

*CHAPTER 1*  
*WHERE THERE'S A WHILL -*

*TWELVE MONTHS EARLIER*

**T**HERE'S NO WAY I'm going to get in." I crumpled the pamphlet in my hand and tossed it toward the trash can. It bounced off Gerald Thurson's half-eaten bologna sandwich to land on the floor in a colorful puddle of orange juice. The paper soaked up the liquid, darkening, the vibrant pictures dulled as if it were being burned.

Someone pounded into my back, knocking me against the garbage can so that both of us fell over in a tangle of gangly limbs.

"Hey!" My forearm automatically shot backward, almost connecting with the soft cheek of Aarush Patel. "What the heck, Aarush?" We landed on the lunchroom floor. I raised my hand with a sticky wad of gum now attached to it.

Aarush was on his back, propped up by his bony elbows,

his glasses lying crooked on his large nose. “Elwood pushed me.” Aarush rolled his eyes at the retreating back of the middle-school quarterback. “Ugh. This place. I wish I could get into—”

“Don’t even say it.” I stood, then reached down to haul him up. I brushed off the remnants of the bologna sandwich from Aarush’s khaki pants. “You’re going to have to be careful when you go past Ivan’s house on your way home. You look like Processed Meat Man.”

“Ivan’s house?”

I gave him an arch look, one eyebrow almost reaching my hairline. It was a hidden talent, and I had spent hours perfecting it. It worked great when I needed to make a point. In this case it was about Ivan’s pit bull, Marcie.

Aarush blew a gust of air from his mouth and with a nod confirmed, “Marcie.”

He rubbed vainly at the glob of mayo on his knee. “Maybe the mayonnaise will disguise the meat odor.” Aarush spoke mostly in a monotone. I don’t think anyone had ever heard him raise his voice an octave much above a whisper. Right now, he was obsessing about the mayo stain. I knew it would bother him for the rest of the day to the point that he would miss the conversations going on around him.

Not that anybody is too eager to talk to him anyway. Aarush did just fine for most of elementary school until some aide let it slip that he was on the spectrum, then slowly kids drifted away. Playdates and parties became rare for him.

I guess parents thought it might be catching, like he’d cough and you could get infected with autism.

I’d known Aarush almost my whole life. He wasn’t diag-

nosed until he was eight. The day after the doctors informed his parents, he still looked and acted the same to me.

“Leave it.” I shook my head. He was smearing the stain down his leg, his hands scrubbing and making it worse. He did that when he was upset. It was as if he didn’t have a shut-off valve.

Sound receded and I knew he was attracting attention. Next would come the taunts. Onlookers made everything worse.

“We’ll take the long way home, Aarush,” I told him from the side of my mouth so no one would hear me. “Stop. It’s okay.”

With a sigh, Aarush picked off a piece of half-eaten meat glued to his plaid shirt.

“That’s better than Potato Chip Man,” I offered, trying my best to sidetrack him. Aarush was a hard person to distract.

Aarush’s top lips tilted in what passed as an Aarush smile. I brushed off a cluster of chips onto the floor that were embedded in my shirt at the shoulder.

Aarush was the most serious kid I’d ever met, yet when he smiled, I have to tell you, his face transformed. It might have been slight, but it was there. His dark eyes lit up with merriment, as if he knew a joke and was sharing it with you. I couldn’t understand why no one else could see it.

They called him Robot Boy or a lot of other less complimentary names. Aarush always took it in stride as if it didn’t bother him. I always wondered though if deep down inside it did. I know it bothered me. Over the years, more than one of my old friends melted away, as if I had to choose between him and them. For me, there was no contest. Anyone who’d

make you pick one friend over another is not worth investing your time.

Not for nothing, he had been my best friend since pre-K, and he played a killer game of *Super Dude*, our favorite video game. Super Dude was the epitome of all superheroes, impervious to nuclear events, and managed to save the mythical folks of Silicon City without breaking a sweat. I don't like to admit it, but he had a few chinks in his armor, Master Disaster being his major Achilles heel. But what's a superhero without a nemesis? Pretty boring, I'd say.

I heard laughter, looked up to find the school jock, Elwood Bledsoe, and his group of followers, as they pushed past us kicking the garbage that had fallen from the trash can into the center of the room, turning the small pile of refuse into a more noticeable mess. If Master Disaster was Super Dude's enemy, Elwood Bledsoe was mine. You could say we had a history. My hands curled into fists, but I kept them hidden at my sides.

Elwood set his court up at the corner table. He was surrounded by the popular kids. He sat on the tabletop, breaking almost every lunchroom rule. The lunchroom aide, Mr. Mason, lounged behind him, his back to the wall, clearly ignoring Elwood's violation.

Mr. Mason was hired to watch us in the lunchroom and during recess. I was taller than him already and probably outweighed him by a few pounds. He wasn't a teacher, but some sort of all-around aide the school brought in to help with security, and other odd jobs needed throughout the day. Right now, he was manning the lunchroom making sure we didn't revolt from the crappy snack food they'd recently brought in. He had a poor excuse for a mustache that clung to his thin

upper lip. His long hair was combed over his small head and tucked behind two of the biggest ears I'd ever seen outside of a circus tent. Those ears, I had learned, had very selective hearing. Mr. Mason rocked on his black sneakers, his beady eyes watching me.

"I'd like to—" I started. I was sick of Mr. Mason, Elwood Bledsoe, and school in general.

"Like to what?" Aarush interrupted me. "You can't win." He held up his hands, ticking off each point with his fingers. He could be analytical at the most inconvenient times. At least he had stopped fixating about the grease stain on his pants leg.

Only right now, I wanted nothing more than to retaliate against the bully. Adrenaline coursed through my body, but Aarush's voice persisted. "One, he's the school star, beloved by everyone. Two, he's massive. He could crush Super Dude with those ham-sized hands."

"He couldn't crush Super Dude," I said, horrified at the mere thought, interrupting him. I didn't care if I was rude. Aarush Patel was the nicest guy in the whole school, but that was sacrilege. "No way. Super Dude wouldn't even waste time on a creep like Elwood Bledsoe."

"Would too," Aarush shot back quickly, watching for my reaction. He was distracting me, just as I had done before to him, and we both knew it.

I shook my head. "I'm not doing this with you, Aarush."

"Won't matter. You will lose this argument." Aarush stopped speaking. He spied a wadded-up ball of paper on the floor. "What's this?" He reached down to grab it.

"Leave it." I kicked it under the table.

Aarush snatched it up. "That's the application. You were

supposed to bring it home. Your uncle has to fill it out. I can't go there without you."

"Go without me? Aarush, wake up, bro. We are never getting into the Temple. No way, no how." Temple was Templeton Academy for those of us on a first-name basis with the best and newest school in the universe. Getting in was the dream of almost everyone I knew.

"Of course we are going to Templeton Acedemy." Aarush's voice was reasonable, as if being one of five hundred hand-picked special students to attend the most exclusive high school in the world were possible.

"Besides"—I waved my hand—"my uncle can't afford—"  
"Tuition is free," Aarush stated.

"And there's the extra supplies I would have to buy. I'll be going to Middlebury High with the rest of this riffraff." I gestured at the packed lunchroom. We still had a good part of the school year to go before graduation.

"There will be grants." Aarush was nothing if not insistent. He placed his books on the table and gave me his full attention. "I could ask my father." He smoothed out the application in the middle of the brochure.

"No. I'm not taking charity." Both of Aarush's parents were doctors. Money was never an issue. I was an orphan, living with my father's brother, who was barely old enough to take care of himself, never mind me.

I never revealed my past to just anyone. I hated pity. My parents died when I was an infant, leaving me to the care of my grandparents. Don't get all moony-eyed; it wasn't bad. You can't miss people you don't remember, and Grandpa and Mema were great grandparents—I mean, not great-grandparents; they were my grandparents. You get it, right? They were

nice people. Sadly, illness took one, and the after-effects of a stroke took the other.

Uncle Leo, the son they had late in their lives, was now my guardian. While he hadn't seen thirty yet, he hadn't quite gotten the maturity memo. Sometimes he was overwhelmed with the idea of *me*. He was a shock jock at the local radio station and worked long hours. I think I got paid more than he did with the hour and a half I spent at the supermarket bagging groceries.

"Between friends is never charity." Aarush was organizing trash in size order that students had left on the table.

"Not going to happen." I shook my head, then looked at him. "It's enough, Aarush. The garbage is neat now. Throw it out."

I took an empty milk carton and tossed it toward the trash can. It bounced on the rim and, to the dismay of my audience, landed on the floor. There were a few jeers and some choice words, all relatively harmless.

A whistle blew. "Whill!" Mr. Mason, it seemed, had noticed my failed attempt at basketball. "That's littering. Pick it up." He stomped over, pointing to the crushed milk container, the whistle dangling from a chain around his neck. "In fact, make sure you two are back here at three. You can sweep the entire room."

"We didn't make the mess," I protested.

He came close to my face, his mustache quivering. "You threw the carton." He pointed to the milk container next to the trash that had fallen earlier. "So you made the mess."

"Oh, come on. It's just one container. We don't have to sweep the whole room," I complained as I reached down to

toss it in the garbage can. “Besides, I have to go to work. I’ll lose my job.”

“Be here at three,” he said through clenched teeth.

I could hear Elwood hooting a chant, his friends echoing him. “Clean it up! Clean it up! Clean it up!” The first bell rang, cutting off their cheer.

Mr. Mason smiled good-naturedly at them, sharing their fun at our expense and waved them out of the lunchroom.

I snatched the brochure off the table while Aarush cleared the rest of the junk. The paper was wet and cold, but it burned in my hand. I threw it toward the garbage without looking backwards. I didn’t see Aarush catch it in midair or see him stuff it in his book bag, nor would I expect him to intercept it. Aarush Patel couldn’t catch a cold, much less a paper missile.

The second bell rang, letting us know we had to head toward science or suffer another disciplinary action.



## CHAPTER 2

### ***MY FIRST DANGEROUS ENCOUNTER***

**I** DON'T WANT TO bore you with class. It's bad enough one of us has to go; no reason we all have to suffer. Suffice it to say the only person having a good time was Aarush.

He was in his element with the elements. This was the Aarush most people saw, someone focused on his subject. While he was a great listener in class, he failed miserably with conversations. It appeared that he didn't relate to the stuff that's important to everybody else. I never found him that way, though. Most people said he couldn't do small talk. I say it's because they never bothered to listen to him. We had lots of great conversations, so maybe the problem was with them rather than Aarush.

Aarush was really interesting. He had laser vision that saw right through the crap. Maybe it was his monotone voice or lack of reaction. He reminded me of Spock—you know,

from *Star Trek*—which made me feel like Captain Kirk. Most people don't know what I'm talking about either. That's what happens when the uncle who is raising you is stuck in the eighties watching reruns of the sixties on the Sci-Fi Channel.

In our house it was either *Star Trek* or anything with a zombie. Zombies make me want to puke. Give me a superhero any day. Uncle Leo is, however, king of the remote, and what worked while my grandparents were alive doesn't work now. My uncle reigns supreme over our household like the king from *Game of Thrones*.

History class followed science, where we learned a whole lot of useless information about stuff that happened in the past. I mean, does it really matter what happened five hundred years ago? What's that got to do with today, I'd like to know? At least Mrs. Farber was nice to look at.

Three classes later, Aarush met me at the entrance to the lunchroom. Mr. Mason was waiting, two brooms in hand.

"Lucky for you the custodian cleaned up most of it," he sneered. "I left the remnants from the last study hall." He was referring to the students who met there during free periods for extra studying.

His smirk made me push the broom hard on the floor, smearing crushed snack bars and fruit roll-ups. Aarush worked meticulously on his side of the room. He hung the chairs upside down on the tables and swept methodically, leaving the linoleum spotless.

"Whill." Mason's gravelly voice grated on my nerves. "Look at the job your friend *Rain Man* is doing." He was, of course referring to an autistic character from a movie I'd watched with my uncle.

I didn't even think. "That's it!" I threw down the broom handle, which cracked when it impacted the floor.

Aarush ran over and placed himself between me and the aide, who was now squaring off on the other side. "I don't care." Aarush blocked me.

"You're barely on the spectrum." I said, my voice raw. Aarush simply gave me one of his looks, stopping me in my tracks. *Don't pay attention*, I could almost hear him say it. The air rushed out of me like a deflating balloon. I sighed and grumbled, "At least you won't end up babysitting kids in the cafeteria during lunchtime when you graduate from an Ivy League school." I said it to Aarush knowing Mason was within earshot.

"Stop." Aarush shook his head, looking over his shoulder at the aide. "His opinion of me doesn't mean anything."

Mr. Mason placed his walkie-talkie down and picked up the broken broom as though he was going to use it as a weapon. "You're going to answer for this, Whilly." He held it up close to my face. I eyed him back trying not to flinch.

"There are rules about calling people names," I said. I glanced at the discarded walkie-talkie and added, "You can't do anything to us."

He seemed to wrestle with something, and the moment broke. I guess he must have second thoughts about corporal punishment. I mean, we're in eighth grade in a suburban bubble, not some reform school from one of those old boring English novels.

He grabbed the two way radio and stalked to the door. "Think so?" he sneered, snapping off the lights, leaving us in the darkened room.

I stood in the shadows, my heart fluttering, my cheeks

flush with anger. Now, not only do I have to deal with Bledsoe, but some creepy school security guy too. Where's a superhero when you need one?

"I'm going to report you!" I shouted out, but it sounded hollow. "Should we say something?" I asked Aarush.

"Nothing happened. All he's going to do is respond that you were obnoxious to him, and he left us alone in here."

"I wasn't!" I burst out then added, "He threatened us."

Aarush shrugged. "Not really. He picked up the broom. He wasn't going to do anything with it."

I looked at him sharply. "How do you know that?"

Aarush nodded once. "He's a bully and a coward. He stretches his authority only to the point that he won't get caught. Observe him, next time. You'll see what I mean."

I replayed everything in my mind, but couldn't wrap my head around what Aarush said.

"Let's go," I told Aarush.

"The long way home," he reminded me, grabbing his bag.

"Any way we go is the long way home," I muttered, disgusted with the school, the other kids, and my life.

We walked home in the late March afternoon. It was chilly enough for jackets, but real men that we were, we didn't wear them. They were squashed in our backpacks.

Aarush sniffed the air. "It will rain soon."

I looked at the clear azure sky, then back to my serious friend. I nodded, trusting him. I've learned not to doubt him. If Aarush says there'll be rain, then you can bet money there'll be rain.

I was in a funk. Selection to Templeton would start soon, and I wasn't anywhere on their radar. I knew I had better give up the dream and accept I'd be spending the next few years

here. If only I could get into Templeton Academy. The mysterious Dr. Clifford Templeton and his daughter, Valencia, had founded a new center of learning that supposedly was going to separate the wheat from the chaff. In other words, only select people went there. I bet there were no bullies in the handpicked, elite student body.

My backpack was slung over my shoulder. Aarush kept up a running commentary about some stuff we were learning about DNA. I nodded as I listened, stopping him once or twice to explain something. I was having some trouble distinguishing between the two types of nucleic acids.

An insistent horn broke through my thoughts. I looked up to see a black Explorer pulling alongside.

“Tell the geek to shut up.” Elwood Bledsoe had his arm out the passenger window, and to anyone observing this tableau, it would have seemed we were having a friendly chat.

“Hey, you’re parked illegally,” Aarush called out. “You have to move the car.” He squinted to see who was driving, but the windows were darkened.

Elwood snickered, then said in a stage whisper, “Call the cops, *Rooshy*. I bet you memorized their number.”

Aarush seemed impervious to the remarks. That Aarush—he had a bulletproof personality. Insults dropped off him like ammunition off a superhero.

“Piss off, Smellwood.” I kept my head down.

“Don’t call me that,” he ground out. “I am Bledsoe.” He pointed a finger to his chest.

I opened my mouth to comment about being famous enough to be known by one name seemed a bit ego-driven, but he interrupted me before I could speak.

“You’d better watch how you speak to me. I’m moving out of this dump and won’t have to put up with morons like you.”

“Shut up,” I said.

We used to be friends, Elwood and I. I can’t put my finger on what happened, but by fifth grade I’d stopped hanging out with him. We’d grown apart. His idea of fun and mine didn’t go together. I couldn’t find joy in tripping somebody or giving monumental wedgies, leaving a guy in music class singing like a soprano. I guess as he got meaner, I stopped wanting to hang out with him. He had an ill-concealed hatred of Aarush that made me uncomfortable.

“Thanks for the mess in the lunchroom. I probably lost my job because of you.”

“You’re such a loser, Grady.” He rattled a shiny paper out the window. “Hey, Aarush,” he shouted. “I made it. I made early admission to the Temple.”

The world receded for a moment. *Elwood Bledsoe made Templeton?* I could feel my heart drop to my knees. My stomach flip-flopped leaving me breathless enough to reach for my asthma inhaler. I willed the feeling away. There was simply no justice in this world.

Aarush stopped dead in his tracks. “What?” He adjusted his glasses and walked quickly over to the car door. “You did not. The names haven’t been released yet.” He peered at the sheet of wrinkled silver paper. “I don’t believe it. You have incredible luck.” He reached out to touch the missive. Elwood snatched it back.

“It’s probably a fake,” I said hoping my voice sounded steady. There had been a rash of forged acceptance letters circulating. I saw a site online where you could buy one for six

hundred dollars. For another two-fifty, they had a fake reporter deliver it to you in front of people to make it look real.

Elwood waved the gray envelope from the window. "See? It's addressed to me: Mr. Elwood Bledsoe. It's the real deal."

Aarush backed away, lost in thought.

"Watch this," Elwood told the driver in the next seat.

I heard a soft voice respond. I couldn't make out what was said. I knew the voice, though. It was Lindsay Carruthers, the prettiest girl in the high school. She was the head cheerleader. Aarush was crazy about her. I mean, who could blame him?

Elwood rattled the paper before Aarush's stunned face. Aarush's body tightened until he stood straighter than a soldier. He seemed oblivious to anybody watching him. He was going all distant and hyper-focused on us. *Oh no*, I thought, *Aarush is going to hate himself later*. Even if he didn't, I was mortified enough for us both. I leaned forward to grab his arm.

Elwood kept taunting him. "It's not luck, jerk. It's strength. Raw, unadulterated strength that got me in. Oh yeah, and my superior intellect." Elwood drew out the words proudly.

"Superior-" I started, but snapped my mouth shut when I saw Aarush's expression.

Aarush walked backwards five precise steps, pivoted on his heel, and turned in a tight square, his face devoid of emotion, mumbling to himself. I placed my body between Aarush and the SUV to no avail. Everybody in the world could see Aarush going all weird on us.

"Well, congrats. Gotta go," I said walking backwards hoping to steer Aarush from their line of sight.

I shook with rage.

This was cruel. You'd have to have been blind to miss

Aarush's face whenever he saw Lindsay. He was near to drooling. Right now, he was skipping over mindless drooling by going into a catatonic meltdown.

I watched Elwood preen. He understood how to press Aarush's buttons. He knew Aarush was desperate to be accepted into the new school. *Heck*, we all were.

Templeton Academy was a groundbreaking concept. The school was built in a secret location, cut off from all outside influence. Dr. Clifford Templeton was assembling the greatest minds in the world for a school so special, they claimed they would transform the student body into a class of people with highly advanced abilities. It was the stuff of dreams! Just what those capabilities were, was not explained. It could be anything, but our imaginations went into high gear.

Templeton boasted his team of educators could harness undeveloped potential and train anybody to use their hidden potential to overcome nature. The sky was the limit according to chatter on the internet. All sorts of exciting things were being hinted. The entire concept was mind-blowing. Then, there was the mysterious Codex, a newly discovered ancient artifact that was filled with secrets that made the whole thing possible. There was just enough mystery to keep us all titillated for more information. Anytime there was a press release, we talked about it for days.

"He just started recruiting." Aarush appeared puzzled, as if he were coming out of a deep sleep. He stopped his circling. "Templeton is only taking people—"

"I know who Templeton is signing up, and make no mistake, I was recruited. Face it, Aarush, no matter how connected your parents are, you are not going to make it."

I watched Aarush digest the information. People who



didn't know him wouldn't have noticed the slight slump in his shoulders or his worried expression. Admittedly, it was barely there, but I saw it. His bony shoulder blades stuck out like wings, making small dents in his plaid shirt.

"Your father went to school with Templeton." I placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You have a better chance than most."

"So do you." He looked up hopefully.

Elwood's triumphant laugh made me turn in disgust. That laugh. It bounced off the houses like an echo chamber. *How does he manage to do that?* I wondered.

"Come on," I said.

I hated when Elwood laughed, as if he were superior in some way. So what if he was the fastest quarterback in the nation or had a face like he belonged on a *CW* network vampire television show? Tall, skinny people with asthma may have some hidden potential too.

I grabbed Aarush's arm before he could begin his aimless circling and walked purposefully away from the truck.

"Wait!" Elwood called loudly, his taunting voice grating on my nerves. "Don't you want to read my acceptance letter, Aarush? *Ah-ah-rooosh!*" He drew the name out so that we heard him after we turned the corner sooner than we'd planned.

"Crap." I stopped to stare at the street sign.

Aarush's head snapped up. He had followed me blindly, not aware of our direction.

"Look. We're on Chestnut Avenue." I pointed to the green street sign as I eyeballed the deserted street. In my haste to get away from Elwood, we'd ended up in the exact place I wanted to avoid for fear of being mauled.

“Marcie,” Aarush said gravely, pushing up the glasses that had slid down his long nose.

“Marcie,” I confirmed.

“More like Cerberus.”

“What?” I scratched my head. Aarush was always coming out with statements like that.

“The three-headed dog that guards the gates of Hades. Don’t you remember?”

As if on cue, we heard the deep-throated barking of a large dog. It came from down the street, the sound ricocheting off the buildings so it was amplified as if a pack of animals were coming for us.

“Run!” I cried, grabbing Aarush’s backpack and dragging him as fast as my feet could go.

We raced up the nearest lawn, churning up clods of grass and dirt. Aarush was a sloppy runner, his movements spastic. He looked like a loping dog himself. He moved as if in slow motion. I yanked his schoolbag, half dragging, half carrying him across the once-manicured lawn.

The hound from hell was hot on our tracks. I twisted and saw it dripping chains of saliva from its huge maw.

Marcie was one ugly dog. Her coat was splattered with reddish hair, looking as if she were fresh from her last kill. She was all coiled muscle, with thick legs that ended in paws like mallets. We gawked at her, my knees shaking. She slid to a stop, panting, her eyes widening with...*could that be joy?*

“Move!” I screamed, but it came out in a hoarse whisper. I had no air in my starved lungs. My heart raced like a jackhammer.

Never the most athletic, Aarush fumbled. I caught him up and hauled him to Old Man Ivan’s backyard through a

small hole in the fence. We heard the sound of fabric ripping as I pushed Aarush through the opening. His bulky backpack snagged on the rolled-up chain link.

“Leave it,” I urged him.

“No.” He tugged. “All my notes are in here.”

“I’ll give you mine,” I said frantically.

Aarush stopped long enough to look me in the eye, his face full of pity, his glasses crooked. “You can’t be serious.”

“Aarush, this is not the time!”

I was wheezing already. I grabbed my inhaler and took in two quick puffs, freeing the tightness in my lungs. I was always surprised by the air rushing into the constricted space and the relief that followed.

“Hey, you kids!” The old guy came out, spitting remnants of whatever he had been eating as he yelled at us. He waved his hand at us and I could make out a half-eaten sandwich. “You’re ruining my daffodils.”

The massive liver-colored pit bull shook her head violently as if coming out of a stupor. She wore a black leather collar studded with sharpened spikes that gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight. She reared back, then surged forward, tearing up the turf with her great paws. Her eyes rolled in her massive head. Her bark, I thought, was as throaty as my great-aunt Marilyn, who drank gin and smoked tons of cigarettes.

“I wonder if her bark is worse than her bite,” Aarush said, watching her intently, analyzing the dog.

“My daffodils!” Old man Ivan flailed his arms, chunks of turkey flying from the sandwich.

Marcie skidded to a dead stop, her nostrils twitching. She turned in a curious circle, the tiny nub of her tail darting from the right side to the left. She sniffed the ground, then trotted

to Ivan and vacuumed up the turkey, her powerful jaws not stopping to chew.

“Interesting,” Aarush commented. “We should pack meat if we want to go this way again.”

“Move out of the way,” I told Aarush.

I got on my back and gave his bag a solid kick, dislodging it. Aarush bent over and pulled me through the fence. We ran, laughing at our narrow escape, until we reached the modern monstrosity that Aarush called home.

*CHAPTER 3*  
*CHUTES CAN BE LADDERS*

**A**ARUSH LIVED IN a smart home, as opposed to my stupid home. It performed all kinds of tricks. His parents have tons of money and could have lived on the other side of Middlebury but chose to bring up Aarush near people rather than down a two-mile driveway. They wanted him to play on the sidewalk with neighbors, walk to school, and ride his bike to the park.

But life had changed in our little neighborhood. Nobody played outside anymore, not with all the video games available. People had playdates; everything had to be arranged. If your parents didn't socialize or you were just a bit off, then nothing was ever planned. You fell into the crack where you were basically ignored or became fodder for the bullies. Aarush didn't care. He was impervious to their taunts. I wondered how much he really was on the spectrum or if he played

up certain aspects to avoid having to deal with those kinds of kids.

As I said before, I had met Aarush in pre-K. His parents didn't mind that I was an orphan, and Mema, my grandma, had never met a kid she didn't like. I enjoyed his peaceful nature, and his mom was...well, she was a pediatrician and happy to have somebody, anybody, play with her son.

She is beautiful. Dr. Patel—his mother, not his father—is the prettiest woman in the world. Not that Dr. Patel, his father, is not a nice guy, but who notices anything when Dr. Patel, Aarush's mother, comes into the room? I realized early on that their names may present a problem if I was to be friendly with Aarush, so I devised a brilliant plan to identify the good doctors.

I started calling his mom Mrs. Dr. Patel, and his father Mr. Dr. Patel after that. They thought it was cute and it kind of stuck, however, I don't like to do it in public.

Anyway, Mrs. Dr. Patel works about five minutes from home. His dad is a bigshot at Dream Weaver Industries in the next town. He's the head of research or something like that and travels a lot. They do stuff with computers. Mr. Dr. Patel tried to explain it to me once, but I never got much beyond thermodynamics.

Gita runs the house. Gita is his mom's third cousin and takes care of Aarush like a doting grandma. She reminds me a bit of my grandmother. It's not unusual to feel that lump of longing in my throat when I'm around her.

Gita can usually be found in the kitchen. The house had the warm smell of curry. Today, the stove was on with lots of pots steaming.

"Aarush!" Gita cried out when we fell through the door.

“What did you do to your pants again?” She spoke with that lilting accent that somehow reminded me of music.

“Nothing, Gita.” He brushed off her fussing when she examined his torn trouser leg.

“Was it that *Bledsloo* boy?”

We both laughed at the way she said Elwood Bledsoe’s name.

“No. Marcie,” Aarush informed her.

“A girl did this to you?” She reared back, looking incredulous.

Aarush cracked a rare smile. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Dreadful... this is dreadful. I hope you didn’t hit her back, though. I will have to call her mother, I see.” Gita clucked her tongue a bit.

Aarush grabbed a *nankhatai* cookie, which is a sort of butter cookie, from a plate on the table. He tossed one to me. “I don’t think you will be able to call her mother. She’s a mean, old dog.” Aarush’s voice was as deadpan as ever.

This time I cracked up at Gita’s reaction, spitting bits of cookie everywhere. Gita rushed back into the room, her face flushed. Her mouth was moving rapidly as she cried out her response in Hindi. Believe me, I have spent a lot of time in Aarush’s house and know a few words. I couldn’t recognize anything she said. Finally in English, she said, “That’s no way to talk about another person, Aarush!”

“Marcie’s a dog, Gita. A real dog,” Aarush explained patiently. “Which means her mother is a dog, too.”

However, the older woman was having nothing of it. She went on and on, slamming drawers, placing things on the table with a lot more force than necessary. “Well, I never!” she

huffed. “Go change those pants, and I will see what I can do with them.”

Apparently she was still annoyed. She swiped the cookies from the table and left them on the counter before we could take another. We beat a hasty retreat to Aarush’s room on the second floor.

Aarush’s room was one of many cubes that comprised the Patel house. The entire dwelling was divided into different-sized glass, wood, and aluminum boxes, as if a giant had been playing with blocks and set them down on the lot. The ground floor had a bunch of rectangles comprising the living room, dining room, kitchen, Mr. Dr. Patel’s study, a room where Gita grew herbs, and presumably her private room as well. From the outside, the house looked like corrugated metal with big glass picture windows.

Aarush’s room hung suspended over the living room in a marvel of modern architecture. He had a million-dollar view of the Long Island Sound. Dr. and Dr. Patel had a room another level up with another study, this one for Aarush’s mom. Mr. Dr. Patel had designed the house. I’d seen it do all sorts of crazy things when buttons were pressed. Shades retracted from skylights I never noticed, walls of drapes vanished in a blink, opening to picture windows strategically placed for the best view. They even had an observatory upstairs to look at the stars through a giant telescope.

While I understood Aarush wanted to attend Templeton, I couldn’t figure how he was going to give up what he had here. Aarush’s room was the size of my entire home. One wall was taken up by a game system built into a wall unit. His bed appeared only when he pressed a button.

As I said, the house did all kinds of neat things. Walls



changed into furniture or could move sideways and transform into a doorway. It was like a giant puzzle. Every time I was there, I discovered something new. Aarush seemed mildly bored with it all.

Aarush ran into an alcove and changed his pants. They disappeared down a chute that snapped open when he pressed a panel on the wall.

“That’s new,” I said with interest.

“Laundry chute. Gita is having trouble climbing the steps. Trash chute is over there.” Aarush waved airily at another door in the wall near his *PlayStation*.

“Where’s it go?” I asked, peering down into the darkness.

Aarush shrugged. “Laundry room, I suppose. Gita will be on the receiving end.” He pressed a button. Her angry chatter filled the speaker. “Contact.” Aarush smiled, that slow, lopsided grin that few people saw. It made me smile too.

We heard something slam through the speaker, and we both laughed this time. “Can she hear you?”

“Not unless I want her to.” He raised his eyebrow in a way similar to how I did it, only both his brows shot up to his dark hairline, making him look surprised. I didn’t have the heart to tell him he was doing it wrong.

I looked out the vast window in his room at the low clouds hanging over the gunmetal water of the sound.

Aarush came to stand next to me. “There’ll be rain soon.”

“Yeah.” I considered the wind whipping the waves on the ocean, making the bay look choppy. Aarush’s prediction was coming true. I didn’t relish walking home in that. “I have to leave.”

“Aw,” Aarush complained. “I wanted to play *Super Dude: Infinite Enemies*.” He pressed a button on his remote and a

large screen lit up with the newest version of our game. “I’ll be Master Disaster.” He was upping the ante, making it hard to leave. He took out two smaller controls with brightly colored buttons on them. “Besides, it looks like it’s going to rain. You could stay here. We’ll fill out your application together.” He reached into his bag, which was on the floor next to him, and pulled out the sodden mess that was once all my hopes and dreams. “Gita will make dinner.”

“Forget it, Aarush.” I picked up my backpack. His house suddenly seemed as cold and dreary as outdoors. Hollow anguish settled into the pit of my stomach. I was going to be alone.

Aarush, like my nemesis Elwood Bledsoe, would be leaving soon, moving to the secret Temple campus to discover hidden talents and develop them into formidable powers while I bagged tuna fish for the next three years and hoped I could get a scholarship for college. My breath hitched while I shredded the skin on my lower lip. It couldn’t be helped. Elwood had strength; Aarush had connections as well as a brilliant mind; I had nothing.

I felt jealousy creep in, lodging heavily in my chest. I fought the feeling, resenting the fact that it was even there. I didn’t want to be envious of my best friend.

Forcing a smile, I refused to acknowledge the leaden feeling of despair stealing into the room and leaving an oppressive heaviness, obliterating all light.

Suddenly, I missed the cluttered mess of the cozy home I shared with my uncle. I looked around at the carpeted floors, the ice-colored walls. “Nah. I think I’ll head for home. I have to call work and explain why I missed my shift.”

“You’re too young to be working,” Aarush said simply.

I shrugged. Technically, I was too young. It was a pet gripe of his. He didn't understand why I joined the school-work program. Aarush had never wanted for anything. My job kept the shampoo and toothpaste flowing in my modest household. When they offered the program, both my uncle and I thought it would be a minor windfall to help with the household expenses.

Aarush looked at me with a hopeful expression. "Stay, Grady and we'll take care of this," he wheedled. He held out the wad of paper in his hand. It was the brochure with the application on the inside. I ignored the paper. Instead, I wrote a quick text to my manager, explaining why I missed work. This made it possible for me to avoid eye contact with Aarush.

"Grady," he repeated drawing out my name so it sounded like *Graaaaady*.

Words clogged my throat. I simply shook my head and walked toward the door. I had filled it out several times, but every time I finished it somehow never made it to the mail. I had left more than one application in my backpack carrying it around until they fell apart. Uncle Leo shrugged with indifference and made it perfectly clear he didn't think the school was a good idea. I forgot exactly what he said, but something like *not for us*, whatever that means. I brought it up more than a few times, but he would clam up faster than peregrine falcon, which is the fastest animal in the sky, according to Aarush, so after the fourth attempt, I gave up.

Uncle Leo's young to be in the parenting role, and as I have no one else to help plead my case, in the end, it is easier to let it go. Still, it rankled, I wanted to be thought of as good enough to be included. I mean, who doesn't like to think that they are special?

It was however, a lost cause, and much as I enjoyed vain attempts like tempting the fate of pissing off nasty numbers like the lunchroom aide, the odds of me making it into the school and then convincing Uncle Leo to let me go, was just too much of a hurdle.

I stopped and looked at the wall, remembering the trash chute near the entertainment center. I reached over to snatch the papers, pressed the knob on the chute, then tossed the brochure down the dark tunnel to wherever the Patels sent their garbage.

“Nooo!” Aarush tried to grab it. “Why did you do that? My father—”

“Your father can’t help me.”

“No,” he interrupted me.

“It’s okay,” I told him. I paused and added. “It’s nothing new for me.”

I felt like I should explain what was comfortable for me. I don’t know what I’d have done if things ever turned out differently. I didn’t think I could actually handle getting something I wanted. “You will get into the Temple, and I’ll be happy for you.” I felt that by saying it, maybe it would get easier to accept.

I put my hand on the polished bar that served as a door-knob to his room, ready to leave. Aarush waved goodbye as I trotted down the steps past the kitchen. Gita smiled at me, her good humor restored.

I grabbed a cookie on the counter as I left, never noticing the wet papers spread across the kitchen counter, drying under a rotating fan. I was later to learn that all the chutes in the house led to Gita.

*CHAPTER 4*

*UNTOUCHABLE SUBJECTS*

**I**T DIDN'T TAKE long to get home. I had to admit I was tired.

I dropped my schoolbag by the front door and called out for Uncle Leo, who didn't answer back. I deduced that he wasn't home yet.

I boiled water, dumped in a pound of macaroni, sliced up some cheese, and waited for the pasta to rise to the top. With Mema's old slotted spoon, I sampled a few of the elbows. Crunchy. They weren't done yet. I wish I'd known how Mrs. Berry made mac and cheese. She delivered buckets of it when my grandparents had died the previous year. We froze it and lived on a variety of casseroles for months, but then the food stopped coming. Everybody went back to their lives, including Uncle Leo and me.

Uncle Leo had switched his shift to the morning so he'd

be home at night even though I told him I was old enough to take care of myself. My uncle had shrugged those sloping shoulders of his and flipped his life around to accommodate mine. He never complained even though I knew that by changing his time slot, he'd lost his nightly radio show as well as his fans and took on boring stuff like traffic and events taking place around town—cookie bake-offs and dog talent shows. For a guy who made our bread and butter talking on the radio, at home he didn't have much to say.

The only good thing to come out of it was Joni, his special "friend." If he heard me calling her that, though, it would piss him off. I don't know why it was so hard to admit he'd finally gotten a girlfriend.

The water boiled over. The pasta went to that soft mushy place of a couple minutes too long. I sighed. After draining the water, I poured bacon bits into the pot with the cheese, hoping the added flavor of fake soyish pork would make up for overcooked pasta.

The door slammed, and I heard one set of footsteps.

"Squirt?" Uncle Leo called.

I rolled my eyes. I was almost as tall as Uncle Leo. Another growth spurt would have me topping him pretty soon.

"You're alone," I said without looking up.

My uncle came into the kitchen, his long brown hair tied back in a ponytail. He stretched, his bones cracking. He looked at me, his head tilted in an unspoken question.

"Superpowers. I can see through walls," I said, explaining how I'd deduced he was solo tonight.

"Hah. Just like your father," he laughed.

*Wait, really? My father. That's a first,* I thought. Usually

an untouchable subject. It was a rare event when Uncle Leo shared an interesting tidbit about my dad.

“Tell me more,” I said without looking up. I didn’t think I wanted him to see the longing in my face

“Yeah.” He opened a drawer, grabbed a soup spoon, and started eating the macaroni straight from the pot. I pulled over a stool and dug in with the serving spoon. “Ugh. You overcooked the macaroni, again.”

“My father?” I prompted him.

“Yeah, well, your dad had this innate ability to see what I was doing when I wasn’t even in the same room,” Uncle Leo said, though all his attention was on the pasta. “I wonder if more cheese can save this.” He dumped a handful of shredded parmesan cheese from a can I had left on the counter.

“Really?” I tried not to get too excited. “He would be in, like, one room and knew what you were doing in...what...the kitchen?”

Uncle Leo paused thoughtfully. “It used to scare the crap out of me. He knew when I was into his stuff and was on me in a flash. Mom...you know, Mema...said it was because of his superpowers. Dork that I was, I believed it too.”

“You think he was born with them?” All I could think was, *Could they have been passed down, and how can I use them to get into Templeton?*

Uncle Leo barked a laugh. “Grady, your dad was twelve years older than me. He knew what I was doing ’cause I was a inquisitive little sucker, like you were when you were young.” He chuckled to himself, apparently lost in a memory of me messing with his belongings as a baby. “Don’t tell me you’re still angling to get into that stupid school.”

I lowered my head, my cheeks flaming. It wasn’t shame,

maybe a little anger. "I don't know what you have against Templeton," I replied.

"Don't want to talk about it," he retorted, and the subject was closed just like that.

Clamming up about stuff ran in the family. After the accident that took my parents, the story was that Grandpa had forbidden mentioning them in the house again. I guess Uncle Leo was following his lead. Not that that made any difference to me...about my parents, not the school. I was just a few months old when they died. Still, sometimes I imagined I could catch a whiff of a scent so soft, so ethereal, it made my eyes sting for something I didn't know I yearned.

The hair rose on the back of my neck when you know someone is watching you. I jumped when Joni's voice broke the quiet.

"Aren't you going to save anything for me?" Joni stood in outraged indignation in the doorway. She was short and stocky, her pink hair clipped almost to her scalp under a knitted cap. She wore a small round stone in the crease of her nose that I knew would have set Grandpa off something fierce. She had the quality and exuberance of the ex-gymnast that she was. I swear, it always looked like she was going to leap into the room.

Uncle Leo hooked a stool with his gangly leg and pulled it toward the counter. "Find a spoon and dig in."

As usual, Joni vaulted into the seat. Making herself comfortable, she grabbed a utensil and chowed down with us.

"I thought you said you were alone." I looked up, a little horrified at Uncle Leo, the red in my cheeks now stained with embarrassment. I handed Joni the glass of water she pointed at.



“No, *you* said I was alone. I didn’t answer.” Uncle Leo smiled, taking the sting out. My uncle was a teaser; not mean spirited—everything was a joke. I guess that was how he’d developed his radio personality. “Besides, there’s no such thing as superpowers, Grady.”

Joni volunteered to wash the dishes. I was happy to escape to my room and do my homework. I checked my messages on my phone. My manager had called and left a message, it seemed I hadn’t lost my job, as he felt detention was a reasonable excuse.

I settled onto my bed, math homework done, and started my science assignment. I glanced at my alarm clock, my gaze resting on a framed photo next to it. Mema had framed the small Polaroid and placed it beside my bed despite Grandpa’s edict. I picked up the scratched chrome frame and examined my father’s expression. His mullet bracketed a narrow face with wire-rimmed glasses. My parents were sitting casually on a couch I didn’t recognize in a room I didn’t know. It looked messy. The background had stacks of books—a dorm room, maybe?

They had met at school. Love at first sight, Uncle Leo told me once. They were together from the first day to the last, graduating, then getting married and having *moi*.

Dad’s family became hers. “Your mother had no one,” Mema once responded when I asked who my mom’s parents were. They died when she was young.

In the photo, my mother was leaning her head on my dad’s shoulder. Her long, dark hair covered half of his hand, which was wrapped around her arm. They were smiling, their faces rosy with mirth at some shared joke.

I had looked at that picture every day of my life. It was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes in the morning. It

was like a piece of a puzzle that completed my room, the part that reflected me. It was as much a part of my make-up as my hand or arm. I slid my lids closed, then opened them slowly, knowing the picture would be there just like the *Spinal Tap* poster that was my sole inheritance from them.

I placed it back on the night table and rubbed the flat part of my chest, feeling a weight of sadness like a wet blanket. Wherever the sentiment had originated, I wished it would go back. Those types of emotions made me uncomfortable.

## CHAPTER 5

# ***FIND MY POWER***

**I**'D LIKE TO say that life improved, but I'd be telling you a lie. Elwood Bledsoe continued to bully Aarush. While Aarush constantly cautioned me to rein in my reaction to him, I could not. It landed me in two more detentions, and the last one finally cost me my job at the supermarket where I bagged groceries.

"You're coming for dinner," Aarush informed me one afternoon.

I shook my head. "Can't."

Aarush neatly packed his brown bag with unfinished food and told me. "You have to come over. You're not working. Tonight they are announcing the winners of the *Find My Power Essay* on television. Devon Neely has to win. Imagine losing your sight and learning—"

"Aarush, they'll never accept a blind kid."