

THE GIFT OF  
TYLER

THE GIFT OF THE ELEMENTS SERIES  
BY C.S. ELSTON



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*The Gift of Tyler*  
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For my parents, whom I was still living with when I first conceived this story nearly two decades before it saw the light of day and who have gone way above and beyond the call of duty to support me and my crazy dreams.

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*...the Lord God formed the man from the  
dust of the ground and breathed into his  
nostrils the breath of life, and the man  
became a living being.*

- Genesis 2:7



CHAPTER ONE  
***Trippin' In 1972***

1972 was the longest year in history. No, this is not an attack on Richard Nixon or a commentary on either the Winter Olympics in Sapporo, Japan or the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam. Within the context of Coordinated Universal Time, 1972 was literally the longest year ever. Two seconds were added during the 366-day leap year in order to keep the time of day close to the mean solar time. A single second is occasionally added but the two extra seconds added on a leap year officially made 1972 the longest year in history. That, however, was not the most significant thing about 1972.

Whereas some might celebrate the births of celebrities like Shaquille O'Neal and Ben Affleck which occurred that year, and some might mourn the deaths of notables like King Edward VIII and Harry Truman in 1972, something even more amazing happened that year. It happened four times in four different

locations around the world. Each event had only two witnesses: a messenger, and a recipient. No one else was aware of these extraordinary happenings at the time because their impact would not be revealed to the rest of the world for another twenty-five years, and they would be shown in spectacular ways.

The recipient of the message in Seattle, Washington was a sweet, pretty, Caucasian seventeen year-old girl with long brunette hair flowing down her back. Just before it happened, Flower Hirsch, as was her normal routine, was walking west down the North Seattle sidewalk of Roosevelt Way in her pink waitress uniform, having just ended her dinner-rush shift at Eddie's Diner. She lamented the smell of cooking grease and potatoes that penetrated her nostrils with every gust of wind that brushed over her dress or breezed through her hair. She couldn't wait to get out of those clothes and into the shower every time she left the diner. This night was no exception.

As usual, she turned left to enter her parents' driveway. Then she walked the same old sixteen steps uphill toward the white single-car garage door that was outlined by sky blue-painted trim. She turned right onto the concrete path below the living room window, which was framed in bricks. Bricks covered about three quarters of the front of the house if you didn't count the garage door. The rest of the house consisted of windows that were set into either white frames or frames painted with that same sky blue

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color that surrounded the garage door.

She walked eleven paces along the path that was flanked on both sides by eight-inch flowerbeds and ultimately stepped onto the small, concrete, rod iron-framed porch in front of the main entrance. She knew that the next step was to enter the 1,402 square foot rambler shaped like a shoe-box. However, home was not a place she had a strong desire to be. It never really had been but that feeling had grown stronger in recent months and tonight it seemed to be peaking.

This was Saturday night and her parents were throwing one of their typical parties. Flower could make out every note of Iron Butterfly's *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* as it blared from inside. The only thing stronger than the sound of the music was the smell of the marijuana emanating from the same open windows.

She paused on the porch to sigh deeply at the thought of entering a house inhabited by her thirty-five year-old parents and their friends, all of whom had lived every moment of the hippie-era to its fullest and showed no signs of giving it up any time soon. Trying to swallow her desire to escape this home and, with her exhale now complete and the draw of the shower pulling her inside, she reached forward and gripped the cold metal handle on the screen door.

She paused again, feeling like an ex-convict choosing to go back to prison without having committed a single crime. Guilt set

in for a moment. Her home environment wasn't horrible. Her parents were really nice people. She was just tired of being the youngest person in the house and yet, somehow, also feeling like the only adult, especially since she was the only one in the family who technically wasn't an adult yet. She sighed a second time as she pressed her thumb in on the button that unlocked the screen door and slowly swung it open. Taking a third and final deep breath, she stepped in front of the door and let it hit her in the backside, practically unnoticed, as she exhaled and reached for the doorknob on the front door to complete the seemingly excruciating process.

"Flower," a voice called out calmly from behind her. Startled, she spun around to find an elderly woman standing in the driveway who had not been there just seconds ago.

"Oh," Flower exclaimed with her heart suddenly racing. "Oh, my... You... You scared..." Flower studied the woman's straight hair that hung below her waistline in the back and hippie-style clothing, complete with a tie-dyed caftan, and concluded that this must be one of her parents' friends tripping the light fantastic. "Can I help you? Are you a friend of my parents?"

"Should I call you Flower?" The woman inquired. "I'm assuming it's too soon to call you Kathleen."

"Excuse me?" Flower exclaimed with shocked confusion. "How could you possibly know...?" She hadn't told anyone of

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her secret plan to change her name so, how could this woman know what she had just revealed? That was absolutely impossible. Thoughts of a hallucinogenic drug opening the woman's mind and transforming her into some kind of psychic flashed through Flower's brain, even though she knew that wasn't really possible. Her thoughts were interrupted by the woman who began speaking again.

"You're changing your name next week," the woman stated matter-of-factly. "After you turn eighteen, I mean. You just haven't told them yet." She pointed to the house, clearly referring to Flower's parents, before continuing. "You haven't even told them you're moving out."

Growing more perplexed by the second, Flower started to get angry. She didn't even notice that *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* had ended and someone was playing *Fortunate Son* by Creedence Clearwater Revival in the background. "You might be high as a kite but I know I'm not. So, start explaining yourself. Are you going to tell me who you are and how you know what you think you know? Or, am I going to have to call the police?"

"I'm no one of great consequence, Flower. Just a humble messenger."

"The police it is then," Flower said as she turned and reached for the front door. But, once again, she was stopped by the woman's voice.

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“You’ll have a son one day. He’ll be exactly your age when you realize how special he is. You will come to realize that he’s not just a gift to you, but to everyone.”

“You’re crazy,” Flower stated as she spun around and discovered that the woman was already gone. She stared in silence for a moment before finally admitting, “That, or, maybe I am.”

Flower continued to stand, staring in silence for a few additional moments, wondering if she was the one tripping the light fantastic. Was the marijuana in the air laced with something that she had inhaled secondhand causing her to hallucinate what she had just experienced? It would be decades before she found her answer. But, the answer would most definitely come. And, although it wouldn’t involve any narcotics, it would be absolutely mind blowing.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ***1997 & Everything In Between***

To the casual observer, the first several months of 1997 made it appear to be about as normal as any year could be. Of course there were notable deaths, like East Coast rapper The Notorious B.I.G. and NASCAR driver John Nemechek, but every year has that to some extent. 1997 was shaping up to be, by most counts, as common as the Wednesday on which it began. However, 1997 was the year that events prophesied in 1972 to four different people in four different locations around the world, including a young Seattle girl named Flower, would finally happen.

But, for Flower, the events that transpired in the two and a half decades between the prophecy and its fulfillment are what made it all possible. Just as the elderly woman who appeared to Flower in her parents' driveway had predicted, Flower changed her name to Kathleen on her eighteenth birthday. Almost immediately afterward, she spent over half the money she'd saved

working at Eddie's Diner on a blue and yellow 1959 Wartburg 311. She drove home, told her parents she was fed up with being the most mature person in the house and packed her new car with all of her belongings. The fully-loaded car looked like the camping limousine the previous owner had told her it was advertised to be when it was new. She pulled out of the driveway with a mixed sense of fear and relief and headed out to find what she considered a "normal" life.

To her surprise and true to the stereotypical hippie attitude, her parents had said that they thought it was "far out" she was finally showing some free spirit by heading out on her own to find herself. It wasn't exactly the start to her journey that she expected, being far from a normal parental send-off, but she chalked it up as par for the course and hit the road to close that chapter of her life and start a new one.

Her journey ended only three hours from where it began but that was enough. Away, even if it wasn't far away, was still away.

She had stopped for lunch, and only lunch, in a small town called Penuel in the middle of Eastern Washington State. Kathleen stepped out of the car and gave her body a half-hearted stretch as she looked up and down Main Street. It was an old-fashioned, quaint farming town with little activity. She immediately spotted an antique shop and a general store, but no sign of any customers. As she turned 360 degrees, the only places



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she saw with any customers at all were a gas station about a block away and a butcher shop two doors down. Each place had just had one customer. *Not exactly a booming metropolis*, she thought to herself.

She peeked into the window of the diner she had parked in front of. Other than the fact that there were only four customers, it was not so different from the one she had just quit working in. She opened the door, strolled inside, and took a whiff of the familiar bacon scent left over from breakfast. Fearing there were no better options in town, she sat down and ordered a turkey sandwich without even looking at the menu.

It wasn't very busy, considering that it was the lunch hour, so she and the middle-aged waitress, Gwen, talked quite a bit. Kathleen hadn't noticed the *Help Wanted* sign on the way in but Gwen was quick to point it out when she learned of Kathleen's work experience.

Kathleen gave it some thought while she ate. She knew the money she had left would quickly run out if she didn't start bringing some more in right away. Plus, as she looked around the diner, she knew this slower paced environment, while not the big change she was looking for, would be better than the one she had just left.

When she finally agreed to stay and take the job, it was supposed to be temporary. But, for Kathleen, time passed quickly

and that offer ultimately evolved into a new home, a new best friend and mother figure, and employment that lasted eight years until 1980 when her newly established world was turned upside down.

Gwen had a heart attack and died right there behind the diner's counter during the breakfast shift. The diner closed for six months until a man named Val Stafford re-opened it without Kathleen's help.

By then, she had taken a job as a teller at the local bank. She had also briefly let a man named Brett Riggle "wriggle" his way into her life when she was weak from grief over Gwen's passing. He didn't treat her well and the relationship was never meant to last. "Emotionally abusive" is what psychiatrists typically call it – not that Kathleen could ever afford a psychiatrist.

Kathleen was saved from the experience of having to break things off with him though because he vanished immediately upon hearing the word "pregnant." Brett's exit was a welcome one and the start of yet another chapter in her life. She indefinitely gave up dating altogether but finally decided after eight years that Penuel was her permanent home. It would be tougher without Gwen but easier without Brett and baby Tyler's arrival was the best thing that had ever happened to Kathleen.

She, of course, had fears that stemmed from being left alone with the responsibility of raising this innocent child. But, his

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presence also, somehow, gave her comfort. Even the birthing process had been smoother than Kathleen had anticipated. There was severe pain and Tyler came out crying like all babies do. But, the whole thing only took a couple of hours and even Tyler's crying stopped about seven or eight minutes after that. Tyler simply made Kathleen's life better from the start and she knew that he would be her focus and her joy from that point on.

She made banking her career largely because it gave her consistent hours, which were never something she could count on when she was working as a waitress. Once Tyler was born, those consistent hours became vital to her existence. She had to call in favors and trade pies and meals to make sure Tyler was always cared for while she was at work. She even occasionally had to shell out a little cash for a babysitter but it was always worth it. There was nothing she looked forward to more than her time with Tyler.

A lot of moms have favorite phases of their children's upbringing but Kathleen truly felt that each was somehow even better than the last. Probably because Tyler was such a great kid. He was never the smartest or the most athletic. Tyler was just flat out good. He made the right decisions from an early age both at home and at school. Tyler also challenged her in good ways and managed to get her to look at things from other points of view.

From the beginning, Tyler was a gift. And, just as the woman

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in her parents' driveway had predicted twenty-five years earlier, 1997 was the year she would discover that he wasn't just a gift to her, but to the whole world.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ***Tyler***

Tyler was twisted up like an Auntie Anne's soft pretzel as he slept soundly and peacefully in his bed. The song "The Good Life" by the Los Angeles based rock band Weezer was playing from his radio alarm and was doing less to wake him up and more to provide the soundtrack to a fantastic dream. His childhood friend Jessie, who had since become one of the most popular girls in school, was suddenly confessing her eternal, undying, and profoundly immeasurable love for him. Tyler wasn't a morning person but, even more than usual, if he had been aware that this was only a dream, he wouldn't ever have wanted to wake up.

His room was fairly typical for an American teenager in the nineteen-nineties. However, unlike certain peers of his, the posters that lined Tyler's walls were not that of exotic sports cars, athletes or bikini-clad women. His walls were covered in meticulously chosen posters of his very favorite modern rock 'n'

rollers.

The nineties were a great time for a teenager to be from Washington State. The whole country had gone crazy for “The Seattle Sound” and, therefore, most teenagers in Washington loved to claim Seattle as their own – even if it was hundreds of miles away.

“Grunge music,” which took its inspirations from hardcore punk and heavy metal, was characterized by heavily distorted electric guitars and growling vocals that accentuated the angst-filled lyrics of the songs the bands played. It began to emerge in the mid-eighties and was popularized in the early nineties by two primary bands: Mother Love Bone and Nirvana.

Mother Love Bone formed in 1988 but their promising career ended in 1990 when lead singer Andrew Wood died of a heroin overdose. However, the members of the band split up, found two new singers, and formed two new bands: Soundgarden and Pearl Jam.

Nirvana released their first album in 1989 but subsequently left the local music label Sub Pop and signed with major label DGC Records. They released *Nevermind* just a month after Pearl Jam released their immensely popular album *Ten* and only a couple of weeks before Soundgarden released *Badmotorfinger*. The Fall of 1991 was the beginning of the Grunge explosion into pop culture.

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What followed was a wave of bands that pulled from the same sound. Alice in Chains released *Dirt*, Stone Temple Pilots released *Core* and the underground sound began to hit the mainstream. By the end of the nineties, most of the bands were gone but the influence of the Seattle sound would permeate rock music for decades.

Tyler's walls showed signs of that Seattle sound with posters of grunge bands like the originals: Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden; as well as later arrivals like Alice In Chains and The Smashing Pumpkins. But, it also showed the signs of a changing tide with posters of bands like Radiohead, Bush, Oasis and Silverchair who were all from places much further away.

Additionally typical of an American teenager, clothes were strewn all over the room which was also full of the nineties versions of computer stuff, video game accessories, and school books. There were also a few remnants of night snacking such as dirty dishes, half-empty bottles of soda, and completely empty bags of chips that hadn't yet been cleaned up.

A knock on the door and the sound of his mom's voice woke Tyler up, but to call his initial state as being one of "consciousness" might be a stretch.

"Tyler," Kathleen called apprehensively from the other side of his door. "Hurry up or you'll be late for school again."

"That's the idea," Tyler responded as his eyes remained

closed but his hand began searching for his alarm button. “Sleep is so much better than school.”

“I’m sure there are very few people who would argue with you about that,” Kathleen admitted. “But, don’t you still have to show up on time?”

Ultimately, his hand finally hit a shoe on his nightstand and the alarm turned off. As tired as he was, he didn’t even realize he never touched his alarm and therefore had no idea that something extraordinary had just taken place.

“Nah,” Tyler teased. “But thanks for asking.”

“I’m serious,” Kathleen fired back. “The question was rhetorical. I’m not really asking, Tyler. Get up. Now.”

Tyler sat up but still didn’t open his eyes as he responded, “I’m up! Geez! We can’t all be full of sunshine in the morning.”

“Do I need to direct you to the sunshine out your window and the fact that it means you need to move that lazy butt of yours?”

“I’m not lazy! You’re just interrupting a really good dream...”

“Will telling me about it help you wake up?”

After a brief pause in which Tyler faced the reality of admitting his feelings for Jesse which no one but he considered a secret, “I already said I’m up! Let me get ready in peace, will ya?”

“Fine. But, I need to hear movement in there,” Kathleen told



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him with not-so-subtle skepticism infused into her voice.

Ready to put on a show, Tyler laid back down. He repeatedly kicked and punched his bed like a toddler pitching a hissy fit before asking, “How’s that?”

“A good start. Move it, or lose it, kid.”

“I’m moving! Holy cow...”

Vigorously rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and opening them wide in an overstated expanse meant to speed up the process of adjusting from dark to light, Tyler yawned and stretched his way to a standing position with absolutely no enthusiasm whatsoever. He was an appealing looking kid but not the traditionally popular type. Although he was well liked, with no athletic affiliations or anything equivalent, he was living a conventional middle-of-the-road high school existence. All in all, it was a perfectly adequate way to go. Things could have been much worse. But, it wasn’t exactly ideal either. Certainly, there were things in his life he would change if he could. If he had his druthers, he would probably start by making the dream from which he had just been so rudely interrupted, a reality.

Tyler looked around the room as his eyes gained focus and started putting his school books in his backpack. He searched the disaster area for clean clothes and, after rounding up some jeans and a hoodie, opened the door and stepped out into the hallway to head for the bathroom.

After his “morning relief” session, Tyler stood in front of the sink and gave himself a “hobo shower” to save time. He leaned down and got his hair wet before throwing gel into it and re-styling it, used a washcloth and soap to clean his armpits before re-deodorizing, and finished up by brushing his teeth.

He put his clean clothes on before returning to his room for his backpack, shoes and socks. He decided to throw a plaid shirt on over his hoodie and, short of having breakfast, could then consider himself ready for the day.

However, there was no way for Tyler to truly be ready because he couldn’t possibly know how this day would absolutely change everything he had ever known about his entire existence. The shoe alarm incident that had completely escaped his notice would have been a preview of what was to come on the same scale as a two second movie trailer would be for a three and a half hour epic adventure. In other words, the snowflake that had just fallen would soon be rolling itself into a mountain-sized snowball.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ***Breakfast Tsunami***

Kathleen had grown into a conservative-looking but very attractive forty-two year-old woman. Her hair was still long but not as long as it had been when she was a seventeen year-old girl. Her hair had more body now and she dressed and did her make up in a manner specifically designed to present a professional appearance. It was a notch above the effort put out by the other employees of the small town bank and may have been a subconscious way of holding on to a piece of the big city she had left behind twenty-five years earlier.

She didn't have to be at the bank for over an hour so, she found herself scrambling eggs in a metal frying pan on the stovetop. She used a wooden spoon so she didn't scratch the non-stick surface but her lifting and folding movement had slowed down considerably in the last couple of minutes. Her focus was now divided between stirring the eggs and the small, muted television set on the kitchen counter displaying a

“breaking news story” about a tsunami off the coast of Japan.

The old familiar smell of the diners she used to work in filled the air but it no longer bothered her like it once did. In fact, with her attention already divided this morning, the smell was barely registering in her brain and certainly wasn’t bringing up any nostalgia.

Tyler tottered into the kitchen and sat down in front of the table where he already had a place setting waiting for him, along with a carton of orange juice, a piece of toast and several slices of applewood smoked bacon. This was all part of the routine the two of them had established a long time ago.

“Good morning sleepy head,” Kathleen teased as she snapped out of her trance, spun around and slid some eggs onto his plate. She followed the action up by sliding the remainder of the scrambled eggs onto her own plate at the place setting next to his.

“What’s going on?” Tyler asked as he finished pouring his orange juice and set the carton down, pointing to the television with his other hand.

“Oh, a huge tsunami off the coast of Japan. They’re calling it a miracle.”

“What?” Tyler inquired. “How could a disaster be a miracle?”

“There was virtually no disaster,” Kathleen declared. “That’s the whole point.”

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“Okay,” Tyler said hesitantly as he tried to wade through the waves of confusion. “Whenever you’re ready, you can now start making sense.”

“No...”

“No? Meaning, you have no intention of making sense?”

“Let me finish,” Kathleen fought back. “The waves were heading right for Tokyo and they never made it past the shoreline. They’re estimating that the number of lives saved could be as many as a hundred thousand.”

Still confused, Tyler continued pressing. “How did the waves not go beyond the shoreline?”

“No one knows,” Kathleen persisted. “But, some people are claiming to have seen a teenaged girl on the beach with her arms stretched out and they say it looked like she was actually holding the waves back.”

“What?”

“Seriously. Then the wall of water crashed down and took her out to sea. So, the death toll dropped from a hundred thousand to one.”

“Get out of here.”

“I will not. This is my kitchen and I’m just telling you what they said,” Kathleen insisted before noticing something was missing from her son’s face. “Hey, you’re not wearing your glasses.”

“I’m not?”

“Don’t be a smart Alec.”

“I guess I forgot,” Tyler supposed with sincere bewilderment.

“Stop it. I told you, you’d look better in those contacts I bought you.”

Finally taking a bite of his scrambled eggs, Tyler confessed. “I’m not wearing any contacts either.”

“What do you mean?” Kathleen asked as she stood behind her chair and set her butter and jam smothered toast down on her plate after taking a bite out of it.

“I mean there are no vision enhancing devices on my eyes of any kind.”

“Then why aren’t you squinting?”

“I don’t know. But, I can see just fine.”

“I guess we have a miracle of our own brewing right here, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

Staring at her son without expression, Kathleen finally smacked him playfully on the shoulder and exclaimed, “Stop it. That’s impossible, Tyler.”

“Obviously not. Weird though, huh?”

“Eyes don’t get better,” Kathleen maintained while sitting down and leaning forward to study Tyler’s eyes. “They get worse.

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Trust me. I go in every year and walk out with a new prescription.”

“I’m aware of the norm on this subject, mom. I’ve been having the same experience for about five years now, myself.”

“You have to be wearing contacts.”

“Mom,” Tyler said in frustration. “I told you, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You have to be. You just don’t want to admit I was right.”

“Right about what?” Tyler questioned.

“About how much better you look without your glasses on.”

Tyler was tired of putting up the fight so he finally caved in and told a little white lie, mostly to put his mom’s mind at ease.

“Alright fine. I’m wearing contacts.”

“I knew it. You can barely even see them. Nice. You really do look good.”

“Thanks,” Tyler said as he let the subject go and looked back at the TV set on the counter. He allowed his mind to wander, contemplating both what had just happened to him and what he was seeing played out on the television. He couldn’t help but think about the possibility of miracles. This wasn’t something he had previously given a lot of thought to. He certainly believed in God so, he felt like he had to believe miracles were possible. But, he had never witnessed one himself and wasn’t sure they still happened.

However, something he had once read by C.S. Lewis popped into his mind. He wasn't even sure where he'd read it. Only that he had. The C.S. Lewis books he actually remembered reading back when he was a kid were the Chronicles of Narnia series. Those were about witches, fauns and talking beavers, which would be a miracle Tyler wouldn't mind witnessing. But, the statement that he was remembering, he didn't believe had come from any of those books. C.S. Lewis, somewhere, had written something about the fact that the extraordinary cannot be recognized until you have first discovered what is ordinary. That belief in miracles did not depend on an ignorance of the laws of nature. On the contrary, it is only possible to the extent that those laws are known. Or, at least, he believed it was something close to that. That was, the general idea anyway.

Tyler thought about it for a moment or two while he nibbled on his deliciously salty bacon. Perhaps the impossible was only impossible because no one had yet discovered that it was actually possible. If that were true, would that make everything possible? And, if everything was possible, would nothing be a miracle? Or, would everything be a miracle? *This philosophical hooley is way too deep for breakfast*, he ultimately decided as he finally let go of his unexplainable eyesight improvement and brushed off the tsunami incident as false hearsay with no clue as to how much stranger this day would soon become.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***High School***

With Tyler behind the wheel, a red 1988 Chevrolet Cheyenne pickup truck rolled into the high school parking lot and into a parking space in the second row of vehicles all belonging to students. This parking lot was located on the South side of the building that contained the school's offices while the staff parking lot, which was much smaller, was located around the corner on the East side of the same building.

Tyler's truck was something he truly appreciated. In part, he appreciated it because it symbolized his independence and freedom as well as a stepping-stone into adulthood. But, even more so, his appreciation came from the way in which he had obtained the truck. About six months before his sixteenth birthday, his mom had informed Tyler that she would come up with the money to pay for half of whatever vehicle he decided he wanted. That meant that Tyler had to come up with the other

half. So, he started taking whatever odd jobs a fifteen year-old boy could find. He mowed lawns, painted fences and even milked some cows. When he turned sixteen, he hadn't saved enough to be satisfied. So, he kept working and about eight months later he had saved almost \$3,400. Kathleen was so impressed that she rounded up so he had an even \$7,000 to go shopping with. Mr. Roberge, the farmer for whom Tyler had milked the cows, cut his price on the truck he was selling by \$999 because he recognized that Tyler was a good kid. He had been driving the red Cheyenne ever since.

Only seconds behind Tyler and his truck was his best friend, Preston, an unusual eighteen year-old who could be an attractive young man if he stopped trying so hard to keep up with trends while simultaneously putting far too much effort into being unique. Travelling at a velocity just beyond the line that caps any reasonable safety standards, Preston drove into the adjacent parking space on Tyler's left-hand side and came to an abrupt stop with a brief screech of the tires. He looked over at Tyler for approval and caught his friend's eye line.

Tyler gave Preston a wave with his right hand without any acknowledgment of the obnoxious driving maneuvers. He reached for the door handle with his left hand, not noticing that the handle had positioned itself into his hand completely on its own. Unaware that the phenomena were continuing to happen

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wherever he went that morning, Tyler stepped out of his truck and grabbed his backpack from the uncovered bed.

Like the bottom of a teenager's skateboard, Preston's light blue 1982 Renault Fuego was plastered with every lame bumper sticker imaginable from *I Love It When They Call Me Big Papa* to *Fat People Are Harder To Kidnap*. Preston leapt out of his clunky beater of a car in his wide-leg carpenter pants that sagged off his backside, a Tommy Hilfiger American flag sweatshirt, a crooked Seattle SuperSonics baseball cap, and fake Buddy Holly frames with no glass in them. He had nothing to carry and immediately greeted Tyler with merriment. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Hey," Tyler responded.

"Sleep well?"

"Once you finally let me hang up the phone around three o'clock in the morning, yeah, I did. Thanks."

"Come on," Preston taunted. "You love it. If I didn't shower you with so much attention, who would? Huh?"

"My mom," Tyler deadpanned as he put his arms through his backpack straps.

"But I'm better at it."

"Debatable."

"Ouch. That really hurts. I've got her in the looks department though, right?"

"Absolutely not."

“Ow! You’re killin’ me here, man. Give me something. Am I at least more entertaining?”

“Yeah,” Tyler conceded. “I think you have her on that one.”

“Finally. This lady’s packin’ some mad skills. She’s harder to bring down than a nun’s skirt.”

“Easy,” Tyler responded. “You’re crossing a couple of lines there.”

“What lines?”

“That’s bordering on sacrilegious and you’re talking about my mom.”

“It’s a compliment to both. The nun is being faithful to her sacred vow and your mom is an amazing woman.”

“Okay. Good call. And, you’re right, you are more entertaining.”

“Of course I’m right. I’m always right. I’m a freaking Albert Einstein meets Sigmund Freud genius over here. I’ve got it all balled up into one big Preston.”

“You’re one big somethin’ alright,” Tyler said as he chuckled to himself and nodded his head toward Preston’s car. “How’s she holdin’ up?”

“My hooptie?”

“Your car.”

“My hooptie,” Preston agreed. “She’s good. It’s like a long, healthy marriage.”

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“You’ve barely had her two years.”

“Exactly. I see the younger hotter models but I’m not even considering trading her in because she already knows how I like to ride.”

“Again you’ve barely had her two years,” Tyler told his friend as he continued to chuckle.

“That’s twice as long you’ve had your truck, hombre. You should be coming to me for marriage advice.”

“Fair enough,” Tyler conceded. “Hombre, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“You know, I might like you more if you were Mexican.”

“You love me because I’m like the United Nations. Best of all cultures. All worlds.”

“Best, or worst?” Tyler asked, jokingly, while he dropped his head and looked down at the pavement.

“That’s cold, man.” Preston feigned emotional scarring with a dramatic flair.

“You know I’m kidding,” Tyler reassured him half-heartedly, knowing they were both in on the joke, as he kicked a small rock. He quickly looked up again without realizing that the rock he’d kicked rolled through the parking lot, hopped a curb and flower bed, then bounced across the street and disappeared in the field on the other side of it. Instead, Tyler spotted a cocky jock named Graham pulling into the parking lot in his flashy black 1995

Chevrolet Camaro Z-28. Tyler despised Graham but, to make matters worse, in the passenger seat was his Jessie, the girl he'd been in love with for nearly a decade. She was a beautiful, smart, sweet eighteen year-old girl who broke his heart every single day. Seeing her with Graham now was a painful reminder that the dream he was having when he woke up this morning was exactly that: a dream. But, it was a really good dream. It included every component he needed in a dream to place it in the upper echelon of dreams. Of course, the list of components was a short one. Jessie was actually the only item on it. He briefly wished he could go home, crawl back into bed, and re-enter that dream. The only problem with that, if it were possible, is that he would want to live in that dream forever.

“Hey,” Preston started, “dig the contacts.”

Distracted, Tyler watched as Graham parked just a few cars away. As Jessie was getting out of the passenger side of the car, Tyler was probably the only one who took note of the fact that she had an unusually urban upscale look for a teenager in a small farming town. She was gorgeous. Of course he noticed.

Graham suddenly reached over and pulled her back inside of the Camaro to kiss her. It wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning yet and she'd already broken Tyler's heart again. “Yeah,” Tyler finally responded to Preston, “thanks.”

“You're so pretty,” Preston mocked. Trying to figure out

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what was distracting Tyler, he started to ask, “What are you staring...” But, he quickly caught on and continued, “Oh. Don’t worry about those two, mate.”

“Mate?” Tyler finally snapped out of his trance. “What are you Australian all of a sudden?”

“What’s wrong with mate?”

“Nothing. If you’re Australian.”

“United Nations. Come on,” Preston proposed as he tried to change the subject. “Let’s get inside before Graham decides to chamois his car with our faces.”

The subject change was successful and into the high school they went.

“You hear about that tsunami in Japan?” Tyler asked.

“Yeah,” Preston concurred. “Whack, right?”

“Doesn’t get much weirder than that.”

And yet, it would soon get much, much stranger.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Earth Science*

Mr. Russell, a porky man in his sixties, sported a bald head surrounded by salt and pepper hair wrapped around the sides and back like a horseshoe. Cementing the nerd-vibe, he accented his face with thick horn-rimmed glasses and a mustache that would make Tom Selleck jealous.

On this day, as was true approximately one hundred and eighty days out of the calendar year, Mr. Russell lectured at the front of a fairly typical nineteen-nineties high school science classroom. The room was complete with standard epoxy resin counter tops and polyolefin sinks instead of the desks that one would find in other types of classrooms. To complete the scientific learning experience the students, of course, sat on stools instead of in chairs. The key physical clues as to the subject of the lesson on that particular day were the three rocks resting on the counter top in front of each individual student.



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“There are three different great classes of rocks,” Mr. Russell instructed. “Each class is represented by the three rocks you have in front of you. On your left, you have a sedimentary rock. In the middle, is an igneous rock. And, finally, on the right, is a metamorphic rock.”

While most of the students stared down at their rocks, either interested in what Mr. Russell was teaching or pretending to be, Tyler and Preston sat in the back of the room talking to each other. They were paying little attention to anything but their own conversation and no attention at all to Mr. Russell.

“Did you see the shirt Virginia Leigh is wearing today?” Preston asked while holding his hands out in front of him to make the international sign for big boobs. “Boom! Yeah, she was out sick last week. Right. Doctor’s appointment for sure. Not a general practitioner though. Quite an improvement I have to say, too. Like an upgraded Ginger Spice. I’ll tell you what I want – what I really, really want. Yes, Virginia. That was totally worth the wait. Am I right?”

Mr. Russell had stopped lecturing to watch Preston. Just before Tyler could inquire as to exactly who it was that Preston thought had been waiting for Virginia Leigh’s operation, Mr. Russell made an inquiry of his own. “Is there something you want to share with the class, Preston?”

Had Virginia been in the classroom, Preston probably

would have considered her feelings enough to keep his mouth shut. However, Virginia wasn't present. So, without hesitating, Preston responded, "We were just talking about the new set of twins Virginia Leigh adopted while she was out sick last week."

Almost instantaneously, Mr. Russell was the only one in the classroom who was not laughing. Everyone, including Mr. Russell, knew exactly what Preston was referring to and Preston, of course, ate the attention up.

"Alright," Mr. Russell started in, in an attempt to regain control of his class by removing the distraction. "Step out in the hall, Preston. I need to have a word with you. Or, more likely, several words."

Preston made it to his feet and headed for the door with pride as some of the laughter turned into a collective "Ooh" sound, in response to the fact that the class recognized Preston had gotten himself into trouble. Preston, on the other hand, continued to perform for his fellow students as laughter reclaimed its position as the dominant sound among his classmates. "Sure. You're probably thinking what I'm thinking. We should do an experiment on the fun-bags. Test the pressure or somethin'. You can put me in charge, Mr. Russell. I'm the right man for the job." Preston went back to making the international sign for boobs but cupped his hands much smaller as he was talking. "Too bad we don't have the before statistics to measure

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against the after.” He expanded the cups to show the growth pattern of Virginia Leigh’s assets. “All in the name of science, right? I think this is really smart of you, Mr. Russell. This is going to get the students a lot more engaged in science. You might win the teacher of the year award for this. They have that, right? You could even find yourself on the cover of *Educator Monthly*... If, of course, that’s a real thing.”

The entire classroom was hysterically cracking up with laughter as Mr. Russell and Preston stepped out into the hallway and the door closed behind them. The class watched through the tall but narrow window in the door as Mr. Russell indignantly scolded Preston.

Tyler was still chuckling as he looked down at his rocks. He casually reached forward to pick the igneous rock up. It briefly wiggled and then leapt into his hand. Startled, he sat back and glanced around the room to make sure no one else had seen it. Lucky for him, they were all preoccupied with *The Preston Show* going on in the hallway.

Setting the rock down, Tyler glanced around the room again to make sure no one was looking in his direction. He focused on the rock and tried to repeat the incident. Nothing happened. *Did I imagine it?* He found himself wondering as he continued to stare at the rock.

Suddenly, it leapt into his hand again and he quickly

scanned the room. *Phew*, he thought. *Still no gamblers*. He set it down and looked at the other two rocks. He reached forward and concentrated on the sedimentary rock. Almost immediately, the rock leapt into his hand the same way the igneous rock had. He quickly set that one down, too. He looked around the room again, as everyone else continued to watch Preston and Mr. Russell. Tyler tried like crazy not to think about the rocks anymore, glancing back at them a couple of times like someone trying to keep their eyes off of the giant wart on the nose of the person they're talking to.

Fear set in as he thought about his vision being restored overnight and added the rocks to his short mental list of odd happenings since he woke up this morning. The movie "Phenomenon", which he'd seen a year earlier at the local, one-screen movie theater, popped abruptly into his mind. The film starred John Travolta, Kyra Sedgwick, Forest Whitaker and Robert Duvall. Travolta's character had a fatal tumor on his brain that made some amazing things happen to him including super-intelligence and the same kind of telekinesis that Tyler was now experiencing with the rock. *Am I dying?* he suddenly wondered with his emotions teetering on panic. *I don't feel any smarter. Maybe that's a good thing*, he thought, trying to calm himself down.

Mr. Russell re-entered the classroom without Preston who gave everyone a quick wave as he started down the hallway

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on his way to the principal's office.

With the distraction of *The Preston Show* now over, Tyler quickly folded his hands in his lap and stared straight ahead to make sure nothing else happened that someone could bear witness to.

Looking down at his notes, Mr. Russell asked, "Now, where was I?"

"Ta-tas," a student announced to more chuckles.

"Alright," Mr. Russell started without any sign of amusement. "Who's funny guy number two? You people must really want to keep Principal McClean busy today. I assure you, he does not like having his time taken up with this kind of nonsensical behavior."

The only student in the classroom not giggling was Tyler.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ***Roid Rage***

The crowd funneled out of Mr. Russell's classroom, continuing to talk and laugh about the show Preston had just put on. Several of the students were even quoting Preston's suggestion of experiments and mimicking his demonstrative hand motions. From an outside perspective, one would think they had just been let out of a hilarious movie rather than an earth science class. Such was life in a world lived under the Preston effect.

At the back of the pack, still not laughing at all, was Preston's best friend, Tyler. He broke off from the crowd and walked quietly down the hallway to his locker. Deep concern over the incident with the rocks was still consuming his thoughts. On any other day, he would have laughed about Preston's antics as much as the rest of his classmates. After all, Preston had been his best friend almost his whole life for good reason. Today, however,

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was not like any other day he had ever experienced. At this moment, Preston wasn't even on his mind. While everyone else was thinking and talking about Preston, Tyler was understandably preoccupied with what was happening to him and he could only hope that he was the sole witness to the unexplainable events he had just experienced.

In the twenty-seven seconds it took for Tyler to reach his locker, he was able to ask himself some huge philosophical questions like *How and why did this happen to me?* but he was also thinking about all of the comic books he had read while growing up. The characters in those books were often humans who developed superpowers because they had been involved in some kind of an accident. But, nothing like that had happened to Tyler. This made it seem less random, which brought him right back to the questions *How and why did this happen to me?*

Standing in front of his locker, Tyler stared at the combination lock attached to the handle for a few seconds with no answers and no one to talk to. It was a frightening feeling. At least, it was frightening until his thoughts shifted gears and he began to ponder the immediate possibilities.

He glanced around to make sure no one was watching and then looked back at the lock. *Perhaps it's time for another test,* he thought before glancing around again, just to make sure that the coast was still clear. He slowly reached for the lock and it wiggled

a bit, just like the igneous rock had. But, unlike the quick leap the rock had taken, the lock gradually rose from its resting position against the locker, signaling Tyler's gain of a bit more control. He deliberately lifted his hand up between the lock and the locker and watched as the lock gently dropped itself right into his hand.

Tyler exhaled and swallowed nervously as he looked around again, relieved and satisfied that no one had noticed. Gaining confidence, he lifted his other hand over the dial like he was going to turn it. But, before he even touched it, he decided to try something else. Sure enough, it began to turn for him. As Tyler's eyes slowly widened, the lock dialed the entire combination and then unlocked. He let go and jumped back, unsure if he should be excited or terrified; as the unlocked lock clanged noisily back down against the locker.

He stared at it for a moment, then looked around with a panicked feeling. A couple of students gave him a funny look, not because they knew what was happening, but because the noise had drawn their attention to the fact that Tyler was acting so strangely. He brushed it off and cautiously approached his locker again. He removed the lock and opened the door as a grin began to peek out of the corners of his mouth.

Suddenly, his moment of triumph was interrupted by a hand on his back that completely startled him. He nearly jumped out of his socks like someone in a cartoon. He spun around to find



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Graham with two of his goons, Dan and Kevin, in tow.

“Hey Bert, where’s Ernie?” Graham asked, laughing hard at his own joke.

“Always a pleasure Graham,” Tyler responded, sarcastically. “Can I help you with something, or...?”

The smirk on Graham’s face had quickly disappeared. “Yeah, you can stop looking at my girlfriend,” he shouted venomously.

“Didn’t realize I was.” Tyler stated as he began to glance around. “In fact, I don’t see Jessie anywhere.”

Graham slammed Tyler up against his locker. “Don’t get smart with me, Tommy.”

“Tyler. And, I wasn’t. I honestly didn’t...”

He was interrupted when Jessie ran up and tried to push Graham off of him. “Leave him alone, Graham.”

Graham suddenly let go of Tyler and turned to Jessie with a fake smile on his face.

“Found her,” Tyler said, leaning toward Graham and pointing at Jessie.

After flashing Tyler a quick look to let him know he didn’t appreciate the humor, Graham turned back toward Jessie to smooth things over. “Hey, baby. We were just having a chat. Weren’t we, Tommy?”

“Yeah,” Tyler answered. “Grimace and I... We were just having a chat. Always nice catching up.”

Graham was furious at the fake name game Tyler had joined him in and the fact that Tyler's chosen name compared him to a fat, purple blob from the McDonald's gang. But, he couldn't do a thing about it. Instead, he swallowed hard as he stared at Tyler before turning his attention back to Jessie. "See," he exclaimed. "Just talkin'."

"Fine," Jessie imparted. "Then walk away."

"Yeah," Graham conceded. "Sure. I'm goin'." He kissed Jessie on the cheek, staring at Tyler to send a message of ownership, before walking away. "See you at lunch."

"See you at lunch," Jessie responded while watching him leave before turning her attention to Tyler. "Are you okay?"

"Never been better," Tyler responded, trying to hide the emotion he felt which fell somewhere between embarrassment and love on his imaginary psychological chart.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what gets into him sometimes."

"Probably steroids," Tyler uttered, only half joking. "I'm fine, Jessie. Really."

"Okay," Jessie replied before walking away with a bit of sorrow in her expression.

She was quickly replaced by Preston's arrival. "What happened? You look bricked. You're not gonna shout at your shoes, are ya?"

"Let it go, Preston," Tyler responded with a deep sadness

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that had nothing to do with Preston and everything to do with Jessie. He exchanged his books and locked his locker – the same way he had done a thousand times and without resorting to any of the new tricks he was learning.

“Was Graham here?” Preston inquired, still trying to get to the bottom of Tyler’s mood. “Did he rush you? We’ve gotta nuke that cheese-head.”

“I’ll see you at lunch,” Tyler said as he walked away.

“We’ll take care of this, Tyler,” Preston announced as he watched his friend go. “Me and you. I promise.” What Preston, unfortunately, didn’t realize was that Tyler had suddenly found himself under a mountain of problems, not one of which Preston could possibly find a way to fix.

CHAPTER EIGHT  
***With Eyes To See...***

The schoolyard was packed with students eating their lunches. There were also a handful of teachers scattered about, supervising and making sure that peace and order were kept as much as could be reasonably expected. Especially at a small town public high school in the second half of the nineteen nineties.

Tyler and Preston sat underneath a tree, eating Mexican food from the school cafeteria, and Preston was continuing to have trouble letting go of the earlier situation with Graham. “I still can’t believe that cob was joanin’ you like that.”

“Cob?” Tyler asked, puzzled. “Like, the salad or like corn on the...?”

“Alright,” Preston admitted, “that one I made up. Works though, right?”

“Not even a little bit,” Tyler said. “And, joanin’s kind of ten years ago, don’t you think?”

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“Timeless,” Preston insisted. “Just like it’s namesake Joan Rivers. And stop avoiding the subject. Why do you think that duker was joanin’ you so hard today?”

“Who knows?” Tyler imparted. “It’s not the first time. Duker I like, by the way. Describes Graham to a tee. The only person I can think of that I’d like to flush down the toilet.”

“Thank you,” Preston said, accepting the praise. “And, yes, it does and I would, too. But, back to today. I know he’s slammed you before. But, never without reason.”

“What reason did he have before?”

“Well, you know, it’s always been when he caught you scamming on Jessie. I thought we got out of there before he saw you bird-dogging this morning.”

“I wasn’t bird... When have I ever scammed on Jessie? Scamming involves flirting and that requires speaking. Until today, we haven’t said more than ten words to each other since fifth grade.”

“Duly noted,” Preston declared. “But, you do gaze. And flirting is totally possible without speech. Otherwise mutes would never breed. Wait, you two talked today?”

“Yeah, she was the intermission between Graham and you.”

“That’s way more interesting than popcorn and jujubes in the lobby.”

“When was the last time the movies had an intermission like

that?”

“Joan Rivers isn’t the only thing that’s timeless, Tyler. Roll with it. So, did Jesse come to your rescue or somethin’?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“It totally was. No wonder you looked so bricked.”

“I said it wasn’t like that.”

“Maybe not exactly like that. Because she’s not the shining knight and you’re no damsel. But, it was close and it still threw you. Totally understandable. I get it. Just keep in mind the obvious fact that we’re not in fifth grade anymore. I know it’s hard to separate the fact that the three of us were once best friends. But, she grew up, got hot, and bought the new and improved model from the friends aisle. Granted, it looks like her department store was more K-Mart and less Nordstrom but, I got over it and so did she. You’re last in line, bro. And, it’s been your turn for about half a decade now. Come on. Join the party of the real. Water’s warm.”

“You’re crazy, man. I mean it. I can’t keep up.”

“You can’t keep up? I’m not crazy. You’re crazy. You’re straight up loco in amor. I mean, we’ve established that she got hot. That’s obvious. Whole school knows that. So, the lure is understandable. But, she flew the coup and left us to starve. Long time ago. Time to wake up and smell the trail of pretty perfume that leads into the forest of despair and then turn and run as fast

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as you can in the other direction before you get eaten by the prowling ravenous monsters.”

“Prowling ravenous monsters? What are you talking about, man? You’ve completely lost me. But, I think it sounds like you’re maybe the one that’s in love with her.”

“No way,” Preston expressed before pondering a moment and then coming up with a revelation. “Her mom’s crazy hot though.”

“Oh, my...” Tyler whispered as he stared off in the distance.

“What? You just think it’s gross because you want her to be your mother-in-law.”

“I think you’re gettin’ a little ahead of yourself there, don’t you?”

“Maybe. But, she is hot and you know it’s true. She always has been. I swear she just keeps getting better. She’s aging like a perfect Pinot Noir. Awesome.”

“Like you’ve ever had a Pinot Noir,” Tyler said, under his breath, as his eyes slowly scanned the school grounds. His stare was contemplative, with thoughts ranging from his relationship with Jesse as kids, and the lack thereof over the last decade, to the events of that very day. The contemplation lasted until he spotted two people several hundred yards away. They suddenly jumped into focus like they were five feet in front of him. It was Graham and Jessie and they were fighting over the fact that she

had rushed to Tyler's defense in the hallway. "Jessie," Tyler said at a volume barely audible.

Jessie tried to apologize but Graham pushed her away so hard that she fell to the perfectly green grass and landed on her back, causing her eyes to bulge as she tried to catch her breath.

"No, not Jessie," Preston stated, oblivious to what Tyler was actually referring to. "Jessie's scorching hot mom. Are you even listening to me? You've got a one-track mind, bro. Jessie, Jessie, Jessie. All the time. Making Jessie a mantra won't make Jessie loving you a reality. I hope you know that."

"Leave her alone," Tyler stated emphatically as he got to his feet.

"Leave her alone?" Preston asked as he stared at his friend, confused as to why Tyler was now standing up. "Is my attraction to her mom hurting her in some way? Or, do you just need her to be the damsel in distress now so you can be the knight in shining armor? Maybe you're the one that needs to leave her alone. Ever think about that? You're the one with the crazy obsession, dude. And, what the heck are you lookin' at over there?" Preston asked, finally realizing they might not be on the same page. He looked to see what Tyler was staring at. "What's down there, fry-daddy?"

Graham grabbed Jessie by the arm, hard, and pulled her to her feet. He continued to scold her for sticking up for Tyler. She



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was clearly scared and in pain.

“He’s hurting her,” Tyler announced quietly but angrily.

Preston was still looking but it was so far away he couldn’t tell exactly what it was he was looking at. “What are you talking about, buddy? Someone’s actually, physically hurting Jessie? Tell me what you’re talking about. Who’s hurting her? And why do I feel like I’m talkin’ to Lassie?”

“Graham.”

“Graham’s hurting her? Oh, I’ll put the smack down on his A-bomb. You rush him and I’ll come in behind you for the kill. Wait. Where? Where do you see this, Joe Broseph?”

“Football field.”

“What?” Preston probed. “I think I can see something down there but, I can’t tell what it is. There’s no way you can see that far.”

“Something weird is happening to me,” Tyler admitted.

“No kidding.”

“I can’t explain it.”

“I can explain it,” Preston told him while glancing at Tyler’s lunch and then back up at Tyler himself. “You’re hallucinating, homie. Maybe you got a bad burrito.”

“I’m not hallucinating. I’ve got to do somethin’.”

“Like what?”

“What I should’ve done a long time ago. This ends now.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Escalation*

Like a heavy square rock would awkwardly emerge from the quick release of a slingshot, Tyler took off as fast as any non-athletic teenaged boy possibly could. He raced toward the football field with determination in every pump of his arms, retribution in the pounding of every step, and a decade of unrequited love in every breath of air in his lungs. This was finally his moment to take a stand both against Graham and for Jessie, and he was going to take full advantage of it regardless of the consequences.

“What you should have...” Preston pondered momentarily while he sat alone in the confusing wake of Tyler’s sudden departure. “What does that mean?” Finally, Preston realized that Tyler meant he was about to confront Graham. He still couldn’t figure out how Tyler knew Graham and Jessie were even on the football field. Fear immediately set in and quickly escalated to a

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state of panic that arrived with all the subtlety of the school's marching band. "Oh, no you don't. That smack down thing was just an act. We can't rush... Tyler, come back. It's suicide, man. Tyler! TYLER!"

Preston's head swiveled in flustered uncertainty as Tyler pressed on, so focused he didn't even hear his friend's incessant yelling. Preston finally hurried over to a tall and lanky teacher with thin-framed glasses and a clean-shaven face. "Mr. Brooks!" Preston shouted. "Graham is going to beat the crap out of both Tyler and Jessie."

"What?" Mr. Brooks asked with puzzlement quickly shifting into a deep concern. "Wait. What? What's going on? A fight?"

"They're down on the football field," Preston exclaimed. "Just check it out before somebody dies."

"You know," Mr. Brooks hesitated, having had a few seconds to think about who he was talking to, "you've tricked me before, Preston. Are you trying to get me to leave the area so you can pull one of your pranks? You know, I still get flack from pretty much the entire staff about the time you convinced me that the vending machines had all-

"Mr. Brooks..." Preston interrupted, begging with a discernable sincerity that was rarely seen on his typically cunning face. "Please."

Mr. Brooks quickly lifted a walkie-talkie to his mouth. He

had thought of a way to maintain his post while still checking out the fight. But, he was still a bit wary of Preston and his motivations. So, before triggering the microphone, he gave Preston one more stern warning: “You make me regret this even a little bit, Preston, and I’ll have you cleaning toilets with a toothbrush for detention until you graduate. I might even try to find a way to turn it into a Summer program for all the stunts you pulled before.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Bailey, are you available?”

From the other end of the walkie-talkie, Bailey quickly responded, “Sure. Who’s this and what’s up?”

“This is Carl Brooks. I’ve got a possible conflict on the football field. Can you look into it for me?”

“I’m on it.”

“Thanks, Mr. Brooks.” Preston said, earnestly, before running off toward the football field to catch up with Tyler.

Meanwhile, Tyler arrived at the scene of the ongoing confrontation. He stared single-mindedly at Graham and Jessie as he stepped out onto the football field just in time to watch Graham pull Jessie to within an inch of his chest as he continued to yell at her.

“I swear to God,” Graham shouted maliciously, “if you ever embarrass me in front of my friends like that again I’ll—“

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“You’ll what?” Tyler interrupted to Graham’s surprise. “You’ll what, Graham? Are you threatening to hurt her?”

Graham let go of Jessie with a little shove and turned toward Tyler, delighted to have another chance to pummel his face in, as Jessie stumbled a few steps, trying to catch her balance. “Oh, speak of the devil...” Graham began. “She came to your rescue this morning and now you’re coming to hers. How cute. You’re a real match made in heaven, aren’t you? How freaking adorable. You’re just like a couple of precious little puppies. I hope you two have had fun because your playtime is over. Now it’s my turn. And, I’ve been waiting a long time for this, pal.”

“You can do whatever you want to me,” Tyler insisted. “Just leave Jessie alone.”

“Or, what, hero?”

“Find out.”

“I intend to,” Graham said forcefully before diverting his eyes to Jessie. “Clark Kent over here wants to be your Superman, Jessie. Should we find out what’s underneath that cape? Or, do you already know?”

“Just leave, Graham,” Jessie pleaded. “Please.”

“I don’t think so,” Graham said vigorously as he charged toward Tyler. “Let’s skip her and get right to you and me.”

“Is that a romantic offer, Graham?” Tyler asked without flinching as Graham pulled his fist back to his shoulder, about to

throw a punch.

“That’s enough, Graham!” Bailey shouted as he jogged up, intruding on Graham’s fun. Bailey was a short, out-of-shape, forty-five year old groundskeeper who was huffing and puffing pretty heavily from his short jaunt to the field.

Graham knew he could take him, and considered it, but wised up to the fact that the consequences of such an action just weren’t worth it. He’d have to be patient. But, revenge was coming. He was determined to make sure of it.

“You tattled on me?” Graham yelled at Tyler. “Some Superman.” Graham turned his attention to Bailey, “Why are you assuming it was me? How do you know Tommy didn’t start this but tattle on me first as some kind of a set-up?”

“Because my brain is a lot bigger than that tiny little thing rattling around in your skull,” Bailey fired back. “Now, come on. Let’s go. Otherwise, I’ll have to involve the police. Neither of us wants that hassle.”

“Why not, Bailey?” Graham inquired like a wise guy. “You got a record?”

“Not yet, I don’t,” Bailey answered. “But, keep talkin’. I might by the time this conversation is over.”

Bailey and Graham walked away as Tyler smiled at Jessie before turning to leave.

“Tyler,” Jessie said to get his attention.

## *The Gift of Tyler*

“Yeah?” Tyler responded as he turned around.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah,” he said as he turned back. “Just returning the favor.”

“No need. And, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“I think I do,” he told her without looking back as he walked away.

“Just be careful,” Jessie petitioned. “Graham can be pretty scary when he’s mad.”

“I’ve noticed,” Tyler said under his breath as he kept walking, ultimately joining Preston who showed up just in time to do absolutely nothing.

“Everything okay?” Preston inquired.

“Fine,” Tyler lied as he felt the weight of his problems mounting to a level he had never imagined possible. The day was only half over and it was already the most eventful day he’d ever had. Some good, some bad, some just downright confusing. His concern, however, was that the events in the first half of the day would pale in comparison to those in the second. He was, of course, absolutely right. What he couldn’t possibly know, however, was that those later events would have grave consequences.

## CHAPTER TEN

### ***Trouble Brewing***

In a classroom decorated with maps and pictures of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other American historical figures, Mr. Brooks stood at the front, facing the students. He was clearly fascinated by the topic of his own lecture. As he spoke, the depiction of a woman being burned at the stake was being projected on the white board behind him. “In all, about a hundred and fifty people were accused of witchcraft in Salem and nearby Andover, Massachusetts between 1692 and 1693. But, much of what you’ve heard is nothing more than distorted folklore. For example, only about twenty of the accused were really executed and, the truth is, not a single one of them was actually burned at the stake. They were all hanged like common criminals. Plus, not all of the people executed were women. About a quarter of them were men and, as if to prove that fact is sometimes stranger than fiction, two of them were canines.”



## *The Gift of Tyler*

“Dogs?” a student asked in complete shock.

“Dogs,” Mr. Brooks answered, proud to know he had the attention of his students. Of course, that could not be said for all of his students.

While a lecture about people suffering because of fear over misunderstanding is something that may have been useful to Tyler in his current circumstances, he and Preston, per their routine, sat in the back corner of the classroom once again paying more attention to each other than to their teacher. Some of the information, however, did seep into Tyler’s brain and would inevitably influence his decision to keep the things that were happening to him a secret. But, his slightly divided attention, at the moment, was primarily focused on Preston and the anticipated problem represented by the pot of anger boiling over inside of Graham.

“All I’m sayin’ is,” Preston persisted, “after what happened at lunch, Graham is going to be ten times as agro as he was when you were just scammin’ his Betty.”

“I was never scamming his Betty,” Tyler insisted. “How many times do we have to go over that?”

“Okay,” Preston conceded, “for arguments sake, let’s say you weren’t. Even though you totally were.” Before Tyler could interject his rebuttal, Preston conceded again in the interest of moving forward. “But let’s say you weren’t. What really matters

is that he thinks you were.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Tyler acknowledged.

“But, now you’ve dissed him in front of Jessie. He’s got to pick up his face after an incident like this. And, there’s not a shred of doubt in anyone’s mind that you’ve been tagged as his target. You’ve moved up to the top of his most wanted list.”

“I get it.”

“Let’s make sure,” Preston continued. He motioned for Tyler to look across the back row of students. “Look over there for me.”

Tyler leaned forward and looked down the row. His line of vision reached the end and he locked eyes with Graham who was staring right at him with anger so furious Tyler could almost see the cartoon steam billowing out from his ears. A nervous look crossed Tyler’s face before he jumped back and looked at Preston.

“That man is full of acid and ready to front,” Preston stated with anxiety in his voice. “You know what I’m sayin’?”

“Do you?” Tyler asked sincerely.

Ignoring Tyler’s question, Preston continued. “I can’t believe you slammed him like that. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m all for nukin’ the cheese-wiener, but catch him when he’s not lookin’. Maybe, I don’t know, fork his lawn or somethin’.”

“Wouldn’t that be punishing his parents more than him?”

## *The Gift of Tyler*

“They produced him.”

“True,” Tyler admitted, “ but that wouldn’t exactly help Jessie.”

“This isn’t about Jessie,” Preston insisted out of pure frustration. “Why do you want to help that traitor, anyway? What has she done for you lately?”

“Listen, Janet Jackson. Jessie’s not a traitor, it is about helping her, and helping a friend has nothing to do with what she’s done for me or when she did it.”

“It has everything to do with it. The guy’s a spud. No question. But, you cut on him. Now he has his game face on and you’re in la la land for a Betty that traded you in. You’re a very handsome pony, by the way. But, she traded you in for a Clydesdale. You’re risking getting’ pureed over a girl who ditched us both for a better life like six years ago. Get it together, man. You’re in danger here. And, for what? For Jessie? That old crush is totally played out. If I were you, I’d skip town pronto. It ain’t worth it, amigo.”

“Now you’re Mexican. I can’t keep up.”

“You’re a dead man in any language. Can you keep up with that? And, for the record, you might want to think about literally making a run for the border.”

“Taco Bell?”

“Mexico,” Preston insisted as loudly as he could without

drawing the attention of Mr. Brooks.

“I hear you loud and clear. And, thanks for the pep talk, by the way. So helpful.”

“I just hope you’re listening.”

The final school bell rang and the seed of fear planted in Tyler earlier in the day began to take root. He and Preston followed the crowd out of the classroom and Graham filed in a few people behind them.

“I got it, Preston,” Tyler stated with a tinge of frustration in his voice.

“I’m not joshin’ about this,” Preston whispered to Tyler as they entered the hallway. “And, neither is Graham. In fact, why don’t you come over to my house tonight? I’m gonna get my dad to hook you up with a life insurance policy.”

Graham suddenly hurried up behind Tyler and shouldered him into a row of lockers like a linebacker knocking a running back out of bounds. “You’re a dead man, Tommy.”

“Tyler,” Tyler corrected in a whisper barely audible to anyone but himself. “You’re a dead man, Tyler.”

Preston stared at Tyler and shook his head disapprovingly. “I rest my case.”

“First of all, I’m not on trial. And, second, I already told you I read you loud and clear. I’d have to be completely deaf to not get it by now. You’re like a living bullhorn. Besides, he’s just

## *The Gift of Tyler*

trying to scare me,” Tyler said unconvincingly.

“Is it working?”

“Oh yeah, it’s working.”

“Good. What are you gonna do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“Nice. Solid plan. Good luck with that.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I already told you to skip town,” Preston said as he began to hum *La Bamba* and dance.

“If I needed to leave the country,” Tyler quickly interrupted, “I’d go to Canada. Way closer.”

“Not the point,” Preston insisted.

“Not an option,” Tyler fired back.

“Then,” Preston started as he stopped his mariachi impression and pulled out his wallet. He fished out a business card to offer Tyler, “call my dad. Seriously. I don’t think this can wait until dinner. His work number is right there. He’ll hook you up with a primo life insurance policy. Young healthy dude like you will get off cheap. Besides, the least you could do is leave your mom a couple of million bucks. Forget I said that, make me your beneficiary.”

Tyler stared at Preston blankly.

“What? I’m your best friend.” Tyler walked away while, as usual, Preston continued running his mouth. “That has to be

***C.S. Elston***

worth something. I should be compensated while I'm in the grieving process. Call my Dad, Tyler! Seriously! He'll hook you up!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN  
*...And Ears To Hear*

Tyler and Preston returned to the parking lot for the first time since that morning. Tyler was carrying his usual backpack full of books and Preston, as was his routine, was carrying a whole lot of nothing. Of course, the only thing on either one of their minds as they approached their cars was the dramatic events of the day. The main difference in the way the two of them were handling it was, as one might expect, Tyler didn't want to talk about it and Preston couldn't turn off the motor that was his mouth.

“I have to ask one more thing,” Preston said inquiringly.

“What?” Tyler responded with a deep sigh, reluctantly giving him a wide open door.

“How in the world did you ever see what was going down on the football field today? That was hundreds and hundreds of yards away. There's not a person on this planet that could have

seen anything clearly from that far away. You knew who it was and what was going on. Come on. Please. Explain that to me.”

“There’s nothing to explain. I’m sure lots of people-“

“No one,” Preston interrupted.

“Maybe you should get contacts,” Tyler said with a grin sprouting as he pointed to his own eyes. “Or, at least put some lenses in those Urkel frames on your face.”

“Urkel?” Preston responded in dismay. “More like Weezer. Don’t be disrespecting the frames if you want backup when Graham decides the time has finally come to smash up your grill.”

“My sincerest apologies.”

“And they are accepted. Now, about the football field...”

“What am I supposed to tell you, Preston?”

“How?”

“Don’t know. Just saw it.”

“But, how?”

Tyler stared at Preston blankly.

“I’ll accept the fact that you don’t know,” Preston finally compromised.

“Thank you for believing I’m not a liar,” Tyler said without an ounce of sincerity.

“But, why then, do you not seem the least bit curious?”

“About what?”

“About how it happened!”



## *The Gift of Tyler*

“I guess I just don’t see why it’s such a big deal,” Tyler lied without the hypocrisy of having just thanked his best friend for believing he wasn’t a liar escaping him. “I already tried to tell you I think lots of people-“

“No one,” Preston interrupted again with an unrelenting stare. After about three seconds of silence, Preston threw his hands dramatically up in the air and exhaled with enough power to dwarf Tyler’s previous sigh. “Fine. Whatever. I give up. You win. You’re Fort Knox.”

“I’m not Fort Knox. I just don’t have anything to tell you.”

“Like I said, you win.”

“Excellent. Later.”

“Lates.”

Tyler and Preston quickly did the four-part high-five in the shape of a big X that started at eye level and went below Tyler’s waistline that they had been doing nearly every time they parted, ever since the fourth grade. As soon as that was complete, Tyler climbed into his truck and shut the door. He sat in silence for a moment as Preston climbed into his car, still baffled by Tyler’s ability to see clearly what was happening on the football field from such a distance.

Secretly perplexed by the day’s events as well, Tyler just wanted to go home and be by himself to figure things out. Of course, he felt the need to figure out what was happening to him.

But, he also wanted to try and figure out how to fix things for Jessie. He wanted to protect her, even if she said she didn't need it. Whether she was right or not had nothing to do with it. He wanted to be there for her. Jessie and his mom were the two people Tyler cared most about in the world. His crazy friend Preston would be a close third on that list. Sadly, no one else even came close enough to call them fourth. It was a short list, but an important one. Maybe that's why he was never quite able to let Jessie slip off of it.

Pushing the clutch in with his left foot and putting the key in the ignition to start his car, he looked in his rearview mirror and spotted two of Jessie's friends, Andrea and Liz, talking in a red Honda Civic parked in the row of cars behind him. Suddenly, he let off of the clutch and released the keys as their voices became audible with stunning clarity.

"I mean who does she think she is asking him to Sadie Hawkins?" Andrea proposed. "She's so Brady."

Shocked by the fact that the conversation suddenly sounded like it could be taking place just couple of feet away, Tyler spun around in his seat to get a better look as Preston fired up his Fuego and drove away. Tyler was able to zoom in on the faces of the girls in the red Civic as if his eyes were telephoto lenses. The girls' words definitely matched their moving lips. He zoomed back out and glanced around his truck. His windows were rolled

## *The Gift of Tyler*

up, as were the windows in the Civic. His radio wasn't on so, there was absolutely no doubt left that it was their voices. But, as he spun back around to take another look and listen, he couldn't figure out why he was hearing them at all.

"I mean of course he said no because he knew I would eventually ask him," Andrea continued. "We've been flirting for like two weeks. Hello?"

"I went through the same thing with Mindy Widen," Liz shot back. "She tried to get George to go and of course he was like, no way, you're crusin' in the wrong direction, but still."

Andrea suddenly spotted Tyler and pointed him out. "Is that guy looking at us?"

"He is," Liz agreed. "Eww."

"Yeah. Gross."

Tyler spun back around and started his engine. He slammed his truck into reverse, pulled out of the parking space, popped it into first gear and took off in a hurry. Having been spotted staring at Andrea and Liz would have normally embarrassed Tyler to the nth degree but today he felt no embarrassment. He was far too concerned about people finding out what was going on with him. And, he was even more worried about figuring out for himself exactly what it was that was happening to him. Even Jessie's problems temporarily left his thoughts.

*What is happening to me?* He wondered to himself over and

over again as he sped toward home, wanting to get there and be alone even more than he had sixty seconds earlier.

Although Tyler wouldn't have thought things could possibly get any more bizarre than they had already been that morning and the first part of the afternoon, he was well aware of the fact that the biggest danger he currently faced was running into Graham. He hoped that leaving the school reduced his chances of that happening but would soon find out that he was wrong. That run-in would spur on the craziest part of his day and it was now just a few moments away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **ROAD RAGE**

*Cemetery* by the Australian alternative rock band Silverchair had just begun playing on the radio as Tyler drove his truck to the end of the country road. He pulled up to a stop sign that had been plastered with over half a dozen “102.1 The Quake: Central Washington’s Rock Station” stickers and one yellow Nirvana smiley face sticker. Tyler made a nearly complete stop before making a right hand turn onto the two-lane highway.

Although the winter chill was in the air, there was no snow on the ground and the bright sunshine coupled with the desert landscape on both sides of the highway was a clear indicator that Penuel was East of the Cascade Mountain Range. The lack of traffic was a reminder that the closest town of significant size was Ellensburg. Even that only had a population of about 15,000 and was nearly fifty miles away. Wenatchee was almost double the size of Ellensburg but the drive was also an additional twenty

miles. Both were West of Penuel. Ellensburg was even West of the Columbia River and also to the South of Penuel while Wenatchee had the Columbia River running right through it and was to the North of Penuel.

Tyler sang along with Silverchair as Graham's car approached menacingly from behind in the distance. Graham's timing was not perfect enough to make this happen without some planning. He had left school, immediately after the final bell had rung, to make a grocery store run. After he got what he needed at the store, he had parked on the side of the highway, just far enough east of the stop sign. He knew Tyler would have to enter the highway at that intersection on his way home, and waited until he saw Tyler's red truck. But, his wait was only a few minutes and if Tyler had been able to get Preston to stop talking in the parking lot, Graham may have missed him altogether that day. But, Tyler, in this particular case, was not so lucky.

He was attempting to zone out and let go of the events that had been occurring since he woke up that morning. He just wanted to get home and spend some time alone before his mom arrived. It was nothing against his mom. He just needed some time to process everything. Tyler knew he would have plenty of opportunity to worry about all of the outrageous and seemingly unexplainable things that were taking place in his body during those two hours or so he would have to himself in the solace of

## *The Gift of Tyler*

his home. He needed it. But, at this moment, he needed to try and forget about all of it before the massive processing session that would undoubtedly follow. He had even considered taking a nap when he got home and briefly wondered if he could wake up and discover that this had all just been a terrible but thrilling dream. If only it was all that simple...

Singing at the top of his lungs, Tyler was unaware of Graham's presence at first but eventually glanced up at his rearview mirror and the black Camaro caught his eye. Tyler spun around as Graham continued to pick up speed and close in on Tyler's truck. He whirled back around to look at the road even though he couldn't help repeatedly glancing up at the rearview mirror as Graham moved closer. By the time Tyler reached his fifth glance, Graham was close enough to start waving with a big, cocky grin on his face.

Once Tyler finally noticed that Dan and Kevin were both with him, Graham swung his car over the broken yellow line into the empty oncoming traffic lane and sped up alongside Tyler's truck. Tyler looked to his left and nervously watched Graham's approach in his side mirror until the two vehicles were parallel.

While Dan and Kevin both gave Tyler the middle finger out of the open passenger side window, Graham swerved his car at Tyler's truck. Fear had not only taken root inside of Tyler at this point, it was now completely taking over.

Suddenly, both Tyler and Graham spotted an oncoming eighteen-wheeler. Tyler let off the gas as Graham sped up and cut Tyler off, sliding out of the way of the massive truck without so much as a second to spare.

“Okay,” Graham told his friends, “time to bust out the goods.”

Kevin obeyed his leader. Sitting in the back seat, he picked a plastic bag up off of the floor. He reached inside and pulled out a carton of eggs as Graham rolled down the driver’s side window.

Tyler watched as arms with white dots in their hands popped out of windows on both sides of the car. Suddenly, he noticed that something was thrown from each side because the hands jerked and released. The white dots he’d spotted swiftly increased in size until...

SPLAT!

SPLAT!

The eggs connected with Tyler’s windshield and spread their goo all over it.

SPLAT!

SPLAT!

More eggs and more goo.

Flipping the windshield wipers on, Tyler watched as the goo smeared all over the place. Quickly collecting dust from the air, the smeared eggs got darker and heavier as visibility became



## *The Gift of Tyler*

virtually non-existent.

With the eighteen-wheeler now gone, Graham swerved back into the on-coming traffic lane to fall back in parallel with Tyler again. Dan and Kevin immediately bombarded the driver side window with eggs.

SPLAT! SPLAT!

SPLAT! SPLAT!

Tyler could no longer see anything either to his left or in front of him. He was essentially driving blind.

Graham spotted an approaching car. He sped up and cut Tyler off again but, as soon as he settled into the lane, a possum ran across the highway. Graham, naturally, hit his brakes as hard as a wrecking ball to an abandoned building.

All Tyler could see was a big red glare. He recognized it as brake lights and yanked the steering wheel left to swerve away from the light. There was no way for him to know that he was swerving right in front of an oncoming car.

The driver of the oncoming car was Nancy Hanley, a seventy-eight year-old mother of four, grandmother of ten, great-grandmother of two, and widow of one. When she saw Tyler's truck swerve in front of her less than one hundred feet away, her instinct was to raise her hands and shield herself.

Silverchair's *Cemetery* continued blaring from the truck's stereo speakers.

CRASH!

The head-on collision was catastrophic. Both vehicles folded like origami and sailed off the highway onto opposite sides of the road.

WHAM-WHUMP! WHAM-WHUMP! WHAM-WHUMP!

WHAM-WHUMP! WHAM-WHUMP! WHAM-WHUMP!

Each vehicle rolled over and over again until finally stopping a little less than a football field away from one another. During the fourth flip of his truck, Tyler was launched through the windshield and landed in the dirt with an abrupt thud.

Graham hit the brakes again and skidded his black Camaro to a complete stop. He looked at the wreckage with terror and remorse, knowing in his heart that no one could have survived.

THE GIFT OF  
TYLER

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