

# The Incredible Life of a Dying Writer

An Adult Fiction by Matty Speights

© 2012, 2021

---

*Part One of The Steven Brower Shortbook Series...*

*A Work in Progress*

*(190 Pages so far)*

## West Texas

"I can't stand him. I don't want to go." A cross-armed boy sat defiantly in the passenger side of their spankin' new '56 Buick Riviera, staring out the window at infinite sandy nothingness and an occasional pump jack. His stepmother, eight months pregnant, navigated the familiar dusty road from Odessa to Big Spring, swerving occasionally to spare a scurrying roadrunner or horned toad. "E's your fodder," she said. "Und es long as you live, e vill always be your fodder. You vill visit vit im." At the age of sixteen, though the school bullying had made him physically tough and mentally resilient, he was tired of defending his dad's name. "He doesn't even *know* his name. He stole a plane and crashed it, went AWOL, and showed up years after we had his funeral, telling nonsensical stories of a world he created. He's a damn loon." "Vatch your mout," warned the woman.

At long last they arrived at a steep road, ascended it, and turned right into the parking lot. They exited the vehicle—she with some difficulty—and approached the entrance of the two-story H-shaped building. After signing into the psychiatric care facility, they were led by an orderly around the reception desk to the left, up the stairs, and down the hall about halfway. The orderly knocked and slowly opened the door. "Your wife and son are here to see you." Then to the mother and her stepson, "I'll be just outside the door if you need me."

The man in the room looked up from his desk. "Did you bring paper?" He asked his wife. "Yes," she said as she handed him a small ream. The man took the paper and set it on the bed beside him. His desk was cluttered with stacks of paper... sketches and notes and detailed writings he amassed over the six months since he'd arrived. "I'm mapping the tunnel system of Lakamha. It's an engineering marvel. Here," he continued, holding out a small scrap of paper with some scribbled notes on it. "I need you to find these three books at the library, as well as a topographic map of Chiapas, Mexico." The boy sighed audibly in discontent.

"Vee miss you," said his wife. Your release evaluation is next veek." The man opened the ream of paper, barely listening. "Hey!" She

shouted. He looked up at her. “Your evaluation is next week. Vee need you home. Vee ken’t expect Tommy and Vie to s’pport us forever. I vish ve’d never come here in d’first place. Honestly I’m greedy to move back to Anchorage.”

In 1949, after four years of crazy yet blissful marriage, the couple had purchased a home in Alaska. Her husband worked a relative nine-to-five job as a young Air Force sergeant. The next year, he accepted a commission and was sent to Alabama for flight training. While he was away, the woman was surprised by a letter informing her husband that he had a son from a previous relationship, whose mother had died while on vacation outside the country. The father was informed in the letter that he must make arrangements to acquire his son from a foster family in Ohio.

Armed with a notarized Power of Attorney, the woman flew to Ohio and picked up her husband’s son on his behalf. When she returned, the trio spent one week together as an adapting family, before her husband was deployed overseas. He did not return at the end of his tour of duty, and was listed by the government as ‘missing’ with a military aircraft, presumed lost at sea. Then miraculously, he returned home after having been gone for three years, as if nothing had happened. He had changed... drastically.

The man never spoke of his son’s real mother. Without the courtesy of so much as a sit-down conversation with his wife and son, having shed his uniform, he left again—this time to work with his brother Tommy as a roughneck in the Permian Basin oilfield of West Texas. The work was hard but the money was good, and within months, he moved his family down to join him. He would work for two weeks on the rig, then take two weeks off. During those off days, they finally began to bond through a series of adventurous outings.

Like clockwork, the man would return from work and sleep for a day. The next morning, they’d pack up and head out. In one of their first adventures, they took family scuba diving lessons at San Solomon Spring in Balmorhea. On their next outing, they dove the dark crystal waters of Jacob’s Well and climbed Enchanted Rock in the Texas hill country. After several months, they’d hounded for topaz, silver, Pecos

diamonds, Mineral Well fossils and Indian artifacts across Texas and New Mexico; explored Big Bend National Park, Carlsbad Caverns, and Palo Duro Canyon; fished and camped along the Rio Bravo and Brazos rivers, and along the Padre Island coast; and hiked the Guadalupe mountains of New Mexico and the Madera mountains of Old Mexico in search of lost treasure. The discovery of a single Spanish doubloon in a dry creek bed twenty kilometers south of Boquillas ended the possibility of ever venturing elsewhere, as every spare moment thereafter was spent scouring the Maderas.

About a year into their new surrounds, a raid on their home was conducted by federal agents. The man was apprehended, detained, and charged with a laundry list of crimes against the U.S. His attorney fought the charges on plea of insanity and won the case; deferment of charges was granted on condition of seven months' resident rehabilitation at Big Spring State Hospital.

## Chapter 1

### Brego Bay

Stephen Brower followed the familiar sandy bike trail to his favorite fishing spot, his fishing rod pushed out in front of him like a knight's lance. He rounded the bend and ducked through the bayberry bushes, then jumped off the side of his bike while it crashed on the beach.

"Hey," said Kyle. "Hey," Stephen responded. It was the closest thing to a conversation that had been shared between the two ever since Stephen kissed Catherine at the Sadie Hawkins Dance in November. Both boys were, to be perfectly frank, head-over-heels hot for Catherine.

But here they were now. No girls, no kissing, no drama--just two eleven-year-old boys, their poles, a pail of half-frozen shrimp and fish pieces for bait, and a rare sea of glass. The Brego Bay pier (pronounced 'bray-go') was the best spot to not only catch fish, but when the water was still, it was one of the few places where you could actually see the shadowy fish you were casting for.

Brego Bay is located on what is today known as Long Key, south of the small town of Layton near the center of the Florida Keys. It is largely unused for fishing, or for anything for that matter--and the low-lying pier that once was, and thrice rebuilt, is nothing more than a few nubs of rotten piles that can be seen disrupting the perfect, long and shallow waves at low tide.

At the time of this story—nearly a century ago, in the decade before the second great war—the pier was aged enough so that the wood was nearly white, leached by the sand and the wind and the salt of the sea. Though it always flexed and creaked, the pier was strong and sturdy.

Kyle was already set up at the end of the pier, a spot reserved for the 'early bird' among them. Stephen baited his hook and cast in, being

sure not to cross Kyle's line. He kicked off his flip-flops and sat about six feet away from Kyle, letting his tanned feet dangle in the cold water.

The boys had eagerly awaited the coming of Spring. It still wasn't quite here, but today was the first day Stephen's mother agreed that the weather was good enough to let him go to the pier. Southern Florida winters are tricky... the days can still be hot and sunny, but the evening rain and the swimming pools and the ocean were cold enough to numb your toes. Kyle had been out to the pier twice already, with some friends-of-the-moment.

*Kyle has a pretty good life*, Stephen thought as his eyes traced the fishing line from the tip of his pole down to the water where it disappeared. *No, he has a **really** good life. For starters, both of his parents are still together, and they actually like it that way. Then, he gets to do pretty much whatever he wants. He has a brother, he has a sister, and he has tons of friends. And he's got lots of really neat stuff...*

Stephen was so lost in his thoughts that he barely noticed the splash. He was vaguely aware of the wooden planks rocking underneath him. Then he snapped out of it, and looked up. Kyle was wrestling the fish of his life! He had kicked the bucket of cut bait into the water and barely had a foothold at the extreme end of the pier. Stephen jumped up and grabbed Kyle's shirt in an attempt to pull him back. It was then that he felt the strength of whatever was pulling Kyle.

In an instant, Stephen was gripped with fear. Fear that he had never felt in his life. Without thinking, he let go of Kyle's shirt and fell hard on his butt and hands. "LET GO!" he pleaded with Kyle. "I can't!!!" Kyle attempted to look back at his fallen friend, then snapped his eyes back to the pole in his hands. It all happened so quickly, Stephen's mind could not clearly recall a thing beyond that moment.

The water was clear, and not particularly deep. Usually, the boys could stand in the water at the end of the relatively short pier with the tops of their shoulders still exposed. Both boys were excellent swimmers, unlike myself, who at that age was just learning how to swim. Kyle was not in any way entangled in his line, but he couldn't bring himself to let go.

Now, readers of this book, please know that there are events in this story that even I, the author, cannot explain. This is the first: you see, Kyle was pulled off the pier with such force, and so quickly, that one of his sandals remained in place at the very edge of the pier as if it were glued there.

He didn't fall, he flew--nearly twenty feet, in fact, before he hit the water. He gripped the handle of his fishing pole tightly, and was dragged under the surface of the water with a speed of a submarine in the hunt. Once underwater, he traveled so fast and so far that, even if he were above the water, he would have not been visible from the pier with a high-powered telescope. It was an otherworldly phenomenon, the kind that could only happen in a book like this, or in a sci-fi movie.

Stephen's head was spinning. He stumbled while getting up, and stood frozen in place. "Kyle?" he called out, hoping that somehow, Kyle would just climb back up onto the pier despite what he'd seen. "Kyle?" Again, no reply. "KYYYYYYYY-AAAAALLLLLLL!"

Stephen was not sure what to do. He knew that he should get help, but he felt that if he left the scene, no one would be there to hear Kyle call for help. He felt that he would be leaving his buddy behind. He was indecisive and incredibly scared for his friend. He ran to his bike, blinking hard to clear the blinding tears that wouldn't stop flowing. He turned quickly toward the water one last time, and stood still (as still as he could, he was shaking like a leaf) to listen off in the distance. Did he just hear a faint call for help?

He ran back onto the pier, approaching the edge carefully. His mind was preparing him for some awful sight, and he was having a hard time looking down at the water beneath him. All at once, he thrust himself forward to the edge and closed his eyes, then opened them slowly and with much difficulty.

Stephen let out a sigh of relief, though his heart was still pounding so hard he could feel it in his head. There was no half-eaten body floating in the water at the pier's edge. He listened and scanned the water again, slowly from left to right, all the way to the skyline. Nothing. He could think a little more clearly now. It was time to get help. He ran again, and this time he didn't stop. He jumped on his bike

and headed home, riding as fast as he could. He could barely see through all the tears in his eyes.

The ride seemed to take longer than ever. Horrible thoughts raced through Stephen's head. *Kyle's my best friend. Even though I didn't see him, what if he saw me? What if he saw me leave the pier? Would he think I'm abandoning him? He's probably calling for me to help him, wherever he is. Screaming for he...help.* Stephen swallowed hard. The tears welled up again, stronger than ever. Stephen was shaking so hard that he bit his lip. As he popped the curb and crossed his lawn, he stumbled off his bike and fell halfway onto the driveway.

The first thing Stephen's mother thought, was that he was hurt in a fight. She saw the blood on his lip, his freshly skinned knee and the pain in his wrinkled up expression. "Oh my gosh, what did you do?! What happened???" Without waiting for a reply, she pulled him to her chest and held him closely. "C'mon, baby, let's clean you up and you can tell me all about it." "NOOO!" Stephen wailed, pushing away. "Kyle's in the ocean! We have to save him! Mom, call somebody. Call the Coast Guard! Call the police!" He was bawling now. "Honey, **WHAT HAPPENED TO KYLE? WHERE WERE YOU TWO? WHAT HAPPENED?**" Stephen's mother was more demanding now. She sensed the urgency of the situation from her son's desperate pleas.

Grabbing her keys, she rushed out the door, literally holding onto Stephen's shoulder and dragging him to the truck. She was not being mean or insensitive--though she did not know the whole story, she did know her son, she believed him, and so she knew that that they had to act quickly. Stephen had stopped crying for a brief moment. His mother slammed her door shut and fired up the old Chevy. They were nearly to the end of the street when she remembered Kyle's parents. She should have called them before leaving the house, but didn't think of it. Back then, there were no cell phones. She didn't turn around, Kyle needed to be saved.

Mr. Larry Hayes was exactly where he always could be found during daylight hours. Stephen's mom followed the gravel road behind the island's lone bait shack and skidded to a stop. Mr. Hayes recognized



the truck and its driver, put down his fishing pole, and started up from his chair.

Stephen explained the story to Mr. Hayes, just as he had to his mother on the drive over. He was relieved to have the help of grown-ups, but at the same time, he was growing more and more scared for his friend. Mr. Hayes helped them both into his boat, handed a half-filled fuel bladder to Stephen, and then joined them. He primed the fuel line, pulled the crank on the outboard motor, gripped the throttle, and fired it up. The front of the boat lifted and gained speed. Mr. Hayes then radioed in an emergency call to the Coast Guard.

By the time the Coast Guard arrived, Stephen and the grown-ups had already searched Brego Bay far and wide. Stephen watched as the Coast Guard whale boat crews searched the same areas that his boat had already covered. He was desperately hopeful. Everything he saw and heard should make him believe that Kyle was dead. Eaten by a shark, or drowned, or both. But deep down, Stephen felt that his friend was still alive, and in the pit of his stomach, he knew that Kyle was counting on Stephen to find him.

The days, and weeks, and months that followed left the town of Layton feeling empty and lifeless. Kyle was never found, and in August he was officially declared dead by the coroner. After the funeral, Kyle's parents took a decorated box away with them, which might as well have been his casket—empty save his fishing tackle, ballcap and a few mementos—and moved back to Minnesota.

When someone dies in a small town, the impact is felt right down to the dinner table of every home. In the tiny town of Layton, such a spirit of loss was not felt since John Bergemeier and Job Whitcomb died in France more than a decade earlier, when the Germans bombarded their unit with mustard gas. Folks still talked about them, and quite reverently so. It's curious how death—the great equalizer—seems to erase the blemishes of character someone attains while living. Instantly and forever taboo became the mention of Whitcomb's killing of his neighbor's dog, or of the money Bergemeier owed to so many townsfolk.

The loss of a child, an innocent, cuts deeper. The community was hit hard; everyone was inexpressibly sad, and no parent let their own child out of their sight for a long time after that. The kids at school shied away from Stephen, as if somehow he was responsible for all this. Stephen wore the burden like a leaded coat, and his spirit was crushed.

There was one person at school who did not avoid Stephen. "You know, I miss seeing you smile and laugh," she said, setting her tray beside his. Stephen glanced at the owner of the voice. "Hi Catherine." It was the first time that speaking to her had been so easy. Usually, he had to muster some courage. "Why do you always sit by yourself? I know Kyle was your best friend, but it's been like seven months now. You have other friends that care about you, too."

*That's a lie, Stephen thought. My other friends are shallow.* They hung out in groups, and did whatever the group leaders like Zach Stinson wanted them to do. Catherine was different, however. Come to think of it, she had her friends, but she didn't really follow any groups. "I just want to be alone," Stephen finally told Catherine.

## Chapter 2

### The Big House

“What happens next, Grandpa?” begged Allen. “The rest of the pages are gone.” Allen waited in silence as his grandfather’s old, gray-blue eyes stared listlessly at the upper wall of his room. The old man’s mouth moved as if he wanted to speak, but he said nothing. “C’mon Grandpa... you’ve told me the story before. How’s the rest of it go?” “Let him rest, sweetie,” beckoned Allen’s wife gently. “Let’s go for today and you can come see him first thing in the morning. They’re going to ask visitors to leave soon anyway.”

Allen kissed his grandfather on the forehead and gently squeezed his hand. “Love you. See ya tomorrow.” Allen and his wife Julie jumped in the van and exited the Autumn Care nursing home. “Where the hell is that big hard drive?” asked Allen. “It was in a blue Tupperware bin with Grandpa’s stuff.” “I don’t know, sweetie,” replied Julie. “Dammit, I need to find it. It has all of Grandpa’s stories. I spent the better part of a year scanning all of them so that this wouldn’t happen.” “I’m know, Allen, and I’m sorry, but I haven’t seen it. Why is this so important right now?”

Allen’s grandpa was dying. The foul-mouthed but God-fearing man spent the latter part of his life in Suffolk, Virginia, home of *Planters* peanuts and a number of other peanut, cotton, and tobacco farms, gins, and processing facilities. Even as an old man, he had been a hardworking tradesman: brick mason, metal worker, woodworker and single-handedly the biggest individual contributor of vegetables to the local Saturday farmer’s market. At heart a solitary woodsman, he would often vanish for days into the Great Dismal Swamp on the outside of town, taking nothing but a Nikon camera and his buckskin ‘possibles’ bag containing a canteen, a fixed-blade knife, a pocket King James Bible and an unlined journal.

Here and now, at the end of his days, he didn’t have a pot to piss in save the loved ones who seldom visit him and a small tattered

box of trinkets. “Those stories are his legacy, Jules. I told you, he doesn’t have a penny to his name. But the man truly is a gifted writer, and he has at least fifty different books that have never been published. I mean complete, ready-to-publish books... and on top of that, another hundred titles at various stages of completion.”

“I understand that. But don’t you still have the original manuscripts or whatever?” asked Julie. “NO!” responded Allen sharply. “They were moldy, faded, stuck together. Wrinkled and torn. Hardly legible. Hell, the papers were scattered among twenty different boxes that were falling apart in Karl’s attic. That’s why I scanned them all to a drive. Once I scanned them, I chucked the originals. That’s why this is so important!”

Julie, Allen, and their two kids had traveled here from Piqua, Ohio as soon as the kids got off school for Spring Break. They’d been meaning to visit for years, but life always seemed to get in the way. Allen inherited the Ohio farm from his dad after he died, and there was so much more to running it than Allen could have imagined. Julie was, for the most part, a stay-home mom, though she worked last summer as a cashier at The Cracker Barrel to help her sister who manages the place, and she also took a part time job at Kirkland’s recently to keep from going stir-crazy from all the corn, cows, cats and kids.

They topped off at the Southern station and turned onto Murphy’s Mill. The winding road crossed a bridge from where beavers could often be seen moping around their dam, and during at least half of the year, a beautiful pair of meandering swans could be viewed. “No swans today,” Julie sighed to herself whimsically. She always loved this part of the drive. A mile past the bridge, they turned left onto a rocky road that connected the driveways of four lovely and well-spaced houses which shared the edge of Lake Meade. It was no ordinary lake, rather an adventurous one with many small and thickly forested islands, and with a jutting and receding shoreline that hid from view the breathtaking secret coves around each corner. The lake was home to perch, smallmouth bass, alligator gar and giant catfish, the presence of whose roe and minnows attracted mallard and wood ducks, egrets,

kingfishers, and herons of all types. Canada geese would swarm the lake during their migration South.

Turning left at the farthest driveway, Allen and Julie passed between two pillars under a brick archway that served as the entrance to Karl's woods-encircled property. Once inside, the beautiful blacktop wound the length of seven perfect acres of lush green grass, flowering hedgerows, and grapevine-covered trellises. The driveway itself was skirted by tall pecan trees, and at the center of the property was an impressive orchard chocked full of apple, pear, peach, apricot, plum, and fig trees. At the back of the house, near the lake, were raspberry and blackberry briars, elderberry and honeysuckle bushes, and blueberry bushes that mingled with their smaller native cousins—huckleberries. Other trees and plants of edible and medicinal use grew on the property as well, namely red bay, wild ginger, mayapple, sassafras, persimmon, wintergreen, and jack-in-the-pulpit. The lakeshore was rimmed horsetail and bushes of mint.

The house and its property were designed and built by grandma and grandpa with the help of twenty or so illegal immigrants, many of whom remained a close part of the family. Karl, Allen's uncle that was nearly his own age, inherited the house from grandpa as his de-facto caretaker of the past eleven years since grandma died.

The residence today very much resembles a small German castle, and one which attracts a variety of wildlife: wild turkeys, mink, otters, and a cornucopia of nesting songbirds. There's a gray fox who raises her kits on the property every year, feasting on fallen fruit and an occasional member of the family of free-range laying hens. When the young bucks grow out of their felt at the end of summer, they frolic and put on displays of dominance in the front yard, even while being watched from the porch. The wildlife *coup de grace*, however, is a family of bald eagles who nest in the tall longleaf pines on the lake in the backyard. The "honorable mention" of local fauna goes to a chunky albino fox squirrel who has mysteriously managed to reside in the same patch of trees as the eagles, year after year.

The 'big house,' as the family called it, was a sight to behold. The exterior was brick, stone, and plaster, with some beams exposed to

the outside. Protruding through the roof were several chimneys of various size and construct. The main entrance incorporated a monstrous entry door that was rehomed from a Romanian monastery. Inside the entryway was a spacious marble foyer surrounded by pillars from the same monastery, which opened to a sitting area on the right, and which stepped down straight ahead into a large living room with twenty-foot-tall bay windows that overlooked the lake. The centerpiece of the living room was along the left wall; a fireplace so large that ten grown men could stand inside of it, shoulder-to-shoulder.

On the main floor, there were actually two living rooms, a sitting room, a dining room, a bright glass sunroom off the kitchen, a large pantry, and a second-floor walkway over the main living room. The third floor was grandma's art room, accessible through a standard attic door in the ceiling. It opened to a widow's walk from where one could get a bird's eye view of the lake, and of the nesting bald eagles.

In total, there were ten bedrooms between the main and second floors and the finished basement. Each bedroom had its own bathroom, and each bathroom had an extra-large jacuzzi tub. The bedrooms were themed, and inside the swan room was a no-kidding hidden room behind a hinged bookshelf, that had been converted into a play area for the kids of the family. Similarly, there was a sizeable hidden cubby behind the downstairs fireplace—*nearly as large as the upstairs fireplace*--which could be accessed through the false back wall of the built-in recessed shelving to the left of the hearth.

Perhaps the best feature of all, in the basement grandpa had built a trap door in the lower kitchen that opened to a flight of stone steps, at the bottom of which was a long tunnel headed toward the lake. At the end of the tunnel, a room built into the wooded hill, with a long shallow window, a fire pit with a small chimney that was well-concealed from the outside, some sleeping cots, a two-person table, a small bookshelf, a coffee pot, and a cellar door which opened to the lake. The 'lake fort,' as it was called, was where grandpa would read stories to Karl and Allen during summer camping nights as boys.

The basement was truly magical... a literal treasure trove, every nook and cranny filled with the trinkets of a once-traveled old man who

collected hobbies. It opened through wide French doors to the lowest part of the backyard, which rolled into the wide downhill path of the sandy lakeshore. The basement remained locked, and except on rare occasion, was strictly off limits. Not only to children of the family... there was something about this mystic area of the house that made the adults avoid it as well. I'll tell you more about the basement later in this story; for now, let's continue our tour of the rest of the house.

The house as I've described so far only concerns the main building. When approaching from the driveway, there was also another structure to the right which, by itself, was bigger than most houses—more like a barn, but with the paint and trim to match the main house. The downstairs was once a four-car garage conjoined with a large woodshop. It had since been converted into a ground-floor, full-amenity apartment for the elderly and disabled. Mimi and Pawpaw, Allen's great-grandparents, lived together here until each of them had passed, as did Aunt Norma in her fading years of a decades-long battle with MS. Grandpa lived here for a few years before being transferred to Autumn Care at his own stubborn behest.

Above this apartment was an open room with no interior walls, referred to equally as 'the party room' and 'the attic' by members of the family, depending on who you were talking to. Overhead in this room were large crossbeams across the short axis of the structure, upon which a third floor could have been built. At the far end of the room, the floor was raised into a stage. The party room was used largely 'for ministry,' as grandpa would say... grandma held her Bible studies here. It was also used for a couple of weddings, as a venue for a short-lived local Christian rock band, and briefly thereafter as grandma's art gallery. Eventually the entire upstairs became a large storage unit for the whole family, a concert stage for lip-synching kids with air guitars and homemade drum sets, and a daredevil beam-walk for the older kids.

The two buildings were connected and annexed by a collection of incredible brick and wooden patios, decks and arched walkways that could hardly be imagined by the most creative team of home planners and exterior designers. The bridge that adjoined the structures walked into a breathtaking gazebo off the 2<sup>nd</sup>-floor corner room of the main

house. The main area between the houses comprised a rose-garden courtyard, paved with a mosaic of Indian slate. Here, grandma held many mother-daughter tea parties, butterfly- and bird-watching events.

The courtyard exited through a vine-strewn pergola to the backyard, which cascaded down to the basement-level yard in three distinct tiers. The top tier of the yard contained grandma's rock-lined wood chip island full of plants which were known to attract hummingbirds, butterflies, and honeybees. Above the garden was a virtual complex of bird feeders which regularly attracted jays, cardinals, chickadees, juncos, wrens, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and an array of beautiful finches. All around the edge of the backyard, where the grass met the thin wood that partially obscured the lake, were birdhouses. At the opposite end of the backyard was grandpa's rock garden of turquoise, opal, topaz, cat's eye chrysoberyl, pyrite, agate, flint, thunder eggs and geodes; amethyst, schist, gypsum and various other crystal formations; and chunks of source rock which contained veins or isolated crystals of precious and semi-precious stones such as emerald, ruby, sapphire and garnet. Towering above the rock garden was a purple martin house which offered annual haven to eighteen families of the mosquito-eating bird.



## Chapter 3

### Grandpa Frank

Allen stayed in the party room all night, leaving only to unload the boxes that Julie brought from Home Depot. With these, he re-packed the contents of those old boxes that had been falling apart for years, carefully sifting the contents to glean what was left of grandpa's hardcopy stories. He carefully studied every loose paper and notebook, making piles to separate individual stories as best as he could. One pile which quickly outgrew the others was the one which Allen mentally dubbed 'unsorted ramblings'. Occasionally he'd get sidetracked reading a page, or a series of pages, wondering whether the excerpt was part of one of grandpa's bedtime-famous fictions or if it was a factual memoir. In all actuality, Allen was finding it increasingly more difficult to decipher fact from fiction.

One large box that Allen re-packed was filled with photo albums and other nostalgic treasures. He was particularly drawn to a shoebox full of aged, frail letters written in German, which he'd only ever heard about—the memoirs of Great Uncle Hans, written to his sister (grandma) from the Siberian prison camp where he died for his war crimes. Also in that shoebox was a card from adolph hitler. *Even as an author, I cannot capitalize his name or anything he was associated with.* The card was presumably one of many that were mass-produced; not addressed to anyone specifically, only to a mother, thanking her for her "proud" role in serving the nazi regime by virtue of her son's service. The card had two perforated holes through which passed a thin chain holding a small silver medallion... the symbol of the third reich.

At about two A.M., Julie came upstairs with a fourth cup of coffee for Allen. "I'm good, Babe, thanks. Going to call it a night." "Good," she replied. "Go take a shower. You smell like old stuff, and you're only gonna touch these with clean hands." She leaned toward him as she said it, kissing him on the cheek. She lingered with a side to side shimmy to remind him of her womanly endowments,

complimented by her sexy smile and a wink... allowing him a glimpse of her cleavage through the wide, stretched collar of her John Deere sleeping shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra. *She may be forty years old*, Allen thought to himself as he stood up, *but those tits aren't a day over twenty-five*. Allen hit the lights just before Julie started down the stairs. The stairway light outlined Julie's perfect body through her thin gray shirt. She lingered again, barely flashing the bottom of her butt cheek before giggling down the stairs. Allen quickly followed.

Saturday morning, eight A.M., the kids slept over with the neighbor kids at their house, so Allen and Julie swung by IHOP to grab some cheese blintzes for themselves, and blueberry pancakes & sausage for Grandpa. They arrived at the care facility and walked inside, headed toward Grandpa's room. "WARST DU SOLDAT ODER BIST DU SOLDAT?!" The yelling could be heard down the hallway. "Oh boy," said Allen. "Grandpa's telling stories again." As they entered the room, Grandpa was sitting up straight in his bed, arms flailing to aid in the animation of his story. Grandpa glanced at Allen and half winked to acknowledge him, continuing his story. Allen smiled, certain that his grandfather was of good mind and spirit today. The nurse and her aide, both of whom had heard this story before, feigned rapt attention—grateful that Frank had some visitors so they could make their exit.

"You see, the Germans were conscripted at the time. Every man of age had to serve the government—usually in the military—once he hit eighteen. Some did their two years and got out, others kept serving their country by choice. So if a feller looked over that age, we'd capture 'em and quarantine 'em until they could be questioned by the intel guys. The only phrase they taught us to ask, was '*Were* you a soldier, or *are* you a soldier?'

So we pulled the baker and his family out from under the floorboards at gunpoint, right there in Saarwellingen, just inside the German border coming from France. Turns out that the younger guy in the family was working against the nazis, since the family was half French and those bastards took his brother. I was sweet on that bakery girl, and so as we advanced to build that MSR, I kept sneaking back down the line. Blamed my trips on the damn pfaffenhuts, these

hazelnut- or fruchtgelee-filled pastries that all the guys loved. Once we were deep enough in country, I had to request a two-day pass back to France with some BS excuse and my Sergeant made me come clean. Wouldn't you know it, me and the bakery gal eloped on that visit, and I sneaked her back to the States when my tour was up. Gosh, her dad was pissed. 'Course back then, everybody Stateside hated Krauts & Japs, so I told her to sleep on the drive from Jersey—'act sick', I told her—and I kept her at my mom's place in Indy until we could get a remote duty assignment to Alaska. It wasn't a State yet, but we had a couple bases up there. Survival country... nobody gave two craps where you were from. But that's a story for another day."

"Well, SOMEbody's feeling like himself this morning," said Allen with a big grin. "How are ya, Bus?" asked Grandpa, returning his smile. 'Bus' was the general nickname for the boys in the family, short for Buster, the way 'Bud' is used in place of 'Buddy'. "Doing good, Grandpa. We visited you yesterday," said Allen, motioning at Julie, "But you were kinda spaced out." "Oh yeah, that happens," said Frank. "Between the old age and Lord-knows-what kind of medication they put in my food... that's why I don't eat the eggs. I think they got saltpeter in 'em, haven't had a hard-on since I got to this place," grandpa said flatly, with his famous half-wink at the couple. "Ew," said Julie under her breath, laughing a little. Unable to help herself, she prodded. "What's salt...peter?" Allen started to explain what little he knew about it, but his grandpa cut him off. "Potassium nitrate. Used to make explosive, and also to stem libido. Keeps the sailors and submariners from humping each other during long months at sea."

"Well, looks like you're sharp as a tack this morning, Gramps. That's great because I want you to tell me a story." Just then, another caretaker entered the room. "Sorry to interrupt y'all, just here to get Mr. Frank's food cart. Hey, Mr. Frank, you didn't eat your eggs! You want me to come back in a few minutes?" "No, take 'em, I'm done, thanks. So what kind of story?" Grandpa barely paused between the two replies. His face was both inquisitive and suddenly serious. "You remember that story about Stephen Brower?" asked Allen. "Which one?" responded grandpa. "I wrote several." The one where he was

fishing when his friend disappears.” “Of course,” said Frank. “So the first one.” “Ok, yeah. The first one,” conceded Allen. “Well what do you want me to do, tell you the whole story?” Allen didn’t answer immediately.

“You’ve got the story. It’s in a box at your dad’s, in the attic.” “Uncle’s,” corrected Allen. “Which attic?” Interrupted Jules. “The storage room,” corrected Grandpa. “The party room,” said Allen. “The party room,” said Grandpa to Julie, then to Allen, “What did you say before that?” “Oh nothing,” replied Allen. “I said ‘uncle’s’... you said the story’s at Dad’s house. My dad’s Mark, but you mean Karl, your other son. My uncle,” explained Allen, a little embarrassed for his grandpa’s mental slip. “Sharp kid,” Grandpa said of Allen to Julie. Then turning to Allen, “I was testing you. Congrats, you passed.” Allen and Julie laughed obligatorily at the ‘old people’ humor. Frank laughed too, guiltily. “You got me. But that’s normal with older folks. Names and relationships are the first things to get mixed up, especially with bigger families.”

“Grandpa...,” hesitated Allen. Allen looked at Julie. “What? What is it?” A few seconds of awkward silence ensued. Frank started getting upset. “What the hell is wrong with you guys? Did that tornado wipe out the party room? Why doesn’t anybody tell me anything around here?!” “I’ll tell ya,” Grandpa continued ranting, “Don’t get old, you’ll hate it. One minute you’re changing a kid’s shitty diapers and stopping the earth’s rotation to get his ball out of the tree, next minute he’s feeding you fucking baby food and thinking you can’t understand which way is up. And everything’s a secret. Nobody tells you a thing.”

“Ok Grandpa look,” said Allen. “I’m sorry. I copied most of your stories to a hard drive because the boxes in the attic all fell over, and the papers were getting walked on and everything. Before they were in the attic, Uncle Karl had them stored in the basement. You remember that leak that we were telling you about a couple years ago?” “Oh hell,” said Grandpa. “I thought you guys said my stuff was okay!” “Well, it was, except those boxes got a little wet... wet enough to make a lot of your books moldy and stick some pages together.” “Which books?” “The ones you wrote, Grandpa. The manuscripts.” “I’ll bedamned. All

of them?" "No, not all of them. But a lot of them. So that year I spent two weeks out here with Karl, and I scanned what I could to hard drive. The rest of your boxes of books and papers, we moved up to the attic."

"So you put all those books on one of those little zip drives?" asked Grandpa for clarification. "I didn't know you could fit so much on there." "Oh, no, Grandpa. Not a thumb drive. You're thinking one of those little ones you plug into the side of your computer, right?" "Yeah, in the USB port," said Grandpa. "You're not talkin' about one of them?" "No," corrected Allen. "I loaded them onto a big external drive. One with bigger memory than most computers." "Oh ok," said Grandpa, half pausing to think, half awaiting further explanation. "So what happened to this big drive?" He asked finally. "I'm sure it's okay, Grandpa, I just can't find it." "Oh okay. Hell you had me worried," said Frank, continuing. "So you want me to tell you that story because you can't find your hard drive. Why *that* story?" "Well," explained Allen, "Not *JUST* that story. All of them. I want every story you've got. In your words. Your way. The way you would read them to us as kids."

"Oh hell. That's a tall order, Mark." "Allen." "Allen," Grandpa corrected. Did I ever tell you how much you look like your dad?" Grandpa laughed. "I'm not asking for all your stories today, Gramps. Just one. I started with this one because I vaguely remember it from a long time ago, and I know I liked it. I found the first few pages a couple days ago, but couldn't find the rest. I'm thinking most of that manuscript must've been a victim of the water damage. I did read those first pages to you last night though, hoping you'd remember." "Damn shame," said Grandpa. "Yes," agreed Allen. Based on his grandfather's response, Allen guessed that he probably couldn't recall the whole story. "Damn shame." "You got those pages with you?" asked Grandpa. "Sure do," said Allen, grabbing them off the dresser near the door. He handed them over.

Grandpa laid back in his upright hospital bed with a sheet over himself. He set the papers on his lap, then reached over to his nightstand to grab his glasses. Unfolding them with the speed and grace of a tortoise, grandpa put them on and squinted. He took the glasses back off, set them on top of the papers, then reached back to

the nightstand for his quarter-cup of cold black coffee. Holding his cup shakily with one hand, he reached under his sheet with the other and tugged at the handkerchief he kept tucked in the loose elastic waistband of his sky-blue hospital pants. The hanky was off-white and worn. Julie made her familiar face as Grandpa dipped the hanky in his coffee. Allen smiled. 'Classic Grandpa'.

Frank then took a swig of his coffee, swished it around in his mouth, and swallowed. He returned the cup to its place and proceeded to clean his glasses with the handkerchief. Breaking the silence, Allen said, "Grandpa, have you ever seen the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding?*" "No, why?" "Because you're just like the dad in that movie, who sprays everything with Windex. Only you use coffee. "Listen, I'll tell you here, son, coffee is the best damn cleaning product out there. Especially when it's hot." "Hahaha Grandpa, sure, you could use any hot liquid to clean. But water would work better... coffee stains everything." "Does that look stained to you?" Grandpa held up his glasses for inspection, proudly. "No, Gramps," Allen smiled. He didn't come here to get his grandpa riled up. "I'm just bustin' your chops, Grandpa." "I know, Bus. I'm not right anyway—in the head—so you're not telling me anything new. But it's not because of old age! I've always been more than a little... off, y'know?" Grandpa laughed heartily. Everybody laughed.

"You know, that gal across the hall died a couple weeks ago, the one from Spanky's Gang," Grandpa said. "Oh man, really?" Asked Allen. "What was her name on the show again? Darla?" "No, no," corrected Frank. "She wasn't one of the main characters. She was Darla's friend on the series. She only went on the show a couple times. But she could tell you everything about every one of them actors, the sets, everything. She was really neat." Grandpa adjusted his glasses down the bridge of his nose and picked up the papers from off his lap. From Julie's standpoint, it seemed as though the glasses were just for looks, as if Grandpa was just looking over the top of them. The more she studied his face, the more she was convinced. She smiled to herself, glancing at Allen to see if he'd noticed too.

“I think I just wear these things to look serious,” said Frank, as if reading her mind. Then he looked up at her. She blushed, smiling, holding back a burst of laughter. He continued. “Cause they don’t help me see worth a damn.” Julie busted out. Allen joined her. Grandpa kept on about the girl next door: “Yeah that friend of Darla’s went bat-shit crazy there at the end. They caught her one night in the nurse’s break room, she’d put her electronic blood sugar monitor in the microwave and blew the damn thing up. We all heard this loud bang... I thought for sure ‘Well, this is it. Some white kid with teen angst has just entered the building to shoot us all to hell.’” Julie and Allen were rolling now, holding their stomachs in gut-busting laughter.

Grandpa continued. “Yeah we smelled that crap for days. You know what I’m talking about, right? One of those diabetes monitors. Looks like a cell phone. Anyway they asked her why she did it. She said it was the ants. Swore up and down there were ants coming from the damn thing and they were crawling all over her.” A passing caretaker poked her head in the room. “Everything okay in here? Y’all all right? I could hear you laughing down the hall. Mr. Frank’s a trip, aren’t ya Mr. Frank?” Grandpa chuckled as she left the room.

“Why don’t you guys sit down?” Asked Grandpa. “Gimme a minute to read what we’ve got here.” Allen and Julie grabbed chairs from the corner of the room, and moved them over to Grandpa’s bedside while he read the pages, mumbling as he read. Out of the corner of his eye, Frank noticed that Allen had propped his smartphone up on the dresser, with the lens directed at himself. He heard the distinctive beep of the ‘record’ button. He pretended not to notice. *Kid’s just like me, he thought. Information junkie. Researcher. Photographer. Recorder. Family historian.*

*Keeper of the books.*

## Chapter 4

### An Eerie Recurrence

Grandpa Frank set the papers back on his lap and removed his glasses. Suddenly his countenance changed. Without skipping a beat, he continued the story, and it was instantly apparent that his manner of speaking also changed. He was describing the story in the way he'd written it, eloquently and fluently, without all the rough language and rugged character. He skimmed over the boring details and got right to the good bits, explaining the story as follows.

About a year after the incident, Stephen's mom accepted a job offer from an insurance company in Colorado Springs. Stephen didn't want to go. He felt that by moving away, he'd be leaving Kyle behind—or perhaps the spirit of Kyle behind. He'd also developed quite a friendship with Catherine. Since he had no choice in the matter—all children are subject to the possibility of relocation due to their parents' jobs—he begrudgingly packed his things and said his goodbyes. The last day he attended school in Layton, Catherine gave him a note and asked him not to read it until he was home. Back in his room, he unfolded the letter, nervous with anticipation and excitement. *Wherever you are, wherever you go, no matter how old we are, no matter if you have a girlfriend, or if I have a boyfriend... I will always love you, Stephen Brower. Find a way back to me.* She left her address and urged him to write to her. In the weeks that followed, Stephen read that letter a hundred times.

Stephen had been living in Colorado about four years. A senior in high school, he had a few friends that he hung out with regularly. They liked to get together on the weekends and go rock climbing at Garden of the Gods. Last weekend, however, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and it was all anyone talked about. The event disrupted all regular activities for most Americans, including Stephen and his friends. Adding to the local hysteria, two girls from school were involved in a car accident that week. One girl died, and the other—Lori Theesfield—was



recovering in the hospital. Lori lived on the same street as Stephen, and they usually walked together to and from the bus stop. Instead of spending time with friends on Saturday, Stephen visited Lori in the hospital.

Lori was pleasantly surprised by Stephen's visit. She was recovering well, but on the sensitive subject of her best friend Andrea, she was inconsolable. Stephen was sincerely sorry for her loss. "I can relate," said Stephen, finally. "I lost my best friend five years ago." It was the first time he'd mentioned Kyle to anyone since he moved to Colorado. Over the next hour, he proceeded to tell Lori all about his friend, and about the incident on the pier that fateful day, and about the feelings of anguish he'd since suppressed.

"That's horrible," admitted Lori. "I'm so sorry." Lori stared through him, looking puzzled. "What is it?" Asked Stephen. "You know, this is really weird. I've heard that story before," said Lori. "It's the same story, but it happened about two years ago I think, also in Florida." "Really?" Asked Stephen, incredulous. "Yes," she continued. "It was on the news and everything. You can probably find out more about it at the library." Stephen felt a disconcerting chill run down his spine, and his eyes began to water. He could barely recall a single word that was shared between the two of them after that. They hugged and said goodbyes, and Stephen, as you might have guessed, drove straight to the Colorado Springs Public Library.

Stephen pored over the microfilm collection until the library closed. The following week, each day after school, Stephen returned to the library to continue his search. Finally, on Thursday he found the article. "Florida Keys Boy Missing After Mysterious Fishing Incident." The article was dated June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1939, and the place of occurrence was his very own Long Key. Stephen's jaw dropped. He paid for a copy of the article and drove home. He approached his mother and handed her the article. "Did you know about this?" He asked flatly. Stephen's mother read the headline and looked back up at him, with sadness in her eyes. Stephen was shaking. "Honey... Honey you have got to let this go. It's not good fo..." "Look at the date," interrupted Stephen. His mother looked at the article again, puzzled. "What is this? I don't

understand,” she said as she continued reading. Stephen watched the paper begin to shake in her hand as she read. With her other hand, she slowly covered her open mouth in disbelief. Tears escaped her eyes and Stephen’s silent tears followed suit.

“I don’t know what this means,” she said, finally. “I never heard anything about this.” Stephen took the papers and his mother gently grabbed his wrists. “Son, there are a lot of crazy things happening in the world right now. I’m scared for you. You’re going to graduate in a few months and I’m scared to death that you and all your friends are gonna have to go fight the Japanese.” She shook her head, lost for words. “Stephen, whatever you think this is, or whatever this means, you need to put it all behind you. We’re not going back... I’ll be honest, I never thought I’d say this, but I could stand for us to never visit the ocean again... ever.”

Stephen kissed his mother’s forehead and retreated silently to his room. Sitting at his desk, he turned on the lamp and grabbed a few sheets of paper from the drawer on his left. He sharpened a pencil and began to write. *Dear Catherine...* When he had finished, he addressed an envelope, placed the letter inside, licked and sealed it, and applied a stamp. Back then, it only cost three cents to mail a standard letter anywhere in the United States. Stephen sighed. The two had been regular pen pals for the first couple of years after he left. Eventually though, she had a boyfriend—well, kind-of—and their letters to each other became less frequent.

Stephen didn’t know it, but the “boyfriend” was really just a friend, not at all as important to her as Stephen was. She only mentioned the boy occasionally to incite a little jealousy from Stephen, the one whose attention she most desired and missed. Her intentions backfired, and Stephen began to distance himself emotionally. Though she’d continued to write often, it had been nearly six months since Stephen replied to her correspondence. This, dear readers, is a common flaw between the sexes during the development of mutual feelings for one another, especially at youth... even between good friends. Jealousy, a natural emotion, most often peaks in the formative years. If only young love spoke truly and directly; if only the

inexperience of adolescence didn't cloud the mind's understanding and judgment... perhaps more relationships would be formed of couples who should be together, and not simply of ones who end up together.

Stephen placed the letter on his nightstand as he laid on his bed. His mind raced. Soon, he drifted off to sleep. When he woke the next morning, still in his clothes from the previous day, he quickly grabbed the letter and ran it to the mailbox. For Stephen Brower, this day was different from all others before. As he slept, his mind formed the beginnings of a plan which would change the course of his life forever; one that would soon solidify into a fixed mental determination that could not be altered. Today, for the first time in his life, Stephen knew what he must do.

Everything changed. In the months leading up to graduation, Stephen's friends readied for the reality of going to war. Stephen's mind was far from such matters. He'd been corresponding with Catherine religiously, and almost as if a light switch had been flicked on, their friendship was renewed, amplified, and then transformed into an unexpected love relationship. They didn't even bother testing the waters, they leapt headfirst; one week their letters innocently spoke of the weather and of old acquaintances, and the next week's letters revealed passionate feelings and secret desires. Another week, and the exchange of racy content had each of them ready to drop everything start a life together. It all happened so fast, neither of them could tell who actually pulled the trigger. It was as if the floodgates of pent-up raw emotion had been lifted from between them. The only thing left for them to do, was to bridge the geographic span which separated one from the other.

During those same months, Stephen picked up jobs every day after school. During the week, he worked part time as a ranch hand, shoveling manure and mending fences, breaking ice in the cattle troughs and delivering feed bales to different pastures. On the weekends, he worked as an apprentice logger for Pikes Peak Timber and Pile; felling, stripping, splitting and loading raw lumber in the field. Occasionally he worked for the local railroad, cleaning cars and greasing

sections of track. He saved every penny he earned, and on graduation day, Stephen kissed his mother and boarded a bus for Miami.

The entire trip, Stephen was restless. He couldn't sleep. Couldn't even sit. At each stop, he exited the bus, lit up a cigarette—a habit he picked up from the logging crews—and paced. In New Orleans, he called Catherine from a pay phone—now calling her 'Cat'—to let her know of his travel progress. The next morning, Cat borrowed her parents' station wagon and drove to pick him up in Miami. When they finally stood face-to-face, they only hesitated a moment to look at each other before hugging so tightly that neither wanted to let go. During their embrace, both thought about how the other looked. Stephen was tall with dark hair, striking green eyes, and the forming shade of soft a mustache and beard. Cat was a tanned, slightly freckled, blue-eyed, dirty blonde with almost white-blond natural highlights. Her body was fit but quite shapely; she was graceful, but no modest dress could hide the fullness of her perfect breasts. Her lips, thought Stephen, were her best feature: though he didn't possess the vocabulary to describe them, they were voluptuously pouty and magnetizing.

As they held each other, Cat could feel the muscular tone uncommon to boys his age, sculpted by swinging an axe—or a sledge to drive splitting wedges—on the steep slopes of the Rockies. As they felt one another, Stephen restrained his hands from touching her noticeably-round backside, though he did pull her close with his hand low on her back, and with his other hand gently grabbing her hip like a handle. She responded willingly to his yearning pull, and looking into each other's eyes for a brief second, they kissed fiercely. It was the first of that kind of kiss that either of them had ever given or received. After several minutes, Stephen threw his bag in the trunk and they were on their way, physically disconnected only for the moment it took them to each enter their respective side of the station wagon. They had barely passed Little Blackwater Sound when Cat whipped the vehicle, almost involuntarily yet instinctively, onto a faded trail in the middle of a tall grass thicket, where their kissing and touching finally escalated into a lustful crescendo in the backseat.

Cat continued driving—naked but for her shirt—with one of Stephen’s shirts wadded tightly between her legs, constantly checking to ensure there was no blood on the seat. Still kissing and caressing, they could now both think a little more clearly, and they went over the plan. In a few days, Stephen would begin working for Cat’s uncle at a marina in Marathon, which included free board at one of her uncle’s small houses until Stephen could afford to pay rent. Marathon was a twenty-minute drive south of Layton. In the days that preceded the new job, Stephen stayed as a guest at Cat’s house, where he slept on the couch under the watchful eye of her father. During the day, Catherine and Stephen spent their time holding hands and walking the whole of Long Key, making love in the warm sand at every available occasion. With their high school days just behind them and a world of opportunity ahead, neither could imagine a more fitting entry into adulthood.

On all their walks, Brego Bay pier was the only landmark they avoided, primarily because it was fenced off and closed to the public. Cat had described in her letters the details surrounding the second boy’s disappearance, and just as Stephen had suspected, the incident took place at Brego Bay pier. The incident was so uncannily identical to the disappearance of Kyle, that it roused the interest of the entire State of Florida, and briefly, of the nation. Local legends grew, the second incident lending credibility to notions of a man-eating shark, or a sea monster, or some deep, dark magic. Though many residents departed the area permanently after the second boy’s disappearance, both Stephen and Cat understood fully that the news of his return might not be well-received by the remaining populace. For this reason, they restricted their walks and other activities to the beach, most parts of which were distant enough to deter their recognition from the inhabitants of most houses.

Stephen explained to Catherine what he had to do, and though it frightened her deeply, she understood him and was supportive. Weeks passed, and at every opportune occasion outside of work, the two were inseparable. Stephen made clear his intentions with Cat’s father, Mr. Hunt, that he hoped to marry her when he had earned

enough to secure a home and cover three years' worth of bills financially. Mr. Hunt did not object, but he questioned Stephen intently about his thoughts on the war, as the Hunts were principally resistant to all forms of fighting except in direct defense of the homeland. Stephen's mind remained as far from the thought of war as could be imagined; though he wouldn't shirk his duties if directly confronted, he also wouldn't be quick to check the mail and find a draft notice.

That summer, Stephen accompanied Cat and her parents to their family's shared vacation home in Key West for a weekend to celebrate Independence Day. The beautiful property was just a few blocks from today's popular intersection of Duval and Front Streets, and less than a mile from the home of Ernest Hemmingway. Stephen joined Cat's father in catching a score of spiny lobsters the first night along a rock jetty near a boat ramp, using nothing but a duct tape-waterproofed flashlight and a laundry bag. They grilled the lobsters the next day with ribeye steaks, sipping cold suds from the Frigidaire to round off the perfect surf 'n' turf dinner. Fireworks rang through the night. Stephen and Cat sneaked off to the beach hammock of a closed bar for a two A.M. tryst, the idea of which was hatched spontaneously in the moments before bedtime, but having been enacted, might have been fondly recounted by them both for decades to come, presuming they both would live to remember it. We never know in advance which small, sporadic and unexpected moments in time the mind will choose to sear deeply into the crevices of memory.

On Monday morning they returned to Layton. Cat begged her parents to let Stephen stay the night at their house instead of dropping him off in Marathon. He had to work the next morning, and Cat was hoping she could just wake up early and drive him. They acquiesced. Stephen was growing on her family; he was very well-mannered and hardworking, and he treated Cat and her mother quite respectfully. That afternoon, Stephen told Catherine that this would be the day of his important task. She cringed, pleading with him to change his mind. She had already decided that he was her man, and if he must do this, then she would be joining him. "We're going for a walk," yelled Cat to her parents as they exited through the garage.

They held hands and locked fingers in what had become their familiar pattern, with his arm behind hers. They walked in stride together to Mr. Hayes' bait shop. Mr. Hayes was asleep in his chair on the beach. *Perfect*, thought Stephen. *This spares me the awkward and time-consuming reunion, for now.* He walked inside of Mr. Hayes' shack-in-the-back, grabbed a large surf pole that was fishing-ready, then walked inside and found a pen and receipt booklet on the counter. He grabbed two small containers of shrimp from the freezer, scribbled a note explaining that he'd borrowed a fishing pole, and left a dollar under the note with the pen on top of both. He signed the note "S. Brower—Back in town."

Stephen's gait was steady as he cut through the ample reeds and sparse palms toward the tall fence which barricaded the Brego Bay pier from visitors. The fence, formed like a horseshoe, extended about thirty feet into the water on both sides of the pier. Cat gripped Stephen's hand with a sweaty palm, nervous about ignoring the foreboding signs that were posted plainly: *Danger. Off Limits. Keep Out. No Trespassing. Violators will be Prosecuted.* A City of Layton sign with additional fine-print warnings was secured front-and-center on a padlocked 3x6 gate. Stephen walked directly into the water, following the right-side fence to its end. He was standing waist deep, and the sea was calm. The water level was just above Cat's navel.

Stephen set the shrimp containers next to his rod & reel on the pier, and heaved himself up. He turned and grabbed Cat under both arms, hoisting her until she could sit on the pier, and then he helped her to stand. They kissed each other, then looked around to make sure there was no one in view. They walked quickly to the end of the pier. Stephen had imagined this moment many times, but with increasing determination over the past several months. He looked around, trying to remember that fateful day. Now that he was standing here, he realized that the nervous apprehension or anticipation of this moment had faded. He was calm and confident.

Cat was shaking nervously, so much that she stuttered when she spoke. "Ok-k wha-what now?" She asked. Stephen bend the fishing rod slightly to remove the hook from its stowed position on the pole's

lower eyelet. He broke off a jumbo shrimp from the quick-thawing block and inserted the hook between the front legs of the prawn, maneuvering it until the tip of the hook exited under the base of its tail. He checked the drag weight to make sure it was properly secured to the leader swivel, then stepped so that he was positioned directly in front of Cat. Twisting his torso back to the right, he shot forward and let fly a perfect cast. Then he reeled in until the line was taut.

Stephen caught two hardhead catfish, which he released, then lost his bait to a big hit after the third cast. The water was still, but unusually murky, as if an underwater sandstorm hadn't quite settled to match the calm disposition of the surface. Despite the water's cloudiness, the couple was able to make out a large black shadow moving in the direction of Stephen's bait, about ten minutes after he'd cast in again. "Cobia," Stephen thought out loud. "Mmm, I love cobia," chimed Cat as she stood closely beside him. The shadow passed and headed back out to the deep.

After an hour, the couple was blasted with a chilly wind coming from a storm that was building over the ocean. Stephen was visibly irritated. He hadn't come to catch fish. He wanted more. He wanted answers. What he really came here for, as crazy as it sounded, was a supernatural experience. Cat prayed—and truly believed—that he wouldn't find it. She simply hoped that he would find closure. Stephen was realizing that the "lightning bolt" moment he sought may not come for a long time... but he was willing to try for a lifetime, to find the answers he sought. As dusk fast approached and the storm grew nearer, Stephen gave in to the unspoken will of the shivering young woman beside him. He began to reel in his line. "That's a wrap," he said aloud. Music to Cat's soft, nippy ears.



## Chapter 5

### A World Apart

Cat turned toward the land, instinctively scanning for suspicious busybodies. She froze in guilt and surprise, for standing directly at the end of the pier, staring at her sternly from behind the fence gate, was Mr. Hayes. Suddenly and simultaneously, she watched Mr. Hayes' face turn to horror as instantly as the pier rocked under her feet and she heard the splash. Her heart stopped. She spun around so fast that it hurt her neck, and in the realization of her utmost fear, screamed so loudly and for so long that the whole of Long Key could hear. Stephen was gone.

Larry Hayes' body forgot that it was seventy years old. With long strides, he bolted around the fence and into the water, to the end of the barrier where he launched himself onto the pier, gripping Catherine both in consolation and in protection against whatever she might try to do next. Cat crashed to her knees and Mr. Hayes followed, holding her in a strong but gentle bear hug. She screamed again, her soul wailing from her diaphragm like an air raid siren. Her face was ghastly pale. She cried aloud in heaves as she gasped for breath.

As Stephen was reeling in, his heart sank. His pitiful subconscious, sniper-ready on the trigger of self-reflection, did not have a nanosecond to react before the hundred-pound test on his reel strained against the might of his 187-pound body. Stephen had already puzzled over the physics for years, and there was no time to think about it now. This was no longer a conscious decision... it was an involuntary response. Fight or flight, life or death, Catherine or whatever saltwater demon preys upon the land-dwellers of Brego Bay. Gripped by fear and fury, unable to form thoughts or words, he flew from the pier and into the shallow water, rocketing at an ungodly speed, scraping at intervals against the wavy sand below. It took all the grit he could muster to hold his breath, for somehow he knew that he wouldn't be able to release the rod even if his conscious mind willed it.

Stephen was 'all-in'. Moving too fast to think, too fast to fear, he sensed only the changes to his personal atmosphere. The water grew colder, and the light beyond his closed eyelids grew darker. Suddenly he sensed a change of pitch in the sound of his own movement through the water, as if he were in space, with no walls around him or ceiling above him or floors beneath him. He was, actually, pulled past the continental shelf and into the open ocean, all in a matter of twenty or so seconds. Now if, like Stephen in the year following Kyle's disappearance, you're mentally discrediting the possibility of this and other phenomena using science—rather, using science according to the spectrum that we know and understand—you'd be absolutely correct in doing so.

It would be impossible to travel through the water, from Long Key to the upper crust of North America's continental shelf, in twenty seconds. It would be impossible for Stephen to hold on, let alone maintain any semblance of consciousness at such speeds. Our physical laws forbid it! But what if... what if there were other universal laws, ones which simply exceed the limitations of human comprehension?

Here's what we know (and this much is true): strong correlations exist, at least in credible scientific theory, between visible light / color... and sound, lending weight to the notion that they are all part of the same spectrum. Electricity, magnetism, microwave technology, radio wave propagation, invisible-to-the-naked-eye ultraviolet and infrared light... all the threads of one cloth. If what we see and what we hear are simply confined to the limitations of our creative design or evolution, then if such restrictions were lifted, could we see sounds? Hear colors? Imagine a world without limitations, not only to the senses, but also to the physical laws we know: gravity, genetics, density and mass, pressure and temperature, space and time. I'll tell you exactly what that would mean... Anything. Everything. Wormholes, time travel, translocation, aliens, ghosts, unicorns, mind-reading, mermaids, Atlantis... all transform magically from figment to fact.

Stephen could feel himself being pulled down, down, incredibly far down. He sensed that he was in an aerial freefall, only traveling faster than at the terminal velocity of which an object is capable of falling. At his depth, the conventional weight of water should have crushed him. He

was cold... unbelievably cold but not frozen. He felt darkness... now not only in the atmosphere beyond his closed eyelids, but inside himself. Everything was indescribably black. His 'freefall' slowed... all the way to the perfect standstill of static buoyancy—*very much felt the way floating in outer space might feel*, he later recalled thinking. Stephen didn't know when exactly he started breathing. *But I AM breathing*, he thought to himself. He was no longer clenching his eyes shut... in fact, he was pretty sure that his eyes were open. The pressure, the cold, the darkness... he felt everything, but all was oddly bearable.

The feeling of zero movement changed, replaced now by the sense that he was floating upward. He was, in fact, nearing the bottom of an obscure and unknown pit in the Atlantic Ocean's floor. Though nearly three times deeper than the bottom of the Marianas Trench, it is unknown to scientists because this perfect tunnel is barely the diameter of a backyard trampoline... so even if discovered by some underwater mapping device of the future, the hole will be discounted as a glitch or a fissure. As he descended headfirst, Stephen had the feeling that he was somehow ascending. Above him, a warm red light, like that of a photographer's darkroom, for those of you old enough to know what that is. Finally, after what seemed like an hour, Stephen reached the bottom.

He felt the ceiling that was the deepest part of the ocean floor. It was made of a thick, permeable sludge, which glowed a soft red like the plasma of a dying lava lamp. He sank hands-first into the ceiling, and panicked. Instinctively, he held his breath, and within a few moments, passed through the uncomfortably tight membrane until he was dangling from his feet that were stuck in the mud. His body was no longer surrounded by water, and he realized with clarity now, which way was up and which way was down. From a distance, Stephen resembled a bat, dangling by his feet from the ceiling of an endless cave. Once his feet slipped free of the ceiling, he fell—yelling and flailing for about a hundred feet—and into a lake of denser air below. The lake of air, which was so thick that it resembled clear gelatin, suspended him as he 'swam' awkwardly toward the shore.

Stephen was in a secret world near the bottom of the earth's crust, where the cold of the oceans above and the intense heat of the

mantle below created many pockets of temperate air, stretching the span of continents but with many interconnecting pillars between the floor and the ceiling, or the ground and the sky. The pillars were formed where the stalactites and stalagmites met, though these formations were not often as small as we would know them, rather the size of mountains. In other words, in this world there were mountain ranges that grew upward from the ground... just as the Alps or the Himalayas on the earth's surface... but there were also equally impressive mountain ranges that grew downward from the sky or ceiling. At some places, the peaks of the upper and lower ranges touched each other, conjoining to form subcontinental pillars.

Like the place where Stephen passed through, the 'sky' between the mountains above glowed pale red in some places, in others, pale green or blue, giving the appearance of overhead lakes and oceans. There were no plants in this world, except for algae and other single-celled forms; otherwise the closest relatable objects were crystalline formations that had grown like shrubs, sparsely patched throughout the lower and upper landscapes. The crystals served to refract the atmospheric light in all directions, creating a wonderful kaleidoscope of color.

Stephen trekked the rugged terrain toward a distant area of concentrated light. It was yellow light, and warm, not unlike the sun's rays on a summer afternoon. The light grew brighter and warmer as he approached, over the course of an hours-long hike. Though he studied his surroundings as he traveled, pausing often to listen, there were no apparent signs of life... only the dull roar of what he could only describe as a distant waterfall. With the crossing of each ridge on this small subterranean mountain range, he expected to locate the source of the light and sound he followed, as they seemed to be coming from the same source. At long last, he ascended a final geological finger to discover the source: a breathtakingly magnificent crystal city, through which flowed countless channels of bright white-yellow magma, like the visible circulatory system of a living object made of glass.

Stephen stood awestruck on the mountain, taking it all in. The city was built as a translucent solitary object, with many minarets and

spires protruding from its center like tall buildings. There were several facets and outcrops along the sides, opening into what he believed to be neighborhoods, and arches through which passed two prominent narrow roads: one at ground-level and one which was elevated. Perhaps “tubes” were a better description than “roads.” Though not fully enclosed, these thoroughfares each resembled a tube slide from a water park, the kind with high walls and no roof. Both roads followed the same course away from the city, far to his left, where the elevated road eventually descended to the ground and the two roads continued side by side over the mountains. He observed that the elevated road was transited by vehicles traveling into the city in single file, while the lower road carried vehicles away from the city in similar fashion.

Stephen began his descent to the city. The mountain he traveled did not have many loose stones; it was a single monolithic sculpture in the shape of a mountain range, formed by the flow of lava long ago when the earth shifted. Though he was apprehensive of whatever unknown encounters lay ahead, he was steadfast in his determination to find Kyle, and would not let something so trite as fear deter him from moving forward.

He was nearly to the lower road, just a few minutes’ walk from the entrance to the city, when he heard a sound behind him. Before he could turn, he lost all feeling in his body and fell prostrate. When he awoke, he was naked and in the fetal position, laying in the bottom of a large bowl with high walls and slick, hot surface. He struggled to his feet, dripping sweat. The side of his body that he was laying on was burned, much like a very severe sunburn. The sulfuric fumes in the bowl were so strong that he struggled to keep from passing out, and Stephen instantly noticed that he had a splitting headache and a sharp pain in the center of his back. Now that he was standing, he noticed that soles of his feet were on fire, and he was standing in his own fecal discharge, the evidence of which stained the inside of his legs. He scrambled to try to crawl out of the bowl but kept slipping back to its center. “HEEELLLP!!!” He screamed.

He saw movement at the top rim of the bowl. There were now two hideous creatures staring at him, gurgling as if communicating with

each other. The creatures were gray and fish-like, with scales and noticeable gills, but stood on four legs like a dog. Their faces were the most disgusting part of their appearance, and looked like they were turned inside-out. Suddenly one of the creatures stood upright, revealing powerful hind legs shaped like those of a large stallion or a bull, and smaller forelegs that resembled human arms. They had two-fingered hands which were curled back like a mantis, and a retractable digit on each that appeared to be an opposable thumb. Studying the creature that still stood on all fours, whose fingers were still curled back, it looks as if they regularly walk on the backs of their wrists.

The pain in Stephen's back grew sharper, and he could feel a tightness until he realized that he was being dragged up the side of the bowl opposite the two creatures. He had been subdued by a claw which pierced center of his back in two places about four inches apart, which now gripped the muscles surrounding his spine. The claw was attached to a flexible cable which could be made rigid through the application of electrical current—which, consequently, also disables all motor function and causes one's bowels to be released. Out of the bowl, the ground was still hot, but he stood upright... face-to-face with no less than ten of the creatures who were also upright but crouched over. They studied their captive intently. Stephen was most certain of his impending death.

The creatures, called grols, conversed with one another in guttural, gurgling sounds. Stephen started to speak and the grols became frantic, screeching and drowning any words he might have uttered. Stephen's labored breathing exhibited his pain and disorientation, his vitals perceptibly unstable as his mind skirted the edges of dementia. Finally he was prodded by his captors along the hot, slippery surface until he was forcibly pushed into a pod, followed by one of the creatures. The pod floated forward, like a hovercraft, and was channeled into the open-topped tube that Stephen recognized as one of their alien roads or thoroughfares. The pod picked up speed and exited the city on the low road.

Stephen struggled to remain conscious, recognizing the mountainside that he traveled down on his way into the city. He studied the craft in which he traveled, literally a pod made of some type of crystal,

resembling a large, crude bobsled. Also translucent, he could not observe any mechanical systems which could cause the pod to move. Actually, the grollds' transportation system—both the tubes and the traveling pods—made use of ferromagnetic crystal technology to propel all pods at the same speed dependent on the spacing of magnetic markers on the highway, which were partially obscured and oriented in a single direction. This is why all roads were one-way.

The grollds were one of at least ten thousand species of organisms which inhabited the lower earth, and among the three species most developed in terms of intelligent design. Myself a creationist, I can find no other explanation in this story for the biological makeup of the grollds except that they were highly-adapted vertebrates, existing midspan of an ancient evolutionary process. Their bodies could thrive both on land, where they'd breathe the stale air of lower earth, and in the deepest crevices of the ocean, where they'd breathe as fish do, but crawl and forage as crustaceans.

Similar to their closest surface-dwelling counterparts, the grollds had a recorded history which spanned thousands of years. Over the past several centuries preceding the timeline of our story, they discovered ways to harness the energy of ever-present iron & magnesium magma that travels through fissures from the asthenosphere through the earth's lithosphere, forming small passages through the crust below. More impressive perhaps is the grolld advancement in magnetic crystal technology, which had manifest two major highways spanning 650 kilometers in the past eighty years. In total, about three million grollds inhabit lower earth, primarily occupying two major cities under the western waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

With the city far behind him, Stephen's eyes adjusted to the dim glow of the dark blue sky ahead. An occasional tug reminded of the grolld seated behind him, and of what he could only presume was a giant fishhook in his back. Stephen thought like a fisherman. Though he had never heard the word *karma*, the concept weighed heavily upon him as he pondered his own fate. He wondered if this was how Kyle died. Somehow still, in spite of his current situation, he would rather die

knowing than remain trapped on the surface, in the unsolvable mystery his mind presented.

The juxtaposed pod highways rolled together through the dimly colorful hills and valleys before another wide range. Stephen fixed his eyes on the next uphill segment of highway, squinting and blinking to see that he was assessing the road correctly. The road graduated upward to the base of an approaching cliff, then rose steeply in pitch to the tip of the tallest peak on the range. Instead of following the mountain downward on the other side, it continued upward, like an amplified version of the world's tallest roller coaster built atop the world's tallest skyscraper, until the highway tubes were suspended by the lowest-hanging peak from the sky's downward-hanging mountain range. The highway continued through the upper mountains, spanning wide valleys of bright blue incandescent light above.

The groid must have moved a lever or something, for the pod began to slow and then veered off into a slower-moving tube that traveled between well lit structures, presumably houses, both upon and within and suspended under the mountains. The pod slowed further, turning down a lane that headed straight into a large stalactite. The pod came to a stop, and his captor exited, tugging at Stephen's back while beckoning him in that vile guttural manner. Outside the pod, Stephen stood on an earthen platform near a large hole that was lit inside. He watched a shadowy figure approach, and shuddered. The movement caused a shooting pain in his neck, back, and legs. All of a sudden, a small, pale, bearded man stood hunched in the window. He conversed with the groid, and Stephen thought they exchanged something. Then, without further hesitation, the claw was removed from Stephen's back, and the groid got in the pod and left. Stephen lay crumpled and naked on the floor, shaking and sweating.

The man crawled through the hole and crouched next to Stephen, helping him up. He was not compassionate, but he did not want Stephen to fall off the platform. There was a Stephen-sized gap between the end of the pod tube and the wall of the stalactite, where the boy could easily have fallen from the sky to the mountains below. "Stå på dine fødder," said the man. "Stå op, søn." The man helped Stephen to



his feet and through the hole, where he flopped to the floor again like a sack of wet rags. The little old man slid back into the hole, and returned to Stephen with a cup of liquid. "Drikke," the man urged as he held the cup to Stephen's lips. "Drikke det hele. Det er godt." Stephen tasted the water on his lips, sure that it had once been saltwater. He drank in deep gulps, touching the cup. Water spilled down the sides of his face as the man holding the cup clumsily misjudged the rate at which Stephen could swallow.

"Who are you?" Asked Stephen. "Where am I?" The man recognized his idiom. "You gud. Raest. You sekkrifice for Adom. Raest now." Stephen sank quickly into a deep sleep, hurting everywhere. When he awoke, the old man was smiling at him. "Gud slept. Gud slept. Go now. You sekkrifice." As the man spoke, he kept pointing toward the ceiling repeatedly with his bony finger, a curiously mischievous smile on his face. The old man's eyes were glazed, but within them shone a certain wickedness that Stephen had never before encountered in a man. The man helped Stephen to his feet. "Hvad hedder du, dreng?" The man asked again. "Hvad hedder du?" Frustrated by Stephen's confusion, the man tried his English. "Who its you name?" "Du," he said, pointing at Stephen. "Stephen," he uttered finally. "My name is Stephen."

The man's face lit up with Stephen's understanding. "Eer. Eer. Skrive you." He pushed a bowl of glowing slime into Stephen's hands, and led him toward the wall of the cave home. "Skrive." The man pointed at the wall with his bony finger. Stephen strained his eyes, floored with incredulity. There on the wall, under ten other names of various origin, was the dimly-glowing finger-painted name of his best friend. "Kyle," he said out loud. "KYLE!!!" This time he yelled it, as if the old man had Kyle shackled up in some cubby of the single-room abode. "KYALLL!!!" The man was shaken. He covered his ears, then tried to cover Stephen's mouth. "Shhh! Shhhha!" "No is ere. Sekkrifice." Stephen looked squarely at the old man's face as he smiled grimly. "Sekkrif-ice."

"Sacrifice?" Asked Stephen, softly. "SACRIFICE?!!!" He struggled against the old man, throwing him to the ground. Grabbing the stone bowl, Stephen lifted it high above his head with one hand. He held the

man to the ground with his other hand, and with the weight of his body. "SACRIFICE??" He asked again, screaming. The old man clawed at Stephen's neck. "Adon! Sekkrifice! Ofre til Adon!!" Stephen smashed the bowl with all of his might into the old man's skull. He repeated the blows until the man stopped moving, and his feeble hands curled up into his chest. Everything was silent.

## Chapter 6

### Jesper Jespersen

“Grandpa.” “...Grandpa!” Frank was sitting up, staring straight ahead. He was mumbling. “Rose... Rose. Rose...” Allen strained to listen, leaning over the bedrail and positioning his ear closer to Frank. “Rose?” He whispered. “Grandpa, who’s Rose?”

Julie had left to go get the kids. She was going to take them up to Virginia Beach for the day. While Grandpa delved into the underwater world of Stephen Brower, she kissed Allen and mouthed, “Have fun with Grandpa... call Karl to get you or I’ll pick you up later.” This is why they were here. Allen was in his element. An aspiring writer himself, he hoped to help his grandfather’s works gain notoriety, even if it was a posthumous effort where the author was concerned.

“Rose...” continued Grandpa. His eyes filled with the saddest tears, and he looked at Allen, grabbing his hand. “They burned the sled. They... they threw it in the fire.” “In the end... in the end...” “Rosebud!!!” Said Frank finally, spoken as if with his last breath. Allen felt that he’d heard that story before; that he should understand the reference. Frank wiped his tears with his hanky, as if the release of some spontaneous memory cleared the fog. He swigged his cold coffee.

“After flight school,” said Frank finally, laying back, “I joined up with the 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group. Those guys were based in England with the RAF and the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force back when I was an E-man, and I couldn’t tell ya how many times they saved our asses on the ground. So you could imagine, I was really amped up to get that assignment.” Frank wiped that last tear with his rough hand. He was smiling now. “So of all places, they send me to Denmark. The Danes had just picked up some Supermarine Spitfires, and we were there to train ‘em. Of course, I was just a greenhorn flyjack myself—just a kid really—so I was learnin’ with ‘em.”

“We flew sorties all over Europe. The war was over... well one of ‘em was over. Korea was just around the corner. It was right around

1950 when I stayed a couple weeks out at this Danish air base in Greenland. Stopped in Iceland to gas up on the way. But this base in Greenland was right on the water. At the end of the runway was this giant hole, huge hole. Deep, like a well, but wide as big around as a pro football stadium. Well, word around the bar was this: the original project was intended to be a privately-funded global seed repository. Then the money ran dry, and it turned into some big secret nuclear power project run by the Danish government. Project Bohr.”

“As I young pilot, I can tell ya, it was scary as hell taking off eastbound. If you had a tailwind, your plane would literally drop into the hole before it would start to climb. Scary as hell.” “What was in the hole?” Asked Allen, intrigued. “Well that was the crazy part. It was a city.” “A city?” “Yeah, a city. Restaurants, a school, a church, a housing development, everything... two hundred feet below the ice. You see, the Danes were testing the application of nuclear power as a clean energy source, but they knew that if shit went south, it’d be bad. So they decided to test it deep underground. The seed bank—which actually came to pass about eight years ago near the North Pole, at the hand of the Norwegians—but the defunct one in Greenland was the perfect spot for the Danish project.” “Was it populated?” Asked Allen. “Oh hell yeah, but not while I was there. It was still under construction. Supposedly the U.S. government was involved as a silent partner, they supplied the money and even a handful of the volunteer families that lived there. But something happened to the reactor, there was some bad fallout, and by 1952 the Danish government had everybody evacuate so they could plow it over with snow and ice.”

“Are you kidding me?” Allen couldn’t believe it. “No Sir,” said Frank. “It doesn’t end there. The U.S. doesn’t like to fail. So they signed some kind of treaty with the Danes almost a decade later. Opened a couple U.S. bases farther in Greenland father northwest. Tried to replicate the project. ‘Camp Century.’ ...’Project Iceworm’. It wasn’t as robust, as I understand. Instead of tunneling straight down, they tunneled in, digging trenches and covering them over. Same thing. Chow hall, chapel, billeting. Started as a military thing but somebody snitched, so the Army turned their botched deal into a publicity

campaign, under the guise of working with the world's top scientists to test a city fully powered by nuclear energy. Of course, the only real interest Americans had in nuclear energy at the time was to weaponize it. Go figure... leave it to us damn Yanks. The project became a front for an underground missile site where they could keep ICBMs close enough for to strike potential targets in Russia. Ran the whole operation for three years, until a warm spell started caving all the ice in everywhere. Finally they abandoned the project... buried everything like the Danes did back in '52. The cherry on top? Greenland's melting like hot shit. That original project? Covered in water. Nuclear disaster in the Atlantic. There's your real *Inconvenient Truth*. Send that one to Al Gore."

"Grandpa," Allen interjected, pausing, "why are you telling me all this? Where did this story come from?" Frank grabbed his grandson by the hand, looking down as if gathering strength to ask his next question. Then looking into Allen's eyes, Frank's own showed the welling of more tears. "Allen... do you believe in time travel?"

"Wow, Gramps, that's a tough one. I can see from your face that you're serious... you're serious, right?" Grandpa nodded, his lower lip wrinkled—knowing how crazy he sounded right now—as if he were about to start bawling. Before he could, Allen quickly offered, "Tell me."

"We were drunk. Me and Rob, one of my pilot buddies. Real drunk. It was prob'ly around Midnight or so, we talked ourselves into seein' what was in the bottom of that hole. Hell it was my idea I think, but once I said it, there was no stoppin' Rob. We walked wide, way out around the runway so as not to catch attention from the control tower. Don't think there was anybody working the tower, they were still drunk at the bar that night... but just to be safe. There was a little building about fifty feet from the edge, had a fence around it. Service elevator, we were told. So we jumped that fence, can't remember if the door was open or if we busted in. I think it was open. Remember, this city wasn't operating yet, it was still a construction site. Final stages though... hell, they even had a big organ and a piano in the church, pews and everything."

“We took the elevator down to the bottom. Both had flashlights. It was spooky, though. I remember Rob was kinda freaked out. You could hear an echo, even your footsteps crunching on the ice would echo. As soon as we exited the elevator, we were on the main street, straight through the city to our left. Streetlights, power lines. No cars though. We walked into the houses... kitchens, bathrooms, the whole nine. Big school. Big church. Even had a café and what looked like a burger joint. It was somethin’. Only thing missin’ was a bowlin’ alley.”

“Wow, I can’t believe this. Incredible,” admitted Allen. He leaned over his shoulder to check the battery on his phone, and to ensure he was still recording. *Need to charge soon*, he thought to himself. He stopped the video and started recording a new one.

“We were down there about an hour, and each of us had taken a memento. I took a coffee mug from the café. Rob grabbed a hymnal. I told him he’d prob’y burn in hell for that one.” Allen chuckled. “So we were almost to the elevator, when we heard this real, real disturbing noise. Someone down there was crying. Sounded like a real wail though. Blubbering good. Scared the hell out of us, we were just about to jump in that service elevator but I stopped us short. ‘Let’s check it out,’ I told Rob. We walked past the elevator and the tunnel continued about twenty or thirty feet, then it sloped down to the left, real steep, and continued another hundred feet. There on the ground was a man in a coat, on his knees. He was crying, cursing. ‘Hey, hey, are you okay fella?’ I asked him.

Couldn’t see real good. Flashlights were dim. Hell, couldn’t tell but from his voice what that lump of jacket was on the ground. I didn’t think he understood us, so we scooted in closer. Had to be careful, didn’t know if he had a gun or what, y’know? ‘What’s your name, Mister?’ He got quiet. ‘Jesper,’ he finally said. ‘Jesper Jesperson’. I’ll never forget that name as long as I live. He started mumbling, something crazy. We didn’t understand him.”

Grandpa was shaking. Trembling. His eyes shifted between focus and lost stare. “Not of here,” he said. “Must return... for to sekkrifice.” Frank was not in the Autumn Care nursing home at that

moment. He was in a secret cave under a Danish airfield in Greenland, 1951. He was in a cave below the ocean. Gripping the rail of his hospital bed, he pulled himself forward, looking past Allen like he wasn't even there. "What... did you say?" Frank fell upon the old man with all of his might, holding the man's face into the dim beam of Rob's flashlight. Without hesitation, before Rob could stop him, Frank crushed the old man's skull with the coffee cup in his hand. He followed the fallen man quickly, gripping his hair and smashing his face repeatedly into the icy ground. He didn't stop beating the man until Rob dragged him away and pinned him. "WHAT THE FUCK, FRANK?!!" "YOU KILLED HIM! YOU MURDERED HIM IN COLD BLOOD!!! OH MY GOD FRANK, HE'S DEAD. He's dead." Both men lay on the ground, shaking.

Allen threw himself out of the way as Frank's coffee cup collided to the floor, shattering to pieces. Frank was halfway out of his bed, caught up in the sheet, half mimicking the motion of a downward crushing blow slowly, repeatedly. He stared through the wall, furious and confused, waking from the nightmare. Two nurses rushed into the room. "What happened??" "Oh it's okay," Allen said quickly. "Everything's ok. Grandpa had a spell. He's ok." "You okay, Gramps?" Allen asked loudly, trying to downplay the scene that just unfolded before him. Being loud was his subconscious way of trying to snap his grandfather back to reality. Frank sat back slowly and started to breathe again. After a few deep, full respirations, he finally said, "I'm okay."

Allen was thunderstruck, more by the story than anything. He began to pick up the porcelain fragments off the floor. "Good thing it wasn't full," he said nonchalantly, adding, "Do you ladies have some paper towels?" The senior nurse answered his question with another: "Can I speak with you for a minute please, Sir? Outside?" It was more of a demand than a question. "Yes Ma'am." The two nurses stood outside as Allen emptied coffee cup shards into the tiny trash can beside the dresser. He stepped out and partially closed the door behind him. "You're his kin, right?" Asked the senior nurse directly. "Yes, Maam. I'm his grandson, Allen." Allen extended his hand. As she shook

it, the nurse said, "Listen Mr. Allen, I'm gonna shoot straight. Your grandfather is one of our special cases. He's an incredible man, full of life, full of stories." "Indeed," agreed Allen. "But I need to ask you not get him riled up. Some of his rants become very violent, and it's potentially a danger to himself and others here in the facility. You yourself could've been hurt."

"Yes, Ma'am, I understand—" "I'm not finished, Mr. Allen. Mr. Frank is in a two-person room. We don't have any other rooms available, but we can't put someone else in there with him. If he keeps having outbursts, we may have to have that uncomfortable discussion of discharging him and referring your family to another place. I know for sure that all the homes around here are at capacity. Now earlier I heard you egging him on..." Allen looked puzzled. "Listen," she continued, "All I'm telling you is that when he gets that lost look on his face and he stops making sense, please just give him a hug and see yourself out quietly. Seems like he does best that way." "I completely understand," said Allen. "Sorry about all this." "Oh it's no problem. We deal with Mr. Frank every day. I've been his caretaker for years... he's a good man. Now you've got another hour or so until visiting hours are up, just to let you know." "Thank you Ma'am." "Thank you, Mr. Allen."

Allen took a deep breath and re-entered the room. Frank was looking at him. Allen closed the door and checked his phone battery. Gonna die soon. "You ready?" Asked Frank. Allen sad down, unsure what exactly he was supposed to be ready for. "Sure. Let's go, Gramps."



## Chapter 7

### Adon and E'sprah

The adrenaline had blocked all of Stephen's pain receptors. Without thinking, he wiped the blood from his face and his eyes started to sting. It was then that he noticed his forearms—no, his whole body—was covered in markings made from the iridescent slime paint that was in the bowl. He found a stone vase half-filled with water, and poured some into his hands to rinse his face. He noticed a rag on the small table in the room, drenched it in water, and wiped his face again, blinking his eyes several times. He then ran to the window in the wall through which he'd entered the room and crawled out of it. Standing on the entry platform, he leaned out to survey the crystalline tube on his left through which the pod had traveled. He sensed activity outside. He looked down at the gaping hole where the track ended. He felt trapped. Turning to the right to reenter the room, he stopped. Barely visible in the dim light, blending with the wall, was an anchored ladder that went straight up.

Stephen grabbed the ladder and began climbing higher into the stalactite, instinctively pulling at each successive rung to test its integrity. He could see nothing above, only the dim light that poured through the window below which was becoming increasingly distant with his ascent. Also more noticeable now was the soft green glow that emanated from the markings on his naked body, barely illuminating the ladder rungs in front of him. After climbing perhaps forty of fifty feet, he reached for the next rung of the ladder and it wasn't there, which threw off his rhythm and caused him to draw closer to the ladder, gripping tightly. He felt the pain in his back again. In pitch darkness, he felt around with his free hand and found that he was at the top of a hollow shaft, which opened to a ledge. The light below him looked like nothing more than a vague pinhole of light on a sea of black. He climbed onto the ledge, standing slow in full awareness that his

imbalanced sense of equilibrium might cause him to stumble backward into the hole.

He reached forward and felt nothing, then felt the wall beside him. He stood slowly, reaching above him with his other hand to check for a ceiling he couldn't find. He was inside of some horizontal shaft now, wondering how far it went and where it led exactly. Wary of the possibility of another hole, he felt his way forward in small motions, feeling the ground ahead with his feet before he committed to each step. He moved his hand against the wall for balance and bearing. After what felt like an hour—though it was probably only fifteen minutes or so—Stephen sensed a soft red glow of overhead light. In front of him, another ladder mounted to the wall. This time, he could see that he stood only about four meters from the red ceiling. It was the same type of ceiling, he was certain, from which he hung when he first entered the underworld. He climbed the ladder and felt the ceiling with his hand, noting mentally that he was correct in his assessment.

He could not remove his hand. As instantly as he realized this, combining his current knowledge with the fuzzy details of the last membrane he'd encountered, he panicked and pulled, fighting against the tightly-gripping sludge. He pulled against the top ladder rung until his elbow joints and back popped, then released the rung before his shoulder was dislocated. Unable to judge the membrane's exact distance from his face, he toughed the living goo with his other hand's fingertip and was able to retrieve it quickly. He took one last deep breath and then covered his eyes and nose with his hand as he fully entered the strangely permeable ductile wall.

For the second time today, or this week—as his concept of time had been altered—Stephen found himself in a dark and freezing recess of the lower ocean. He was not in a shaft this time, rather a crevice, and it was not nearly as deep as where he'd originally entered. Scared again for his life, Stephen wasn't sure if he could breathe underwater this time. He barely cracked his pursed lips and saltwater entered his mouth. He panicked toward the floor, hoping to re-enter the dry shaft from which he just came. But once his last toe had passed through the membrane, the way had sealed, and was nothing now but a solid