

Chapter 1

The phone connection 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 had stolen 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 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 started getting smaller. Without moving her legs she moved away from me. Further and further, and then... she was gone."

Lane was wide awake now. The air crackled through the phone.

"Lane, are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm hear, Josh. I'm just trying to figure out what to say."

The numbers on the clock glowed bright blue and traced the contours of his bedspread with a cold edge. The last chance of sleep was definitely gone.

"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 laid down on his back. The dark December morning showed no signs of light at this hour and the ceiling above him was a murky shadow.

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

The snooze buzzer squawked at him from the nightstand. "Time waits for no man, not even the brilliant" as Dr. Clark loved to say. Dr. Clark is a great man, but why does he have to schedule classes so early?

The dark 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. He wondered how people got them so tight. Had they invented a way to drive sideways?

When he had first arrived in Cambridge he rode his bike to campus. That was when the streets were still alive with the last fleeting beats of summer buzz. Now, his old reliable transportation sat under a tarp in the entryway

and longed for the first spring thaw. The soles of his feet and his ability to balance across patches of slick ice would have to serve as his transport until then.

He reached the end of the block and stood at the corner. In a couple hours this street would be clambering 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. Just a year ago he had taken the test to qualify for this program. Now here he was, one of the few students that had the privilege of spending 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. *Whoa, I've got to get going.*

He moved quickly through the campus. First stop was the coffee shop. One of the first lessons he learned at school was 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 that had 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 as he pushed into the room.

"Mr. Gray!"

The voice came from the front of the lecture hall. Lane looked just in time to see the gnarled hands raise the 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, 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 wide, thin-lipped smile spread across the professor's face and the icy gray eyes twinkled with

mischievous. 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. The 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 shoulders.

"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 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 all 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."

Then 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.

Dr. Clark is a strange little man, that's for sure. But I'm so glad he was my first prof. I'd don't know what would have happened if he hadn't taken me in.

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, hoping their morning coffee didn't get cold before they reached the office.

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

This had been his home for most of the semester. He stopped in front of it for a moment. Its dark brick façade stood like a fortress. His sanctuary. Dr. Clark's home. Dorm life had not gone well for him. Had Dr. 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 left soon, so he had to hurry. He touched the covered bike on the front porch. "Soon, old friend. Soon"

He ran up the narrow wooden stairs. His bedroom 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 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, just a crack of darkness was exposed. It called to him. He looked at the clock, then back at the door. Super quick. Just a look. He could make it.

The door creaked as he opened it. 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 these stairs. But that never stopped him.

At the bottom of the stairs the blue light pulsed against the rough stone wall. The air was dank and musty and filled with the sounds of electronic buzzing and beeps. It was a sensory combination he had come to love.

He rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs and stopped. 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. I have to get going.

He flew up the rickety stair case 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. He found the gate with no troubles. A crackly voice came over the loudspeaker. They were beginning boarding. He pulled his boarding pass out of the inner pocket of his jacket. He had printed it the night before, so he was ready. The long line of people slowly moved passed the flight attendant as she scanned each passenger's pass.

Lane handed her the pass and she scanned it. Did she notice his hand shaking? She looked at him and smiled. "Enjoy your flight"

He tried to respond, but no words came through his tightened throat. He simply gave a weak smile and nodded. Now the line moved through a door into a long tunnel. The air grew colder the further they walked. Was the temperature actually dropping or was the cold due to the fact that the blood was draining from his face?

By the time he reached the end of the tunnel he was freezing. Another flight attendant stood in the long oval doorway of the plane and greeted each person as they entered. Lane approached her. She looked at him and the expression on her face told him everything.

She tried to recover quickly with a smile, but her eyes were still full of concern.

"Sir, is this your first time flying?"

He tried to speak, but still nothing came out. He nodded and gave a sheepish and embarrassed smile.

The attendant relaxed a little. Perhaps she was relieved that she didn't have a medical risk entering the plane. Just a wimp who was afraid of flying.

"Don't worry," she said. She 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.