rusted 1983 Mustang hatchback. I feel I should mention the year so you wouldn't think it was a hot sports car. That's so not Clove. But a little beat-up creation from the 80's is totally her.

"Oh wait!" I exclaimed. "Forgot something." I ran back up to the office, fumbling with the keys in the darkened hallway. I clicked my cell phone to light up the screen, and pointed it as a makeshift flashlight at the lock. Opening the door and walking in the office, I turned on the actual flashlight app since it was way darker in the lobby area. I flashlited my way to Dean's desk, opened the bottom drawer, and pulled out the box with my handgun. It was a 1935 Walther PPK, given to me by my last foster dad. I'd been good with the thing, and he gifted it to me on my 18th birthday. I liked to shoot with it down at the shooting range, but I didn't carry it on me often. Tonight, no telling who was out and about in the dark. Better safe than sorry.

"Moneypenny?" Clove asked when I got in the car. "Moneypenny," I confirmed. Did I mention my gun had a name? My gun has a name. Clove started the car. Her headlights streaked bright light across the road, and we both threw our hands up to protect our eyeballs. "YAAAA! BRIGHT LIGHT— BRIGHT LIGHT!" I playfully screeched.

“I’m a mogwai!” Clove giggled, and I fist-bumped her. Clove was not a self-professed geek, but hanging out with her brother and his best friend her whole life meant some of it rubbed off on her.

Christmas decorations that had been up for weeks now were black silhouettes in the dark streets—those that survived the blast, anyway. Even though the city was bathed in black, it seemed the citizens of Harmony were behaving themselves. As we drove, we saw groups of people moving broken furniture to the curb, people standing around and surveying the damage by flashlight, and just neighborly people in general. It was cool to see such friendliness.

Pulling up to the house that contained my apartment, Clove parallel parked neatly and shut the engine off. “Yup. Looks like you’re out of power as well. Hope you didn’t go grocery shopping recently. All your food will be ruined.”

Actually, I had. Sigh.

We both climbed out of the car and took out our cell phones, turning on the flashlight function. “I hope no one thinks we’re robbing the place,” I giggled. We started up the stairs.

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!!!” a voice boomed, and a flashlight blinded me. I dropped my cell phone with a shriek. The flashlight lowered. “Oh, sorry Raney. I’m a little nervous tonight.”

“No problem, Tom,” I said, retrieving my cell phone from the sidewalk. “Clove, it’s ok, this is my landlord.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Clove said, her hands still raised in the air.

Tom waved the palm of his hand in a downward motion. “Put your hands down, dear—I’m sorry I scared you. Nice to meet you— Clove, you said?”

“It’s a nickname,” Clove said as she lowered her hands.

“Nice to meet you,” Tom said again. He turned to me. “Glad to see you’re ok. I stuck my head in the door to check on your apartment when I got back from work. Heard your cat hollering from the bathroom.”

“OH, no—did you let her out?” I asked.

“Nah, I figured you shut her in there to protect her from the glass,” Tom said.

“And to keep her from getting out the window. What a mess this all is. Any word on when the power will be back on?” I asked.

Tom shook his head. “Can’t get through to the power company. No idea. Water is working, so that’s a relief at least.”

“Would you like some candles to get you through the night?” I asked. “I have a ton.”

“Well actually, yeah—that’d be great. I don’t have much use for candles. Never keep any around,” Tom said.

We all three climbed the stairs to my apartment. I was relieved to hear Mouse caterwauling as soon as I opened the door. It took less than ten minutes to find and present Tom with some candles, pack a bag, and find the cat carrier. It took over a half hour to catch and stuff a furious cat in the plastic container.

I shut the cat carrier door with a CLICK, and set it on the floor a little heavier than was probably necessary. “BAD KITTY!!” I hissed. Mouse hissed back.

Clove giggled, “Well chalk that off my bucket list.”

“You have ‘Catch a Cat in the Fucking Dark’ on your bucket list?” I grumped.

Tom was holding a handkerchief over his bleeding left wrist. “I did not expect that thing to move so fast when you opened the door.”

“Yeah, lesson one in cat ownership— ‘DO NOT Grab Feline by the Tail,’ ” I said. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Fine, fine,” Tom insisted. “My ex-wife had a cat when we were married. I was thrilled to get rid of them both. Well, you girls be careful. Thank you for the candles. I’ll start clean up and repairs on the place tomorrow.”

“I’ll come back to help,” I promised.

“MEEEEEEEEOWWWWW!” Mouse added.

The 45 minute drive to Clove parents’ seemed like twice that long. Part of this was because her radio was broken. The other part was Mouse mewed the entire time. Ok, that wasn’t technically true. She alternated between pitiful mewing and chewing on the metal bars of the cat carrier door.

We arrived at Clove and Gabriel’s parents’ house, all lit up for Christmas and quite cozy-looking. When I met Gabriel, his parents were college students living in the same cheap apartment complex as my foster folks. Now his dad’s one of the top oral surgeons in the state. His mom is an art teacher. She’d always use us as guinea pigs when she had an assignment to do. Gabriel and I helped her test homemade play-dough and paper mache, fingerpaint projects, and a gazillion arts and crafts. It was

always so much fun, even though I've never been artistic. Gabriel's warm, loving home was something I admired and envied simultaneously. It was the family environment I never knew. Well— I knew from them. They constantly had me over for dinner and sleepovers and even threw me a couple of birthday parties. Which was always kinda depressing, because I really didn't know exactly when my birthday was.

"There they are!" Gabriel and Clove's dad boomed cheerfully as we walked through the door, howling cat carrier in tow. The Christmas lights inside were twice as plentiful as outside. A huge decorated white pine stood by the fireplace, looking like something out of a magazine. I knew another Christmas Tree was in the back, with a hodgepodge of ornaments the Joneses had collected through the years—some handmade by Gabriel and Clove in their childhood.

"Hello, Jack," I said, putting Mouse's cat carrier on the floor on my left side and my overnight bag on the floor to my right. I nodded at the friendly group in the living room. "Hello, everybody." Jack was tall with an athletic-build like his son, and his hair was sprinkled with salt and pepper gray. He went gray early, I remember— runs in the family. Gabriel stubbornly dyes his sandy blond hair religiously to cover his sprinkling of gray.

Gabriel's mother got up and walked around the couch, arms wide. The pretty lady had amazing skin care, amazing genes, or both. She didn't look much older than when I met her over two decades ago. Her artistic side showed in her red and green streaks she had in her hair. It looked out of place with her husband's professional white-collar look and their extremely nice home, but it worked for her. I bet she's the only wife with bizarre hair color at the oral surgeon's conventions. Do oral surgeons have conventions? I should ask that when we're settled in. "So happy to see you!" his mother cooed, enveloping me in a hug. She picked up the cat carrier and peeked inside. Mouse yowled.

"Thank you for letting us crash with you, Judy," I said. "Love the hair! Very Christmas-y." I opened the cat carrier and fished Mouse out. She hissed at me. "Obviously, fluffy-butt here has had a bad day."

"Poor kitty, kitty," Judy sang. She took Mouse from my arms. "How about I find you a nice fluffy blanket, and—" Mouse shot out of her arms and under the sofa by Dean's feet. He recoiled, lifting his feet out of the way.

"Yikes!" Dean said. "Mad cat, out of the way!"

"She'll get over it," I said. "She's stayed here before— I'm sure she'll remember where we put her food and litter box the last time."

"Already got it set up in the bathroom down here," Judy motioned behind me. "I love taking care of Mouse when you're out of town. Maybe one day we'll get another cat . . ." her husband made an "Ugh" sort of noise. She waved at him to shush him. "Ignore Jack," she said in a low voice to me and Clove. "He loved Snowball more than anyone. Cried like a baby when that cat died."

“ANYWAY,” Jack stood up. “Let’s go check on the pizza, shall we?”

The rest of the evening was full of family fuzziness, frozen pizza, and poker. We all hung out until well past midnight, then Gabriel and Dean retired to Dean’s old room, and I followed Clove up to her room. I changed into black yoga pants and an oversized grey sweatshirt. Clove put on black pajama shorts and a black tank top. She has one of those cool bunk-bed futon combo things, so I made my nest on the bottom and she climbed up to the top where she normally slept. Mouse, still skittish from the day, buried herself in a fuzzy blanket at my feet.

“Have you gotten your phone to work yet?” I directed the question at the top bunk above me, frowning at the “No Service” message still displayed on my cell phone.

“Nada,” Clove answered. “I’m trying the same thing up here. Our internet at the house is knocked out as well. I wonder what happened with the guy trapped in the hotel?”

“That’s what I was wondering,” I said. “I guess we could do the old-fashioned thing and find a radio.”

“Ah! I have a radio app on my . . .” Clove stopped. “Yeah, I’ll bet my brother has a real radio in his room.”

We walked across the house and up the stairs to the attic room that Gabriel took over as a bedroom on his 14th birthday. His ultra-cool and unconventionally understanding parents allowed me to have sleepovers, knowing Gabriel was not interested in girls, and also knowing I was missing my best friend horribly after they left the apartment complex. I administered the secret knock. The door opened a crack.

“Password?” Gabriel whispered seriously.

“Fuck you,” I whispered just as seriously.

“Come right on in, ladies!” Gabriel swung the door open with a flourish. Dean was sitting cross-legged on the bed, listening to the radio on the nightstand. Bernard was perched by the radio, leaning in as if he was listening closely. Dean was wearing Superman pajama pants and a blue tee shirt, while Gabriel had on Batman pajama pants and a black sweatshirt. Feeling left out, I wished I’d packed one of my more sci-fi themed sleep outfits.

“We wondered if you’d heard any updates on the guy in the hotel,” Clove said. She plopped next to Dean. Gabriel climbed behind Dean and rested his head between Dean’s shoulder blades. I pulled a beanbag across the floor close to the group and settled in. Dean shook his head.

“We haven’t been listening but maybe 15 minutes,” Gabriel said, still resting on Dean’s back. “Took awhile to find the stupid radio, and even longer to find batteries.”

“You know this isn’t comfortable, right?” Dean said.

“Quiet, pillow,” Gabriel answered. Dean rolled his eyes, but I could see a tiny grin at the corners of his mouth.

“Five years together, and you two are still adorable,” Clove said, jealousy wrapped around the edges of her voice. “How do I get a guy like that?”

“Facebook,” the guys answered in unison. They’d met on a comments section on a local television channel. The sci-fi show *Lizard Planet* had been rebooted, and Channel 7 preempted the premier episode for a football game. Dean and Gabriel were separately pissed (as was I) and they were posting crankiness on the channel’s Facebook page— along with several other nerds in the area. Gabriel was posting how to call the television station, and Dean answered that he’d gotten hung up on when he called, and they chatted and ranted their frustration for hours until the game was over and the channel finally aired *Lizard Planet* at 1:15 in the morning.

It was a horrible reboot. The lizard people weren’t even orange. The show was canceled after 11 episodes. Apparently there are four episodes that didn’t air. Dean and Gabriel are part of an online movement to get the studio to release the unaired episodes. So far it hasn’t been successful.

Dean suddenly scooted off the front of the bed and onto the floor. Gabriel tipped forward with a shriek. “Bad pillow!” he scolded. Dean turned around and patted him on the head. Gabriel reached over and grabbed Bernard, holding him close and pouting dramatically.

The music ended, and the DJ came back on. We all got quiet and leaned forward. “Here’s the latest update on the meteor that hit Harmony this afternoon,” the pleasant voice of the female announcer said.

“Meteorite,” Dean corrected.

“SHHHHH!!!” Gabriel, Clove, and I hissed.

“Over 2000 people have been treated for injuries, and the death toll is now 10. This updated number includes Jeff Gilbert, the man broadcasting on the internet from the hotel that collapsed down by the stadium.”

We all gave a collective, tiny, “Oh.”

“Gilbert was trapped in the rubble for almost three hours, broadcasting his experience over Facebook before his phone and power bank died. Rescuers reached Gilbert later that evening, but he had bled to death from a leg wound.”

“Damn,” Gabriel said. Dean moved back up to sit on the bed, so Gabriel could rest his head on Dean’s back again.

The female voice on the radio continued. “Injuries in the collapse of the hotel could have been much worse, as much of the hotel was booked because of the upcoming holiday season. The meteor– or meteorite as it should be called. . .”

“THANK you,” Dean muttered.

“. . . was undetected by scientists because its trajectory originated from the sun’s direction. By the time experts could see it coming, it was too late to warn the public. The meteor entered the earth’s atmosphere and burst into pieces about 20 miles from the surface. Seismic measurements determine the blast was about the strength of a 500 kiloton nuclear bomb.”

“Damn,” our group collectively muttered.

“Authorities are encouraging people to remain indoors and off the roads unless absolutely necessary. Most of the city of Harmony is without power, but utility companies are working through the night to restore electricity. Hospitals and emergency services are operating on back-up generators,” the announcer stated. “Police officers will be patrolling the streets. Police chief Gordon Snow had this to say. . .”

“We have all available manpower,” the police chief paused and added clumsily, “and woman-power working ‘round the clock to patrol residential areas in Harmony. Many folks do not have a landline anymore, and cell phone towers in the area were all completely destroyed. If you need any kind of assistance, please approach these patrols and we will help you or get you to help.”

The soundbite ended and the radio announcer was back with her even and professional tone. “Chief Snow added that any requests for information or non-emergency requests should be avoided, so the patrols can help citizens who are in need.”

“Excuse me officer, but my internet is down and I can’t get on Pornhighway.com,” Gabriel quipped.

“All my ice cream melted, and I can’t find a place to plug in my Christmas lights!” Clove chimed in.

“There’s glass everywhere, and I can’t find a broom!” I wailed.

“Glass breakage is reported across the city,” the voice on the radio boomed on cue, and we all collapsed into giggles. “It appears windows and glass doors have been destroyed in about a 30 mile radius from the epicenter. Despite the obvious security issues, no looting or robberies have been reported.”

“That’s because we’re all pretty decent people in Harmony,” Clove stated.

“I’ll drink to that,” I quipped, holding up an imaginary glass.

“Wait a minute,” Gabriel raised up off Dean’s shoulder blades. “Why don’t we have any alcohol?”

“THIS is a good question,” Clove agreed. She retreated downstairs.

“In related news,” the radio announcer had a brighter tone to her voice. “Mortimer K. Montgomery and his wife Ruby donated ten generators to the children’s hospital in Harmony.”

I hissed at the radio.

“Don’t you work for the Montgomerys?” Gabriel asked. I hissed at him.

“The Montgomerys have donated much to charities over the years,” the radio announcer said. “Focusing on children’s charities since the death of their young daughter from cancer five years ago.”

I didn’t hiss at that.

Dean turned down the radio. “I know they represent corporate greed—”

“And the death of the mom and pop businesses,” Gabriel added.

“And the oligarchy state our government is heading towards,” I grumbled.

“Actually probably already in,” Dean mused. “But you can’t hiss at them. You work for them.”

I hissed at Dean. He stuck his tongue out in response.

“I work as a tour guide for their stupid building,” I said.

“Montgomery Incorporated Triple Towers!” Gabriel said grandly.

“MITT,” I grumbled. The locals nicknamed the ugly pompous building ‘MITT’ for short. “It - MITT - was the only thing I could find when I was ‘downsized,’” I made air-quotes around the D-word. “Stupid part-time job pays some of the bills. I’m still looking for different employment. Meanwhile, I have the joy of informing people that there are 12,327 windows in Montgomery Incorporated Triple Towers . . .” I trailed off in thought. “Holy shit. I wonder how many of those broke?”

“The skyscrapers probably didn’t lose as much glass as the shorter buildings,” Dean mused. “They would sway and give more upon impact.”

The door flew open, and Clove bounced in with a bottle of wine in one hand and four beer mugs in the other. She'd neatly wrapped her fingers around the handles.

"Nice," I said, taking two of the mugs. "One would think you're a bartender, not a barista."

"Beer mugs and coffee mugs both have handles," she said matter-of-factly, handing the other two mugs to the boys. She started pouring the wine. "And customers are whiny babies no matter what the establishment."

"To Jeff Gilbert," Dean said, holding up a wine-filled beer mug.

"To Jeff Gilbert," the group replied, and collectively drank.

Clove brought her mug down and swirled it in front of her. "Who's Jeff Gilbert?"

"The man in the collapsed hotel," I said quietly.

"Oh yeah," Clove said.

We all drank again in silence.

"To everyone who lost their lives today," Gabriel raised his mug. We nodded, and then drank for them too.

The room was very quiet for what seemed like a long time. I looked around at our little pajama party— these people I'd known for years and years and years. My family. I raised my mug and looked around. "To us."

I received warm smiles in return. "To us," they replied, and we all drank.

Purplillum

Opening my eyes, I saw wooden beams very close to my face. “Meow?” A grey ball of fluff headbutted my right ear. I was very confused for a second. Mouse was here, but this wasn’t my . . .

Oh yeah. Meteor. Meteorite. Jack and Judy’s house. City in disarray. Pancakes.

I sat up. Pancakes?

“Do I smell pancakes?” Clove asked from the top bunk.

“Meow?” Mouse answered, jumping up there with Clove.

“Well hello, fuzzy one. Are you in a better mood after you got rested?” Clove cuddled Mouse like a human baby. Mouse purred ferociously.

“I’ll assume that’s a yes,” I answered, stretching and grabbing my shabby fuzzy house shoes. “Let’s go investigate this pancake smell.”

Clove and I bounded down the stairs, Mouse on our heels. Dean and Gabriel were already at the table, coffee cups in hand. Judy was at the head of the table behind a newspaper. Jack was behind the stove, whistling and making pancakes.

“Good morning!” Jack boomed.

“Coooooooooooooooooooo . . .” Clove moaned, arms outstretched, lurching for the coffee pot zombie-style.

“Nectar of the Gods,” Dean lifted his coffee cup in admiration.

I waited my turn for my nectar of the Gods, and then joined the group at the table. “The death toll is up to 15 now,” Judy said from behind the paper as I sat down.

“Ugh,” Clove said, stirring her coffee. “We heard it was 10 last night.”

“They found more people in the collapsed hotel,” Judy said, lowering the paper as Jack set a stack of pancakes in front of her. “It doesn’t appear the meteor was responsible for any deaths directly— just the collapse of buildings and debris and car wrecks that followed.”

“Any pictures of the meteor ITE?” Gabriel asked, adding the fourth syllable with a smack from Dean at the louder syllable.

Judy smiled. “The meteorITE,” she looked at Dean, “exploded in the atmosphere, so there are pieces, but no big chunks so far. The paper says they’re looking at the stadium where the blast radius is centered, but so far only tiny bits of rock.”

Jack poured a fresh batch of pancakes on the skillet. “I texted Clay this morning,” he said as he cooked. “Clayton is an old friend of mine that teaches science at the university downtown,” he explained in my direction. “He’s a huge space buff– I figure he’ll be down at the crash site with bells on if they let him. I texted to ask him if he was in the thick of things, but got no answer.”

“Cell towers are probably screwing up signals everywhere– man alive, these are good, Jack!” I said.

“Can I have Mickey Mouse?” Clove asked.

Jack looked over his shoulder. “And HOW old are you, daughter dear?”

“Twenty-five,” Clove said. “The perfect age for Mickey Mouse pancakes.”

“Hey!” I complained, pausing with a fork in my pancakes. “I didn’t know Mickey Mouse was an option!!” Clove stuck her tongue out at me.

“So school is closed today,” Judy said. “And I’ve talked Jack out of going to work– no idea if there’s power at his office or if anyone would even keep a dental appointment with the city in chaos. You are all welcome to hang out here today and spend the night again tonight.”

“No chance anyone would want a detective today, but we should wander by the office and check things out,” Gabriel said. “If we don’t have power at the apartment, we’ll come back tonight.”

“Ditto,” I said. “I doubt anyone will be touring the MITT today, but I’m not even on the schedule until Sunday. Last night I promised my landlord I’d go over and help him with cleanup. Is it ok for me to leave Mouse here? No idea how long it’ll take for my windows to be fixed.”

“Probably awhile, dear,” Judy said. “The paper said glass was broken and buildings were damaged in over a 50 mile radius. There’s a lot of clean-up to be done.”

“We’re not that far from the city,” Clove said. “Ooooo! Thanks Dad!” she chirped as Jack set a Mickey Mouse shaped pancake in front of his daughter. “How come the house windows didn’t break?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Jack sat down at the table with a pancake in front of him. I noticed his pancake was also Mickey-Mouse shaped. “Your mother’s flower pots on the patio fell off the steps, and it rattled some other things in the neighborhood I noticed.”

Breakfast continued with talk about the damage that was done, and discussion on how quickly the city could bounce back from such a disaster. My vote was fairly soon. Harmony had withstood trauma before, it could withstand a rock from outer space.

Upstairs in Clove's bathroom, surrounded in steam and wrapped in a towel, I leaned towards the mirror as I carefully drew on eyeliner. I heard someone bound down the hallway and stop in front of the closed doorway. "Yeeeeees?" I drawled out, eyes wide and mouth half open trying to keep the stupid line even. Clove threw open the bathroom door releasing the last of the steam. She was bouncing up and down from excitement. "Hang on, hang on," I said, drawing the line a little too far outside the corner. There was a fine line between perfect winged eyeliner and crazy Egyptian queen. I grabbed a Q-tip and licked the tip, poking at the edge of the thin black line to shorten it a little.

"Guess what I've got?" Clove sang—still bouncing.

"An over-abundance of energy from Mickey Mouse pancakes?" I suggested, smoothing out the line on my other eye.

"A meteor!" she proudly held out a small stone. "Ite," she added. "MeteorITE."

Intrigued, I leaned away from the mirror and capped my eyeliner pen. Turning towards Clove, I held out my hand. She dropped the rock in my outstretched palm and stopped bouncing. I held it between three fingers and inspected the jagged thing. "Cool," I declared. The piece was almost two inches tall and about a half inch around. It was a dark purple, and looked a like a rough garnet. I liked crystals and stones, and had a small grouping of them in a candy tin back at my apartment—including a rough garnet, which is how I knew to compare the two. The jagged but flat edges made little facets all over the meteorite stone. It looked more crystal than rough stone, like something had chiseled little pieces off of it and splintered off instead of just broke. I bent my fingers and dropped the stone into my hand. It felt heavy and warm—friendly, even. Weird. I shook off the odd, friendly feeling. "Where did you get this?" I asked Clove.

"It's cool, isn't it? I call it purplillium!" she announced.

"That actually sorta fits," I grinned, holding it up to the light. "It's definitely purple. Purplillium sounds like something from a comic book. So where did you get it?" I repeated the question.

She held her hand out for the rock back. "Dad's friend—the one that teaches at the university. He's downstairs. Dad was right. The guy did go to the crash site and snoop around. . ."

"Oh yeah," I remembered. "He mentioned his friend at breakfast. Said he was a space geek."

Clove nodded. “Yup. A space geek with connections. These shards are everywhere down by the stadium. The professor has a friend who has a friend who’s in law enforcement. They were poking around down there and the friend of the friend let them walk around the area. He pocketed some of the rocks. He’s got a whole collection of them downstairs. The boys are freaking out.”

I grabbed my mascara bottle. “Lemme finish getting ready and I’ll be right down,” I said.

Make-uped and clothed, I felt more human as I descended the Jones’s stairs for the second time this morning. I’d just thrown on clothes yesterday instead of brushing my hair and putting on makeup, and all the stuff that a girl has to do in the mornings. Today I felt like Gabriel in my flannel shirt and blue jeans, except mine wasn’t as neatly pressed as his shirts. My flannel shirt was purple—a fitting match for the stones scattered out on the table. Dean was holding one up to the light, and Gabriel had a magnifying glass trained on another one. A rotund man with thinning hair was sitting at the table next to Jack. He looked up at me as I walked in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I nodded in his direction. “My name’s Raney. Raney Winter.”

The man stood up and extended his hand. “Clever name, Raney. I’m Dr. Clayton Forest. My friends call me Clay. Come to check out my stash?”

“Dr. Clayton Forest?” Dean repeated, his arm with the rock still held in the air. “Isn’t that the lead character in the original *War of the Worlds*?”

“That was ‘Dr. Forrester,’” Clay sighed. “You’re not the only sci-fi nerd who’s caught that.”

“Look at this, Raney!!!” Gabriel waved at me with his right hand, magnifying glass in his left. His eye was glued to the stone in front of him. “Look at this crystalline pattern!” he exclaimed, still waving his hand in the air. I walked over to him until my torso bumped his waving hand. He grabbed my shirt and pulled me down over the table, his eyeball never leaving the magnifying glass. I took Gabriel’s left hand with the magnifying glass and pulled the magnifying glass towards me, settling it in front of my face.

“Cooooooooooooool,” I said. “What am I looking at?”

“That’s just it,” Dean said, lowering his arm from his examination in the light. “We don’t know.”

“Oh come on,” I said. “You’re telling me this is some sort of new mineral or something?”

“Purplillium!” Clove chirped.

Gabriel sat up. “I like it. Clay, can we petition to call this substance purplillium?”

“I’ll file the paperwork when I get back to the office,” Clay quipped. “But seriously, I’m with you guys. It’s not a mineral or element I’ve ever seen.”

“These are all very interesting, Dr. Forest,” I began.

“Clay,” he corrected.

“These are all very interesting, Clay,” I corrected. “But why didn’t you take these back to the lab at the university to study?”

“Good question,” the professor answered. “The school’s out of power still. No point in taking them there yet - plus, my keycard wouldn’t even work to get in the lab with the power out. No problem in showing off my stash a little in the meantime.”

I sat next to Gabriel and picked up a square chunk of the meteorite. “How many purple rocks can there be out there? I can only think of amethyst—but this doesn’t have that bright of a purple cast to it to be an amethyst.”

“There are several stones that are purple,” Dean said, still holding a piece of purple rock up to the light. He squinted with the other eye and shifted the stone to catch more light. “There’s a lot of ways to identify them: crystalline pattern, brittleness, opaqueness . . .”

“Oooooooh - wonder if it shatters?” Clove asked. She looked at her dad, who looked at Dr. Forest, who shrugged. Clove bolted out of the kitchen door into the backyard.

“What’s the official word on the material?” I asked, tossing the cube-shaped chunk I picked up from one hand to the other.

“There isn’t, at the moment,” Jack said.

Clay leaned forward, arranging some of the stones in a pattern from biggest to smallest. “My guess is they’ll make an announcement tonight that the meteorite contained—or was made of—an element new to man.”

Gabriel looked up from his magnifying glass. “Cool! Wonder what these will be worth?”

“Probably nothing,” Clay said. “There were a lot of them, and I wasn’t the only one picking them up. They were scattered over a large enough area, they’ll be fairly easy to find.”

“Plus, when scientists figure out the chemical composition of whatever this is, they might be able to manufacture it in a lab,” Dean said, lowering his arm and rubbing the eye that he had squinted.

“That’s how moissanite was created,” Judy said, joining us in the kitchen. She held up a hand with a pretty silver ring containing a clear stone.

“Hello, Judy!” Clay greeted. “Wow. Christmas colors in the hair, huh? It was blue streaks last month.”

“Tis the season,” Jack grinned at his wife.

“That’s not a diamond?” I asked, taking Judy’s hand and examining the sparkling stone in her ring.

“No,” she said. “It’s called a moissanite. I saw a documentary on the horrible conditions of the workers who mine diamonds, and how one corporation controls the mines and the villages. . .”

“. . . and the price,” Jack added.

“And the price,” Judy agreed. “I didn’t want to be a part of any of that, so when Jack wanted to buy me a diamond for our 30th anniversary, I asked for a moissanite instead. It was a mineral first found in a meteorite years ago—then they started creating them in labs.”

“This would make pretty rings, I bet,” I said, putting the two inch cube on my finger. I frowned, then switched to a smaller stone. “There!” I announced. “My beautiful ring of purplillium!”

“You look mah’valous, darling!” Gabriel put a hand on his chest dramatically.

“Thank you, thank you,” I said.

The kitchen door burst open, and Clove charged in, welding a hammer over her head. “Stand back!” she cried. “Scientific testing in progress!”

In one smooth motion, Judy grabbed a piece of stone off the table, set it on the floor next to her chair, and scooted back. Clove, never hesitating, fell to one knee and slammed the hammer to the floor. It made a loud, “CHINK” sound. She lifted the hammer, and peered at the solid stone on the floor. “I don’t think it even dented it.”

“Allow me,” Gabriel stood and rolled his sleeves up. Clove handed him the hammer. He aimed, and “WHAM!!!” They touched foreheads as they both leaned over the purple stone. “Nada,” he declared.

Everyone had a go whacking the stone, and it refused to chip even a little. “Purplillium is bad ass!” Clove declared.

Clay stood. “And with that declaration, I must make my leave.”

“Aw, Clay—stay for lunch,” Judy said. “Nothing exciting, but there’s deli meat for sandwiches in the fridge.”

Clay sat back down. “Sold,” he said. “I imagine there’s not a drive-through open.” He started to pick up the collection of purple stones, then leaned back. “I have plenty of these—if you guys want one, go ahead.”

“Hooray!” Clove cheered. She held up the one she’d shown me upstairs and waved it at Clay before pocketing it. Dean and Gabriel each picked a stone, and Jack grabbed a large piece.

“This’ll look awesome on my desk at work,” Jack said. “Thank you.”

Judy was pulling out deli meat and condiments from the refrigerator. She called over her shoulder towards the table, “I don’t need a rock Clay, but thank you.”

I fingered the cube-shaped rock I’d bonded with since I came downstairs. Putting it in my pocket, I nodded towards Clay. “Many thanks. This is a cool memento.”

“You’re welcome,” the stout man said. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything exciting about them.”

We all jumped as our phones started buzzing and chirping almost in unison. “It appears cell phone service is back up,” Gabriel said.

“Oh look, I can get 30% off golf balls this week at the sporting good’s store,” Dean quipped. “So glad I now have this information.”

“How did you get on a golf ball email list?” Judy asked, sitting down at the table with a ham sandwich.

“Who knows,” Dean shrugged.

“Spam, spam, spam, spam . . .” I started singing.

“Spam, spam, spam, spam . . .” Gabriel joined in.

“Spammity spaaaaaaaam!!! Wonderful spaaaaaaaam!” Gabriel and I sang together.

Clay looked amused. He looked at Jack. “This kinda thing happen often around here?” he asked.

Dean had joined in by this point and we had formed a kickline. “Spam, spam, spammity spaaaaaaaam!” we crooned.

“Only when this crew gets together,” Jack answered his friend.

“Spam, spam, spam, spam . . .”

**Lie awake in bed at night
And think about your life**

Do you want to be different?

**Try to let go of the truth
The battles of your youth**

Cause this is just a game . . .

- Beautiful Lie

by Thirty Seconds to Mars

2x4s and Beer Bottles

I didn't know how traffic would be, and was pleased to find the roads were fairly easy to navigate. Since cell service was up and running again, I could verbally navigate around closed roads and traffic snarl-ups while Clove drove. I was doing my best GPS voice. "Road closed in one-quarter mile," I recited in a bland voice. "Turn right at the next traffic light."

Clove giggled, but then her face fell as we passed by Christmas lighting the city had hung weeks ago. "Awwww, I liked the silver candles," Clove said as we drove underneath shiny downed decorations. They hung from the lampposts like glittery silver slugs.

"There's one that survived," I pointed ahead.

"Hooray!" Clove grinned. "The brave little candle. Sounds like a children's book."

"The Brave Little Street Decoration," I said. "The Brave Little Candle' sounds like an actual candle.

"It wanted to be a real candle!" Clove exclaimed as we drove underneath the silver-tinted candle, proudly holding firm to its lamppost. "He survived the horrible storm, to show the true spirit of Christmas, and so the blue fairy—"

"Stop," I commanded. "Disney's already going to sue you. Pretty sure they've copyrighted the Blue Fairy."

"Damn," Clove said. "It sounded too much like The Velveteen Rabbit anyway. Disney'd sue me for sure."

I counted off on my fingers. "Number one, they can't sue you for an idea that's similar to other stories. Velveteen Rabbit is just another version of the Pinocchio story. And two, Disney didn't own the Velveteen Rabbit."

"Wait, wasn't the Blue Fairy that made the Velveteen Rabbit real?"

"No, the Blue Fairy was in Pinocchio. And hello, spoilers!"

"Fucking bite me," Clove stuck her tongue out in my direction without turning her head from the street. "You've read the Velveteen Rabbit. You read it to me when I was little."

"Real isn't how you are made. . . It's a thing that happens to you," I quoted.

"That's what the candle said too."

“Will say. You haven’t written the book yet.”

“And, we’re here!” Clove announced.

Clove had wanted to check on the coffee shop where she worked and help the owners with whatever they needed. From the looks of it, there wasn’t much clean-up that needed to be done. Several twenty-somethings gathered around the stairs of the front door, chatting. The inside looked dark. I wondered how long before the city was back to full power.

“This is my stop!” Clove put her car in park in front of The Warm Mug and hopped out, leaving the motor running.

I got out of the passenger seat and zipped up my blue puffy coat. Today was much colder than yesterday. “You sure you want me to leave you here?”

“It’s not a problem,” Clove said. “I can catch a ride with anyone here—or I’ll text you to come get me.”

I hugged Clove, knocking off my knit hat. Firmly jamming it back on my head, I opened the driver’s door. “Ok,” I said. “My apartment’s not too far away anyway. I can be back in five minutes.”

Clove pulled her long black coat around her and waved as I pulled away from the curb in her little Mustang. I waved behind me. There was discussion about all of us riding in one car to head to town, but no one wanted to be cramped up in the backseat of Clove’s little hatchback, especially all bundled up in coats and such. We couldn’t all fit in the boys’ Fiat Spider, it didn’t even have a backseat. They bought the little convertible not too long ago to celebrate the 5 year anniversary of Angel Investigations. Gabriel has had the detective agency since before he and Dean met, but Dean fit right in to the mix with his computer skills. Gabriel hasn’t solved many cases, but he has had his fair share of clients. Plus, Dean does a good bit of freelancing on the side with various computer stuff. I’m proud of them. So many of us Gen-Exers are barely living on a wing and a prayer.

I can’t fly and I don’t pray, so I’m more screwed than most.

I had once a decent job doing graphic design for a locally-based magazine—until people stopped reading the printed word. One by one, I watched all my coworkers get ‘downsized.’ Such a lovely word for ‘fired.’ By the time I finally got the ax, the office crew was so small I asked them not to throw me a party. We’d attended so many ‘Sorry You’re Fired’ parties by that time we were all pretty sick of the pretense. I think the magazine is now run by one guy and a handful of freelance outsourcers.

I looked down and discovered I was speeding.

Slamming on the brakes, I looked around. The police had other things to do that day than arrest a daydreaming redhead. Is it daydreaming if you aren't dreaming nice stuff? Reminiscing about a full-time job with benefits. Hmph. I used to daydream about riding flying unicorns. Hashtag-adulting, indeed.

Oh look, I'm here.

I parked at the curb and watched my landlord carry a large bag of trash out the front doors. I'd lived at this house-turned-apartment building ever since I lost my job at the magazine. I calculated in my head. So, three years now. Wow. I've been gainfully underemployed for three years now. Well, actually, unemployed for part of that. I moved out of my condo and into this shabby but cozy little house that had been converted to apartments. I frowned at all the glass in the front yard. Far more shabby than cozy today.

"Afternoon, Raney!" Tom waved at me as I opened Clove's car door and got out. He was an extremely nice man. In addition to being a landlord, he worked at the post office. Tom was mid-50s, dark hair, and had a mustache that looked like it belonged a couple decades ago. He was wearing royal blue coveralls.

"Afternoon, Tom!" I called back, tugging down my warm blue coat and putting on gloves that were also blue. "Look at us matching in blue today!" I held up my gloves to emphasize the color combo. Tom gave me a thumbs-up sign. I stamped my boots in place trying to warm up as I surveyed the side of the house. "Is there any window intact in this whole place?"

Tom shook his head. "Nope. Figured I'd clean all the glass, then nail boards over the windows. It'll be some sort of protection for now, anyway."

Tom and I spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning glass and debris out of all the apartments and dragging bags of trash to the curb. I handed tools and supplies like a medical assistant as Tom patched the wall on my apartment where the tv had fallen, and hung the television back in place. Amazingly, it didn't seem broken, but I'd have to wait until the power came back on to test it.

We covered the windows in my apartment and the Smith's (Smitty's? I really should learn their name) with trash bags to keep the elements out. The final step was to nail up all the windows on the ground floor. We took a break first.

"Egads, it's dark in here," I announced standing in the doorway of Tom's apartment. I set one boot on the floor, then backed out again and tapped off the mud that had caked in the treads of my black combat boots. They were awesome in the winter because they kept my feet warm and dry, but man, they collected earth easily. Boots clean, I walked through the doorway and down the stairs.

"It is a basement," he said, following me in. "The only light that can get in is through the window in the bedroom. But I have a wood-burning stove, so it stays warm down here.

And I still have plenty of candles left over—thank you for those, by the way,” he said. I sat at the kitchen table while Tom lit a white pillar candle and set it straight on the table. “Beer?” he asked.

“Sure.” I took off my gloves and laid them on the table.

Tom handed me a beer and then twisted the top off one for himself. He sat down, took a long drink, and sighed in relaxation. “That rock sure did a number on our city.”

I nodded in agreement. “It could’ve been worse though. Did you hear the hotel collapsed?”

We chatted about the damage and the news reports while we caught our second wind.

“The city doesn’t know when the power’s going to be back in this neighborhood. You staying at your friend’s house again tonight?” Tom asked.

“Yes, and Mouse is all settled in there too,” I said. “Do you have a place to stay?” I asked, instantly regretting it. I couldn’t very well follow up with an invitation to Jack and Judy’s house. But it seemed impolite not to ask if Tom had a place to go since he’d asked me.

Tom took another drink of beer. “My ex-wife offered to let me stay with her. I’d rather sleep in the car,” he snorted. “I haven’t seen her since we signed the papers on this house.”

“Oh, this was your house before you made apartments out of it?” I commented.

“Yup. Moved in the basement, and fixed the other two floors into apartments. This place wasn’t much, but it was all I had left after the divorce. She left me for an insurance salesman.” He finished off his beer. “And a bigger house. He must sell a lot of insurance.” He stood, tossing his bottle with a flick of his wrist across the room where it landed in a trash can. I got the impression he did that out of muscle memory. “I raised the kids here,” he continued. “We had 50/50 custody, none of that weekend-dad bullshit, and when the last one graduated high school I decided to keep the house and make a little money off renters. It’s been a nice way to help the kids through college.” I nodded to show I was listening. “My youngest is still in school. The dorms have power, amazingly. He invited me to crash with him tonight.”

“No house or kids in my divorce, thankfully,” I said. “Hardest thing we had to divide up was the Star Wars figurine collection.” I stood up and eyeballed the trashcan, but hesitated to try Tom’s trick. I moved my arm back and forth, aiming towards the can. Finally I released the beer bottle, but I could tell I’d aimed too far left and the bottle was going to miss. I lunged clumsily for the bottle, but it arced over in a smooth half circle and landed square in the can. I blinked a minute, wondering how the laws of physics had bent and I’d made the shot. I looked over at Tom, who was also staring hard at the

trash can. Weird draft in here, maybe? Floor slanted? I must've just hooked it somehow.

“So, wood for the windows is in the shed?” I asked.

Tom nodded, eyes still fixed on the can. “Yup.” He shook his head and turned around towards the hallway. “Lemme use the facilities, and I’ll meet you out there. Good thing the water still works.”

I climbed the stairs and walked around to the shed. I opened the double doors wide to let light in. There was a large pile of 2x4s stacked neatly against the wall. They weren’t too long—I figured I’d need Tom to help carry them. I picked one up. It wasn’t heavy at all. Odd. I assumed it’d be heavier. I balanced one on my left forearm and reached down to stack another one on top. They weren’t heavy, just awkward to hold. I filled my arm as full as I could without dropping any boards, and then wrapped my right arm around the top to support it. Pivoting, I lined up with the door and saw Tom standing there, mouth open.

“Good god, Raney! Let me help you!” Tom came running over and grabbed the back end of the 2x4s, letting out a little “Oof!” when I released the weight onto his hands to shuffle towards the front of the load and balance it. We walked out the door of the shed to the front of the house, Tom setting his end of the pile down heavily.

Tom put his hands on his knees and gasped for breath. “Raney! Do you lift weights or something? Yeeesh.”

What he said made no sense. The boards weren’t heavy at all. He must’ve been just tired. I picked up a 2x4 with one hand, and held it above my head over the window. “Do you want to cut these, or just nail them up like this?” I eyeballed the overlap. “Oh—this will probably be better,” I said, turning the 2x4 vertically to the ground. Tom still looked strange, and I thought I heard a strangled noise from the back of his throat.

I held boards while Tom nailed them in. We secured the last boards in place by headlight of Clove’s car. My phone buzzed as if on cue as Tom hit the last nail. It was Clove—ready for me to pick her up. I helped Tom pick up the tools and return the leftover boards to the shed.

“Goodnight! I’ll stop by tomorrow to check on the trash bags in my apartment windows!” I called, waving behind me as I walked to my car. I didn’t trust the wind not to whip the flimsy bags right out of the window frames we’d neatly stapled them in. But it was the best we could do for now.

That should’ve been the motto for the whole city at the moment, I decided. ‘Harmony—the best we can do for now.’ I shoved my hat a little further down over my ears and climbed in the cold car.

Jack made tacos that night for dinner. I was starving, even though I'd eaten breakfast and lunch. I eat well when I'm at the Joneses. It's a wonder Gabriel isn't 300 pounds. Dinnertime chatter was everyone comparing notes about what they'd heard about the damage and repair work to the city.

That night found us all crowded around in Gabriel's room again, this time playing Cards Against Humanity while listening to the news reports. A scientist was being interviewed about the meteorite strike.

"If you're just joining us," the pleasant voice of the woman radio announcer stated, "our guest tonight is Dr. Devin Grazier, a scientist from specializing in space and . . ."

". . . totally fuckable aliens," Dean said seriously, placing the white card face up on the table.

"Dammit, Dean, you have to wait for the question card," Clove said.

"What? It worked." Dean grinned.

The scientist on the radio broke in, ". . . haven't seen a city catastrophe like this since . . ."

". . . raptor attacks!" Gabriel shouted, throwing down a white card.

". . . vikings!" Dean joined in with his card.

". . . a thermonuclear detonation," Clove sighed, giving up on playing the game correctly for the moment and dropping a card on top of the others.

I looked at the cards in my hand. ". . . Glenn Beck convulsively vomiting as a brood of crab spiders hatches in his brain and erupts from his tear ducts."

"That's not a card," Clove said.

I dropped the card I just read on top of the pile. The group leaned in.

"Where do they come up with this shit?" Gabriel asked.

"No idea, but I vote for the raptors card," I said. "Dinosaurs rule."

"Agreed," the group said in unison.

". . . the best and safest way to approach a cleanup at the impact site is to use . . ."

". . . two midgets shitting into a bucket," Dean said, laying down the card.

Clove started giggling.

The radio continued, “And now I’d like to introduce my second guest for the evening, a man known for being . . .”

“. . . a mother-fucking sorcerer,” I laid down the white card.

Clove snorted and dropped her cards.

“. . . he’s also studied . . .”

“. . . a bleached asshole,” I burst into laughter as I dropped the card, collapsing across Clove and laying there in a giggling heap.

“. . . and won awards for . . .”

“. . . vigorous jazz hands!” Gabriel proudly proclaimed, throwing the card and pumping his fists in the air in a gesture of victory. Clove and I fell over, gasping for air.

Dean leaned forward and drew another card. “I love this fucking game.”

Clove pointed accusingly at him, still laughing too hard to talk properly. “You . . . aren’t . . . playing . . . it . . . right . . .”

“. . . meanwhile, authorities are reassuring citizens of Harmony that by tomorrow, firefighters will be distributing . . .”

“. . . assless chaps,” Gabriel threw his last card on the pile.

“Gabriel wins!” I proclaimed through my tears of laughter.

“Assless chaps for the win!” Dean high-fived his partner.

“Assless chaps for the win!” Clove and I shrieked in unison.

The Loofa Incident

A week passed, and I slept every night at the Joneses. Normally I like my space, but it is such a friendly environment over there, and the time passed quickly. The MITT building remained closed for the time being, so no need for part-time open availability nights and weekends tour guides until the building reopened. Gabriel and Dean's apartment regained power before my street, but I chose a comfy bed over a pull-out couch at their place. I did move out of Clove's room into Gabriel's. I had spent many a sleepover night in that room when we were kids, but it was very strange sleeping in my best friend's room alone. Well, with Mouse. She'd adjusted nicely to life at the Joneses. I noticed Judy had bought her canned food. Spoiled little fluff monster.

Saturday, Tom called to let me know the power was back on and I could come back home. I loaded the spoiled little fluff monster in my car—an aging but reliable red Toyota Yaris, and threw my suitcase in the hatchback. Judy came out as I slammed the back shut.

“Brrr!” she shivered. “It actually feels like Christmas now!”

“Right?” I agreed, accepting her hug and squeezing her back. “It was easy to forget it's the holidays there for a minute.”

Judy released the hug, and leaned back just enough to place her hands on my forearms. She squeezed her fingers. “You come over for Christmas, Raney. Promise me?”

I smiled at the kind woman. “Promise.” I hopped up and down. “Man, it got cold! Get back in the house where it's warm, Judy. I'll see you later!”

Judy crossed her arms over her front and darted for the house. “MEROW!!” greeted me from the backseat when I got in the car.

“Yes, I know, I know,” I apologized, starting the car. I revved the engine to try and warm the car cabin up faster.

“MEEEE-YOOOOOW!!” Mouse complained.

“Alright, alright, heading home now,” I promised.

A horrific stench hit me when I opened my door. I was afraid a small animal had gotten in through the trash bags over the windows and died somewhere. I let Mouse out of the carrier, hoping she'd track the source of the smell. She bolted under the couch. Figures. “Some help you are. I shoulda gotten a dog!” I called after her.

I tracked the smell to the refrigerator. Ah. Yes. Rotten food. Dumb me—should've cleaned it out when I was here a week ago with Tom. I opened the door, gagged, and slammed it shut again. Looks like the rest of my night is planned.

Yippee.

I procured some heavy-duty garbage bags from Tom, who offered to help me. He was all chilled out in a bathrobe and slippers, and I hated to ask him to do anything else. He'd already replaced the trash bags on the windows with sturdy plastic, and staple-gunned heavy blankets over that to keep out the cold. This combination worked surprisingly well. The glass people were supposed to come next week. Tom did loan me a painting respirator, which helped the fridge cleanup go without any regurgitating of my lunch.

After I hauled four bags of trash to the curb, (egads, who would've thought I had that much crap in my refrigerator?) I walked back up the stairs, into the kitchen, and stared at my fridge. Sitting at a barstool at the raised countertop in the middle of the kitchen, I pulled out my phone and Googled, "how to clean a refrigerator with spoiled food." Top search: "Removing Odors from a Refrigerator after a Power Outage."

Fuck me, I love the internet.

The article suggested washing and rewashing with different combinations of soapy water and vinegar. It said to leave the door open for 15 minutes or more. If that didn't work, try some odor-removing materials. Well that was easy. I had some zeolite crystals left over from when Mouse got a bladder infection and peed all over my apartment. Zeolite was fabulous stuff. I followed the washing and rewashing instructions, dumped an entire carton of Zeolite onto the selves of the icky fridge, and propped open the door.

I decided to reward myself with a bath.

I did the bath up proper. I turned on the hot water and added bubble bath. Remembering a pile of new candles I saw on the kitchen counter, I went in and retrieved a package of cherry-scented tealights. Tom must've left these to replace the candles I gave him a week ago. Has it really been a week since the meteorite hit? I marveled that not more people were killed—I think last I'd heard the death toll was at 18 with 5 people still missing. Thousands were injured, but it really could've been much, much worse. Harmony was home to almost 75,000 people, not counting everyone outside the city limits. The rock hit in about the best place it could to do the least amount of damage to the area.

I pulled the little cube-shaped chunk of purplillium out of my pocket. I'd carried it with me like a good-luck charm ever since Jack's friend had given it to me. I liked stones and crystals. I have a little tin of crystals, in fact. I wasn't quite ready to put the little

stone in with the other ones. This came from outer space and was new to this planet. I felt it needed time to hang out on its own instead of in a box. I set the little purple cube on the edge of the tub.

I placed four of the cherry tealights at each corner of the tub and lit the wicks. Tom had installed a garden tub on this floor when he renovated the house to apartments. It was an awesome tub—deep with tile around it to hold shampoo and soap and rubber duckies and in my case - books and candles too. I tossed in my rubber duck.

“Mew?” There was soft batting at the bathroom door, and I turned to see a grey paw slide underneath and bat blindly on my side. I walked over and let Mouse in the bathroom.

“Happy to be home, kitty, kitty?” I cooed. She settled sphinx-style on the fuzzy cover on the lid of toilet stool and half closed her eyes.

I undressed and stepped one foot in the tub. Pausing, I adjusted the water to make it a little cooler. I sat on the edge and kicked around the rubber duck until the temperature was perfect, then adjusted the water again to match and sank in. The bubbles closed over my body and the duck bumped my chin. I let out a sigh of contentment.

“A message for the princess, R2!” my phone chirped.

“I’m relaxin’, here!!” I snapped.

“A message for the princess, R2!” my text message tone went off again.

“I’ll mess up the bubbles if I reach my arm out!” I argued.

“A message for the . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” I sighed, reaching a bubble-covered hand out and tapping the phone to shut it up. I had the phone set to chime several times when I got a text message. It was handy if the thing was in the other room, annoying if it was right by me. I wiped off my hand and grabbed the phone.

The text was from Gabriel. It was a picture of a cheeseburger followed by a question mark.

‘Fuck yeah,’ I typed. ‘Double cheese, w/everything.’ I still felt it necessary to use capitals and punctuation in a text message. ‘Large chocolate shake,’ I added. I was starving.

Gabriel enjoyed pictures for communication. He sent back a Pikachu making a thumbs-up sign. I sank back in the bathtub, grateful to be home, grateful I had dinner on the way, and grateful my bathwater was the perfect temperature. I reached out my fingers

towards my loofa hanging from the faucet, and it shot across the bathtub easily into my hand. I dipped the loofa in the water, getting it full of bubbles and—

Wait, what the fuck?

What the actual fuck?

I looked at Mouse to see if she had noticed what just happened. She still laid on the toilet, sphinx-style, eyes fully closed now.

I dozed off? Maybe I'm dreaming?

I lowered my hand into the bathwater, still clutching the loofa. I blinked hard, bewildered for a minute, then sat up and hung the loofa back on the faucet.

I looked over at Mouse. She was still snoozing.

This made no sense.

I reached my fingers out towards the loofa again. Nothing. I realized I was holding my breath and let it out.

The loofa moved forward two inches and dropped into the water.

I jumped, sloshing water and bubbles on the floor.

Mouse opened her eyes and squinted at me, irritated.

I laid in the tub, eyes darting around the bathroom.

Did I do that?

Ghost?

Aliens?

Mouse?

I looked at her again for answers, but she was drifting off to sleep, purring softly.

I was scared to move.

My gaze landed on the rubber duck, propped sideways against a high stack of bubbles against the edge of the tub. As I watched him, he straightened up and floated upright.

What.

The.

Fuck.

I fished the loofa out of my bathwater and quickly ran it over my body. Running it under clean water, I then hung it back on the facet. I looked at it a minute, daring it to move again.

The loofa swung nonchalantly from its pink string.

Sitting upright in the tub, I stared at it until it stopped swinging.

The rubber duck brushed my leg and I shrieked.

Mouse shot off the toilet.

“A message for the princess, R2!” I screamed as my phone went off.

I leaped out of the bathtub, grabbing a towel and drying off. I was shaking.

Ghosts? Aliens?

Why would either care about my loofa? Or the duck?

Or my beer bottle? That arc-into-the-trashcan thing at Tom’s last week floated into my brain.

“A message for the prince—” I smashed my hand on the phone to shut it up.

Cheeseburgers. Gabriel.

Do I tell him?

Tell him what?

“Maybe the loofa just fell,” I said out loud. I shoved my left foot in my Wonder Woman pajama pants. “The rubber duck just tipped over because the bubbles shifted.” I shoved my right foot in my pajama pants and pulled them up. I reached for the waistband. The drawstring wasn’t there. I’d put my pajamas on backwards.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I announced to the bathroom.

I gave the loofa a hard look. It hung from the faucet like an innocent bystander.

“I don’t believe you,” I snarled at the round bit of puffy netting.

It said nothing.

Thank goodness.

I re-put on my Wonder Woman pants, shoved on a Bon Jovi concert tee-shirt, and stuck my feet in my purple fuzzy house shoes.

“A message for the princess, R2,” my phone chirped as I crossed the bedroom and headed into the living room. I opened the front door.

“I’ve been texting you,” Gabriel grumped.

“A message for the princess, R2,” my phone confirmed.

“I was in the loofa. The shower. The bathtub.”

My friend looked at me. “You ok, Raney?”

“Long day,” I brushed off his question. “Oooooo, you got onion rings too?”

It was amazing how easily I forgot the loofa incident at the sight of my best friend holding food. I couldn’t believe how hungry I was. Had I eaten lunch today? Yes, Judy fed me breakfast and lunch. Jack had spent the day with the boys putting in a new window at the detective agency.

Gabriel and I sat on the kitchen barstools and dove into the food. “Thanks for dinner,” I said, beaming at my cheeseburger.

“You’re welcome,” Gabriel smiled. We haven’t hung out lately, and I thought I’d come over and say ‘welcome back.’ So, welcome back!”

“Dean working tonight?”

“Yeah, some freelancing computer thing. Coding—I don’t know what. If he designed websites, that would be easy to understand, but how he manipulates all those lines of code is beyond me. Still, it pays the bills. Detective work is down this week. Everyone is cleaning up and repairing after the meteorite strike.”

I drank a hefty slug of my milkshake. “Any word on purplillium?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Nope. They’ve determined that it’s not any substance found on earth. Which isn’t that big of a deal, I don’t think. There’s actually lots of minerals and materials that have fallen from the sky and wound up on earth.”

I wiped my hands on a napkin and pulled out my phone.

“Where were we before Google?” Gabriel mused.

“Funk and Wagnalls and good old-fashioned libraries, my boy,” I said, typing in the search query. “According to the modern-day Funky Wagnuts—”

“Also known as Google,” Gabriel interjected, dunking a french fry in a swirled mayonnaise/ketchup combination.

“. . . as of 1997 there were approximately 295 mineral substances which have been identified exclusively in meteorites.” I glanced down the list. “Oh, here’s moissanite—like your mom’s ring. You think purplillium would make nice jewelry?”

“I wonder if you can purchase rock polishers anymore?” Gabriel mused. “Remember that one I had as a kid? It was entertaining for like—an afternoon.”

Punching buttons, I didn’t look up from my phone. I paused as the screen loaded. “5 Best Rock Tumblers, Everything You Need for Rock Tumbling, Rock Polisher on Amazon, Discover the beauty of rocks and—”

“So there’s still rock tumblers.” Gabriel wadded up his wrapper and put it in the brown paper bag our dinner came in. “We should tumble a rock or two of purplillium.”

“Already been done,” I turned the phone around to show Gabriel an Etsy store. “Lady here in Harmony is making jewelry out of the rocks as of six days ago.”

“Holy shit,” Gabriel pulled the phone closer to his face. “\$500 for a set of earrings? Wonder if she’ll sell this crap at that price. They’re not very imaginative pieces.” He stood and started cleaning off the counter.

I shrugged. “It’s the latest thing. It’ll probably die down.”

“Purplillium . . . today’s hottest fad! Buy now, supplies are limited. What is the lady calling it?” Gabriel asked.

“Harmony Rocks.”

“Purplillium is better.”

“Far better.”

I tested the tv, and it worked perfectly. Wonders never cease. Gabriel and I spent the rest of the evening watching DVDs and alternating Mouse head-scratching depending on which lap she was in at the moment. I didn’t have cable or Netflix, and local channels were boring. My little blue Christmas tree twinkled from the corner. Life was normal.

I forgot the loofa incident until past midnight after Gabriel had left. I laid down in bed, closed my eyes, and the weirdness from earlier in the bathtub floated past my eyelids. “Ghosts,” I muttered. But somehow that didn’t seem right. The apartment had never felt ‘off.’ I’d lived here for three years now. The community college I attended was full of

ghost stories—and those old buildings felt like they could easily harbor a spirit or two or twenty. I never claimed to be intuitive to such things, and never encountered a ghost—unless that really was what that was in the bathroom.

“If you’re here,” I said into the dark room, my voice sounding small. “If you’re here . . . give me a sign.”

I waited.

Mouse jumped onto the bed, and I damn near fell out of it. I raised up on an elbow and glared at my cat. She curled her tail around her torso and primly sat, lifted a paw, and began bathing. I stared hard at her, but she never met my eyes.

“Well played, ghost,” I grumbled. I laid back down. “You’re not really here, are you?” I said to the room.

Nothing answered.

Back on the Cliff

The next morning I laid in bed for awhile, snuggling with Mouse and screwing around on Facebook. I have never bounded out of bed in the mornings, but the invention of smartphones (coupled with the abrupt ending of my day job) really reduces my productivity before noon.

My email dinged, and I punched my screen over to see what it was. It was my boss. Well, a building manager. I was technically independent contract. God forbid anyone would hire full-time with a real schedule in this economy. I had been doing tour guide work for the largest skyscraper in Harmony—Montgomery Inc. Triple Towers. The ‘MITT’ we called it in Harmony. How the MITT got away with hiring tour guides as independent contractors is beyond me. Seems they could take the money they spend lobbying and give that to their employees and everyone’s lives would be better.

But what do I know?

The Montgomery Incorporated Triple Towers Manager of Public Relations, Christy Napoli, emailed to inform us tour guides that the MITT was operational again. Schedules were attached. Perfect. I worked two whole days this week. At least they were Friday and Sunday. Busy days made the shift go faster.

Part-time tour guide. Exactly why I got a degree in graphic design.

I rolled over and scratched Mouse behind the ears. Closing my eyes, I dozed off to sleep again.

I looked down and watched little rocks tumbling over the edge of a cliff. This seemed familiar. Had I been here before? I felt hot breath on my shoulder and could smell cotton candy.

Yup. I had been here before.

“What’s up, Puff?” I directed my question to the right scaly side of the monolithic dragon sitting next to me. I assumed it was the same dragon.

“DON’T CALL ME PUFF,” he boomed.

Same dragon.

“Sorry, Puff,” I quipped. “Why am I here again?”

“Beats me. I suppose to delight me with your presence.”

“I’m equally thrilled to be here,” I grumbled. “Dreams are supposed to be an escape, right? I’m supposed to be a millionaire sunbathing on a beach in Rio, or diving in a pool of chocolate pudding, or—”

“You want to die in a pool of chocolate pudding?” the dragon asked, perplexed.

“DIVE,” I emphasized. “DIVE in a swimming pool of chocolate pudding.”

“You want to swim in a pool of chocolate pudding?”

“Not really. But I did dream that once.”

“Was it a good dream?”

“No. I woke up with actual pudding in my hair. One of my foster brothers dumped a bowl of the stuff on my pillow while I was asleep.”

“Charming fellow,” the dragon laughed.

“He’s now a bank manager,” I said. “Look, is there something I’m supposed to accomplish here?”

“I don’t know. My only job is to terrorize people in dreams. And you don’t scare easily.”

“I don’t find you terrorizing.”

The dragon stood up, turned towards me, outstretched his wings, and blew fire directly over my head.

I shrugged. “Not even a shiver. Lucid dreamer, remember? I know this all isn’t real.”

“DAMN!” the dragon whirled back around and sat down with a THUMP. The ground shook. I bounced a little and giggled.

“I’m glad you find me amusing,” the dragon said, fire in the back of his throat.

“I’m glad you’re glad about something,” I said. “Why are YOU here? Don’t you have other dreamers to terrorize?”

The dragon puffed sweet-smelling steam into perfect rings. They floated out over the ginormous cavern we were sitting at the edge of. “The dream realm doesn’t work like that. I can be many places at once. And I don’t represent every dragon in every dream. Just certain dreamers imagine me like this.”

I eyeballed the huge beast up and down. “So you’re a representation of my subconscious? Interesting. I’d have thought my spirit guide would be a cat.”

“I’m not a spirit guide.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m a dragon.”

“A dream dragon.”

“Sure.”

“That’s supposed to terrorize me.”

“Exactly.”

“But you don’t.”

“I KNOW!!!” the dragon roared. That outburst made me flinch a little. He jumped off the cavern, spun around to face me, and seemed to land in the air on his gigantic outstretched wings.

“Ok, that was impressive.” I made an impressed face.

The dragon flapped his wings, adjusting himself lower so his nose was directly in front of my face. He turned his head to the left so he could stare at me closely with one large eye. The eye blinked. It was purple, and had a crystalline property. My dream dragon was detailed.

“Andrea Winter,” the dragon said simply.

“My friends call me Raney.”

“Raney Winter,” the dragon said in the same even tone. “Nice pun.”

“Thank you.”

“Where did you get that name?” the dragon asked.

I felt odd sitting there while being interrogated, so I stood up and started walking across the edge of the cavern. I was walking much closer than I would to a real cavern. Even though I knew it was a dream, the sensation of walking so close to the edge gave the same adrenaline rush.

“I was turned over to a social worker when I was found abandoned as a baby. I didn’t have a name or anything identifying me. The social worker named me. I’m told she gave me the last name of Winter because it was the end of winter when I was found. Andrea was the name of her favorite aunt. I don’t think she realized the pun was there.” The dragon was gently flapping his wings, drifting sideways in the air next to me as I walked. “I never met her, so I’ll probably never know.” I walked several more steps,

balancing on the edge, my companion floating next to me. "It is a nice name, though. I like it." I stopped and turned towards the dragon. "What's your name?"

"I don't have one," he said.

"I guess you don't need one."

"Quite right," he said. "I only have conversations with one person at a time. If they're speaking, I know they're speaking to me. But most often, all they do is shriek and run."

"Eeeeeek," I said, feigning uninterested fright. I put my arms in the air and started running away from the dragon in a slow, exaggerated run.

This was a bad idea.

In one fell swoop, the dragon pumped his wings, glided over top of me, grabbed my shoulders, and lifted me off the ground.

"Holy shit!" I yelled, as the earth got further away from me.

"HA!" triumphed the dragon.

"What? I'm not scared," I stated, crossing my arms in defiance. Egads, it was a long way down. Dream or no dream.

The dragon let out a roar with a blast of fire, and I could feel the heat above my face. Even though dangling from his claws, I was a long way from his head. All at once, he opened his talons, and let go of me. I dropped like a rock to the ground. Now I started screaming. Lucid dreaming or no lucid dreaming, this was far from fucking cool. The ground had disappeared, even though I could see it just a minute ago. I was falling into nothingness.

I felt something falling with me. My body tumbled to the left, and I could see the dragon beside me, nose pointed towards the ground, flying downward in the same trajectory as I was falling.

"Fly, Raney," the dragon said calmly.

"FUCKING WHAT?!?!?" I screamed. "THIS NOT COOL!!!"

"Fly. You can fly."

"FUCK!! HELP ME!! YOU WIN!! I'M SCARED!!"

I couldn't believe how calm the dragon sounded. How quiet his voice was. How easily I could hear his words even though I was falling faster and faster.

"You - can - fly." The words fell as sweet as his breath.

“I can fly,” I repeated.

And I stopped in midair.

I woke with a jolt, startling Mouse, who jumped off the bed.

“Sorry, kitty,” I said. I looked at the clock. 12:42 pm. Lovely. Not that I had anywhere to be, but it always made me feel super-worthless when I slept this late.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed. No house shoes. Must’ve left them in the bathroom. I yawned. Fragments of my dream floated through my sleepy brain. I stood up and stretched. I’ve had reoccurring dreams before, but this dragon is a new thing. Usually, the repeat dream subjects or scenarios I’ve had, were recycled since childhood. I couldn’t think of a single time I’d . . .

Mouse bumped my foot with her head. She walked under my legs, rubbing her back along the bottom of my foot. Something wasn’t right. She reversed direction, walking back under my feet.

I was standing up.

My cat was walking under my feet.

I was hovering 12 inches off the ground next to my bed.

I yelped, throwing out my arms to steady myself.

I stayed hovering.

“WHAT THE EVERLOVING FUCK?!?!” I shouted, extra emphasis on the ‘fuck.’

Mouse jumped on the bed and started washing a paw.

“I’m dreaming,” I announced to the room. “I have to be dreaming.” I looked around for the dream dragon. He wasn’t there. “Ghost thing? Hello?” I called into the room, arms still outstretched. I felt like an idiot, floating there like a crucified Jesus in Wonder Woman sleep pants.

Arms still perpendicular to my body, I carefully set my right foot in front of me. I shifted forward as if I could put my weight on it—like walking on air.

I pitched forward and dropped face-first to the floor. I threw my hands in front of me to avoid slamming my nose into the hardwood.

“Ow.” I rolled over and looked at the ceiling. “Not dreaming.” I laid on my back, afraid to move. I concentrated on breathing in and out. I also concentrated on not freaking out. So far so good.

Mouse leaped off the bed onto my chest. “OOOF,” I complained. She started making bread on my left boob. “Ow, ow, ow.” I plucked her off my chest and set her on the floor. I sat up, rubbing my breast. “Not dreaming.” I looked around like the answer to this situation was laying around my room somewhere.

Still too nervous to get off the floor, I spun around on my butt and faced the bathroom. I could see my purple fuzzy house shoes on the floor in there. “Ghost!” I announced. “Bring me my house shoes!”

Nothing happened.

“Ghost!” I called. “Bring me my house shoes . . . please?”

Nothing happened.

I held out my hand, palm down towards my left house shoe.

It easily floated across the room into my outstretched fingers.

I placed the shabby shoe on my left foot. I stared at the right shoe, all alone on the bathroom floor. It shot across the room and hit me in the face.

WHAT IN THE FUCK WAS GOING ON HERE?

I put on the other shoe and placed both feet on the ground. I was terrified, but exhilarated all at the same time. This wasn't a ghost. This wasn't aliens. This was me. Well, maybe aliens –maybe they gave me some sort of powers? This was . . .

I had no fucking idea what this was.

But I had an entire day to fuck with it.

Turns out being underemployed has its benefits.

So What All Can I Do?

I put my right foot on the floor, placed a hand on my knee, and shifted my weight to stand up. Midway to standing position, my knees buckled and I pitched forward towards the bed. I landed sprawled half on and half off the bed.

I'm pretty sure I was in full-blown freak-out mode.

Understandable.

I felt nauseous.

That solidified my legs and I ran to the bathroom, dropping to the floor in front of the toilet. God, I hate throwing up.

I am not going to throw up.

I am not going to throw up.

I am going to throw up.

I opened the lid of the toilet.

My stomach relaxed.

I am not going to throw up.

I closed the lid of the toilet.

I threw up.

The vomit hung in the air like . . . like . . .

Ok, I have no simile for this one.

Let's just move on, shall we?

Where was I?

Hanging vomit. Right.

Not removing my eyes from the floating pile of mess, I reached out and opened the toilet lid with my hand. The vomit curved over and gently lowered in the bowl. I looked at the toilet lever, and it flushed.

I think I may be on to something here.

Still sitting on the floor, I turned around to look behind me. I rested my gaze on a pile of washcloths, stacked on the countertop. The top one floated off, then over to the sink.

For now I'm going to go with the theory I am the one controlling these actions. I don't think ghosts are this helpful. Plus, everything that's moving is something I want to move. It's like an instinct, maybe?

The hot water facet turned on and the washcloth moved underneath the stream of water. The facet turned off again. The washcloth hung in the air over the sink, dripping. I watched all this activity from the floor. I did this all with my . . . my mind? My will? I tried to wring the washcloth out. It just twisted slightly and still dripped. That took dexterity I didn't have yet.

YET. Already I'm looking at this thing as something I'm going to improve upon. But that thought made sense. This felt like a part of me. Like an extension of me. Like learning to use a fork or chopsticks for the first time. I remember taking a drawing class for an elective in community college, and the instructor had said, "Let the pencil be an extension of your arm." That's what this felt like. But like the clumsy stabs I made at the paper with my pencil in art class, this feels clumsy as well.

I stood up, plucked the washcloth out of the air with my fingers, and wrung it out the normal way with my hands. I washed my face. I held my hand out with the cloth draped over it, and slowly dropped my hand out from underneath the damp cloth. It hung in the air in the shape of my hand. I floated it over to the towel bar and draped it over the middle.

I was shaking.

I need food.

I went to the kitchen, put a coffee pod in the machine, put a mug underneath and mashed the button. I fished out a frozen breakfast sandwich from the freezer and tossed it in the microwave. Sitting on a barstool at the counter, I finished the sandwich in two bites.

I nuked a second sandwich and ate that in three bites.

The third sandwich I took more time with, taking small bites and eating like a normal human.

A normal human.

Was I a normal human?

Nope.

Was I human?

Uh . . .

Good fucking question.

And pending my orphaned abandonment status, one I may never know the answer to.

I shook my head. Not important. Not important. What was important?

Coffee. More coffee.

I made a second cup, and carried the steaming mug and remainder of my sandwich in the living room.

I sat on the couch. Mouse jumped up next to me. She marched across the cushions and settled in my lap, purring. I finished my sandwich, wiped my hand on my shirt, and petted her.

I felt somewhat more normal after my coffee and sandwich. It dawned on me that it was odd that I downed three sandwiches right in a row after I'd gotten sick to my stomach. But the food and hot coffee had made me feel better. I guess I had been eating more lately. Maybe my metabolism is higher from this thing?

What WAS this thing?

Well, let's see—apparently I have telekinesis and I can fly. Or at least, hover.

Badly.

Let's play with the telekinetic thing first.

I wasn't feeling brave enough to try hovering or flying again.

I looked around the living room. There were some pictures on an end table. I focused on one.

Nothing happened.

I tried to tip it over.

Nothing happened.

I focused as hard as I could, willing the picture to float or fall over or SOMETHING.

Nothing happened.

"Dammit!" I grumped out loud.

My phone rang from in the kitchen. I stood up and turned around in time to see it whizzing around the corner and flying towards me. Instinctively, I threw my hands in front of my face and caught it.

I stood like that, frozen.

The phone kept ringing.

My ringtone is *Flight of the Bumblebee*.

My phone was just flying through the air to the tune of *Flight of the Bumblebee*.

I started to giggle.

Then I started to laugh.

Then I couldn't stop laughing.

Oh lovely, hysteria has set in.

I dropped to the couch, laughing until my sides hurt.

I never answered the phone.

I woke up on the couch an hour later. I sat up, groggy. I was exhausted.

Also starving.

I headed to the kitchen and began boiling water for macaroni and cheese. Pulling out the small pot I usually used for my favorite comfort food, I eyed it, then put it back in the cabinet. I dug in the back and retrieved the largest pot I had in the kitchen.

As the water was heating, I rested on a kitchen barstool. My eyes fell on the wall clock. It read 3:00. I felt like it was late at night. I laid my head on the countertop. "This thing is fucking with my energy," I announced to the empty room. I could hear the water beginning to boil. I stood up and dumped in three boxes of macaroni and cheese. Returning to my barstool, I laid my head on the counter and spoke again to the empty room. "And my metabolism." I sighed dramatically. "Booooooil . . . faaaaaster . . ." I pleaded with the pot.

The macaroni cooked in its own goddamn sweet time, and a whole seven minutes later, I was able to finish the preparation by adding milk and butter and the three orange powdered cheese packets. I dumped the mess of cheesy goodness in a mixing bowl, carted the thing to the living room, and plunked down in front of the television. Reaching for the remote, I realized it was across the room. I started to get up, and then

smugly settled back in the couch cushion. Not even looking at the remote, I stretched out my left hand in the air.

The remote smacked me in the side of the face, popping me sharply in the nose.

“FUCK!” I recoiled, dropping the mixing bowl. I clutched the side of my face. Mouse walked over and sniffed the bowl of macaroni and cheese, hovering upright a few inches from the floor. I’d caught it in mid-air with my mind. Left hand still over my face, I floated the bowl into my lap. I turned and looked sternly at the remote on the couch cushions, and it floated in an arc to my outstretched right hand.

“Don’t get cocky. Got it?” I addressed the unseen power I had. I turned on the tv.

A crashed helicopter hung from the corner of a building. Christopher Reeves flew in from stage left. He caught a screaming Lois Lane, and said, “Easy miss, I’ve got you.”

“You’ve got me!” she screeched. “Who’s got you?!”

John William’s orchestral score trumpeted triumphantly.

“Really?” I said, raising an eyebrow to no one. “Trying to send me a sign I’m supposed to be a superhero?” I hadn’t a clue who I was asking. “If I’m a superhero,” I continued, “where’s my fucking John Williams’ score?”

Mouse jumped on the couch next to me, turned in a circle, and settled in for a nap. I scratched her on the top of her head. She purred.

Turning back to the tv, I watched Superman fly across the screen with a helicopter in one hand and Lois Lane in the other. A crowd of bystanders cheered. “Is that what I’m supposed to do with this?” I asked Mouse. I gestured towards the screen with a forkful of macaroni and cheese. “I can’t do that!” I insisted, inserting the fork of noodles and cheese into my mouth. “Fly around all day and save people and helicopters . . . I have a job. Ok, a pathetic job where I work two or three days a week . . .” Mouse flicked an ear. “. . . but I will get hired somewhere full time again. It’s going to happen. So I can only save people on off hours. Should I learn CPR? That seems like something a superhero would do.” Mouse had no words of wisdom.

“Or do I even want to BE a superhero?” I continued my one-sided conversation. “I should be a villain.” I was halfway through the bowl of cheesy pasta. I stuck a forkful of macaroni in my face and continued. “All the superheroes I’ve seen . . . wait. Ok. All the FICTIONAL superheroes I’ve seen get their powers early in life.” Christopher Reeves’ chiseled face filled my television screen. I gestured towards him. “Like Superman. He was born with his powers. Supergirl. Wonder Woman. All born with their powers.” I thought about this. “Flash, all the X-men—those guys and gals got their powers with adolescence. I can’t think of a single superhero who got their powers in their 30s.”

I knew who'd know. Gabriel and Dean. The comic world kings. They'd know instantly who and in what version and in what expanded universe. I leaned forward to grab my phone and call them.

Um—bad idea. That would mean I had to tell them. I didn't know why, but I didn't want to tell anyone this yet. This was all so crazy . . . and so frightening . . . but so exhilarating and exciting at the same time. I didn't want to share this yet.

Also, a part of me was afraid if I tried to show this thing to anyone, the powers wouldn't work and people would think I was crazy. You know, like when you take your car to the mechanic and it suddenly stops making that horrific knocking noise.

So I've reduced my abilities to a knocking noise.

Or like Big Bird on Sesame Street. Nobody believed Mr. Snuffleupagus was real—how does a three ton mammoth-like creature hide on a city street, anyway? But nobody believed Big Bird for years. I think people can see Mr. Snuffleupagus now. Can they? I put my empty bowl on the floor and held out my hand for the phone. It rose vertically off the couch and slapped the tips of my fingers. I turned it around and started typing. Then I stopped and held it flat on my palm. Staring at the keyboard, I imagined typing on the keypad. That didn't work.

Worth a shot. Maybe I'd try it later.

Let's see . . . Mr. Snuffleupagus . . . created to be a woolly mammoth without tusks, has a little sister named 'Alice' . . . here it is. In the mid-80's, he was revealed to be real. Big Bird staged a big meeting, and now everyone can see him.

Well that's just weird.

Reading further, I discovered that the creators of the show were starting to get concerned that no one believed Big Bird when he told them about his friend, and they were afraid that children were learning the message that what they said wouldn't be believed if it wasn't seen. Abused children in particular . . .

Well, that's just sad.

And true.

And now I'm depressed even further about my childhood.

Although I wasn't abused. That sounded like I was abused. I wasn't. I mean, we all know someone who was—that's just how it works. But I actually had a pretty decent string of foster homes.

I briefly thought of my last home, and if I would've told them about this had they been alive.

Car wreck.

Very sad.

Very quick.

Very long ago.

Ok, ten years ago—but that counts as ‘very long ago.’ In some timelines.

I wouldn’t have told them.

I don’t know if I’ll tell anybody.

I picked the mixing bowl off the floor with a wave of my hand just to make sure I still could. I watched the bowl rise off the floor like a pathetic David Blaine trick.

I’m not saying David Blaine is pathetic, I’m saying lifting a mixing bowl with macaroni and cheese residue is pathetic.

I sat there with the bowl in the air, holding my palm upwards, outstretched. I didn’t need the hand motions, it just seemed more natural to do it with a gesture.

I wondered how long I could hold the bowl.

I sat there for several minutes, floating a mixing bowl in the air. Eventually my hand got tired and I dropped it. The bowl tipped slightly, then righted. I left it in the air and continued watching Superman.

Ten minutes.

Twenty minutes.

Thirty minutes.

I wasn’t tired at all. Nothing felt tired.

This was so weird.

Wonder if there was a range on this thing?

There had to be a range on this thing. I envisioned myself using my power three states away to lift a newly-elected President Trump in the air and throw him out the White House window.

Beautiful thought.

But I doubt I could pull that off. This thing **MUST** have a range.

I stood up, and the bowl wobbled.

I backed towards the wall of the living room. The bowl didn't move, and it didn't follow me. I kept going, backing towards the door to the kitchen. The bowl hung motionless. I backed around the corner, until only my left eyeball was peering around the corner and watching the bowl. The bowl hovered motionless. I stepped backwards around the corner and pressed my body to the wall, wincing.

There was no crash from the living room.

"Nice!" I exclaimed.

There was a crash from the living room.

So this will take practice.

Maybe I should use something that won't leave blobs of cheese sauce on the floor.

I cleaned the orange splatters off the living room floor, the side of the couch, the bottom of the television, and the side of the wall. Then I dug around in a spare closet for something random to practice with.

Tennis balls. Perfect. I had three of them.

Settling back on the comfy couch, I posted a message on Twitter and Facebook about how I was not feeling well. That'll give me some privacy other than sympathetic comments and a text or two from the boys and Clove. I laid my phone in the palm of my hand again, and clicked the switch on the side with my mind to turn the sound off. Then I floated it across the room and laid the phone on an end table.

Ok. Tennis balls.

Wait—I need music.

**I've got big balls - I've got big balls
And they're such big balls - Dirty big balls**

**And he's got big balls . . .
And she's got big balls . . .**

But we've got the biggest balls of them all!

- Big Balls

by AC/DC

Throwing My Balls Around

I turned on a hair metal music station, and AC/DC's *Big Balls* came on.

Oh I love it when the universe has a sense of humor.

Scooting around so I was sitting sideways on the couch against the armrest, I crossed my legs in front of me and settled in. The tennis balls were on the floor. I gestured my left hand and raised one off the floor and set it on the cushion in front of me.

Nice, nice . . . I didn't smack myself in the face. I was gaining some finesse with this thing.

Trying for two at once, I lifted the other two tennis balls off the floor, arched them over in a dramatic swoop, and settled them in a neat line to the right of the first one.

My phone vibrated once. I ignored it.

Using both hands, I made a lifting motion, and all three tennis balls rose off the cushion. They hung in an uneven row. I frowned and motioned them back down on the couch.

My phone buzzed again.

"Dammit, I'm training here!" I snarled at the phone.

It was quiet.

I lifted the three balls again, this time trying to keep them in an even line. The last ball sagged a little.

My phone buzzed again and I dropped the balls. "DAMMIT!"

It was long buzzing. Not a text this time, a call. I held up my hand and the phone shot across the room into it. This was going to be a handy dandy new little talent thingie.

It was Clove. "Yeeeeeeeeees?" I answered, drawling out the greeting.

"I'm so sorry you're sick!" she said. Sweet girl. She was always so caring and compassionate. "Can I get you anything?"

"Aww," I said. Trying to sound sick. "You're so sweet—no, I'm ok."

"Are you coughing sick or stomach sick?"

Oh-oh. Details. I hadn't thought that far ahead.

"I uh . . . I . . . just don't feel like myself today," I said. Well, that WAS the truth.

"Oh. General funk. I got ya," my friend said sympathetically. "I'll leave you alone. Let me know if you need anything, ok?"

"Ok," I said.

"Love you."

"Love you too."

I beeped the call off. A wave of sadness hit me. Would I lose my friends when this came out?

No.

They loved me. And they were the coolest human beings on the planet.

Even if I wasn't.

Human, I mean.

They would understand.

Ok, they wouldn't understand. I don't understand. But I didn't think I'd lose them.

But things would change when they found out. They'd know I was different. I mean, I'm different now, but they'd know and that would change everything.

But I had time to worry about that later. Right now, I was spending time figuring out my power.

I floated the phone back over to the end table. Missing the edge, it dropped to the floor when I released it. "Shit!" I said, and lifted the phone back on the table, scooting the device further to the middle. Depth perception was different from a distance.

Henceforth the practicing.

I shrugged my shoulders and shook them out, shaking my head a little. Clearing my throat, I sat up straight. One tennis ball had bounced off the couch when I dropped them. I lifted all three at once, moving that one a little faster so it joined its mates when they all reached an imaginary line. There. They were in a neat row. I'm improving. I moved the balls closer together, then farther apart. I smiled.

My phone buzzed again.

I scowled.

Text message. I ignored . . .

It buzzed again.

I set the balls on the couch and reached out again for my phone.

It was a picture of a sad kitten from Gabriel. I sent him back a brief, “TY. Your sister just checked on me too. I’ll be ok—just retreating for a day or two. Pajamas and macaroni and cheese.”

It was amazing how easy it was to tell my friends exactly what I was doing but omitting the ‘practicing telekinesis’ part.

I spent the rest of the evening playing with my new talent. I also ate two more boxes of macaroni and cheese.

Yes, I have a lot of boxes of macaroni and cheese in my cabinet. So?

Well, actually, at the moment, I had none.

I should maybe go to the store.

I jumped in the shower, then threw on some powder foundation, mascara, and neutral-toned lipstick. I started wearing makeup when I was 12, and I’ve never been in public without it since. I went on a camping trip in high school and took makeup. The kids made fun of me.

But I was the one who got to second base with Jason McGuire. So fuck those kids.

As I walked through the living room, I raised the tennis balls off the couch, juggled them in the air, bounced them off the wall one right after the other, and rested them in a row on the top of my bookcase—all without breaking stride.

Baby steps. But I was developing mad skills.

I drove down the street to the grocery store, thankful that it was open 24 hours. I like going to grocery stores in the middle of the night. The daytime rush of a store gives me a headache. It’s all: “Excuse me. Pardon me. No, you go ahead—excuse me. Excuse me, could I just get . . . thank you. No, I’m sorry. Yes, here you go. Sorry. Sorry. Excuse me. EXCUSE ME!!!”

No thank you.

I blissfully pushed my cart through the empty rows, no 'excuse me' necessary. I rounded the corner of an aisle to find a disinterested stockboy stacking coffee on a shelf in even rows. Dammit.

"Excuse me," I said. He moved to the side without a word and without even looking at me. I reached for a box of cinnamon bun-flavored coffee pods. I hit the corner of the stack next to the box and they started to topple to the floor. Instinctively, I caught the boxes in midair, without my hands. The boxes hung suspended in the air like it belonged there. I blinked hard and shot a side glance to the boy. He'd taken his phone out of his apron and was punching on it with his thumb, patiently waiting on the dumb redhead. With my right hand I grabbed the edge of the hovering box stack and shoved them all backwards back on the shelf. With my left I snatched the box of cinnamon bun coffee out of the air and tossed it in with the other groceries. I nodded at Bored Box Boy, then pointed my cart at the end of the row.

I scolded myself internally as I pushed the cart away. I'd figured out this thing operated on instinct, but how in the hell could I shut that off? It's like a hand up to deflect a dodgeball to the face. Muscle memory can be trained, so I imagine this thing can be trained.

Something tells me my fake illness is going to last a few days.

Fake Illness

It lasted a week. It should have lasted a lot longer than that, but Christy Napoli, my boss, was getting pissy. She had plenty of employees to draw from—and as far as I knew, all of us were happy to work extra hours, but she couldn't let too many people work too many hours for too many weeks at a time or they'd qualify for benefits and her boss wouldn't allow that.

God forbid a job would pay a living wage AND benefits. Perish the thought. Nope, just keep us part-time, broke, and on food stamps.

Assholes.

My fake illness allowed me to practice a lot in seven days, and felt I had a much better grip on the telekinesis thing than I had when I first curved that beer bottle into Tom's trashcan. I could levitate twenty things at one time, both all in a row: one, two, three, four, five, until all twenty items were hovering; and I could also lift twenty items simultaneously all at once.

I even recreated Luke's training on Dagobah. One-armed handstand, stuff lifting and floating all around me . . . Mouse played the part of Yoda, balanced neatly on my foot while I was upside down.

She was less than pleased. I gave her lots of kitty treats afterwards.

I had NOT tried the hovering-in-air sorta flying thing again that I'd done the morning this all kicked in to full gear.

I was not that brave.

Yet.

Telekinesis first. Flight later.

Fly or fly not, there is no . . .

Shut-up, inner monologue. I have to go to work and act normal.

"You can do this, you can do this," I pep-talked myself on the drive into downtown Harmony.

"You can do this, you can do this," I cheered as I pulled in the parking garage.

“You - can - do - this - you - can - do this . . .” I chanted in time with the ‘thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk’ sound the tires made as I drove up the ramps of the parking garage.

I turned off the motor and opened the door. “You can . . . oh holy fuck,” I stopped breathing as my foot hit the concrete. I was really going to do this. I was going to pretend that my life was normal when it wasn’t. When I could propel this car across the parking lot with the force of my mind if I wanted.

Ok, I didn’t know if I was THAT strong, but . . .

I made a mental note to test that soon.

I discovered I was shaking.

I sat in the seat. I put my head on my knees. “You can do this, you can do this, you can do this . . .”

“Look,” I chided myself. “No one fucking pays attention to you anyway. They’re all ‘oooo’ing and ‘aaaaaaah’ing at the stupid building. You won’t slip. You got this. You have to work. You have to have gas money. You have to have money to feed Mouse.

That did it.

I raised up.

Mouse. I could do this for Mouse.

FINE.

I slammed the car door, and locked the doors with the clicker. Tilting my head sideways with a swift CRACK of the neck, I squared my shoulders and marched towards the elevator.

As I was walking, I saw an empty soda bottle on the ground. Turning my head left and right and seeing no one, I raised my hand and with a flick of the wrist, neatly flipped the soda bottle off the ground and spun it end over end into the trash can three feet from it.

Telekinesis without breaking stride. Nice.

‘Don’t get cocky, kid,’ Han Solo’s voice rang in my head.

I sighed. My inner monologue and its sense of humor.

‘Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi . . . you’re our only . . .’

“SERIOUSLY?” I said a little too loudly. “That one doesn’t even make—” The elevator doors opened with a DING, and four people stared at the crazy red-head talking to

herself in an empty parking lot. I sheepishly grinned at them, lowered my head, and walked in the elevator.

“The locals call Montgomery Incorporated Triple Towers ‘MITT,’ M-I-T-T” I spelled out, “. . . for short.” I was in the lobby of Montgomery Incorporated Triple Towers—the ‘MITT’ for short—in my stupid black pants with my stupid white button-up shirt and my stupid black blazer, telling all these stupid people about this stupid building for the upteenthousandth stupid time.

The lobby glittered and glowed with stupid Christmas decorations in gold and silver. Not too Christmasy, not to Hanukkahy, just festive and glittery. A decorated tree stood right in front of the doors, right in the way of the normal flow of pedestrian traffic. The tour group followed me around the left of the tree.

My tour guide voice had kicked in. These people had no idea how much I hated them or the building. “At 110 feet tall, this indoor waterfall is the second tallest indoor waterfall in the nation.” I gestured towards the waterfall like Vanna fucking White. Like these people couldn’t see the waterfall. Like all of this couldn’t be on a fucking plaque in the lobby for people to just read when they come in. But then I’d be out of a minimum-wage part-time job. Pictures snapped. I waited.

“Where’s the tallest?” some kid in a ‘Tour Harmony!’ green and yellow tie-dyed ball cap asked. I knew she didn’t care. I knew she just wanted to make the tour guide sound stupid if she didn’t know.

“Good question!” my tour guide voice chirped. “According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the tallest indoor waterfall is in an office building in Detroit.”

“This says the tallest inside waterfall is in Singapore.” A dude in the back of the group wearing a camouflage hoodie and torn jeans was bent over his phone. The group collectively turned to look at him, then collectively turned back to face me.

“Google ‘International Center Building,’ ” my tour guide voice said. My stupid tour guide smile didn’t crack. “Singapore has claimed for years to have the highest indoor waterfall in the world, but apparently they haven’t bothered to file a request with the Guinness Book of World Records to have someone come measure it.” The group nodded in unison.

People see reports on the news of angry mobs, and they wonder how men and women can act so stupid and inhumane . . . but tour guides understand the mob mentality that total strangers can exhibit. One asshole dude with a Google search can ruin the whole tour experience for everyone.

And if everyone has a bad time, my tips go way down.

One trick is to get the kids to like you. If the kids like you, the parents like you, and then the rest of the group likes you. I reached down and spun the 'Tour Harmony!' hat on the kid backwards and patted her on the head. She giggled. The parents smiled. My tips increased.

"But neither detail matters," my tour guide voice continued. "Because whichever one is tallest, the statement that this is the second tallest indoor waterfall IN THE UNITED STATES still stands." Everyone nodded. I gestured towards the bottom. "I'll give you a minute for pictures, and if you'd like to throw coins, go right ahead. It's said to be the luckiest fountain in Harmony."

The group moved towards the waterfall basin, digging in their pockets for loose change. Luckiest for the MITT, that is. Every year they drain the basin for cleaning, collect the change, and have a huge BBQ for the building employees.

The tour guides don't get to go. We're independent contract. I know more about this building than any of those fuckers, and I don't get free BBQ.

Mmmmmmm. BBQ! My stupid metabolism has kicked into high gear again. I glanced around. The lobby was pretty quiet except for the tour group, which was lounging around the fountain, taking selfies with the Christmas tree, and dropping coins in the water.

Hmmmmmm. Coins.

I mentally grabbed four coins out of the fountain at the back corner behind a row of plants. I shot the coins into the sky as fast as I could to dry them off, then dropped them directly into my hand behind my back. Fucking-A, I landed them on a target I couldn't see. Nice. I looked around. Selfies and chit-chat continued. I pulled my hand around to check out the coins. Damn. Three quarters and a dime. I repeated the throwing-coins-in-the-air trick with three more coins, and managed to fish out another quarter.

My gaze settled on the gift shop across the lobby on the other side of the ginormous Christmas tree. The girl at the counter was on her phone, texting. I flew four quarters across the lobby and landed them neatly by the cash register, grabbed a Milky Way, and shot it back into my hands so quickly it actually startled me.

I pocketed the candy bar. I could eat it when we got to the observation deck. No one wants to hear the tour guide when they're on the observation deck—they just want to observe. And take pictures. And take selfies.

I physically tossed the remaining three coins back in the fountain. "Ok, guys," my tour guide voice said. If you follow me this way . . ."

Back at home I sat in front of the tv, two burger wrappers crumpled into balls on the floor, third burger half-eaten in my hand. Mouse was happily batting a wrapper around the sofa. I'd picked up three double-patty burgers from the drive-in down the street. They'd thrown in an order of onion rings and I'd eaten that too. What on earth was I going to do about this metabolism thing? I was going to have to turn villain just to afford my appetite.

Is that why villains turned villain?

No.

Villains turned villain because of a character flaw.

Ok, that's not right either, because our superheroes certainly have character flaws. Batman is a walking, brooding mess of character flaws.

Batman can fucking afford three double-patty cheeseburgers without worrying about how to pay for it.

So if Batman had grown up poor, would he have turned villain?

There was probably an alternate universe comic that explored that idea.

I reached for my phone to text Gabriel and ask him and then sat back instead. "DAMMIT!" I said. I wadded the third wrapper and flung it at Mouse. She reared back on her hind legs and tried to catch the projectile in midair. She succeeded in knocking it across the room and flew after it. I picked up the closest wrapper to me to throw at her in a minute.

It was so frustrating that I couldn't share anything about this craziness with Gabriel, but I just didn't want to. For one, this did not make any sense. For two, it was sorta terrifying. For three, it was sorta fucking amazing. Whatever this was, I knew it wasn't going away anytime soon. It just felt like a part of me. So I wanted to examine this part of me before letting anyone in on it.

No idea when that would be, but I assumed I'd figure it out.

Mouse shot by me, batting a wrapper ball between her paws back and forth like a little soccer ball. I threw the wrapper ball I was holding at her, but stopped it from hitting the floor. It hovered in front of her nose. She batted at it with both paws. I moved the little paper ball around the room at Mouse-height, dipping and bobbing the ball while she tried to catch it. Mouse had zero issues with my new powers. She'd let me pick her up in mid-air and float her over to me without a care. Animals can sense things humans can't—could she possibly know it was me and my energy lifting her in the air?

Maybe?

I guess there were tests and things that would determine answers . . . but I knew I didn't want that. If there was anything I'd learned by watching all this sci-fi through the years, it was don't get caught and don't let anyone know your real identity.

I need to make a list.

List of Rules for Superheroes

Huh. That doesn't seem right. I don't know if I'm going to be a superhero yet.

List of Rules for Potential Superheroes

Uh . . . no.

List of Rules for People Who Exhibit
Superpowers and May or May Not be a
Superhero

Oh good fucking god.

List of Rules for Me

That's better.

- 1) Do not tell anyone. Yet.
- 2) When you do tell someone, make sure it's only Gabriel, Dean, and Clove.
- 3) Don't get caught.
- 4) Practice using your superpowers so you can get better at them.
- 5) Practice NOT using your superpowers in public.
- 6) Try not to let your superpowers become second nature.
- 7) Unless you're fighting a bad guy.
- 8) Decide if you're going to be a bad guy or not.
- 9) Remove the words 'bad guy' from your vocabulary and change it to 'bad girl.'
- 10) Scratch that, 'bad girl' sounds kinky.

Fuck this. I need a drink.

**Baby . . . you know I want a little taste, taste
So let me take you all the way, way
You know you'll never be the same, same**

(You fuckin' bad girl!)

**One night . . . you won't forget the rest of your life
So come on over to the wild side
Buckle up and, baby, hold on tight**

**Miss me
Miss me
Now you wanna kiss me**

**We
both
know
that you love me 'cause I'm so bad . . .**

- *Bad Girl*

***by Avril Lavigne
(featuring Marilyn Manson)***

Bad Girl

(In case you missed the inference from the lyric set-up.)

I found a bottle of Southern Comfort in my cabinet and an hour later found myself halfway through it.

Don't judge, it's been a rough fucking week.

Weeks.

Month.

How long have I known about this shit?

I wobbled to the kitchen and stared at the calendar on the wall. There were two calendars.

I closed one eye.

Oh hey, there was one again.

I moved back here on Saturday—no, last Saturday. Soooooo . . .

I counted the days.

There appeared to be ten.

So I'd been a superhero for ten days.

Ok, I think that's the appropriate time to crack.

Day ten.

And welcome to day ten.

I poured another shot.

Glass. I poured another glass of several shots.

Ok. Must not do anything stupid. Must not do anything stupid. Must not do anything . . .

Man, I was hungry again.

I looked at the clock. It was one in the morning.

Taco Bell it is.

The quintessential stop for drunks at one in the morning.

Look at me, spitting out four-syllable words when I'm drunk as fuck.

Oh yeah. I'm drunk as fuck.

There's no way I should drive.

Lucky for me, I had other modes of transportation.

I flew to the nearest Taco Bell, being careful to stay close to the tops of trees so not to fly in open space. Apparently I can fly really well when drunk.

Which is super interesting, because I hadn't ACTUALLY tried flying yet.

I read somewhere that people do better on standardized tests when they've had a bit too much to drink, because drinking lowers our inhibitions.

I counted on my fingers. In-hi-bi-tions. Fuck me, another four-syllable word.

I'm on a roll.

Whoops, there's Taco Bell.

I dropped to the ground in a patch of trees . . . no, I mean I LITERALLY dropped. Like WHAM! Like, man, it should've hurt, but apparently I have a high pain threshold with this thing.

Or maybe I'm just drunk.

Or both.

I'll make a mental note to check this out when I'm sober.

Eat now, rationalize later.

Four-syllable word! Boo-yaaaa!

I walked into Taco Bell and ordered five bean burritos—add sour cream. “They are MUCH better with sour cream,” I told the 16-year-old behind the counter. She agreed. I fist-bumped her.

I’m fucking cool.

Am I eating these here, or to go, the 16-year-old wondered?

“THAT!” I said dramatically. “THAT . . .” I peered at her nametag. “That, Susanna, is a FABULOUS fucking question.”

“To go?” the girl suggested.

“To GO!” I agreed, and high-fived Susanna.

Susanna looked relieved.

I weaved out of Taco Bell with my five bean burritos with sour cream in one hand, and a large soda in the other. I wondered if I could fly with items in my hands.

I didn’t have to test this question.

Someone was pulling through the drive-through that I knew.

“Well hello, stranger,” the someone said.

“Oh fuck me, Jon, how are you today? Tonight? How are you tonight?” I was trying my best not to appear drunk. I casually leaned on the door and stuck my face in Jon’s window. Goddammit he smelled good. Jon was sitting behind the wheel of his vintage black convertible BMW, looking stupidly handsome wearing a blue and white striped long-sleeve button-up shirt and blue jeans. He always wore button-up shirts. Like some sort of preppy boy who was rebelling by adding the blue jeans. He was a great kisser, fairly decent in bed, but horrible at the relationship thing. He’s part of the ‘it’s-not-you-it’s-me’ club. We’d tried no less than three . . . four . . . I don’t remember at the moment . . . SEVERAL times to do the boyfriend/girlfriend thing, but he . . . but he . . . well, he’s just a fuck-up and doesn’t do monogamous relationships.

Mo-no-ga-mous. Four syllables.

Man, I forgot how good he smelled.

“Man, I forgot how good you smelled,” my mouth rattled off straight from my brain. Dammit, mouth—you have no filter when you’re drunk.

“Are you drunk?” Jon asked.

“WHAT?” I stepped backwards, shocked. “ME? DRUNK? WHATEVER WOULD GIVE YOU . . . I’m speaking too loud, aren’t I?” He was leaning away from me in his car seat, but smiling. He eyed the bag of food in my hand.

“Party at your house?” he asked.

I looked at the large bag. “I’m hungry,” I answered.

“You didn’t drive did you?” he looked around the lot for my car.

“I flew,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Want a ride?”

“Why not?” I asked him.

Ride indeed.

Do I really have to type out this part?

I’m kinda embarrassed about it.

I mean, seriously, who here hasn’t gotten fucked up over a major life upset, worked their way through a bottle of alcohol, went out for fast food, and accidentally hooked up with an old boyfriend?

Girlfriend?

Fuck you all, I know it’s not just me.

I’m assuming the flying part and five bean burritos with sour cream first WAS just me.

But hey, maybe I’m wrong.

Fortunately, I had reached the alcohol-induced stage where talking was difficult, so I just munched on my burritos while Jon drove me back to his place. I’ll give him kudos, he was being a perfect gentlemen. He even mildly protested when I straddled him on the couch and started removing my . . .

Why don’t we just skip this part.

Skipping the Sex Scene

OH QUIT YOUR WHINING, there's all kinds of smut out there to read. You don't have to have details on my one-night hookup.

Although with Jon, this was probably our sixth or seventh night hookup.

WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT NOT JUDGING?!?!?!?

Ok, fine. My favorite position is the 77.

Google it.

I'll wait.

Back? Got the visual? Ok.

There was a lot of 77ing. Along with other numbers.

It had been awhile.

For at least one of us.

We laid there in the dark—me, comfortably alcoholicly numb and straddled over my ex-on-again-off-again boyfriend with the fuzzy buzz that that follows an ear-splitting orgasm, and Jon breathing deeply.

“Holy shit,” he said, running his fingertips up the base of my spine.

I moaned and wiggled from side to side slightly.

“Holy shit, Stacey, that was amazing. I'd forgot—”

I stiffened. “I'm sorry, what?”

The silence was deafening.

“Raney,” Jon said firmly. “I meant to say, Rane—”

I don't remember anything after that.

WHAM WHAM WHAM

WHAM

My head was pounding.

I could hear it hammering behind my eyelids.

WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM

“Miss?”

Wait a minute.

Headaches don’t talk.

wham wham wham wham

“Miss Winter?” Pause. “Andrea Winter? Are you home?”

knock knock knock knock

Ah. It wasn’t my head hammering, it was knocking on the door. I sat straight up. Door? I was home. Laying on my couch. Naked.

“Ms. Andrea Winter? This is Detective Johnson. I have a few questions.”

Join the fucking club.

I grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around myself. Stumbling to the door, I opened it a crack and peered an eyeball out. My gaze settled on a badge.

“Oh, you’re home. Ms. Winter? May I ask you a few questions?” I could see a tall African-American man in a sport coat and khaki pants holding the badge.

“Sure, lemme uh–um, not–uh . . . I just woke up. Gimme a minute.” I shut the door. Then opened it a crack again. “Or two.”

I clicked the door shut. SHIT. What happened last night? My mouth tasted like cotton and onions. Taco Bell onions.

BeanburritowithsourcreamSouthernComfortJonFrazierIamsuchaFUCKINGidiot.

Ow.

Is it possible for a thought to hurt?

The detective cleared his throat in the hallway. Too bad I don't have super speed. Why the fuck am I naked?

I hurried to the bedroom and grabbed my robe, throwing my long dark red hair in a scrunchy and heading back to the doorway. I opened it, then stepped aside with a small permissive gesture to . . . "Detective . . . ?"

"Johnson," he answered, giving me an up-and-down look. "Detective Don Johnson."

"Detective Don Johnson," I repeated and shut the door. Why did that name sound familiar? What was I going to tell Detective Don Johnson? I decided to be honest. Well honest-ish. "I am hungover, Detective. My apologies for . . ." I looked down at my robe wrapped around my body crookedly and my hair fell out of its scrunchy. "Just, my apologies," I settled on.

He gave me a long look.

I adjusted my scrunchy.

What the fuck was he doing here?

Coffee. I need coffee.

"Coffee. I need coffee," I said. "Would you like a cup?"

"No, thanks, Ms. Winter." He followed me into the kitchen. He waited until I'd turned towards him so he could see my face. Then he asked, "Do you know a Jon Frazier?"

Do I know a Jon Frazier? Right down to the little mole on the side of his— Play it cool, play it cool, bitch. "Uh yeah," I said fumbling for a coffee mug. I turned to meet the detective's gaze. "I was over there last night." I made a small little throat-clearing sound. I could not remember how I got home for the life of me. What happened last night?

The detective sat on a barstool, took out a pad of paper, and set it on the counter in front of him. Do detectives still take notes? I would've figured they would type it on their phone. Or record the conversation. But I guess they can't record a conversation without my permission.

This is way too much thought before coffee.

I stuck a She Hulk mug under the coffeemaker and punched the on button.

“There was an accident last night.” The detective was still looking me straight in the face.

I didn’t have to fake anything—these emotions were genuine. “What? When? How? Jon? Is he ok?”

“He’s fine. Few broken bones.” The detective made a few notes on his notepad.

Wait. Something was starting to come back to me.

Detective Johnson flipped back a few pages in his notepad, then read out loud: “Jon Frazier was found naked, wrapped in a blanket outside his apartment complex at approximately 3:32 this morning.”

Was he now. I opted for a shocked/concerned look. “Broken bones?” I asked. “Outside?”

“The side of the building was collapsed. It appears he jumped out the window when the ceiling started to fall in.” The detective’s face was emotionless.

Somehow my fingers did not shake as I grabbed a cinnamon bun coffee pod and jammed it in the coffee machine. I punched the green button and tried not to hold my breath. Keep it together, keep it together. You have no idea if you—oh who am I fucking kidding. “Is he going to be ok?” I decided to ask.

“He is, he is. When we took his statement, he said he was with you. Thought you were still in the building. Crews searched through the rubble, but no body was found. That’s why they sent me here.”

Something was curling at the edges of my soggy Southern Comfort brain. I retrieved the cup of coffee and poured sugar in it. Settling a spoon into the mug, I stirred and my brain stirred with it. “Stacey!” I cried.

“Stacey?” Detective Johnson wrote on his pad.

Chill, Raney, just chill. I stared at my coffee, then carefully blew on it. “I remember now,” I said—not lying. “He called me Stacey.” I took a sip and scowled. “My name is NOT Stacey.”

The detective nodded, writing more on his pad.

Ok, I can do this. Here goes. A version of the truth. I squared my shoulders. “I had too much to drink last night. I’m adult. It happens.” I paused. Detective Johnson gave no hint of an expression on his face. Oh good. I kept going. “I went to Taco Bell.”

He was copying all this down. “You drove?”

“Oh, no, I was too drunk to drive.” I continued, hoping he’d assume I walked. Because what else would I have done? Flown? “When I walked out of Taco Bell, Jon was there in the drive-through and asked if I wanted a ride. He took me back to his place . . .”

I took a bigger drink of my coffee as it was beginning to cool. The detective was scratching my story down, face emotionless. I can do this. Holy shit I can do this.

Caffeine in my system, I suddenly made a connection in my brain. “Don Johnson!” The detective looked up. “Your name is Don Johnson!” He gave me a slow blink. “Like the actor! Who played a detective on . . . on . . .”

Detective Johnson offered no suggestions, but he gave another slow, irritated blink.

“Miami Vice!!” I snapped my fingers and pointed at him. “He played a detective on Miami Vi—you’ve heard this before.”

Detective Don Johnson-not-the-actor was clearly not amused.

“I—uh—so anyway, yeah.” Detective Johnson’s expression could’ve frozen Medusa in stone. I’d better go back to the uncomfortable topic. “Don—JON,” I said empathically. “Jon and I have this on-again-off-again thing, and last night we were spontaneously . . . uh . . . on.”

The detective stopped glaring at me, and started writing on his pad again. He was, however, now glaring at his pad.

“When we were—I mean after we—uh . . . well, he called me Stacey.”

He kept writing. “I’ll bet that made you mad.”

“Well the whole situation was fucked up, sorry—screwed up.”

“Yes, Ms. Winter. So then what happened?”

Good fucking question. What happened indeed.

“Uh . . .” Well, let’s try this approach. “I honestly don’t remember.” I took a swig of coffee and shook my head. “I’d had a lot to drink. Next thing I know, I woke up here with you pounding on my door. I must’ve been angry—walked home.”

Since I technically didn’t remember flying home, it wasn’t a lie to say I probably walked home.

Feeling more normal now that I was caffeinated, I decided to shoot a few questions off myself. I walked to the middle island and perched on a barstool across from the detective. “You say the building collapsed?”

He nodded. “That area was shaken pretty badly with the meteorite strike, and while they inspected all the buildings, the structural damage to that one must’ve been worse than they thought.”

“Worse than they thought,” I repeated, nodding. “So Jon woke up when the ceiling started to cave in, freaked out, and jumped out the window?” I suggested.

“That’s the best we can tell,” Detective Johnson closed his notebook. Oh sweet baby Jesus he closed his notebook. Now to get him out of here. “He’s actually suffering from a bit of memory loss as well.”

“He wasn’t drinking,” I said. I did know that.

“No, but trauma can cause short-term memory loss. I’d say an event like that can cause some trauma.”

I snorted. “So can calling someone the wrong name.”

“Names are funny things,” Detective Johnson said, giving me a hard look.

“You are so right,” I said, standing up to escort him to the door. He sat there, staring at me.

Shit.

His intuition was spiking. All detectives had a well-developed intuition. Gabriel had it. It’s why he wanted to run a detective agency. Well, that, and the fact his favorite show was Angel—the Buffy the Vampire Slayer knock-off show.

“You know my best friend is a detective,” I offered.

“Really.” Wow, this guy was good at showing zero emotion.

“His name is Gabriel. Gabriel Jones. Angel Investigations. He would’ve picked up your name quicker than I did. Anyone give you any grief over—”

“All the time.”

“Of course.”

Silence.

I couldn’t leave it alone. “Is it Don or Donald?”

“It’s Don.”

“So not short for Donald.”

“No.”

“So why don’t you change it?” I asked.

“It’s my name.”

“You’ve been asked that before, haven’t you?”

Silence.

Boy I do not know when to shuttup. “I have to ask one more question. . .”

“No, I don’t let anyone call me Crockett, yes, Tubbs would be a better nickname because I’m black, no I’ve never met Don Johnson, yes I used to watch the show.” He spun on a heel and took long steps towards my front door.

I followed him, still prattling. “Did you wear pink?”

“It was the 80’s, Ms. Winter.” He opened the door with a little more force than was really necessary. “We all fucking wore pink.”

I giggled. He was not smiling. I had no idea if meant it as a joke, but I giggled again.

He turned towards me, and stuck out his business card. “If you remember anything else, here’s my card.”

“Am I in trouble? Is Jon in trouble?” I asked, taking the plain white business card.

The man gave me a stoic look. “There’s something off here,” he finally said. “But dammed if I know what it is. Call me if you feel like telling me anything else.”

I can fly and move things with my mind and I’m not dealing with this information well.

“Have a nice day, Detective.”

“Good day.”

**I'm dreaming of a white Christmas,
With every Christmas card I write . . .**

**May your days be merry and bright
And may all your Christmases be white.**

- *White Christmas*

by Bing Crosby

Merry Fucking Christmas

It had snowed overnight. This was not horrifically unusual in Harmony, but it was unusual this early in the winter. I can only remember one other white Christmas, and that was when I was little.

I'd never built a snowman, so my foster mother took me outside and we built one taller than I was. I was amazed that something so powdery and fragile could combine and make something so solid. "Can we take him inside?" I had asked. She explained that snowmen live outside, or else they'll melt. I took my scarf off and gave it to the snowman. "Because he has to stand in the cold," I explained. She smiled and hugged me.

I know, I know, the troupe is for the girl to grow up in the foster system and have a troubled upbringing. Was it perfect? No. Was I abused? Never. Was I ignored? Not on purpose. Did I ever feel like I really had a family?

Yes.

When I met Gabriel.

I'd had a present under their tree ever since Gabriel and I first became friends. And in later years, a seat at their Christmas dinner table. Jack was an amazing cook, and they'd have the whole nine yards: turkey, stuffing, gravy, cranberry sauce . . . not that shit from a can, the homemade stuff. It was awesome. They were awesome.

And I had to go over there today and lie to them all. Well, lie by omission, I guess.

I hadn't seen Gabriel, Dean, or Clover in forever. It had only been a couple of weeks, but it felt like a lifetime. It was a lifetime. My life was different back then. I was normal.

I am far from normal now.

I was flying around my apartment, wrapping presents at the last minute before I went over to the Joneses. I was literally flying, like a giant Tinkerbell in jeans and an ugly candy cane Christmas sweater. I found I could move a bit faster in the air, and it helped me fine-tune my precision flying. I whizzed over top of Mouse, dropping a ball of wrapping paper over her head to play with. She happily leaped up to catch it, then dropped on her back to try and rip it to shreds with her back claws.

I loved Christmas . . . which some might find strange because I was technically an atheist. While I don't believe in a large deity that lives on a cloud and micromanages everyday life for us puny humans on earth, I do believe that there is some universal purpose to life and humanity. So I guess you'd say I'm a spiritual atheist. And I have

nothing wrong with Jesus. He was extremely cool. Jesus was a hippy who wandered around and hung out with the downtrodden and castaways, and told everyone to be nice to each other. I can get behind that. I saw somewhere on a documentary that technically, Jesus never officially stated he was the son of God. Jesus was bestowed with that title hundreds of years after his death. So I say, no matter who Jesus represents to what religion, he had to have been a really awesome dude for people to still talk about him today. And I love the cultural glittery goodwill and tidings of joy thing Christmas represents. So I celebrate the holiday.

I'd gotten Clove a black sweater, Dean a leather laptop case, and Jack and Judy throw blankets with matching throw pillows. Jack and Judy were the hardest to buy for. They had everything they needed. But they always added a good dose of cozy to their upper-middle class home, so I thought I'd contribute to that. I'd bought their presents at a craft fair. I liked that they were handmade. Judy was such a fantastic artist, and store-bought decorations just don't work in that house.

Gabriel's present was my favorite. Three hardcover graphic novel compilations of Squirrel Girl, and the crowning jewel of my gift . . . a copy of *Sandman Vol. 1: Preludes and Nocturnes*, signed by fucking Neil Gaiman himself. Gabriel's gonna shit.

All of Gabriel's favorite comic book heroes have a dark side.

I wonder if I'll be his favorite superhero.

Or villain.

Or freaky girl with superpowers who's decided not to be either and just use her powers for her own good.

Which at the moment is retrieving the scissors from across the room.

They shot into my outstretched palm, turning downwards in mid-flight so the blades were pointing at the floor. I'd gotten more confident in my abilities, and with confidence was coming dexterity. Last week tennis balls, this week scissors, next week cars.

Maybe I should put something in between the scissors and car step.

Still, I was sure enough of my powers that I could vault a pair of scissors across the room and not stab myself with them. I guess if I do ever stab myself with them, I'll have to dial back the usage a bit and be more careful.

But at the moment, my powers were becoming a more graceful extension of myself, and I was getting better at not accidentally using them in public. Like a sudo-instinct instead of a full-blown reflex.

I had even been practicing flying—at night, when it was harder to see me. And sober—always sober. The alcohol removed the inhibition of full-blown flying in the sky, but it

was still unnerving to look down and see nothing holding you up there. I hadn't gone more than a four-block radius, and I'd stuck close to the trees in case I fell, but it was a start. I didn't seem to get tired when I flew, but I'm sure I had a limit.

I turned a midair summersault in my living room. I was in a good mood. Christmas with the Joneses is always fun. And this year was probably the last year it would be normal.

I would tell them.

All of them.

After Christmas. We'd enjoy Christmas, then I'd tell them before New Years.

I liked this plan.

"YOU DID WHAT?!??!" Gabriel shrieked. He was holding Bernard. The little teddy bear was wearing a red Christmas sweater with a green wreath on it. It matched Gabriel's sweater. Gabriel took Bernard's paws and launched the bear at me, throwing punches wildly.

"SHHHH!" I waved my arms frantically as Dean and Clove shot a look our direction.

"YOU-ARE-AN-IDIOT!" Gabriel accentuated each word with a punch from Bernard. And now Clove and Dean were coming over.

"I OUGHTA . . . I MEAN . . . RANEY! You know better." Gabriel's eyes were flaming. He threw Bernard at my head. I caught the bear and held him in front of my face, hiding.

"I know," I said.

"IF IT WASN'T CHRISTMAS, I'D--"

"Chill, big brother," Clove calmly stepped between Gabriel and me. Somehow she'd found a Christmas sweater in grey, with a black Christmas tree. It had little silver stars on it. She'd wrapped tinsel around her platinum blond braided hair, and it framed her face like a fluffy, sparkly halo. Only Clove could dress monochromatic for the holidays and still make it look festive.

I peered Bernard over Clove's shoulder at her brother's direction. "I plead the Southern Comfort defense," I said, peeking over her other shoulder.

Dean put his hands on Gabriel's shoulders and rested his chin on the crook of his partner's neck in a rare outward gesture of affection. "Chill, Gabriel," he cooed. "You're not really mad, you're just overreacting for dramatic sake."

"I'm well within my rights for dramatic sake, here!" Gabriel insisted. He wrapped his hand around the back of his boyfriend's neck in a backward hug. "Raney did something stupid!"

"Someone stupid," I added.

Clove spun around to face me. "Oh lord, not the ex-husband."

"Oh lord, NOT the ex-husband," I confirmed. "NEVER the ex-husband. There's not enough Southern Comfort on the planet."

"Wait a minute," Gabriel twisted out of Dean's hug, grabbing his hand and spinning under his arm. He kept ahold of Dean's hand, swinging it back and forth while he was thinking out loud. "I saw in the news that your old boyfriend Jon was in an accident recently."

"OH!" Clove said in realization. "Sympathy sex."

"IT WAS NOT SYMPATHY—oh, hello Judy," I changed the subject as Gabriel and Clove's mother rounded the corner into the living room. She was grinning. I know she heard the whole thing.

"There's nothing wrong with sympathy sex," she said. Yup. Heard the whole thing.

"IT WASN'T!" I repeated. "He got hurt after I left!"

"Wait, what?" Gabriel had stopped being irritated and had switched to confused.

"His apartment building—er—collapsed," I said. I left out the part about how I probably caused it. "I was over there that night YES IT WAS A BAD IDEA LEAVE ME ALONE," I directed at my best friend, tossing Bernard at him. "I left because he pissed me off, and later the building collapsed. Jon jumped out the window. He's fine."

"Good lord, you literally made the earth move?" Clove giggled.

"You had to go there, didn't you?" I rolled my eyes at her.

"Someone had to."

"Perfect."

"Food!" Judy insisted.

"Food?" we all echoed.

"Food!!" Judy made a motion towards the dining room with her hand and we all followed.

The Joneses' house is very traditional in some spots and very untraditional in other spots. The outside decorations were certainly traditional, lights everywhere, and decorations, and yadda yadda yadda. Inside, they had three Christmas trees. One in the living room decorated in a color scheme—this year's was pink and green. It always looked like something from a magazine. They'd set it up right in front of the window so it looked stunning through the window from the street with the outside house lights. Then there was a tree in the hallway with nothing but bows. It was a tradition that harkened back to the early days of the Joneses' marriage, when they were still in college and didn't have money for ornaments. Jack brought Judy a little Christmas tree he'd gotten at the corner lot, and she had some ribbon left over from an art project, so they tied little bows all over it. So every year since, she's put up a small little tree with different colored bows.

The third tree was my favorite. It was in the basement, in the family room, and had the most personality. The tree was covered with all the ornaments the family had collected through the years. All the little hand-made ornaments Gabriel and Clove had made when they were little, odds and end ornaments the family received as presents, goofy things picked up at garage sales and after-Christmas clearance sales . . . this tree had personality. I loved it. It was the tree that used to sit in the family's living room until they bought this pricey house in a pricey neighborhood. I loved that they still put the tree up every year—and it was here the gift exchange always happened.

An hour later, the room was littered with paper, ribbon, and empty boxes. I sat with my treasures lined up in front of me like a row of trophies. A Spider Gwen coffee mug from Clove—she likes giving coffee mugs because she works at a coffee shop. Dean gave me a collection of adult coloring books and a really cool colored pencil set. As I was shuffling through the stack, I noticed one of the books was REALLY adult. I giggled, and quietly stuck it back in the middle of the pile. I fired a finger gun at Dean and he fired one back. Hooray for equally twisted friends.

Judy gave me one of her custom-made tee-shirts. She does amazing screen printing of her designs, and we all have several dozen "Judy Tees." This one was black with a red and purple heart on it, although the heart was turned to the side and it had a sharp line through it. "Not broken, but attacked," I said when I opened it. I hugged Judy hard and told her I loved the metaphor. I did love the metaphor. It was also a really cool shirt.

Gabriel gave me a Blendtec Blender. I didn't know whether to kiss him or kill him. Those things were expensive, but I've been wanting one for a long time. The company did a series of YouTube videos called "Will it blend?" where they had a nerdy scientist dude putting random things in the blender. It blended everything from cell phones to

concrete. My blender wouldn't fully chop frozen strawberries. Gabriel had met my OMG glare with a shrug and a declaration that the blenders were on special at Costco recently. I kissed him on the cheek and punched him in the arm. He tackle-hugged me when he opened his graphic novels and signed copy of Sandman. "RANEY! YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE!!! BUT I LOVE IT!!! BUT YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE!!!" He had screeched, pinning me to the floor.

"Merry Christmas, you idiot," I told him.

He pulled me upright and wrapped me in a bear hug. "Merry fucking Christmas, my friend."

I closed my eyes, and felt something stab my heart. Judy's shirt had come to life within my own chest. This was all going to be different next year. Nothing would be normal again. I kept my eyes closed and wrapped my arms around Gabriel. "Merry fucking Christmas," I repeated.

I would tell them in two days.

Two Days Later

I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

Fuck me, that was cliché.

But I was doing it.

It's like I was waiting for the girl with deep red hair in the mirror to give me some words of wisdom. Some advice. A smile. Anything.

I leaned forward and scowled at the girl in the mirror. "Your roots are showing," I scolded her.

She stuck her tongue out at me. We sighed.

I brushed fine grey cat hairs off the front of my black tee shirt. It was cold outside, but I wanted to wear Judy's Christmas present. I loved the heart with the line through it. It wasn't a broken heart, just pierced. Damaged. Still whole. I had a black turtleneck on underneath it, and my favorite pair of camouflage leggings. I never would have believed camouflage would become a fashion statement, but a few years ago when the military went to digital pixelated camouflage, I noticed suddenly female fashion had camo all over. My guess is the fabric companies had so much old-style camouflage patterned fabric left over, they successfully launched a campaign to make it popular fashion. Whatever the reason, I liked it. The earthy green colors worked with my ultra-pale skin and the blood red I liked to dye my hair. I found these leggings at the thrift store on a trip with Clover. They were super-comfy, and went with everything.

They also made me feel slightly bad-ass.

To complete the bad-ass image, I had on combat boots. I was pretty sure combat boots were out of fashion, but I didn't care. They were comfy, it was cold and rainy, and I needed all the bad-assery I was gonna get this afternoon.

I was going to tell my friends I had superpowers.

I had the whole scenario mapped out in my brain. I had even practiced the speech.

"Friends," I told the mirror. "I am not pregnant. I am not dying. Nothing is wrong with Mouse. I feel I need to preface this speech with these three statements."

I had been practicing this speech since I got home Christmas night.

“You’re gonna wanna sit down for this, though.” I paused. “Ok. So the deal is, something has happened to me. It happened a few weeks ago. I didn’t tell you because—well, it scared me.” I took a deep breath. “It’s really bizarre. And I can’t quite believe it myself. But it’s real. And it’s not going away. And I wanted to tell my closest friends. Please don’t freak out, ok? It’s important to me that you don’t freak out.”

And then I will wait a minute for all that to sink in, strike a wider stance, extend my arms, and float Bernard to me.

Then I’ll float in the air.

I practiced these two things now with a roll of toilet paper.

It’ll be better with Bernard.

I threw the toilet paper across the room and caught it with my mind in mid-air. I floated it to the top of the toilet and set it down carefully. I then set myself down carefully.

“Ok,” I breathed. I smoothed my hair, smoothed my clothes, picked another wayward cat hair from my shirt, checked that I’d unplugged the straightening iron and flipped off the light.

I flipped it back on again. “Ok,” I told my reflection in the mirror.

I flipped the light off.

I stood before the door of Angel Investigations, my heart pounding. I knew Gabriel and Dean would be there, they were working on a case. Some woman’s husband had gone missing after the meteorite strike. He had not been found in any of the collapsed buildings, or anywhere at all actually, but she suspected he had ran off with a woman. “The Case of the Houdini Husband” Gabriel had named it. So far they had very little leads to go on. They’d interviewed the man’s workplace, favorite deli, gym, and the wife. Wednesdays were paperwork days, and the boys were pretty true to form. I knew they’d be there.

I had texted Clove to meet me at Angel Investigations, and she said she got off work at 2:00 and would be there at 2:30.

It was 2:45.

This was it.

No turning back.

I raised my head a little, put my hand on the doorknob of the detective agency's door and . . .

Froze.

"Fuck you, Raney," I scolded myself. "Open the goddam door."

I turned the doorknob.

I felt tears well up in the corners of my eyes.

I turned the doorknob back.

"Fuck me fuck me fuck me fuck me . . ." I breathed out in rapid succession.

In one swift move, I twisted the doorknob and shoved the door open. I stood in the open doorway, heart pounding.

"Hello?" I called out—way too softly for anyone to hear.

"HelACK!" I choked on the word. "FUCK!" I cried. "HELLO! FUCKING HELL, HELLO!"

This was not going as smoothly as planned.

There was no answer.

Weird.

The lobby was empty.

The office door was open and there was no sound coming from the door.

My phone went off. "A MESSAGE FOR THE PRINCESS, R-2!!" I screeched and jumped sidewise away from the door. It sounded three times as loud in the empty office.

"FUUUUCK!" I shouted, slamming the door. I flopped dramatically on the couch in the lobby.

"A message for the—" I mashed my finger on the button to shut my phone up. Reclining to lay down on the couch, I groaned. This was not going as I had planned at all.

I looked at my phone. The message was from Clove.

'Meet at Gab's apt' it read. So the boys weren't working here today. But how did Clove know I wanted to meet the boys too? I'd only told her to meet me over here. But maybe she remembered Wednesday was paperwork day. Or maybe they . . .

Or maybe they know.

How could they possibly know?

I mean, I'd been acting strangely lately, sure, but other than holing up and being sick I really hadn't let on anything was different. Had Tom told them about my weird strong behavior during house repairs? We were all so busy with Christmas stuff, we hadn't spent much time together.

My heart pounded.

They knew. Oh my god they knew. They'd called the press. They'd called the police. They'd . . . they'd . . .

I threw myself off the couch into a standing position. I tugged my tee-shirt and smoothed down my leggings. "Stop being a fucking idiot, Raney," I scolded myself. "They've done none of that because even on the off chance they DO know you magically have superpowers, they wouldn't sell you out."

Would they?

What would they do?

They'd act normal? They'd freak out? They'd run away?

"A message for the princess, R-2!" I momentarily pondered throwing my phone across the room to watch it break into three nice-sized chunks when it hit the wall.

Instead I walked out of Angel Investigations, shutting the door behind me.

Wait a minute.

The door had been unlocked.

I walked back in, peering around the lobby and sticking my head in the office door.

It was all unlocked.

Bernard was sitting on the desk.

Something was wrong.

I grabbed the stuffed bear and left, locking the main door behind me.

Who Died?

It didn't take me long to drive to Gabriel and Dean's apartment. I parallel-parked, threw money in the meter, turned around to beep my car locked, and started towards the building.

"Shit!" I cursed quietly.

I spun on my heel and flew back to the car. Literally, flew two inches over the sidewalk back to my car because I could move faster when I flew. I hit the side of the car with my hand to stop my forward momentum. "SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT," I smacked the side of the car with each curse, taking a deep breath and looking left, right, back, and front to see if anyone had seen me. No one had. "I know it's instinct, but you HAVE to stop that, Raney," I snapped at myself. Beeping the car back open, I grabbed Bernard, slammed the door, beeped it locked, and turned on my heel, placing my right foot in front of me, then my left, then my right, until I was at Gabriel and Dean's apartment building's front door.

In the elevator, there was a little girl with her dad. She couldn't have been more than three. She was looking at me out of the corner of her eye, and her head dropped when she caught me looking back. She peered sideways again, and I realized she was eyeballing Bernard. The little girl was holding a teddy bear in her left arm, away from me. I hadn't seen it immediately. I took Bernard's paw and waved at her. She giggled and dropped her head again.

The dad looked at me, puzzled, then grinned when I waved Bernard's paw at him. The little girl giggled again.

"His name is Bernard," I said to her. "What's your bear's name?"

"Leonardo," she said.

"Cool!" I told her. "Like the painter or the turtle?" She just giggled in response.

"She likes the actor," the dad explained.

"Ah," I answered. "He's cool too." Do kids even know about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? When the fuck did I get old?

The door dinged at the boys' floor, and I walked backwards out of the elevator, waving Bernard's paw at the girl as I went. She waved Leonardo's paw back, and the door closed. "You can be right polite when you wanna be, Bernard," I complimented him.

I tried the front door and found it unlocked. “Take two,” I said out loud to myself. Inhaling a huge breath, I opened the door to Gabriel and Dean’s apartment and walked in.

“How dare you fucking leave me . . .” I stopped as I saw three stone-faces around the dining room table. Only Dean looked up. “Who died?” I quipped.

Gabriel burst into tears.

“Oh dear fucking god!” I cried, heading for the table. “Gabriel!??” I put Bernard against Gabriel’s chest and my friend grabbed the bear with both hands, burying his face in the top of the bear’s head. I looked at Dean and Clove.

Clove answered my questioning gaze. “Carrie Fisher,” was all she said.

I sank to the ground next to Gabriel’s chair. Tears filled my eyes. “Carrie Fisher?” The actress had a heart attack on a flight a few days before Christmas, but everything had sounded like she was doing better. “She died?” I asked, one tear running down my cheek.

Gabriel started crying louder. I put my hand on his knee.

There were no words. We all loved Star Wars, sure—but Carrie was her own shining beacon of personality. She was a symbol of strength and beauty in a business we all know is dark and seedy. Carrie was one of the first celebrities to openly speak about her struggles with bipolar disorder and drug use, and while none of us at the table had directly dealt with such darkness, we all knew someone in real life who had. How could someone who had beaten all that died so suddenly?

It had been amazing to see our old friends on the screen again with the new Star Wars movie. All four of us went—Gabriel dressing Bernard in a little Star Wars tee-shirt with a tiny little lightsaber. . . it was a glorious night. Our childhood nostalgia back on the big screen—and our heroes, older, grayer, some wiser, some crankier, but they were there! I felt like I was ten again, that little girl who dressed like Princess Leia for Halloween and had a Star Wars lunchbox. When Han and Chewbacca stepped on the Millennium Falcon and Han said, “Chewie, we’re home,” I cried. Even though I’d seen the damn line a dozen times in the trailer, and had cried each time.

I put my forehead on Gabriel’s arm, and he let go of Bernard and wrapped that arm around me.

“How did this happen?” I asked.

“Heart attack,” Dean answered.

“NO,” I said forcefully, raising my head. Tears were falling down both cheeks now. “I mean, how did we get old? Losing our heroes? I knew it would happen one day. I

remember when Steve McQueen died and Jack and Judy were so upset and I thought how ridiculous because he was so old. . .”

“Steve McQueen was only 50 when he died,” Dean said quietly.

“When did 50 become ‘not that old?!?!?’” I screeched.

“A message for the princess, R-2!” my text message went off.

I burst into tears.

A Vigil Fit for a Princess

So my news can wait another night. Another week, maybe.

Gabriel was really upset. He organized an event on Facebook, and I'll be damned if a few hundred people didn't RSVP for it. 'A Vigil Fit for a Princess' the event headline read. 'Bring lightsabers.'

I had not one, but two Force FX lightsabers, believe it or not. Because you can't have just one lightsaber. You have to have two. A reminder of the days I had a full-time job with benefits and a savings account.

Now I have neither, but goddammit I have two lightsabers for a vigil.

Deciding to arrive the old-fashioned way, I turned down the street to Truman Park and whistled. Wow. Both sides of the street were filled with cars. I saw a several people walking up the sidewalks, some in Star Wars tee-shirts, some in full cosplay, a lot of them with lightsabers. I drove up an extra block, turned the corner, parked, and started walking, lightsaber in each hand.

Heading up the path to the main fountain in the park, it was quite a sight. I scanned the crowd and noticed the demographics were very diverse. There were several Gen-Exers, but also quite a few people older than me, and several younger. I spotted Clove's platinum blond hair by the fountain—she was higher than the rest, and I suspected she was standing on the edge so she could look for me. I navigated the crowd, turning sideways and doing that "excuse me, excuse me, I'm sorry, excuse me" thing I hate so much. Halfway through excusing me, Clove turned around and raised a hand when she saw me. I finally got up to her and placed a lightsaber in her raised hand.

"Is it lightside or darkside?" she asked.

"Which one do you want?" I answered.

"I dunno. I'm a little bit of both," she said.

"Aren't we all." I flicked on my saber and it flashed blue with a crackle-buzz. The Force FX sabers had sound effects, and would make cracking and crashing sounds if you hit them against something. It was half the fun at conventions, whacking people with lightsabers to make noise. Until you get kicked out.

I may be speaking from experience.

But don't dress like a Jedi unless you can take a lightsaber whack upside the shoulder.

Pansy.

Clove flicked on her lightsaber and stood in the red glow.

"Your hair looks pink," I said. "Cool. Where are the boys?"

She pointed. "On the other side of the fountain."

Oh wow, the crowd was bigger than I thought. It extended around the fountain. Gabriel and Dean were standing by the edge of the fountain. It was turned off for the winter, but the concrete statue in the middle had an angel. Appropriate.

Both for the occasion and my best friend's name.

Gabriel handed Dean his lightsaber, stepped onto the edge of the fountain, and turned to face the crowd. Someone handed him a megaphone. I guess he was considered the leader since he created the event.

Gabriel flicked on the megaphone and it made that whining sound they all do. Murmuring and low chatter stopped, and everyone turned to face the man with the megaphone. Darkness had settling on the crowd, and we all glowed in lightsaber light. It would've been beautiful if it hadn't been so sad.

I guess sadness can be beautiful sometimes.

"Thank you for coming," Gabriel addressed the crowd. "We are here to remember our fallen princess." His voice wobbled. "We are here to remember Carrie Fisher."

"Yeah!" someone cheered from the back. It was awkward. Do you cheer at vigils? Gabriel ran with it.

"Yeah!" he cheered back.

"YEAH!" the crowd cheered, raising their lightsabers collectively towards the heavens.

"Go ahead and cheer!" Gabriel shouted through the megaphone. "FUCK YEAH!"

"FUCK YEAH!" the crowd cheered.

So, there are children in the crowd getting an education. But if you know anything about Carrie Fisher, you know that was her favorite word.

"Carrie had a strength and an attitude that was unmatched," Gabriel said. "And that was a glorious tribute to her, thank you."

Gabriel then told a touching story about the first time he saw Star Wars, and then passed the megaphone to someone else, and soon over a dozen people had gotten up to tell their Star Wars stories and what Carrie Fisher had meant to them.

It was very touching.

It was also getting very cold.

But I wasn't about to leave my friend.

The stories went on for about 45 minutes, but most everyone stayed. Finally, the megaphone was handed back to Gabriel.

"Let's all have a moment of silence for our princess," he said. He bowed his head, raising his lightsaber above it. The crowd repeated the gesture. What a fitting memorial to a beautiful soul.

"We ceeeeeeeeeeeeebraaaaaaate a daaaaay of peeeeeaaace . . ." Gabriel sang through the megaphone.

Clove looked up, eyes wide.

"Oh shit, he's launched into the dumb-ass song Princess Leia sings in that god-awful Christmas special," I whispered to her.

"A daaaaaaay of haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar-mooooooooooooooooooooo-nyyyyyyy. . ." the crowd sang.

"Oh shit, half these people know the words," Clove whispered back.

We stood there, mouths open, as half the crowd sang with tears in their eyes and half the crowd looked bewildered and confused.

"toooooooooo beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee . . ." the group finished in a high falsetto. And everyone clapped.

And laughed.

And cried.

As the crowd dispersed, Gabriel walked around the edge of the fountain and joined Clove and I.

"Brother, that was ridiculous," Clove told him with a hug.

"And Carrie would've loved it," I said.

"Carrie would've loved it," Dean repeated.

Once Upon a Midnight Dreary

“The locals call Montgomery Incorporated Triple Towers ‘MITT,’ M-I-T-T” I spelled out, “. . . for short,” my tour guide voice said cheerfully. It was New Year’s Eve afternoon, and for some stupid reason there had been a lot of traffic through the tour guide booth today. “At 110 feet tall, this indoor waterfall is the second tallest indoor waterfall in the nation,” I said. I waited, counting down in my head . . . three . . . two . . .

“Where’s the tallest?” a teenage kid in the front of the group asked.

“Good question!” my tour guide voice chirped.

Blah blah Detroit, blah blah Singapore . . . surely you remember the previous tour conversation from earlier in the book. If not, you can flip back.

I’ll wait.

I finished the waterfall conversation I HAVE WITH EVERY FUCKING TOUR GROUP and turned them loose for a minute to take pictures and throw money in the fountain. I stood off to the side, with a row of potted banana plants and ferns behind me, casually plucking coins out of the fountain with my powers and catching them behind my waist. I had figured out a way to supplement my grocery budget.

Yes, it was technically probably stealing, but fuck them for never inviting the tour guides to the BBQ that the building staff throws with the money from the fountain.

Ooooooo. BBQ. I’ll have BBQ tonight.

And mashed potatoes. And rolls. And macaroni and cheese. And green beans.

I vaulted more coins out of the fountain.

Oh, wait. I was meeting the gang later for New Years. Wonder if I can talk them into BBQ?

“Why is there a bird up there?” a voice at my elbow made me jump. A small boy had snuck up on me—jesus, I have to be more careful, what if he’d seen me stealing quarters with my brain?

There’s a sentence I never thought I’d say in my entire life.

“Bird?” I repeated. The little boy was pointing, and I followed his gaze up the open lobby. Each floor had a balcony that wrapped completely around the inside of the building, so people could look down the lobby at the tremendous waterfall. At the 13th

floor was a bar and grill called 'The Raven.' It was all Edgar Allan Poe themed, with 19th century decor and drinks like 'The Tell Tale Heart' that was blood-red and actually quite good. It was served with a strawberry rimmed on the glass, and a little plastic stick with a heart on the end speared through the strawberry.

An actual plastic anatomically correct heart. Not a cutesy little Valentine's Heart. It was gruesome and awesome. The drink was \$13.95. I'd never had one.

The little boy was pointing at a large shadow of a bird that shown on the front of The Raven. "Ah!" I said. "The bird up there! That's so people notice there's a place to eat on the 13th floor of the MITT," I explained. "See how there's a spotlight over there. . ." I pointed across at a spotlight with a bird silhouette on the front, ". . ." and it shines the bird shadow over the restaurant over here," I pointed on the opposite side. The boy followed my finger.

Some of the group came over to listen. "The story goes," I said, "that there used to be a boarding house on this site in the 1800's. Local stories say that Edgar Allan Poe slept at that boarding house on a visit to the area. When the MITT opened in 1980, Mr. Montgomery wanted a themed restaurant to honor Poe."

"Quote the raven, nevermore!" a guy chirped. A ripple of polite laughter went through the group.

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!" I cried, a finger pointing upward.

Blank stares from the crowd. The little boy next to me stared the blankest.

"Do a google search, kiddo," I said, patting him on the head. The parents smiled. The tips went up. "Now if you guys will follow me . . ." I continued the tour.

Maybe one day I'll grab a bite to eat at The Raven. Wonder if they have BBQ?

Wonder if they take loose change?

Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot

“Last hour of the year!” Clove exclaimed, raising her White Russian in the air.

“WHEW!!” I cried with Dean and Gabriel, duplicating Clove’s gesture with our drinks before we all clinked glasses. Alcohol sloshed on the table.

“DAMMIT!” Clove licked the back of her finger to catch the sticky drink running down her hand. I caught the waitress’s eye and pointed to the table. She gave me a thumbs-up and headed our way with a dishrag.

“It never does that in the movies,” Dean noted.

“Nothing is the same in the movies,” Gabriel said. “It’s soooooooo glamorous.”

I took a swig of my Southern Comfort and Dr. Pepper. Looking at Clove I said, “Like the grabbing-for-a-towel thing after sex so you don’t get spooge all over the sheets.” She raised her glass, and we clinked them carefully.

“EEEEEW!!” Gabriel protested. “I don’t want to hear about my little sister’s spooge escapades!”

Clove had raised her glass to her lips, and she dang near sprayed her drink all over the table. “SPOOGE ESCAPADES!!!” she howled. “That sounds like a late-night Cinemax movie!!!!” We clinked glasses again, rougher this time because we were laughing, and spilled more alcohol.

“Jesus, I can’t take you guys anywhere respectable,” Dean grinned.

“The Coyote Lounge and Cafe is far from respectable,” I shot back.

“Better than the Spooge Lounge and Cafe,” Clove giggled. More glass clinking

“The password is . . . spoooooooooge,” I said in a game show host voice.

“I hate you both,” Gabriel rolled his eyes.

“No you don’t!” Clove and I sang back at him, and raised our glasses towards him to clink.

After my tour guide shift at the MITT ended, I met my friends over at this crappy little bar in downtown Harmony. We weren’t bar people, but it was New Years, and there are rules about such things. It wasn’t a bad little place—the parking lot was well-lit, the bathrooms are clean, and there’s usually always a place to sit.

Yes, I'm aware I sound old, but such things matter even to the millennial. See, Clove is here too.

"Wonder if HE'D spooze all over me?" Clove leaned over and said a little too loudly in my ear. She was eyeing a redheaded dude across the bar.

I eyed my friend who was leaning on my knees, trying to make eyes at the redhead. "Clove dear, how many of these have you had?" I asked, removing her half-drunk White Russian from her hand before she spilled it in my lap.

"Enough," she giggled, taking her drink back.

"Ah, youth," I said, pretending I hadn't gotten shitfaced just a few weeks before.

Gabriel looked like he was about to say something, but closed his mouth again when I shot a look of death his direction.

Dean downed his drink, placed the glass upside down on the table, and slapped his palm down beside it. "One more round should get us to midnight guys—then, I say we head back to the house for some Cards Against Humanity."

"TWO MIDGETS SHITTING IN A BUCKET!!!!" Clove shouted, getting several questionable stares from that side of the bar.

There was a "Whooo!" from the other side of the bar. A Cards Against Humanity fan, apparently.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" Gabriel said, looking for our waitress. "One more round here," he motioned around at the three of us, "and a Coke for my sister," he finished quietly. "Would you put some milk in it—"

"—so she thinks it's another White Russian," the waitress finished quietly. "Can do."

"WHITE RUSSIAN SHITTING IN A BUCKET!!!!" Clove shouted. We clinked glasses.

I looked around the table. I'd had enough drinks to be really relaxed. I think I could get away with a random question.

Took a breath.

"So, hypothetical question," I started. "If you had superpowers, would you tell anyone?"

"What kind of superpowers?" Dean asked.

"Does it matter?" I said.

"HMMMMMMMMM," he pondered. "I think it does."

“All the old-school superheroes had secret identities,” Gabriel said. “Bruce Wayne, Superman, Spiderman, The Hulk . . . it was to protect their loved ones as much as themselves. The bad guys instantly like kidnapping innocent loved ones of the heroes, and the heroes didn’t want to get experimented on.”

“The secret identity thing started with the novel the *Scarlet Pimpernel*,” Dean said.

Gabriel beamed at Dean. “My boyfriend, the purveyor of random geek facts.”

Dean smacked Gabriel lightly in the forehead with the heel of his palm. “I did a paper in english class, dork.”

“My boyfriend, the remember-er of random college paperwork,” Gabriel said. “The other title flows off the tongue better.” He took a sip of his drink, giving Dean the side-eye. “How about I flow you off the tongue better later?”

Clove giggled, and I braced myself for another spooge comment.

“ANYWAY,” Dean went on, “the main protagonist in the *Scarlet Pimpernel*—”

“THE SCARLET PUMPERNICKEL!!!” Clove cheered.

“That’s Daffy Duck, I’m pretty sure,” I said.

Dean continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “The Englishman, Sir Percy Something-or-Rather, kept the secret from his wife for—reasons. I don’t remember the whole book. But anyway, that started the whole hero-with-a-secret-identity thing. Zorro was the next one in popular culture.”

“Ah!” I said, looking at my phone. “Superheroes on Wikipedia, because of course there’s a Wikipedia article for it.” I scrolled the article with one hand and sipped my drink with the other. “The word ‘superhero’ goes back at least to 1917, wow. Blah blah, Scarlet Pumpernickel . . .”

“Scarlet PIMPERNEL,” the boys said in unison.

“Blah, blah, Robin Hood,” I went on, “Good heavens, there are a lot of superheroes,” I scrolled through the article.

“Oh yeah,” Gabriel nodded. “And then you have alternative timelines and alternate universes and reboots like the New 52 where DC just started all over again . . .”

“No wonder I never got full-blown into comics,” I said, holding my head. “There’s too much to remember. I like my Wonder Woman stories, Buffy Comics, and Spider Gwen. I can keep all of those straight.”

I took a drink, and realized we’d strayed from the original topic. “But if YOU had superpowers . . . would you tell anybody?”

“What kind of superpowers?” Dean followed up my question with the same question again.

“I DON’T KNOW . . . you can fly,” I finally offered.

“THE SCARLET PUMPERNICKEL FLYING IN A BUCKET!!!” Clove shrieked, then looked confused. “Wait . . .”

“Someone’s bound to see me flying around,” Gabriel said. “And how would I sneak out of the house to go flying without Dean finding out?”

“And would you keep something from your significant other?” Dean mused, swirling his drink. “I don’t think I could.”

“So two votes for ‘yes,’” I said. “Clove?” I looked at my inebriated friend. She gave me a thumbs-up. “Three then. Ok. But what if the authorities found you and wanted to do experiments on you?”

“They’d have to catch me first!” Clove announced, sipping her virgin White Russian.

Dean sat forward and rested his elbows on the table. “She has a point. If you have superpowers, you can defeat the authorities.”

“But what if someone is hurt while you’re defeating the authorities?” Gabriel mused. “Now we’re venturing into anti-hero territory.”

Dean nodded. “I guess it would boil down to my motivation,” he said. “Anti-heroes are out for themselves—but they can do good things for others if they want to. They’d tell someone if it benefits them.”

“And a superhero would bear the weight of the responsibility alone,” Gabriel said.

“But Superman told Louis Lane who he is. Well, in this movie reboot anyway. What did he do in the comic book?” I asked.

Gabriel straightened. “Funny you should ask, oh non-comic book reader.”

“Hey!” I protested. “I’ve read a few. Like I said, it’s impossible to keep up!”

“And expensive,” Dean agreed.

Gabriel continued. “Last summer, in Superman #41, Superman was kidnapped for reasons, and the bad guy was gonna do some horrible thing if Superman didn’t reveal who he was. Lois Lane did it. Told everyone he was Clark Kent. Big scandal.”

“Really,” I said.

“She did it with the click of a button,” Dean said. “Uploaded it on her phone.”

“Nothing is private anymore,” Clove said. She snapped a selfie and then pushed buttons on her phone, trying to post it to Instagram. Man, she was gonna have a headache in the morning.

Dean gestured to his boyfriend’s little sister. “Case-in-point,” he said. “Everyone is a walking reporter these days. It would be impossible for someone to keep an identity secret from the world, much less from their friends and family.”

I sat back. Damn. They had a very good point.

Suddenly everyone in the bar was screaming collectively. “TEN . . . NINE . . . EIGHT . . .”

The countdown had begun.

“SEVEN . . . SIX . . . FIVE . . .” my group jumped to our feet and joined in.

“FOUR . . . THREE . . . TWO . . .” Clove put her arm around my shoulder. I noticed the hot redhead from across the bar had maneuvered over so he was beside her chair.

“ONE!!! HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!” the bar screamed. The redhead put his hand on Clove’s shoulder and when she turned, he kissed her. I saw the boys out of the corner of my eye sneak a quick kiss. Dean gets nervous with public affection, but he’ll make an acceptance on a rare occasion. Clove broke her grip on the redheaded stranger and planted a kiss on my cheek. Her brother climbed over a chair and planted a kiss on my other cheek.

I hugged them tightly.

This would all change.

Maybe I wouldn’t tell them in two days.

Two Days Later

I sighed at the neat, bulleted list on my laptop with two columns at the top. “Reasons for Secrecy” and “Reasons to Tell Them.”

Both columns were actually full.

I was sitting at my kitchen island, frowning at my computer. I’d spent the day eating two entire bags of frozen french fries (yes, I baked them first) covered in canned chili and shredded cheese, dancing fries in the air with my mind so Mouse can chase them, and composing this list.

I still didn’t have any solutions to this superpower thing.

I floated a can of Dr. Pepper to my hand and took a huge drink.

To compile the list, I’d been researching fictional characters. Movies and television shows all seemed to have the same patterns, and comic books are WEIRD. There’s alternate universes, split timelines, clones, robots, and very few women, I noticed.

And fuck most of these outfits. I will not be flying around with my cleavage hanging out.

Also no shiny spandex.

Or capes.

Or outfits. Why do I need an outfit anyway?

I don’t if I don’t tell anybody.

Look, I’ve always been the ‘drop the spare change in the jar at the cash register’ kinda gal, and I’ve even written a few emails to my congressman (and woman) in support or disagreement with some sort of law. I pay my taxes, I pick up trash on the ground if I see it, and I try not to be an asshole to anyone . . . even if they deserve it.

Rude cashiers are one of my pet peeves. If I can grin for an hour and a half repetitive tour of the MITT, they can grin for five fucking minutes at me.

Alright, maybe their day is full of five minute transactions, and they have to be pleasant for eight hours instead of five minutes.

Not the point.

Or the topic.

The topic is, 'Does Raney Tell Her Friends She Can Fly?'

I'm leaning towards no.

They will never find out unless I tell them.

This was at the top of my "Reasons For Secrecy" column.

Well, they won't.

I'd been working very very very hard on not using my powers on instinct, and I've gotten pretty good at it.

Plus, this isn't just about them, it's about me.

What responsibility do I have here?

This isn't a fucking comic book. "With great power comes great . . ."

What?

I don't have a responsibility to save mankind.

Do I?

Nope. I don't. It's number four in the Secrecy column.

#4 - I don't have a responsibility to save mankind.

Although that looks horribly selfish.

Does it?

I have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So says the Constitution.

Wait, Declaration of Independence? Statue of Liberty? No, she's huddled masses yearning to breathe free or something.

Google search.

Declaration of Independence.

Shuttup, I got straight A's in science, math, and art.

A solid C in Civics class.

Obviously.

So . . . life. Does revealing my superpowers threaten my life?

Well, yeah.

If the population at large found out, the authorities could come after me. Lock me up. Try and control me. Try and duplicate me. Those examples are all over these superhero stories.

Interesting that no one tries to duplicate or control a villain

Only stop them.

Liberty.

Liberty means . . . what IS the exact definition of liberty?

Give me liberty or give me death!

Quiet, random quoting side of my brain.

I guess liberty would be the freedom to do what you want to do?

Right?

C in civics class, remember?

Googling . . .

Scanning . . .

Yup. Freedom, in a nutshell.

Bleh. So freedom to USE my powers, or freedom to hide them?

Mouse jumped in my lap. She was never a lap kitty when I first got her, but she's becoming a snuggler as she gets older. I scratched her behind the ears, and she settled in for a nap.

I am free to do what I want to with these powers. I can keep them to myself or tell people. I can use them to help people or . . . well, I guess to hurt them, but why would I want to do that?

An image of Jon lying in broken brick flashed before my eyes.

Ok, so there's reasons I'd want to hurt people.

But I don't want to hurt them all the time. So safe to say I'm not going to go villain status with this.

Today.

Talk to me in five years if I'm still a part-time tour guide fishing quarters out of a goddamn fountain in order to survive.

I could pull a bank vault out of a building and fly off with the money.

Could I?

Something told me I had the physical strength to do that. Or I could start with something small, like a cash register.

A little zing of electricity went up my spine. That WAS an exciting thought. Be the bad guy. I could only snag a register from an awful store . . . like The Big S. You know, the mega-superstore that's open 24 hours and has everything from hair dye to hashbrowns and is probably a huge reason for the downfall of our economy because it buys everything cheap cheap cheap overseas and pays its employees so low they qualify for food stamps in order to survive?

Yes. I know that was a run-on sentence. I did it on purpose, for dramatic affect.

I do dig dramatic affect.

You've never heard of The Big S? Yes you have. I had to change their name for the book so they wouldn't sue me.

The stores have high ceilings in there too. HIGH. I could walk in the front doors, find an empty aisle, shoot to the ceiling, fly over, snag a cash register or two, fly out again . . .

That didn't feel right at all.

No matter how much I hated The Big S.

Ok, so bank vault. But it'd have to be an evil bank.

I snorted. Easy enough. Pretty sure they all were.

What if I divided the money and gave some to the poor?

Ooooooooooooo . . . a modern day Robin Hood!

Not a bad idea.

But an impossible one.

I could've give to all the poor.

There were a lot of us these days.

And that would go back to the responsibility thing. Was it my responsibility to take care of the poor with these powers?

And how do you find them? Door to door?

"Excuse me, may I see your bank statements? I'm giving free cash to the poor today," I quipped.

A image of a Jack Nicholson Joker rolling through the streets of Gotham dropping cash from balloons to the tune of a catchy Prince song came to mind.

I sighed heavily.

Prince was gone too.

What a dreary day when we start to lose our heroes.

Hero.

Superhero.

I am far from a superhero.

I am a girl with accidental superpowers.

And I'm doing the best I can.

At the moment I can barely take care of myself. Why in the world would I think I could take of everyone else?

We had firefighters for that. Policemen for that—like Detective Don Johnson. I giggled. Poor man. Hell of a name.

And I'd need a superhero name, wouldn't I? The Amazing Raney!

Ridiculous.

I'm far from amazing.

Also, couldn't use 'Raney' if I was going to superhero incognito.

Say that five times fast.

Superhero incognito superhero incognito superhero incognito superhero incognito
superhero incognito.

I stared at my list.

Did I have to make a decision today?

I brightened a little.

No.

No, I didn't.

I could take this day by day.

Ugh. That would weigh heavy on me. Every morning I got up, 'Do I tell people I can fly today?'

"What about week to week?" I asked Mouse. She purred. "That's not a bad idea, is it?"

What is today? Monday. Fine. FINE. Every Monday I will sit here, over coffee, stare at these two columns, and make the decision for the week if I was going to tell anyone I had superpowers.

It was a lame-ass copout, but was it necessary to make a firm decision now?

The pursuit of happiness.

I'd skipped that one.

Since I've been in survival mode ever since I lost my job, I'd never considered 'the pursuit of happiness' important. Does it make me happy this week to keep my powers secret?

I looked out the window. It was getting dark. I picked up Mouse, kissed her between the ears, and set her on the island. What would make me happy today is to put this list behind me, and clear my head.

Still in my black pajama pants and shabby grey sweatshirt, I stood on the island next to Mouse and jumped over to the counter by the sink. My striped fuzzy socks slipped a little on the edge of the counter, and I used my power to stay upright and balance. Mouse washed a paw, unfazed. Slowly, I leaned forward in the air, resting my body on nothing, a 45 degree angle to the counter now, socks still in contact with the ledge. I held this position to see if I could.

I could.

Moving forward, I lifted my legs so I was parallel to the ground, and slowly floated into the living room.

Magician. I could do magic tricks. Something to ponder. I should put that on the list.

I turned 90 degrees in the living room and slowly floated to the bedroom door. Opening a window with my mind, I floated towards it, easing my head and shoulders out the window and looking down to see if my downstairs neighbors were home.

Their windows were dark. They weren't home.

Protected by tree cover in the backyard, I floated out the window, turned so I was perpendicular to the ground and pushed the window shut so Mouse couldn't get out.

The night air was brisk, but the adrenaline rush of flying always added warmth. I lifted straight up, and went higher and higher and higher until I actually touched a cloud.

It was a fairly low cloud, but my fucking god, it was a cloud.

"Hello there," I giggled at the densely packed water vapor. "Come here often?"

I heard a car horn below me and I jumped.

They were honking at someone on the ground. Chill, Raney.

I was so high they wouldn't be able to tell it was a person up here, I'll bet.

My cloud had shifted, and I flew through it.

I spent the evening circling and spearing clouds.

It was amazing.

The Amazing Raney.

Nah.

Maybe.

Raney's Amazing Powers.

There ya' go.

Two Weeks Later

It's startling how easy it is to accept abnormality as normal. Like when you're a kid and your parents get divorced. Suddenly two Christmases and Dad's new girlfriend Juanita are just part of every day life.

That sounded specific—I grew up in foster care, remember? And none of them got divorced . . . while I was around, anyway. I did know kids whose folks got divorced. Not the point. The point is, that we're humans. We adapt.

Well, humans adapt. There's a good chance I'm not human.

I guess I'm humanoid?

Android? Ooooooooooooo. There's a possibility I hadn't thought of.

Do I dream of electric sheep?

I watch too much sci-fi.

Fuck me, I'm LIVING sci-fi.

Or fantasy.

The jury's still out on if superhero stories fall in the sci-fi or fantasy genre.

I really think it depends on the origin of the superhero.

And at this point in my story,

I

have

no

fucking

idea.

So maybe it's a mystery story.

Speaking of mysteries . . .

The boys were still on The Case of the Houdini Husband, and weren't having much luck. Gabriel had told the woman to hang tight on canceling the credit cards—there was a good possibility the dude would slip up and accidentally use one. As time goes by, people get relaxed and sloppy.

Or maybe her husband really did die in the hotel collapse.

Since I had four days off in a row from my tour guide gig, I helped Gabriel knock on doors and interview people. We pretended to be with a life insurance company. No sense in smearing the man's name if they really did find a body, and no sense in tipping the dude off if he really was alive and someone knew it and let him know a random detective agency was asking questions about him.

It's amazing how easily you can get people to talk to you if you show an official-looking Insurance Agent badge at them, and it's amazing how easy it is to print an official-looking Insurance Agent badge.

Dean is a wiz at such things, and the boys have an ID printer at home.

Gabriel and I didn't get any leads. No one had seen the missing man since—well, he went missing—but it was nice to hang out with my best friend and not worry about the superpower thing for an afternoon.

“So did you ever imagine detective work could be so exciting?” I asked Gabriel as we walked around the corner to his Fiat Spider.

“Bleh,” he responded, lifting his hand up with his keys to beep the doors open.

“It's always so much more exciting on telev—” I stopped short.

There was a man with a knife standing by Gabriel's car.

Such things don't register correctly with your brain. It's an impossible sight. Your first reaction isn't always the normal reaction.

With that statement out of the way, I'll tell you that I giggled.

The man pointed the knife at me. “What the fuck's funny, Red?” he snarled.

I giggled again, and clamped my hands over my mouth in horror. Gabriel had frozen to the spot, arm still extended with the clicker. The robber pointed the knife at Gabriel, leaned forward, and took the clicker out of Gabriel's hand.

Still holding the knife upright, the robber beeped the doors open.

Bernard was sitting in the passenger seat, unfazed by the scene unfolding outside the car. He was also wearing sunglasses.

I was far more worried about the idea of a stolen bear at the moment than I was a stolen car. Cars can be replaced. Bernard couldn't.

Although I should've been worried about the knife.

But again—I didn't see it as a threat because I hadn't registered that this whole thing was real.

I should've said or done something amazing. Something like, "Look dude, don't hurt us. Just take the car." Or, "It's ok man, just go." Or even, "LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU!!" and then knocking him to the ground when he turned.

I have no idea if I could be cut by a knife.

Also, I'm not trained for situations like this.

I AM trained to carry a handgun, but Money Penny was in the goddamn trunk of the car.

If I had super-speed this wouldn't be a problem.

But I don't. And bemoaning this fact is not going to help me at the moment.

Or Gabriel.

Who is currently closest to the knife.

The robber was backing away from us towards the car. He backed up until the car stopped him. Then he started slide/walking around the car, knife still pointed at us.

Gabriel broke the silence. "Dude, take the car. Please give me the bear in the front seat."

The robber stopped, perplexed, and looked through the window at Bernard. The man gave a giant laugh. "A fucking teddy bear? Does the widdle baby want his teddy bear?"

Gabriel and I said nothing. The robber, still laughing, made his way to the driver seat and sat down. He put the key in the ignition and started the car.

"NO!" I cried. What can I possibly do here?

I watched as Gabriel ran to the passenger door and threw it open.

"NO!" I cried again. I should be the one doing this. I'm the one with powers. God, I'm worthless.

No I'm not.

I ran in front of the car and stood there, leg on the hood. Please god, let me be strong enough to survive a car running over me. Although I knew I could fly up if the asshole gunned it.

The robber was startled to see me in front of the car, and distracted – which was my purpose. “FUCK YOU, RED!” he screamed. “GET OUT OF THE FUCKING WAY!!”

“Make me,” I said. I was shaking so badly I couldn’t believe the words came out at all. I saw Gabriel had Bernard in his arms. Gabriel backed up, leaving the car door open.

“HEY!” the robber yelled at him. “Close the fucking DOOR!” Gabriel flipped him off.

We heard sirens around the corner. Nice timing. The robber sat bolt upright, obviously hearing the sirens as well. He darted his eyes back and forth for a second, and as the sirens grew louder, he jumped out of the car, falling on the pavement.

“Better run, asshole,” my voice was stronger. Gabriel wrapped his arms around his bear more tightly and backed away from the car. The sirens grew louder. The robber’s eyes widened. He looked right and left, then scrambled to his feet and took off running straight down the alley. Gabriel and I stood frozen, Gabriel holding his bear, me with my foot on the hood. The siren grew louder and louder as the man ran down the alley and turned the corner. He was gone.

The siren whizzed past us, doppler-effecting into the distance.

Gabriel and I stared at each other. He loosen his grip on Bernard, and the sunglasses the bear was wearing fell to the sidewalk. Legs weak, I lifted my foot off the hood of the car and tried to stand upright.

“Holy shit–” he began.

“The siren–” I said.

“–had nothing–”

“–to do with us,” I finished.

We threw ourselves at each other, hugging tightly and laughing.

A horn blew, and we jumped. I shrieked.

“Hey assholes,” a guy in a car shouted out his window. “Are you gonna get out of that parking spot or what?”

Gabriel bent over and put his hands on his knees, trying to calm down. I glared at the impatient driver. “A MOMENT PLEASE . . . we were almost robbed at knifepoint, K?!” I shouted. “You ok?” I directed at Gabriel. Still bent over and breathing deeply, he nodded.

The car honked again and I lost it. "OHMYFUCKINGGODGOAWAY!!" I screamed. "We're not leaving! GO ON!"

"Fucking hipsters!" the dude yelled at us as he drove past.

"THAT'S FUCKING GEN-EXERS TO YOU, JACKASS!" I flipped off the taillights. I took Bernard from Gabriel's arms, and propelled my friend backwards until he was sitting in the passenger seat. "Police?" I asked him. "Police," he confirmed.

Police

“Well, no shit.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I was sitting cross-legged on the pavement by the open car door, Bernard in my lap. Gabriel was sitting in the passenger seat, legs out of the open door and resting on the pavement. My words were directed at the detective that was walking towards me, a matching ‘no shit’ expression on his face when he realized who I was.

Gabriel looked back and forth between us, confused. I stood up and brushed off my jeans. Shifting Bernard under my arm, I stuck out a hand towards the black man as he stopped in front of me. “Detective,” I said in greeting.

He took my hand, the corner of his mouth raising in mild annoyance. “Ms. Winter.” He gave my arm a pump, then dropped it.

I gestured towards Gabriel. “This is Gabriel Jones. He’s the owner of the car. Gabriel, this is—” I gestured towards the detective. “Detective Don Johnson.”

Gabriel thought a moment, then a light brightened in his eyes. “Oh!” He pointed at Detective Johnson, then looked at me. “The —” I nodded. “Who came to see you after . . . ?” I nodded again. “With the hilarious . . .” I glared at Gabriel. He amended to, “. . . interesting . . . uh . . . name . . .” He turned to the detective. “Uh, hello officer, nice to meet you. Small world.” Detective Johnson accepted Gabriel’s hand in a firm shake, then pulled out a notepad.

“It’s Detective Johnson,” he said. “Not Officer. I’m just here because we’re a little short-handed today, and I happened to be in the neighborhood. Are you both alright?”

“Yes sir,” Gabriel and I answered in unison.

“What happened?” Detective Johnson asked. Gabriel and I recounted the attempted robbery, and gave him a description of the thug. Detective Johnson took notes. When he was through, he closed the notebook and put it back in his sport jacket pocket. “Do you think you could sit down and do a facial composite of this guy? We’ve had a several reports in this area of a man wielding a knife, and sounds like this is the same asshole.”

Gabriel and I agreed, and we got in his car to follow Detective Johnson to the police station. “Well, this is not how I saw this day going,” Gabriel said, slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting Johnson’s Ford Taurus at a stoplight.

“Yeah, don’t rear-end the cop, please.” I shook Bernard’s paw at Gabriel like the bear was lecturing him.

“Not my fault, the dude in front of him had plenty of time to go through the light and changed his mind,” Gabriel argued with Bernard’s paw. Bernard bopped him on the nose. “Bernard, behave,” Gabriel scolded.

I put Bernard’s sunglasses on the bear and sat him in my lap facing forward. “What a day,” I sighed.

“Indeed,” Gabriel agreed.

‘What a year,’ I thought. Instead I said, “I’ve never done a police composite sketch.”

“It’s not that hard,” Gabriel said. “They have a dude – or dudette,” he added, “that walks you through the whole process. Sometimes they do it old-school and someone draws it, sometimes they have a computer program.”

“How many of these have you done?” I asked.

“Oh, three or four,” Gabriel said. “The police force is actually fairly nice to private detectives. We all want the same goals – to make the city safer, stop crime, yadda-yadda-yadda.”

There’s a good superhero motto. To make the city safer, stop crime, yadda-yadda-yadda!

It’d look great on a tee-shirt.

I internally rolled my eyes at my internal monologue.

The police station looked like a police station does on television or the movies, and I realized I’d never been in one until now. I was surprised at how sheepish I felt, less from fear and more from just being out of my element. I let Gabriel take point, and we followed Detective Johnson through rows of desks. The building had an old feel, lots of glass and wood. It really did look like a stereotypical police station from a television show. The detective motioned towards two empty seats, and we sat in wooden chairs with high arms that rolled back and forth. Johnson sat across from us behind a cluttered desk.

The detective picked up the phone, punched buttons, said something, sighed, then hung up. He turned to us. “They are all busy with other witnesses,” he apologized. “It shouldn’t be more than an hour. Can I get you a cup of coffee or bottle of water or something?”

Gabriel requested a water, I took a coffee. I wasn’t surprised when Johnson handed me a styrofoam cup. Now all we needed was the unruly thug being lead in with his arms handcuffed, screaming and hollering that he was innocent and had been framed.

As if on cue, the main doors opened, and two cops walked in a surly-looking chick, dressed in black and red. She had on heavy makeup, and her mascara was running. She'd been crying. Her arms were cuffed behind her back. I waited for the outburst, but none came. The officers propelled her across the room, then lowered her in a chair. An officer unlocked one wrist from her cuffs, then fastened the cuff to her chair.

"I wonder what she did," I whispered to Gabriel.

"Or WHO she did," he whispered back.

I barely had time to chuckle before all hell broke loose. A man, dressed head to toe in denim, burst through the front doors of the police station. He was screaming and knocking people down. The woman cuffed to the chair saw the screaming man. She jumped to her feet and began cursing at him.

Gabriel and I shrunk into our chairs. "Holy shit, I thought you could curse a blue streak," Gabriel said. The words pouring from that woman's mouth came faster, and she picked up the chair she was handcuffed to and slammed it on the desk in front of her.

The police station churned into life. Detective Johnson leaped over the desk in front of us. He grabbed the front of Gabriel's jacket and my arm and pulled us down behind the desk.

What is happening with my life? Am I attracting drama now?

"GUN!" we heard someone yell. "HE'S GOT A GUN!"

Now normally you'd think a statement like that would make a person hide, or in our case—continue hiding.

Nope.

Gabriel and I peered over the back of the desk. Detective Johnson skittered around the side of the desk, drawing his weapon. The screaming man had drawn his gun and was pointing it straight at the lady in red and black. Her arm was twisted in front of her, still cuffed to the wreckage of the chair. She'd broken the chair when she slammed it into the desk. She was frozen, staring at the barrel of the gun at her nose.

"This is like a movie!" Gabriel hissed.

"What kind of a fucking day is this?" I hissed back.

"SHHH!" Johnson hissed at us both from around the desk.

"Like anyone can hear anything over his screaming," I said in a normal voice.

"We are about to see someone get shot," Gabriel said.

Sure enough, after multiple attempts to get the crazed man to lower the gun, a ZING rang out and he was tased from behind.

“I wonder what stops him from jerking and pulling the trigger when he’s hit with a taser?” I mused out loud.

“Nothing,” Johnson said, motioning us to stay down. He waited until the man was subdued and disarmed. When it was over, Johnson stood, turned, and reached a hand down to help Gabriel up. Gabriel grabbed my arm, pulling me up, and I put a hand on his shoulder. We supported ourselves, standing behind the desk. Johnson walked around the desk, straightening his shirt and tucking parts of it back in. The woman was shrieking obscenities at the man on the floor, but I don’t think he heard them. He was cuffed and carried out.

Still hanging on to each other, Gabriel and I lowered each other to the set of chairs we had been sitting in before the ruckus started. We sat in silence for a moment.

“Normal day at the office?” I asked the detective.

“We have our moments,” Johnson said, shaking his head. He scanned the room. “Some fine men and women we got here on the force, though.” We followed his gaze. Everyone seemed to have settled back in to whatever they were doing before the chaos began. The handcuffed woman had been lead away, crying and cursing simultaneously. “Yup,” he continued. “Best force I’ve been on. Other stations have their drama, but this crew—not a bad group. Pretty level-headed bunch. They know their stuff.”

And I didn’t. This was the second time today fate had dropped a superhero situation in my lap and I not only froze, but it all worked out ok. Was this the universe showing me that I should let others with more training and skills than me handle crime?

Johnson’s phone rang. The composite artists were free. Gabriel and I stood, following Johnson to another part of the station. As we walked, I looked around at the officers with new admiration and enlightenment.

Holy Shit

“HOLY SHIT!” Clove cried. “You could’ve been killed! TWICE!”

The gang was once again crowded around the table at Coyote Lounge and Cafe. We’d ordered dinner, and Gabriel and I had just finished telling Clove and Dean about our day.

Dean shook his head. “Man, dude . . . that was . . . that was . . . wow. What the hell?”

“Yeah, it was all pretty crazy. Even for a detective, right?” I looked at my best friend.

He finished his beer. It was rare to see Gabriel drinking beer. He set the empty bottle on the table. “Crazy,” he agreed. “I mean, it was honestly the kind of day I expected to have when I started Angel Investigations,” he began. “But fuck me, I’m super glad that my days are mostly paperwork and phone calls.”

“And dead ends,” I added.

“And dead ends,” Gabriel agreed. He waved at the waiter and held up his empty beer bottle.

“I think the dude is really dead,” Dean said.

“Wait, what?” Clove looked confused. “I thought the guy at the police station was tased, not shot.”

I stabbed a nacho towards my plate and broke the thin layer that had formed on my nacho cheese as it cooled. “He’s switched subjects, Clove,” I said with a crunch. “I think he’s talking about the Houdini Husband case.”

Gabriel took the fresh beer from the waiter and took a long drink. “Dead or not dead, we work until we find proof or until she stops paying us.”

“Haven’t you used up all your leads?” I asked. A tomato fell off my chip and I jumped as it landed in my lap. I scowled at the red squishy square on my black jeans, less angry that it had dropped and more angry that I couldn’t catch it with my mind in front of my friends. Stupid secret superhero identity.

“All the local ones,” Gabriel said, running a french fry around the plate to pick up stray spots of ketchup and mayo on his mostly empty plate. “We’re gonna head to his hometown and visit relatives and old friends.”

“Can I come?” Clove brightened. “I love being the gumshoe!”

“Do you have time off from the coffeehouse?” Dean asked.

“Yup. I’ve earned it. Raney? You in?” Clove looked at me.

I tried not to choke on a nacho. “I think I’ll pass,” I said in a quiet voice. “They’re a little short-handed at work, and I might nab some extra hours.” Dammit. A road trip with the gang would be awesome. But while I can keep a handle on my powers for long stretches at a time, I doubted I could go days without giving something away. It was just too easy to hold out a hand when I needed something across the room. It was going to take more practice—despite the success I had at dropping a tomato.

My life has gotten so weird. Letting a tomato drop to my lap has become successes.

Gabriel had rested his gaze on me a little too long from across the table. I was avoiding his eyes. “Is it money?” he asked straight out. “My treat—we can hire you to do paperwork and work it in the cost of the trip.”

“That sounds awesome,” I said. “But I really can’t irritate them at work. They’re already mad for the time I took off when I was sick.”

Slave to the Grind by Skid Row started up on the jukebox.

“Yea for a well-timed real-life soundtrack,” I laughed.

“Yea for hair metal!” Gabriel shouted, and he and Dean high-fived.

“Yea for the oldies station!” Clove teased, raising her drink in a toast.

I smacked her on the shoulder. “You’ll be old one day, bitch,” I laughed.

“Not yet,” Clove retorted, flipping me off.

Let the tomato drop.

I have zero desire to do anything that will ruin what I have.

And today proved that I can’t handle anything crime-ish or dangerous. I need to let people trained for such things deal with such things.

It was all going to be alright.

You know better, don’t you?

Otherwise this book would end here.

**Doesn't everyone belong
In the arms of the sacred**

**Why do we pretend we're wrong?
Has our young courage faded?**

**Shots were fired on the street
By the church where we used to meet**

**Angel down, angel down
Why do people just stand around?**

- *Angel Down*

by Lady Gaga

Angel Down

I flew through the air, aiming from tree to tree.

I had become more confident with flying, but I was still too chicken to all-out Superman-style it. I mentally aimed for trees, zig-zagging in the air from tree to tree. That way I'd have something to catch me if I plummeted to the ground.

Which I hadn't yet, by the way. If anything, my powers had strengthened. It might have just been because I was getting more used to them.

Knife Dude that had tried to steal Gabriel's car had been captured. I had nothing to do with it, the police had caught him trying to carjack a woman and her two kids. Asshole. I hope they throw him up and lock away the key.

I slowed a little. Lock him up and throw away the key, I mentally corrected. I rolled my eyes and laughed at myself. I flew up and backwards, turning a neat, perfect circle in the air, and then continuing straight.

Things were working out how they were supposed to be. This was my power, and I could keep it to myself. It wasn't my responsibility to save anyone.

It was a bright night tonight, and I had dressed in all white. Most nights I wore all black, but there were a lot of clouds in the sky and the moon was huge and its light was bouncing around everywhere. I figured a black spot on the clouds would draw attention, and a white spot would blend in. I was right. I had been out almost every night the past seven weeks, and no one had spotted me yet. I was beginning to enjoy this new part of my life. I flew over a car accident, fire truck arriving on the scene. See, there were human beings to rescue other human beings.

A part of me was secretly glad I'd decided against using my powers to save people. It's not that I was deliberately callous, it's just that I was old enough (oldies station HMPH) to have become a bit jaded with human beings. Whatever this was . . . whatever I was, I owed humanity nothing. What had humanity done for me? Crashed the economy, trimmed my safety net down to ramen noodles and bald tires, and insulted me for not working hard enough.

I flew faster. The drag increased, and my hair started whipping around my face. I had become nothing, and I owed humanity nothing. Not a damn thing. Not a goddam fucking . . .

I heard screaming.

I turned 90 degrees and flew lower. The screaming was coming from a church. No. In front of the church. Bystanders were huddled in two groups, flanking a frightening scene in the middle. A man and a woman were staring each other down, anger thick between them. The crowd was transfixed on the scene of impending violence. No one noticed the white-clad figure in the sky gliding over. I flew over an eave of the church, headed towards the upper branches of a nearby tree, landed, and looked down.

“MOTHERFUCKER, I WILL KILL YOU!!!!” the woman shouted.

“NOT IF I KILL YOU FIRST!!” the man screamed.

The vision was so horrifying, I couldn't focus on what the two people looked like. They were both wearing jeans and sweatshirts, and both holding guns and screaming. I registered the basic information that one was a man and the other a woman, but I couldn't discern height, weight, or even hair color. Just two human beings locked in violence. I realized why bystanders were so confused and stupid-sounding when you saw them talking to reporters after a crime.

BYSTANDERS.

There were well over a dozen people motionless on the sidewalk. Some had run away when the trouble began, but now, the way the man and woman were circling and waving the guns, and as busy as that street was, it was almost impossible to get around them. Everyone's animal instinct kicked in and they were frozen to the spot.

Must. Think.

Tattoo. Chick on the right had a tattoo on her fucking face. Good god, that had to have hurt. I guess that was the point. It was all black, and was an image of flames. Started on her cheekbone and wrapped up around her eye. Ouch ouch and ouch. What artist would even tattoo the eye area?

Ok, shutup inner monologue. Bigger questions to ask.

What the fuck am I supposed to do here?

Can I stop a bullet?

Will I make this worse if I interfere?

Will I startle them into shooting by accident?

Is this my fucking problem anyway?

Where are the police?

Should I call Don Johnson?

The detective, not the actor.

I should've figured out a mask.

But if I'm not going to be a superhero I don't need a mask.

I reached below my chin and grabbed my turtleneck, unfolding it and lifting it over my chin and nose. There. That would do if I decided to do anything.

Which I still hadn't decided if I was going to do anything. Let these two fools kill each other. I didn't care about them. I didn't care what they were fighting about. I didn't care about any of those people on the street . . . right? My inner monologue had no one to answer that question.

Fire-Eye Tattoo now had the tip of her gun barrel pressed against the other guy's chest. He was taunting her. "What do you think you're gonna do, bitch? You gonna pull the trigger? Your brother's a pussy. Your mama sucked my dick last night. FUCK YOU CUNT! FUCK YOU AND YOUR COCKSUCKIN-"

There was no sound. I always thought there was supposed to be a sound. Turns out that a close-shot gunshot wound (also called a contact shot) often does not make a sound. Depending on many things: such as the angle of the gun, what the person is wearing, the build and mass of the person—the body will absorb the blast, trapping the gases fired out under the skin and muffling the sound.

Fire-Eye Tattoo's shoulders were heaving with every breath, her eyes fixed on the dead man on the sidewalk in front of her. The gun in her hand had been angled up a little, and this caused blood and goo to propel into the air. Since there was no stereotypical gunshot noise, many people not in direct line of sight to the display did not know what had happened yet.

In the group behind Fire-Eye Tattoo, the front row had gotten a good look. There was a little girl in the front, dressed in jeans and a little pink shirt. She had on a purple scarf. Her mother must have been across the sidewalk, because when the man hit the concrete with a dull, wet, THUD, the little girl shrieked, "MOOOOMMMY!!!" and bolted towards the other group.

Right past Fire-Eye.

Spooked, the woman turned and fired at the little girl point blank.

"NOOO!!!!" I screamed—along with a good number of the onlookers. I was on the ground before I knew what I was doing.

I had a split second to choose between Fire-Eye and the little pink tee-shirt dripping with red. Fire-Eye turned and ran. I scooped up the little girl and shot into the sky. I heard screaming and crying on the ground behind me. I didn't look back.

The girl's little chest was moving up and down with a raspy sound. Her eyes were closed. She hung in my arms like a little rag doll. I had a death grip on the side of her jeans pocket with my right hand and her shoulder with my left. The red stain on her shirt was spreading so fast you couldn't tell it was pink anymore. Her thin purple scarf had unwrapped from her neck and wound around my arm as I flew. She coughed up blood, hitting me in the turtleneck fabric covering my face. Her eyes opened halfway and she looked at me with an eerie calmness.

"Are you an angel?" she whispered. Her eyes closed again.

My heart was pounding. I was flying so fast I went past the hospital and had to double back. "SHITFUCKSONOFABITCH!!!" I cursed, pulling a hard u-turn in the sky. I slowed down, still flying, and headed towards the doors marked EMERGENCY. The motion sensors triggered on the doors, and they opened as I flew through. I landed halfway into the waiting room and stood there, the little girl gushing blood in a pool on the floor at my feet. A nurse behind the counter leaped up and shouted something unintelligible, and three people came barreling out of the back with a rolling bed. They rushed over to me, still standing where I had landed, and in slow motion I laid the limp little doll on the bed. They reversed direction back the way they came and broke into a run, pushing her through the doors and back into the ER.

I crumpled to the ground on one knee, each hand on the floor, my chin on my chest, surrounded by a pool of blood that was bigger than it should have been to come out of any human being, much less a little girl. Her scarf was still wound around my elbow. I left it there for the moment.

She couldn't have been more than—I don't know, ten? Eight? I'm terrible at ages. The blood puddle she'd left on the floor was soaking into the knee of my white jeans, but I didn't move. I couldn't move. I knew there were people in the waiting room. I knew they had seen me fly in. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything except knowing how that little girl was. I stayed there, knelt to the ground in a kind of prayer pose. If I believed in a god I would've been praying. Instead I breathed in and out, in and out, trying not to scream and trying not to cry and trying to will the little girl behind the doors of the emergency room to breathe in and out as well.

Would they tell me if she made it? I'm not family. I'm not her mother. Oh dear god that I don't believe in, HER MOTHER. I left her mother on the street in front of the church. Should I go get her? Carry her like I carried her daughter? Cover her in her daughter's blood that was soaking my entire front? Bad idea. I couldn't move at the moment, anyway. Doubtful she was still there. She'd find a cop who'd put her in a car and radio

dispatch and discover that a crazy woman dressed in white flew her daughter in a hospital emergency room and was now frozen on the floor.

I heard someone wheeling a mop bucket towards me. They'd have to wait. I was still in can't-move-mode. I guess I was in shock. I've never been in shock. Do superheroes go in shock? WHY ISN'T THERE A MANUAL FOR THIS?!?!?!?

If there was, there most undoubtedly is a chapter about saving the child BEFORE the fucking criminal shoots her.

There was a hand on my right shoulder.

I looked towards the hand, and saw it belonged to a young boy—about the same age as the bleeding little girl. He seemed a little frightened, but looked me dead in the eyes. He was trying to comfort me. Then I felt a hand on my left shoulder. Turning, I saw an elderly woman with the same combination of expressions—a little frightened, but comforting.

I dropped my head down and wept.

More and more hands laid on me. No one said a word. They just took the young boy's lead and tried to comfort a person they didn't understand, in a scenario that no one should have to understand.

The ER doors opened. In one abnormally swift motion, I straightened up, putting both knees on the floor and settling back on my heels. The crowd around me shuffled backward when I moved, and kept backing away as the doctor approached me. Her forehead was wrinkled and covered in sweat. She had blood on her scrubs. She stopped just short of the blood puddle on the floor. I looked in her dark eyes and she met my gaze. Then she closed her eyes and shook her head. The doctor opened her mouth to say something, but I was already gone—flying out the door so fast it didn't have time to react and open. I heard a loud, collective yelp from the waiting room as I shattered the doors in thousands of pieces.

So Angry

I flew through the air—so angry. Just a half hour ago I was so happy. Now I had this dark knot in the pit of my stomach that hurt like all holy hell. I lifted a car from the street as I flew, slamming it into the side of a building.

That felt better.

I slammed three more cars into buildings as I streaked through the air. Glass and metal crashed into brick and stone. Crumpled steel fell to the streets with gargantuan crashes.

That was definitely burning off some adrenaline.

I broke a street lamp in half, kicked in several store windows, and destroyed a metal statue of the Eiffel Tower in front of the library. Why the holy fuck there is a metal statue of the Eiffel Tower in front of the library I haven't the foggiest.

Welp, there isn't one anymore.

I flew in the window of Angel Investigations, dropped to the floor, and walked into the tiny lobby the boys used as a waiting room for clients. My legs just folded underneath me, and I crumpled in a ball on the battered couch in the lobby.

That's where Gabriel found me in the morning.

"Raney?" I could feel someone petting my head. "Raney?" Gabriel pulled my turtleneck off my face. "Oh god, you've got blood all over you! Raney?!? RANEY?!?!?" Gabriel started shaking my shoulders.

I knocked him off me a bit too hard and he fell to the floor. I sat up and dropped to the floor next to him. "Oh shit, Gabriel—sorry. Are you ok?"

He grabbed my arm and pulled himself to a sitting position. "OK!" he said. "But you! Blood! Raney?" Tears and confusion covered Gabriel's face. I buried my face in my hands and started sobbing uncontrollably.

Gabriel reached for my bloody shirt again, and I grabbed his arm with one hand and pulled my shirt off with the other. I threw it across the room. "I'm . . . fine . . ." I managed to gasp out in between heaving, wet, sobs. "It's . . . not . . . my . . . blo . . ." I fell forward on the floor, unable to get the last word out.

I heard Gabriel get off the floor and walk out of the lobby. He retrieved a blanket from a closet in the office and returned, dropping to the floor beside me and wrapping me in it. We sat for a minute on the floor, me shaking and crying, him with his arms wrapped around me. I wiped my eyes and saw a thin strip of light purple cloth close by on the floor. Leaning over to the right, I picked it up. There were splotches of blood on the little girl's scarf. I scooted backwards until I felt the couch behind me, and I rested against it, clutching the scarf. Gabriel crawled forward on the floor and placed his head on the couch seat next to me.

We all sat like that for a minute, and then Gabriel broke the silence. "Dean and I heard on the news last night . . ."

I sniffled loudly, leaned over to the end table, and knocked a kleenex box to the floor.

Gabriel tried again, "Dean and I heard on the news last night, a . . . shooting happened in front of a church downtown . . ."

I reached for the kleenex box with two fingers and scooted it towards me until it bumped my leg.

"And a woman flew down from the tree and flew off into the sky, trying to save the little girl," he continued softly.

I pulled a handful of kleenex out of the box and made a strangled noise.

"I . . . didn't . . . stop . . . it," I started sobbing again. "Fuck . . . ing . . . hell . . . I . . . despise . . . crying!!!" I crushed tissues into my face.

"It's ok to cry," Gabriel said very softly. "I can't imagine . . ." He sat there, words escaping him. He settled on repeating, "I can't imagine."

"Neither can I," I managed.

Gabriel tried again. "It wasn't your fault."

I became angry. "THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE GONNA GO WITH THIS?!?!?"

Gabriel sat up straight, unflinching. "Yup."

"I can fly, and that's what you're going to say first?!?!?"

"Yup."

"WHY??!"

Gabriel rolled over to his knees so he was in a squatting position in front of me. He took both my hands, soggy tissues and all, looked me dead in the eyes, and said, "Because you are hurting and at this exact second that's the most important thing."

And, fuck me I'm crying again.

Still Angry

Wrapped in the blanket, bloody shirt tucked underneath it, I allowed Gabriel to lead me down the stairs and place me inside his car. He drove me to my house, got out and opened the door for me like a gentleman. I let him propel me inside and back to the bathroom. He started the bathwater for me, and dumped in a large amount of bubble bath. Feeling like I should help with the cleaning process, I went to the kitchen and located a black trash bag. I dropped my bloody shirt in it and carried it with me to the bathroom. Re-entering the bedroom, I saw Gabriel on the bed playing with Mouse, but I felt his gaze follow me across the room. I walked into the bathroom and surveyed the rest of my clothes. My pants were covered in blood, so they joined the shirt in the bag. My tank cami was bloody, so—bag. Undies and socks were fine, but I threw them away as well. Removing everything distanced myself from the scene.

Except the scarf. I hung the thin purple fabric from the vanity mirror and stepped in the bathtub. Relaxing back and closing my eyes, I heard Gabriel open the door a crack.

“Raney?” he asked.

“Mmmm,” I answered.

“May I . . .” Mouse ran in through the crack in the door and Gabriel chortled. “May I come in with Mouse?”

“Mmmm,” I answered.

“I’ll assume that’s a yes,” Gabriel said, slipping through the door and shutting it behind him. I kept my eyes closed.

“Soooooo, anything you wanna talk about?” Gabriel said nonchalantly.

“I got a little girl killed last night,” I said, eyes still closed.

“No you didn’t.”

“I could’ve done more.”

“You’re not trained for anything like that,” Gabriel said gently.

“I COULD HAVE DONE MORE!!!” I shrieked, punching a hole in the wall beside the tub. I blinked hard, looking at the perfect circle in the wall. “Sorry. I apparently have some extra strength with whatever this is.”

“I see,” Gabriel said evenly. “And, do you know what this is?”

“I - HAVE - NO - FUCKING - IDEA!!!!” I screamed, punching holes around the first hole with each word. Mouse dove behind Gabriel who sat very still. I shook drywall dust off my hand over the side of the tub onto the floor and leaned back into the tub again.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and then I took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“I’m still angry.”

“I understand.”

“I should have helped her.”

“It’s ok.”

“I don’t know how I’m doing all of this.”

“It’s ok.”

“IS IT?” I sat up. Gabriel winced. I sighed, “I’m not going to punch anything else. At the moment.” I settled back in the tub. “I’m out of spots to punch, and if I put holes in the tub, I’ll lose this perfectly good bubble bath—which at the moment, is the only thing holding me together.”

Mouse climbed in Gabriel’s lap. He scratched her behind the ears. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was going to,” I said sheepishly.

“And?” Gabriel pressed.

“Well—Carrie Fisher died.”

Gabriel’s hands flew to his face. “Oh no!”

Now it was my turn to comfort him. “It’s ok.”

Gabriel shook his head. “No it’s not! I mean—Carrie—that was awful . . . I’m still sad about it, in fact, I mean . . . we’re all sad . . .” he looked at me. “But you should’ve bitch-slapped me and demanded I snap out of it and there was something important you had to tell me—”

“You were crying.”

“I was sad!”

“You were organizing a vigil.”

“That’s what you do when people die and you’re sad!”

“You were . . . you’re exactly right.”

“I was . . . wait, what?” Gabriel looked confused.

“A vigil,” I said. “I need to hold a vigil for the little girl.” I thought a second. “Or at least attend one already in progress. I need to tell Fire Eye Tattoo I’m coming for her.”

“Who?” Gabriel asked.

“The woman who shot the little girl.”

“Fire Eye?”

I nodded. “Tattoo. She had a tattoo around her fucking eye.”

“OUCH,” Gabriel offered.

“I know, right? Fire tattoo around her fucking eye, and I got a good look at her face. She shot the guy she was arguing with, and that scared the little girl. The girl ran right past Fire Eye, I guess to her mother on the other side of the sidewalk, and it spooked the bitch with the gun and she fired again.”

Gabriel pondered this information. “So it wasn’t REALLY Fire Eye’s fault.”

“She was in public, with a gun, and she’d just murdered a man in cold blood. She got spooked, yes, but she freaked out and murdered two people in front of a church. Bitch must die.”

Gabriel digested this. “An eye for an eye?”

“A Fire Eye.”

“Ok.” He pondered this. “But are you a killer?”

“I don’t know what I am,” I said.

“Fair enough,” he answered. Gabriel petted Mouse with long, smooth strokes. She purred. “Can I tell Clove and Dean?”

I sighed heavily. “I originally had this whole speech and this whole plan on how I would tell you all.” I sunk lower in the bath until the bubbles touched the bottom of my nose. “I don’t remember any of it.” I raised my eyes. “Will you tell them?”

Gabriel nodded.

“You’re a good friend,” was all I could manage. Gabriel smiled at me, petting Mouse in long, gentle strokes. There was a bit of silence. I soaked. Gabriel petted. Mouse purred.

“What all can you do?” Gabriel finally asked.

I met his gaze. “So far, I’ve discovered I can fly, I’m getting stronger by the day, and I can move stuff with my mind.”

“Really?” Gabriel said.

To answer, I stretched my arm towards the loofa hanging on the faucet and it shot across the length of the tub into my hand.

“No shit!!” Gabriel clapped his hands.

I let go of the loofa and it flew across the room, circling his head and returning back to my hand like a fluffy pink boomerang.

“HOLY shit!!!” Gabriel broke into full applause, startling Mouse. She leaped off his lap and sat in front of the bathroom door.

“I’m getting better at it,” I said.

“Well you’ve had time to practice,” Gabriel said. “Wait—how long has this been going on? Carrie’s been gone since December.”

I looked sheepish. “Actually before that. Christmas stuff got in the way as well, and then I couldn’t decide the right time to tell you guys—or if I was gonna tell anyone at all.” I levitated the loofa, and it hung in midair above my head. “This happened right after I moved back into my apartment—not long after the meteor strike.”

He digested this information. “Do you think that had something to do with your—powers?” That last word hung in the air, dripping with disbelief.

“Have you heard any other reports of people flying around the city?” I asked. Gabriel shook his head. “Me neither. So unless they’re quiet about it—which I guess they could be, I certainly am . . . but anyway, I’m going to assume I’m the only one for now. Maybe it’s a coincidence. Maybe it’s evolution.”

“At 38?”

“Maybe I’m an alien.”

“I think you’d have this from birth if you were an alien,” Gabriel said.

“How do you know?” I asked. “Maybe my race hits puberty at 38.” I stuck my tongue out at him and flung the loofa around his head once more. He smiled.

“Good to see Raney’s still in there,” he said. “Would you like a soda?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “I’m going to stay in here until I’m shriveled to a prune, or the bathwater’s cold, or both.”

“And then?”

“And then, I’m going to hang out until dark, grab some candles, and head down to that church.”

Gabriel nodded. “I’ll call Clove and Dean and we’ll go with you.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Gabriel.”

“You’ll never have to find out, Freak Girl,” he smiled, opening the door for Mouse to run out.

“I have NOT figured out if I’m going Super Hero, Anti Hero, or straight-up villain, but I can tell you, Jones—my name will not be FREAK GIRL,” I said.

“Whatever you say, Freak Girl,” he said, walking out of the bathroom.

“Freak Girl wants to know where the fuck her Dr. Pepper is!!!”

“Now there’s a slogan for you,” Gabriel called out as he headed into the kitchen. “I’ll write that one down in case you decide to do endorsements.”

“You do that,” I muttered, sinking down so low in the bath the bubbles settled below my nose.

A vigil.

That’s what you do when people die.

That’s where I’m going tonight.

And there I’ll announce I’m going to kill Fire Eye Tattoo.

Freak Girl demands justice.

So Now They Know

I stayed in the tub so long the bubbles fell and the water got cold. I drained the water, rinsed the tub, and ran a fresh bath - hotter this time. I noticed my fingers and toes were not pruning up. I remember reading one time that the pruning effect had something to do with evolution—humans can hang on to things in water better because of the skin wrinkling up all weird. They also discovered people with nerve damage in their hands don't prune up like normal people.

I doubted I had nerve damage. Probably the opposite.

So maybe it was some sort of hyper-advanced evolution? I still liked the alien theory.

The front door opening and shutting and the voices of my friends in my living room jolted me out of my thoughts. Well, here we go. The beginning of the end of my regular relationship with my friends. This would change everything. I just didn't know how.

But there was no turning back.

I heard Gabriel's voice, but couldn't make out what he was saying. So apparently I don't have super-hearing. His voice buzzed on for a bit, and then there was silence. I envisioned Clove and Dean standing there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Clove broke the silence with a small shriek.

Yup. No turning back.

I heard my bedroom door burst open, and Gabriel's voice a little clearer now. "Clove, wait!" I heard. "She's fairly shook up," *muffled* "soaking in the bath," *muffled* "hours now, just let her be. She'll come out when she's ready," I heard him say. The bedroom door shut.

I heard low, excited tones in the living room as Gabriel relayed what he knew and Clove and Dean asked questions. Then I heard the TV click on. I wondered if they were covering up what they were talking about, or watching the news for the little girl story. Probably a little of both.

My water was getting cold again, and I contemplated running a third bath, but decided it was late enough I should get out. I didn't know what time the vigil started, but usually such things happened after dark. It made the candles more poignant, I guess. Who knows? There are unspoken rules to such things.

I nudged the drain release with my foot and stood up. I dried off while still standing in the tub, watching the water swirl down the drain. When the tub was empty, I had no more reason to stand there. I got out and wrapped the towel around my head.

Deciding to look as human and non-threatening as possible when I greeted my friends, I grabbed my dark purple and grey striped bathrobe and wrapped it around me. I then shoved my feet in my purple fuzzy slippers. Giving my face a once-over in the bathroom mirror, I wiped off a smear of mascara from underneath my right eye with my thumb. Taking my time, I walked to the bedroom door. I stood there a full two minutes, imagining every possible scenario that could happen when I left the room. Deciding I couldn't postpone things any longer, I squared my shoulders and turned the doorknob.

No one looked at me when I padded into the living room. I think they were all trying to act casual. It was failing.

"Ok, the casual act isn't working, guys," I said a teensy bit too loudly. "Fucking say something."

"Something," Dean and Gabriel chimed in unison. They then grinned and fist-bumped.

Clove leaped off the couch and enveloped me in a bear hug. I hugged her back, then realized she was crying. "Oh, Clove honey, what on earth?" I asked.

"Are you ok?!?" Clove held each one of my arms in a death grip and looked me up and down. She turned me around, then turned me back around. I put my hands on her shoulders before she started peering under my robe.

"Sweet girl, I'm fine," I said, trying to sound reassuring. "Freaked out, frazzled, and fucked up, but fine."

"Those three descriptions do not add up to 'fine,'" Clove snarled.

I recoiled. "Whoa—that was anger. Are you angry?"

Tears rolled down Clove's cheeks. "I'm scared," she said. "Something's wrong with you. Shit like this doesn't happen in real life. It happens in movies. In books. In graphic novels. It doesn't happen to people you care about." She'd enveloped me in a bear hug again.

I wrapped my arms around her, gently lifted us both off the floor, glided over to the front of the couch, and set her down in front of it. She released her grip on me and looked down, startled by what I'd done. She dropped on the couch next to Dean. "So you can fly," she said, bewildered.

"Didn't Gabriel tell you?" I asked.

“Well yeah, but it’s one thing to hear it and a totally fucking different thing to see it,” she gave a loud sniff. I lifted a box of Kleenex off the bookshelf by the back window and floated it into her hands.

“Thanks,” she said. “Oh my god, this is weird.” She blew her nose with a honk. “What else can you do?”

I floated a few inches off the floor and hovered, bobbing up and down. I didn’t have to bob, but it seemed more realistic than just lifting myself up and remaining motionless in the air. Plus it seemed more comfortable. Like swinging a leg while sitting with your legs crossed.

Dean and Gabriel just sat there watching me float in the air with their mouths slightly open.

I carefully picked up Mouse from the corner and floated her into my arms. She snuggled in and purred.

“That’s amazing!” Clove exclaimed. The boys didn’t change their shocked expression. I floated down to the floor, still cradling Mouse, and folded my legs underneath me in a half-lotus position.

“I’m also pretty strong,” I said. “I don’t have any way of demonstrating that except for lifting something heavy or breaking something, and I don’t want to disturb the happy kitty at the moment.” Mouse purred and made bread on my arm in response to my voice.

“I saw Raney knock four holes in the wall in the bathroom like it was paper,” Gabriel said. “Trust me, she’s super-strong.”

“HOW?” Dean finally found his voice. “WHEN? WHY?”

“I don’t know, shortly after the meteorite hit, and I don’t know,” I answered.

“Do you think it’s temporary?” Dean asked.

“No,” I said.

“How do you know?” Gabriel added.

“I just do,” I said. “I hate answers like that, but that’s what fits here. You remember when Clove was little, and she was taking piano lessons?” I directed my question towards Gabriel and his sister. I looked toward Dean and explained, “She’d come home every week and teach me what she’d learned, and I learned to play a little piano from her. It feels like that. Like I suddenly have a learned skill. Like when my foster dad taught me to shoot. I was clumsy at first, but I got better. I was super-clumsy with this, but in a couple of weeks, I’m better.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?!?!?” Clove was wiping tears again, clearly back to freak-out mode.

I leaned forward and put a hand on her foot. She flinched a little, then looked angry she flinched. “Clove,” I said. “It’s me. I’m still me. I’m sorry this is freaking you out, but I can’t deal with this alone.” I sat up straight. “Well, actually—I DID try to deal with this alone. That’s why I didn’t tell you guys immediately.”

“And Carrie Fisher died,” Gabriel said grumpily.

“And it was Christmas,” I added. “There was a lot going on. . .”

Dean interrupted. “Well, yes, but Raney. . .” He paused and sat back on the couch. “Ok, my first instinct is to lecture you and tell you it was ridiculous to not come to us immediately, but honestly—I can’t imagine what went through your mind. What’s going through your mind now. . .”

“Why ARE you telling us this now?” Clove had calmed down a bit and was thinking of questions.

“Gabriel found me,” I said sheepishly.

“Covered in blood and passed out on the couch at the office,” Gabriel added, still grumpy.

“He said you were the one all over the news,” Clove said. “That you busted up all those cars and destroyed the Eiffel Tower.”

“The Paris one, or the library one?” Dean asked Gabriel.

“The library one,” Gabriel answered. “Wait, right?” he directed his question at me. “Can you fly to Paris?”

“No idea,” I mused, answering his last question first. I think I’ll try a long-distance flight over land first before I tackle anything inter-continental. “And yes, it was the library one. I was angry.”

“Don’t blame you,” Clove waded her kleenex in a ball and started to get up to the trash can in the corner. I held a finger up to stop her, then motioned a finger in an upwards motion. She grinned slightly, and tossed the kleenex in the air. I moved my finger towards the trash can and it shot over in the corner, making a perfect basket. Clove settled back again.

“Do you have to move your hands in order to get things to move?” Dean asked.

I remained perfectly still and lifted the lamp off the table straight in the air until the cord plugged into the wall was taunt. I unplugged the cord with a swift jerk, floated the lamp across the room to another table, gently set it down, and plugged it back in.

“So, no then,” Dean stared at the lamp in its new position.

I turned on the lamp. It snapped on with a soft ‘click.’

The group jumped.

Dean looked from the lamp to me. “I wonder if that’s how you can fly.”

“Telekinetic flight!” Gabriel said, clapping his hands in an act of recognition.

“Telekin-who-much-what?” Clove asked, looking at Gabriel in confusion.

I waved a finger at him. “You may be on to something there, Jones.”

Dean explained to Clove, “Telekinesis is the ability to move things with your mind. Example—” and he dramatically gestured both arms in my direction, and then towards the lamp. I bowed my head. “Telekinetic flight would be someone using telekinesis to fly—lifting their body with their mind,” Dean continued his explanation. “Jean Grey does it.”

“Phoenix! Xmen!” Clove was excited she got the reference.

I nodded enthusiastically. “This makes total sense. I don’t know how I’m flying, just that I’m flying. It’s as natural to me as running. So I guess my only power is telekinesis. . .”

“Strong telekinesis,” Gabriel added.

“. . . and strength.” I finished.

“That you know of,” Clove added.

“That I know of,” I admitted.

Clove looked thoughtful. “So could you make one of us fly?” she asked.

I gave Gabriel a look. He cracked his knuckles, and tilted his head back and forth, cracking his neck. He started to stand up, but I had already lifted his body three inches off the couch. He shrieked and fell towards Dean, off balance. I caught him before Dean could, and lifted Gabriel straight in the air. He hung like a crooked rag doll, a look of terror and excitement all at once.

“HOLY SHIT!!!!!!” Gabriel cried, inhaling sharply. “My brain is screaming that I shouldn’t be in this position!!! But the other half of my brain is all ‘wooooooooooooo!!!’ ” He carefully straightened his torso so he was sitting upright in the air. Then he straightened

one leg, then the other, so he was straight up and down. I adjusted him higher so he was floating a good two feet above the couch. He put his hands to his sides, then on his hips, then on his sides again, not knowing quite what to do with himself. Clove and Dean watched him, mouths open.

“Is it hard for you?” Dean asked me, eyes still on Gabriel.

“No,” I said. “It’s a little weird how easy it is. Like, if I was physically picking up a piece of paper, it would feel much different than if I picked up a television. But with this telekinesis thing, both items would feel equally—easy.” I thought about it. “That’s such a lazy way to describe it, but it really is—it feels easy.”

“She was lifting cars and throwing them into buildings last night,” Clove said. She looked at me. “Why did you do that? To see if you could?”

“I was angry,” I said, fire suddenly in my eyes. “I’m still angry.” I lowered Gabriel two feet so he was standing on the couch under his own power. He jumped to the floor and sat down.

“The news said a little girl was shot in front of St. Francis last night,” Dean said.

I nodded.

“And a man,” Gabriel added.

I nodded.

“Did you shoot them?” Clove asked.

“CLOVE!” Dean and Gabriel admonished in unison.

“No, it’s ok,” I said. “It’s a fair question. I’m not the person you thought I was . . . well, anymore . . . and I do own Money Penny. But no,” I directed the answer at Clove. “I didn’t shoot anybody. I haven’t ever shot anybody.” I cocked my head sideways, thinking. “Yet,” I added.

“Yet?!?” Dean and Gabriel were staying in unison for the moment.

I looked at them. “Well, superheroes have a thing, right? I have super strength, but no fighting skills. I can’t very well take a karate class or anything—not with these powers. I could carry Money Penny with me for protection and to dissuade criminals.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Gabriel reflected.

“So who shot them?” Clove asked. “Did you see?”

My eyes blazed. “A woman with a tattoo of fire on her face.” I motioned my finger around the side of my right eye.

“OUCH!” Clove shrieked, clutching the side of her face. “Who would do that?!? What tattoo artist would tattoo around an eye?!?”

“That’s what I thought!!” I lifted off the floor a few inches in excitement. “It’s bizarre the things that go through your brain when you’re in a situation like that.”

“So what happened?” Dean asked.

I recounted my experience last night to my friends. By the time I got to the part where I flew the little girl in the ER, I was crying so hard I couldn’t finish the story.

I sat on the floor, face buried in kleenex, Clove at my side with both arms wrapped around me.

“I found Raney this morning at the office,” Gabriel said. “I didn’t know she was there - I was just coming to check on the case.” His voice got somber. “She was covered in blood. I didn’t know what had happened. I wrapped her up and brought her home, and she told me everything.” He looked at me. “Well, I guess everything, right?”

I blew my nose and took a deep breath. “Yes. That’s everything.”

The room was quiet. You could hear Mouse purring from Dean’s lap. She moved over there when I started crying. I took my kleenex and set it on an imaginary shelf in front of me. It hung in the air, unmoving. I picked up the other kleenex in my lap one by one and set them on top of and next to that kleenex, forming a kleenex ball. Then I drifted the mess of tissue across the room, swirling it down into the trash can against the wall. My three friends watched the whole process, mesmerized.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to that,” Clove said, still staring at the trash can.

“It’s surprising to me how easily I got used to it,” I admitted. “I have a hard time not using my powers in public because it’s become so second-hand.”

“Your powers,” Gabriel repeated. “That just sounds. . .”

“Weird?” Dean suggested.

“Scary?” Clove added.

“. . . awesome,” Gabriel finished.

I rose so high in the air the top of my head brushed the ceiling. “All three, guys. All three.”

The Vigil

Clove freaked when I told everyone my plan for the evening. Dean and Gabriel were supportive, and they finally won Clove over. It was decided that they would attend the vigil together, and I would arrive separately.

I wanted to wear the same thing I was wearing last night so people would know me, but the blood-soaked clothes were wadded in a ball in a trash bag in the can outside. When I mentioned I was going to stop by the store to get another white pair of jeans and turtleneck, Gabriel said that was a bad idea. The flying woman in white story was all over the news, and anyone casually purchasing a white outfit an hour before flying around in it might draw suspicion. We argued, he won.

Time was running short, so we decided to go separate ways and then meet in the alley behind the church. Clove headed out to buy a white turtleneck, Dean white jeans, and Gabriel white shoes and socks.

I stood at the front door for a second, watching my friends walk down the stairs. That didn't go so bad. I mean, I hated that I freaked Clove out so much, but the boys seemed more excited than scared.

I was all of that. Freaked. Excited. Scared. There's a cacophony of emotions that accompany this superhero stuff.

I walked to the bathroom and brushed my teeth. I put on mascara and lipstick, then thought better and wiped the lipstick off. If I pulled the turtleneck up like I did last night, I'd get makeup all over it. I added a little eyeshadow and pulled my dark red hair back in a pony tail.

In the bedroom I threw on a pair of jeans, white camisole tank top, and a zip-up hoodie. Shoving my feet into some flip-flops, I grabbed my cell phone and shoved it in my back pocket. Money penny was sitting beside my cell phone, and I grabbed the gun and tucked it in my jeans at the small of my back. This outfit should be easy enough to get into and out of. I did not have super speed, unfortunately.

Walking out the front door of the house, I stopped and looked at my car. Should I take it? It was so much easier to fly. But would people be looking for me?

I walked back in the house, unlocked my front door, grabbed a couple of candles, then left again. I stood on the porch, eyeing my car.

I briefly wondered if Superman had all these issues.

Supergirl. I'd be Supergirl.

Although I was actually more of a Wonder Woman fan. Oooooo—maybe I was a greek god from Themyscira.

Scolding the inner monologue into silence, I decided to take the Yaris and park it a few blocks away.

The drive to the area of town by the church was a short one. It was pretty easy to get around Harmony. Most anything was a half-hour drive. People were still spooked after the meteor strike, so traffic was lighter than usual. And it was after rush hour, which helped.

I pulled in a parking spot at a drugstore over on the side by a row of trees. I locked my car, walked in the store, and bought a soda and a lighter. I felt stupid buying only a lighter. I walked back out, shoving the lighter in my jeans pocket. I unlocked my car, opened the door, twisted the bottle cap off my soda and took a swig. I drained half the soda. I think it's time to admit these superpowers have increased my metabolism. I reached in the front seat and grabbed the candles, putting them in my hoodie pocket. I locked the car again, looked around, then made a hovering jump into the middle branches of the tree. I jump/hovered from branch to branch, rising higher and higher, until I was at the very top. Confident no one saw me, I took to the sky.

I flew the few blocks closer to the church, but screeched to a halt in mid-air when I saw several news vans parked outside the church. Backtracking a short distance, I dropped into a tree and worked my way down like I'd worked my way up in the other tree. Not seeing anyone, I hopped to the ground and started walking, trying to look as normal as possible. Just a normal girl, no big deal, can't fly or anything, hi, how ya doing, keep walking . . .

Two blocks, a left, then another block, and I was in the alley beside the church. Clove and Gabriel were waiting for me.

I donned the turtleneck and socks, and by that time Dean had arrived with the white jeans. I pulled the lighter out of my jeans pocket, quickly skinned them off, and hopped up and down pulling the white jeans up my legs. I picked up the white shoes Gabriel had bought and popped the plastic tie holding them together. When I leaned down to slip one on, I felt something touch my butt. I shot into the air on instinct, whirling around. "You have a sticker down your butt," Gabriel said, an eyebrow raised. He made a whirling motion with his finger. I spun around in midair and allowed him to remove the label stating "size 4" all the way down my left leg.

Clove reached down and picked up my clothes, handed me the candles sticking out of my back pocket, then folded everything and put the bundle in her backpack. "Thanks, guys," I said. I really don't know what I'd do without you."

"Ok, Freak Girl . . ." Gabriel started.

“That is NOT my superhero name!” I hissed as I pulled the turtleneck up to my nose.

“Then what is?” he shot back.

“Anything but Freak Girl!” I glared.

“Ok, Bitch . . .”

I giggled.

“ . . . we’re going inside. We’ll meet you back at your apartment when this is over, ok? Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Gabriel instructed.

I gave him a look.

“Right. You can fly, and move shit with your mind, and . . . look, I’m new at this, ok?”

I pulled my turtleneck down from my face and stated, “So am I.” I sighed.

“Just be careful, Raney, ok?” Gabriel looked stern and concerned all at once. I held up my hand and made a fist. We fist bumped. Then the group turned and walked away from me towards the end of the alley. I pulled the turtleneck back over my face.

I shot straight up into the air, pretty high, then over the eave of the church like I did last night. Blood stains were dark on the sidewalk, and people had placed flowers and crosses and pictures and stuffed animals around the perimeter of the police-taped area. I heard a shout, and suddenly cameras were pointed at me. Ignoring them, I glided down and settled on the same tree branch. The church doors were open, with warm light spilling out onto the sidewalk. People were walking in the church, carrying candles and flowers. They were ignoring the cameras, and by proxy, ignoring me. I watched the people file in, wondering if they knew the victims personally, or were just there to express sympathy.

There was a crowd around my tree now, snapping photos, pointing video cameras and circling like vultures. Amazingly, they stayed quiet. My first thought was they were being respectful for the mourners. But then I realized they were probably confused. Or maybe even scared.

They could join the club.

Organ music floated down the stairs of the church and spilled out into the dark little street. I guess it was nice the church opened their doors for these sad people. I sat a little straighter when I realized I was one of those sad people. There were more and more people streaming in. What was I supposed to do now? Do I make an entrance? How do I even make an entrance. Why was I even here?

Justice.

Vengeance.

Anger.

Sadness.

All of it.

The organ music stopped. Not waiting to see if they were going to start up another song or if someone was going to start speaking, I gathered my nerve and flew off the eve of the church, performing a perfect superhero landing in front of the open double doors. I heard several people gasp. The cameras at my back felt like actual pressure on my shoulders.

No turning back now. I stood as tall as possible and looked straight ahead. Every eye in the building was on me. I fought the temptation to scan the crowd for Clove, Dean, and Gabriel.

I took one step into the church. Damn. Candles! As smoothly as I could, I took a candle out of one pocket, and pulled the lighter out of the other. I lit the candle on the first try, internally patting myself on the back. The entire church was turned around, staring at the girl in white trying to light a candle in the back of the church. The wick caught fire, and snapped straight into a friendly, orange flicker. Feeling I had to reinforce the fact that I was the flying girl from last night, I rose two feet off the ground and glided to the front, holding my candle.

I heard someone sit down heavily. I hope she didn't faint.

I had floated to the front of the church. Ok, now what? I scanned the crowd, looking for my friends. The faces blended together, and I couldn't pick them out of the crowd. I knew they were there, but my brain wanted to see them. News cameramen were spreading out among the audience, video cameras balanced on shoulders, jockeying for the best angle to see me. I wonder if they were live or just recording?

I felt very alone.

I was even with the pulpit. The priest looked at me with a mixture of wonder and kindness. Had he heard what I'd done last night? I'm sure he had. Still floating, bobbing a little, I faced the congregation. A little boy was standing in the front, mouth open. His candle had gone out. I glided towards him, bent down, and used my candle to light his. He looked down at his glowing candle, grinned, and said, "Thank you, lady!"

"You're welcome," I said, and the group gasped. I guess by speaking I made my presence real. I had to say something else.

Fuck. What was that going to be?

Also in the front row, sitting there holding a well-loved teddy bear, was a woman who's face was swollen and puffy. She looked miserable. She had a loved one on either side of her with an arm around her. The little girl's mother. I focused my gaze on her and she met my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. She shut her eyes and tears rolled down her cheeks. I waited until she opened her eyes before I spoke again. "I flew as fast as I could, and I know the hospital did everything they could . . ." I stopped. "I'm sorry," I said again.

Sitting behind the mother was a girl—maybe twenty years old, holding a picture of the man who was killed. "I'm sorry," I said to her too. "I'm new at this," I said. I looked at the crowd. "I don't even know what this is," I admitted. "I've never been good at anything. . ." why did that come out of my mouth to a room full of wide-eyed strangers? "Sorry, father," I said to the priest. "I know you have things to say to these grieving people. I just wanted to say I'm sorry I didn't stop this. I'm sorry I didn't know how. I'm sorry your daughter died," I turned to the mother who let out a sob. I floated to the ground and stood firm. "I wanted to tell you all I was sorry," I said, my voice loud and clear in the large sanctuary. "And I wanted to tell you I will find and destroy the fucking bitch that did this."

The church exploded in cheers. Whoops. Didn't mean to let an F-bomb slip in the house of the lord, but there it was. Couldn't take it back.

I flew over to the mother, handed her my candle, nodded to the woman with the man's photograph, and flew to the back of the church to make my exit. The crowd was still cheering and clapping.

The goddamn doors were closed.

Someone had closed the doors.

I screeched to a halt, and hovering in the air, reached down to open them. They were locked.

Someone locked me in?

The video cameras closed in, flanking my left and my right.

"Hold it right there!" I heard a voice cry over the cheering. I was staring at the business end of a gun. A woman in a police uniform was pointing a gun at me. AT ME. What the fuck? I didn't shoot anyone. I wanted to get the person who did. The crowd went quiet.

"Officer," I said, flying slowly backwards back towards the pulpit. "I am going to leave, and there is nothing you can do about it. Please do not fire at me, there are a lot of people in here that could get hurt." I knew better than to show them I was armed.

Thinking well under pressure, good, good. Keep it up.

Great, my inner monologue is a fucking cheerleader tonight.

Save the cheerleader save the world?

Stick to the script, inner monologue.

Got it.

“You leave her alone!” someone shouted at the police officer. Cries of, “Yeah!” “Right on!” “You tell her!” rang out. The crowd was on my side. How do I get out of here?

Without any cue, a line of people formed in front of me—shielding me, well, shielding my legs, I WAS three feet above the ground, from the policewoman.

“Look, I just need to take you downtown for questioning,” the woman said, her gun steady.

“We’re ALREADY downtown, Officer,” I pointed out. “Why do they always have to take someone ‘downtown?’ ” I directed my question at the nearest person to my left. “What if the precinct isn’t downtown? What if it’s uptown? ‘I need to take you uptown for questioning’ just doesn’t have the same ring to it. Inside your uptown world . . . I’ll bet she never had a backstreet guy . . . and now she’s looking for a downtown man . . . wait. That’s not the lyric. What’s the lyric?” The nearest person to my left just blinked at me, hard.

I flew back to the front of the church so fast I was a white blur. I stopped in front of the priest and lowered myself to the ground so I was standing in front of him. It seemed disrespectful to hover in front of him.

“Please unlock the doors, Father,” I said. “I can break them down, but I don’t want to damage your building.”

His eyes met mine. I saw kindness and understanding.

“I ask for sanctuary?” I said, questioning. Was that even a thing?

Whatever he saw in my eyes, he trusted. “I cannot offer sanctuary, this isn’t the 17th century.” My face fell. “But I do have a back door.” I returned the man’s warm smile. “Lower your weapon in my church!” the priest barked at the police officer in the back. He put his hand on my wrist and turned around. “Come with me.”

The officer lowered her gun, but started to move forward and head to the front of the church. More of the crowd flowed into the aisles, surrounded her, blocking her path.

The father opened a door in the back of the church, and we hurried down a hallway towards a door marked clearly with a red ‘Exit’ sign. He placed his hand on the door and pushed. It was a fire door. An alarm sounded within the church.

“Thank you, Father,” I said over the loud alarm chimes.

“You’re welcome,” he said. He pushed the door open wider, holding it for me. “Go with God.”

“God had nothing to do with this.”

His gaze didn’t waver. “Someone did.”

“True.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “Today I owe you.”

I shot to the ceiling, angled downwards, and flew out the church doors in a white streak. I could hear cheers and applause behind me.

So it’s official I guess. I’m a superhero.

Without a name.

Without a clue.

But with a promise.