

AMO

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CHAPTER 1

The phone crackled. Silence.

“Lane, did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, Josh, I heard you. I’m just not sure what to say.”

Lane rolled over and looked at the alarm clock on his night stand. 5:57am. The phone call stole his last moments of precious sleep. He rolled back and sandwiched his head between the phone and his pillow.

“Josh, do you know what time it is?”

“I know, I’m sorry, but I was really scared. I just needed to hear your voice.”

Lane softened at the sound of his little brother’s desperation. Three and a half months. This was the longest they’d ever been apart.

Pity won out over the need for sleep and Lane propped himself up on his pillow. “OK, Josh. Tell me again. What did you see in your dream?”

“It was weird, Lane,” Josh said, “this one was the most real so far.

“At first everything was fuzzy, like a million specks of dust swirling in the air. The cloud of sparkles moved in and out until they formed her body.

“She floated. I couldn’t tell if she was a ghost, or was under the water. It was like she was in slow motion, or something.

“Then she jerked. First to the left, then to the right. I think something hurt her. Then pain shot through my body. I didn’t know what was happening to me.

“She reached out to me and got super close to my face. It

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was hot, and it buzzed a little, and sent prickly tingles all over my face, into my hair, and then down my back. I froze.

“Josh, I need you.’ she said.

“That’s the part that really freaked me out. I heard her voice. She looked right into my eyes and spoke to me. I tried to talk back, but my throat was really dry and nothing came out. I tried to reach out my hands, but they were glued to the mattress.

“Suddenly she turned her head and looked back over her shoulder. The hair separated and I saw the back of her neck. She had five dots, like moles or freckles, that formed the shaped of the letter J. It was really clear against that white skin.

“She turned back around and her eyes were wild. I think she was afraid. She reached out to me again. Then her body shrank. Without moving her legs she moved away from me. Further and further, and then... she was gone.”

The air crackled through the phone.

“Lane, are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here, Josh.

Bright blue numbers on the alarm clock traced the contours of his bedspread with a cold edge. He sat up straight and flopped his pillow into his lap.

“Listen, little man, it was just a dream. I’m going to be there tonight. After I’m done with my exams I’m going to hop on a plane and, before you know it, I’ll be home.

Now, I’ve got to get going so I don’t miss my first exam. Try to get some sleep before you have to get out of bed.”

“OK. I can’t wait to see you tonight.”

“Me neither. Now go to sleep.”

Lane pushed “end” on the phone and leaned back against the headboard. The dark December morning clung to the windows with and icy grip.

How could Josh have known about the J? I never told him that. I wonder if Dad did.

The snooze buzzer squawked from the nightstand. “Time waits for no man, not even the brilliant” Lane mimicked his professor’s voice. Dr. Clark is a great man, but why does he have to schedule classes so early?

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The New England air was damp and cold against his skin. Patches of ice formed a precarious obstacle course along the sidewalk. It would be easier to walk along the snow-packed gutters of the street, but the cars were too tightly packed along the edge.

In a couple of hours this street would clamber with honking horns, angry drivers, and all too frequent sirens. But now, it was still. The street lights cast an amber tint to the otherwise blue black darkness of a winter morning.

Lane stood for a moment and took it in. He still couldn't believe it. MIT. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Just a year ago he had taken the test to qualify for this program. Now, here he was, one of the few students who had the privilege to spend their senior year of high school as a "pre-freshman" at one of the greatest Technical Institutes in the world. He had survived the first semester and was about to spend his last day on campus before Christmas Break.

A passing car honked its horn and startled him, jump-starting his cross-campus trek.

The coffee shop sat on the edge of campus. Everyone knew that the life blood of the serious college student is dark caffeinated liquid.

Hot coffee in hand, he wove his way through the labyrinth of buildings until he came to the Physics department. Half way down the dark hallway a slice of yellow light marked the only room with life at this hour. He pushed open the door to reveal a room half full of red-eyed, sleep deprived students.

The metal handle squeaked.

"Mr. Gray!"

The voice came from the front of the lecture hall. Lane looked just in time to see the gnarled hands raise a stack of blue books into the air, then slam them down on the desk. The loud slap pulsed through the room in a sonic ripple of bobbing heads.

Lane's heart stopped. He was caught in the professor's stare. Piercing gray eyes peered out from underneath two very bushy,

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furrowed, eyebrows. Silence gripped the room. Some of the co-eds nervously snuck a sympathetic glance at Lane.

“You sir.” The hunched professor paused and leaned into his next statement with the gravity of an undertaker. “Are right on time.”

A thin-lipped smile widened across the professor’s face and the icy gray eyes twinkled with mischief. The air reentered the room as everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“Please take your seat, sir,” the professor continued.

Lane shook his head and skipped down the stairs to the front row of the lecture hall. Dr. Clark has such a strange sense of humor.

The old professor passed out the exam packets. He placed one in front of Lane and mouthed the words, “Good luck, son,” then gave him a reassuring wink.

The next two hours were filled with the sound of pencils frantically scribbling across paper, punctuated by the agonizing groans of students desperately trying to recall a formula. Lane flew through the test. He loved it. He loved everything about this experience.

At least everything inside the classroom. This was his safe haven. Here he was king. Once he left the classroom and entered the larger world of the campus and college social life, things were very different. Who knew that even the world’s smartest people and a campus with the highest concentration of math geeks could still be full of cruel people.

Lane finished the test and brought it forward to place on Dr. Clark’s desk. Wise, wrinkled eyes looked up at Lane. They motioned to the door and called Lane to step out into the hallway.

It was light in the hall now. The rest of the building had woken up while they were taking the test.

Dr. Clark placed his hand on Lane’s shoulder.

“Is everything set, Lane? Do you have a way to the airport?”

“Yes, Dr. C. Dad sent some money. I’m going to take the T. I’ll be fine.”

“Good. When you get back to the house, I left a little gift for

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you. It's hanging on the door handle to your room. Take it with you, but don't open it until Christmas."

He smiled and his eyes nearly disappeared under the folds of skin. Lane nodded his head.

Dr. Clark looked over his shoulder and then down the other direction in the hallway. No one was around. He leaned in closer to Lane and whispered, "Don't worry about the lab. Your secret is safe with me. I'll work on it over the break, but I promise I won't do anything important until you get back."

He looked into Lane's eyes, gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze and a quick pat, and then motioned with his hand.

"Alright then, no long goodbyes. Off you go. Have a good break."

He turned and disappeared into the classroom before Lane could speak.

"Right. You have a good break too," Lane said to the door that closed in front of him.

Lane moved to the door at the end of the hallway. The campus grounds had changed dramatically over the few hours he was in the exam. Now it was full of people walking quickly across the plaza through the criss-cross of paths cut through the snow. Puffs of crystal clouds around their heads marked their breathing. The sluggish winter sun was just above the edge of the bay. It washed the buildings in golden hues and threw long, icy, purple shadows across the grounds.

Lane retraced his steps across the campus. The intersection was now busy with morning traffic. Cars honked, taxis wove masterfully in and out of traffic. Steam rose from all the exhaust pipes and froze in crystalline pillars. Bundled business men and women hurried along the sidewalks, cradling coffee cups in their hands.

The walk signal turned white and Lane flowed with the crowd across the street. Cold air propelled him quickly down the three blocks to the brownstone.

He stopped in front of the familiar building for a moment. Its dark brick façade stood like a fortress. His sanctuary. Dr. Clark's home. Dorm life had not gone well for Lane. Had Dr.

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Clark not intervened, who knows what would have happened. Had he not told the professor about his secret, he would have never had this place. It was worth it.

Up the front stairs and into the old house. His train would leave soon, so he had to hurry. He touched the covered bike on the front porch. “Soon, old friend. Soon”

His bedroom was at the top of the narrow wooden stairs, was at the end of the small hallway. A bag hung from the door handle with a note attached.

*Lane,
This is a little gift for you. Don't open
until Christmas.*

*There is a sack full of food for your
trip. It is on the kitchen table. Be safe.*

Dr. C.

Lane shook his head and smiled. It was highly unusual for a professor to take in a student as a boarder. He wasn't even sure if it was legal, but Dr. Clark had a lot of clout in the school and must have pulled a few strings. It definitely didn't help with Lane's social standing among the other students. It was the ultimate teacher's pet syndrome. He didn't care. It's not like he had been fitting in that well before Dr. Clark took him in. This was definitely a better situation.

He threw his things into a duffle bag and slung it over his shoulder. Down the stairs and to the kitchen. The sack of snacks sat on the table. Lane smiled and added it to his duffle.

The wall clock read 9:45. He had to get moving if he was going to catch the T.

The door on the other side of the kitchen stood slightly open. A crack of darkness caught his eye. It whispered, “please.” He looked at the clock, then back at the door.

Super quick. Just a look. I can make it.

The door creaked open. The stairs were even louder. There must not have been building codes for basements when this house was built. He felt like the steps would collapse every time he went down them, but that never stopped him.

At the bottom of the stairs blue light pulsed against the

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rough stone wall. Electronic buzzing and beeps filled the dank, musty air. He loved it.

There it was. The very center of his life for the past three months. The lab.

It was really nothing more than a mass of electronic equipment piled in a musty, cramped basement with low rafter ceilings, moist stone walls, and a dirt floor. A small table sat on one side of the room with two desk chairs nestled underneath it. Other than that, there was not much order to the chaos. They had spent the last two months just acquiring the necessary equipment.

Lane stared at it. A thing of beauty. Someday it would all come together.

A beep came from the kitchen at the top of the stairs. The sound startled Lane.

He flew up the rickety staircase in three steps, grabbed his duffle bag, and raced to the front door. The icy patches on the sidewalk were a hazard, but he still managed to run the full eight blocks to Kendall Station. He had filled his pass yesterday, so it was a quick slide through the gate and he was on the platform just as the train pulled up.

An hour later he was at Logan airport and flowing with the increasing crowd of holiday travelers. The gate was easy enough to find. People crowded around number 14, waiting impatiently for the gate attendant to let them in. A crackly voice came over the loudspeaker.

A small knot formed in Lane's stomach. The long line of people slowly moved past the flight attendant. She scanned each passenger's pass and smiled. Lane's hand shook as he handed over his pass. She looked at him and smiled. "Enjoy your flight." He tried to respond, but no words came through his tightened throat. He smiled weakly and nodded. The line moved through a door into a long tunnel. With each step down the walkway, the air grew colder.

He was freezing. Another flight attendant stood in the long oval doorway of the plane and greeted each person as they entered. Her face reflected Lane's condition.

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“Sir, is this your first time flying?”

He tried to speak, but still nothing came out. He nodded and feigned a smile.

The attendant relaxed a little and muffled a chuckle.

“Don’t worry,” she said, then placed her hand on his shoulder and gently led him into the long metal tube of death. “Everything will be just fine. You’re in good hands.”

We’ll see.

Hundreds of eyes stared at him. The long line of people in front of him painfully inched down the narrow aisle as each person had to stop and stuff their bag in the overhead compartment.

Row 17, row 18, row 19. 19B. That was his seat. His two row mates were already seated. Next to the window a young woman clutched a bundle of blankets on her lap. The aisle seat overflowed with humanity. A large, sweaty man greeted Lane with an apologetic smile. His excess flesh hung generously into Lane’s seat.

Great.

Lane hoisted his duffel above his head and barely squeezed it into the remaining space in the bin. The large man leaned hard into the aisle and lifted one leg to allow room for Lane to slide into his space in the middle. Lane sat down and looked at the woman next to him. The bundle she clutched to her chest moved. It had flesh and squawked.

Oh this is wonderful. Of course, on my first flight I’m stuck in a bad joke.

Lane forced a polite smile at the woman and nodded to the infant with as much false admiration as he could muster. Then he glanced at the large rolls of man piled in the seat to his left. They made brief eye contact, a quick head nod, then both retreated into isolated forward stares.

The final passengers found their seats and the plane lurched backwards. Lane’s stomach flipped. He gripped the armrests. You can do this, man. You’ve been through far worse. Millions of people do this every day. Pull it together.

An overly enthusiastic woman stood in the aisle and gave

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implicit instructions on what to do in case of an accident. Loss of cabin pressure? Really? Lane frantically looked at the roof above his seat and wondered if he would lose consciousness before the oxygen mask reached him. He studied the schematic of the airplane that was in the seat pocket in front of him as if it were a sacred text that held the key to his eternal destiny.

The plane taxied to the end of the runway and lined up for take-off. There was a moment of peace, and then a loud whining sound filled the cabin. The entire craft shook. Ground and buildings moved past the small window. Slowly at first, then they blurred against the glass. Lane's body pressed into the back of the seat. Then it happened. All of the soft tissue in his body shifted down three inches. They had left mother earth and were now suspended in mid air in... a metal tube.

How did I let this happen? He pressed his head into the back of the chair and squeezed his eyes shut. For the next several moments he waited. And waited. The pitch of the whining sound increased. It was obviously heading toward a climactic explosion. Wait for it. Time hung suspended.

Bing.

A soothing voice filled the cabin. "The captain has informed us that we have reached our cruising altitude and it is now safe to walk around the cabin."

Really? That was it?

Lane looked outside the window. White. Nothing else. No sign of movement. The whining pitch was gone. For all he could tell they were sitting perfectly still on the ground. He craned his neck above the seats and scanned the crowd. Most people had already nodded off. Some read books or magazines. Most looked totally bored.

"Mr. Rolls" had nestled into his own neck and was lightly snoring. Baby and mother were snuggled up against the wall, fast asleep.

Huh. I guess this isn't too bad.

Color returned to his knuckles as he released the armrests. No indents in the plastic. That was good.

The hard knots in his neck softened and Lane eased back

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into the seat. I might make it home after all.

With the tension of first take-off past him, Lane's stomach relaxed and formulated a new form of pain. Hunger. Dr. Clark's bag. It was in his duffle bag, which was on the other side of the pile of man next to him. He calculated the level of his hunger versus the size of his obstacle. Hunger won.

"Excuse me." He tapped the man on the arm. A sharp snort blew from the man's throat and he woke in confusion.

"I'm sorry, but I need to get my bag from up there."

The man twisted and pulled heaps of flesh, still leaving only a small gap for Lane to squeeze through. Lid open. Zip. Grab. Squeeze. Grunts and snorts from the obstructive man. Back in the seat.

Now, to open the bag. Was it worth the effort? Lane peeked inside to see. There was a small note:

Lane,

I thought you might need these for your first take-off. Bon Voyage!

Dr. C.

Chocolate cookies. The perfect comfort food. Dr. Clark is a good man.

With two cookies soothing his insides, Lane relaxed into the seat and thought of the coming weeks.

Home.

He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and felt for the papers. Do I dare read this again? He pulled out three pieces of pink paper and unfolded them. Perfect handwriting danced across the page in purple looping rhythm.

He took a deep breath and began to read.

September 17th

My Dearest Lane,

It has been two weeks since you left for school. I knew I would miss you when you left, but I didn't realize how big of a hole it would leave in all of our lives. Josh really misses you, too. Your Dad talks about you all the time. He's so proud of you, really.

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There is so much that I have wanted to say to you over the past year. I know I came on really strong at the beginning. You made that very clear. Please forgive me. I've been content to just sit back and be your friend. I know you really needed that more than anything, and I was happy to be that for you.

I was so happy to help your Dad over the summer and watch Josh for him. You Gray boys have truly made me feel like part of your family.

I'm still amazed when I think about how all of this started. I was so proud of you that day. You were taking the entrance exam to the early enrollment at MIT. I told you that you were my hero that morning, remember? Well, was I wrong? Now you're there, Mr. Smarty Pants.

I waited for you to come home from the test that afternoon. I sat by my front window and watched for you to ride your bike around the corner. I thought I'd be able to tell by the look on your face if you did well on the test.

You came around the corner so fast. There was panic in your eyes, like something terrible had happened. I froze. I didn't know what to do, so I just watched.

You skidded your bike in front of your house and then jumped to the front door and nearly ripped it off when you opened it. You bolted in and then I heard shouting and crashing. I was really afraid. I actually picked up the phone to call 911.

But then it got really quiet. Two minutes later I saw something that changed my life forever. You just appeared on the sidewalk, right out of thin air. And you looked different. You had on different clothes and a rope tied around your waist. You ran inside, again, and the rope kept extending out of nothing.

Then a creature appeared on the sidewalk, on the other end of the rope. It was the scariest thing

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I had ever seen. All gnarled and scarred, like it had been burned. And it was so massive, like one of those disgusting body builders on the magazines.

Your Dad appeared in the doorway and fell to his knees. The creature vaporized and shot into your Dad and threw him back into the house.

It was quiet again. A few minutes later you came out to the front and walked around the yard. You were looking for something, but you didn't find it. You went back inside.

That was the last thing I saw or heard.

What was I supposed to do then? I definitely couldn't call 911. "Uh, yeah, a giant creature just materialized out of thin air, and then, uh, dematerialized again and is inside of my neighbor." I wasn't going to go down that road.

So, I did the only thing I could think to do in that moment. I marched right over to your house and knocked on the door.

Oh, Lane, if only you could have seen your face when you opened the door. You were so cute. I love it when you get flustered like that. You tried to brush me off, but I wasn't about to be dismissed. I knew what I saw and I wanted to know what was happening.

After much persistence – I'm sorry if I was a little hard on you – you invited me into your house... and to your secret.

You changed me forever. How could I ever go back to boring old normal after knowing that you and your Dad had been to another place. I mean, how cool is that?

Lane, like it or not, you're stuck with me.

So, here's the part that you may or may not want to hear. Part of me is so frustrated with you for the fact that I don't know if you want to hear what I'm about to write. The other part of me understands

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why it is so hard for you to know. You've been through so much in your life. When your Dad was "checked out" you lived in fear all the time and you had to take care of Josh. You didn't have a normal life. And, it's not like the kids at school made it any easier on you. I always felt so sorry for you.

But now, Lane, I have to say it, whether you want to hear it or not. I love you. I love your quirkiness and your brilliance. I love the way you care for Josh. I love the intensity you bring to everything you do.

I can't pretend to just be your best friend any more, Mister.

I know this might not have been the best way to express my feelings to you. I also know you, and know that this might make our next encounter a bit awkward for you. I'm sorry about that, but, I just felt like I needed to let you know and give you enough time to process it before you come home for Christmas.

I'm counting the days until you return to us.

Love,

Heather

"Would you like something to drink?"

Lane looked up at the attendant with a blank expression.

"Something to drink?" she repeated.

"Oh, sure. Diet Coke?"

The brown soda fizzed over the ice and she placed the cup on a small napkin in front of him. Lane stared at the effervescence for a long time.

Heather. What was he going to do about that?

The rest of the plane ride was uneventful. The baby woke up and squawked a little, but was mostly just cute and smiley. The landing was actually fun. Soon a bell rang through the cabin. Everyone stood up at once, craning their backs and necks to awkwardly maneuver their bags from the overhead compartments. They stood and waited. Slowly the line moved toward

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the exit at the front of the plane.

Lane followed the signs that read “baggage claim.” He only had carry-on luggage, but the passenger pick-up was just outside the doors. He weaved his way through the crowd that gathered around carousel 4 and headed toward the bank of glass doors.

A blast of wet, cold air greeted him as the automatic doors slid open. Cars clung to the curb along the full length of the building. He looked to the left. Nothing. Then to the right. Four cars down he recognized the blue Echo. The back door opened and a little body tumbled out of it. Thick, curly brown hair flopped up and down above the big, blue eyes.

“Lane!” Josh yelled. He ran to his big brother. Lane dropped his bag and opened his arms. Josh jumped in and Lane engulfed him in a long awaited hug.

Words spewed from Josh’s mouth in a gush of passion, “Lane I’m so glad you’re home there’s so much to talk about I want to tell you everything I want to hear all about school our whole family is coming over tonight I’ve been sleeping in your room all semester...”

“Whoa, little man! Slow down!” Lane pulled away from Josh and smiled. “Take a deep breath. I’m going to be home for two weeks. We’ll have plenty of time to talk.”

Josh smiled and buried his face in Lane’s chest.

“I know little J,” Lane said. “It’s good to be back.”

Two more bodies emerged from the tiny car. First, Heather came from the passenger seat. Black curls danced around the edges of a colorful knit cap. She held onto the door and hesitated. Her eyes sparkled. She gnawed on the corner of her bottom lip and waited to see how she would be received.

Wow. He had forgotten how truly beautiful she was. A strange sensation rumbled in Lane’s stomach. It was like a swarm of insects swirled around inside his belly. Some of them got loose and charged up his back. He stopped and looked at her. For a brief moment panic flashed across her face and her shoulders fell. Her eyebrows arched and a sheepish smile begged for Lane’s response. She waved slightly and held her breath.

Lane couldn’t stand it any more. He opened his arms toward

her and a wide smile erupted on her face. She bounced once and then ran to him.

She jumped into his arms and his face was lost in her curls. She smelled good. His whole body was enveloped in her presence. The way she smelled, the way her slender body felt in his arms, the beat of her heart against his body, her little giggle in his ear, it was all overwhelming.

The purple words from the letter flashed in his mind “I love you.” Could this be possible? Lane froze. He wasn’t sure what to do now.

He pulled back. Her faced beamed with joy. Steam from her breath formed a halo around her head and the cold air kissed her cheeks with a rosy glow. He stared and said nothing.

The sparkle in her eyes dimmed, slightly. The corners of her mouth receded. They moved from the full expansion of absolute abandon, and took their place in the polite position that recognized the reality of the situation. Her eyes reflected Lane’s spirit. He was not ready. He didn’t know how to reciprocate her feelings. Not yet.

She looked deeply into his eyes. After a moment she smiled again. This time it was the smile of gentle resignation. She pulled him close and gave him a long, warm hug.

“Welcome home, Lane. I’ve missed you.”

She moved away from him and the second body filled his vision. His large frame dwarfed the tiny car as he moved around the back end. He stood squarely on the sidewalk and extended his bulky arms.

Lane moved forward and entered the embrace.

Everything went dark. Lightning flashed. Thunder pealed. Rain pelted into his face. The scenery spun around him in a blur. The bulky arms squeezed in on his body. Large fingers wrapped around the back of his neck and crushed in on his spine. Pain shot down his back. He fought against the grip but couldn’t move. He struggled and pushed back. Finally, he pulled his head back far enough to see. Two blazing red eyes sat in a tomb of mutilated flesh. Hot breath heaved from the grotesque mask. The Bellator.

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Gone. Suddenly. The sky was bright again and the sound of cars moving in and out of the pick-up zone softly buzzed around them. The vision left as quickly as it came and, once again, Lane looked into the eyes of his father. Soft, kind, blue eyes.

Lane shuddered.

“Are you OK, son?”

“Yeah, Dad. I’m just so glad to see you.”

He stuffed his strange emotions and flung himself into Owen’s arms. Father and son embraced long and hard.

“I’m glad you’re home, Lane. It’s just not the same without you.”

Josh jumped into the hug and the three Gray boys relished in their curbside reunion. Heather looked on with approval.

After one extra moment of embrace, Heather interjected. “Come on, boys. People are waiting for our spot. We can continue this at the house.”

“Yes, mother,” Owen said. He looked at Josh. Josh rolled his eyes and smiled.

Owen popped the trunk and Lane threw his duffle bag into it. They all strapped into the car and Owen drove them away from the loading zone. Lane sat in the passenger seat and Heather rode in the back with Josh.

“Lane, tell us everything,” Josh said. He could hardly contain his excitement. “What’s MIT like? Have you made friends? Did you get to blow anything up? What’s the ocean like?”

“Yeah, Lane,” Heather said, “we want to know everything.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on you two.” Lane twisted his body to look into the back seat. “One question at a time.”

Lane looked at Owen. “Dad, you know me. Before I launch into some monologue about my MIT experience, you know what my first question is, right?”

Owen laughed, and together they all said, “What’s the plan?”

“Right,” Owen said, “we do have a plan, as a matter of fact.”

“Now you’re talkin’.” Lane clapped his hands in approval.

“Yeah,” Josh said, “it’s a boring plan. Dad, why do we have

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to do this? Especially tonight, on Lane's first night back? We hardly know these people."

Owen looked at Josh in the rear view mirror. "Listen, Josh, we've been over this a hundred times. It has been a really long time since we've had a family reunion. A bunch of people from your mom's side of the family called me this fall and wanted to get together with us. Aunt Judy is coordinating it, and this was the only night that worked out for everybody."

Josh slumped back into the seat and crossed his arms in disappointment.

Owen shook his head and looked over at Lane, "So, that's the plan. We have a big family reunion happening at our house tonight. Actually, people will be arriving shortly after we get home."

Lane turned around and looked at Josh. "Hey, little J. Don't worry about it. It'll be like a huge welcome home party for me. We'll have fun. Let's just get through tonight and then we'll have all of Christmas Break to catch up on everything. K?"

"Fine," Josh pouted. Lane glanced over to Heather and gave a wink.

"Yeah, sport," Heather poked Josh in the shoulder, "and I'll be there to protect you from any cheek-pinching, mustachy kissing aunts."

Josh fought a smile with all his might. He looked up at Lane. "But you have to tell us everything you can before we get home!"

Everyone laughed and Lane agreed. The rest of the ride home was filled with details about MIT and the Boston area. Lane kept it light and factual, for now. The rest would come in time.

CHAPTER 2

“Wow, Dad, the house looks great,” Lane said. He was the last to hang his coat on one of the hooks in the stairwell that led to the basement. He closed the door and stepped back into the small kitchen where everyone had already jumped to work.

“You can thank Heather for that,” Owen said.

She didn’t look up from the platter she was working on. “Really, you can thank my Mom. They had a surplus of flowers at the shop, so she let me use them.”

“It’s too bad your parents couldn’t make it tonight,” Owen said.

“I know, they had a meeting at the church. They said to make sure I send their love.”

Something tugged on Lane from behind. He spun around to find Josh anxiously waving him to follow. As soon as Lane made eye contact with him Josh turned and sped to the stairs and scrambled up and out of view.

Lane took two steps into the small entryway and stopped. It had been three and a half months since he stood in this spot. The archway was to his left, door in front of him, stairs to the right. The scene played through his mind. A drunken beast. A blow to the head. A scramble up the stairs. Panic.

Lane retraced his steps.

Up the first flight of stairs to the small landing. A hard right. Up the last flight. A hard left down the narrow hallway. The door to his room. It was already open. He barely noticed Josh standing there as he went straight to the bed. The blanket hung down the side and touched the floor. In one fluid movement he

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was on his knees and threw back the blanket. Now on his belly. Darkness under the bed. A swirl of dust bunnies fled from his hand as he reached in and felt around on the floor.

How many times had he done this same thing over the past 14 months? Nothing. There was nothing unusual about that space. Dusty floor boards. A tattered bottom of a box spring. A few old, forgotten toys. How had this space become a portal? How had it opened in the sky and not in a Bitter Bush? How had he fallen through when he hadn't been saturated? None of it made sense.

A dull thud hit in the middle of his back. Josh.

"Lane, did you find anything this time?" Josh asked. His eyes were wide with anticipation.

Lane pulled himself up and sat on the floor next to the bed. "No. Same old thing. There's just nothing there."

Josh's shoulders slumped. He looked over at the side of the room and walked to the desk. He returned with something in his hand and presented it to Lane.

"You still have this," Josh said.

He held out a knife. Lane took it from him and held it in his hand. A bone handle protruded from a leather sheath. Lane pulled on the handle and exposed a six-inch metal blade that glinted in the lamp light. The blade was ice cold and smooth to the touch. Intricate carvings wrapped around the bone handle. Most of the patterns were meaningless to Lane. All but one. In the center of the pattern was the rough shape of a mountain peak. The symbol of Amo.

"Lane, I have to tell you something," Josh wrung his hands together.

"Oh, right," Lane said, "You brought me up here. I'm sorry, little man, I got distracted. Go ahead."

Josh took a deep breath. "I've been having..."

"Josh! Lane!" Owen's voice boomed up the stairway and down the hallway. "Come on boys, our first guests are arriving!"

Lane jumped to his feet and moved to the door. Even though it had been 14 months that booming voice still sent a cold chill

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down Lane's neck and elicited an immediate response. It was time to go downstairs.

Josh grabbed Lane's wrist and stopped him. The expression on his face moved beyond frustration. Something was not right. For the first time Lane noticed dark circles under Josh's eyes.

"Josh, are you OK?"

"No. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"Boys!" the voice boomed louder from the bottom of the stairs.

Lane looked to the door, then back at Josh.

"Listen, little man, I know you have something important to tell me, but we've got to get downstairs. I promise you can tell me all about it after the party."

All sparks of homecoming excitement extinguished in Josh's eyes. Now he just looked tired. He begrudgingly dragged his feet toward the door.

"Whatever."

Lane came around the landing to find Owen opening the front door. A cold blast of air filled the entryway. A wide woman, draped in a fake fur-lined coat, entered and smiled. Her eyes widened and the thickly painted lips expanded into a gaping smile.

"Owen!" She extended her hands in exultation and then grabbed Owen's neck and pulled him to her. "It has been so long. How wonderful to see you." Her shrill voice reverberated through the house.

A short, balding man with a salt and pepper beard stood behind her. He held the storm door open and looked upon the reunion with ambivalence and mild annoyance.

"Is it OK if we take this inside? It's a little cold out here." His voice dripped with contempt for the woman. He paused, then added, "dear!"

"Oh, Roger," the woman released Owen and moved into the house, "you won't freeze out there. You have plenty of insulation."

The man stepped into the room and peeled back his coat to reveal a large amount of insulation wrapped around his midsec-

tion and packed tightly under a very festive knit sweater.

“Well, that makes two of us, dear,” Roger flashed a sardonic smile.

The woman patted Roger’s cheek. “You’re so cute when you’re perturbed.”

Roger rolled his eyes, looked at Owen, and held out his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Owen.”

Owen shook his hand. “Roger. Judy. It’s been a long time.”

Roger smiled. “Where’s the food?”

Owen laughed and pointed to the kitchen. “Everything’s in there. Help yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Roger locked on target and moved to the kitchen.

Lane and Josh stood at the base of the stairs. Judy’s hands flew into the air. “Oh, there they are!” Her entire body jiggled and swayed back and forth as she stamped her feet in excitement.

Suddenly, Lane was engulfed in soft flesh. The smell of hairspray flooded his sinuses.

“I hear you are the fancy college boy now. Very nice, very impressive.” She released her grip and stepped back. Her dark brown eyes looked up at Lane and glistened with a ring of moisture. “Your mother would be so proud.”

She squeezed his arm and held on to the moment.

“Thanks, I hope so,” Lane said.

She nodded, looked beside Lane, and then her face exploded into another gaping smile.

“Tell me this isn’t little Joshie!”

At that moment Heather walked into the room from the kitchen. She was too late. Aunt Judy reached over, extended her pinchers, and latched on to Josh’s left cheek. She gave it two quick jerks. Josh looked at Heather in desperation.

Heather mouthed the words to Josh, “I’m sorry,” and shrugged her shoulders in defeat.

“My goodness, Owen,” Judy said. She stayed focused on Josh and measured him with her eyes. “Josh was just a baby the last

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time I saw him. It's just amazing how time changes things."

"Indeed," Owen said. He glanced at Lane over Judy's back. This might end up being a long party.

Over the next hour the small house filled with people. Most of them were vaguely familiar to Lane and complete strangers to Josh. The two boys observed their father interface with each new guest. Some of the people received genuine smiles and a warm embrace. Others evoked a pained expression on his face. There was obviously a story behind every new encounter.

It was a story that Lane had never been privy to. Before Mom died, parties like this were fairly common. Back then he was too young to pay attention. Family was something he took for granted. Parties were a time to receive gifts and run around with cousins, not sit and listen to old people talk about boring stories from ancient history. Now he wished he had listened. His father had said nothing since she died. Lane looked around at the strangers that were his family.

Heather slid in beside him and grabbed his hand. He didn't mind. Her soft skin and the warmth of her familiar body next to him was great comfort in this sea of cold strangers. Josh snuggled in on the other side and the three watched Owen work the crowd.

The doorbell was hardly audible over raucous conversation. "I got it!" Owen yelled.

He worked his way through the bodies to the front door. By this time it had become the pattern for everyone to gather around the front door like it was center stage and anticipate who the next guest would be to join the party. Lane, Heather, and Josh positioned themselves on the stairway to get a good vantage point.

Owen opened the door and a tall, vivacious man filled the room with his presence. Wild, white, wavy hair bounced on the top of a high forehead. His face was framed with a neatly trimmed, white beard and his dark eyes flashed with exuberance and a robust lust for life. With the exception of the facial hair and the receding hairline, he was the spitting image of Lane's mother.

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“Owen!” He extended both hands toward Owen and revealed a gift. “Merry Christmas!”

A large, green, glass bottle glinted in the light. A wine bottle.

Everyone froze.

The room that had just been buzzing with life now fell silent in a nervous hush.

Lane looked into the living room. So many days he had looked into that room from these stairs and had seen bottles all over the place. On the coffee table, on the floor, spilled out on the carpet. Green bottles, brown bottles, clear bottles, tin cans. All of them wreaked with the stench of pain and misery for him and Josh.

The newcomer’s countenance fell. He shot a confused look across the crowd. He looked at Owen, then down at the bottle. The realization spread crimson up his face. Profuse apology mixed with embarrassment streamed out of his eyes.

He was about to speak when Owen grabbed the bottle from his hand and thrust it into the air for everyone to see.

“Thank you, Peter,” Owen said, “I didn’t know what to get my boss. Now I have the perfect solution. You saved the day!”

A nervous sigh spread through the room.

“Come on, brother,” Owen moved toward the kitchen, “all the food’s in here. You must be hungry.”

Peter sheepishly followed Owen into the kitchen, thankful for his gracious deflection.

The crowd slowly regained a festive excitement and soon the noise level reached its former deafening din. It was like the consistent roar of ocean waves, punctuated by the cackle of Aunt Judy’s laugh.

Eventually, through Heather’s persistent persuasion, Lane entered into the fray. He sat on the couch between Owen and Heather. Josh sat on the floor and stayed nestled up against his legs. Judy sat across the coffee table on a chair that was not quite big enough for her robust frame. She rested a well loaded plate on the shelf of her chest and freely shoveled food as she talked.

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“Well,” Judy patted her thigh, “Lane, there has been something I’ve been dying to ask you all night. Who is this lovely young lady sitting next to you?”

All eyes fixed on Heather.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Lane said, “I totally forgot that you wouldn’t know Heather.” He paused and extended his hand to the group of eager onlookers. “Everyone, this is Heather Gyles. Heather, this is everyone.”

Heather smiled. A soft, rosy glow radiated from her face. “It’s nice to meet all of you,” she said.

“I must say, young man,” Judy said, “you two make a nice couple.”

“Oh, uh,” Lane scrambled for words, “us? We’re not a couple.” He sat up straight and pulled away from Heather, slightly. “We’re just friends.”

Heather’s lashes fluttered. “Oh right,” she said, “Lane and I are friends from school.”

“Right,” Owen said, “Heather has been helping me out over the summer. She’s been taking care of Josh while I’ve been trying to get reestablished at work.”

“Yes,” Peter said, “I heard that you got a faculty position at Lizzy’s school.”

“That’s right,” Owen said, “there was an opening in the philosophy department. Lizzy’s name still held enough clout for Paul Misner to take me in. He’s been really great.”

“That’s wonderful,” Peter said.

Lane’s face was hot. He couldn’t look at Heather.

Judy stared at Lane and Heather. A small curl formed on the corner of her mouth.

She looked at Owen. “Speaking of Lizzy, I’ve been thinking a lot about her lately. It’s strange. I mean, I’ve always thought about her since the accident, of course, but it’s been different lately. She’s on my mind a lot.”

Judy set the chicken wing down on the plate. She looked at everyone in the circle and hesitated. “It might sound a little weird, but I’ve been dreaming about her. Like, really vivid dreams. I hate to admit it, but I’ve never dreamed about her

before now. Is that bad? She's my sister, and I've never dreamed about her before." Her chin quivered and sent a jiggling ripple down her jowls.

Aunt Shirley placed a reassuring hand on Judy's back and rubbed it. "We all miss her, dear. It's OK."

"It's interesting that you mention dreams," Uncle Peter sat at the opposite side of the coffee table. "I've been dreaming about her, too."

Several heads nodded in the crowd. It seemed the whole family had been thinking a lot about Lane's mother over the past few months. Josh squeezed harder onto Lane's legs. Lane rubbed his back and listened as the conversation turned to telling stories about Elizabeth, or Lizzy, as most of them knew her.

Lane soaked in every story. This made the awkward social moments at the beginning worth it all. Story after story washed over him like a warm breeze. He saw her face in each of the aunts and uncles. Aunt Shirley sounded just like her when she giggled. Uncle Peter had her twinkle in his eyes.

Lane looked over at Owen. He was lost in the moment as well. Tears flowed freely down his cheek. Everyone toggled between moments of hilarity and grief. One second they belly laughed and the next they sobbed.

That's when it hit him. This party was ten years late. It was the funeral they never had. Dad refused to attend the family gathering after Mom's memorial service. He had dragged the boys away from the church, threw them in the car and sped away, never to return. He had not seen these people since that day.

Lane reached over and placed his hand on Owen's shoulder. This must have been a huge step for him to allow Judy to coordinate this gathering. In that moment he had never felt more proud of his father.

This was the perfect welcome home party.

CHAPTER 3

“Great party last night,” Lane said. He and Owen sat at the small kitchen table and shared a breakfast of cold cereal and coffee.

“It really was, wasn’t it,” Owen said. He stirred the flakes in his milk. “I had forgotten how fun Mom’s family can be.”

He chuckled. “What did you think about Aunt Judy? She’s something else.”

“Yeah,” Lane said, “she’s a piece of work. But, she definitely knows how to keep the conversation going. I’ll give her that.”

Lane took a drink of coffee. “I really like Uncle Peter. Out of all of them, he reminded me the most of Mom. Are they alike at all?”

Owen stared into his coffee cup. The words seemed difficult to form. “In some ways they are. It’s been so long. I’ve lost track of him. There was a time when we were really close.”

Lane wanted to ask what happened, but then thought better of it. He knew.

Owen shrugged, “Stuff happens. People drift, I guess.”

The conversation stifled. Lane sensed that his father was still not comfortable talking about those memories.

After a few silent bites of cereal, Lane spoke. “Dad, is Josh OK? He was trying to tell me something all day yesterday, but never got the chance. Poor guy fell asleep before everyone left last night, so I still don’t know what it was. He doesn’t look right.”

Owen stood up and walked to the coffee pot on the counter. “You want some more?” He held up the carafe to Lane.

“Sure.”

Owen poured the dark liquid into Lane’s mug.

“Honestly, Lane, Josh has me really worried. I haven’t said anything to you about it because I didn’t want to add extra stress to your first semester at school. You carried the burden of Josh for all those years. It’s about time I acted like a father and let you be a big brother.”

Owen placed the carafe back in the coffee maker and sat down at the table.

“So, what’s up with him?” Lane asked.

“He’s been having dreams. About your mom.”

“Yeah,” Lane said, “he called me yesterday morning. Woke me up to tell me about a dream he had about a woman. The way he described her, it sounded like Mom. You mean that wasn’t the first time.”

Owen leaned back and rubbed the stubbled on his chin. “I’m sorry about that, Lane. I told Josh not to bother you with this.”

He leaned forward and gripped the coffee mug tightly. “That dream must have been really bad.”

“How long have these dreams been going on?” Lane said.

“About two months.”

“Two months!” Lane said, “I can’t believe no one told me about this.”

“Like I said, I didn’t want to complicate your life. I can handle it Lane. Just relax.”

“OK, I’m sorry. You’re right. I suppose I should thank you for watching out for me like that.”

The muscles in Owen’s jaws softened.

“So, tell me more about these dreams,” Lane said.

“They’re all very similar. He’s sees a woman. According to his description, it sounds like your Mom. She talks to him.”

Owen paused and looked at Lane.

“What is it, Dad?”

Owen took a deep breath. “She tells him things...that he shouldn’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

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“Things that he can’t know. Details about his childhood or our life that I know you and I haven’t told him. It’s spooky.”

“That’s right,” Lane snapped his fingers. “Have you ever told Josh about Mom’s birthmark?”

“The J on her neck?” Owen said. “No. Why?”

“In the dream that Josh told me about, he said that the woman turned her head and exposed that mark on her neck. How would he know that?”

An ominous presence descended on the table. Owen and Lane sat frozen and stared at each other.

“Dad, you don’t think...”

Owen’s eyes squinted and a confession gathered on his face.

“I know this sounds crazy, but I had to explore every option.”

“Dad, what did you do?”

“I told some of the ladies at work about Josh’s problems. I wondered if it were possible that your Mom might actually be communicating with Josh from the dead.”

“Are you serious?” Lane said.

“I know, I know,” Owen held up his hands to ward off Lane’s objections. “Tooly, one of the ladies in the office, really seems to be tuned into the whole spirituality thing, so I felt comfortable bringing it up with her. A good scientist should explore every option, right?”

“I suppose,” Lane said. “So, what did she say?”

“She got all worked up about it. She told me that spirits don’t communicate from the dead. She started talking about familiar spirits, or something like that, and recommended that I talk to her pastor.”

“And?” Lane couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“And, I did.”

“Wow!”

“I know. It gets better. I was really frustrated and worried about Josh, so I was willing to try anything. I took him to see her pastor. He listened to our story for a while, and then asked a

bunch of questions. Before I knew it he was telling me that there was sin in our family and that Josh was possessed with an evil spirit. He said we needed to repent of our sins and Josh would be set free.”

“Get out,” Lane said, “he actually blamed you for it?”

“Yes. It was incredible. I know I was a terrible Dad while I was in the other world, but this guy was out there.

“Here’s the funny thing. His church is called the House of Mercy.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I listened. I acknowledged that I wasn’t perfect and that I would consider it. Then I politely excused myself.”

“Incredible,” Lane said.

“I know.”

“So,” Lane said, “we don’t believe it is an evil spirit that needs to be exorcised. But that still doesn’t help us. How can Josh dream the things he’s dreaming?”

“I have another idea,” Owen said. “The chair of the Psychology department at school has done a lot of work with dream research. I thought he might be able to help. I’ve set up a meeting with him on Monday at the school. Would you like to come?”

“Sounds interesting. I’d love to.”

A sound clunked from the front room. A very groggy boy scuffled into the kitchen.

“Good morning, little J!” Lane said. He stretched out his arms and welcomed Josh onto his lap.

“Whoa, you’re almost too big to sit on my lap. Did you grow overnight?”

Josh looked at Lane with an expression that said it was far too early and he was far too intelligent for such patronizing talk.

Lane laughed and gave him a big squeeze.

“Listen, you wanted to tell me something all day yesterday, but I was too busy for you. Lay it on me.”

Josh looked timidly at Owen. Owen nodded his reassurance. “It’s OK, Josh,” Owen said.

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“Is it about your dreams?” Lane said.

Josh nodded and started to cry. He buried his head in Lane’s shoulder.

“I know, Josh. Dad and I just talked about it. We’re going to figure out what’s going on.”

Josh released the emotions he’d built up for two months. His body shook as he wailed. The three Gray men sat in the warm amber glow of the kitchen light, and cried.

CHAPTER 4

Lane and Owen pushed through the inner bank of glass doors and stepped into the main lobby of the Community College.

“Owen!” a voice called from the back of the maze of cubicles that sat behind the front desk. A bald head slid along the top of the cubicle wall. It came to the end of the wall and revealed the middle-aged man attached below. Tufts of white hair lined the base of his shiny head, and reading glasses sat perched on a long, curved nose. His thin-lipped smile spread wide across his face, and the lanky frame of his body moved in long strides toward the door that led from the office area to the main lobby.

“Right on time,” the man continued.

He came through the door and extended his hand to Owen. “Thanks for meeting me on campus, Owen. With all the students gone I’m playing catch up all week in the office.”

“No problem,” Owen said. “I’d like to introduce my son to you. This is Lane. Lane, this is Dr. Robert Stein.”

“Ah, the brilliant one,” Dr. Stein’s wide smile opened to expose a rugged row of coffee stained teeth, “your father has told me so much about you.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Lane said.

Dr. Stein gripped Lane’s hand firmly and gave it one solid pump. “Humble. That’s good, son. That will take you far.”

He gave a wink to Owen and then headed off down the hallway in long strides. Lane and Owen fell in step behind him and followed down a flight of stairs into another wide, tiled hallway. A bank of windows let the bright, winter light flood the space. At the end of the hallway a set of wooden doors stood propped

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open, revealing a large cafeteria. Two or three campus employees sat in the corner around a small table. Otherwise, the room was empty.

Dr. Stein headed toward the service line on the other side of the room. Without stopping, he called over his shoulder. "I thought we could grab some nutrition right away and then we can settle down and get to business."

Most of the bins that looked like they would normally hold hot dishes sat cold and empty. A slim row of cold sandwiches sat wrapped in cellophane along the bottom glass shelf. A few burgers leaked grease through their paper shrouds and were tucked under a warming lamp next to some limp French fries.

"Sorry for the slim pickings, boys." Dr. Stein surveyed the food selection with consternation. "Apparently we're on emergency rations during the holiday break. I tell you what, it's on me. Perhaps that will compensate for the lack of luster."

"You're too kind, Bob." Owen nodded and graciously accepted.

The girl behind the cash register barely looked up as she rung in the order. Red, puffy flesh on the top of her nostril engulfed the metal ring that protruded from within. It looked painful.

"Will this be on your account, Dr. Stein?" her speech clicked as the heavy metal ball pinned in the middle of her tongue rapped against her teeth.

"Yes, Beth, thank you."

Lane slid his tray off the end of the metal rack and turned to follow the two men. He stopped, dead cold. On the wall at the end of the serving line a plaque caught his attention.

Across the top it read:

In loving memory of Elizabeth June Gray

At the bottom it read:

This cafeteria is a space for all the students that she loved.

A photo of Elizabeth hung in the middle of the plaque.

Lane stared at it. Long dark hair framed her porcelain skin. Her eyes exuded kindness and grace.

A body slipped in next to Lane. Dr. Stein stood for a moment and joined in his contemplation.

“She was a truly great woman. The students loved her, and she loved them.” He took in a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. “Such a meaningless tragedy.”

He stepped away from Lane and moved toward the table where Owen was already seated. After a few steps he paused and looked back. “Lane, are you coming?”

Lane finally tore his gaze away from his mother’s eyes. “Yes, sir, I’m coming.”

At the table they unwrapped their sandwiches and settled in for conversation.

“Bob, thanks for meeting with us.”

“No problem, Owen. I’ve been meaning to connect with you ever since I heard you were brought on staff.”

“I appreciate that. Elizabeth always said great things about you.”

“She always was overly kind like that. If you ask most of my students, they might have a different opinion.”

They all laughed and took a few bites of their meal.

“Now,” Dr. Stein continued, “what can I do for you? Your message sounded fairly important.”

Owen swallowed his bite and washed it down with a quick drink of soda. “I had heard that you have been involved with some research involving dreams. Is that true?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. There is a symposium of psychologists and neuropsychologists from several schools in the area that have created a sleep lab. We received a nice grant last year. It’s fascinating work.”

“What are you researching?” Lane asked.

“We are trying to determine the correlation between REM sleep, psychological wellness, and academic performance among college students.”

Lane laughed. “Well, from my cursory observations on the MIT campus, I can tell you that a lot of the students aren’t getting enough REM sleep.”

“Oh really,” Dr. Stein raised his eyebrows, “have you had some trouble in your first semester?”

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Lane flushed and realized that he exposed more of his world than he had intended. “Oh no,” he lied, “I was just trying to be funny.”

Dr. Stein’s gaze lingered on Lane for a moment and then turned to Owen. “What is your interest in our research?”

“Well,” Owen hesitated.

“What is it, Owen? Is everything alright?”

“Actually, Bob, it’s not. It’s my son, Josh. He’s been having some disturbing dreams lately. About his mother.”

Dr. Stein leaned back in his chair and drummed the rim of his cup with his finger. “I see. Unfortunately, this doesn’t seem uncommon for a child who has lost his mother.”

Owen leaned forward. “That’s what I thought at first. Just normal bad dreams. I didn’t really pay attention. But then he started describing his dreams to me.”

“Tell me about them,” Dr. Stein said.

“He sees Elizabeth. She always looks like she’s floating, almost like she’s in water. And she talks to him. She tells him things.”

Owen stopped and looked around, like he wanted to make sure no one could hear his next words. “She tells him things he couldn’t possibly know.”

Dr. Stein sat up. “Like what?”

“She tells him details about our life. Inane details, like where she would take him shopping when he was a baby, or our favorite ice cream shop. I just don’t understand why he would have a dream like this. He was only a baby when she died. He didn’t even know her. Is it possible that he would have information like that stored in his subconscious memory?”

“Hmmm,” Dr. Stein took a long drink through his straw and studied Owen and Lane’s faces. He set the cup down.

“This is interesting. So, you’d like our group to run some tests on Josh to see if there is anything unusual?”

“Actually,” Owen said, “I didn’t really know what I was asking. I just knew that you were a psychologist and had some connection to dream research. I’m grasping at straws at this point.”

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Dr. Stein looked at Lane. "What are your thoughts on this?"

Lane shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea. I just found out about the dreams a couple days ago. All I know is that they are doing something to Josh's head. He's not the same kid he was when I left for school. I'm worried about him."

Dr. Stein leaned back and pulled the handheld from the holster on his belt. He poked around the screen with his stylus for a few moments and studied it carefully. The corners of his mouth pulled down and his eyebrows worked up and down above his squinted eyes.

"I tell you what I can do. This Friday is Christmas Eve. Nothing is scheduled in the lab that day. I and some of my colleagues don't do the whole Christmas thing, so I and my equipment are available. If you are willing, bring Josh in Thursday evening and we'll observe him overnight. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great," Owen said. "That's much more than I expected."

"Excellent," Dr. Stein raised his hands and let them fall on his knees in a slap, "I'll have Ruthie, my office assistant, call you and set up all the arrangements."

The conversation turned to a lighter mood and the three men finished their lunch. Dr. Stein escorted them back to the front lobby and stopped in front of the glass doors that led outside. He grasped Owen's hand and looked intently in his eyes.

"Owen, please know that we will do whatever we can to help your son."

"Thank you, Bob. I know you will."

Dr. Stein patted Owen on the shoulder, gave a quick wave to Lane, and then retreated behind the front desk and into the maze of office cubicles.

* * *

Thursday night came quickly. The Echo pulled up to a small strip mall lined with colored Christmas lights.

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“Are you sure this is the address she gave you, Dad.” Lane said.

“Yes, 12001 Roosevelt Road. This is it.”

“It’s just a strip mall. Isn’t that a dry cleaning store, the one with the really annoying commercials?”

“Yeah, it is. But look there, the second one from the right. The door is marked “Suite E”. That’s the one.”

“OK,” Lane said, “let’s go. Are you ready Josh?”

Josh looked at Lane from the back seat. He was obviously nervous. “Are you sure I have to do this?”

“Don’t worry, little J. All you have to do is sleep. How hard can that be? Dad and I will be right there the whole time, so don’t worry.”

They climbed out of the car and headed toward Suite E. Josh slung his backpack over his shoulder and crunched through the dirty snow behind Lane.

“Welcome!” a young woman with a thick Indian accent greeted them as they entered the front door. The room looked like the waiting room of a typical doctor’s office. Short, wide chairs lined the walls and led the entrant toward a window cut into the wall. The woman sat behind a desk that allowed her to look through the window and view the front door.

“You must be the Gray Family. We’ve been expecting you. Please come in.”

She opened the wooden door next to the window and welcomed them to come back. Her white teeth shined brightly against her dark, smooth skin. She set Josh at ease immediately.

Behind the door the atmosphere was completely different. Rather than the cold tile floors and flashing machines one would expect in a doctor’s office, it was decorated like a warm, comfortable living room. The lights were low and soft music played in the background.

“My name is Sylvia,” she spoke as she led them down a short hallway to a door. “I will be your hostess this evening.”

At the door she stopped and squatted down on her heels to bring her face level with Josh’s. “You must be Josh.”

He nodded.

Sylvia extended her hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you, young sir. Do you feel sleepy?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I guess, a little."

She smiled and stood up.

"This will be your bedroom for the night." The opened door revealed a small, comfortable, dimly lit room. A large bed sat against the middle of the far wall. It was piled with overstuffed pillows.

She walked to the head of the bed and pointed to the nightstand.

"Here we have a special treat for you, Josh. Do you get to drink milk and cookies before bed at home?"

Josh looked up at Owen, then back at Sylvia. He smiled and shook his head sideways.

"Well," Sylvia said, "here, in our rooms, everyone gets to have warm milk with honey and some very special cookies. Come and give it a try."

Josh looked at Owen again to see if it was OK. Owen nodded and motioned for him to go ahead.

Soon the contents of the glass and the plate were gone and Josh wore the face of a very content and very sleepy boy.

"Why don't you slip into your PJ's right now." Sylvia said. "The restroom is through this door. We'll be right out here."

She motioned for Owen and Lane to follow and she led them into the hallway.

"The milk and cookies contain a mild sedative. It has been proven to not interfere with the subject's normal sleep patterns, but it sets them at ease and allows them to sleep in these foreign surroundings. Josh should be asleep soon."

Josh poked his head out the door. "I'm all ready for bed."

"Wonderful," Sylvia said. She entered the room and patted the bed. "Hop up here Josh. I need to get you prepped for the night."

She opened a small panel in the wall just above the headboard and pulled a bundle of wires from it. Josh's eyes widened.

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“There’s nothing to worry about,” she said, “give me your hand.”

Josh extended his hand and she gently took it in hers. With the other hand she placed a circular pad on the back of his hand. Wires ran from the pad into the panel on the wall.

“Does that hurt?”

Josh shook his head.

“No,” she said, “not at all. I just need to attach a few of these to different places on your head, chest, and hands. These pads will allow us to keep track of what’s going on in your body while you are sleeping tonight. Is it OK if I put these on?”

Josh nodded.

“Good.”

Sylvia quickly, and gently, situated several pads to the sides of Josh’s head, on his chest and on his hands.

“There. All done. I’m going to ask your father and brother to come and tuck you in now. I’ll be outside all night if you need me. Good night Josh. Sleep well.”

Owen and Lane stood on either side of the bed and made Josh feel comfortable. Soon he was fast asleep.

Sylvia met them in the hallway and led them to another room. She opened the door and revealed a scene from a science fiction movie. The wall was lined with monitors and machines. Green, yellow, and red lights flashed everywhere. Dr. Stein sat in an office chair in front of the machines.

“Owen! Good to see you. I see you’ve met my lab assistant, Sylvia.”

Owen shook Dr. Stein’s hand. “Yes, she has been a wonderful host. She was great with Josh.”

“Oh yes, Sylvia is one of the best.”

Dr. Stein invited Owen and Lane to come into the room. The wall across from the bank of monitors was lined with a set of comfortable living room furniture.

“This,” Dr. Stein said, “is the observation room. We’ll all be in this room while Josh sleeps. Feel free to make yourself at home. It’s not very exciting, but at least it is comfortable.”

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A buzzer screamed through the room. Lane and Owen both jumped off the couch in unison.

“What’s happening?” Owen looked around the room in panicked jerks.

Across the room a very calm Sylvia sat on a rolling office chair. She was obviously amused at the sight of the two Gray men in their quasi-conscious state.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Gray. That alarm can be disturbing if you are not prepared for it.”

“What’s going on?” Lane said. “Is Josh all right?”

“Oh, yes. Josh is quite fine. He’s all done, actually. It is time for you to go wake him.”

Owen and Lane cleared the sleep from their eyes and then walked across the hallway to Josh’s room.

“Josh.” Owen spoke softly and placed his hand on Josh’s shoulder. “Hey, bud, it’s time to wake up.”

Josh slowly opened his eyes and smiled.

Sylvia entered the room and removed the pads and wires from Josh’s body.

“When you are ready,” she said, “please return to the observation room and we will discuss our findings.”

Josh used the restroom and then the three of them returned to the observation room. Dr. Stein stood and welcomed them with a smile.

“Josh, did you sleep well?” Dr. Stein said.

Josh smiled and looked well rested.

“Would you care for any coffee, gentlemen?” Sylvia held up a tray with a carafe and some mugs.

“That would be great,” Owen said. “Thanks.”

They all gathered on the living room furniture and enjoyed hot coffee and some muffins that Sylvia had set out on the coffee table. Josh slurped chocolate milk through a straw.

“Wow, doc,” Lane said, “what was in those cookies? I haven’t seen Josh look so rested since I got home.”

“Yes, indeed. He does look rested, doesn’t he?”

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The doctor wheeled a rolling chair over to the stuffed chair where Josh sat and looked at him intently.

“Josh, did you dream last night?”

Josh cocked his head and looked up with a puzzled stare. “I’m not sure.”

“So, you don’t remember anything?”

“No, not really.” Josh’s eyes opened wide and a smile spread across his face. He looked at Owen and then at Lane. “Hey, I didn’t dream!”

Owen gave Dr. Stein a confused and concerned look.

Dr. Stein sat back in his chair and turned to face everyone. “Josh is not entirely accurate. In fact, he did dream last night. You see,” he leaned forward and raised his hands, obviously excited about the information he was about to dispense, “when we sleep, our mind goes through several phases of brain patterns. It is like we descend a stair case through several layers of consciousness until we reach the deepest level. We call it REM, or Rapid Eye Movement. During REM sleep our brain cycles through all the data it has stored and reorganizes it. Sort of like when you defragment your hard drive. After the REM cycle is complete, your mind climbs back up the staircase to higher levels of consciousness until you are awake once again.”

He paused and took a loud sip from his coffee mug.

“The truth is that we dream every night. If you sleep well, and descend to REM and ascend from REM without interruption, then you will not remember your dream when you wake. It is only when you are disturbed during REM that you remember the dream. Sometimes, if the dream is traumatic enough, it will wake you. That is why nightmares seem so vivid to us. They wake us during the deepest level of REM and the mental experience of the dream seems as real as if you had experienced it with your five senses.”

He placed his hand on Josh’s shoulder.

“Josh dreamed last night. His REM patterns were off the charts. In fact, he cycled through REM twice. That is why he looks so rested this morning.”

“I don’t understand,” Owen said. “You didn’t dream about

your Mom last night?”

Josh shook his head.

“Little J,” Lane set his coffee mug on the table and leaned forward, “when was the last time you remember having a dream about Mom.”

Josh scanned the ceiling as if his memory were written on it. “It was when I called you.”

“Hmmm,” Lane rubbed his chin, “that was a week ago. You mean you haven’t had a dream since I got home?”

“Nope.”

An intense silence hung in the air as everyone searched for some explanation.

Dr. Stein offered some probing questions. “What has been different since that night?”

“Well,” Lane said, “the obvious one is that I’m home.”

Dr. Stein stuck out his lower lip and nodded. “Perhaps he just needed the comfort of your presence.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

Everyone sat back and the room was silent again.

“Well,” Owen raised his hands in the air, “Bob, I can’t thank you enough for taking the time to do this for us. Seems like that’s how things work, isn’t it? You feel sick, and then, on the day of your appointment to see the doctor, you feel fine. I feel bad that there was nothing to observe.”

“Don’t feel bad, Owen. I’m glad to do it. I think the best thing to do now is to simply wait and observe. Let me know the next time Josh has one of those dreams. Be aware of the circumstances and the surroundings. Keep a journal or some kind of record. I’d be happy to follow up with this. I’m sure there is still something going on.”

Owen stood and shook hands with Dr. Stein. Everyone exchanged farewells and Sylvia escorted them to the front door.

Josh buckled himself into the back seat of the car.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Don’t be sorry, Josh. Hey, let’s look at it this way. You

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haven't had a bad dream since Friday. That's great!"

"Yeah, little J, you look good," Lane added, "let's just focus on having a great Christmas break together, OK? Have you made your Christmas list?"

Josh nodded in excitement.

The deflection seemed to work. The drive home was filled with conversation about Christmas presents and all the good food they would eat over the holiday weekend.

The conversation came to a lull and Lane looked at Owen. Their eyes met and spoke volumes to each other. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER 5

“Wow, Joshie, you look great!” Heather stood in the doorway that Josh had opened for her. Lane and Owen stood in the entryway to form a Yuletide welcoming committee. The bright white sky framed Heather’s body like an aura and the cloud of her breath formed a frigid frame around her head.

“Come on in, Heather,” Owen pulled her into the house with a warm embrace. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Gray.”

Heather looked at Lane and smiled. Her cheeks flushed.

“Merry Christmas, Lane.” She kissed him on the cheek, then paused and connected with his eyes for one extra moment. A warm pulse flooded down Lane’s body.

“It’s so nice that you could join us on Christmas morning,” Owen said. He motioned for her to come into the living room. “What about your parents?”

“Oh, we do Christmas when it’s still dark. My Dad’s a freak about that. ‘It has to be dark and there has to be a fire, or it’s not Christmas morning,’ he says. I guess it’s been a tradition in his family forever. We’ll get together with the rest of the family later this evening. So, this works out perfect for me.”

Owen paused and looked at Lane with apologetic eyes. “We really haven’t slipped into a tradition just yet, I guess.”

Lane remembered all those Christmas mornings where it was just him and Josh. He was lucky if his father would roll out of bed by noon. He always said there had been too much Christmas cheer the night before. Now, to see his Dad, standing there, clear-eyed, on a Christmas morning – and welcoming a

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guest, it was almost too much to take in.

Lane surveyed the room. Christmas decorations adorned the space. Josh was on his knees counting the presents that sat neatly wrapped beneath the tree. Everyone beamed with joy.

“I think we’re off to a good start, Dad.”

Josh passed out the presents and paper flew everywhere. Everyone exchanged “oos” and “aaahs” over the treasures they had uncovered.

Lane sat in a pile of paper.

“Oh! I have one more.”

He ran upstairs and quickly returned with a small package in his hand.

“Dr. Clark gave this to me on the day I left. He said I couldn’t open it until Christmas.”

Lane stared at the small, flat package.

“Open it! Open it!” Josh said.

Lane peeled the wrapping back to reveal an old, leather-bound book, about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. In gold embossed letters, the title read,

On the Theoretical Possibility of Multiple Realities in Inter-twined Co-Existence within the Space-Time Continuum.

“Catchy title,” Heather said.

Lane ignored her remark and opened the cover. The first page revealed a message scratched out in Dr. Clark’s handwriting. Lane read in silence.

“Lane, is that a tear in your eye?” Heather sat down next to him on the couch. “What is it?”

“Dr. Clark wrote me a note.”

“Would you feel comfortable reading it to us?” Owen asked.

Lane hesitated and looked at each of them. “Sure, I guess. Here goes:

Lane,

I wrote this treatise as a young physicist. My peers mocked me for it and it nearly ruined my career. Now, all these years later, I meet you, and discover that I’m not crazy after all. Thank you for restoring my dream.

Dr. C.”

“OK,” Heather took a stern tone, “now you have to tell us all about Dr. Clark. What’s going on over there?”

Lane traced his fingers over the inscription as he ran the events of the last few months over in his mind. He looked at Heather, Owen, and Josh.

“I suppose this is as good a time as any to tell you.” He set the book next to him on the couch. “Why don’t we grab some breakfast, and then I’ll tell you.”

Josh jumped on the idea. Soon everyone had a bowl of food in front of them and they regrouped in the living room. Heather picked up all the wrapping paper and made the space more presentable.

Lane sipped his coffee, and then began.

“Life at MIT wasn’t quite what I had expected. I thought that it would be a place where I finally fit in. High school was such a difficult place for me.” Heather placed her hand on his knee and gave a slight squeeze.

“I figured that everybody at MIT would be the geeky misfit like I was. I was wrong.”

“What happened?” Heather asked.

“Well, you know how I like to carry the bag that Quinn gave me?”

They all squirmed a little. Heather cleared her throat. “Yes, I can’t remember a day when you didn’t have it dangling from your belt loop.”

“Right. I love that bag. And the knife. I would’ve taken that with me, too, but I thought it might get me in trouble. Those two items are the only things that keeps me from thinking I’m not totally insane. That I didn’t just dream up Deltonia, and Jethro, and Quinn.

“So, anyway, During the second or third week of school, a group of guys was following me in the hallway. I heard them talking and laughing, but I was trying to ignore them. The next thing I know, they jumped me from behind. One guy put me in a head lock while another one ripped the bag off of my belt loop. They yanked it so hard the loop ripped right off my pants.

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“Before I knew what was happening they had spilled the dried bitter berries all over the floor. They made some brainless comments about me being a freak and carrying croutons around in a bag.”

He paused. His body trembled. With tears in his eyes Lane looked at Owen.

“Dad, they were stepping on the Bitter Berries, and crushing them.”

Lane wiped his hands down his face.

“I lost it. All the training that Jethro put me through flooded back into my mind. I lurched at the guy who was doing the most damage. Before I knew what I was doing, I was on top of him. My hands were moving so fast. Blood splattered from his nose all over the wall and floor.

“Then a pair of hands grabbed me from behind. I thought it was one of the other jerks, so I spun around and got ready to unleash on him. It wasn’t. All those guys had left. Once I stood up, the guy I had been beating bolted down the hallway, holding his nose.

“Instead of turning around and seeing one of the other punks, I looked into the face of a little old man. He had the kindest, wisest eyes. It was Dr. Clark, my physics teacher.

‘What seems to be the trouble, young man?’

“That’s all he said to me. I looked around on the floor at all the crumbs of bitter berry. I was so overwhelmed, all I could do was fall to the ground and sob. I crawled on my hands and knees and gathered up as much of the crumbs as I could. There were only a couple morsels intact.

“Now I’ll never get back.’ I kept saying that over and over, like I was crazed. I didn’t care at that point. I thought I had lost everything right then. All hope of seeing Quinn, Jethro, Gustov, Tora, and Trik. Gone. I was a basket case.

“Then I looked over and couldn’t believe what I saw. This little man was on his hands and knees picking up the crumbs with me. Together we gathered the pile of dust and put it back in the bag.

“That’s a very unusual bag,’ he said to me. ‘Where did you

get it?’

“I didn’t know what to do. I hesitated and felt like running. He must have sensed what was really going on inside of me. He’s funny like that. He has such intuitive wisdom. He just gently grabbed my arm and locked onto my eyes. A sense of peace flooded over me.

“Why don’t we go to the Coffee Cove and you can tell me all about it. Would you like that?’

“All I could do was nod my head. He smiled, led me to the coffee shop, and bought me a drink.

“The next thing I know I’m spilling my guts to him. I told him everything: About under the bed, the Deltonians, the Festival, the Bellator, Quinn, the Bitter Berries, the bushes. I couldn’t believe it.

“The crazy thing is that he didn’t even blink an eye. The more I talked the more he smiled. But it wasn’t the smile of mockery or false pity. It was the smile of someone who was thoroughly engaged in the story and wanted more.

“I babbled on forever, and he just sat and took it in. His coffee stained, toothy smile egged me on the whole time.

“When I had finally spilled it all, he leaned forward and put both hands on my arms. ‘I believe you.’

“‘What!?’

“He told me that he had noticed me on the first day of class, and had noticed the bag hanging from my belt. There was something strange about me. Of course, everybody thought that, but he said it was not that kind of strange. There was a presence about me that caught his attention. So, he’d been observing me. When he came into the hallway and had seen me so passionately defending the contents of my bag, it truly piqued his interest.”

Lane stopped and took a drink of his coffee. It was starting to get cold. The others had finished their breakfast. “So, then what happened,” Owen said.

“Turns out, Dr. Clark has been theorizing about the existence of alternate realities throughout his entire life. The things I talked about totally resonated with his theories. By the end of that coffee shop conversation we had come up with a plan.

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“He lives in a brownstone just a few blocks from the campus. There are lots of unused rooms on the top floor, so he offered for me to stay with him and get away from the ‘ignorant masses that lurk the hallways of our sacred walls dripping with the money of their opulent and oppressive parents’, as he put it. He had recently received a research grant, and, after meeting me and hearing my story, knew just how he was going to spend the money. He proposed that we build a lab in his basement and, together, figure out the mystery of the bitter berry and the portal to the other world.

“So, that’s what I’ve been doing with every spare moment of my life since that day.”

“Fascinating,” Owen said. His face did not match the word. Rather than ask probing questions, or lean in, eager for more information, he simply stood and reached down to the coffee table. “I’ll clear your dishes.” He disappeared into the kitchen.

An awkward silence hung in the room for a moment.

“Lane,” Heather said, “that is amazing.”

“Yeah!” Josh pounced on the couch next to Lane, opposite Heather. “Tell us more.”

“There’s not much more to tell. We’ve only been gathering the necessary equipment. Honestly, I’m not sure what the next step will be. Dr. Clark seems to have a plan, but he hasn’t said much. I’m pretty much a lab assistant at this point. You know, ‘move that there’, ‘plug that in over there’. I feel like I should be hunched over saying, ‘yessss, mathster.’”

They all laughed.

The conversation turned a corner and soon everyone was marveling over Josh’s new toys. The rest of the day became the best Christmas Lane could remember in a very long time.

* * *

Black. Thick, suffocating darkness. A heaviness pressed in on his chest. He couldn’t breath. White, shimmering sparkles flowed up in his field of vision. It pulsed and spread wide like a wall of mist. An image formed on the undulating surface, like a projected film.

A woman’s body. Long flowing, white robe. Raven black

AMO

hair. Floating. She moved and swayed like she was suspended in water, or in the heat of a flame.

Suddenly the entire scene rushed toward his face. The woman's arms thrust toward him.

Shattered. The wall scattered into a millions specks of shimmering light. The darkness pressed in on him. A voice shrieked in the distance.

Air rushed into Lane's lungs as he sat up in bed. Sweat poured from his forehead and his heart beat hard and fast.

The darkness of his room seemed bright compared to what he had just experienced in his mind. Blue moonlight traced the faint edges of his books. Those familiar friends were still there to protect him in the night.

Wow, that was a weird dream.

He looked at the clock. 3:30am. Great. Why does this always happen on the night before I have to travel?

He threw his head back onto the pillow and tried desperately to fall back to sleep.

* * *

"Did you sleep well?" Owen asked.

"Yeah, great." Lane lied. No sense raising unnecessary concern over a simple nightmare. At least his dream was explainable. And, now that Josh hadn't dreamed for two solid weeks, it just didn't seem right to raise the whole dream issue on his last day at home.

"Good. As soon as you're ready, we can head out to the airport. Heather will be here soon."

The Echo pulled up to the curb marked "Passenger Drop-off" and everyone piled out. Lane grabbed his duffle from the trunk and set it on the sidewalk.

"Lane," Heather put her arms around his neck. He was surprised at how natural it felt. He didn't tense up, or pull back. She

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noticed, and smiled. “It was so good to see you. I’m not going to get all mushy, or pushy. I just want you to know,” she paused, then gently kissed his cheek, pulled back, and looked deeply into his eyes, “I’m not going anywhere.”

A warm tingle spread across Lane’s body. He pulled her close and squeezed. He wasn’t sure why she would wait. And he wasn’t sure why he made her wait. But, he did know that, in this moment, he was very glad he could hold her close.

Josh wrapped his arms around both of them. Then Owen engulfed them all in his large frame. The cluster clung together for several moments. Their breath formed one pillar of cloud rising up from the middle of the huddle.

“All right,” Owen said, “it’s time to go.” He placed one hand on Lane’s shoulder and looked him in the eyes. “You take care, son. Focus on your studies, I’ve got everything under control here.”

“I know, Dad. Everything’s going to be OK.”

The automatic doors parted. Home was behind him and the second half of his first year of school was only a plane ride away.