

*Tales of the Spin*

Book 1

The Normal Brothers

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*Mother Nature is the embodiment of all living things on this planet. She keeps the balance. She protects, creates and destroys. She is equality, as she favors none.*



## Prologue

The nurse pulled him away. He was crying, extending his arms to try and reach his mother. The nurse kept pulling him back. Inside. Where his brother and sisters were.

His mother looked at him, sobbing. But she didn't do anything to stop the nurse from taking away her son.

His father, standing behind his mother, said something. She turned around and walked towards him.

He shouted. Trying to get her attention again. Hoping that she would turn around and get him out of there. Instead, she turned her head and nodded at the nurse. Somebody closed the door. He would never see his mother again.

As if waking up from a bad dream Frank suddenly opened his eyes.

"Whoa there, don't scare me like that son," the driver said with a thick southern accent. He focused on the road again, but every few seconds he would look at his passenger, hoping for a response.

The dream had caused a headache, one that hurt.

A resurgence of a memory. A painful one.

How long has it been since his parents left him? And the other kids, were they his brother and sisters?

"I'm fine," he lied, feeling his heartbeat in his head, "Just a bad dream."

But he knew it wasn't. He'd been having more of these dreams recently. And every one of them had messed him up more than the previous one.

It was as if his mind couldn't take it. Just like now, a headache would follow. No matter how long the dream had lasted. His eyesight would get worse. He wouldn't be able to concentrate.

It had started three weeks ago. Memories of a long-lived life started to pop up.

But it was too much to handle.

The these returning memories were slowly frying his brain.

"Well, if you ain't, you'd be home soon," the driver said, a balding trucker in his late forties.

His destination was indeed approaching.

The town where he would hopefully find a solution to his problem.

The truck passed the last fields before houses appeared.

He got dropped off at the Kroger's and from there he made his way to what he thought would be the downtown area.

Somehow he had known how to contact Mama Ru. The woman who could help him.

She told him where she was.

Covington, of all places.

It sucked because Frank was staying in LA.

But he made it. And he slowly made his way through town.

Another memory flash.

Fire.

Somebody came running towards him.

Through the mud and the rain.

Somebody yelled things in French.

The guy charging at him stepped on a landmine.

His hand landed right in front of him.

Frank snapped out of it and had to bend over as the contents of his stomach wanted to leave him.

If felt as if his head was about to explode.

The pain temporarily blinded him.

It was getting worse.

“Are you okay?” Somebody to his right asked.

He tried to speak, but he couldn’t.

“Do I need to call...”, the stranger started.

“Mama Ru,” Frank uttered with effort, “I have to find her.”

His sight returned slowly. First blurry. But eventually his own made puddle came into view.

The gruesome sight of his sick and the foul after taste made him gag.

Frank stood up and backed away.

“Through this street, to your left,” the stranger said.

Frank looked his way and saw the shocked expression on the man’s face.

“You look like hell son.”

“Tell me about it,” Frank replied. He pointed down the street.

“That way?”

The man nodded and Frank began to walk.

Mama Ru’s Pawn Shop was hard to miss. A big sign hung above the door. All the blinds were closed and it looked as if the shop was too, but no sign indicated that to be true.

Frank opened the door and walked into the barely lit shop.

The bell rang again as he closed the door.

A musky moldy smell hit his nose, telling him that most of the items in the shop were very old. One lightbulb hung from the ceiling, but it didn’t provide enough light to illuminate the room.

Candles did the rest. On the shelves and on the floor in the corners, there were dozens of candles. Each lit. Providing enough light together to enable people to look around and maybe find what they were looking for.

Another man was waiting at the counter. He looked at Frank and for a moment Frank thought the man recognized him. He quickly nodded his head and greeted him before he went back to inspect the items he wanted to purchase.

Mama Ru appeared, a big lady with an afro. With a bottle in each hand, which she put next to the man's other items.

'That should get you through the year,' Mama Ru said with a faint Dominican accent in a soft voice, one that you wouldn't associate with somebody who looked like her.

"Thank you very much, Ru, how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing dear. Just make sure the boy is okay."

The man nodded and grabbed his items.

"Till next time," he said.

"Call me first," Mama Ru added.

Frank saw the man fumble with the products in his arms and opened the door for him.

The man smiled and used the opportunity.

As he was about to pass Frank, he stopped and looked at him. He smiled. And for a moment it looked as if he wanted to say something. The man quickly glanced at Ru and then back at Frank.

"Thank you," he said while nodding and left the store.

Frank answered with a 'you're welcome' and closed the door. Mama Ru smiled at him.

"Well, if it isn't Joe." She extended her arms invitingly for a hug.

"It's Frank."

He walked towards her.

"Oh, yes of course," she sang as she wrapped her arms around him.

After a while she grabbed his shoulders and pushed him away from her. Still holding on to his shoulders she looked at him from top to bottom.

Her expression became more serious and their eyes met.

“It’s happening again?”

Frank nodded.

“And you want me to help you again?”

Another nod to answer the question.

“How much do you remember?”

“Not everything,” Frank started, “it’s still a mess. But every time when I remember something, it hurts like hell.”

Mama Ru let go of him and started to caress his shoulders instead.

“Memories can’t be forgotten forever, sweetheart. Especially not for a person like yourself. The next time it will hurt just as much, or even more.”

One hand caressed his cheek and chin.

“I just don’t want to remember.”

“One day I won’t be able to help you anymore.”

“Please, Mama!”

She waved her hand in the air, urging Frank to stop begging.

“Of course I’ll help you dear.”

Frank started to smile but his headache stopped him.

“Let’s get this over with then,” Mama Ru sounded worried.

She urged Frank to follow her into the room behind the counter.

It was a small room with a desk and a chair. Shelves lined the walls of the room, each filled with wondrous items.

“Sit down,” Mama Ru said. Pointing at the chair.

Frank sat down and looked around.

“Is that a severed vampire head?” He asked, pointing at a big jar to his right.

Mama Ru sighed.

“We’re not here for a tour, but yes.”

She put her left hand on his head and the pain immediately lifted.

“Now, let’s do this again,” she said, “think of who you want to be after this.”

Frank smiled at the idea of a new life. Of a time without the hassle of returning memories.

He knew what he wanted.

“I want to go back to school,” he said hopefully, “act like my “age” again.”

He used air quotations which made Mama Ru giggle.

“You don’t have to tell me dear, I only want to know your new name.”

Frank thought about it. But he couldn’t find one that he wanted to have.

“Use my original one,” he said without hesitation.

The witch had to smile, knowing very well what he was saying.

“Benjamin it is.”

## John I

A slow thumping sound accompanied by moans of effort came from the stairs. First the suitcase appeared. It was slowly making its way down. Then two feet came into view, slowly and carefully searching for the steps. Eventually a body appeared, a young man, sweating and moaning as if the suitcase was the heaviest thing he had ever brought down the stairs. John watched with amusement as his younger brother dealt with the heavy load. His brother had a frail posture and obviously barely enough strength to get the suitcase down. “What have you got in there, Dave? Bringing books to a library?”

“Shut up and help me if you want,” Dave replied.

“I rather enjoy watching you wrestle with that heavy monstrosity. Poor airline, that plane is going to drop right out of the sky with that thing onboard.”

“Seriously, shut up,” Dave exhaled as the suitcase reached the floor and landed with a loud thump.

“You made it downstairs. Well done little brother, I am so proud of you,” John said as he put his hand over his heart in an emotional gesture.

“He made it downstairs? Oh, my.” A voice from the kitchen exclaimed. “When is your taxi here, Dave?”

“In a couple of minutes, mom.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there, just finishing up here.”

“Seriously, I have the feeling that her lasagna is more important than me going to London for the summer,” Dave sighed.

Dave waited for John’s reply.

“Were you talking to me?” John jokingly asks.

“Seriously, why are we brothers?” Dave turned around to grab the handle of the suitcase.

“She’ll be right out. And yes, that lasagna is special. She is making it especially for me and Nathalie. I invited her over for dinner.”

Dave looked puzzled.

“I thought your anniversary was next week.”

“No, it’s this week. Today, I just invited her for a casual dinner. Tomorrow or the day after I’ll take her to a fancy restaurant. If I can get a reservation.”

“Well ain’t that cute. Anyways I am going outside; I still have to carry this thing to the street.” Dave opened the front door and left the house, pulling at the suitcase behind him. Within a few seconds John stood beside him.

“Here, let me help you. I need nicotine, so I’m going outside anyways,” John grabbed the handle and lifted the suitcase with ease.

Together John and Dave walked towards the street, where John put the suitcase down and started using it as a chair.

“Where are you going again?” John asked as he grabbed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. In a swift motion, he lit the cigarette and the pack and lighter were gone already.

“London, England,” was Dave’s short reply.

“I know where London is, smartass. And you will be spending your summer reading books, right?”

“Correct. Working on an important paper.”

“You and your friends are crazy. Seriously why would you do that?”

The sound of a taxi coming around the corner distracted Dave, he grabbed his suitcase and looked at the approaching vehicle, then at the house and back to the taxi.

John understood what Dave was thinking and ran towards the front door. Instead of walking through he opened it and

screamed: “Mom, Dave is already in the taxi, you better be quick to say goodbye or he will be gone.”

John had returned at Dave’s side when the car pulled over and the driver opened the trunk. John offered to put the suitcase there, so Dave could say goodbye to their mother, who had just exited the house and made her way towards them.

“My dear Dave, have a great trip and enjoy England,” their mother said, opening her arms along the way to pull Dave into a hug. “Behave, and work hard. And most of all, enjoy the city,” she added.

“I will, mom, I will,” Dave replied, mumbling in his mother’s shoulder.

“Where are Alex and Max? They’re supposed to be here.”

“I already said goodbye to them mom, they are upstairs preparing for their trip.”

“They don’t want to come downstairs is what he is trying to say. The other two are just lazy.” John took another swig of his cigarette.

“As long as Dave is okay with that,” their mother replied defensively. “Now, go. Get in the taxi, the driver is waiting. Have fun dear. And call me when you arrive in London.”

“I will. Goodbye mom, bye John. See you all in a month,”

Dave entered the car and settled himself in the back seat. He said something to the driver after which the car drove off.

Their mother waved until the car was out of sight. Then she suddenly turned around to go back inside, mumbling “the lasagna, must not forget the lasagna,” the whole time.

John stayed behind, he already finished his cigarette and grabbed his pack to take another one. He looked up at the sky, and let his thoughts go.

Halfway through his cigarette he heard a familiar voice.

“Smoking is bad for you.”

John looked down and found his girlfriend standing in front of him. "You're one to judge, you got me started in the first place."

Nathalie grabbed John's cigarette and brought it to her mouth. After she exhaled she said: "Still bad for you though. So, found Orion yet?"

"I wasn't looking for the constellations. I was thinking."

"About what?"

"About which place to take you to, for our anniversary."

Nathalie looked at John and a smile appeared on her face. "Are you taking me out for dinner?"

"I am, my fair lady."

"Eek", was all the sound Nathalie could make, and jumped around John's neck. "I love you, I love you, I love you," she repeated.

As they stood there, hugging each other, a car came around the corner and stopped next to John and Nathalie.

"Hey John, is your brother ready?" A young man asked through the open window.

"I don't know, let me check." John left Nathalie's embrace, got a hold of her hand and dragged her with him to the front door. John opened the door and shouted: "Hey Max, your camping guide is here."

"Thought so, I'll be right down," Max replied.

John's mother appeared from the kitchen, drying her hands with a towel.

"John, Max, I don't want you shouting in the house," she yelled. Then with a calmer voice after she noticed Nathalie, "Nat, hey. Are you joining us for dinner? I'm making lasagna."

"Such a bad example mom," John uttered, while Nathalie responded with a simple "I'd love to".

With a smile on her face John's mother turned around and went back into the kitchen.

Suddenly a bag fell down the stairs. "Dude what's your problem?" Max asked as he came down the stairs.

"Is Alex throwing things again?" Nathalie asked John as they watched the spectacle take place.

"Timber!" Alex shouted and another bag came soaring down.

"Watch out, you could have pushed me down the stairs," Max said as he reached the floor. He kicked Alex's bag out of the way, "Not mine," and grabbed his own.

"Mom," he simply said and waited.

"Guess me and my bag deserved that," Alex mumbled as he descended the stairs.

Nathalie quickly moved to John, "I still can't get used to the fact that they look so similar. I can barely tell who's who."

"Well, I'm Max and this is Alex," Alex said as he gestured to Max.

"I said barely," she quickly replied to the twins.

"Here I am," said their mother as she appeared next to John.

Every time when John and his mother were standing next to each other she could see the resemblance. Something that Dave nor Max or Alex had. They looked completely different.

"After their father," John's mother would say. Nathalie had never met the guy. He left or something. Never to return.

A horn snapped Nathalie out of her trail of thought, soon to be followed by another different one.

"Aww, how cute. The twins leave at the same time. What a surprise," John teased.

They all walked outside and Max joined his friend in the car.

"Enjoy your vacation."

"Thanks mom," Max and Alex replied at the same time. And while Max and his friend drove away Alex gave his mom a short hug. "Be careful in the mountains dear."

“I will.”

Alex joined his friends in the car and waved one last time as the car drove off.

Soon the silence returned to the street.

“The lasagna!” John’s mother suddenly realized and she quickly went back inside.

Nathalie and John stood there, once again.

“Cigarette?” Nathalie asked as she offered John one.

“Smoking is bad for you,” John grabbed one.

“I know,” Nathalie replied as she lit hers.

## Max I

After picking up three more of their friends, Max and Thomas made their way to the camping ground they'd decided to go to. They were on the road for seven hours. Once they had arrived, dawn had already started and the rising sun painted the sky orange and red. After parking the car, Neill, Jack, Thomas, Nick and Max grabbed their gear and started walking up the hill to their camp site. When they'd found a suitable spot for their tent everyone helped build it and, in no time, they were done. Thomas and Neill were both tired and decided to catch up on some sleep. They had both been driving during the night. The other guys had slept in the car. Jack quickly installed himself in a chair and let out a huge sigh.

"Hey Nick, are those beers still cold?"

Nick walked to the cooler to check and confirmed the news to Jack.

"Great, could you grab me one? And one for yourself if you want. Hey, Max, do you want a beer? To celebrate we finally arrived?"

Max stood at the edge of their open spot, enjoying the surroundings.

"No, thanks. It's a bit too early for me to have beer."

"It's never too early for beer," Jack said as he grabbed the bottle Nick offered him and opened it.

"I'd like to have some breakfast first," Max replied as he walked to his bag. He took out a granola bar and unwrapped it.

"You on a diet or something?" Jack asked with a mocking tone.

"Zip it and enjoy your beer."

"I will," Jack replied as he toasted with Nick and took a first sip.

Jack annoyed him. Already. And their camping trip hadn't even properly started. Because of Nick and Thomas, Max had decided to join. He didn't even know Neill that well. Neill was one of Jack's friends. Jack insisted on bringing him with them and nobody thought that would be a problem.

Max had known Nick ever since kindergarten. All their lives they had lived close to each other and they were always in the same class. Thomas joined them during their first year of high school. After school, they would always meet at each other's place to watch movies or play ball. During senior year Jack was the last one who joined the group. He had transferred schools. He had a couple of classes together with Thomas and that's how he found his way into the group. Max never liked him.

He finished his granola bar and watched how Nick and Jack enjoyed their beer. They were silent, with an occasional muttering about how good it tasted and that vacation had begun.

Max looked around and regarded the nature surrounding him. He had always liked the woods. Nick and him had the idea to go camping here. He enjoyed the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves, the light of the morning sun protruding through the canopy and the soft jittering of birds in the distance.

Max got back up on his feet.

"I'm going to wander around a bit. Explore the area," he said to no one in particular.

"Don't get lost," Nick replied with a hint of concern in his voice.

"Yeah, don't get lost," Jack copied in a sarcastic way.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," was all Max could reply.

He quickly chose a direction and started walking. Soon, he walked through the low vegetation bordering the open spot. Max felt a gradual slope that made it possible to be out of Jack's sight.

After a long walk through the woods Max decided to head back to camp. This wasn't that difficult and at noon Max arrived back at their open spot. Jack was asleep in his chair, three empty bottles of beer on the ground underneath him. Nick sat next to him, playing on his Nintendo. Max unfolded another chair, grabbed a book from his backpack and joined Nick. And so, the afternoon passed by. Eventually Neill came out of hibernation and joined them. Soon followed by Thomas. While Jack was still asleep the others enjoyed the sun, and each other's company. As the afternoon progressed they started talking about all sorts of things, sharing their favorite music and eventually Nick's Nintendo went around, everybody playing a level, and then passing it on. When Jack woke up they started playing music and drinking beer. This time, Max also accepted a bottle.

The afternoon gradually shifted into the evening and the guys thought it was time for something to eat. But first they needed a fire and so Max and Nick ended up looking for fire wood on Jack's orders.

They soon had a pile of dry wood, eager to burn. The barbeque could commence.

"We have to get some meat from the grocery store in that town nearby, if we want to do this again tomorrow," Nick suggested.

"Good idea, one of us could do some shopping tomorrow anyways," Neill added.

“Isn’t that forsaking the very idea of camping,” Thomas jokingly replied.

“What then? You want to go hunting tomorrow?” Jack asked.

“Well luckily I brought my gun,” Max quickly said.

“No shit,” Jack sounded baffled as he looked at Max in amazement. Max rolled his eyes and Jack knew enough. Then, the music stopped.

“Guess my iPod died,” Neill said as he walked towards the speakers that were connected to his iPod.

“Mine is still full,” Nick said as he grabbed his phone and threw it to Neill, who immediately connected it to the speakers.

“I hope you’ve got some good music on your phone, Nick. Not this one, Neill,” Jack said as soon as the music started. Neill skipped the song.

“Next.”

Neill pressed skip again and a dance number started.

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Nick said.

“Just the first song Nicky boy. Don’t be too sure I like everything.”

“Who wants another sausage?” Thomas interrupted.

When dinner was finished, they stored the food away and all sat around the fire. The music was still playing. Beers went ‘round and soon everybody began to feel a little tipsy. The alcohol hit Neill and Jack the hardest. As the evening turned into night Thomas was the first to call it a day. Soon followed by Nick.

“Kind of gay,” Jack muttered.

“What?” Neill asked.

“Us.”

“Whaddaya mean?” Neill slurred.

“Five guys in one tent,” Jack answered.

“But a big tent though,” Neill responded.

Max had to laugh. He finished his bottle and took it to their they previously assigned bottle collection point. When he sat back down, another bottle dangled in front of his face.

“Here, have another one,” Jack offered.

“I shouldn’t drink anymore,” Max excused.

“Come on,” Jack boomed.

“Yeah, come on,” Neill joined in.

“Okay, okay. Alcoholics,” Max accepted the beer and opened it.

“The best life style,” Jack and Neill replied together.

Max took a sip of his beer and wondered whether the two guys amused or annoyed him.

Lost in thought he quickly finished the entire beer. He then realized his fatigue and wanted to get up to go to bed. But when he stood up, the beer hit his stomach and a feeling of nausea washed over him. He’d better wait before he went to bed in case of any alcohol related accidents. Just as Neill fell out of his chair and Jack lost it completely, Max started to walk. He was annoyed, he concluded, and together with the nausea, his annoyance quickly turned to anger. He just had to get some fresh air, at a quiet place. Max grabbed a flashlight out of his bag and left the open spot, following the same route he took earlier that day.

“Don’t get lost, honey,” Jack screamed after him in a motherly way.

Neill’s laughter boomed through the forest. It took a while for Max to find a place where it was completely quiet. And dark.

## Dave I

As soon as the train left the tunnel rain pitter-pattered against the windows and the carriage was flooded with daylight. Dave looked up from his book, surprised by the sudden sound and light. The London suburbs raced by, as well as some stations. It was a grey and rainy day. Not much to be seen but houses and streets. Soon the train went into another tunnel. Dave barely noticed, already lost in his book once again.

He turned another page of *The History of England* when the announcement mentioned his stop:

“The next station is Leicester Square.”

Dave had already finished reading volume 1 of that book on the flight to London, and now he was well on his way in volume 2. Always intrigued by history, it thrilled Dave to be able to visit London, a place filled with it.

He put his book back into his backpack and waited for the train to stop. Being new to the London Underground, Dave thought things were going smoothly and within no time he found himself standing in the middle of London.

In the rain.

He forgot about that.

Despite him getting wet Dave looked around and inhaled the city air. As if it were some kind of a ritual, he turned around, looking up and down while exhaling and inhaling deeply.

“There you are,” a small girl with long blonde hair said as she made her way towards Dave.

Dave woke up from his trance and searched for the source of the voice he heard.

“Carol,” was all Dave could say before Carol started hugging him.

“Welcome to London, dude,” a young man, who just appeared besides Dave and Carol, said.

“Joey,” Dave replied happily. “Good to see you.”

“Likewise, man,” was all Joey responded.

Carol let go of Dave and took him by the hand.

“Come on, Noah and Mike are waiting for us. The waiters are getting impatient.”

“We decided to wait for you in that restaurant over there,”

Joey explained.

Dave let Carol drag him into the restaurant. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and with a big smile Dave greeted Noah and Mike.

Soon they all sat down and ordered something to drink.

The welcoming party wanted to know about Dave’s flight and when his trip was thoroughly discussed, they told him about their experiences in London so far. Dave was the last one to arrive, a day later than the rest. When all the stories were exchanged, they started planning what they could do during the rest of their stay. Visiting all the historical sites was a must. Iconic sites as well. All of them soon concluded that their vacation was too short for it all and they had to prioritize. Dave felt tired but at the same time thrilled to go and explore the city. Happy that he had met these guys and looking forward to their time together in a city he didn’t know, but loved so much already.

Dave studied history at university and Joey, Noah, Carol and Mike were his classmates. Their love of history brought them together and quickly after that, they became a close group of friends. To prepare for their second year it was Noah’s idea to

go to London together to already get a taste of European history. The others thought that was a great idea and together they decided to go. Unfortunately, because he booked the ticket too late, Dave arrived a day later.

After a couple of drinks and a light meal Dave felt tired and he wanted to go to the hotel. The others decided to go with him, since they had seen enough that day. Once at the hotel Dave got to share a room with Noah. In a way, he was happy it wasn't Carol because she was always so wild and full of energy around him. Everyone suspected that Carol liked Dave, even Dave himself, but she never mentioned it or did anything to prove that. Dave, on his turn, let it all happen. He didn't like Carol in that way, but he did like the fact that she probably liked him.

When Dave touched his bed after unpacking most of his backpack, he fell asleep almost instantly. He heard Noah mumbling about the three volumes of *The History of England* on his nightstand, but he was too tired to decipher the message and respond to it. He closed his eyes instead, and drifted away.

The next day they got up early, too early, according to Dave who hadn't overcome his jetlag yet. After a continental breakfast, they left their hotel and made their way to the nearest Underground station. They had decided to start the day in the City of London, and where better than St. Paul's Cathedral. Dave had always wanted to go there and with the help of Noah, favoring that idea, the group decided to go. Once inside the church, they decided to take the tour. Especially because Carol insisted. The tour would lead them through the library and the staircase used in a Harry Potter movie. When Carol realized this, she went ballistic and forced everyone to come along.

The tour would take one hour, too short for Dave's taste, but perhaps for the best because Carol couldn't wait until they reached the staircase.

"It's just a staircase," Mike sighed.

"Shut up," was all Carol could say while she eagerly started to follow the tour guide.

"She's going mental," Mike whispered to Dave, who was walking next to him.

"I heard that! Church, remember," Carol responded.

"Shut up, and let the tour begin," Noah interrupted.

"Good. Well yes," the tour guide started.

The tour guide, a man in his fifties, had been working for St. Paul's for over twenty years. According to himself he knew everything about the church.

"Welcome to St. Paul's everyone," he continued.

And so, the tour began. The tour guide told the group about the church and its history, pointed out interesting facts and sights as they passed them and entertained the group with short anecdotes. When they got to the staircase Carol took over, as she told the guys what exactly happened there in the movie.

The tour guide was seemingly annoyed by her interruption. Dave listened and tried to remember everything the tour guide told and showed them. The church was fascinating and he enjoyed every bit of it. Even though the guys fooled around a bit and made silly remarks, Dave continuously listened to the guide. Until they got to the library.

Once they entered the room, Dave was in awe. Carol as well, but that was because it looked like something out of Harry Potter again.

As they made their way through the room Dave checked out the books on the old dark brown wooden shelves. They looked

so old and interesting. He wished he could have stayed there and read them all.

As the tour continued and the group left the room, Dave's eyes landed on one remarkable book.

In the middle of old brown leathered books Dave noticed a fiery red one. But unlike the other books in the library it didn't have a leather cover or one of fabric. Dave couldn't recognize the material. The book also didn't have a title. The back of the book had no information on it whatsoever. It was simply red, a dark kind of red, but incomparable to any other kind of red, and at the edges both at the bottom and at the top a gold colored metal was attached. Clearly that was part of the cover. Dave couldn't think of a reason why it interested him so much, but he kept staring at that book.

"Shall we continue?" The tour guide kindly asked, apparently waiting for Dave to move along.

Dave snapped out of his trance-like state. Without saying a word, he followed the guide who had just turned around the corner, there Carol, Joey and Mike were already waiting. He walked towards them and noticed Noah behind him. And they continued their tour.

After a long day of walking through London the group decided on going back to their hotel. Carol wanted to shower and after that they could go somewhere to eat. Dave followed mindlessly as he was still thinking about that red book. He settled himself on his bed. As he sat there he pictured that book in front of him. A completely red cover with a golden framework laid over it. It was locked like a diary and the pages were of old paper that had a faint golden shimmer to it.

"Dave, snap out of it," Noah, snapped his fingers to make his point. "Earth to Dave."

Dave came to his senses and looked up to see Noah standing in front of him.

“Check it out, dude,” Noah said as he hinted towards his hand with his eyes. “Like what you see?”

Dave didn’t picture the book; he saw the book. Because in Noah’s hands, in front of him, was that same red book he saw in the library. Noah stole it. He stole a book from the library of St. Paul’s.

“I saw you staring at it, so I thought... let’s take it with! Right?”

## Alex I

The sun shone brightly on their camp site in the valley. The nearby lake reflected the sunlight everywhere as an afternoon breeze made small waves. The vegetation on the mountain slopes swayed softly back and forth, welcoming and sending off the jittery birds who were playing together in the air.

Two tents were keeping each other company on the open field. In one of the tents a girl, Jessica, was unpacking her stuff and making sure her sleeping bag had the right underground. Outside, Jim and Alex were working on getting their stuff inside their tent and putting away the materials they needed to build them. It was a hot day and the two young men were sweating. Jim used his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. Not that it helped. Alex put the extra pegs and rope in a bag and tossed it into the corner of the tent.

“I can’t believe I let you guys talk me into this,” Jessica complained.

“Sorry I forgot the inflatable bed, Jess,” Jim quickly responded.

“Mom even got it from the attic and you simply forgot. It was on the kitchen counter.”

“Sorry sis,” Jim replied while making a like-I-care face to Alex.

Alex had to laugh.

“That’s not funny Alex, I don’t know if I can sleep tonight,” Jessica continued in a whinny voice.

“You’re one to complain. You have a tent for yourself, I have to share one with mister snore here.”

“I don’t snore,” Alex said.

“Yes you do! Expert here,” Jim announced proudly, not realizing what he said.

“How come you’re an expert?” Jessica asked while she peeked her head outside of the tent.

“Oh, Jim and I...” Alex started.

“Had sleep overs,” Jim quickly said, eyeing Alex he almost went too far. “You know, game nights and all.”

“I didn’t know about that. Anyways, I don’t even care. But jeez, it’s hot in the sun.” Jessica went back inside the tent.

“There’s a lake nearby, let’s swim there,” Alex suggested to the party.

“You guys go, I have to make something out of this tent otherwise tonight will be hell,” Jessica yelled from inside her tent.

Jim gestured a ‘leave her, let’s go.

“Oh but Jess! Perhaps you can collect some firewood for tonight then, once you’re done of course.”

“I thought this was a vacation,” his sister sounded annoyed.

“That’s settled then, see you later sis. Let’s go Lex,” and Jim started running.

Alex quickly dove into his tent to put on his swim shorts and to get a towel. After that he ran after Jim who headed for the lake.

When Alex reached the shore, he saw Jim swimming towards the center of the lake, unaware of the fact that Alex had arrived. Alex walked into the water, enjoying the cooling effect it had, and when it was deep enough he started swimming towards Jim. When Jim stopped swimming Alex quickly dove under water. He reached Jim’s legs who was checking his surroundings. Probably looking for Alex. Alex grabbed his legs and pulled Jim under. Terrified and surprised he started panicking, frantically moving his arms and legs to

get back to the surface. Alex grabbed him by the middle and swam to the surface, both inhaling deeply when they got back up.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Alex saw Jim's angry expression.

"Idiot, why did you do that?" Jim spouted.

"I'm sorry," Alex repeated.

"You scared the crap out of me," Jim said with a rage noticeable in his voice.

"Just look at it as your own little horror movie experience," Alex tried.

"Seriously?"

"I said I was sorry. I was careful and I pulled you back up."

"It's not funny. My heart is racing."

"Thousand apologies. It was a stupid joke."

While Jim calmed down Alex looked at him. Checking out Jim's face and enjoying every little detail of it. His best friend. Best friend? No! Boyfriend! Or was that too forward? Friends with benefits maybe? Alex hoped that it would be more than that. One of the reasons he wanted to go on vacation with Jim. Too bad Jessica had to come along; her idea. She wanted to use the opportunity to hike and train for a marathon. Not that Alex didn't like Jessica. He just wanted to be alone with Jim to figure out what it was they had. At least they were alone now. Alex and Jim were still floating opposite each other. Alex moved forward and planted a kiss on Jim's lips. This surprised Jim, who let it happen at first. Then he pushed Alex away.

"Not here, Alex. Not now."

"What about tonight then?" Alex asked hopefully.

"I mean not during this trip. Not during this summer."

"Wow, that's new. What happened to the old Jim?"

“He’s still at home. This Jim doesn’t know what... who he wants,” he said carefully.

“So, Jim suddenly starts to doubt himself?”

“Jim has always doubted himself.”

“Jesus Jim, why didn’t you say this sooner?”

To convey his annoyance Alex moved away from Jim, increasing the distance between them.

“I wasn’t sure,” was all Jim could say. He tried to avoid eye contact with Alex.

“What was it that we had then? The sleep overs? The game nights? What was that? And don’t...do not tell me that was some sort of experiment.”

“Of course not. As far as I’m concerned that was real. But afterwards the doubt comes in. I just need time. To figure out what I am? And what I want.”

“Without distraction?”

“Yes.”

“Without me?” Alex carefully asked.

“Yes. No. I mean you weren’t a distraction.”

“It confused you then?” Alex tried to help.

“Yes. It did.” Jim looked at Alex, they stared at each other for a couple of seconds.

“Okay, I think I get it. I’ll keep my hands within the vehicle at all times. But if the waiting takes too long....”

“No, it won’t,” Jim quickly said.

“Okay. Jim, I respect your honesty. And I want to help you.

But your timing sucks. I had hoped that we, during this trip.

You know! Anyway, I’m heading back. I am in dire need of a good glass of wine.”

Alex started to swim towards the shore, but Jim stayed behind.

“Alex?”

“Yes.” Alex continued swimming.

“Thanks. You’re a good friend.”

“Hope I can be more.” Alex replied not knowing if Jim could hear that.

At the end of the night and three bottles of wine later Jessica couldn't keep her eyes open anymore and decided that she should go to bed. Also because she wanted to hike during sunrise. Jim and Alex didn't hear her after she zipped the tent shut and apparently, Jessica could indeed sleep.

Jim and Alex watched the fire they had made and finished the last bit of wine from the third bottle. The last flames licked the charred wood, and the temperature dropped, so the guys eventually decided to follow Jessica's example and go to sleep.

The alcohol had affected Jim most and he had trouble getting into his sleeping bag but soon enough they were lying next to each other.

“Good night,” Alex whispered, leaned over and gave Jim a peck on his cheek. “Sorry, force of habit.”

“That's okay,” Jim slurred and gave Alex a kiss on the cheek back.

They looked at each other, only illuminated by the light of a flashlight.

Jim moved his head towards Alex and gave him a firm kiss on the lips.

Alex quickly ended the kiss.

“Don't, Jim. Not after what you told me this afternoon.”

“Forget that,” was all Jim said as he gave Alex another kiss, this time more forceful.

“You're drunk, don't do this.”

“Oh come on, let's have some fun. Like old times.”

“No, Jim, stop it. You'll regret this.”

“I made up my mind, Alex.”

“No, you are drunk. Just stop.”

Alex tried to avoid it but Jim kissed him again.

“Jim! Stop! Go to sleep. Stop it Jim.” Alex tried to push Jim off of him.

“I thought you wanted this, isn’t this why we are here,” Jim said loudly with the alcohol apparent in his voice.

“After what you told me today, that has changed. I want to give you some time.”

“I don’t want time, I want you.”

“Jim, you are drunk, leave me...” Alex said again.

Jim didn’t listen and forced another kiss on Alex’s lips.

“You better cool down,” Alex said as he pushed Jim away.

He got up and unzipped the opening of the tent.

“I’ll wait outside until you’re asleep. Thanks for a great first night.”

“Oh, just shut up. You don’t know what you want,” Jim fired at Alex.

Alex left the tent and closed it again. He stretched his legs and took a few steps away from the tent.

“You suck at being a boyfriend,” Jim shouted.

“Just shut up and go to sleep,” Alex whispered in return not to wake up Jessica.

God, how Alex hated the combination of Jim and alcohol.

Jim said some more things. Alex didn’t want to hear them and walked away from the camp site.

The full moon illuminated a small path and he followed it up the hill towards the mountain.

What did he just do? Did he regret it? No. It was better this way. God, how Alex hated the kind of guys who weren’t out yet.

A gust of warm summer wind blew through the leaves of the trees around him. In the distance an animal snapped a branch on the ground.

Alex walked a bit further until he found a spot where he had a clear view of the lake at the bottom of the hill. Or was he already on the mountain? He sat down and leaned against a tree as he enjoyed the sight of the moon reflecting on the still waters of the lake.

Luckily it wasn't that dark. The moon provided enough light that night.

He felt tired and soon he fell asleep.

## John II

A chilly breeze blew across the terrace sending shivers down John's spine. He took a swig of his cigarette while his other hand reached for his phone on the table in front of him. The small flame of the candle swayed in the wind, surviving the breeze. John checked his phone. No missed calls or messages. Nathalie was late.

It didn't surprise John, but he felt annoyed. Couldn't she make an exception for their anniversary dinner. Nathalie had the habit of showing up late and of suddenly having to leave. John was used to it. It was something that gave her life, because she always seemed short of breath when she finally did arrive. As if she just did something great and important before seeing him. Others would call it lazy or disorganized. John knew it was a weird thought, but nevertheless a nice one. Nathalie never told him where she came from or where she was off to. John also didn't have to know. He was just so happy he had this energetic lively girlfriend.

Three years.

They had met each other during their first year of college. Randomly on campus. Every morning they crossed paths on their way to their respective classes. Nathalie seemed to always check him out as they passed each other, and he didn't know how to behave when she did that. It started this one morning when John found Nathalie leaning against a bench in the quad. When John walked by, she asked him to come with her for a second breakfast. Her teacher was ill so her class got canceled, and she had waited there especially for him. John didn't dare say no.

He took the last swig of his cigarette and killed it in the ashtray.

A person appeared next to him, and John looked up.

“Can I ‘elp you with your order?” Nathalie said with a thick French accent.

She looked gorgeous, with her hair loose and slightly curly. She appeared in a simple outfit of jeans and a shirt, and her trusty backpack. She always had that thing around. John enjoyed the sight.

“Yes, I would like to have a girlfriend to share an anniversary with, please,” John played along.

“Very well, monsieur.” Nathalie bent over to give John a short loving kiss and took the seat in front of him. She put her backpack next to the table. They stared at each other for a moment before they shouted to each other: “Happy Anniversary.”

It was their tradition. Surrounding people looked up and stared at the couple. Somebody yelled “Cheers.”

A waiter appeared at their table with a bottle in his hands. He offered it to them. “Champagne for the lovely couple.” The waiter started pouring the wine. After he finished, he placed the bottle in the cooler behind him, wished the couple a happy anniversary and left.

“Champagne! Wow. That’s a first,” Nathalie said with a big smile.

“Been saving all year,” was all John replied as he took out a small box from his pocket.

He stood up and went down on one knee next to Nathalie.

“Oh no, no, no,” Nathalie started, “Please don’t.”

“Dear Nathalie,” John began. “We have been together for three years now...”

“John, don’t,” Nathalie pleaded.

“And in those years, I have grown to love you, respect you, live with you and I have seen you a lot.” John didn’t let himself get distracted by Nathalie’s plea.

“And in that time, I have never seen you wearing a necklace.”

“What are you...”

“So would you please accept this necklace...,” John opened the box. “...as a token of my love, for the past three years, now, and the years to come?” John had to laugh when he finished, but he didn’t stand up.

“Asshole. You scared me to death. What a joke,” Nathalie said as she tried to push John away.

“Please, Nat, accept the necklace. My knee is starting to hurt,” John whimpered.

“Of course I will accept your necklace. But don’t ever give me a present like this again.”

John stood up and rubbed his knee. He sighed. He took the necklace from the box and put it around her neck. “There, now that’s a first.”

And they both laughed.

After the main course John was once again alone. Nathalie had to excuse herself to go to the bathroom. He took a sip of the champagne and looked around. People had already left and it was a lot more quiet on the terrace now. The candle on the table, now nothing more than a short stump of wax, had a small flame, about to die out. John inhaled and enjoyed the fresh summer air, smelling the grass and the leaves and the food around him. He closed his eyes and listened to the muttering of voices around him and the birds and crickets in the trees. A car drove past, disrupting the tranquility.

John opened his eyes just as Nathalie's phone started going off from within her backpack. John let it ring, didn't want to get it. No interruptions tonight. He took another sip of champagne and followed a car with his eyes as it speeded past.

Nathalie's phone started ringing again. Perhaps it was something urgent. Something to do with her family. John considered the options. He bent over to get the bag and zipped it open. He saw the screen lit up in the darkness of the bag, grabbed it and took it out. The caller's id said 'Adam'. *Who is Adam*, John wondered as he pressed the accept button and raised to phone to his ear. "Nathalie's Phone, John speaking, can I help?" Silence. Nobody answered on the other side and soon the call disconnected.

*Weird.* John removed the phone from his ear and placed it on the table. He felt confused. Who was Adam? And why didn't he answer. A slight feeling of jealousy bubbled up inside of him. How come he never heard that name before?

Nathalie's return interrupted John's trail of thought.

"I'm back! The toilets in there are amazing. You should check them out."

"Who's Adam?" John heard himself ask.

Immediately regretting the question. This was nothing like him. He wasn't the jealous type. He trusted Nathalie completely. And yet.

"Just a friend, why?"

Jealousy nagged at him and the answer didn't help.

"He just called you. When I picked up he didn't say anything and hung up."

Nathalie's face looked worried for a second. But soon she replaced that emotion with an innocent look.

"He's kind of shy. If it's urgent he'll call again."

John didn't respond and tried to reason with the feeling of jealousy which seemed to help him digest his food. Nathalie

looked so innocent but that short moment of worry, what was that?

“So, what’s for dessert?” Nathalie asked with a smile.

They were halfway their dessert when John could finally focus on his anniversary again. He quickly analyzed the situation, asked himself why he should feel jealous and then let it go when he couldn’t come up with a good answer.

Nathalie brought another spoonful of ice cream to her mouth, “Why so quiet? Brain freeze?”

But before John could answer, the phone, which was still on the table, went off again.

Adam.

Again.

Nathalie picked it up, “Adam? What’s up?” She asked in a casual way.

She quietly listened to what Adam had to say. She looked at her ice cream, then at John and then at an alleyway across the street.

Without saying another word she ended the conversation, grabbed her bag and dropped her phone in it, looked at John and stood up.

“I’m sorry. I will be right back.”

She put on her backpack and left the terrace, crossing the street and entering the alleyway.

It baffled John. What just happened? Why did Nathalie leave so sudden? And once again, who was Adam? John stood up, too eager to know what was going on. He grabbed his wallet, took out some bills and dropped them on the table. He then went after his girlfriend.

John crossed the street and entered the same alley. It was a long one filled with dumpsters but no Nathalie. He started

running, almost tripping over some garbage bags lying on the ground. The lights at the end of the alley were all broken so it was dark. When John reached the end, he entered a street which ran parallel to the one of the restaurant. To his right the street took a turn left where an elderly home was located. To his left the street went on to connect with Main Street. Along the street was a parking lot at the back of the abandoned Irish Pub. John couldn't decide which way to go, until he heard a loud bang coming from the parking lot. He turned left and ran towards the source of the loud bang. "Hey, over here," a female voice shouted.

Nathalie!

John ran even faster and reached the parking lot. He could barely see what was going on because the lot was barely lit. The lights at the back of the pub were old and most were broken. The ones that did work weren't very bright. The street lights didn't do much either.

John stood there in the driveway trying to make sense of what he saw. But as she stood there, observing, he began to make out shapes. A couple of meters away from him there was a man, lying on the ground. He looked unconscious. A muffled sound of a gun with a silencer echoed through the air, followed by a loud groan. A groan that sounded rather inhuman. John looked away from the unconscious man and saw someone firing at a much larger figure. The smaller one moved closer to its opponent and reached the illuminated area casted by that last working lights.

It was Nathalie.

She shot again at the large figure in front of her. The figure groaned but still moved toward her, hitting her hard in the stomach. Nathalie came off the ground and landed a couple of

meters back on the ground. The figure kept moving towards her and hit the area of light.

John wanted to shout at his girlfriend, making sure she was okay. He started to move towards her, but when he saw the figure enter the light, he froze on the spot.

Nathalie's opponent didn't resemble a man, nor an animal. A creature unlike anything John had ever seen. A massive creature with grey skin, broad shoulders and a bald head. Its ears were pointy and it looked as if it had tusks coming out of its mouth. The legs of the creature were covered in black fur. It had a tail, which was grey skinned with a hairy black tip like a lion. And to top it all off its legs looked like those of a goat. It had hooves. It looked like the mythological Satyr, but only bigger.

John didn't know what he was seeing. As if glued to the spot he couldn't move.

The creature walked towards Nathalie who had just got back up on her feet. The fall had hurt her left leg and it couldn't support her anymore. She had lost the gun when she hit the ground. She bent down to her right foot and pulled a small dagger out of her boot. The creature had reached her and as Nathalie lunged forward to strike with the blade, the creature hit her in the side. Nathalie hit the wall of the abandoned building and dropped the dagger. The creature walked towards her with a quick pace and grabbed her by the hair. He lifted her off the ground and Nathalie screamed and tried to hit him with her legs as he lifted her higher. His other hand wrapped around her neck. He let go of her hair and watched Nathalie choke in his grasp. He placed his thumb on her jawbone and as if it took too long already, snapped her neck.

## Max II

The fresh air did him some good. And slowly that nauseating feeling subsided. Max followed the path he took earlier that day and ventured deeper into the woods. In the distance, he could hear the guys scream and laugh, together around the campfire, where the alcohol fueled their enthusiasm.

*Poor Thomas and Nick, Max thought, hopefully they can sleep with those two drunks in front of the tent.*

Max kept walking until he couldn't hear the guys anymore and stopped. He looked up, curious if he could see the stars. But the thick canopy blocked his view. The only thing he could see was bits of the moon, which he believed was almost full. The moon created beams of light piercing through the woods, which barely made it to the ground. Luckily Max had brought his flashlight. He hoped that standing still would help him get rid of the unpleasant feeling he got from drinking beer too quickly, but it didn't.

So, Max started walking again, moving further away from the campsite with every step he took.

He found another path, one he hadn't noticed during his previous walk and decided to take it. It was a small one, mostly overgrown with small shrubberies, but nonetheless Max could still see where it went. He followed it.

Max checked his phone after an hour had passed. The bright light of the screen blinded him in the almost complete darkness around him. He quickly put his phone back in his pocket and stopped to let his eyes readjust to the night. The moonlight couldn't reach the ground in this part, his flashlight was his only source of light, and it wasn't much. Max feared that the batteries were dying.

He decided to switch the flashlight off, to enjoy the wood at night. It looked as if the soft click of the flashlight scared a bird, as the creature flew away when Max switched it off. Now, darkness was all around him. A soft wind fluttered through the leaves and crickets were chirping. Luckily there weren't any wild animals like wolves in this part of the wood. The guys had picked the camping spot mostly because of that. It turned out that Jack was frantically afraid of bears. *Typical. The tough guy's afraid of bears*, the thought made Max laugh.

Max stood there in the near silence. Smelling the scent of the wood, the plants and the dry earth. He looked around and could vaguely make out the shapes of the trees that surrounded him. He didn't fear the dark. But Alex did. Although they were twins, Max and his brother were different in so many ways. Max thought that Alex was crazy for wanting to camp in the mountains, but then again it was Jim's idea. And Max knew that his brother would do anything for Jim, it was so obvious.

The peace and quiet were disturbed by a small animal hastily running past Max. It came from behind him. Although he couldn't see it he guessed that based on swiftness and sound it had to be a rabbit. He heard a twig snap behind him. Max switched on the flashlight and immediately turned around. He let out a loud scream. A man standing in front of him a few meters away, aimed a gun at his head.

"What the fuck dude," Max yelled with a fast beating heart thumping in his chest.

"What are you doing here?" The hunter, at least Max thought it looked like a hunter, said. "It ain't safe to be alone in the woods."

“You scared me to death with that gun, man. Please aim it at something else.”

“Are you from that group that is camping at that campsite? With the big tent?” The hunter inquired.

“Have you been spying on us?”

“It’s not safe here. I suggest you follow the path back to the campsite, as quick as you can,” the hunter said, ignoring Max’s question.

“Why isn’t it safe here? I thought this was one of the safest parts.”

And then it hit him, this was so like Jack.

“Wait, is this Jack’s doing? Did he hire you to try to scare me?”

“What the fuck are you talking about kid. I don’t know any Jack. Animals move, it’s what they do, now they’re here, so it’s not safe. So get out of here,” the hunter replied, clearly annoyed.

“Okay, sure. Geez dude, calm down. As if-”

A long lasting howl in the distance interrupted him.

“Enough proof for ya?” The hunter said. “Get out o’ here, boy.”

Clearly thinking that the conversation was enough to persuade a teenager to leave the woods, the hunter turned around and walked away from Max, in the direction the howl came from.

The words did indeed persuade Max, as he turned around as well and started following the path back. He ran, hoping that he wouldn’t trip over branches or stones. He stumbled and almost fell a couple of times. But he managed.

There was a frigging wolf in the woods. Max thought there weren’t any but, obviously, there was. Suddenly he felt stupid, for wandering so deep into the wood. He ran as fast as he could until he couldn’t do it anymore. His pace went from

Olympic marathon to a casual stroll through the park. He had to gasp for air, never had he run that long and fast. He reached a small junction and thought he had returned on the previous path. He turned left and followed it. When he could breathe normally again, Max went for another run. But another howl in the distance, followed by a gunshot, distracted him.

Adrenaline pumped through his body and his heartbeat went through the roof. He continued the running and made his way through the woods. After a long while on hard soil and plants under his feet, he suddenly felt something soft. He stopped immediately to examine what it was. He shone his light on the ground, where Max saw a pair of pants, his footprint was clearly visible on the dark fabric that obviously belonged to a fancy suit.

*Weird*, was all Max could think before he prioritized and started running again. In the distance, he saw a small bush with naked branches and just a few leaves at the ends of them. One of the branches had a tie hanging from it. A dark red one with black lines running diagonally across it.

*First pants, now a tie, what was going on?* Max's mind tried to make sense of it all as he continued to run through the woods. After a while he once again had to slow down, as he couldn't keep it up anymore. A painful side stitch didn't help either. He tried to walk as fast as possible, hoping that he soon would reach the camp site.

But instead, he reached a jacket, lying on the ground, with a phone and wallet lying next to it. Max stopped in front of it and looked at it for a second. How weird could anything be. A jacket, with a phone and a wallet lying in the middle of the woods. Perhaps they belonged to the hunter, although the man didn't look like a person who had just changed out of a suit and tie. Max bent down to grab the wallet. His hand just barely

touched it when he heard a growl coming from something in front of him.

Max froze, knowing what was growling at him. He slowly moved, removing his hand away from the wallet. He went down on his knees, keeping his flashlight pointing towards the jacket. Max slowly raised his head, trying to see the situation in front of him, assessing every possible step he could take.

The light of the flashlight reached far enough to illuminate the creature. The eyes reflected the light, making it seem as if the eyes glowed with a bright light blue hue.

It was a very, very big wolf. With black and grey fur. Its paws the size of a human hand and its body as long as a grown man. The light-blue glowing eyes were staring at Max; the wolf had its teeth exposed and it produced a loud growl that meant business.

Max tried to take a slow step back.

Then, the flashlight died.

But the wolf's eyes kept glowing.

## Dave II

“Are you crazy?”

Dave jumped up from the bed and Noah had to take a couple of steps back.

“Let’s take it with? Why would you do that?”

“I thought you liked the book,” Noah looked at Dave, still holding out his arm, offering the book to Dave.

“That’s not a reason to ‘*take it with*’,” Dave said mockingly, making air quotes with his fingers.

“You could have taken a picture of it for me. That would have been enough.”

“The real deal is so much cooler,” was Noah’s argument.

“What if they find out? I guess they already found out. You need to return it. Take it back and apologize.”

“And then what? Get arrested? Dude, I did this for you.

You’re the one being all obsessed about English history. Well I have some of that history right here. Check it out first. Once you’ve seen it, I’ll bring it back.”

“I don’t want to check it out. I want it back at St. Paul’s, where it belongs. Besides, haven’t you noticed that you can’t open it.”

“What?” Noah sheepishly said. He turned the book around in his hand, looked at every edge. “Well darn it. What kind of book is sealed shut like this?”

Noah sat down and began to pry at the edges of the golden framework.

“Stop it, you’re damaging it.”

Dave grabbed the book, to place it on the nightstand next to his bed.

A weird sensation went through his body, the one you get from sitting too still for a long time, causing numb limbs and then

feeling the blood flow back when you stand up. An image of his father quickly flashed in front of Dave's eyes, the man who left his mother, brothers and him. The sensation disappeared when he let go of the book.

"I'll bring it back tomorrow," Noah offered.

"Huh?"

The short but vivid image of his father, made Dave lose all focus.

"I'll bring it back. I said. Tomorrow."

"Yes," Dave answered, more as an automatic reply. "Very good. Wise idea."

"I'm sorry Dave. Let me buy you a drink to sort of make it up to you."

"No thanks. I'm tired. I really need to sleep."

"Sure, relax. Sleep well then," Noah started to walk towards the door, he grabbed his phone out of his pocket, opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Dave saw how looked for a contact and put the phone against his ear. Max only heard Noah announce himself before the door automatically fell shut.

Dave dreamt that he was sitting upright in bed. With his left arm in a cast that itched. The book he got for his ninth birthday lay on the table in front of him. Dave tried to read it but with one hand and a killer headache, he had trouble doing so. Max was also in the room, sitting at the table in the corner, playing on his Nintendo. Dave didn't know where John and Alex were, but he believed that they were close. His father and mother were in the hallway. Dave couldn't see them, but he heard them talking.

Dave just turned the page in anticipation, knowing that this was the scary part, when his parents came in.

“We are going to check up on Alex and John. Max, do you want to join?” His mother asked.

“Yes,” was all Max said as he paused his game, put his Nintendo down and jumped off the chair.

“Dave? Is it okay if we leave you for a moment?”

Now he remembered. They were in hospital after the car crash. This was ages ago.

“Sure,” Dave said. “I have my book.”

“I’ll tell them you said hi, and perhaps if you feel better you could visit them tomorrow,” his mother said.

“Of course,” was all Dave said before he focused on his book again.

Suddenly the hospital bed morphed into a couch. Dave was still reading his book, but he only had a two more pages to go. His father was seated in the fancy leather chair in the corner. Also reading a book. He looked concerned as he hastily browsed through the pages.

Dave finished his book and put it aside. He watched his father study something on the page, before turning a couple of pages, looking for something else.

“What are you reading, dad?”

“A book about ancient medicine,” was all his father answered.

Dave remembered that this father was a historian. A person studying the events and people of centuries and millennia ago. Dave couldn’t even imagine how long a millennia lasted, but it sounded interesting. One day he wanted to be just like his father.

“I finished my book,” Dave said.

“That fast? You just got it,” his father replied without looking up.

“It was an exciting story.”

“Is that so?”

This time his father did look up.

“Does your book have exciting stories in it?”

Dave jumped off the couch and walked towards his father. As if he wouldn't answer and Dave had to discover it for himself.

“I'm afraid not. This is a very boring book. But I do have some books that you might like one day.”

Dave's eyes were suddenly filled with enthusiasm and anticipation.

“Come on, I'll show you,” Dave's father put the book away and rose from his chair. He walked up the stairs and Dave followed him. He followed his father through the hallway, passing his own room, until they reached the hatch in the ceiling. Soon a small ladder connected the hallway to the attic. “You go first,” Dave's father suggested. “It's safer.”

Dave started climbing up the stairs. Which was a hard thing to do if you only have one arm you can use. Dave's left arm was still in a cast. But he reached the top of the stairs. It was dark in the attic. Dave could see a couple of boxes in the light coming from the hallway. His father appeared behind him and after a click the entire attic was ablaze with artificial light.

Dave saw piles and piles of books in between old boxes. He let out a cry of excitement.

Dave walked towards the books. He started reading the covers, but he couldn't understand what they said. He climbed and crawled through this wonderful world full of books. Big ones, thin ones, very old ones. He thought there was no end to this collection.