

XPERTS



The Parashield

Samuel Osborne

Hermann Maurer, Coordinator
of The XPERTS Collection

XPERTS:
The Parashield

Samuel Osborne

BookLocker.com, Inc.

Copyright © 2004 Hermann Maurer

ISBN 1-59113-604-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated..

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2004

Visit the Website www.iicm.edu/Xperts for the latest on new books in the XPERTS collection!

For Juliette

Acknowledgements

If someone had told me at the start of the year that I would write my first book and it would be published in another country while I was still studying at university, I would not have believed them. However, someone did say it would happen and now it has. Thanks Trecia for your foresight. I would like to thank all my friends and family who were in my life while I was writing this book, my parents for introducing me to Hermann. My girlfriend Juliette, who encouraged me so much, and also, Beryl, Adrienne, Christine, Fiona, Andrew, Patty, Brien, and my grandfather Doug for much appreciated feedback along the way. I would also like to thank Mark who gave me some tips on how to write a blockbuster and for all the times he let me stay at his house in Lake Grace. Also, thanks to Bob for being a great friend and constant source of stimulating conversation, and Grant Stone of Murdoch University for his assistance. And finally a big thank you to Hermann for giving me the opportunity (of a life time) to write a book for the Xperts series. It was an absolute delight to undertake this creative adventure.

Samuel Osborne, Perth, July 2004

Preface to “Xperts: The Parashield” by the Editor of the XPERTS Collection

This is one of the novels in the XPERTS Collection, a collection of novels I am coordinating. Some of them I write myself, but others, like this one are written by others. This one is written by a very good friend of mine from Australia, Samuel Osborne. Like all books in the series this one also follows an outline agreed upon between the author and me, thus making sure that the books fit into a general ‘master plan’. I am reading and editing each of the books as they progress.

Each novel is completely self-contained, yet there is some coherence due to a set of persons that appear in each of the novels at some stage, usually playing a pivotal role.

The books in the collection are an unusual mixture of adventure, human emotions, supernatural powers (‘parabilities’), science fiction with glimpses into the future, and this interwoven with often detailed descriptions of interesting places from all over this world, be it USA, Canada, the Arctic, Europe, Brazil, Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, India, Bali, La Reunion, Borneo... you name it!

Some of the books have been written originally in English, others in German, but they are generally available in at least those two languages.

I want to cordially thank my friends for their continuing support, the Austrian publisher Freya and the US Publisher Booklocker for excellent cooperation, and my US friend and agent Andrew Burt for his endless patience.

Send me some feedback, positive or negative, to hmaurer@iicm.edu, will you!

Enjoy the book!

Hermann Maurer,
Editor of the XPERTS Collection,
Graz / Austria, July 2004

Chapter 1

Perth, Western Australia
May 1991.

Within the mother's womb, the baby's aura is activated and expands gently as a telekinetic shield around its body, which reduces the threat of suffocation; for the baby's umbilical cord is tangled around its neck. The nurse quickly passes the clamps to the doctor and he begins to assist the delivery with an increased sense of urgency.

"Is the baby going to be all right?" asks the mother. The doctor looks at her gravely, then turns around to watch the monitor displaying the child's weakening heart.

The child's parents look at each other intensely for long moment.

"Will it survive?" asks the father. The heart monitor sounds a flatline. The parents hold each other and begin to weep. The doctor drops his head in defeat. There is a long pause in the room. The assistant doctor, a young man in his late twenties, stands behind the senior doctor with his eyes fixed on the heart monitor.

"Come on, little one," the assistant whispers to himself. "You're not finished yet. I can still *feel* you there."

Beep Beep. The heart monitor sounds. *Beep Beep.* It sounds again. The senior doctor raises his head and looks at the parents and then at the heart monitor in astonishment.

"Impossible," he says.

The baby's heart had started again!" says the nurse. The hospital staff snap back into action and the assistant doctor remains standing, now smiling too.

“Looks like your child is ready to come out now, it must a be miracle,” says the senior doctor. The mother and father look at each other with new hope in their eyes. “Ok, start pushing again.”

The mother grits her teeth and begins to scream in agony as the baby begins to move again. The father stands at his wife’s side holding her hand tightly. Sweat drips from everyone’s brow.

“All right, almost there, keep going, you’re doing fine. Nurse, get some clean water ready. Doctor, notify the midwife’s ward and prepare the trays,” says the senior doctor.

The nurse rushes over to a large basin and begins to fill the pan and the assistant doctor steps over to the intercom.

“Ok, here it comes, one last push,” says the senior doctor.

A moment later the doctor places the newborn baby into warm towels and passes it to the nurse.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Falconer, you have a son... again.” The doctor’s eyes become teary and the newly parents embrace each other joyfully.

“Thank you nurses, thank you doc –”

The senior doctor looks around the delivery room for his assistant.

“Doctor?” he asks. “Nurse, where is Doctor Campbell?”

*Cottesloe Beach, Perth
January 1996.*

Dusk. The sun’s bright orange rays radiate unrestricted across a clear indigo sky saturating the western coastline of Australia. The light glimmers in the rippling waters of the Indian Ocean. The easterly sea breeze arrives in an instant and the atmosphere begins to cool. The soft yellow sand attracts families and tourists toward the shoreline, the smell of battered fish and chips wafts through the air, and the subtle scent of pine trees lingers in the background. Small flocks of seagulls descend upon the beach in anticipation of obtaining an easy meal. Children run around playing games and kicking up the

sand, while the parents sit on their tartan rugs drinking red wine and telling their children to behave. Further back up the beach, couples stroll along the path while others cycle and jog, and the windows of the Indian Tea House reflect the ocean's hypnotic power. Out on the groyne, dozens of anglers whip their rods over their shoulders, and a tangled frenzy of lines and baited hooks are cast out into the ocean, creating a myriad of tiny splashes in the water. For every line cast into the darkening waters, another is pulled back with a scaly little creature on its hook. The anglers drop them into one of the many plastic containers colouring the rough black jetty.

A young boy comes climbing over the rocks equipped with a small net and purple plastic bucket, weaving his way through the maze of fishing lines and tackle boxes. He stops at a small hole and squats down to look for tiny crabs. He stretches his arm down into the gap between the rocks. Holding the net tight within his hand, he scoops through the pool of water below. He pulls his arm back up; there are no crabs inside the net. The young boy frowns, but his face is suddenly replaced by excitement as he catches sight of another spot to catch the little sea crawlies. Jumping and stepping carefully over the uneven terrain, the young boy ventures over to another hole, placing each foot down as if it is the sole importance of each moment. Again he sits down and scoops the net with childish clumsiness into the water and around the nooks.

"Dad, I got one!" Standing up quickly and looking round for his father, the young boy holds his net high in the air, showing his victorious capture to the world. A small blue crab crawls frantically within the entanglement of the net.

"Please be careful, Ryan. Those rocks can be slippery," calls the boy's father, as he reels in his line. Ryan starts to make his way toward his father to show him the crab.

The sun's last rays have finally sunk under the horizon and the sky becomes an enchanting pink and orange. The atmosphere hums with the sounds of conversation and the clinking of cutlery on porcelain plates from the cafes and

restaurants lining the street above the beach. Cars cruise along the coast road slowly, their headlights sending a soft glow out into the evening air. The success of the anglers begins to increase; fishing rods are cast and reeled back more rapidly. The fish on the hooks wriggle in the air as they are yanked from the water and placed into the buckets. Squatting down next to his father, Ryan plays with the fish inside the container that his father is using to hold the evening's catch. Ryan untangles the crab from within the net and the small crab plops into the bucket. He watches it dart among the fish. It soon sinks to the bottom of the bucket, startling the fish for a moment before they settle again. Ryan becomes disinterested and looks around at the other anglers and into the evening sky.

"Dad, can I go up there?" Ryan asks his father, pointing to the far end of the groyne.

Jack doesn't even move his head, but keeps his gaze upon the fishing line. "Yes, but be careful, don't go where I can't see you."

Ryan starts to walk along the concrete path in the middle of the pier, weaving his way through the other anglers and dangling hooks.

"Don't be long little man, we've gotta go soon," Jack calls out to his son, looking at him this time.

"OK, Dad."

Ryan is already at the end of the path where fewer anglers gather because of the oncoming breeze. Ryan walks around the larger boulders and looks for a good spot to sit. As he climbs down a few levels, the sounds of the anglers and the noises from the beach are drowned out by the roar of the ocean as it washes and whirls back and forth around the peak. Ryan sits down on a flat surface and watches the horizon, allowing it to mesmerise him. He stares into the darkness of the water and the whole world behind him slowly dissolves from his awareness. His dreamy stare is broken when a small blue light flashes in front of his face. Ryan flinches and looks up into the sky trying to find what he has just seen. He watches as the first stars come out and the blue lights flit around his face again. Despite being

unsure of what he is seeing, Ryan, remains calm and a small smile crosses his face. Lights of various colours begin to appear more frequently and follow a spherical orbit around his whole body. Ryan looks around and sees no one else nearby. He slowly stretches his little arm out completely in front of himself, and the lights flash brighter for a moment and then vanish again. He laughs playfully in surprise.

“Who’s there?” He asks quietly. There is no response.

“What’s your name?” Ryan whispers to the empty air, still transfixed in the space above and in front of his head. Nothing happens. His smile is decreasing a little. A wave crashes into the rocks and sends a spray of water over Ryan. Undisturbed, he remains attentive to the point in front of him. The lights flash and fade again. Ryan’s smile returns and his eyes widen in delight.

“Do you want to play a game with me?” He is met with silence again. “I know lots of games.” Another wave lands hard below and a huge gush of water partially soaks Ryan’s clothes. A little startled, Ryan jolts and jumps to his feet and starts to climb back up to safety. More water bursts into the air soaking Ryan completely. He stops climbing and starts to weep. The tide is beginning to pick up and so is the wind.

“Ryan!” Jack yells from above, the wind flicking his fringe into his eyes. “I told you not to go past the end.” Ryan looks up toward his father, who is silhouetted by the glow of a streetlight.

“I’m sorry Dad.” His clothes are dripping wet and his eyes are filling with tears.

Jack starts climbing down to Ryan. Struggling to keep his balance, he says, “Come on, we have to go home now. Hurry up and get back up here.”

Ryan begins climbing up hesitantly. He slips and scrapes his knee, and sucks in air as he feels the pain.

“You all right son?” Jack is moving awkwardly down the crevices in the boulders, but is almost within arms reach of his son. Ryan steps up onto a small ledge and places his hands onto another rock to balance himself.

“Yeah, I’m OK, I just hurt my knee, that’s all.” A wave crashes below and sprays salty water over the whole end of the groyne.

“Well come on, it’s getting too rough out here. You don’t want to catch a cold.” Just as his father finishes speaking a large wave swarms in and washes right up and over Ryan and his father.

“Ryan!” Jack shouts. His voice is suffocated under the bellowing roar of the wave. Ryan does not answer. Jack looks for his son intensely. His eyes search quickly and then he finds him. Ryan is crouching at the base on a reef shelf right where the white wash is flooding in and out.

Fear rises in his voice. “Ryan! Wait there—don’t move. I’m coming to get you.” Jack calls out to some nearby anglers to alert the coast guard of the emergency and points down at his son. The anglers look at him with confusion and then see Ryan stuck below. Two men quickly drop their fishing rods and begin to climb down to assist Jack. Another man begins to scuffle through the anglers back toward the beach to alert the rescue authorities. A few people begin calling the emergency response team on their cell phones. The atmosphere explodes into a flock of worried faces; parents check for their children and the anglers reel in their lines.

Jack begins to panic and continues to climb down to Ryan, who is calling up to him for help, but the boom of the waves drowns his voice to a far away cry.

“I’m coming mate.” Jack stumbles down a few ledges. “Hold on tight—I’ll be there in a second.” But it is too late. Ryan cannot hold on any longer. A surge of water pulls him off the reef and into the swell. The waves come in one after another picking Ryan up and sucking him under the surface and slamming him into the solid wall of rocks. The water erupts into the air. The noise adds to Jacks dread. The tide continues to flow in, and Jack cannot see Ryan anywhere. He squints, but cannot see clearly through the spray of the waves and the stinging salt water running in his eyes.

Beneath the fierce surface of the ocean Ryan floats softly with his back to the sea floor. His eyes are wide open and his body gently spreads out in feathery movements. His clothes are beginning to dry. The water glides back and forth above his skin without touching it. He no longer cries. His body bears not a single mark of injury. The lights from above shimmer down through the water, dissolved in a dreamy glare of green and white. Ryan rests safe and quietly. The space between his body and the water begins to expand into an opalescent spherical shape. He takes in a short gasp while he watches in amazement as the sphere around him comes to a stop a few feet away from his body. He blinks once and upon opening his eyes again his mouth drops down slightly. He looks down at his hand in surprise and then touches his black cotton jumper: it is completely dry, as is the rest of his body.

From within the protective bubble, Ryan hears the distant muffled roar of the crashing waves above and the gurgling sea currents as they wash alongside the sphere. He is not thrown about within the sphere; instead, he drifts slowly just above the sandy seabed at a sedated pace. A small smile begins to form upon his face and his eyes light up cheerfully. He reaches out his little arm slowly and touches the transparent enclosure holding back the vast weight of the ocean's body. It bounces and ripples back into a smooth surface. A small blue flash of light appears where Ryan touches it, then it is gone. The sphere makes no sound except the effect upon the water surrounding it. Ryan looks to his left side and watches curiously as a school of Whiting glide delicately by; the bubble moves closer to the school of fish, seemingly by itself. Then, out of the shadows of the ocean's depths, a small Tiger shark stealthily hones in on Ryan. It opens its jaw fully to expose dozens of jagged sharp teeth. It darts suddenly toward Ryan at the last moment, but it does not come close to him. The shark thuds into the sphere, then jolts and whips about in a fit. Ryan covers his eyes and the shield dashes swiftly from the hungry predator, causing it to bolt in the other direction with one quick flick of its tail. Ryan

does not feel the sharp movement from within. He remains still, floating in the center.

The coast guard accelerates around the peak and then cuts the engines. The captain calls out orders to the crew. Searchlights scatter the water's surface in a random dance of fury. The rescue helicopter dives in the air and whips down close to the ocean's surface. A voice on the megaphone crackles into the wild night air.

"Please clear the area. Proceed back onto the beach. This is an emergency." The anglers begin gathering their belongings and briefly huddle back toward the beach, turning their heads to look back to catch a glimpse of the action. Jack stands frozen, overlooking the ocean. He grits his teeth and tears dry in his eyes. The helicopter searchlight passes over Jack. He turns his head toward the light, and blocks it with his open hand and partially covers his eyes.

"This is not a drill," comes the voice over the megaphone again. "Please clear the area." The land rescue team arrives in a four-wheeler at the end of the groyne. Three service men spring out of the car doors and call for Jack to return to safety. The other men who were helping Jack are now retreating.

"I'm not leaving until I find my son!"

The emergency team climbs down to Jack and helps him back up to the top of the rocky groyne. "We'll find your son, sir, but please come back to where it's safe."

The helicopter circles the area above, and the sea rescue vessel bobs up and down upon the waves, searchlights beaming onto the water. A large crowd is forming on the shore. The ambulance siren whines through the air as it races down the coastal highway toward the beach. As it comes nearer, its red emergency lights flash against the dark green pine trees next to the beach service road. The medical team move quickly to the back of their van and the crowd move back. They carry a stretcher down to the shore and wait, alert.

"Where's my son, have they found my son?" Jack asks a rescue team official. He sits shaking in the back of the four-wheeler, his shoulders wrapped in a warm rug.

“We’ll tell you as soon as we know, sir.” The rescue official hands Jack a warm drink and says in an much rehearsed reply, “don’t worry, we’ll find him. He’s going be OK.” Jack looks out of the car window at the searchlights scanning the area.

Below the water, Ryan floats unaware of the action above. He stares out of the sphere, fixating his gaze upon the dark depths in the distance. His attention returns back inside the sphere. He no longer smiles, though he is neither worried nor upset. Ryan’s eyes wander in speculation at the space surrounding him. The sphere bounces along the increasingly close sea floor. Small flashing lights of blue appear as it touches small rises in the sand.

Several moments pass and Ryan is still not found. The search teams continue to scan the area, and a second rescue boat enters the area carrying an underwater rescue team. They step off the boat and begin searching beneath the waves. The crowds on the beach have become partially influenced by Jack’s fatigue and hopelessness. They stand in the cool evening air, huddled together and whispering behind the police line.

“What’s going on?”

“I think a young boy fell off the groyne.”

“Have they found him?”

“He might have drowned.”

The television journalists begin to arrive and start reporting the emergency situation. Their presence only increases the anxiety of everyone on the beach.

The underwater rescue team slide down beneath the waves and begin to search through the rubble around the base of the groyne. One of the divers finds a small net drifting back and forth with the current. He ascends to the surface to report the item.

A senior, female rescue official steps closer to Jack. “Mr Falconer, we’ve done all we can, but—”

“But what?” Jack interrupts quickly.

The female official pauses, and then continues in a sympathetic voice, "But our team will continue looking for your son into the night. I would suggest you go home and be with your wife, and try to get some rest."

"I won't leave until my son has been found." Jack snuffles and the woman gives him a handkerchief and places her hand on his shoulder.

"There's nothing you can do to help, Mr. Falconer. Please go home and get some rest. Our team is going to give you a ride home." Jack places his hand over his face and starts to cry.

The woman shuts the door and the four-wheeler reverses down the groyne. While Jack's escort is driving up the service road, he weeps quietly.

A voice suddenly comes through on the short wave radio. "I think we've found something."

Jack looks out of the window, his eyes glued to the shore. The searchlights reflect on the window of the four-wheeler.

"Stop the car!" The driver brakes, and Jack opens the car door and jumps out. He quickly steps off the service road and down onto the beach. He makes his way through the crowd, pushing some people out of the way.

"Excuse me... let me through."

Breathing heavily, Jack reaches the front the crowd. He cannot see clearly because of the lights from the helicopter, rescue boat, and ambulance. When Jack arrives at the waters edge he cannot see Ryan, but there is something in the water. A soft glowing light radiates in the shallows. The crowd hushes, suspended in anticipation and confusion. The top of a small round object emerges above of the water. Jack's heart throbs inside his chest, his eyes widen, and his breath becomes still. The outline of the small sphere appears and moves closer into the shore; the glow of the sphere is diluted by the helicopter's trembling searchlight from above. The police officers and rescue officials hold the crowd of people back as they shuffle to find a clearer view.

"Ryan?" Jack whispers to himself. Ryan's small body wades through and out of the water straight up to his father with a smile on his face.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Ryan? Ryan! You’re all right!” Jack holds out his arms to his son. The crowd erupts into a cheer of release and the rescue teams hurry to assist Ryan.

“Dad, I’m OK, really,” says Ryan without any comprehension of what has been happening in the last half an hour since he fell into the ocean. “Why have you been crying dad? Are you OK?”

Jack hugs his son close and tears fall freely down his face. “I thought I’d lost you,” says Jack.

Ryan simply looks around at the crowd gathered on the beach. “What are all these people here doing here? Has someone been hurt?” Ryan looks up into his father’s eyes curiously.

Jack looks back at his son in surprise. “You—we all thought you were hurt, Ryan.” Jack runs his fingers through his son’s hair and hugs him again. The medical team offers Ryan a thick rug.

“Thank you,” says Jack, who begins to wrap the rug around Ryan and then notices that his son’s hair is dry. He finds that Ryan’s clothes are dry too. Jack looks at his son strangely, but he soon snaps out of his daze and places the rug around his son more firmly and gives him another hug.

“I’m so happy you’re all right son, I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m OK, dad.”

“How did you get back to the beach? You must have been very brave to swim all that way by yourself.” The helicopter’s search light beams directly down onto Jack and Ryan.

“The lights helped me,” Ryan said sincerely.

“What? What do you mean the lights helped you? You mean the search lights?”

“The lights are my friends. They made me float.” Ryan looks up into his father’s eyes innocently and Jack knows that his son is not lying, but he is still confused.

“Made you float? I think you mean the lights helped you find the beach, little man. Isn’t that what you mean?”

“No, Dad. The lights made me float into the beach. They made me float underwater.”

Jack raises his eyebrows and looks at Ryan, but his thoughts are interrupted by a swarm of journalists and camera operators. The police and rescue teams try to hold them back.

Flash.

“Give the boy some room,” the police shout, but the reporters surround Ryan and his father.

Flash. Flash.

“Sir, can you tell us what just happened?” asks one reporter. Jack flinches. *Flash. Flash. Flash.*

“Little boy, what’s your name? Can you tell us what happened?” *Flash.*

“My son is all right... he... swam back into the shore by himself,” Jack answers, and it even sounds unconvincing to himself. He takes Ryan by the hand and starts walking up the beach toward the ambulance. The police clear a path for Ryan and his father, and the medical team begins checking Ryan over. The watching crowd becomes restless, trying to see the action. A moment later the medical team are examining Ryan; they find no injuries on him anywhere.

“Your son seems fine Mr. Falconer,” says one of the ambulance officers surprised. “All I can suggest is that you go home and get some rest. There’s nothing we need to do here.”

Jack looks at the ambulance officer and then down to Ryan. “Are you sure you’re not hurt, little man?” Ryan nods his little head as he eats some chocolate given to him by the rescue team. Jack steps closer to the officer and leans his head to whisper, “But I thought I saw my son being thrown against the rocks, a child can’t take that kind of pounding... can they?”

“I’m not sure either Mr. Falconer, but somehow he came out without a scratch. Consider it a miracle, if you believe in that kind of thing.” The ambulance officer closes the back doors of the vehicle with a smirk on his face. He shrugs his shoulders and gets inside.

Ryan and Jack do not talk on the drive home. Jack is still trying to understand the evening’s events, and at the same time be thankful that Ryan is alive. Ryan sits in the passenger seat of his father’s car and simply stares out the window without really

understanding what happened back at the beach or the commotion caused by his rescue. When they arrive home, Isabelle, Ryan's mother is waiting for them at the front door of their home in the suburbs.

"I saw what happened on the news, are you all right my boy?" asks Isabelle. Ryan mumbles a reply. She kneels down and holds Ryan for a long time and some tears run from her eyes. Isabelle looks up at Jack for a moment and an unspoken message of relief passes between them.

"Let's get you inside, little man," she says.

"OK, Mum."

Jack stands in the entrance for a moment longer and watches his wife and son as they walk into the house. He takes hold of the door handle and begins to close it, but stops briefly. He thinks, then closes the front door completely and locks it behind him.

After they have put Ryan to bed, Jack switches on the television and watches the late night news report.

"This afternoon, a five-year-old boy has walked away miraculously unharmed after he fell off the groyne at Cottesloe Beach. Rescue authorities said the boy was extremely lucky that he was not thrown against the groyne, or pulled under water by the strong current. The boy was missing for twenty minutes before he appeared on the shore. Chief medical officer, Brian Collins said the boy had no injuries whatsoever and seemed to be quite unfazed by the event."

"To sport now, this evening Sri Lanka have defeated Australia in the One Day International by sixteen runs. Man of the match was awarded to Romesh Kaluwitharana..."

Jack turns the television off and stares at the blank screen for a moment. Isabelle stands beside him and gently rubs his back.

"Let's sit down." Isabelle begins walking into the kitchen. "Do you want a drink, honey?"

Jack turns his head in reply and sighs as he speaks. "Yeah sure, thanks."

Jack and Isabelle sit at the coffee table in silence. Jack stares into space and Isabelle looks at him sorrowfully.

"There's something else you're not telling me, Jack." Isabelle is sitting opposite him and moves her head closer. "Hmm, am I right? Is there something the news report didn't mention?" Jack sips his peppermint tea slowly; it is still hot. He licks his lips and puts the teacup down on the table and looks at his wife. "Tell me what's got you spooked, sweetie."

Jack breathes deeply and blinks a few times. "There *is* something I'm not telling you." He stares across the room toward Ryan's door, and whispers, "But I'm just not sure what it is." He sits in his chair uncomfortably.

Isabelle leans over the table and places her hand over her husband's and looks into his eyes with compassion. "Jack, honey, maybe you just need some rest?"

"No," he snaps. "I'm not tired. I just don't know... it was like..." He breathes deeply again.

Isabelle takes her hand off of her husband's and sits back into her chair. "What *did* you see, Jack, honey?"

Jack sips his tea again and stares into the steam evaporating from the cup. "I don't really know." He blows air onto his tea. "But there was something strange about Ryan when he came out of the water. I think there was a light. His clothes were dry and his hair was not even damp. I've never seen anything like—" Jack stops suddenly as he notices his wife's eyes widen and peer off to the side. He turns in his chair and sees Ryan standing in the doorway staring back at him sadly.

Faking a smile to cover up the conversation with his wife, he says, "What's wrong, little man? Can't sleep?"

Ryan rubs his face and walks over to his father. "Why were you talking about me, dad?" Ryan holds his father's arm. Jack looks at Isabelle to back him up.

Isabelle holds out her arms to Ryan. "Come here, sweetie-pie. Give mummy a hug and I'll put you back to bed. Are you feeling all right?" Jack takes in a deep breath now that the attention is not on him. "Mummy and daddy are sorry we woke you up. I'll tuck you back into bed."

"I feel funny," Ryan mumbles tiredly.

Isabelle walks Ryan to his room by his hand. "You'll be all better in the morning, but now you need to get some rest."

When Isabelle returns a few moments later, Jack is standing at the back sliding door, and looking out over the shadowy backyard. Isabelle comes and stands behind him, and places her arms around his waist and kisses his neck.

"Come on, let's go to bed," she says softly. "Let's just be happy our son is alive." Jack nods his head and sighs. "Stop worrying about it. It's probably nothing. You know how people can see things when they're anxious."

Isabelle goes into the main bedroom and Jack remains standing at the back door for a moment, his eyes closed in thought. He opens them a moment later and shrugs his shoulders.

"You're probably right," he says to himself, and turns off the light and goes to bed.

The house is steeped in darkness. The street lamp shines in the window and fills the corner of the main room with white fluorescent light. The house is quiet and still, yet outside the trees sway in the heavy wind, playing shadows across the walls in a nightly silent drama. A blue light glows at the bottom of Ryan's door. It fades and returns in a breathing rhythm.

Ryan lies on his bed covered in a dome of blue light. His body lifts and remains hovering gently within a whirlwind of light. The cartoon characters painted on the walls are highlighted with iridescent life. A mobile of the planets hanging from the ceiling turns in slow motion. Ryan begins to close his eyes and drift into sleep. The sphere begins to vanish and Ryan eases down onto his bed. When he finally drops off to sleep and his head rests comfortably upon the pillow, the night unfolds within the room, and the soft glow of the bed lamp falls upon his face.

Chapter 2

*Perth, Western Australia
September 2006*

The alarm clock silently flashes red: 12:00. Lightning blinks into the room whitening Ryan's face while he sleeps. A quilt with a Celtic design is tangled up around his shoulders and he lies diagonally across the bed. Outside the rain taps gently on the window and a low rumble of thunder vibrates faintly through the house. A crow caws intermittently from a nearby roof and then takes flight as it hears its mate responding across the suburb. The muffled sound of a car passes down the street, changing gears as it drives away. The rain eases off, and only the gentle dripping of water disturbs the silence. Ryan's things are spread about the bedroom: pieces of unwashed school uniform, an astronomy magazine opened to a page on black holes, a half empty soft drink bottle lying on its side, and an Australian Rules football next to a school bag in the corner which, among pieces of clear plastic film, contains an apple core and a chocolate bar wrapper. On a wooden desk by the window a few books are piled on top of each other, and nearby an LCD screen displays the green, falling lines of text of a Matrix screensaver. The lightning flickers again, highlighting a small wooden framed photo of Ryan and his father standing on a jetty by the beach. In the photo, Ryan is aged thirteen, and his hair is the same blonde color as his father's. His face and green eyes mirror his mother's. His father, Jack, smiles happily, but Ryan's face is distant and withdrawn; there is a kind of knowing imprinted in his posture.

Ryan breathes deeply and calmly as he sleeps. But then his eyes twitch and stop, and his face returns to a peaceful state. The room is still and cool. Droplets of water fall down the drainpipe, creating a metallic tap–tap–tap. The thunder claps far above in the sky over the house. Ryan’s eyes twitch again, and begin to move erratically under his eyelids in small bursts. The numbers on the clock begin to tick over: *12:01, 12:02, 12:03, 12:04...* The rain picks up again and patters on the window. Ryan’s head turns slightly left and right and he moans with his mouth closed. *12:11, 12:12, 12:13...* He moves his legs up and down under the sheet and rolls over onto his front.

“Ryan,” his mother calls from downstairs. *12:15* The numbers on the clock stop changing. “The power went out in the night. Everything has been reset. You need to get up soon if you want to be on time for school.” Ryan makes no response and continues to lie sprawled out across his bed.

From beneath the sheet a soft blue glow emits from the middle of Ryan’s back. Two small sparks of light flash around his head. *12:16, 12:25, 12:38...* The clock begins to speed into a blur of red LED patterns. Ryan moans quietly and shakes his head. The lights around him spiral from his feet to his head and then vanish. Slowly at first, the bed sheet and quilt covering Ryan begin to expand into a dome from both ends of the bed, and then gradually increase their speed until they puff up half way toward the ceiling. His body slowly lifts off the mattress without jerking and comes to float within the center of the space. The quilt and bed sheet slide to the ground over an invisible, spherical object. Ryan’s head shakes again and his eyelids twitch intensely. The room is filled with sharp white light and the thunder crackles through the sky, booming as it unfolds. The house trembles. He begins to breathe more heavily now, moaning louder, still within a dream. The timber blinds clack against the closed window, the football rolls around on the floor, the plastic sandwich wrapping flies around the room, and the pages of a magazine flip over continuously.

Downstairs, Isabelle feeds breakfast to Jacob who sits strapped into a high chair at the kitchen bench in a blue jumpsuit. Crumbs of honey on toast are smeared across his face and gelling in his thin blonde hair. Apple puree and orange juice dribble down his *Tigger and Friends* bib. He bangs his plate on the high chair table and blurts out happy baby noises to the room. Isabelle dips the plastic spoon into the baby's bowl and sighs in resignation. She looks at the clock on the oven. 8:05.

"Oh, what is that boy doing?" she asks, placing down the plastic bowl and wiping Jacob's face with a cloth.

"Now you wait there, you little monster, while I check on your brother." Isabelle exits the kitchen. Jacob stares at her from behind and shortly resumes banging his plate on the table and making his happy babbling.

Carefully avoiding the assortment of scattered, colourful toys and the Sony Playstation, Isabelle crosses the hardwood floor of the games room and walks out into the hallway. She climbs the first few stairs and stops. Placing her hand on the wooden railing, she looks up to Ryan's door.

"Ryan, you need to get up now, mate, it's after eight," she calls out.

Ryan's breathing is slowing down; he floats motionless and asleep above the mattress, which is pressed down into a concave bulge completing the spherical shape around him. The contents of the room are overturned and untidy. A hat stand leans in mid-air over Ryan, then falls to the floor making a clunking sound as it lands. There is a gentle double knock on the door.

"Ryan, are you awake yet?" Ryan opens his eyes suddenly, surprised by the knock. The door opens a little. He glances down at the bed three feet below him and drops his mouth in disbelief. He falls to the bed, the mattress pops back into shape and his mother enters the room.

"If you don't hurry up you'll be late for school, young man," says Isabelle. Ryan lies on his back looking above his head trying to find his mother. He mutters sleepily as he thinks of an excuse, but does not find one.

“Hurry up and get dressed quickly, otherwise you’ll miss the bus. I don’t want to receive any more calls from your Principle again, OK?” Ryan blinks a few times, still half asleep and confused. “And clean your room up, it’s looks like a bomb hit it,” she says crossly. Isabelle exits the room and closes the door firmly behind her.

“Sorry, mum,” says Ryan hastily.

“And take a rain coat, otherwise you’ll get wet on the way,” Isabelle calls as she descends the stairs.

Ryan takes a deep breath and exhales. He looks at the ceiling and then turns his attention to his bedroom. He moves his head to the side and looks at the state of the floor, his desk and other areas. His eyes widen and he jumps up out of the bed and scans the room in surprise. He pauses for a moment as he attempts to comprehend how his room became so messy. He rubs his face and stretches his arms out while yawning.

“I gotta clean my room more often,” he says to himself with a hint of reproach.

Ryan swings the front door closed behind him. His black raincoat twirls around him as he turns and runs out from under the porch into the rain and along the path down toward the gate. The front garden of Ryan’s house is enclosed by a six feet high fence covered with creepers, the courtyard is filled with luscious green plants, and a wooden park bench in one of the corners compliments a limestone sun dial. Ryan opens the large thick wooden gate by its cast iron handle, steps out onto the sidewalk, and puts his foot straight into a puddle of water, promptly splashing his trousers. Ryan pauses, looking down, and sighs regretfully when he sees the water soaking through to his socks. He looks down the tree-lined street to see the bus pulling away from his stop. He darts off down the sidewalk hoping to catch the bus before it reaches the next stop. The rain begins to pour down harder; the bus turns the corner and disappears from Ryan’s sight. He cuts down an alleyway between two houses which leads to the next street.

As he shoots out of the alleyway onto the next street, he nearly collides with the postman riding his motorbike, but

jumps out of the way just in time. He barely keeps his footing and tries to avoid more puddles of water, but eventually falls onto his bottom and lands on a patch of wet grass, feeling the water dampen his pants.

The postman continues on down the street delivering letters to the houses. Ryan watches him as he rides away, wondering why he did not swerve or react. The bus drives past, Ryan quickly responds and begins chasing after it.

The bus slows down as it approaches the next stop about a hundred meters away. A couple of people get off and open up their umbrellas as they step onto the footpath. Ryan continues to run toward the bus, gaining on it now; it is still stationary while other school students board. Just as Ryan reaches the back end of the bus it begins to accelerate and pulls away from the curb.

“Hey, wait for me!” shouts Ryan, rapping on the side of the bus. The passengers inside ignore him and continue to read the paper and listen to their mp3 players. He leaps out onto the road alongside the bus and tries to get the attention of the driver by waving and shouting at the side mirrors. The bus picks up more speed and Ryan begins to lag behind.

“Hey! Stop! Stop the bus.” The bus does not stop, but drives off down the street and around the corner. Ryan watches hopelessly as it drives away and he begins to slow down in the middle of the road and finally comes to a standstill, puffing. He bends over to relieve a stitch, but a car appears and honks at Ryan. Startled, he jumps back onto the curb and drops his bag into a deep puddle of water. His bag flap opens and his notepads and schoolbooks fall out onto the path, becoming wetter by the second. Ryan slouches and mopes while staring at his schoolbooks. A flash of veiny, white lightning breaks throughout the gray clouds and a thunderclap fills the sky and rolls away across the urban sprawl. The rain buckets down and Ryan stands soaked to the bone, frowning, his chin dropped to his chest and his shoulders slumped.

“Why did this have to happen to me?” he whines.

All of a sudden Ryan notices something strange about the footpath around and under his feet. He looks more closely and

sees there are no puddles, not even wet concrete. He looks up to see if there is a tree or something else sheltering the immediate area. There is nothing but clear space between the clouds and the ground. Ryan's face takes on a look of puzzlement, and he looks at the footpath further away from himself. All around him the heavy rain is soaking the concrete path and making it dark; all around him, that is, except for the slab he is standing on, which is now dry and light gray. A single drop of water runs down Ryan's cheek and falls onto his left shoe, which is now dry too. He wriggles his feet within his socks, and smiles cheerfully in surprise when he feels that his socks are no longer damp. He looks over at his school bag and reaches down to pick up one of the notebooks lying face down and opened in the middle. He holds it up and is amazed to see the pages drying out before his eyes. Ryan blinks and shakes his head, doubting what he is seeing.

He drops his arm slowly, still holding the notebook and moves his other hand out in front of him. He no longer feels the rain falling on the book, and when he looks closer he cannot see a single drop of water falling into his hand either. Yet the rain is pouring down around him and all along the street. His raincoat shows only a few patches of water, which promptly vanish as he runs his finger over them. Ryan's mouth drops and he looks at his coat wondering how this is be possible. Again he stretches his right hand out, but further this time, and eventually feels the wetness of the rain falling onto the tips of his fingers. He retracts his arm slowly and watches as the water on his fingers slides off the ends and disappears. He runs his thumb over his fingertips, feeling only dryness. He tilts his head back, closes his eyes and opens his mouth to collect some water to drink from the sky, but not a single drop enters his mouth. He opens his eyes one at time, and he looks into the sky, confused. He bows his head and turns it slightly to the side and thinks. The thunder and rain hush in the background and Ryan recalls a distant memory, yet he struggles to remember it clearly.

"There's something very strange about all this," he whispers and scratches the side of his head. He is standing on the footpath

in the middle of a circle about three feet wide, which is completely void of water and falling rain.

MEEP-MEEP! The postman's motorbike revs down the footpath at a rapid pace.

"Get out of the way, mate," the postman shouts from under his helmet. Ryan snaps out of his deep thoughts and jerks his head to the side but does not have time to avoid a collision with the postman. The motorbike races toward Ryan and he half-crouches and lifts his arms up in defence.

The motorbike suddenly stops dead and falls to the ground with a clunk, the postman flies through the air screaming the whole way, while white and yellow envelopes explode into the air and follow close behind him. He lands with a thud in a large bush ten meters away in the front garden of a nearby house. There is a moment of silence and Ryan remains crouched with his eyes closed tight. Finally a moan rises from within the front garden. The motorbike's engine chugs and splutters before it abruptly cuts out. Ryan slowly lifts his hands from his eyes and stands up straight. He looks down at the motorcycle; its front wheel is buckled and the handlebars are bent back. There are envelopes lying all over the footpath and in the nearby gardens.

The rain stops. Ryan peers over the small fence into the front yard where the postman has landed. The postman lies on his back with his head moving from side to side. He looks up at Ryan, shocked and baffled.

"Are you all right?" Ryan calls pathetically, obviously aware that the postman is not in serious danger, but may have a few bruises and a serious headache. The postman moans again and passes out in the garden bed. Ryan looks around to see if anyone else is nearby and saw the accident. He suddenly becomes disinterested in the postman and realises the rain has stopped. He runs his hand down his raincoat and lifts up a trouser leg and feels it. Dry. Not even slightly damp. He leans down to collect his bag, and then stands up again. He looks up

into a nearby tree for a moment. It moves gently in the breeze, while the other trees in the street hardly move at all.

When his awareness returns to the present, he shrugs and exhales deeply in disregard for the strange occurrences of the morning and begins walking down the path to school.

"You're late again, Ryan Falconer," says the geography teacher as Ryan enters the classroom. "The class began twenty minutes ago. What's your reason this time?"

"I'm really sorry, Mister Kinross, the power went out and my alarm didn't go off," says Ryan cowering at the front of the classroom holding his bag at his knees.

"Your excuses are beginning to run a little thin with me, Ryan," says Mister Kinross as he towers over Ryan. "Can I suggest you come up with some better ones, or maybe you can think about arriving on time for a change?" he says sarcastically.

The students laugh at Ryan and he drops his head in embarrassment, trying not to look at them. He walks to his desk and sits down. The other students chuckle quietly. The teacher continues to give the lesson to the class.

"All right class settle down. Now, we were talking about earth movements. They are commonly called gradation forces or wearing down forces, such as wind, water, and ice and have a significant effect upon the land over millions of years, and sometimes over shorter periods. Under the surface of the earth there are tectonic forces or building up forces which result in diastrophism, which includes faulting and folding." The teacher points out various parts of the large diagram hanging at the front of the classroom as he explains to the students.

"These earth changes have created the land as we see it today, and they continue to change it over time." The teacher continues to talk while the students restlessly pay attention.

At a desk diagonally behind Ryan sits Nodge Saltoggio, the largest boy in Ryan's year, and very much the most troublesome too. Nodge discreetly chews on a small piece of paper covering it with his saliva, and when the teacher turns and faces the diagrams on the wall, he fires the spitball at Ryan. It shoots

across the gap between the two desks and sticks to Ryan's cheek.

Ryan flinches and picks it off. He looks at it disgusted and drops it onto the floor. He turns around cautiously to Nodge, who grins mischievously in the other direction. Ryan turns back around and attempts to concentrate on what the teacher is saying.

"We can see evidence of these movements in the Hamersely Ranges and many other locations in Western Australia, such as the Stirling Ranges and many coastal areas too."

Ryan studies one of the large diagrams at the front of the class, which displays a cross section of the earth's atmosphere and subterranean levels. The teacher's voice begins to drift away as Ryan contemplates the diagrams. In a daydream like state, Ryan sees an image of a vast landscape covered with wheat fields and salt lakes. He travels over the land at a fast pace. He hears a soft voice calling his name, whispering at first and becoming louder.

"Ryan. Ryan. Ryan."

"Ryan!" shouts the teacher.

"Huh?" he mutters, breaking out of his daydream and returning his awareness to the classroom.

"Are you paying attention?"

"What? Um... what was the question?"

"Do you know how lightning is created?" asks the teacher. The students laugh quietly at him. He looks around while he stalls to give an answer. The school bell rings.

"Ok, class, good work today. Ryan, try to stay awake in my class please."

The students begin to pack up their books and files, and the class becomes a flurry of movement and noise. Nodge shoots another spitball. It flies through the air at Ryan and suddenly stops in mid-air inches before hitting the back of his head. It stays suspended, going unnoticed by Ryan or anyone else.

"All right class, for next week read chapter four and answer the study questions. Enjoy your lunch," says the teacher.

The students rise from their desks and begin exiting the classroom. As Ryan stands up out of his chair, Nodge fires

another spitball at his face. Ryan flinches and Nodge quickly passes by Ryan and exits the classroom laughing. Ryan mumbles angrily under his breath.

The classroom is empty and Ryan is left standing by himself. Outside, the other students meet up with their friends and the courtyard is filled with lunchtime activity. Ryan puts his bag onto his back and starts for the door. His eyes turn slowly and focus on the spitball floating by the side of his face.

Ryan quickly pushes the bathroom door open and drops his bag onto the floor. He leans over placing his hands on either side of the sink and looks at his reflection in the mirror. His eyes fall upon the spitball floating next to his head. He reaches up to pick it from the air and holds it before him. He throws it into the sink and then turns his head to find a second spitball floating behind him. Ryan glares at it in the reflection and slowly lifts his hand to take it out of the air. As he is doing this, he notices something in the mirror sparkling around him. He looks closer.

The bathroom door flies open, and Ryan jumps and the spitball drops out of the air and onto the floor making a small sloppy sound. Two other schoolboys run in, making a racket, and completely ignoring Ryan, who glances sideways at them in the mirror's reflection. He turns the hot water tap on and begins washing his hands so as to appear busy. The boys leave as fast as they arrived. Ryan turns the tap off and looks down at the spitball on the floor. He looks back up into the mirror, which is slightly steamed up. In the reflection, Ryan makes out a shinning object above his head. Using his sleeve to remove the fog on the mirror, he sees that the shiny object is still there. He observes it starting to take shape all around his body. A glittering spherical bubble of various colours encompasses him from his head to his feet in a slow and liquid-like way. Ryan puts his hand to his mouth as he watches the miniscule points of light flicker into view all around him. He steps side to side and the transparent sphere remains close to him, following his body's movement.

Jerry, Ryan's best mate, suddenly rushes into the bathroom.

"Hey Ryan, are you OK?" Ryan remains fixed on the reflection and makes no reply. "Dude?"

Ryan blinks and notices Jerry standing nearby. "What? Oh yeah. Yeah I'm fine. I think." says Ryan looking at Jerry in the reflection.

"Well, are you comin' to play football? We're selecting teams now, so hurry up."

"Yeah, I'll be there in a sec," says Ryan turning to face Jerry.

Jerry leaves the bathroom and Ryan looks back into the mirror and sees that the sphere is gone. He pauses and stares at his reflection with slight suspicion.

"Come on, Ryan," calls Jerry from outside the bathroom.

Ryan picks up his school bag, and as he goes to open the door, he stops and looks back into the room and then above himself. He opens the door and walks out.

"All right, I'm ready, let's go," says Ryan, and they run off to the oval.

The rain is spitting down gently over the school. The courtyards are a hive of activity with teenagers running around, some eating their lunch, and others chatting to each other casually. On the green grass playing field a large group of schoolboys engage in a lunchtime game of Australian Rules Football. Ryan and Jerry are positioned at one end of the field near the goal posts. Both stand with their hands on their hips while they look up field. The ball is at the opposite end of the oval and the two boys wait patiently in the goal square. Not far away in the center of the field, Nodge, five foot six and very overweight, is standing with his back to Ryan and Jerry.

"He did what?" asks Jerry, angrily.

"Look it doesn't matter anyway," replies Ryan.

"Like hell it doesn't matter. That guy's gonna pay."

"Look, just leave it alone all right."

"No way, Ryan. He's just a big lout. He deserves a taste of his own medicine."

Jerry goes to run over to Nodge, but Ryan holds him back.

"Don't worry about it, Jez. If you piss him off, he'll probably do something worse to me, and probably you too."

"Ah, I'm not afraid of him. I could take him any day. He's too slow to catch me."

"Just don't be mentioning me all right. He'll just pick on me more in class," cautions Ryan.

As Jerry is running off, the ball is kicked into the center of the field and he runs toward the play. The ball is captured by a player on their team and Jerry makes a lead.

"Timmy," calls Jerry.

Tim kicks the ball and it shoots into the air and the other players run around the area, anticipating the play. Jerry marks the ball on his chest and Ryan leads out from the goals. The players gather in the goal area waiting anxiously for the ball. Jerry kicks it high into the air and it falls into the pack of players waiting in the goal square. Ryan goes up for the mark, but the ball just misses his reach, and it falls into the pack of schoolboys fighting for its possession. The ball bounces out into a clear space and Ryan sees an opportunity to take possession of it. As he takes the ball from the ground, Nodge is closing in for the tackle. Ryan clears the pack and sees Jerry leading in from the flanks. Nodge dives at Ryan, his arms swooping around his body. Ryan kicks the ball quickly, but it is smothered by Nodge's tackle and they both fall hard onto the ground.

Nodge holds Ryan down and punches him once in the thigh. Nodge climbs to his feet and runs off to chase the ball with the other players. Ryan stumbles to his feet and hobbles back into the goal square. He breathes quickly through his nostrils, frustrated at Nodge while rubbing at his thigh.

Jerry runs up alongside Ryan and helps him along.

"You OK?" asks Jerry.

"Yeah, Nodge just gave me a dead-leg, that's all." Ryan limps along as he runs into position.

"Right, that's it, I'm gonna get him now." Jerry runs off after Nodge, who is further downfield.

"No, wait, Jez," calls Ryan, but Jerry continues toward Nodge. Ryan follows after him reluctantly.

The ball is kicked around the flanks and back into the center of the oval. Nodge marks the ball and plays on. The other players swoop and dart across the field, and Jerry closes in on Nodge and goes to tackle him. Nodge runs through the pack and pushes a smaller boy out of his way with one swing of his arm. The boy is flung to the ground and is winded. Jerry latches on to Nodge around the waist and pulls him down to the ground. The pressure of the play increases and Nodge fumbles the ball and it spills out in front of him. Ryan runs in from the side and chases after the ball. Nodge elbows Jerry in the guts to remove him from the tackle. Jerry puffs his cheeks and sucks air as he falls onto his back, holding his hands to his stomach. Nodge rises to his feet and targets Ryan, who has the ball and is running toward the forward line. The other players call out to Ryan to kick the ball, making leads in every direction. He hesitates momentarily and the opposing team players close in on him.

A tall boy runs in fast at Ryan and attempts to side bump him. In all the action no one notices that the boy has suddenly stopped short of Ryan with a thud and fallen to the ground, missing Ryan completely and practically flying over him. Ryan bounces the ball and continues running into a clear space. Nodge falls in fast over Ryan and the other players swarm around the area, but they are unable to get close enough to Ryan. He uses his arms to swat away the other players, and he seems to do this with great ease; they seem to be pushed back from him.

Nodge reaches out to grab Ryan but he is held back by something. He looks around for opposing players who might be pulling him back from Ryan, but the other players are occupied with their own man. The opposing players knock into Nodge and they all fall hard to the ground, with Nodge landing on top of them. The other boys standing around laugh at Nodge and he becomes very embarrassed. Nodge shouts out curses to them as he loses his temper.

As Ryan clears from the pack, Nodge watches from the ground as he runs away with the ball and kicks it on toward

another player, who promptly marks it and then kicks a goal for Ryan's side. The team cheers and Jerry runs past Nodge, kicking him in the ribs.

"Ha! Ha! We're winning now, fatboy," calls Jerry.

Nodge bends in pain while he grits his teeth in frustration.

"You're dead meat, Jerry," shouts Nodge.

Jerry runs off laughing at Nodge and soon catches up to Ryan and celebrates the goal with their other players. Ryan smiles with his team, and then looks over at Nodge, who glares sceptically and ferociously back at him. Ryan's smile slowly falls away.

"Good game, Falconer, you played really well," says Tim, "I was really impressed with how you got out of those tackles. You can really handle yourself."

"Thanks Timmy," replies Ryan, "I guess I was just lucky."

Tim laughs with Ryan. "Don't be so modest, mate. You're a good player."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow." Tim grabs his bag and makes for the door.

"Yeah all right, see ya later."

Tim exits the changing room and leaves Ryan standing alone on the cold tiles. He places his sport clothes into his bag and folds up his towel. He clips his bag shut and stops. Looking down into space, Ryan reflects over the game and the other strange incidents of the day.

"Weird," he says to himself and goes to place his bag on his back.

The changing room door slams open and Nodge steps inside. Ryan's face turns white. Nodge closes the door behind him and leans back against it, blocking the way out. He stares at Ryan aggressively and doesn't say anything.

"How's it going, Nodge?" asks Ryan insincerely. He swallows and takes a short breath.

"Shut up, Falconer." Nodge steps into the center of the changing room and stops. Ryan looks to each side nervously,

then looks back at Nodge, who stands like a boulder between himself and the door.

"I wanna have a word with you," says Nodge, infecting Ryan with fear and helplessness.

"Why, what have I done to you?"

"Oh, nothing much," says Nodge with a slight sting in his voice. His eyes are wandering up and down Ryan as if to size him up and intimidate him.

Nodge inches closer to Ryan, who is becoming very worried, but is trying not to show it. "There's something different about you Falconer."

"Oh really, tell me something I don't know," says Ryan sarcastically. Nodge raises his arms and points at him.

"You think you're so smart don't you," he says, prodding his index finger into Ryan.

Ryan backs off and rubs his chest. He lowers his head, and says, "No I don't. Why don't you just leave me alone."

Nodge leans in close to Ryan and grabs him by the scruff of his jumper. He pulls Ryan in toward his face and lets the stink of his sweat wash over Ryan.

"Listen here you freak. You better not mess with me again or I'll kick your ass so hard you won't be able to sit down for a week." Nodge slams Ryan against the change room wall. Ryan's brow is beginning to sweat. "And you better tell your smart ass little mate, Jerry, to watch out too, if he knows what's good for him."

"Get lost, Nodge," protests Ryan.

"Or what?" Nodge grabs Ryan again. "You gonna make me sorry I picked on you? HA! You gotta be kidding." Nodge lets Ryan go and pushes him into the wall again. Ryan falls and sits on the floor, breathing heavily and rubbing the back of his head.

"Get up you little worm. I'm gonna teach you a lesson your not gonna forget too soon." Ryan remains sitting on the floor staring at his feet. "Get up!" shouts Nodge and he kicks Ryan in the side.

Ryan rocks back and forward slightly, his eyes are forming tears. Nodge leans down and grabs Ryan by the chest of his jumper and pulls him upright.

“Leave me alone,” cries Ryan.

“No one tells me what to do, Falconer. And no one, especially little grommets like you, get away with making me look stupid.” Nodge clenches his other fist while still holding Ryan and takes a swing toward Ryan’s nose.

The fist stops an inch from Ryan’s face; Nodge is confused and steams with anger. Ryan turns his head submissively. Nodge’s fist launches into Ryan’s stomach, stopping a little further away from him than before.

“What the...” Nodge says quietly. “What’s your game?” he roars. “What have you got hidden under your shirt?”

Nodge throws Ryan across the changing room floor and he slides into one of the corners, but he stops safely before banging into the bench seat.

“Get up, freak.” Nodge stomps over to Ryan and stands over him. Ryan breathes quickly and tries to pick himself up off the cold floor.

“Leave me alone!” shouts Ryan.

“Leave me alone,” mimics Nodge.

Nodge pulls Ryan up and takes a few steps back to get a run up. He charges at Ryan, but again is met by an invisible barrier protecting Ryan. Nodge falls back and grabs his hair while tensing his arms and making claws with his hands before he charges in again. Ryan stands up straight as Nodge is blocked again and looks at him frightened. Nodge whacks into the transparent shield.

“What... the hell... is wrong with you?” puffs Nodge. Ryan faces Nodge with shocked eyes while his heart races.

“I don’t know what you’re game is, Falconer, but it won’t save you for long.” Nodge steps up to Ryan again and starts throwing punch after punch at every part of his body, each strike being blocked further away than the previous, and Nodge becomes even angrier. Nodge bends over to catch his breath and Ryan stands in the corner shaking with fear, although he is unharmed.

“That’s it, you’re gonna be in hospital by the end of the day. I’ll guarantee you that, you smart arse,” sneers Nodge.

Ryan looks right into Nodge's eyes and watches as he stampedes closer for one last assault. Nodge's hands spread wide as they move in to grab Ryan around the neck. Ryan lets out a long, loud shout, expelling all his fear and anger, and a series of tiny blue lights flash around him.

Nodge's final leap is abruptly stopped at arms reach from Ryan. Nodge freezes, horrified at Ryan, and unable to make sense of the situation. More tiny lights flash and swirl about Ryan and Nodge.

Nodge is instantly thrown back across the room, and crashes into one a toilet cubicle doors He falls into the bowl and bangs his head hard on the wall, knocking him out cold. The cubicle door snaps off its hinges and falls to the floor in large chunks. Nodge lays sprawled inside the cubical while Ryan motionless, stares wide-eyed in the middle of the changing room.

Chapter 3

Murdoch University, Perth
21st July 2011

The campus vibrates with a buzzing atmosphere of new and old students orientating themselves on the large grassed area of Bush Court, walking in the cool shade of tall Eucalyptus and Pines trees. Hundreds of people flow within the streams of students pouring out from the lecture theatres and the library wings. The more experienced students walk confidently along the broadwalk with a casual sense of purpose. Tour guides wear orange student guild t-shirts and attempt to familiarize small groups with the vast outlay of the university buildings and facilities. The winter sun shines brightly within a perfectly clear, blue sky. The day is warm; many carry plastic bottles of water and the smell of sunscreen sneaks nostalgically across the campus grounds. The majority of young men are outfitted with long shorts and t-shirts. The girls display long youthful legs from under short skirts and tanned bodies covered with colourful singlets and the occasional body piercing. A multitude of smiles and hand gestures pass across the campus grounds as girls and boys inspect potential partners, yet it appears that nobody is brave enough to initiate the first move. In one corner of the courtyard, a circle of lads play a game of hacky sack. They laugh and cheer as they kick and flick the small rice filled heshin sack to each other. Some maneuver the hacky sack with precision while others clumsily balk and drop the ball.

Outside the bookshop, the line stretches along the corridor for several meters. Inside it is packed with students purchasing their course readers, essential texts, and stationery. The air sounds with the beeping of infrared bar code scanners and the

rattling of eftpos machines churning out paper receipts. Near the back of the checkout line stands Ryan; with a medium build and proportional height, his hair is spiked with gel and he carries his books in a red plastic carry basket. He waits patiently for the line to move, watching silently and unconfidently as a group of girls meet and chat to each other in the line ahead of him. He decides to flick through his books to pass the time. The first book is Bill Molison's *Permaculture One*. He scans the diagrams and reads a few paragraphs. He feels excited to be at university and cannot wait to begin his studies.

"It's pretty amazing that they're offering that in the Bachelor of Sciences these days," says a young man from behind Ryan. He looks up and turns his head around.

"What? Permaculture?" asks Ryan to the young man who is much taller than him.

"Yeah. There's no way that would have happened five or ten years ago," says the young man.

"Really, I didn't know that. Why?" Ryan asks.

"The Uni was just too damn concerned with making profit from the mainstream courses. They were shit scared no one would want to study things like this," explains the young man in a casual tone. "My name's Cameron, by the way," he extends his hand to Ryan.

"Hi, I'm Ryan." They shake hands firmly.

"Good to meet you, Ryan. I take it by your textbooks, you're going to be studying Deep Ecology?" asks Cameron.

"Yeah, I've always wanted to do something holistic and science based and this seemed to make a lot of sense to me. It felt right, you know?" says Ryan.

Cameron nods and hums agreeing.

"Is Astronomy still required as one of the core units?" asks Cameron.

"Yes it is. I'm enrolled to take it this semester actually," says Ryan. "How do you know about that?"

"Oh, I've done some units from the Deep Ecology degree myself," explains Cameron.

“So what are you studying at the moment? Is this your final year?” asks Ryan.

Cameron smiles and lets out a small laugh.

“No, I’ve got two years left on my PhD,” he says.

“Wow, that’s impressive, what degree did you do?” asks Ryan.

“Well, I was doing some physical sciences and sociological units before I got my shit together, but I eventually completed a Bachelor of Psychology,” says Cameron.

“You must have been at university for a while now?”

“This is my seventh year. I’ll be twenty-five soon,” says Cameron.

“And what is your PhD about?”

“I’m researching transpersonal psychology counselling,” explains Cameron. “I want to start my own clinic someday. At the moment I work part-time in Fremantle with a company which specialises in psychological research and technology. They also provide some counseling services to the public.”

“That sounds very interesting,” says Ryan.

“Well it keeps me off the streets, anyway,” says Cameron jokingly.

They both give a small laugh.

“So what are you doing down here today,” asks Ryan while using his head to gesture to the extremely busy bookshop. “I see you don’t have any books to buy.”

“Oh, I’ve come to check out the new first year talent,” Cameron says with a wink, eyeing a slim, young girl who walks past wearing fitted jeans and showing some cleavage. “Only kidding. I’m actually helping a couple of my mates who are just starting this year as well,” he says as he points over to his friends in the aisle.

“I see,” says Ryan.

“Hey, I can introduce you if you want?”

“Yeah, that’d be good. I don’t know many people yet,” says Ryan.

Cameron calls to his friends to come over. Two young men, both in the same age range as Ryan, wander over to Cameron, each carrying a pile of two or three books.

"Hey guys, this is Ryan... sorry I didn't get you last name?" says Cameron.

"Falconer," says Ryan.

"Ryan Falconer. He's just starting too, so maybe you guys can hang out?" says Cameron. "This is Patrick and Curtis."

They greet Ryan and shake hands.

"Good to meet you both," says Ryan.

"So what are you studying, Ryan?" asks Curtis.

"B.Sc. in Deep Ecology". The line moves up a few spots and they all huddle along.

"Hey cool, I'm doing that too," says Curtis excitedly. "We'll be in the same classes."

"What about you Patrick?" asks Ryan, gesturing to him.

"Philosophy," replies Patrick.

"Quite a nice range of fields," says Cameron.

"Ah, but they are all intertwined," says Patrick in a comically pompous voice.

"We'll be having some interesting conversations later on in the café, I'm sure," says Cameron.

The line moves up again and Ryan places his books on the counter. The shop assistant begins to scan them.

"Well it was good to meet you all," says Ryan. "Maybe we can catch up for lunch in the refectory this week?"

The others agree. Ryan pays for his books and puts them in his bag.

"All right, Ryan, we've still got to get some more books, but we'll be seeing you around," says Curtis.

"Yeah OK, thanks, I've got a lecture to get to now anyway. I'll see you guys later."

Patrick and Curtis wander off into the bookshop and Ryan is left standing with Cameron by the checkout.

"Thanks for introducing me to your friends, Cameron."

"No problem. It was good to meet you too," says Cameron. "I'll see you later."

Cameron turns and walks back into the bookshop proper and Ryan begins to walk out the door.

“Hey, Ryan,” calls Cameron, suddenly remembering something more. “If you wanna catch up this weekend, we are all going to the Conscious Living Expo at the Perth Exhibition Centre on Saturday. Do you want to come along? You might enjoy it?”

“Yeah, maybe. What’s it all about?” asks Ryan

“It’s a health and lifestyle festival.”

“All right, sounds good. Shall I meet you there or what?” asks Ryan.

“Well, I can pick you up if you like. We are all going together in my car anyway,” says Cameron.

“OK thanks. Do you want my address?”

“Yep, sure,” replies Cameron.

Ryan takes a piece of paper and a pen from the counter and writes his home address down and gives the paper to Cameron.

“Nice one. We’ll be around at midday. It costs about fifteen bucks to get in to the Expo, but bring some money for other stuff too,” says Cameron.

“All right, I will. See you later, Cameron,” says Ryan.

Cameron waves a quick hand movement and Ryan exits the bookshop still looking back at him.

“Bye,” calls Cameron.

As Ryan steps out onto the corridor he stumbles into a young woman who is entering the bookshop. He trips and knocks the chocolate milk carton she is holding and it spurts onto her clothes.

“Oh, great,” says the young woman displeased.

“I’m so sorry,” Ryan says sincerely as he regains his feet.

The young woman looks at her t-shirt and flicks her hands down to remove some of the milk drink. Ryan offers his sleeve to wipe the milk off the young woman. She sighs and turns to open her bag.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, reaching into her bag and retrieving some tissues.

"I'm really sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going," explains Ryan.

The young woman looks up at Ryan with sweet brown eyes, and a curly strand of her long brunette hair falls down alongside her cheek. She smiles pleasantly.

"It's OK, really. It was an accident, I'm sure," she says, looking up fully and facing Ryan.

They both smile gently and find themselves staring at each other for a moment too long for comfort. They break eye contact and look in different directions while muttering apologetic excuses and pardons.

"Look, I'm over it. Please, forget it," she says.

Ryan breathes more comfortably now and smiles to release the tension.

"Thanks..." says Ryan waiting for her name.

"Hannah," she says, "and you are?"

"Ryan Falconer," he replies quickly, looking slightly embarrassed and clearing his throat.

"Well, Ryan Falconer, it was nice to meet you," says Hannah as she smiles and walks into the bookshop.

"Nice to meet you too..." calls Ryan as she walks out of hearing distance. "...Hannah," he says to himself, following.

Ryan turns and walks away from the bookshop and back up the corridor to his first lecture.

Inside the bookshop, Hannah stops in the aisle as she is pulling out one of her required books. She closes her eyes and bows her head down to think deeply about something. Her brow dips and she concentrates harder. A faint image flashes into her mind. She sees a man glowing within a soft light and then the image is gone. When Hannah opens her eyes again, she turns and looks over her shoulder curiously, biting the bottom of her lip in thought.

The four young men travel into the city via the Mitchell Freeway in Cameron's car. The six lanes are decorated on either side with elegant palm trees and artistic murals depicting the various leisure activities of the people of Perth. Large pelicans

perch on the lamp posts high above the road and watch the traffic go by. Between the riverbank and the freeway, numerous walkers and cyclists enjoy casual exercise along the footpath. Raised above the freeway, a train carriage zooms along the railway, transporting people in and out of the city. Many of the passengers are on the way to Subiaco Oval, dressed in the purple, green, and white team colours of the Fremantle Dockers Football Club.

Cameron is driving, and Patrick, being the biggest of the group, sits in the passenger seat up front. They are discussing the geometrical similarities of the Egyptian pyramids and the submerged pyramid structure off the coast of Japan. In the back of the sedan sits Curtis and Ryan. Curtis bobs his head to the beat of the music, which is playing in the car's TB (terabyte) player. He looks out the window contemplating the shapes of the clouds forming overhead. He then continues reading an article in *Conscious Living* on the latest E.S.P. research in Australia. Ryan sits quietly on the right side and looks out the window at the white lines passing by on the road.

"Hey Ryan, check this out," says Curtis, referring to the magazine.

Ryan turns his head across to look at the magazine. Curtis reads aloud.

"Parapsychologists from the University of Sydney have recently discovered that they are having better success with telepathy experiments with candidates living in the district around Urulu. Parapsychologists and local Aboriginal elders are now working in conjunction, mixing ancient techniques of accessing the Dreamtime with Western neurological technology produced in Sydney."

"They say this kind of work will help bring the two cultures closer together, but it will also open up some very interesting avenues in psychic research. Speculations as to the success might be attributed to the unique electromagnetic vibration emanating from Urulu, otherwise known as Ayers Rock."

Cameron and Patrick pause their discussion and listen in. Cameron looks at Curtis briefly through the rear view mirror, which Ryan sees. Curtis continues.

“Aboriginal elders say they have always known of Urulu’s sacred power, and it is viewed in their culture as the center of the universe, thus it is where tribes have, throughout their history, received much of their wisdom.”

“How awesome does that sound,” says Curtis enthusiastically. “Can you believe these guys are working with tribal elders? This is going to do amazing things for reconciliation between the Europeans and Aboriginals of Australia, not to mention parapsychology.”

“Um...” says Ryan hesitantly. “Can I ask, what is parapsychology?”

Curtis and Patrick both glance simultaneously at Ryan.

“You don’t know about parapsychology?” asks Curtis.

“It’s the study of extra sensory perceptions, Ryan,” Cameron calls from the front of the car.

“Yeah, like telepathy and telekinesis,” says Curtis.

Ryan nods his head slowly, grasping what the others are talking about.

“You know, a bit like the Force in *Star Wars*,” says Patrick, turning around to face Ryan in the back seat. “You will understand what we are talking about,” he continues in a deep voice while waving his hand in front of Ryan’s face.

“Oh right, I know what you mean now,” says Ryan, smiling at Patrick’s jedi knight impersonation. “So you guys are into that quite a bit then?”

Patrick shrugs his shoulders and pouts and then turns back around to face the front.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” says Curtis, “but as a group, we’ve got about as much psychic ability as a packet of wet rice, so don’t expect any of us to start bending spoons and reading your mind anytime soon.” He goes back to reading his magazine.

Ryan looks forward and sees Cameron looking back at him in the rear view mirror again. Cameron smiles.

“You’ll find out more at the Expo if you want, Ryan,” says Cameron. “There’s plenty of stalls you can check out on those kinds of things, if that’s what tickles your fancy.”

Ryan nods and turns his head to look out the window at the scenery. The Swan River is bathed in the sunshine and the white sand riverbanks play host to numerous families enjoying barbeques and picnics on their Saturday outing. A flock of sailboats tack back and forth in the middle of the river, while a few jet skis skip and slide across the water like little mosquitoes floating on the surface of a pond. The rich earthy colours of Kings Park and its tall gum trees loom down over the freeway while Ryan and his friends cross the Narrows Bridge. The Perth City skyline hums quietly as they approach the Exhibition Centre.

“C”mon, Ryan,” calls Cameron, standing with the others just inside the entrance of the main pavilion of the Perth Exhibition Centre. Ryan pays for his ticket and then catches up with the group.

“Wow, there’s heaps of people here,” says Ryan, as he looks gob smacked into the Expo’s main arena. “Are all these people here for the parapsycho... watcha-ma-call-it?”

“Well, as you can see by the turnout, it’s pretty popular, but not everyone comes for the same reasons. There’s many different things to see and do,” says Cameron.

Curtis buys a program from a young attractive woman who is walking around promoting the event. He flicks the program booklet open to today’s schedule and looks for activities and stalls of interest.

“There are plenty of environmental technology and Permaculture stalls we can check out, Ryan. We can get some info for our up coming essays. Oh, and we all definitely have to go over to the paranormal avenue. There’s some strange things over there I want to see,” says Curtis.

The young men start walking through the crowds, observing the various stalls. Curtis and Patrick pair up in front, pointing

out various things to each other and Cameron and Ryan follow closely behind.

“What about the Raelians, are they here this year?” Cameron asks Curtis.

“Um...” Curtis scans the program booklet. “Yep, they’re here all right, over by the back corner, and in full force too. It says their membership has doubled in the last year. Must be due to the increased interest in UFO’s after the increased sightings over the Middle East in the last few years.”

“I wanna go see them for sure. They are such a nice bunch of people,” says Cameron.

“I wanna see them too. I’ve got some questions for those weirdoes,” says Patrick.

Cameron and Patrick laugh together.

“Hey look, it’s Dan Winter,” says Cameron, pointing to the man with the white beard standing on the stage. “That guy is cool. He talks a lot about the harmonic frequencies of the heart and *phi*. We should go get hooked up to his laptops later on to measure our emotional flexibility range.”

“What do you want to do, Ryan,” asks Cameron.

They all stop in front of a Chinese massage stall.

“I wouldn’t mind going to the paranormal avenue,” says Ryan, looking at Curtis.

Inside the nearby stall, an Asian man steps all over a middle aged European man lying face down on a massage table. The Asian man uses his foot to dig deeply into the shoulder muscles while he makes loud breathing noises. The man lying down on the table has a very relaxed look on his face.

“All right, well let’s go then. I want to chat with a clairvoyant and see what they have to tell me about my future!” says Patrick and marches off in the direction of the psychic stalls.

The others follow close behind him.

“I’ve never really gotten into this paranormal stuff before,” says Ryan quietly to Curtis. “What is it all about?”

Curtis moves closer alongside Ryan while Cameron leads ahead of them.

“The paranormal covers a wide range of fields: its basically strange occurrences that science cannot prove yet. Most of the things at this Expo are paranormal, but many are becoming more and more accepted by society,” explains Curtis.

“So what was Patrick going on about getting his future read?” asks Ryan.

“Oh, a clairvoyant is someone who can supposedly use their minds to receive knowledge about the past and future of a person. They can also get psychic impressions from objects. Sometimes they use tarot cards, other times runes, or just stare into your eyes. I had a reading done last year. It was kinda freaky because most of the things the guy said would happen, did, in a way,” says Curtis.

“I see,” says Ryan.

“But just take it all with a grain of salt. It’s not a science as far as I’m concerned, and besides, if these clairvoyants were genuine, why do they still need to make a living by telling people their futures? Why can’t they just predict the lotto numbers instead?” says Curtis.

“Maybe they can’t read the mind’s of lotto numbers?” says Ryan.

Curtis and Ryan laugh together.

Patrick is already sitting at a table with a woman dressed in traditional gypsy clothes when the others catch up. The woman holds his hands across the table and talks to him quite seriously. Patrick pays close attention and contemplates the lady’s advice.

“So which one are you going to pick?” Ryan asks Curtis, looking around at the dozens of psychic and paranormal stalls. Some have curtained entrances with dazzling signs and others contain just a simple table with two chairs.

“It doesn’t really matter to me, they’re all interesting,” says Curtis, also looking around.

Cameron approaches one of the curtained tents and looks back at Ryan and Curtis, flicking his eyebrows up and smiling as he disappears into the stall.

“Well, I’m going to check this one out,” says Curtis, pointing to a colourfully decorated stall nearby.

“Just meet us all back here in twenty minutes after you’ve had a look around, and we’ll go get lunch soon after that,” says Curtis. He walks through the crowd a little way, then sits down at a table where a man with long black dreadlocks and dressed in hemp clothing is shuffling a deck of Egyptian Thoth tarot cards. A burning stick of frankincense wafts through the air.

Ryan remains standing in amongst the passing crowd and looks around at all the various stalls. He focuses in on one sign that says, ‘Discover Your True Potential’, another, ‘I know your future, I know your past’ another ‘The Aliens Have Landed’, but then one particular stall catches his attention more than the others: ‘Aura Visions’.

Liking the sound of it, Ryan makes his way through the crowd and stands outside the stall. He takes a breath and places his hand on the curtain opening. He is about to enter when he hears feint soprano singing coming from inside the tent. He pulls back the green curtain veiling the entrance and proceeds inside. As he steps in, he sees a lady in her late sixties standing within a dimly lit space; she is wearing a long green and blue mediaeval dress. She stands behind a table facing the back of the stall. In one corner there is a large camera and beside it on a bench is a sophisticated looking computer. Hanging around the inside of the tent are photo portraits of people surrounded by bright colours. The lady sings to herself and takes a bite from a sandwich. She turns around chewing her food, surprised to see Ryan.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” says Ryan. “I didn’t know if you were...” Ryan starts to exit the stall tent.

“No, don’t go,” says the lady with her mouth full of food. “You’re not intruding. I was just having my lunch—we don’t get much of a break around here. Please come in, come in. Sit down. I’ll be right with you.”

The lady seems friendly enough to Ryan. She puts her half eaten sandwich down on a side table and picks up a bottle of tropical fruit juice. Ryan moves back inside the tent and sits at the table opposite the lady. She takes a quick sip from the bottle and puts it back down.

“Us weirdoes need to eat and drink you know. We’re all still human, at least some of us are anyway,” says the lady looking quickly from side to side and then smiling genuinely. Ryan returns the smile and starts to feel a little more relaxed.

“Now, what can I do for you?” she asks.

“I don’t really know actually,” says Ryan. “I’ve never been to one of these things before.”

The lady sits up straight and looks at Ryan fixedly. “One of these things! One of these things!” she says almost offended. Then she breathes in and smiles again. “I’m only kidding, dear. Why don’t I tell you what I can offer and you can make up your own mind, OK?” says the lady.

“That’d be good,” says Ryan.

“First, introductions—I am Teresa, and who are you young man?”

“My name is Ryan,” he replies.

“And are you at the Expo by yourself?”

“I’m here with some friends from Uni. They are seeing some clairvoyants at the moment. They thought it would be fun.”

“Fun, hey? Well, Ryan, I know a few Seers¹, and they don’t think of their work as being all serious, but they do believe in using their talents responsibly. I, on the other hand, rely on empirical evidence and scientific analysis when giving advice.

“Nevertheless, we will keep this session short and sweet for you, since it’s your first time and all. I don’t want you to freak out too much considering the nature of my work.” She pauses, looking deeply into Ryan’s eyes. “Just kidding, my dear.” Teresa chuckles to herself and Ryan tenses up a little bit. “For goodness sake boy, you are too easy. Try to relax, this won’t hurt”

“All right,” she says getting serious, “the service I am offering involves taking a special type of photo of you. It’s called Kirlian photography, and it allows us to see your electromagnetic field, otherwise known as your aura.” Ryan

¹ A term to describe someone with clairvoyant or prophetic intuition (although the phenomena is not scientifically proven)

looks at Teresa a little confused. "You know, those pretty colours that surround people?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but they do sound familiar," says Ryan.

"Well, once I have taken your photo, I can tell you things about your health and personality using psychological and scientific methods," she explains. "It'll cost you twenty dollars for the photo and interpretation. Does that sound fair enough for you?"

"Yes it does," Ryan replies.

"All right, dear, if you could just come and stand in front of the camera while I prepare. Just relax for moment and smile," says Teresa.

A few moments pass and then the camera clicks a couple of times.

Ryan stands and waits for Teresa's instruction. The muffled sounds from outside the tent seem to have faded slightly.

"All right, Ryan," comes Teresa's voice from the other side of the camera, "you're all done. We've just got to wait a moment while the computer processes the image and then I'll be able to tell you a little about your aura."

Ryan takes a seat again at the table and waits patiently. Teresa stands over the computer monitor as the photo begins to slide out of the printer. Ryan peers around to see the screen, but Teresa is blocking his vision.

The printout finishes and Teresa holds the photo closer to her face while she examines it. She looks at it for a long time without saying anything.

"Is something the matter," asks Ryan leaning up out his chair.

Teresa turns around to face Ryan; her face is curious.

"This is an interesting photo, Ryan," says Teresa. "Your aura is quite different to any I've seen before."

"What do you mean," asks Ryan.

"Well, the colour of your aura indicates that your physical health is fine," says Teresa. "However, its size and intensity

fascinates me. It is rather unique. Let me run an analysis of it on the computer.”

Teresa sits at the monitor and accesses the finer details of Ryan’s image.

“Your aura is quite strong you know,” Teresa calls over her shoulder. “Are you a spiritual person by any chance?”

Ryan shakes his head and pouts. “No, not really,” he replies.

Teresa continues to work at the computer.

“Mmm, this is strange,” says Teresa, who sits back into her chair and then turns to look at Ryan thoughtfully. “Yet it’s beautiful.”

“Can I see the photo?” asks Ryan.

“Oh I’m so sorry, I forgot,” says Teresa, passing the printout to Ryan. “I am just overwhelmed by your aura.”

Ryan takes the photo and looks at it. Around his head and shoulders glows a dazzling arranged fractal of iridescent rainbow colours. Ryan begins to examine the image; upon viewing the photo, his whole body starts to feel warm and buzzy. He places his hand over his heart and takes a few breaths as the vibrant feeling moves through him. His body begins to return to its normal state and he places the photo on the table still looking at it.

“It’s really beautiful, isn’t it,” says Teresa, now standing opposite Ryan.

“Yes, yes it is,” replies Ryan. “What do you make of it?”

“Well, I don’t usually see many people with such developed auras as yours. In fact I don’t ever remember seeing one like yours at all,” says Teresa.

“So are you trying to say I’m a freak?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. In fact I was going to say the complete opposite, and since you said you were not a very spiritual person, I would only think that you must have an enormous psychic potential.”

Ryan listens to her carefully.

“And since you said you were unfamiliar with auras in the first place, I bet you are not even aware of your own potential

gift because it has been latent inside you and has never been used.”

Teresa clears her throat and leans forward over the table, looking Ryan directly in the eyes. Ryan feels slightly stupid for a moment.

“You think I’m having you on, don’t you Ryan?”

“It’s just that—” Ryan attempts to explain but Teresa cuts back in:

“I don’t make things up sweetie, there are other cases like yours that I’ve studied, however rare. You should do some research into it, you might be surprised by what you find.”

Ryan sits back into the chair while Teresa places his photo in a protective sleeve.

“Well, that’s about it, my dear,” says Teresa.

“Thank you very much, that was…” he pauses.

“Fun?” Teresa finishes.

Ryan smiles and pays Teresa.

“Have a nice day, Ryan,” says Teresa.

“Thanks again,” says Ryan as he rises from his chair and turns to exit the tent stall.

“Oh Ryan, one more thing before you go, and this is a freebie.”

Ryan stops and turns around to face Teresa.

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Can I suggest you go and visit my friend—he’s a stage hypnotist at the Expo, but don’t let his acting skills deter you. He’s got the right touch. He’ll be doing a show later today and might be able to shed some more light on your special gift, if that’s what I think it is.”

“OK, thanks, I’ll check it out,” says Ryan and exits the tent.

He pulls the curtain back and steps out into the main avenue again. He looks left and right for his friends. The soprano singing starts up again inside the tent.

“There he is,” calls Curtis. “Hey, Ryan, over here mate.”

Ryan looks through the crowd and sees Curtis waving to him. He starts walking over to the group of young men.

“How’d it go? Who did you see?” asks Curtis excitedly.

“A lady took a photo of my aura. It was pretty interesting,” replies Ryan pulling out the photo from the sleeve and showing the others.

The others are impressed with the photo; Curtis and Patrick briefly look at each other silently and then make further comments about the aura.

“C”mon, let’s get some lunch, I’m starving,” says Cameron.

As the group of young men eat their lunch, they begin to discuss in detail what the clairvoyants and paranormal counselors revealed to them. However, Ryan’s input is only brief and he remains quiet at the table for most of the time.

“Hey, Ryan, what’s on your mind? You been spooked by the photo or what?” asks Curtis.

Cameron and Patrick stop their individual conversation and focus on what Ryan has to say. He looks up uneasily at them, but quickly covers it up with a shrug.

“Not much really. She said I had a strong aura, whatever that is supposed to mean, and that I have some special gift, but I don’t really believe her. I can’t remember ever having a psychic ability,” says Ryan.

“She say anything else?” asks Patrick.

“She told me I should go see the hypnotist. Would any of you mind if we went and checked him out?”

The others look at each other briefly then nod and shrug as they think about it.

“Yeah sure, Ryan, we can do that,” says Cameron, the others agree too. “Do you know where it is?”

“Ah, not exactly,” says Ryan.

“Curtis, check the program and find it will you?” asks Cameron.

Curtis begins flicking through the booklet and the others finish their meals.

“OK, I found it. It’s on the stage in about forty-five minutes,” reads Curtis. “Maybe we can check out the rest of the Expo in the mean time.”

The group rises from the table and set off to explore the pavilion. A feeling of agitation begins to rise inside Ryan, but

he tries to ignore it, not wanting to ruin the day with his new friends.

“Come one, come all,” bellows a man’s voice over the sound system. “Come and see for yourselves as I, Barry the Great Hypnotist, send the human mind back into the most distant reaches of the past *and beyond*.”

Ryan and Curtis stand at the front of the audience while Cameron and Patrick stand behind them. They watch as the stage is prepared for the next show. A large crowd gathers behind them. Barry is a short man with long black hair and long moustache curled up over his cheeks. He wears a black top hat and overalls with a rose pinned to his chest.

“Can I have three volunteers from the audience who are willing to explore the depths of their minds under my guidance?”

A young woman walks out of the crowd and climbs up the stairs onto the stage. She smiles and waves back at her friends in the audience.

“Thank you very much young lady,” says Barry. “Could you please make yourself comfortable in one of these reclining chairs.”

The young woman lies back into the chair.

“Can I have two more volunteers please?” calls Barry.

Ryan turns to face Curtis who flicks his head toward the stage and smiles.

“C”mon then,” says Curtis. “You wanted to do this, and now’s you’re chance.”

Ryan looks up at the stage and then back at Curtis.

“All right, let’s go,” says Ryan.

Ryan and Curtis walk around to the stairs and walk onto the stage. Cameron and Patrick remain standing in the audience and cheer them on.

“Thank you lads,” says Barry, gesturing to them to lie down on the chairs. The crowd gives them a round of applause as they step onto the stage.

“Let’s get going right away then,” booms Barry once more.

Curtis and Ryan occasionally look across at each other and pull silly faces when the hypnotist is addressing the audience.

“Ladies and Gentleman,” Barry calls across the pavilion, and the audience hushes. “Indulge me a while as I take these generous volunteers back in time, guiding them through their minds, to faraway and forgotten corners of their lives.”

The audience cheer and applaud loudly. Barry waves his hands down at the audience and they fall quiet.

“OK, volunteers, could you please make yourselves comfortable and listen to my instructions,” says Barry. “Starting with you Miss, on the end there. What is your name?”

“Chelsea,” says the young woman on the end chair.

Ryan and Curtis close their eyes and relax. The crowd settles and lowers their voices. Barry pauses, allowing the suspense in the atmosphere to thicken. He walks around to Chelsea and places his hands over her head.

“Chelsea, I want you to bring into your mind the earliest memory you can remember and totally familiarize yourself with it. Take in the smells, the sounds, the sights—make it real.”

The young woman does this and she nods when she is ready.

“OK, I’m going to count down from five, Chelsea, and then you are going to begin a journey back into that memory. Then, I’m going to leave you to explore it for a while, and when I call you back, you’re going to remember everything you saw and tell the audience all about it.”

“Five... four... three... two... one, you’re there!”

The young woman’s body suddenly flops limp in the reclining chair as she drifts into her unconscious memories. Barry walks over to Curtis.

“OK, and you are young man?” asks Barry.

“Curtis.”

“Are you ready, Curtis?” asks Barry, placing his hands over Curtis’s face.

Curtis nods and wriggles to get more comfortable on the chair.

“Visualize the earliest memory that you can remember, and when I count from five, you’ll be there able to explore back even further,” says Barry.

Barry begins to count backwards from five and soon Curtis’s body sinks back into the reclining chair as he enters the hypnosis.

Barry walks over to Ryan and goes through the same procedure.

“Ryan, are you ready?” he asks.

“Yes,” replies Ryan.

“When I count from five you are going to return to your childhood and bring back hidden memories, *memories you never knew you had*,” says Barry, more so for the audience’s sake than for Ryan’s.

“Five...”

Ryan pictures himself in his room when he was ten, he sees his dad enter the room giving him his first football.

“Four...”

Ryan goes back further and a scene appears in his mind’s eye of a typical school day when he was six.

“Three...” calls Barry’s voice.

Another picture begins to rise from the depths of his memory; it is unclear at first, but starts to take form.

“Two...” Barry’s voice echoes faintly into Ryan’s mind.

Ryan hears the sounds of crashing waves rising in his memory.

“One...” calls Barry, even further away now. “You’re there...” and his voice reverberates away into the distance.

Ryan falls into a deep dark void of silence and stillness.

Ryan stands on a beach. The sounds inside the Exhibition Centre drift away in the wind. Ryan looks all around at his surroundings. The beach is deserted. The wind blows through his hair and he shivers. The sea is choppy and the afternoon sun is setting behind dark clouds. He begins to walk along the beach and then out onto the groyne. He goes as far as the jetty will allow him and stares out at the horizon. The waves crash onto

the rocks below him and the wind sprays the water across his face.

Wiping the salty water out of his eyes, Ryan suddenly sees before him a young boy standing down on the rocks near the water. The young boy faces away from Ryan and, besides his blonde hair blowing in the wind, he is perfectly still.

A large wave rolls in over the groyne and the young boy vanishes from Ryan's sight. Ryan looks for him down in the water, but is unable to find him. All of a sudden the wind stops dead still and Ryan notices that the young boy is standing beside him, still focused upon the horizon. He slowly looks up at Ryan, his eyes are sad and his face white from the cold. The young boy extends his arm and points out into the dark black ocean. Ryan looks up and, turning his head, he sees a large ball of blue glowing light soaring toward him from out of the sky. He closes his eyes and ducks to get out of the way, but he is too slow to respond and the ball of light crashes into him.

There is darkness and stillness once again. All around the soft sound of gurgling water currents pass by. Ryan opens his eyes, and to his surprise, finds himself submerged in the ocean's depths. Shadows extend in all directions, lighted dimly by the soft radiating sphere of light encompassing Ryan's body. He floats gently and safely beneath the fierce waves crashing and washing over the surface only meters above him. He looks around with curiosity and wonder. Surveying the top of the sphere, bright light streams down from above the ocean and pierces the water like moving rainbows. He looks down then lifts his eyes back to gaze directly in front. Far in the distance he sees an object slide out of the shadows. It approaches him through the liquid, hiding here and there and finally exposing itself into the light. Ryan attempts to make out the shape of the object; it is long and slim, but he cannot see it clearly. The object quickly shoots off into the shadows again and Ryan loses track of it. Turning around slowly within the sphere, Ryan searches for the shape, eventually giving up.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Ryan catches a glimpse of a flashing light. He turns his head and sees nothing. There is another flash below him and then gradually the space around him is filled with a starry spectacular of glittering points of light. He reaches out to touch them; his hand moves closer, his fingers curl out.

The lights cease flashing and the dark object swoops out of hiding and charges at Ryan. He braces himself as the object becomes more detailed; its jaws are filled with long jagged teeth and its skin is all slimy and tough. It bolts at Ryan and engulfs his entire vision, blocking out all visibility.

The sound of the water fades away. There is only darkness and the quiet sound of a voice calling his name, getting nearer and nearer.

“Ryan...” says the voice, more audible now.

“On the count of five, you will awake from the hypnosis and return to your awareness in the here and now,” says the voice. “One... Two... Three... Four...”

The sounds of the Exhibition manifest out of the silence and Ryan begins to recognize the voice.

“Five! And you’re back inside your body, present and aware,” says Barry.

Ryan opens his eyes as if waking from a deep sleep. Curtis is still lying on the reclining chair next to him; he rubs his eyes and shows an expression of exhilaration on his face. Ryan smiles at Curtis and gives him a slow thumbs up before relaxing back into the reclining chair and regaining his awareness.

A moment later Ryan leans up off the chair, blinks, yawns, then stretches his arms out wide. Ryan’s eyes catch a man in the audience watching him intently. The man grins slightly and Ryan stares back at him shyly.

“Hey Ryan,” calls Curtis. “Ryan!”

Ryan breaks his stare with the man and turns to face Curtis.

“That was cool wasn’t it?” says Curtis.

“Umm, yeah,” replies Ryan, looking back into the crowd for the man, but he is gone.

“All right, Chelsea, tell us what you saw,” says Barry.

“I was about three-years-old and I was with my Mother and she was feeding me and I could hear her singing the songs she used to sing to me,” says Chelsea, who starts to cry happily.

“Wonderful,” says Barry. “Let’s give her a big hand everyone.”

The audience claps in response.

Barry walks over to Curtis and asks him about his experience.

“Well, I was playing in my backyard as a young child, and I saw where I lost all of my favourite toys, so I’m gonna go look for them now.”

The audience laughs.

“Excellent,” says Barry, “and lastly, Ryan, tell us about your trip down memory lane.”

Ryan looks into the audience and they fall quiet, waiting to hear him. He swallows nervously and scratches his head.

“Don’t keep us in suspense, young man,” says Barry. “We all want to know.”

Ryan fumbles his words momentarily, but eventually clears his throat and begins to speak.

“I’m not too sure what I saw. I only remember standing on a beach and then... there was...”

Suddenly Ryan sees the man standing in the crowd. He is looking back at Ryan.

“What was there, Ryan?” asks Barry.

“There was... I’m sorry, I can’t remember anymore.”

There is a feeling of disappointment in the audience.

Barry quickly takes action and swoops his hands into the air. “Let’s give them a big round of applause ladies and gents.”

The audience cheers and Ryan, Curtis, and Chelsea walk off stage.

Barry speaks through the sound system, thanking them for participating. His voice continues to create a carnival atmosphere and he calls a new batch of people from the audience for another show. Ryan and Curtis rejoin their friends. Curtis speaks about his hypnotic adventures excitedly to the

others, while Ryan is still half asleep and doesn't hear most of what Curtis is saying.

"Hey Ryan, you with us yet?" asks Cameron.

Ryan rubs his face with both hands and then shakes off his tiredness. "Yeah, I think so. Man, that was pretty deep stuff."

"You sure you can't remember anything else," asks Curtis.

Ryan pauses and thinks about it before he speaks. "Well, a lot of it was pretty dark and quiet, but nothing that really made any sense.

"What? No images or anything that was out of the ordinary?" asks Patrick.

"Oh, it was all out of the ordinary all right, but so much so that I just can't put it in words. It was like a dream more than anything; everything was fragmented and kept changing. I couldn't get a clear picture of anything."

"Do we all want to head off home?" asks Patrick.

They all agree and start for the main entrance. Ryan lags behind still looking for something or someone.

The others move a few meters ahead of Ryan and he loses them in the crowd. Suddenly, a man dressed in a very sharp business suit steps out from the crowd and stands in front of Ryan. It is the man who was looking at him while he was on the stage. He towers over Ryan and holds his ground. Ryan stops and simply looks into the man's dark penetrating eyes.

"Hello, young man," the man's voice cuts through the air like a cold wind.

"Do I know you?" asks Ryan, trying to hold back his feelings of intimidation. His instincts begin to go haywire and he cannot bring himself to move his feet.

"That was an amazing show you put on."

"What do you mean," asks Ryan.

The crowd surrounds them both, and passes by not taking much notice of them.

"Up there on the stage," says the man. "You had an impressive memory recall, didn't you?"

“I don’t know what you mean. Now excuse me—my friends are waiting for me.”

As Ryan begins to walk away, the man sidesteps in front of him. He raises his hand quickly to motion for Ryan to stop.

“Wait please. I didn’t mean to offend you. I just wanted to congratulate you on your discovery.”

Ryan looks at the man; he is not sure what he means.

“You mean, what I remembered in the hypnosis?” asks Ryan.

“Yes,” says the man. “You’re very a special young man. I can tell.”

“Tell what?” asks Ryan, becoming less suspicious of the man, and more interested in what he has to say.

“That you have a special talent. I can help you if you like.”

“Help me do what?” asks Ryan.

The man looks around at the crowd and then leans in closer to Ryan’s face and whispers. “Develop your gift.”

Ryan doesn’t respond straight away. He pauses to contemplate what this man is offering him. His mind races with thoughts, none of which he is able to latch onto. Somewhere in there he can sense the right thought lifting to the surface of his mind, but he feels scrambled.

“I’m sorry—I don’t quite understand what you mean. What happened on the stage was just some fancy psychological stunt—it didn’t mean anything. Now excuse me, I have to go.” Ryan takes a few steps past the man.

“Wait, boy,” calls the man loudly. “I know what you saw. I saw the lights around you too!”

Ryan stops still, but does not turn around.

“I know what you can do,” calls the man more quietly.

Ryan slowly turns back around to face the man, looking at him with curious eyes.

“How do you know what I saw?” asks Ryan.

The man smiles: “Let’s just say I have a gift, like you, but mine is different. He lets Ryan process his last remark for a moment. He steps closer to Ryan and places his hand on his shoulder. “Listen to me boy. I can help you with your gift.”

“How?”

The man smiles again and places his hand back down beside him. "I was hoping you would ask." Placing his hand over his chest, he says, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Doctor Francis Campbell. I run a research and development program for gifted people like yourself."

"You mean like *X-Men*?" asks Ryan.

Campbell gives a small laugh. "No, nothing quite as elaborate as that. However my program functions in a similar fashion. Would you be interested in making an appointment?" says Campbell.

"Maybe," replies Ryan.

"Why don't I give you my card and let you think about it?"

Campbell removes a thin metal container from his inner jacket pocket and retrieves a business card and holds it out to Ryan. Ryan looks at the card for a moment and slowly takes the card from Campbell and reads it to himself.

"My office is not in the city; you would have to drive out into the country on the weekend and stay a couple of nights, but it's not that far," explains Campbell.

Ryan thinks over the offer.

"Ryan!" calls Curtis stepping rapidly through the crowd. "What are you doing?"

"I have to go, my friends are waiting for me," says Ryan.

Curtis weaves his way through the crowd and up to Ryan. "Thought we'd lost you for a moment. Come on, we're ready to go." Curtis notices the man that Ryan is standing near and watches him suspiciously. "Come on Ryan, let's go."

Ryan nods his head.

"Like I said," says Campbell, "have a think about it and call me when you've decided."

Curtis grabs Ryan by the arm and leads him away into the crowd. Campbell remains standing still, keeping his eyes on Ryan as he walks away.

"Who was that guy," asks Curtis.

Ryan clears his throat.

"Ah... he was a salesman. He was trying to sell me some crystals."

“Crystals?” asks Curtis. “You don’t want to waste your money on that shit, mate.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The two young men catch up with Cameron and Patrick, and they exit the Expo through the main gates.

Chapter 4

Perth, Western Australia
26th August 2011

Ryan wakes up and sniffs, he has a blocked nose and a stuffy head. Reaching across to the bedside table he grabs a tissue and falls back onto the mattress. He blows his nose, failing to remove a satisfactory amount of gunk from his nostrils. He throws the tissue across the room in the general direction of the waste bin. He hardly looks at all and misses by a long shot, though he really does not care where the tissue lands anyway.

He plods down the stairs and into the kitchen. His hair is creased over onto one side. He pulls his t-shirt around squarely. He flicks the kettle on and waits for it to boil. Jacob sits cross-legged in front of the television watching morning cartoons; he is already dressed for school.

Isabelle enters the kitchen wearing her white dressing gown. Her hair is down and long. She carries the newspaper under one arm and holds an empty coffee cup in her other hand.

“Morning son,” she says softly.

Ryan groans in response, still looking down at the kettle.

“How are you feeling this morning?” she asks, taking the plastic covering off the newspaper.

“Headcold,” replies Ryan.

The kettle pops as it comes to the boil. Ryan reaches for a mug and a bag of peppermint tea.

“Jacob, don’t sit so close. You’ll get square eyes,” calls Isabelle.

Jacob waddles back from the screen barely enough to please his mother. Ryan goes and sits at the kitchen table and looks out in the back garden. It is all green and moist. A pair of pigeons

are perched on the back fence, scanning the ground for food. The wind rises up gently and they flap off into the next yard. Ryan breathes in the steam evaporating from the tea.

"You shouldn't go today if you don't feel up to it, matey," says Isabelle. She places the paper down on the table and returns to the kitchen.

"I'll be fine. Besides I have to find out where the astronomy excursion is being held tonight," explains Ryan.

Two slices of bread jump out of the toaster and Isabelle puts them onto the wooden board and spreads them with butter and honey. "You can't go out tonight. You'll die of pneumonia!"

"I'll be all right, mum. Don't worry so much about me."

He sniffs back some runny mucus and blows his nose again with one of the tissues from his sleeve. In the background the television spits out its daily charge of exploding cartoon characters firing laser beams at each other.

Isabelle sits at the kitchen table and puts a small plate of toast down over the paper. She looks at Ryan concerned. "Is there anything troubling you, my boy?"

Ryan shakes his head. "No, it's nothing."

Isabelle takes a bite of toast.

Ryan sips his tea and looks at his mother. "I'm OK, mum, really," he says, placing his hand on her shoulder. "I'm just readjusting to Uni life, that's all. It's a lot different to working full time, you know?"

Isabelle swallows her food. "If you want to talk about—"

"I know, mum," he interrupts, smiling at her.

Ryan gets up from the table and looks across at Jacob in the living room, then turns back to face his Mother. "Do you still miss him?"

Isabelle nods and eats some more toast, turning to look out the window.

"It'll be all right," says Ryan sympathetically. "We've still got each other, and Jacob too."

"What?" calls Jacob, his eyes still glued to the screen.

"Nothing, darling," says Isabelle, sniffing a tear away. "Have you brushed your teeth yet?"

“Yes, mum.”

Ryan pauses before leaving the table. He places the mug on the sink, exits the kitchen and goes upstairs to his room. He grabs his towel and turns back toward the door, stopping briefly to look at a framed photo on his shelf of his parents with their arms around him as a teenager. Ryan leaves the room and goes to have a shower.

It is late winter in Perth. A cold wind blows from the Indian Ocean, but the sun is warm for most of the morning before the sky becomes overcast in the afternoon. Ryan walks to his university only ten minutes away. He arrives on time and sits at the front part of the lecture hall. There are approximately 200 students in attendance. Ryan turns around and sees Curtis sitting at the top of the back part of the hall. He waves to Curtis, who smiles quickly back at him. Just below Ryan’s line of sight, and sitting three rows back, is Hannah. Ryan drops his eyes to her and she smiles at him. He smiles back then turns round to face the front again, smiling a little more.

The professor enters the hall and proceeds to give the lecture. “Following on from last week, we’ll go over the general methods used when viewing the sky with telescopes. You will all have a chance to complete the practical exercise tonight at the viewing site.”

The students pay close attention and take notes while the professor speaks. During the lecture, Ryan sketches a figure of a person surrounded by a circle. He looks at it strangely, wondering where he has seen it before. Before he knows it, the lecture is over.

The professor switches the projector off. “Just a reminder—the weather will clear up by tonight, so the excursion is still on. In the meantime can everyone organize themselves into small groups or pairs to work together on the excursion.”

Ryan looks around for someone to pair up with. To his left, the students in his row are all occupied with each other; however, when he turns to his right, Hannah is standing in the aisle facing him.

“So, Ryan Falconer, do you have a partner yet?”

“Hi.” Ryan smiles, a little embarrassed as he remembers his previous encounter with her. “No, I don’t have a partner yet.”

“Looks like you do now,” says Hannah, cheekily. “I’ll see you tonight.”

She winks at him and walks out of the lecture hall, her long hair drifting behind her like dream dust.

“You like her, don’t you?” says Curtis, now standing on the other side of Ryan.

Ryan snaps out of his stare and looks at Curtis. “She is definitely very attractive, but I don’t even know her.”

“Oh come on, Ryan, you can’t fool me. You want her bad!”

“Maybe,” says Ryan, covering his real feelings.

“Come on, I’ll buy you a coffee,” says Curtis.

“But I don’t drink coffee.”

“How about a jam donut?”

Ryan chuckles and they make for the door.

“Yeah sure,” says Ryan.

They exit the lecture hall and enter the corridor filled with students quickly passing by.

“And why are you being so nice to me anyway?” he asks.

“It’s my job to look after my mates,” says Curtis, “and besides, if you can pull girls like that, I want to hang out with you from now on.”

They laugh together and head toward the refectory.

Later that night, after the sun is set, the entire astronomy class of Murdoch University arrives in buses and individual cars to Boulder Rock out on the Brookton Highway. The students walk casually through the narrow pathways from the parking area, and gather on the wide, flat rock shelf spanning the ground. The headlights of the vehicles shut off and dozens of torches covered with red and green cellophane paper glow dimly among the trees. The torches bob and sway as the class spreads out over the rock. The students chat among themselves and assemble their telescopes in the near darkness. Beyond the clearing the trees stand still in silhouetted silence under an indigo sky filled with glittering stars. The surrounding forest

blocks the city lights in the western sky. The largest rock towering upon the rise creates a feeling of awe with its oval shape and dark gray surface. A small amount of dew covers everything.

The professor stands on a rise and addresses the students. "OK, before we get going, I just want to say a few things about Boulder Rock. First, this is the traditional land of the Nyungar Australian Aborigines, and this particular place was reserved for initiation rites for various purposes. In Nyungar culture, the Waugal or Rainbow Serpent as it is commonly known, is the creation spirit of the land. The Nyungar believe that the Waugal passed through this area," and pointing to the largest boulder on the rise, he says, "and that it laid its eggs there—"

"So, just remember to respect this land and its custodians as you go about your work. We had to ask for permission to be here tonight because of its significance to the Nyungar people. Also, this is a general reminder on safety. The rocks can get pretty steep in certain places, so please use your common sense when walking around in the dark.

"OK, for the pre-observing session I want you to select ten objects from both lists that you plan to observe with the telescopes and with the naked eye. Remember to use the planispheres; don't just guess, or you'll be here all night. I will be walking around if anyone needs assistance. Get started."

The students commence their astronomy exercises. Somewhere in the middle of the clearing stands Ryan; he sneezes and reaches into his pocket for his handkerchief. Next to him is Hannah, assembling the eight-inch Schmit Cassegrain telescope. Curtis is close by working with another group of students within ear range of Ryan.

"Maybe you shouldn't have come out tonight with that cold?" says Hannah.

"Please. My mum already gave me that lecture," says Ryan.

"Ok, just don't splutter all over me when you sneeze."

Once the telescope is set up, they attempt to figure out the workings of the planisphere, but end up laughing at their clumsiness.

“Hey Curtis,” calls Ryan, “have you figured out how to use the planisphere yet?”

Curtis says, “Yes I have, and you two would have no problem either if you’d been paying attention on the bus trip instead of yappin’ the whole way.”

Ryan and Hannah hold back their smiles.

“Looks like we better put on our thinking caps,” says Ryan.

“It can’t be that hard,” says Hannah, taking the planisphere from him. “Look, this is how you do it, I think,” she says while turning the dial around to the correct date and time.

The first object that they choose to observe is the Jewel Box. Hannah maneuvers the telescope into a general position aiming toward the Southern Cross, which hangs high in the southwestern sky. She squats down to look through the finder scope and positions the target over the bright cluster just below Beta Centauri. She shifts her body over to the eyepiece and begins to adjust the focus. She falls silent while she perfects the view.

Hannah is really impressed by the colors of the stars and gazes at it for long time.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. “I love the red star in the middle, it’s so bright.”

Ryan stands back a step and holds the clipboard ready to record the data.

“That’s a super giant. They’re the biggest kind of stars out there, much bigger than our own star,” says Ryan.

He lets his eyes wander over Hannah’s body, dimly lit by the red light of the torches. She now bends over the telescope to get comfortable. He thinks to himself how sexy her legs are in her jeans.

“Do you wanna take a closer look?” asks Hannah, startling Ryan a little. He fuddles the pencil and drops it on the ground.

“Ah, yeah sure, what eyepiece are we using?” says Ryan, covering up the awkward moment.

“Twenty-four and a half plossle,” she says, standing up again and letting Ryan come closer to the telescope.

“Any filter,” asks Ryan.

“No,” replies Hannah.

After Ryan has written down the details onto the observing log he peers into the eyepiece and can see the exotic colours and luminosity of thousands of stars twinkling as if they were right up close. "They are truly amazing," says Ryan quietly to himself. "It makes you think doesn't it?"

"Yeah," replies Hannah knowingly. "It's hard to imagine that no one else is out there."

"Oh but besides that, I mean it makes me think that *someone* had to have a pretty good imagination to come up with all these works of art," says Ryan, still looking into the eyepiece.

Hannah is sketching the cluster into her observation log.

"So you believe in extraterrestrials then?" asks Hannah.

Ryan stands up and faces Hannah. He nods and then goes to speak, but starts to sneeze. After he blows his nose, he returns his handkerchief into his pocket.

"I just think there is too much space out there for it just to be us, you know?" says Ryan.

Hannah contemplates this and Ryan takes the planisphere to select another object to view. Once he finds something he goes back to the telescope, looks up into the sky and turns the canon slightly left and down. He squats and looks through the finder scope, placing a blurred image in the center of the cross hairs. He accidentally bumps the telescope's base twice and has to alternate between the eyepiece and the finder scope to relocate the object. Eventually Ryan focuses in on the object and is awed.

"No wonder they call it the 'wow' effect," says Ryan, as he gazes upon the starry explosion of Omega Centauri, frozen in time against a black glassy background.

"What have you got?" asks Hannah, nudging closer to Ryan.

Ryan moves his head away from the eyepiece and notices how close Hannah is to him. He slowly stands upright and she moves carefully in front of him, brushing her thighs and buttocks past the front of his waist.

"A globular cluster," says Ryan quickly. "Have a look, it'll blow you away."

Ryan cringes privately at the wrong use of his words. There is a short pause between the two students. Ryan's feet are glued to the ground.

"It's so big," says Hannah enthusiastically.

There is a longer pause. Ryan's eyes become larger and he looks around for Curtis, but he cannot get his attention.

"So what do you reckon it's like?" asks Hannah, still looking into the eyepiece.

"I'm sorry?" asks Ryan, almost choking and beginning to inch his feet back along the rock surface.

"Living on another world?" says Hannah.

"Oh!" Ryan exhales suddenly to cover up his surprise and mutters a few sounds. His bottom lip makes a flapping sound to appear genuinely involved with the conversation strand.

"Probably not too unlike this one," she answers before him.

"You're right," says Ryan, too carefully.

Hannah stands up and looks at him warily, yet she is secretly inviting the uneasiness of the situation. Placing her hands on her hips and tilting her body at the waist to further accentuate her petite figure, she says, "What?"

"Nothing," replies Ryan, trying to hide a smile.

They stand facing each other, too long for comfort.

They are about to crack up when the professor arrives.

"Everything going all right here, then?" asks the Professor.

"Yes, fine, Professor," Hannah and Ryan reply succinctly. Hannah turns around and starts adjusting the telescope aimlessly. Ryan pretends to scribble something on the clipboard.

"Very good, carry on. Don't forget to observe some of the naked eye objects before they set in the west," he says.

Ryan and Hannah both nod discretely and the Professor walks on to the next group of students.

"Let's pick another object to find," says Ryan, as the tension between them returns to a bearable level.

"Good idea," says Hannah, stepping over to Ryan, who holds the checklist.

“How about Saturn, it’s easy to find,” says Hannah, pointing into the northwestern sky.

“See,” says Hannah, stepping in close to Ryan, allowing him to follow her line of sight into the heavens. Their heads touch as they come together; Ryan is two feet taller than Hannah, and she has to look up to meet his eyes. He returns her look and they both smile.

They part slowly and Hannah goes over to the telescope. She swivels it around and points it in the general direction of a bright yellow object in Taurus.

“Hey Ryan, if you had the chance to leave the planet, would you go?” asks Hannah.

“Definitely, I think anyone would want to. I’ve always dreamed of flying through the Milky Way and seeing all the nebulae up close.”

“It would surely be a mind opener,” says Hannah, focusing on Saturn and adjusting the telescope a little. “Do you think we’ll ever get off this planet?”

“Who’s to say we haven’t already?” says Ryan.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe some secret government operation has already developed faster than light travel and doesn’t want anyone to know about it. I mean, can you imagine if tomorrow the Prime Minister got on the television and announced that we can fly to the stars. And better yet, that they have discovered habitable worlds for us to live on.”

Hannah begins sketching in her logbook and thinks about what Ryan is saying.

Ryan takes a peek at Saturn. He says, “It kind of looks like a grain of rice,” then continues to sketch it into his logbook. “I mean, you’re doing Psychology; you understand how people would behave. We haven’t even learned to live on this planet properly yet. If we start colonizing other planets now we’ll probably wreck them too. Anyway, I still like the idea of standing on a planet somewhere out in space and knowing that I’m the only person to have ever walked its surface.”

“That’s a beautiful thought,” says Hannah, “but a terribly lonely one.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t live there forever. I’d travel from planet to planet, mapping the galaxy,” says Ryan.

Hannah takes control of the telescope and points it back into the southeastern sky toward Canopus. “It sounds like a very interesting life, but how do you propose you will get around? In a spaceship?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always imagined what thought travelling would be like,” he says.

“What’s thought travelling?”

“Thought travelling is something I made up, but I can’t do it. It basically means that I can pick a location anywhere in the galaxy and *think* my body to dematerialize here and re-materialize at the new location, at the speed of thought, which I’m told is about four million miles per second.”

“Isn’t that just teleporting?” says Hannah, hardly as excited as Ryan.

“Well, yeah, kind of,” he replies, “but this kind of travelling is different in that you can *see* where you are travelling as you go!” he says with confidence.

Hannah rolls her eyes, smiles to herself, and starts sketching again. “Have a look at this star before you take off, spaceboy.”

“I mean, who’s to say that humans aren’t capable of doing it, or anything they can possibly imagine for that matter?” says Ryan.

“Just think what it would feel like. Would it feel like anything at all?” he continues, while Hannah just listens interestedly and gazes into the Milky Way.

“It might feel weird, but then again, it might just be like walking across the street, but with more than just cars to look out for,” says Ryan. “Who’s to say? Who’s to say it can’t be done, I tell you!”

Curtis walks over to Hannah and Ryan.

“He’s not giving you the space traveling talk is he?” asks Curtis.

Hannah smiles, but doesn’t say anything.

“Get lost, mate. Go look at some stars,” says Ryan.

“All finished,” replies Curtis, smartly and walks back to his group.

Ryan huffs and looks into the eyepiece.

"I suppose you think I'm a bit airy fairy?" asks Ryan.

"I wouldn't say that," she pauses briefly. "I'd say, very imaginative."

"Yeah, whatever," says Ryan, knowing that she is making fun of him.

"I do like your idea about thought traveling, really. I have always been interested in those kinds of things—you know, mind power and stuff."

"Really?" says Ryan, sketching Canopus as a big dot on his logbook and trying not to appear too interested in Hannah's sudden change in the conversation.

"Yeah, haven't you ever had those moments where you know what another person is thinking? Or times when you can think 'hello' to a friend across a crowd and they turn around?" says Hannah.

Ryan suddenly feels nervous talking about this subject, but covers it up carefully. "I suppose I've had things like that happen to me. Hasn't everyone?" Ryan swings the telescope around into the western sky and aims it into the Carina constellation.

"Scorpius is setting soon, so don't forget to sketch it," calls the Professor from across the clearing.

"Not everyone," says Hannah.

"What kind of experiences have you had?" asks Ryan, focusing the telescope on Eta Carina.

"Oh, just those kinds that I mentioned," she says, "I suppose everyone is a little 'psychic' at the end of the day."

"Mmm, maybe," says Ryan, "but I think *really* psychic people are far and few between. Have a look at this."

Ryan lets Hannah look into the telescope while he sketches the nebulae.

While Hannah is adjusting the fine focus an image begins to form in her mind. She sees the shape of a man standing before her. Around his body swirls a circular field of colors. She

concentrates harder to receive a clearer picture and when she finally focuses in closer, she sees Ryan's face.

"It's quite a pretty nebula isn't it," says Ryan, catching Hannah off-guard.

"Ah... yes," she replies.

The image fades. Off to the side, Hannah hears Ryan sneeze and blow his nose. She wonders if she should tell him about the image in her mind.

"You all right?" asks Ryan, placing his hand on Hannah's back.

Hannah stands upright and looks down sideways, avoiding eye contact with Ryan; she seems distressed.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Ryan asks softly.

Hannah mumbles a few words that Ryan cannot comprehend. She tightens her lips and turns away from him, holding in her distress.

"I'm fine," says Hannah. "I just... got some period cramps, that's all."

Ryan rubs her back warmly with his hand and Hannah smiles thankfully back at him, looking into his eyes completely this time. They both smile at each other.

"Thanks... that feels unusually nice," says Hannah.

"Your welcome," says Ryan, smiling gently.

They continue their telescope practical with little further discussion. Ryan senses something about Hannah, but he does not know what. He knows that she is a special girl and he would like to build on their relationship, yet there is something more unique about her. Hannah, on the other hand, is curious about the images she has received and what their meaning may be alluding to.

When Ryan arrives home after the excursion he goes straight into the bathroom for a hot shower. From her bedroom, Isabelle can hear Ryan sneezing. "That boy has gone and got himself a cold," she thinks. She rolls over in her bed and goes back to sleep.

After his shower, Ryan begins to dry himself with a towel. He stops suddenly and inspects himself in the mirror's reflection. Through the steam and fog he sees nothing out of the ordinary and continues drying.

He turns away from the mirror and folds the towel on the rack. Down the center of his back, running along the surface of his skin, an electric gas blue flame of light flickers at every intersecting vertebrae of his spine. Ryan turns around again and dresses into his pajamas, not noticing the lights on his back. After brushing his teeth, he turns the bathroom light off and walks into the hallway. He stops just before entering his room, he notices that the hallway is glowing extraordinarily bright, and looks to see if the ceiling light is switched on. Not letting confusion get the better of him, he enters his room and closes the bedroom door.

Ryan enters into bed around eleven o'clock. He has trouble falling asleep. He turns and tosses, unable to get comfortable. Many thoughts race through his mind. On the floor beside his bed is a packet of throat lozenges and a bottle of eucalyptus oil. Throughout the course of the night the carpet becomes littered with used tissues. Ryan's temperature increases and he becomes feverish. A cold sweat breaks out all over him. He wakes during the early morning hours when it is still dark. He walks downstairs into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water and then returns to his room.

Ryan steps into the middle of the room and stops. In his peripheral vision he sees his reflection in the full-length mirror, situated in the corner of the room. He turns his head to the side so that he can partially view his back. Under his clothes he sees something that surprises him. He puts the glass of water down on the desk and quickly removes his top, stepping closer to the mirror to further inspect his back.

His face sharpens slightly and his eyes squint a little as he examines a series of evenly distributed lights pulsating over his spine. His mouth drops in astonishment. The lights are small oblong spheres. They are changing color from blue to white over and over. He reaches around and touches his spine; his

fingers pass right through the lights, causing him to react and pull away his hand. The lights are very warm.

His eyes open wide as the lights double in size and increase their pulsation rate. A constant flow of light begins to move up rapidly from the base of his spine, disappearing into his neck. He feels a strange sensation overcoming his whole body. At first it feels warm and itchy, and a dull pressure begins to develop in his head.

Ryan grasps his hands around his skull as the pressure builds and then he bends over placing one hand over his abdomen as a sharp muscular spasm erupts. He lets out a small cry of pain and falls to his knees.

Within moments the pain is lessening and Ryan climbs to his feet again. He checks his back in the mirror again. The lights are gone. He looks around his room confused and disorientated. His eyes sift over his desk and come to stop at the business card stuck on the computer monitor. He picks it up and reads it: *Dr. Francis Campbell 'Metapsychologist'*.

Chapter 5

Murdoch University, Perth
12th September 2011

It is late Friday afternoon; Hannah is waiting for Ryan outside a lecture theatre at university. She stands alone leaning back against the balcony railing on the second floor of the economics, commerce, and law building. She checks her watch for the third time in one minute and then looks down into the concrete courtyard below, where two thin trees rise into the air and sway in the breeze. The last of the students vacate the lecture theatre and pass by Hannah swiftly, creating a trail of cold wind, which blows onto her face making her shiver. She decides to look inside the lecture hall, but sees no one inside. "Where could he be?" she thinks. They always meet up after this class and go down to the tavern for a beer on Fridays. Hannah gives up waiting and starts walking to the tavern.

When she arrives she sees Patrick and Curtis playing snooker. She waves to them across the room. The inside of the tavern and the balcony outside is populated with university students, all whom are holding alcoholic drinks in their hands whilst they chat away with each other merrily. Loud rock music is playing on the sound system, which still allows comfortable conversation to take place. The television bolted to the wall in the corner is tuned to the local football game. The home side is playing an eastern state team. The television gathers a healthy crowd of young men around its sizzling glow; they cheer as their team kicks a goal. The view out of the tavern's rear windows looks over the empty parking lot and onto a native bushland reserve. Beyond that a plantation of mature pine trees towers in the background. It is a balmy spring afternoon; the

birds and insects flying around and through the native flora are making low humming sounds interspaced with rhythmic clicks and chirps. Hannah walks up to the bar and orders a beer. She pays for it and turns to face Curtis and Patrick in the middle of the room. She drinks and then walks over to the two young men at the snooker table. Patrick looks up at her as he goes to take his shot, but only lifts his eyebrows in acknowledgment. Curtis stands beside an upturned wine barrel used as a table where he places his drink; he holds the pool cue over his shoulder.

"Hi," calls Hannah over the music. "How have you been?"

"Fine," replies Curtis. "And you?"

Patrick looks up from the cue at Hannah, then at Curtis, and then quickly back down to the cue again. He strikes the white ball with a crack and sinks the red ball.

"Yeah, good," says Hannah.

"Have you seen Ryan today," she asks. "He wasn't in his lecture?"

Curtis takes a swig from his beer bottle and then shakes his head, pouting.

"Nup, haven't seen him all week actually. I was going to ask you the same thing. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him for a couple of weeks now."

Patrick has another shot, but misses his target; he curses to himself.

"Have you asked Cameron, he might know?" says Patrick, stepping over to them and having a drink from his beer.

"I think Ryan has mentioned him before. Do you know where I can find him?" asks Hannah.

"I've got his contact number, if you want that?" says Curtis, reaching into his pocket for his cell phone.

"Ok, thanks. What is it?"

Curtis calls the number out and Hannah types it into her cell phone.

"I'm going outside to finish my beer, it's too loud in here," says Hannah, "I'll see you guys around."

Curtis leans over the snooker table and lines the cue up for his shot.

“See ya later,” says Curtis, striking the white ball across the table. “Say hi to Ryan for me when you find him.”

Patrick waves goodbye to Hannah and she exits the tavern. Patrick and Curtis stand looking at each other across the table for a moment.

Curtis drinks from his beer. Patrick slides the cue along his hand and slightly taps the white ball, which rolls across the green velvet and knocks another red ball into the corner pocket.

“Hello, Cameron? It’s Hannah; Ryan’s mate,” she says, walking back toward the university and leaving the tavern behind her. I’m just calling to see if you know where Ryan has been for the last couple of weeks? He hasn’t been at Uni.” She listens to his response, then says, “It’s just that he didn’t mention anything and I thought you might know something? I know he had a bit of a cold when I last saw him, so maybe he’s at home in bed?”

“Well I’ve just been at the Uni tavern and I met up with Curtis and Patrick, and they don’t know either, but Curtis gave me your number to see if you –

Hannah listens while Cameron speaks on the other end of the line, then says, “Yeah that might be an idea. Let me just get a pen and write it down. OK, go ahead.” She jots down Ryan’s home address. “Thanks, Cam. I’ll see you around.”

Ryan sits midway down the length of the coach and stares out of the window at the passing view. The great western plateau of Australia stretches to the horizon in all directions. The fields are covered in a sea of multi-colored flowers: purples, yellows, and pinks, rolling wave after wave in the breeze. A farmhouse can be seen in the distance, its old tin roof rusted away and the wooden fence posts eaten away from the inside by white ants. Large clumps of forests are scattered all across the land. Every now and then a dead kangaroo is seen lying on the side of the road; crows scavenge the corpse and then hop away to safety as the coach whooshes by.

Inside the coach can be heard the murmuring of the other passengers. On the other side of the bus, sits a middle aged

woman and her young son. The little boy stares innocently at Ryan; the woman is sleeping on her jacket, which is folded up and wedged between the window and her head. Ryan turns his head across and smiles at the boy, who smiles back and then continues drawing into his colouring book.

The coach finally enters the shire of Lake Grace and the scenery begins to change significantly. The land is now sparsely populated by tall, pink-trunked Salmon Gum trees, and low-lying prickly shrubs in the undergrowth. Except for within the occasional farm dams, which are mostly hardened mud, there is very little sign of water."

Ryan tilts his head back on his seat and closes his eyes. He lets his mind drift and his body relax back into the seat. The journey from Perth has taken five hours so far, including a one-hour stop for lunch in Narrogin. His body is starting to go numb again and he wishes he could stretch his legs out further, but the seat in front of him restricts his movement. He sighs and lets his head flop to the side so that he is looking out the window again. Lake Grace proper spreads out before him: the saltpans are flat and white, the crystals sparkle in the sunshine, and three kangaroo trails lead off across the lake. Beyond the banks of the lake small clumps of bushes and dead tree trunks stand gloomily in the wind blowing in from the water. The fields are much more barren here and no longer fertile enough for harvesting wheat: the salinity infects the ground like a virus.

The coach comes to a halt in front of the Shell petrol station and a moment later, accelerates off again down the highway toward Lake King. Ryan is left standing on the side of the road. He drops his carry bag to his feet and looks at the surroundings. The late afternoon wind blows coldly over his body and he decides to put his jacket on. A sedan passes him, and the sound of its tyres on the road takes forever to fade away as it drives down the town's main strip. When the car is finally gone, the silence of the wind returns.

Ryan walks across the road, over to a large information notice board on the corner of the crossroads. It shows a map of

the town layout, and mentions that most of the shops are closed down and the population is under two hundred. Next to the notice board there is an electricity pole with a sign attached to it. It swings in the air by its one nail, catching Ryan's eye. It reads: DANGER HIGH VOLTAGE 666. The number makes Ryan think of the rural legends that have grown over the years about weird cults living in Southwest Australia. Despite knowing that the stories, even when they have some truth to them, are always exaggerated, he still shivers all over.

Ryan looks over the area again; there is not much going on. Besides the people working in the petrol station, he cannot see anyone down the main road. The huge wheat silo factory to the north is closed down, as is the hardware shop and the John Deere dealership nearby. The sun sets and a chill descends in the air. The altocumulus clouds stretch from one horizon to the next, casting shadows on the underside of the glorious orange, red, and indigo feather boa ceiling. Ryan stands alone on the highway, 400 kilometres southeast of Perth, wondering if he has been stood up.

“Master Faulkner!”

Ryan jumps in surprise and turns quickly around to see a man dressed in casual clothing standing two meters away from him.

“So glad to see you have arrived and looking so well. Why don't you let me take your bag and we'll take you somewhere nice and warm where you can rest after your long journey.”

“Thank you... Doctor, that would be good,” says Ryan.

Doctor Campbell opens the passenger door to his four-wheel drive and Ryan enters the car. Campbell enters the driver's side and the car begins to move off down the northern road.

The polished cedar door of Doctor Campbell's house swings open and he gestures for Ryan to enter. Ryan stands at the entrance with his arms folded, looking inside hesitantly.

“Don’t be shy. Please come in, come in. I will show you to your room and then you can freshen up,” says Campbell.

Ryan walks in slowly and steps into the middle of the first room. It is lit by only a table lamp; the air smells of leather couches and old books. Campbell closes the door and switches another light on; the whole room is revealed to Ryan. Before him is an opulent library and sitting area furnished with brown chesterfield seats, a well crafted coffee table made of Jarrah wood with a finely carved edge, a desk in the corner by the fireplace, and an intricately designed Persian rug on the floor. The walls are mostly decked from the floor to the ceiling with bookshelves stacked to their fullest capacity. Above the fireplace hangs a mirror and next to it is a framed print of Salvadore Dali’s *Sacrament of The Last Supper*. There are two archways leading into other parts of the house, one of which Campbell is now walking toward. Overall it has a very cosy feel to it and Ryan feels he can relax now.

“If you would care to follow me,” says Campbell.

Ryan completes his scan of the room and follows Campbell through the archway. The next part of the house is also dark until Campbell switches on another light. Ryan finds himself standing in a short hallway comprising of four other doors. Campbell is standing at the end opening one of the doors and stepping inside a room.

Ryan walks down the hallway; the floor is made of hardwood treated with a honey coloured varnish. He turns and enters the room. Campbell sets Ryan’s bag down on the bed and walks into the ensuite to prepare some towels. The room contains a king size bed, a closet, and bedside table. The carpet is new and soft, and the ensuite is equipped with a bath, shower, basin, and contained toilet.

“You should find this room adequate during your stay,” says Campbell, standing in the middle of the room like a real estate salesman trying to sell him the house.

“Yes, it’s very nice... very modern,” says Ryan, nodding his head positively.

Campbell laughs lightly. "Thank you, but I didn't chose the décor myself; it was already like that when I moved in. I think the previous owners must have got it straight out of a *Homes* magazine.

"Now, give yourself some time to unwind and relax, have a shower if you like, and when your done, just come through to the dining room; the evening's meal will be ready in an hours time."

"Thank you, Doctor," says Ryan.

Campbell exits the room and closes the door behind him, leaving Ryan to settle in by himself. He looks in the ensuite and is impressed. He begins to unbutton his shirt then takes out his wallet and cell phone from his pockets. He looks at his phone: no reception. He shrugs and throws it on the bed and goes to have a hot shower.

Ryan enters the hallway from his room and catches a whiff of onions frying and it tantalizes his nose. He is wearing fresh clothes and his hair is damp. He sniffs the air some more and his mouth begins to water in response. The smell of delicious food drifts through the whole house.

Ryan moves through to the library and stands in front of the fireplace; the flames crackle softly at his feet. He inspects the items upon the mantle piece: at one end is a model of Newton's Cradle, and next to that, a medium sized clock with its moving parts visible through a glass seal. Ryan's eyes move around the room once more; near the desk there are framed certificates of numerous academic qualifications and awards hanging on the wall. On the desk itself, amid the standard writing implements and papers, there is a colour photo of a young woman. Ryan picks it up and looks at the woman.

"She's beautiful, isn't she," interrupts Campbell, now standing in the other archway, wearing an apron and holding a glass of port.

Ryan is startled, but quickly clears his throat, replying, "Yes. Is she your wife?"

"Was. She died fifteen years ago... suicide."

"I'm sorry," says Ryan quietly, putting the photo back on the desk.

"Come," starts Campbell, "let us fortify ourselves first and we can converse at length after we have dined."

Campbell and Ryan proceed into the next room.

To the right, the kitchen is spacious and contains a large bench in the middle of the room, which hosts the source of the delightful smells. There is a laundry through the back, which leads out into the back yard. Ryan walks to the left into the dining room, a vast room of stately proportions.

"Please have a seat, the meal will be served directly," says Campbell, then returns to the kitchen.

Ryan moseys over to the large square table with eight long backed chairs and sits down. The dining room is dimly lit with candles and corner lamps, which accentuate the room's dimensions. The table is set with fine cutlery and China plates; in the middle is an arrangement of exotic flowers floating in a circular glass font. Before Ryan has a chance to inspect the room fully, Campbell enters the dining room carrying a large silver dish. He places it down on the table and goes back into the kitchen, promptly returning with two smaller silver dishes.

Campbell removes the lids and presents the evening's meal to Ryan. "The entrée is potato, onion, and leek soup, followed by roasted kangaroo and organically grown vegetables." Then he begins to serve the soup into a bowl for Ryan.

When the meal is over Ryan sits back into the chair completely satisfied and yawns. Campbell uses his napkin to touch up the corners of his mouth and then places it down on the table next to his plate.

"I trust you are well fed?" asks Campbell.

"Yes, thank you," says Ryan. "It was delicious; it has boosted my energy levels up again, the coach ride really took it out of me."

"Would you like a refill?" asks Campbell, lifting the bottle of port.

"Yes, I would thank you," replies Ryan, who gives his glass to Campbell.

Campbell pours the wine and passes the glass back to Ryan. He lifts his own glass and Ryan follows.

"To health and prosperity," toasts Campbell.

Ryan tilts his glass and they both drink. The room settles into a moment of cosy silence.

"You are very hospitable, I must thank you again, Doctor Campbell."

"Please, call me Francis, we have dined together, we are friends now."

"Thank you, Francis, and thank you for inviting me here. I didn't know who else to go to."

"Perfectly all right, my boy, I understand completely. The world today is not ready to accommodate persons with genuine parapsychological gifts. They'd be snatched up by the government for military benefit no doubt, and that's if they weren't made fools of by the media first."

Ryan looks away to the side.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," says Campbell.

"That's OK, I'm just a little nervous about the whole thing, it's not everyday that your body glows strangely and other weird stuff like that," says Ryan, drinking from his glass again.

"You can be assured that whatever your gift may be, it is quite natural, however far and few between are the persons who actually have them."

Ryan asks, "And what about yourself, you mentioned you had some sort of gift too?"

"Ah yes, my gift," starts Campbell. "I have the ability to locate persons like yourself. I realised I could do it when I was around your age actually. It's a strange talent to have I know, but I have taken it upon myself to provide an exclusive service for talented people: somewhere they can discuss and develop their gift in a supportive environment with an experienced counsellor."

Campbell drinks from his glass again.

"You also mentioned that you can see what other people see," says Ryan, who yawns and then continues, "What did you mean by that?"

Campbell inhales and sighs. "Yes, well that is the other side to my gift and I am reluctant to even call it that. It hardly qualifies as substantial due to its unstable nature, but I have been able to understand its nature over time, regardless of its tendency to backfire on me. Basically I am able to see what people see inside their mind's eye, but for short periods only. If I pursue for more than a few minutes, I usually end up in bed for a week with a migraine accompanied by violent vomiting, so you can understand why I am hesitant to use it."

"What do you think its purpose is?" asks Ryan.

"I believe it is just an added feature of my safer talent," says Campbell.

"How did you figure out that you could do this kind of thing?" asks Ryan.

"There's no great story to tell really. I just started being attracted to people with higher levels of psychic ability—most of them were very weak mind you, and a lot of them were already in mental institutions, projecting a lot of mental energy into the air waves, which I was picking up. So I had to learn how to distinguish the more, approachable persons from the rest."

"And that's how you found me, at the Expo?" asks Ryan.

"Yes. I started attending such events more frequently over the past few years because there are a lot of people there who are already aware of paranormal subjects and it makes it easier to find them, and if they are sane, to invite them here for further work."

"You said you could see what I saw in my hypnosis—how is it possible that I would forget those memories? Surely they would have stuck out more so than any other memories?" says Ryan.

Campbell explains, "There is a scientific theory that suggests when a person witnesses an event that is beyond their normal everyday experience, the mind tends to rationalize what it has seen in an attempt to make sense of it. Anything that is too unbelievable is simply forgotten, and since what you saw came from your childhood, it is not surprising that you have no previous knowledge of your gift. I would also speculate that it has occurred more than once, and that you are only now able to

inquire about its authenticity because you have opened up to the realisation that it might be real.”

“How will I learn to use it?” asks Ryan, yawning again.

“That, we will discover tomorrow, but for now you look like you could do with some sleep.”

“Thank you for a wonderful dinner,” says Ryan standing up and tucking in his chair.

Campbell stands too and bows his head slightly.

“You are most welcome. Sleep well,” says Campbell. “We can continue this discussion later. Goodnight.”

Ryan exits the dining room and makes his way back to his quarters and goes to bed.

The morning is fresh and still. Ryan steps out onto the back veranda and takes in the serene view. Tall Salmon Gum trees grow around the house. Most of them have been stripped of their leaves by the pink gallahs, which have made their homes in the hollows of the branches. Beyond that, the flattened fields seem to spread forever. Ryan breathes in the clean country air and begins to stroll out through the garden. Within the immediate area there is a well-maintained herb and vegetable garden, an orchard of fruit trees, small water ponds containing fish, yabbies, and water chestnuts. Ryan follows a sawdust path around the garden until he reaches a chicken pen where Campbell has just finished refilling a grain trough.

“Good morning, Ryan,” calls Campbell, closing the chicken wire door.

“Good morning,” says Ryan.

“What do you think of my garden?”

“It’s great, I see you grow a lot of your own food.”

“Oh yes, the property is quite self-sustainable.”

“I could live out here, you know,” says Ryan. “It’s so peaceful.”

“I knew you would like it,” says Campbell, putting the bag of feed into a small box made from old tin sheets and wooden framing. “Hard to think it was all trees and bush two centuries ago. How I would have loved to live then.”

“All that natural beauty and they had to go and destroy it,” says Campbell, looking out across the fields. “But that’s what progress was thought to be in those days. I really feel for the Aborigines you know, having their homeland invaded and raped by those white fellows 223 years ago. Fortunately, that’s all changing these days; people are looking to the old ways for help, and it’s about bloody time too!”

“Had breakfast?” asks Campbell promptly.

“No, not yet,” replies Ryan.

“Well let’s go do that and after that you can get ready for the day. Take some time to explore the farm and after lunch we will see what that mind of yours can do. I’ve got some things I need to do first, so just kick back for a while.”

They both return to the house, picking a few of the fruits along the way. Campbell makes a joke and they both laugh.

After lunch Campbell and Ryan walk a short way across the property to a small circular hut with rammed earth walls and a thatch roof. The hut is dark on the inside, but Campbell soon lights up some candles and they sit opposite each other on the old wooden floor. In between them, in the very center of the hut, lays an open fireplace ready to burn. Campbell strikes a match and the newspaper catches alight and soon the kindling is burning too. The smoke permeates through the thatch roof adequately enough and the hut warms up quickly.

Campbell says, “I know this looks like the last place you would expect to develop your gift, but I assure you the dim light and the natural surroundings will assist you in relaxing. I find the electromagnetic signals of the city dull the strength of my mental perception. All that technology can be a bit overbearing at times.”

Ryan nods affirmatively and stares into the growing flames.

“Let’s start with a meditation to relax our minds and we’ll go from there,” says Campbell.

Ryan wriggles on his bottom to get comfortable, closes his eyes and takes some deep breaths. His body begins to let go of its tension and his breath slows down to a rhythmical pace.

After about five minutes, Ryan is deeply relaxed, his thoughts drifting in peace.

“Try and see yourself as you did in the hypnosis, Ryan,” comes Campbell’s voice softly across the hut. “Remember your childhood experiences.”

Ryan’s eyes dart and flicker under his eyelids. After a short time he scrunches his face up slightly. “Nothing’s happening.”

“Ok. Try and visualise what happened on the night of your fever, when you saw the lights on your spine,” says Campbell.

The fire in the hut starts to burn the larger logs and they start to crackle and spit.

Again Ryan attempts to bring up an image, but it does not produce any effects. “What’s supposed to happen, Francis?”

“I was hoping that if you remembered what it felt like to experience your gift, you might produce it again and somehow sustain it long enough for us to work with it... figure out how it can be summoned at will, that kind of thing,” says Campbell.

More minutes pass and Ryan is becoming bored with this approach. “I don’t think it’s going to work,” he says, opening his eyes and slouching.

“Look, don’t feel disappointed, we’ll have a break and start again after dinner.”

Just as Ryan is about to stand up, one of the logs on the fire pops and a small piece of hot coal shoots out toward his face. He is too slow to react in time; however, it stops a hand’s span away from his eyes and falls to the floor. He looks down curiously at the glowing ember as it burns up. Campbell stares at Ryan with a smile.

“Did you see that?” asks Ryan enthusiastically.

Campbell is one step ahead of him. He picks up a small branch next to the fire and breaks a piece off. Ryan nods to him, but closes his eyes none the less.

Campbell throws the twig lightly at Ryan and again it stops, this time a full foot away from his body and falls to the floor. Ryan opens his eyes.

“Well?” he asks.

“It happened again,” says Campbell.

Ryan looks around for another object. "Throw something bigger this time."

"Are you sure?" asks Campbell.

Ryan nods and keeps his eyes open.

Campbell takes a large chunky piece of wood, which just fits inside his hand. "If this doesn't work, I apologise in advance."

They both look at the piece of wood in Campbell's hand and then at each other. Ryan gives a quick nod of approval.

"I understand," he says, bracing himself.

"Do it," says Ryan in a confident voice though he is swallowing nervously.

Campbell licks his lips and raises the log to the side of his head and prepares to throw it at Ryan.

He throws the log. It hits an invisible wall in front of Ryan and falls right onto the fire. They both stare at each other for a long moment with their mouths dropped open in awe. Slowly, they both work up into a chuckle, then an increasing laugh, and finally they are rolling around on the floor of the hut in hysterics.

"We did it!" shouts Campbell, starting to settle down again.

"I... can't believe it," says Ryan, puffing. "Shall we try some more?"

"Let's have a break and talk about it. We can figure out some experiments. And after dinner we'll see what your gift is capable of." says Campbell.

"Good idea," says Ryan. "I think all this laughing has made me work up an appetite. And my energy levels are slightly drained too."

Ryan stands at the kitchen bench holding a plate of food in one hand and a fork in the other. In between mouthfuls he blurts out ideas of how they can test out his new found gift. Campbell is standing at the sink preparing two cups of tea, making grunts of affirmation in between Ryan's excited sentences. When Ryan is not looking, Campbell reaches into his jacket pocket and

removes a small sachet of white powder and empties its contents into one of the cups. He turns to the middle of the room and gives it to Ryan, taking the other one for himself.

“Peppermint tea,” says Campbell.

“Ahh, thank you,” says Ryan, sipping the tea. “Mmmm, it’s very strong, just the way I like it.”

“Straight out of my herb garden,” says Campbell.

Ryan pulls up a stool and sits close to the bench, Campbell remains standing. “So, what do you think it is?” starts Ryan.

Campbell leans against the bench; his hands spread wide over the surface, he takes a moment to think. “Are you familiar with telekinesis?”

“Yes, I’ve heard my friends talking about it,” replies Ryan.

“Oh good. Well, it looks to me like you have some sort of telekinetic force shield surrounding you. It may be the case that your parapsychological ability allows you to project a... para-skin around your whole body. But we don’t know that yet, and it only seems to work against objects that could cause you physical harm. Handy don’t you think?”

“I like the sound of para-shield better myself. But do you think I have it on all the time?”

“Well, temporarily at least. When I threw the log at you, it was repelled, but your clothes and food never jump away do they? How did it feel when it... you know, did what you did?”

Ryan thinks to himself for a moment. “I don’t recall feeling anything out of the ordinary really. It felt quite normal, although I do remember a small sensation around my head, like someone had placed their hands gently around my skull; it wasn’t uncomfortable at all.”

“Mmm, note that down, it may help us later to reproduce it again.”

“I remember talking to a lady at the Expo a few months ago, just before you and I met. She was a Kirlian photographer. She said my aura was like no other she had ever seen before. Maybe my aura has something to do with it?”

“Quite possibly, quite possibly,” says Campbell. “It might happen to be the case that your aura is the source of your... para-shield; it would explain the lights you’ve been seeing.”

Ryan ponders over this for a short time and drinks his tea.

Cambell becomes serious. "Ryan, I must ask you, have you given any thought to what it might mean if you do have some extraordinary psychic ability? I mean, have you thought about how it will affect your life? What will your family and friends think? Will you even tell them about it?"

Ryan thinks about this very carefully. He places his plate down on the bench.

"You know what they say," says Campbell, "with great power comes great respon—"

"Yes, yes, I know all that. I saw *Spiderman* when I was twelve," says Ryan, almost defensively, suddenly realising the seriousness of his situation. "It's just that I didn't really know up until a few hours ago. I don't know what I'm going to do"

"You couldn't hide it forever, but one things for sure," says Campbell, "someone would find out eventually. You could find yourself in a lot of danger."

"I know, I suppose I..." says Ryan quietly, starting to sway on the stool. He looks up at Campbell. "Will you... help me, Doctor... Ca—"

Ryan's eyes roll back into his head and he collapses unconsciously onto the bench. Campbell raises an eyebrow and a small smile grows on his face.

"Of course I will, Ryan," Campbell says to himself. "Of course I will."

Hannah pulls up alongside the curb in her car and stops outside Ryan's house. She opens the front gate and walks into the front courtyard, the sensor light coming on as she walks closer to the porch.

She steps up to the entrance and rings the doorbell; a short time passes and the front door finally opens. Isabelle greets Hannah with a curious but friendly smile.

"Mrs. Faulkner?" asks Hannah.

"Yes dear, what can I do for you?" says Isabelle.

"Hi, my name's Hannah, I'm a friend of Ryan. I was just wondering if he was home?"

“No, I’m sorry he’s not. He left yesterday afternoon with his astronomy class,” says Isabelle. “He said he was going on an excursion for the weekend.”

“An excursion?” asks Hannah, surprised. “That’s funny, I don’t remember there being an excursion planned; we’re in the same class. Isabelle looks confused, but Hannah continues before she has a chance to reply. “I just thought he might be home with the flu, so I thought I might come and visit him, you know, to cheer him up.”

“He was sick for the last two weeks, and he was in bed for most of that time, but he seemed much better this morning when he left,” explains Isabelle, now leaning against the doorframe.

“I wonder where he has gone?” asks Hannah.

They both stop and think for a moment.

“Why that boy has to go hiding things from me, I don’t know?” says Isabelle, sighing. “He’s always been a little strange at times, but aren’t all young men these days?”

Hannah laughs quietly through her nose.

“Don’t worry about him sweetie, that’s my job,” says Isabelle. “I’m sure he is just out with his friends doing ‘secret men’s business’ that he doesn’t want to tell me about.”

“Mmm, all right, but when he comes home, can you get him to give me a call, he has my number.”

“I will, and thank you for coming around. It’s nice to know Ryan has such caring friends,” says Isabelle.

“Thank you Mrs. Faulkner.” says Hannah, smiling, and starts down the footpath to the gate. “bye-bye for now.”

“Have a nice night, Hannah, I’m sure Ryan will show up soon enough,” says Isabelle, stepping back inside the house and closing the door.

Hannah exits the gate and steps out on the sidewalk. She is a little confused, but eventually shrugs it off and walks around to the driver’s side of her car. She selects her car key from the rest, holding it up into the light of the street lamp. She abruptly stops still; she looks straight ahead into space. An image flashes in her mind and quickly goes again. Hannah’s face sinks into an expression of alarm.

“Ryan!” she whispers fearfully.

When Ryan wakes up again he is lying on a long horizontal chair, his arms and legs are strapped and so is his waist and forehead. The room is bright and soon Campbell moves into his drowsy vision. In the corner of the room sits a machine he has never seen before. Its model name reads 'PsiTransfer M-I'.

"What's happening, Francis?" asks Ryan. "Why I am tied up?"

"It's for your own good, Ryan," says Campbell, in a very different tone from before. "Think of it as a safety precaution."

Campbell places some electrodes over Ryan's head and connects them up to the machine.

"Wha...what are you doing to me?" asks Ryan, becoming increasingly worried and trying to struggle under the tight velcro straps.

"If you just relax, I will explain everything to you," says Campbell.

Ryan stops moving and listens to Campbell.

"Eighteen years ago a met the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life. Her name was Laetitia, she was twenty-five at the time, and she had a very strong psychic talent; I found her with the aid of my own gift. I invited her to stay with me and offered to help her develop her skills under my supervision. She accepted and came to stay with me for a while. A while turned into weeks and then into months, we became quite fond of each other and eventually we married.

"Laetitia had the ability to coerce the minds of other people. The house you have been staying in and my other financial securities are a result of our work together. She would mentally command the bank guards to lay their arms down and remain still, while I would walk into the vault and load the money into large bags. We only needed to do this a few times before we had sufficient funds to live comfortably for the rest of our lives; I had a clear conscience, we never hurt anyone. All was going well for few years. We never needed to rob any more banks after that, but I became aware that Laetitia was planning to kill me, though I didn't know why. Perhaps she became scared and didn't want anyone to know about her gift, including me. Don't

ask me how I knew; it was just intuition, and maybe I am a little clairvoyant too, but I don't want to speculate about that.

"I took it upon myself to take protective measures. So I began administering regular drug doses into her drinks and meals to keep her suggestible to my commands. It was a concoction of my own I learned to make when I was a practicing anesthesiology in a mental hospital. I used it to keep patients temporarily addicted and always coming back for more. This ensured she wouldn't run away or try to kill me. It worked for many months, I only had to give the drug to her once a week and she became obedient. However, she retained a certain degree of free will and eventually she took her own life. So what I said about the lady in the photo was true."

"But you gave her no other choice," says Ryan.

"I did so," yells Campbell, showing a side of him not known previously to Ryan. "She had every chance to live a good life."

"Some life where she would have been drugged up all the time?" states Ryan.

Campbell goes to shout again, but restrains himself. "The drugs were perfectly safe, they had no unhealthy repercussions."

"Well she probably didn't kill herself for no reason," says Ryan.

"She killed herself because she couldn't handle her own power!" yells Campbell, shaking the tall chair Ryan is strapped to.

Ryan is sweating and swallows in fear. He says nothing, but looks straight at Campbell, who calms down again and takes a deep breath.

"So, young man, you can probably see where I'm getting to with all this."

"You want to treat me like Laetitia? Well it won't work; I'll resist the drugs and do you in before they take effect."

"That's not going to happen. I'll keep you here until you are suggestible and addicted. Then I'll start to unravel that mind gift of yours and see if I can make it my own."

"You'll never be able to do that," says Ryan. "You don't even know how."

“Oh that’s where you’re wrong, Ryan. You see, I haven’t told you all about my gift. Not only can I see what you are seeing, but I can also read, as it were, the chemical signals of your brain all the way down to your synapses. It will only be a matter of time before I know how you do what you do.”

“So that’s what you were trying to do with Laetitia. That’s why you kept her under your control. So you could steal her gift,” says Ryan, angrily.

“I wouldn’t say steal, Ryan,” says Campbell, tightening a belt around Ryan’s arm and allowing the pressure to build in his veins. “I would much rather say, *experiment*.”

Campbell steps over to a nearby bench and returns holding a syringe filled with a light yellow liquid, its needle pointing into the air. He moves closer to Ryan on the chair and places the syringe next to his arm, waiting for the veins to show.

“And now Master Faulkner, just try to relax,” says Campbell, calmly, rubbing the skin of Ryan’s arm with an alcohol swab. “This... won’t... hurt... a bit.”

The needle moves ever closer toward Ryan’s arm; he tries to wriggle under the restraints, but it is no use.

Ryan lets out a loud scream of fear and anger.

“NOOOOOOOO!”

Campbell’s eyes are fixed on the veins as the needle pricks the skin’s surface and begins to slide slowly into the blood stream.

Ryan takes in a large gasp of air and continues to yell at the top of his lungs.

Suddenly the straps around his forehead pop off and hit the roof. Seconds later the straps around his feet, arms, and body are flung upward and away.

“Get away from me!” roars Ryan, getting up from the chair swiftly.

Campbell is instantly thrown back across the room, the syringe still in his hand. He collides with the glass cabinet on the wall and all of its contents come crashing to the floor. Campbell slumps to the ground as the glass and other objects of the room fall and cut him.

Ryan jumps up off the long chair and starts running for the door. Campbell lunges out with the syringe and it pierces sharply into Ryan's leg, pushing the liquid into his body; he lets out a cry of pain.

Ryan hobbles out of the room and bends to take the syringe out. He continues running through the house and eventually finds the front door, but it is deadlocked.

Campbell comes stumbling out into the library and starts heading toward Ryan with another loaded syringe in his hand. Ryan quickly darts across the library and out into the back rooms of the house, with Campbell close behind him. Ryan enters the laundry and tries to open the glass door, but it's locked, too; Ryan can hear Campbell approaching fast.

He steps back from the glass sliding door and looks at it intensely; Campbell enters the laundry from behind Ryan and lifts his arm into the air ready to plunge with the loaded syringe. A spherical flash of light erupts outwards from around Ryan's body, smashing the glass door to smithereens and knocking Campbell clean off his feet and slamming him hard against the wall. The clothes dryer and washing machine are crushed in half by the psychic blast.

Ryan jumps through the broken door and runs out into the garden. The night is cold and still. He runs across the empty field as fast as he can, his heart races and his body pumps adrenaline all throughout him, making him move even faster.

"Ryan!" shouts Campbell, from the backyard of the house. "I will find you! You can't run forever!"

Ryan just keeps running and running into the night without any destination. When he finally thinks he has lost Campbell, he slows down and walks. He pants madly for several minutes. Eventually he regains his breath, but his heart continues to beat fast.

Campbell searches the field with his parasensing, but is unable to locate Ryan's mental signature; the psychic blast has weakened him.

“You’ll be back,” yells Campbell into the night. “The drug will see to that,” he says to himself, looking over the field with his physical eyes once more, before returning to the house.

By the light of the stars, Ryan makes out a farmhouse in the distance and begins walking toward it. When he comes closer to the house, he realises it is abandoned and partially ruined. It looks like a good enough place to rest for the night.

He finds the front door unlocked and goes inside. The house is dark and cold, but Ryan soon finds some old rugs and a mattress in one of the rooms and makes a bed for himself.

Before retiring for the evening, Ryan goes to the window and watches for an hour to make sure that Campbell is not following. During that hour, a car’s headlights pass down the highway, but they never return.

When Ryan feels safe enough, he goes and lies on the mattress and makes himself warm under the rugs. He runs his hand over his leg and feels a trace of blood where the syringe went in, but he will have to wait until morning to tend to it.

As Ryan lies on the mattress on his back, he realises the roof above him has a large hole in it, allowing him to see into the clear indigo night sky. It is filled with millions of bright stars and the prominent bulge of the Milky Way, white and misty and stretching across the heavens. A shooting star trails through the sky and Ryan begins to fall to sleep.

Chapter 6

Lake Grace, Western Australia
14th September 2011

The morning light flows softly in through the broken windows of the abandoned house where Ryan sleeps. From the mattress on the floor, his eyes begin to open and look through the hole in the roof to see a perfect blue sky. Ryan's mouth is dry and he craves for water and some food. He rises from the mattress and searches the house for clean water, but fails to find any. He walks outside and looks over the fields around the house. Besides the crow's caws and the pink gallah's screeching, there is a peaceful silence over the land.

Ryan walks around the old wooden verandah and finds a rain tank, which to his surprise contains enough water to quench his thirst. After drinking and washing his face, he notices that his leg is itchy and he remembers the syringe. He goes to the back porch over looking the farm, and slouches, cross-legged with his chin on his hand.

After a few moments of thinking about how he is going to return to Perth, Ryan decides to attempt a reproduction of his parashield. He gets comfortable and begins to meditate. He closes his eyes, clears his mind, and deepens his breath. A small breeze caresses his skin, causing goose bumps to form along his arms and down his back.

When Ryan is quite relaxed he becomes aware of his aura and concentrates on enhancing its sensation. A warm feeling grows from within his abdomen and expands slowly to fill his entire body. He takes in a deeper breath and lets go of his bodily tensions, which results in a pleasant tingling all over the surface of his skin; he smiles.

After Ryan has held this in focus for a while, he attempts to push the sphere of energy beyond the confines of his physical body. At first the sensation increases in vibration and, with a final nudge of willpower, Ryan feels this strange force merging with his aura. His heart beats faster as his excitement rises, but he soon calms himself and stabilizes the integrated awareness.

His eyes open gradually and he beholds his immediate area; his jaw falls open too. All around his body shines a translucent sphere of glittering rainbow colors. He holds his concentration for a substantial amount of time and then begins to expand the field further away from his body. He does this with surprising ease and control, forming a dome over himself. Soon the sphere is pressing up against the roof of the verandah and its supporting poles; Ryan can *feel* them. He wonders why the sphere doesn't expand below the floor.

As Ryan exerts the sphere just a little further, the house begins to crack and crumble. He quickly jumps to his feet and briskly walks out from under the verandah and away from the house. One of the poles has bent in the middle and soon collapses into heap. The rest of the house stays intact and Ryan breathes a sigh of relief.

A moment later the verandah caves in, pulling the roof and the walls down with it into a crashing pile of rubble. Ryan steps backward, still looking at the falling house, and his parashield no longer visible. When the house has finally come to rest, Ryan simply stares at it in shock. He looks around sheepishly, although he knows no one has seen him and then sniggers to himself. A window frame still standing upright falls quietly onto the rubble, completing the demolition with a shattering smash.

Ryan smiles in excitement at the discovery of his parability and its power; suddenly his attention changes direction; he hears a car on the highway in the distance. He turns his head and pricks up his ears, listening carefully; he hurries toward the road.

Ryan arrives at the highway and squats behind a large bush on the shoulder of the road; he waits anxiously. As the car comes over the rise, Ryan can see that it is not Campbell's

vehicle. He steps out onto the road and throws his clenched hand out to his side with his thumb sticking out. The car drives passed him, but eventually slows down and stops a small way up the road. Ryan jumps into a light run to catch up with the car.

"Where you going, mate?" asks the driver, a man in his fifties.

"Perth," replies Ryan.

"Jump on in," says the man.

The car accelerates away. Ryan stares out of the window, relieved to be departing this country town.

A phone rings somewhere in an apartment in Perth.

"Yes?"

"He escaped," says Campbell.

"Fuck. Where is he now?"

"I don't know, he probably made it back to Perth somehow.

"Do you want me to find him and bring him to you?"

"You won't be able to, he'll see it coming and he'll just mindblow you away like he did to me," says Campbell, taking a breath. "We must tread carefully, or he might expose me. However I don't think he will for the time being—he has no proof and no one would believe him anyway."

"Do you want me to do him over?"

"No, not yet. I want to see if we can still control him with the suggestibility drugs," says Campbell.

"Will he come back for more?"

"He should have already returned if he was feeling the effects—he must have resisted them somehow," says Campbell.

"What about a larger dose?"

"Can you do it?" says Campbell.

"Should be able to."

"Remember, once the drugs kick in, test his parability and send him to me. It's no use if I can't control him—he'd soon enough mindsplat me all over the place and most likely you too," says Campbell. "Until then I will stay away in case he has told his fucking girlfriend and she parasenses me when I'm close!"

"I wouldn't mind taking that little princess myself."

“Forget her. If she mindsenses me the whole plan is over and my years of waiting will be for nothing!” Campbell snaps.

“I’ll get him for you, don’t you worry about that. You just figure out a way to extract his braingame and give a copy to me.”

A pause occurs between them.

“I was so close,” says Campbell.

“How did he get away?”

“He mindwacked me,” says Campbell annoyed.

“What if I can’t control him?”

“The drugs I’m sending you should work—”

“He might suspect me. How will I give them to him?”

“I’ve already thought about that,” says Campbell. “This batch is well disguised; he won’t notice anything. You’ll know how to administer it when you see the dose. However, if they happen to fail... we will have to take him out.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“If you have to grab him, *be careful*; I think it works whenever he is under stress. But he might not be aware yet of how it actually works... My God he packed a punch, I’m still sore,” says Campbell.

“We could always just grab him while he sleeps?”

“No, he’s too unpredictable,” says Campbell, “and plus, I don’t want another Laetitia incident; and Ryan is even stronger than her.”

“There’s always *his* girlfriend.”

“Possibly,” says Campbell, “but let’s see if we can get him first and then we’ll consider going after her.”

“I’ll call you when it’s done.”

“Good,” says Campbell.

The phone clicks as it hangs up.

That afternoon, when Ryan arrives home, he sneaks in the back door, careful not to make too much noise. Once inside he goes through the kitchen and into the hallway. Just as he is climbing up the stairs to his room, his mother appears at the bottom of the hallway.

“Hi matey, how was the excursion?” asks Isabelle.

Ryan stops half way up the stairs and turns around to face his mother.

“Hi mum, I didn’t think anyone was home. The excursion was really boring. I’m gonna go have a shower. I’ll tell you about it another time.”

“Where’s your bag?” asks Isabelle.

“Ahh... I left it at my friend’s house, after we came back. I’m going to get it tomorrow.”

“A girl by the name of Hannah came around on Saturday,” says Isabelle.

“Really, what did she want?” asks Ryan.

“Oh, she just came around to see how you were feeling. She asked if you could call her. She was really disappointed that she missed the excursion,” says Isabelle, sarcastically.

Ryan cringes in embarrassment as he is found out.

“Look, I don’t mind if you can’t tell me what you get up to, but what I don’t want in this house is lies,” says Isabelle sternly. “We should be able to trust each other, OK?”

“OK. Sorry, Mum,” says Ryan. “It’s just that—”

“It’s OK, you don’t have to explain, just be honest with me from now on,” says Isabelle.

Ryan smiles appreciatively and continues up the stairs to his room. He closes the door behind him and breathes a big sigh of relief. He ponders for a brief moment.

“Hannah.”

Perth

18th October 2011

The following month Ryan attends university and socializes with his friends without bringing any undue attention to himself. While his thoughts are centered on the knowledge of his parability and his experience with Doctor Campbell, Ryan suffers from internal angst. He feels the need to talk with someone about his parapsychological talent, but he is not

confident enough that he will be taken seriously. He is also haunted by Campbell and what he should do about him. Ryan wonders whether reporting Campbell to the authorities would be the smart thing to do or if he can just sit it out in hope that the fear will pass.

When Ryan eventually meets up with Hannah again, she asks him where he has been all this time. Ryan replies with a vague account of the truth: that he had gone to visit a friend in the country and that his mother must have got the message wrong. Hannah buys this story, but underneath she feels that Ryan is hiding something. She feels concerned about him, and hints that it is all right if he wants to talk about his worries. However, Hannah also holds a secret within herself too: she may have a parability, but chooses not to tell anyone about it at this time, not even Ryan.

Ryan does not attempt to use his parashield for the next few weeks because he is afraid that Campbell will find him using his parasensing skills. In the meantime Ryan tries to live an ordinary life, despite the fact that he knows he will need to address his special gift in the near future, whether through his own choice or by the pressure of circumstances beyond his control.

Northbridge buzzes with a hype of energy and bright colours. Big searchlights beam off the roofs into the cityscape of Perth's CBD. Thousands of young adults fill the streets as they move from pub to nightclub in a drunken state of happiness. Groups of people congregate on every street corner waiting for friends to arrive. Beside them stand promotional girls wearing mini shorts and tight bikinis, who pass out flyers of the various clubs in the area. The traffic in the main street crawls along down the center of the action; young men hang out of their windows shouting stupidities into the air, while car stereos add to low range frequencies being pumped out from the nightclub speakers.

The young woman and men dress stylishly for the occasion in their trendy new cosmopolitan street wear. The Nyungar patrol walks confidently along the side path, talking with the

citizens and keeping a vigil over the public as they go. Two police officers ride on horseback authoritatively through the mess of plastic water bottles and discarded club pamphlets.

A busker sits on a milk crate and plays her acoustic guitar, while people passing by throw their coins into the case lying in front of her on the brick paving. While she sings, a pair of very drunk middle-aged men with their shirts hanging out stand next to her. Their wives stand close behind, wearing their husbands evening jackets after a meal at a local restaurant, and pretending to be patient.

Midnight arrives, bringing with it still stranger fashions and attitudes. Occasionally arguments break out and erupt into sloppy street fights, only to be broken up by the police.

Inside Perth's largest nightclub, Metropolis, the music is loud and thumping. The air is saturated with cigarette smoke and artificial vapors from the steam machines. Intelligent lights and lasers wipe and slice through the smoke-laden air creating intense visual effects. Bodies move in ecstatic rhythms upon the multi level balconies, while down below, on the main dance floor, hundreds more people are packed together tightly, throwing their arms in the air and stomping their feet in time with the beat. The conductor stands on the stage wielding the members of the electronic orchestra in a mesmerizing blend of musical complexity and attunement. His arms move at fast and commanding lengths, cueing the next spontaneous creative surge of energy into the piece. The crowd cheers in appreciation as the music builds in tension, before finally resolving itself into a long stretch of auditory satisfaction and delightful vibrations.

Ryan, Curtis, and Cameron stand at the bar on the lower floor overlooking the dance arena, bobbing their heads to the beat. With drinks in their hands, they perv at the young women wearing skimpy clothes barely covering the curve of their buttocks and tight tops which reveal the rise and fall of their breasts.

The three young men wear tight dark evening suits, which expose their youthful, muscular physiques.

“Do you want another spliff, Ryan?” asks Cameron, leaning over to Ryan’s ear.

“Yeah, that’d be good,” replies Ryan.

Cameron smiles and motions silently that he will organize something. “I’ll ask Curtis what he thinks.”

“Hey, Curtis,” calls Cameron, “Do we have anymore J’s?”

Curtis checks his jacket pockets.

“Nah, I’m all out. Where the hell is Patrick?” asks Curtis. “He’s got some more.”

“I’ll go outside and call him,” says Cameron.

Cameron walks through the dense crowd and up a flight of stairs into the main entrance to the club. He dials Patrick’s number on his cell phone and waits for him to pick up. “Patrick, can you meet us at the main bar on the first floor? We need another few spliffs...All right, see ya then,” says Cameron, and ends the call.

Cameron returns to the main bar, where Ryan and Curtis are now dancing.

“Well?” calls Curtis.

“He’ll be here in a moment,” says Cameron and leans against the bar to wait.

Five minutes later Patrick appears through the crowd. The four of them huddle by the bar discretely.

Patrick reaches into his pocket and produces two joints.

“Excellent!” claims Cameron, and takes one from Patrick’s open hand.

“I need another drink,” says Curtis.

Ryan takes a final swig from his drink and puts it down on the bar.

“You want another one too, Ryan?” shouts Curtis.

“Yeah sure,” Ryan shouts back.

“Cam,” shouts Curtis, gesturing to him if he wants another drink.

Cameron jiggles his bottle and then nods affirmatively. Curtis turns around to the bar staff and orders the next round of drinks. Cameron lights up his joint and has a few drags.

"This one is especially for you, Ryan," says Patrick, passing him the second joint.

Ryan inspects it first and soon lights it up. He takes a big drag and exhales the smoke.

"It's good stuff," says Ryan, promptly coughing a few times.

Curtis returns to the group and hands Ryan and Cameron their drinks.

Patrick winks at Ryan, who smiles back in appreciation.

"Your night should start loosening up soon enough," says Patrick, "but for now—let's groove!"

Over the next hour the four young men dance among the crowd. Cameron and Curtis indicate their high feelings toward each other and then their mates with big hugs and large smiles.

Shortly after, Ryan starts to feel the drug's effects too and smiles freely while he dances.

A young woman approaches Cameron and starts dancing close to him. He responds with smooth flirtatiousness and soon they are kissing passionately. She leads him off into the nightclub and Ryan, Patrick and Curtis remain on the dance floor.

"Lucky bastard," yells Patrick.

"Hey, Ryan," shouts Curtis, pointing across the dance floor. Ryan turns and sees a young woman dancing a few feet away. She is one of the most desirable women in the whole nightclub and appears to be without a partner; she looks at Ryan seductively and then turns away.

Ryan turns back to Curtis showing an expression of awe and arousal.

"Did you see that! She was checkin' you out," says Curtis.

"I know, I know," replies Ryan, excitedly.

"Why don't you go dance with her," says Curtis.

Ryan hesitates and bites his bottom lip, umming and ahing.

"If you don't, I will," says Patrick, provocatively.

"Go dance with her, Ryan," says Curtis.

A vacant expression moves across Ryan's face and he turns toward the girl. Next, he is struggling through the masses of moving bodies toward the attractive young woman. When he

becomes close enough he places his hands onto her waist and starts moving his hips in time with her. She accepts Ryan's touch for a while, but soon a young man a few years older and built bigger than Ryan, appears from behind and taps him on the shoulder. Ryan ignores him and continues dancing with the girl, sliding his hand up and down her toned body.

The man grabs Ryan by the shoulder and pulls him around. "Hey, piss off!" he shouts.

"Fuck off, mate, go find another one," shouts Ryan.

The man pushes Ryan down into the crowd and stands over him. He waits for Ryan to get up, standing in a boxer's pose with his fists clenched and ready.

Ryan climbs to his feet quickly and the man throws a punch at him. An invisible force suddenly pushes back the crowd around Ryan, and the man's fist collides with the parashield. Ryan quickly throws a right punch into the man's solar plexus. He falls down winded, his mouth open wide more with surprise than pain. The man gets up and takes another swing at Ryan, only to be stopped again in mid air close to Ryan's face.

The man cradles his fist in agony and stares at Ryan aggressively, but also very confused.

Ryan hesitates not a moment more and extends the palm of his right hand into the base of the man's nose. Blood spurts out in a river of string-like tentacles and the man falls into the crowd behind him. The young woman goes to the assistance of her boyfriend, while yelling angrily at Ryan.

The bouncers have spotted the fight and are fast approaching the area. Curtis and Patrick arrive at Ryan's side and grab each of his arms.

"We gotta get out of here," shouts Curtis, urgently.

Ryan stares down at the man, shocked at the violence of which he is capable.

"I'm so sorry," Ryan says to the man, who sits on the floor holding his nose, while his girlfriend crouches next to him; the crowd has moved back to make some space for them.

Curtis pulls on Ryan's arm, and shouts, "Let's go."

Curtis and Ryan walk quickly through the crowd and up the stairs to the lobby; they lose Patrick on the way. Ryan and Curtis are meters away from the exit doors when four muscular bouncers block the way.

“Hold it right there,” one of them orders.

Ryan looks at the bouncers, who walk toward him and Curtis; his whole body surges with energy ready to be expelled through his parashield.

“We’re going to have to run through them,” says Ryan.

“Are you sure we can do that?” asks Curtis.

“Trust me,” says Ryan, focusing his thoughts and closing his eyes.

Ryan feels his parashield expand around him and then even further to encompass Curtis as well.

“Now!” shouts Ryan.

As Ryan and Curtis charge forward, the parashield propels the bouncers down onto the floor, allowing Ryan and Curtis to escape from the nightclub. They continue running down the street outside and cross the park into the city. They stop when they reach the Entertainment Center parking lot and catch their breath.

“What happened back there?” asks Curtis, puffing.

“I can’t believe I punched that guy,” says Ryan.

“You must have really wanted that girl,” says Curtis, leaning over a car with one hand on the bonnet and the other on his waist.

“Not really,” says Ryan, in between breaths. “I just felt strangely drawn to her like I never—”

“Patrick!” calls Curtis. “Where did you get to?”

“I went another way,” says Patrick. “What about you two?”

“We were almost busted, but we ended up charging straight through the bouncers,” says Curtis. “I can’t believe we got through them.”

“Oh, man, my head’s still racing,” says Patrick. “How are you feeling Ryan?”

“I’m still firing, but wish I hadn’t punched that guy,” says Ryan, sitting down on the pavement.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have had that other joint?” says Curtis.

“Marijuana doesn’t make you violent, Curtis,” says Patrick defensively.

“Well something made Ryan turn into the incredible hulk,” says Curtis.

“Too bad about the girl though, she was damn hot,” says Patrick, “although I would have never had the guts to punch out her boyfriend—he was huge.”

“Yeah, Ryan, you the man!” says Curtis.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either,” says Ryan.

The phone on Campbell’s desk rings for half a minute before he walks in from the garden and picks up the handset.

“Good morning, Dr. Campbell, speaking.”

“It’s me.”

“What happened?” asks Campbell.

“He took it and responded to my commands, but it didn’t last long.”

“Christ,” curses Campbell. “Where is he now?”

“Probably at home.”

“Do you think he suspects anything?” asks Campbell.

“No. You were right about his power though. He is strong and I think he knows how to use it too.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” curses Campbell. “This is getting tricky.”

“I think we need to reconsider his girlfriend.”

“You and his fucking girlfriend,” Campbell snaps.

“I wasn’t talking about that, I meant we could use her as bait.”

“Mmm. No, it’s too late for that,” says Campbell. “She’d still see us coming and he would eventually rescue her; we wouldn’t stand a chance against him.”

“She might still be ignorant?”

“I’m not game enough to take that chance,” says Campbell, picking up the framed photo of Laetitia from his desk. “One parabitche was enough, thanks. You know what to do, but don’t do it straight away. Wait until things have died down a little. He might suspect something.”

“I’ll call you when everything is ready.”

“OK.” Campbell sighs heavily and hangs up the phone.

Campbell calmly places the photo frame down flat on the desk and a moment later slams his fist through its glass covering.

Chapter 7

Fremantle, Western Australia

4th November 2011

“...was stolen from Psi Complex in Fremantle last night. The psychological laboratories have a reputable past, both with their innovative developments in the psychological industry and in professional counseling services. Security guards said they did not hear or see anything out of the ordinary. Dr. Tampalini, Director of the facility...”

“Morning, Ryan,” says Isabelle, walking into the kitchen.

“Hi, Mum,” Ryan replies, remaining focused to the television screen.

“...very surprised about the theft... This is the first case of its kind in the twenty years that I have been at the Psi laboratories. The equipment in question is still in a prototype stage, I don’t know why anyone would have wanted them, especially when we have much more valuable machinery in the labs.”

Isabelle flicks the kettle on and prepares herself a cup of coffee. Ryan sits at the table wearing his pajamas. He holds a small plate in his left hand and slowly bites a piece of toast in the other.

“Police say the thieves must have organised the theft months, or even years in advance. The time needed to bypass the electronic security systems for the building requires...”

“You have any classes on today?” asks Isabelle.

“No,” replies Ryan.

“...the employees with access to the areas, but most of them have been working there for many years. Dr. Tampalini said the theft will not hinder the company’s operations in any way; he also expressed his confidence in his employees; he firmly believes it was not an inside...”

“You all right?” asks Isabelle.

Ryan mumbles affirmatively, but remains engaged by the news report.

“...have information regarding the theft to contact their local police immediately.”

“Ryan?”

“...and to finish this morning’s news, here are some of the latest images taken by the SHASA² telescope of the solar system’s neighboring planets.”

“Ryan!”

The television abruptly switches off. Isabelle stands at the kitchen bench holding the remote control.

“Hey! Are you listening to me?”

“What? I was watching that!” says Ryan, irritated.

“Excuse me. That’s no way to talk to your Mother,” says Isabelle, crossly.

“I’m sorry, Mum.”

“You’ve been acting very funny lately. Is there anything wrong?”

“Was that meant to be a compliment?” says Ryan, sarcastically, “because you know, us young adults need all the encouragement we can get.” Ryan rises from the chair and returns his plate to the sink.

“Don’t get smart with me, young man,” says Isabelle.

Ryan puts the honey and bread back into the pantry.

“You just haven’t been your normal self for a while,” says Isabelle, “and I’m just a little worried, that’s all.”

“I’m all right!” says Ryan, irritated, and putting the margarine back into the fridge.

Ryan sighs and walks over to his Mother and puts his arms around her.

² Southern Hemisphere Astronomy and Space Association

“Look, Mum,” he starts quietly, “I’m fine, really. You’re just being a nervous nanna. If I’m stressed, it’s probably just over my exams. They start in two weeks.”

“All right,” says Isabelle. “I believe you. But I wish you would com-mun-i-cate a bit more with me. I feel like you’re distancing yourself from me.”

Ryan kisses her on the cheek and smiles warmly.

“It’s just that University has been a big change for me. I’m still adjusting. I’ve had to deal with a few... new things this year. I’m sorry if I have been a bit reserved.”

“You don’t talk to me as much as you used to,” says Isabelle.

“I know. Hey, why don’t we go down to a café this afternoon and we can have good chat. God knows we need one, I’ll buy you a milkshake,” says Ryan.

“That would be nice,” says Isabelle. “Thank you.”

“Anyway, I’ve got to get ready for the day. I’m going to meet a friend at ten,” says Ryan, “but I’ll be back around one and we can go then.”

Ryan steps off the bus and onto the sidewalk. The train station is behind him and buses are arriving and leaving the depot. He is wearing shorts, t-shirt and sandals on this fine Mediterranean day. The bus drives away down South Terrace; there are few other cars on the road. Ryan begins walking along the café strip. The smell of coffee and newly baked bread drifts pleasantly through the morning air, carried along by the delicate sea breeze. The streets of Fremantle play host to a variety of people: some walk their dogs while others rest at the café tables after their morning cycle. Tourists and backpackers cruise the streets and parks, admiring the colonial architecture and delighting in the assortment of shops.

Ryan enters the markets and heads toward the fruit and vegetable stands. Situated at the entrance to the market sits a

Nyungar³ man playing the didjeridu⁴ and tapping a clapping stick on the brick paving. The raw sounds fill the large old shed with fervent vibrations; a pedestrian throws a handful of coins onto the sheet in front of the musician. Ryan purchases a pink lady apple and a navel orange and exits the market. He continues walking through the side streets and alleyways of Fremantle. A man is drawing elaborate works of art onto the brick paving.

In an open-air mall, two old men sit on a bench conversing in Italian under one of the many trees running through the middle of the mall. A waiter hurries on by on his way to work, still tying his apparel around his waist. A small group of seagulls glide through the sky and land next to a young girl, who eats her hot chips with satisfaction. She occasionally throws a chip to the birds, which fight over it, screaming at each other.

Opposite the markets stands the Fremantle Technical School, a primarily tall red brick colonial structure. Next to it is the Psi Complex, a limestone building with large works of art decorating the entrance. Its business name *PsiCom* is engraved in sophisticated lettering beside the glass doors. The police are still present within the street, talking to people and shop owners. Ryan walks up the small steps to the entrance and goes inside.

“Good morning, welcome to PsiCom, Tabitha speaking.”

The young woman sits behind the large marble desk in the lobby. She is wearing trendy new office clothes and her hair is styled to compliment her streamline phone headset. “I’ll put you through to one of our consultants,” she continues, pressing a button on the keyboard.

A holographic screen is mounted behind the secretary; it displays the PsiCom logo emblazoned over impressive graphics.

³ The Nyungar were the original custodians of the southwest part of Western Australia, until white European settlers invaded Australia in 1788.

⁴ A long cylindrical wood instrument

“Good morning,” says Tabitha, now addressing Ryan, “how can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Cameron First; my name is Ryan, I’m a friend of his.”

“I’ll let him know you’re here, Ryan,” replies the secretary. “Please have a seat.”

The waiting area is decked out with purple ergonomic couches and lime green walls. There are no magazine piles; instead each couch seat has its own LCD screen on a movable arm, which is neatly attached to the wall. Another client is already sitting. She checks her email and then the news about the PsiCom break in. On the wall in front of Ryan there is a painting of two humans intertwined in a mangled dance of heated passion. The colors attract Ryan’s eyes, but he has trouble understanding the artists intention. On another wall hangs a print of the painting entitled *DNA and the Planets*. This one holds more meaning for Ryan and he stares at it for a long time.

“Hey, Ryan,” calls Cameron, breaking Ryan’s stare as he enters into the lobby from a well-disguised doorway.

“Hey, Cam, how’s *it* all going around here?” says Ryan, indicating the police outside.

“Don’t ask, everybody’s freakin’ out,” says Cameron.

“But the news report showed your boss and he said everything was cool,” says Ryan.

Cameron gestures discretely for Ryan to follow and leads him through the hidden doorway that he previously entered. The door closes automatically behind them with a small soft click.

“Listen,” says Cameron, hushed, “he just said that because he didn’t want the public to know how important those machines actually were.”

“What do you mean?” asks Ryan.

They both start walking down the corridor through the inner administrative offices of the building. Counselors and clerks move back and forth from room to room, and the occasional lab

worker wearing a long white coat walks by. The workplace appears to be operating smoothly and quietly.

"I'm not meant to talk about it to non-employees, but since I know you, I'll let you know a few secrets," says Cameron.

They enter Cameron's office and he closes the door.

"Have a seat, mate," says Cameron, who walks around to his chair behind a medium sized desk and sits down too.

"I am gonna be so glad to finish my work experience with this place in about month. It's way too stressful here. Especially with all the secrecy," says Cameron.

"But I thought PsiCom had a good reputation," says Ryan, looking around the office.

There are a few books in shelves and science posters on the wall. The window behind Cameron looks out over a small inner courtyard filled with small shrubs and sitting benches. An employee is out having a cigarette break.

"Basically PsiCom is a company that provides new technology to assist with the treatment of mental illnesses and general counseling matters, but everyone knows that," says Cameron. "However, the machines that were stolen are the first of their kind. They enable the patient's mind to become re-programmable in a sense. It's highly sensitive stuff, and that's why they don't want anyone to know how dangerous something like that could be in the wrong hands."

"They can re-program minds now? Isn't that getting into political and moral ethics?" asks Ryan.

"Kind of, but, these machines don't just allow you to plug someone in and *ta-daa*, you can control their mind, it's not that good. Basically, the counselor can engage better with the patient because they can identify where the problems originate or where a solution lies within the patient's head. They can act as a guide for the patients to make the voluntary decision to foster a connection in the mind and hence improve psychological treatment," explains Cameron.

"I see," says Ryan.

"The patient is always in control—there is no way that a counselor could force patients to do something against their will," says Cameron. "The counselor is merely a tour guide.

You can follow them through the gallery of your own mind, but they can't make you buy the paintings. Get it?"

Ryan nods his head slowly.

"But like I said," continues Cameron, "I can't wait to get out of here. I don't want to work in a place that is always having to hush things up. I want to be involved with an honest and open company, and that's why I want to start my own counseling rooms someday so I can run it my own way."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," says Ryan. "I don't like to bottle things up either. And that's part of the reason I came to see you today."

"You need someone to talk to?" asks Cameron.

"Yeah... kind of."

"I can get you an appointment with one of the counselors if you feel uncomfortable talking to me?" says Cameron.

"Actually I would be more comfortable talking with you, Cam. I don't think I want to let too many people know what it is I have to say, even though I know they would keep things confidential. In a place like this, I'm not so sure that they could help themselves."

"What are you getting at, Ryan?" asks Cameron.

"You know how we went to the Conscious Living Expo back at the start of the semester?" starts Ryan.

Cameron makes an affirmative grunt.

"And you know how I went to that Kirlian photographer and then the hypnotist?" continues Ryan. "I discovered something about myself that—" Ryan sighs, anxious to find the right words and the courage to tell Cameron his secret.

"It's all right, you can tell me, mate," says Cameron, reassuringly. "Just relax and take your time."

"Maybe it would be easier if I showed you instead," says Ryan.

"Show me what?" asks Cameron.

"I know this is going to sound strange, but I want you to trust me on this one," says Ryan. "I want you... to throw something at me."

Cameron raises an eyebrow.

"I have been asked to do some strange things for patients before, but this one is new," says Cameron, smiling.

"Please, can you just do it, and then you'll see what I mean," says Ryan.

"All right, but if you get hurt it's your own fault," says Cameron, looking over his desk for an object. "How about the calculator?"

"That will do," says Ryan, who rises out of his chair and stands across the room from Cameron.

"Are you sure about this?" asks Cameron.

Ryan shakes his head and stares seriously back at Cameron.

"OK," Cameron says slowly, who raises his arm back over his head with the calculator in his hand. He hesitates for a brief second and then throws his arm forward and releases the calculator. Before Cameron has time to blink the calculator stops a foot from Ryan's face and falls to the floor.

Cameron stares at the calculator lying face down. When he looks back up, Ryan is smiling at him sheepishly.

"So what do you think doc?" says Ryan. "Nothing a bit of R&R can't fix?"

Cameron looks at Ryan flabbergasted and starts to make nasal noises in response. "Did that really just happen?"

Ryan shakes his head.

"How long have you—oh, since the Expo," says Cameron, finally catching on. Ryan shakes his head again. "And you can do it at will?" Ryan continues to shake his head, but with exaggerated movements. "This is truly amazing," says Cameron. "I can't believe it."

"I'm going to stop shaking my head now, Cam," says Ryan.

"Oh sorry, I've just never seen this kind of thing before. I mean we've had some experiments in the labs for telepathy, but nothing ever as genuine as this," says Cameron. "You are a very rare individual, Ryan. But I want you to know, besides my poor attempt to counsel you—"

"It's OK, Cameron, I understand how you must feel," says Ryan, "but I needed to tell someone that I trust, someone who can at least help me keep my feet on the ground."

“Thank you for choosing me, I’m honored,” says Cameron, “but seriously, you can trust me not to tell anyone, you can tell me anything. I see what you mean now about not wanting to talk to just *anyone* here, they might have started experimenting on you. Where would your secret be then? Out on the bloody street with the news crew no doubt.”

Ryan sits again and frowns.

“I’m sorry, Ryan, I don’t mean to scare you like that,” says Cameron.

“I don’t think I could get used to everyone wanting to treat me as an experiment or some kind of freak show,” says Ryan.

“I understand,” says Cameron. “So what are you going to do about it, now that you have this special gift; what *do* you call it anyway?”

“A parashield,” says Ryan, “as in a parapsychological ability to create a force shield around my whole body.”

“Your whole body. Wow. It’s not everyday one of your mates has a psychic power. Have you had much chance to use it?” asks Cameron.

“I know that I can expand and contract it, but I also know that it only works when I am physically threatened, like if someone throws something at me,” says Ryan.

They both chuckle.

“It doesn’t work if I am just sitting down like I am now; otherwise, everything would be really hard to do. Imagine trying to move around with every object always being pushed out of reach.”

“What about side effects?” asks Cameron.

“I haven’t noticed anything harmful yet, but I do feel low on energy when I have used it over long periods, or if I really need to shield myself from something physically very strong,” explains Ryan.

“When have you needed to use it so far?” asks Cameron.

“Um... I’d rather not talk about that right now, but I have done some experiments myself. I was able to expand the parashield two or three meters around me. I was able to push over an old house,” says Ryan.

“You pushed over a house?” whispers Cameron,

Ryan shakes his head.

“So your para... shield as you call it, is it similar to telekinetics?” asks Cameron.

“I think so, but my meeting with the Kirlian photographer at the Expo leads me to think that it has something to do with my aura and is not like normal telekinesis, where you can move things with the mind. This is different. And another thing, I believe I have been able to do it since birth. I keep getting these strange memories that come with the same feeling I get when I use the parashield. They were confirmed when I was regressed by the hypnotist at the Expo.

“So you think you have had this gift all this time and didn’t know about it?” says Cameron. “But certain memories have triggered it off?”

“And other things too,” says Ryan. “Let’s just say this isn’t the first time someone has thrown something at me.”

They both smile.

“Do you know how it *really* works?” asks Cameron.

“You mean, could I teach others how to do it? No. I don’t know how it came about. Probably just born with it? I don’t see myself using it on a daily basis either. What’s the point in having psychic powers if they don’t have a practical use?”

“It’s funny isn’t it,” says Cameron.

“What is?” asks Ryan.

“That we live in an age where our society accepts technological advancements without a second thought, but is unable to believe that the human mind could be capable of making even the fastest processor look like a calculator,” says Cameron, pointing to one on the floor.

“Perhaps one day humans will have to make new laws when computer technology can produce the things parapsychologists can only dream about,” says Ryan.

“You’re right, Ryan, and maybe then you and others, if there are any, will not have to hide their natural talents like you feel you need to now.”

“I wonder if there are others like me,” asks Ryan.

“Who knows?” says Cameron.

They both sit in thought about this for a moment.

"Listen, Ryan, I just remembered I know someone who might be able to help you," says Cameron, getting up from his chair and making for the door. "If you just wait here, I'll and make a quick phone call and see if we can make an appointment to go and see him? What do you think?"

"Wait a second, Cam, I'm not sure I want to do that just yet."

"Are you sure? This guy could really help, and you can trust him too. I've done a lot of work with him, and he's been like a father to me."

Ryan hesitates while he thinks about his answer. "I just feel uncomfortable; I'm very afraid, Cam."

"Why don't I go call my friend and ask him what he thinks; get his advice before telling him about you? I'll only tell him about the parashield; maybe he's heard of it before."

"Yeah, OK, but only if you don't mention who I am," says Ryan.

"I promise," replies Cameron, opening the office door. "I'll just be a moment, they haven't given me a telephone in here yet."

Cameron exits the room and Ryan remains seated awkwardly on the chair. He turns back around and faces forward. He looks down at the calculator and picks it up, and then puts it back on the table.

Cameron lifts the telephone handset and dials the number. It starts to ring.

"Hello?" answers a man.

"Hi, it's Cameron, you'll never guess who I have with me right now."

"Ryan?" asks the man.

"He's been confiding in me regarding his parashield," says Cameron.

"Did he show you?"

"Yes. What do you want me to do?" asks Cameron.

"Continue with the plans, but give it about a month."

“All right, I’ll speak to you later,” says Cameron, and hangs up the phone.

Cameron enters the office again, Ryan is standing by the window looking out into the small courtyard.

“I spoke to the guy and he said that he has never heard of it before, but recommended a few places you could go to if you wanted to be around like minded people,” says Cameron.

“OK, thanks, Cam,” says Ryan.

“No worries, mate,” says Cameron. “Well, I hate to kick you out, Ryan, but I must get back to work.”

“That’s fine, I feel a lot better now that I have spoken to someone about it,” says Ryan, moving toward the door.

“If you want to chat some more, just give me a buzz and we can make an appointment or go and see some of the groups that my friend recommended,” says Cameron.

“Thanks, Cameron, I really appreciate it. You’re a good friend,” says Ryan, shaking Cameron’s hand.

“Sure thing, mate,” says Cameron. “Come on, I’ll show you out.”

Ryan and Cameron walk back down the corridor and out into the lobby.

“I’m glad you came by, Ryan. You have strengthened my confidence to establish my own rooms. I think if I can relate to someone with a situation like yours,” says Cameron discretely, “then I can probably do anything.”

“You’re welcome,” says Ryan. “Oh by the way, before I go, I meant to ask you something else.”

“Yeah, what is it?” asks Cameron.

“I haven’t seen Patrick and Curtis at university for about three weeks. I was wondering if you’ve heard from them.”

“Hmm. That’s strange; those two are not the kind to just skip class for no reason. They are really enthusiastic about their studies. A bit of a mystery, but I’m sure they will turn up eventually.”

“All right then, I’ll see you later, Cam, and thanks again.”

“No worries, mate,” you have a good day, and take care of yourself.”

“See ya,” says Ryan, who exits the glass doors of PsiCom and wanders back out onto the street.

It is now close to midday. Ryan eats his orange and apple while he walks along the sidewalk, but still feels hungry. He decides to find a place to eat along the café strip. There are more people in the street now, and several cars and buses pass by slowly along the road. The cafés and restaurants are starting to fill with the daily dose of tourist diners and office workers out for lunch. Ryan walks inside *Madonna's*, one of the many Italian pizza parlors lining the popular Fremantle terrace. He considers the menu and finally orders a Margarita pizza⁵. He goes and sits at one of the outside tables on the street side. Within a few minutes Ryan is sun drunk and begins to snooze at the table.

“I was hoping I would catch up with you sooner or later,” comes a young woman’s voice.

Ryan wakes from his daze and looks up to see someone standing opposite him across the table, her face silhouetted by the sun. Ryan places his hand over his forehead to block out the glare.

“Hannah, hi,” says Ryan.

“It’s good to see you, Ryan. I was wondering if you were ever gonna speak to me again,” says Hannah, provocatively. “Mind if I join you?”

“Please do,” Ryan replies, smiling.

“Look I’m really sorry about—”

“Don’t apologise,” interrupts Hannah. “I’ve been pretty busy with exams coming up and everything. I guess you must be too.”

“So how have you been?”

“Fine. Uni is just great when your only friend doesn’t have the time to see you,” says Hannah, in a cheeky tone.

⁵ A basic pizza comprising of pita bread, olive oil, tomatoes, shredded mozzarella cheese, and basil leaves

“Ha, Ha. Enough,” says Ryan. “What brings you to Freo today?”

“Well, I didn’t want to spend such a nice day inside studying, did I?” says Hannah. “So I thought I would come and see what was happening at the markets, and maybe catch up with a few friends.”

A waiter arrives with the pizza. Ryan and Hannah both order a drink and the waiter runs off again.

“Aren’t I lucky then. I’m glad you came,” says Ryan. “Would you like to share this pizza with me?”

“Why thank you, I will,” replies Hannah, sitting down at the table.

Ryan and Hannah take a slice of pizza at the same time.

An image flashes into Hannah’s mind. It is the same as before: A man standing before her surrounded by a colorful field of light. Then it is gone.

“So, Ryan,” Hannah starts, “how did you do on your last essays?”

“Oh, I received two credits and one distinction,” replies Ryan. “And you?”

Hannah’s mind is filled with a stronger picture. The face is becoming clearer, and the intensity of the feeling it brings is rising.

“Umm... I did all right,” she says, “but not as good as I would have liked.”

“Oh that’s too bad,” says Ryan, taking another bite of the pizza. “So do you have any plans for the summer holidays?”

“My family and I are going down south to Busselton. We are staying at the—”

The image is quite clear now in Hannah’s mind. She can see who it is. The light surrounding the person mystifies her.

“Where are you staying?” asks Ryan. “Hannah?”

“I’m sorry, I... um... oh, at the Abbey Beach Resort,” says Hannah.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Yeah, maybe it’s all this sun?” replies Hannah.

“I know, it does that to you after a while.”

The waiter returns with their drinks and departs again.

“Look, Ryan, there’s something I need to tell you,” says Hannah.

“Sure. What is it?” asks Ryan.

“I’m not sure how to tell you this, but... um... do you remember when we were at Boulder Rock on the astronomy excursion and the things we talked about?” asks Hannah.

“Yeah, I think so. You mean all that talk about space travel and stuff,” says Ryan.

“Um, yeah, and the other stuff too,” says Hannah, trying to hint at something.

“What other stuff,” says Ryan, now aware that Hannah is referring to their conversation about parapsychological matters.

“I’ve been getting these strange feelings lately. I’ve been getting them for a while now. They seem to have a connection with someone I know.”

Ryan sips some of his drink to ease the tension between them. “What are these feelings like?” asks Ryan, trying to remain natural.

“They seem to occur whenever I am around you.”

Ryan chokes on his drink. “Around me?” asks Ryan, recovering from a cough.

“Yeah,” says Hannah, “but there is something different about these feelings.”

Ryan looks away and tries to appear comfortable, but he is obviously nervous.

Hannah says, “Oh please don’t think that I am coming onto to you. It’s not that I don’t like you, I do, but—” There is an awkward silence between them. “I thought that maybe you would know what I am talking about. You seemed to know more about these kind of things than me.”

“Hey, Hannah, look, I just remembered I promised my Mum I would go for coffee with her. Let’s get together later this week and chat about it, OK?”

Hannah is disappointed, but tries not to show it too much. “Oh, all right, if you have to go, you have to go.”

“How about we get together after our lecture on Wednesday?” says Ryan, trying to cheer her up.

“I suppose so,” says Hannah.

Ryan rises from the table and leans over to give Hannah a hug. He winks at her and she smiles. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Sure. Thanks for the pizza,” says Hannah, still sitting at the café table.

Ryan begins walking down the street toward the bus station. He turns around to wave goodbye once more and then disappears around a corner. The images in Hannah’s mind begin to ease away. Once Ryan is out of sight, she ceases to parasense him.

Chapter 8

Cottesloe Beach, Perth
5th December 2011

The doors of the Holden EH Premier slam close with four metal clunks. Cameron opens the boot and Ryan, Curtis, and Patrick retrieve their towels and other belongings. The four young men leave the car and walk through the parking lot toward the beach. The parking lot is located upon a high ridge and Cottesloe Beach rests at the bottom of the bank. From here the view stretches up the coast and far out west into the Indian Ocean. Rottneest Island hovers on the horizon: the heat distorts its contours, creating a mirage effect over the water. To the north towers The Radisson Hotel in Scarborough and to the south, the shipping port of Fremantle. In between lies miles of soft yellow sand occupied by thousands of people enjoying another day in the cool waters on this hot summer day.

In the street along Cottesloe Beach people park their cars in one of the side roads and then walk to the shore. Nearly everyone is holding a towel over their shoulder and wears a hat. Bodies shine with sunscreen lotion. Flocks of seagulls loiter outside the fish 'n chips shop; a dog barks and attempts to chase the birds, but it is restrained by its leash, looped over a rubbish bin. Ryan and Cameron, followed by Patrick and Curtis, descend some concrete steps and pass onto the grassed surface near the bottom of the hill and find a spot to sit. A couple of slim, young girls with long straight hair and dressed in string bikinis walk past the young men, causing them to turn their heads discretely.

"I just love the beach in summer," exclaims Curtis, putting his towel down on the grass. "All these girls wearing practically nothing but a little material over the spots I like best."

The four young men all wear sunglasses to protect them from the glare, but also so that they can perv at the girls without anyone knowing they are looking.

"I hope it's like last summer," says Patrick. "Remember those girls we met who just wanted to get drunk and fuck?"

"But not Cameron," says Curtis, "He was going out with Tayla and had to simply listen to our stories. Isn't that right, Cam?"

"Hey, Tayla was a hottie," says Cameron, taking his sandals off, "and remember, while you guys were getting off with those girls, just think who I was with."

"Sounds like you guys had a good summer," says Ryan, sitting on the limestone wall nearby.

Cameron smiles and nods at Ryan. "You just wait, mate," says Cameron. "We are gonna find you some nice hot girl and hook you up."

"Hey what about that girl from uni?" asks Patrick. "You know—the one with the brunette hair and petite body."

"Hannah?" says Ryan innocently, hiding his real feelings.

"Yeah that's her. Why don't you give her a call and ask her out," says Patrick.

Ryan shrugs and says nothing.

"Personally, I think Ryan can't wait to get into her little panties and slide around," says Cameron.

Ryan cracks a smile. The others rise up into a cheer as they finally break through Ryan's masked performance. The four young men settle into their spot and face the beach to watch the waves roll in and the females walk by. Families and groups of people of all ages bake in the sun. A group of high school boys throw a torpedo football to each other across the shore; it makes a whistling sound as it flies through the air. A few games of beach volleyball are taking place further down the beach, just past the Indian Teahouse. Some people take a stroll out on the groyne; Ryan rests his eyes on its furthestmost peak.

“So what are we doing tonight?” asks Curtis, “do we want to go clubbing again, or maybe go to a party to meet some girls?”

Cameron says, “Well I was thinking, since it’s my last week at PsiCom, that you might all be interested in coming for a special guided tour.”

“Hey yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” says Patrick, enthusiastically.

“Curtis, Ryan?” asks Cameron. “You guys up for it? It’s a pretty cool place with heaps of hi-tech stuff I can show you.”

“I’m in,” says Curtis. “The women can wait, they’ll be there tomorrow anyway.”

“Ryan?” asks Cameron, again.

Ryan looks at Cameron for a moment and thinks about it. Slowly, Ryan nods his head. “Yeah, OK, I’d like to do that.”

“All right cool. We’ll make it about nine?” says Cameron. “That way no one will be there and we can have a few pizza’s too.”

“Your company lets you do that?” asks Patrick.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” says Cameron. “I got a security card to get us in. They trust me down there.”

“All right, cool that’s settled,” says Curtis, “but for now let’s go for a dip, it’s bloody hot.”

Curtis and Patrick get up and begin heading for the beach. Out past the reef, young kids climb up the Bell (a concrete post one hundred meters from the shore) using the rope attached to the top of it and jump off into the blue waters. Curtis and Patrick run into the low swell and start swimming out over the breaking waves.

The surf club’s life savers commence their hourly rescue drill, dragging the large rowboat out into the waves and out past the Bell. A Ranger’s vehicle drives along the beach service road and passes Ryan. He stares at it for a while.

“So how is everything going with your... you know?” asks Cameron.

“Fine. I haven’t used it for a month, but I know I can still do it,” replies Ryan, returning from his stare. “I can feel it there, waiting to be used, if you know what I mean?”

"I believe you, Ryan," says Cameron. "I don't think you're crazy."

"Thanks, Cam," says Ryan. "I just want to try and live a normal life. I don't even know if I want to have to use it again. I feel like I can't fit in. It scares me a bit."

Ryan and Cameron enter the water and wade out a small way. Ryan stops when the water reaches up his thighs. He stares into the water around his feet.

"What's the matter, Ryan? Water too cold for you?" Cameron provokes jokingly.

"Um, no. I was just... the water's fine," says Ryan, staring out over the horizon.

"I'll race ya," says Ryan, diving into the water.

Cameron follows enthusiastically, always ready for a friendly competition.

The temperature falls only slightly after sunset. The stars pierce through the sky and the gentle Fremantle wind blows in from the east. Cameron's car arrives at the PsiCom building in Fremantle and stops in the staff parking lot. Once again, Cameron, Ryan, Curtis, and Patrick exit the car and walk around to the front entrance. The main street in Fremantle is humming with activity. A long line of young adults waiting to get into the Metropolis nightclub is winding down the street. A block up the road, the Sail and Anchor Bar is chock-a-block with people drinking and conversing. All down the street, people are having fun on Saturday night. The cafes and restaurants are packed with hungry diners, and the air is filled with the sound of live music and car stereos.

Cameron swipes his security card through the slot next to the glass doors and punches in a five number code on the key pad; the other three young men huddle behind him. The door releases a soft burst of air to indicate that it is unlocked. Cameron pushes it open and they all go inside. The glass door closes and locks again making an airtight sound.

The reception area is lit by a few small glow lamps and looping computer graphics on the screen behind the desk. The group of young men pass through a long corridor which leads

off into the main offices and counseling rooms; Cameron swipes his card again, unlocking another door.

"Geez, the security's really tight in here," says Patrick.

"Yeah, but I expected guards too," adds Curtis.

"Well, they originally only had the entrances and windows armed with alarms," explains Cameron, "but ever since the break in last month, they have upgraded the security a little, which makes it a real bitch if you need to get from one section to another. We have to swipe these friken cards through all these doors just to go the bathroom. It pisses me off. Glad to be leaving, but, yeah they think security guards are a bit too much. They don't want to make it look like they need to hide anything."

Cameron swipes the card again and they enter an elevator and descend into the lower floors of the building.

"All the ground floors are boring, they are just for clients and admin," says Cameron. "The good stuff is underground."

"How far down are we going?" asks Patrick.

"Oh, only a couple of floors," replies Cameron.

The silver elevator doors open, and Cameron steps casually out while the others remain inside, rooted to the floor in surprise. Their faces show an expression of increased interest. Slowly Curtis and Patrick exit the elevator, their eyes fixed on the room. Ryan moves gently behind them and soaks up the contents of the laboratory. The lab is a wash of white and silver; computers and large screens are wired up to strange operating tables and electric chair-like set ups. Colored lights flash in random patterns across the ceiling and the walls, while a low hum fills the silence of the building above.

"Have a look around, guys," calls Cameron, from the other side of the lab, which is a large room with a high ceiling and many work stations located symmetrically across the floor, "just don't touch the computers, I'll show you what we can play with in a minute."

Patrick and Curtis are already inspecting the lab and playing around with the sophisticated headsets. Ryan walks along the

main access path and sneaks his head inside the small rooms off to the side of the main lab.

“That’s where they do the telepathy tests,” says Cameron, partially surprising Ryan from behind.

“In here?” Ryan says rhetorically. He nods and sticks his bottom lip out casually. “Doesn’t look like anything special.”

“Not what you expected?” asks Cameron. “They’ve never had any real results anyway, so they don’t get all excited over the décor of the place. It’s not like the movies, you know.”

Cameron walks off again to turn some more lights on and open some other doors. Ryan steps inside the testing room and picks up a deck of flash cards. He turns them over, revealing an array of colored shapes on white card. The walls are plain and the seat is very comfortable. He places the headphones over his ears and the two ping pong ball cups over his eyes and sits back in the chair. He shuffles the cards in his hands and picks one. He allows his mind to relax and reaches out for the card’s image. ‘Purple triangle,’ Ryan visualises.

“Hey, Ryan,” calls Cameron, “where are you?”

Ryan is jolted out of his relaxed state and sits up straight.

“Be right there,” replies, Ryan, sitting up and removing the headphones and ping pong balls. He turns the card over. Red cross. He shrugs and throws the card onto the desk and goes to join the others.

Cameron smiles mischievously, and says, “C’mon, Ryan, we are going down to the bottom floor—that’s where all the new tech machines and gadgets are made...”

“Is it the same place those prototypes were stolen from?” asks Ryan.

“Yeah, it is,” replies Curtis. “I remember the news report.”

“You have to admire the thieves who planned the whole thing. It’s not like you can just walk out of here with equipment like you can in a shopping mall,” says Cameron.

They all enter the elevator again and Cameron presses for the next floor down.

“When did they dig this hole?” asks Patrick.

“Only within the last few years actually. Before that there was nothing here but dirt,” explains Cameron. “The building

above used to be a technical and maritime studies education facility, but PsiCom bought it off them.”

“It would have made a hell of a mess on the street; didn’t all that diggin’ cause some suspicion?” says Curtis.

“You’d think people would remember, but a story was made up, like always—something along the lines of sewage upgrades,” says Cameron. “That way not even the government knows this is here, but PsiCom isn’t *that* secret about its work.”

The elevator doors open again.

“Wait,” says Cameron, stopping the others from walking straight out into the lab. “Look.”

Cameron points into the dark lab. A web of interlacing green lasers scan the room randomly in the dark. Cameron holds out his card just outside the elevator door. A blue laser scans the card and they hear a soft beep coming from the room. The lights illuminate the room with a soft glow pleasant to the eyes.

“Cool shit,” blurts Curtis.

“This is the place PsiCom puts most of it’s funding into,” says Cameron. “The rest is just for fun.”

The four young men step out of the elevator into the spacious laboratory. Their eyes travel over the bulky machinery before them. The remainder of the room contains smaller, yet equally awesome pieces of equipment and some side rooms too.

“What does it do?” asks Ryan.

“Originally, PsiCom specialized in cryogenics research,” begins Cameron. “They were very successful, but wanted to expand their services. This machine is the company’s current project. It’s not fully finished, but when it is, it will be able to store a whole heap of individual memories in it’s databank, and when they find a way to revive the bodies of the frozen clients, they can reload their memories. Neat, isn’t it?”

Patrick and Curtis walk around the base of the machine. It hums gently.

“This is really fascinating,” says Curtis.

“You’d be surprised what technology is out there today,” says Cameron. “Just because you don’t hear about it doesn’t mean it hasn’t been, or isn’t currently being worked on.”

“So, how do you know you can trust us not to tell anyone about this, Cam?” asks Ryan.

“You guys are my friends,” Cameron replies, “and besides, if you did tell anyone, they might not believe you. But if the company finds out you are creating attention, they would slap your arse in prison real quick, if not worse.”

“Shit. You mean...” says Ryan, making a hand gesture of a gun being fired.

“That’s just how it is in these kinds of industries. Don’t think that it doesn’t happen. People get taken out all the time,” says Cameron. “You learn to be very careful who you tell your secrets to in this business; keep your mouth shut, or they will shut it for you. Anyway, just relax down here for a while, I’m gonna go get some pizzas. I’ll be back soon enough.”

“Are you sure it’s OK to leave us down here?” asks Ryan.

“Oh sure, no one comes in here at night, ever,” says Cameron walking back toward the elevator. “What kind of pizza do you all want?”

“Whatever, mate,” Patrick calls out, from the other side of the machine.

“Just kick back and check the place out, but don’t touch the computers!” Cameron says with a smile.

The elevator closes and Cameron is gone. Ryan looks over to Patrick and Curtis laughing and joking about something in the far corner of the laboratory. Ryan investigates the access panels of the main machine. There is a large textbook on a shelf nearby. It is entitled “Memory Bank Prototype Manual”. Ryan takes a seat at a desk and starts to flick through the book. He does not understand the diagrams, but they are interesting to look at nonetheless.

Half an hour passes and Cameron has not returned yet.

“Hey, Ryan, we are just going to get some cigarettes from the shop,” says Curtis. “If Cameron comes back before we do, just let him know we’ll be back soon.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” asks Ryan. “Shouldn’t we stay here? It’s a bit risky just walking around without him.”

“Don’t worry about it. He said no one will show up, and besides we’re not doing anything wrong,” says Curtis.

“Should I come with you guys?” asks Ryan, rising from the chair.

“Nah, stay here and wait for Cameron,” says Patrick. “He’ll wonder where we are if we all go.”

“All right then, I suppose I’ll just occupy myself somehow,” says Ryan.

“Maybe try uploading your memories to the machine?” says Curtis, joking, and stepping into the elevator with Patrick.

“Ha, Ha,” replies Ryan. “Don’t be too long.”

“We won’t,” replies Patrick.

The elevator doors close and the lab falls silent. Ryan looks around at the room. It is almost overbearing being in there alone. He returns to the seat and continues flicking through the manual. There is not much else to do down here.

“Some guided tour this is,” Ryan says to himself. “I’d much rather we’d chosen Curtis’s idea to go chase some women.”

Patrick and Curtis exit the elevator at the ground floor and begin walking down the corridor through the administration offices with Curtis leading the way.

“Hey, Curtis, how are we gonna get out of here? Don’t we need a security card?” asks Patrick.

Curtis pulls out a card from his pocket and swipes it through the slot. The door unlocks and Curtis smiles at Patrick.

“So how come you get a security card?” asks Patrick.

They leave the building, and the door locks behind them.

Ryan sits and waits in the lab. His feet are on the desk, but he soon drops them off and starts swiveling around on the chair; he is getting bored and impatient. He goes to look at the machines around the room again. He comes across a smaller machine that looks familiar to him, but he cannot figure out where he has seen it before. He uncovers a sheet that is draped over the majority of the machine, unveiling its model name and number: ‘PsiTransfer M-III’.

Curtis and Patrick walk down the main street of Fremantle.

"Hey, Curtis, isn't the shop back that way?" asks Patrick.

"Yeah, but I've got to get some money from my apartment. It's just up the road here. It won't take long, mate," says Curtis.

The operator at the Fremantle police station answers another call.

"Fremantle Police," says the operator.

"Yes, hello, I would like to report a robbery, which I believe is happening right now," says the man.

"What is the address in question, sir?" asks the operator.

"It is the premises of a company called PsiCom," says the man.

"Thank you sir, we will send a patrol down immediately," replies the operator. "Could I have your name and phone number in case we need to contact you again?"

"Oh, of course, my number is nine-eight-six-five-nine-three-nine-three. My name is Doctor Campbell."

"Thank you, Doctor Campbell, we appreciate your help," says the operator, and puts the phone down.

Ryan walks over to the large machine for the nth time and places his hand on its cold metallic shell. He scratches his forehead. 'Where the hell are those guys?' he thinks.

Suddenly the lights in the lab shut off and Ryan cannot see a thing. It is pitch black. He remains still.

"Oh, great," he says sarcastically, taking a deep breath and feeling his way across the lab to the light switch on the wall. When he finally touches one of the walls, the green lasers turn on and begin scanning the room. They pass by him making a slight vibrating noise.

Just as a few of the lasers are about to cross over Ryan's body, he extends his parashield all around him, hoping it will hide him from the lasers. The gentle, blue glow from the parashield illuminates the lab and he can see he is standing close to the elevator. The lasers pass over the parashield and Ryan waits for the alarm to go off, but it doesn't sound

'Phew, that was close.'

The alarm goes off. A jolt runs through Ryan's body. His parashield retracts and the green lasers pass over his body like bees disturbed in their hive. He runs to the elevator, but realizes he cannot get out that way. He is trapped and starts to panic. 'Where the hell is Cameron?'

Outside on the street, an entire squad of police vehicles is arriving at the PsiCom building. Their sirens wail down the street and then stop. The police officers act quickly to secure the building and enter through the front doors. A crowd is beginning to gather. Red and blue lights flicker over the surrounding buildings.

Ryan watches the elevator light panel; it indicates that someone is coming down. It stops at the floor above him. He waits. The elevator starts to move again. It arrives at his floor. Ryan paces briefly over to the back wall and starts to look in the side rooms for somewhere to escape or hide.

A team of four police officers enter the lab and begin searching. Ryan hides under a desk. He hears the voices of the police as they scramble around the lab. Flashlight beams cross the room, making Ryan tuck himself deeper undercover. He can hear footsteps in the side rooms and the squeak of heavy, leather boots on the plastic floor of the lab. Ryan holds his breath. He can feel his heart beat throbbing throughout his body. He looks at his chest; a soft blue light is glowing under his clothes. He tries to contain his parability; he does not want to lose control now. The footsteps pass into the next room. Ryan breathes again, thinking, 'I must get to the elevator.'

The lights of the lab are still off, but the green lasers continue to dance through the air. Ryan pokes his head out from behind the doorframe. The police are searching the back of the lab. He starts for the elevator, keeping his body low and trying to avoid the officer's flashlights. The elevator door is closed, it has returned to the ground floor. Quickly, Ryan presses the up button and waits, crouching on the floor. The alarm pulsates in Ryan's ears.

A car arrives outside next to the squad cars. Doctor Tampalini steps out and asks the chief officer about the situation. A larger crowd has formed along the street; the police are herding them back.

The elevator begins to descend again. The police are returning from their search of the back of the lab, Ryan does not have much time before he will be found.

The elevator makes a *bing* sound to indicate that it has arrived at the floor. Ryan is ready to jump inside, but when the doors open and he sees three more police officers inside, he quickly throws himself against the wall to the side of the elevator doors. The officers walk out and into the lab. They call out to the other officers. The lights in the lab finally switch on and the alarm finally stops. Ryan jumps in the elevator and presses ground floor. When the doors begin to close the officers turn around casually at first and then realize that Ryan is in the elevator. They shout for Ryan to stop and they start running toward him. The doors close just as the officers are about to grab Ryan. The elevator climbs to the ground floor. The police officers begin to urgently report into their short wave radios to the outside police squad.

The elevator continues past the first floor and eventually arrives at the ground floor. The doors open. Ryan looks out into the hallway, it is empty, but he can hear stomping footsteps running through the building. They are getting closer. Ryan steps out into the corridor and nervously walks into one of the counseling rooms. He closes the door behind him. He does not have time to hide. There is no window to escape through. A team of officers run down the corridor. Ryan is sweating, his heart is racing. Two officers open the door to the room where Ryan is standing behind a desk. He is cornered. The police officers shine their flashlights into his eyes. He shields his eyes with his hand. The police officers creep closer, their guns aimed right at him.

“Put your hands over head, now,” demands the officer closest to Ryan.

Ryan hesitates at first, but then begins to comply.

Inside the nightclub down the road from PsiCom, Hannah is dancing to the music with her friends. The place is packed tight.

"I'm just going to get another drink, girls," she says to her friends.

Hannah walks over to the bar and orders a drink and waits for the bar staff to return. Suddenly she flinches and places her hand over her forehead. Again she flinches and leans against the bar for support. She receives an image in her mind.

"Oh no! Ryan!"

Curtis sits on the couch in his apartment. Patrick is standing out on the balcony looking back into Fremantle. Blue and red police lights are flashing erratically over the buildings below.

"Curtis, why are we just sitting here? We should go back and find Cam and Ryan," says Patrick. "They could be getting busted."

"Better that we stay here and wait to hear from Cam," says Curtis.

The second officer in the counseling room calls for backup on his radio. The first officer is within six feet of Ryan and still moving closer.

"Hold it right there, young man," says the officer, putting his gun away and taking out his handcuffs.

Four more officers arrive in the corridor outside the room. Ryan's body is frozen on the spot; he does not know what to do. He shivers in fear.

The officer lifts the handcuffs toward Ryan's hands which are now resting on his head. Police backup flows into the room like liquid shadows. Out of the darkness of the room, the metal of the cuffs reflects a flashlight beam and catches Ryan's eyes. The cold metal touches Ryan's skin and he gasps. The first cuff begins to tighten around his wrist. It clicks into place, echoing in Ryan's head. The officer pulls Ryan's other hand down and around his back so he can put the second cuff on.

Time slows down for Ryan and he fails to hear any sounds except his breathing. He closes his eyes. The officers gather in closer, their guns at the ready. The second cuff touches Ryan's wrist and his eyes open again. He turns his head and looks at the officer with confident eyes.

"Get off me," whispers Ryan, under his breath.

"What?" replies the officer.

From under Ryan's t-shirt grows a bright red glow of electricity.

"I said..."

Ryan's parashield covers the surface of his skin and heats the metal cuffs around his wrists, melting them away. The officer stalls in shock as he watches the cuffs fall to the ground into a bubbling pile of liquid metal.

'...get off me!' shouts Ryan.

The parashield expands outwards in an explosive blast. The police officers are thrown back against the walls and back into the corridor. The furniture in the office is blown to smithereens. The back wall ruptures outwards, creating a passage into a side street. The building's glass doors and windows shatter out onto the street. Excited and shocked, the crowd and the police crouch for cover at the sound of the loud boom. The police chief sends in the tactical response team; they leap like lions into the building.

Ryan stands powerfully within the room. The officer's bodies lay motionless on the floor. When the dust and fragments clear, he exits through the hole in the wall. He runs out onto the street, and checks first to see if it is safe to flee further. He hides behind a parked car and crawls over to a tree and checks again. When he feels it is clear, he starts running down the street.

As he jumps out from the shadows, a police officer standing on the street corner spots him and calls for Ryan to stop. The officer is soon joined by several other officers and squad cars, their sirens winding up as they race down the street in pursuit.

"Hey, Curtis," calls Patrick, from the balcony, "I think I can see Ryan."

"Where? What's he doing?" asks Curtis, rising from the couch.

"He's running down the street, he's coming this way. The cops are chasing him," says Patrick. "We gotta help him."

Curtis joins Patrick on the balcony.

"There's nothing we can do to help him. The cops will arrest us for protecting him," says Curtis.

"That's bullshit man," says Patrick, "He's our mate. We can't just let him get busted, we can get him in time."

Curtis walks back inside, ignoring Patrick.

"Just get away from the balcony before you're seen," says Curtis.

Patrick looks down to the street where Ryan is running from place to place, trying to lose the police.

"I said get away from the balcony, Patrick," calls Curtis, from the kitchen.

Patrick is about to call out, but hesitates. He looks back inside the apartment. Curtis is pacing back and forth in the main room.

"Ryan!" shouts Patrick, from the sixth floor, "Ryan, up here mate!"

Patrick waves down to Ryan, who sees him and starts heading for the apartment building.

"Patrick! Are you outa your fuckin' mind," says Curtis, pulling him back inside the apartment and slamming the sliding glass door close.

"I can't just watch him get caught," says Patrick. "Let's go down and help him inside."

"No fuckin' way," says Curtis, now starting to lose his cool. "We're staying right here and we are not letting him up, got it?"

The phone rings in the apartment. Patrick and Curtis look at each other.

"Let him in, Curtis," says Patrick.

The phone continues to ring. Patrick and Curtis stare motionless at the phone.

The police search the streets below. They do not know his exact position, but they are gaining on Ryan.

“Let him in!” shouts Patrick.

“No!” screams Curtis.

“Fine, I will,” says Patrick, picking up the phone.

Curtis tries to stop Patrick, but Patrick is much stronger and throws Curtis back, giving himself enough time to answer the phone and press the security door release to let Ryan into the building.

“You idiot,” says Curtis, getting back onto his feet and bringing his t-shirt square again. “We’ll be bloody accomplices.”

Patrick opens the apartment door and waits for Ryan.

“I’d rather be an accomplice than to see a mate cop all the flack,” says Patrick, firmly, “especially for something he hasn’t done.”

Ryan finally arrives on the sixth floor and exits the elevator. He runs down the corridor to Curtis’s apartment.

“What happened?” asks Patrick

“I don’t know?” say Ryan.

“Where’s Cam?” Patrick asks again.

“I don’t... know that either,” says Ryan, breathing heavily. “Not long after... you went... the alarm... came on... and... the cops arrived.”

“How did you get out?” asks Patrick. “There was only one entry, through the elevator and front door.”

Ryan pauses to catch his breath, but also to avoid answering the question. “I must... have been lucky. The cops were... all over the place, but I managed to... sneak out.”

“What about that explosion? Do you know what caused that?” asks Patrick.

“Nah,” says Ryan, shaking his head. “It could have been ... tear gas or a smoke bomb?”

“Pretty big explosion for tear gas,” says Curtis, unconvinced.

Ryan looks at Curtis, but says nothing. He coughs.

“Can I have a drink of water?” asks Ryan.

“Yeah sure,” replies Curtis, who goes into the kitchen, glaring back at Patrick.

“Sit down, mate,” says Patrick, indicating the couch. “Just relax, you’ll be all right now.”

“Thanks, Patrick.”

Curtis returns with a glass of water and gives it to Ryan, who sculls the whole lot.

The police sirens scream past along the street below, but they do not check near the apartment building. Patrick and Ryan both go out to the balcony and watch the squad cars and police officers on foot go by.

Hannah drives her car out of the parking lot and quickly down the street.

“I’m coming, Ryan,” she says to herself, the images in her mind gaining in intensity by the moment.

“That was pretty close,” says Patrick.

Ryan nods his head, stepping back inside with Patrick following. They both step into the middle of the room and stop. Curtis is pointing a gun at Ryan.

“What the fuck are you doing, Curtis?” asks Patrick.

Ryan stares at Curtis silently.

“Shut the fuck up, Patrick,” says Curtis.

“Just calm down, Curtis,” says Ryan, softly. “Let’s put the gun down and talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” says Curtis. “Your finished, Ryan.”

“I don’t quite follow what you mean, mate,” says Ryan.

“Curtis, just put the gun down man,” says Patrick. “Everything is cool, the cops are gone.”

“Patrick, you’re such dumb fuck,” says Curtis, pointing the gun at Patrick now. “You don’t have clue what’s goin’ on, so just shut up.”

“What’s he talking about, Ryan?” asks Patrick, nervously.

Ryan says nothing. Curtis starts to pull the trigger.

“What’s he talking about?” demands Patrick.

“Patrick, get behind me,” says Ryan, quietly.

“What? Hey?” says Patrick, starting to panic and looking back and forth between Ryan and Curtis.

Curtis’s finger moves slowly back upon the trigger.

“I said get behind me!” shouts Ryan.

Curtis pulls the trigger twice and the bullets enter Patrick’s chest. Ryan goes to shield him, but it is too late; he falls to the floor with blood starting to saturate his clothes. Patrick begins to shake and shiver.

“Ry-an,” mutters Patrick.

“It’s gonna be OK, mate, just hold on,” says Ryan, supportively. “You’re gonna be all right.”

Curtis points the gun at Ryan once again. Ryan looks up at Curtis, who is smiling back at him wickedly.

“Now it’s your turn,” says Curtis, and he unloads the remaining rounds from the gun.

Ryan quickly summons his parashield around his body. The bullets stop short inches from Ryan’s head, then further and further away as the parashield expands outwards in an electric-blue web of energy. The bullets fall to the floor. Curtis reloads the gun, but fumbles the magazine. Ryan looks back at Patrick; he is dead.

Ryan suddenly experiences a head spin and he knows the parashield is starting to drain him already. Curtis loads the gun and begins shooting at Ryan again, but the parashield continues to stop the bullets. Ryan starts for the door and out into the corridor with Curtis firing after him, leaving a trail of bullet holes in the walls. Ryan descends the staircase, but Curtis does not chase him.

Ryan’s heart pumps rapidly, his body is soaked in sweat, and his hands are stained with Patrick’s blood.

Ryan reaches the ground floor and runs to the exit. He presses the security button and steps outside. He is cautiously looking down the street, when a car suddenly speeds up to the curbside. He is about to run, when the car stops next to him. The driver’s window is down.

“Get in,” says the driver.

“Hannah?” says Ryan. “What are you doing?”

“Just get in,” she says.

Ryan smiles and runs around to the other side of the car and jumps in.

“Let’s get out of here,” says Ryan.

The car speeds off down the street.

“Where are we going?” asks Hannah.

“Get onto Stirling Highway, head toward Joondalup,” says Ryan. “I’ll explain on the way.”

Oh my god, you’ve got blood on you. Are you OK? Have you been hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Ryan replies. “Just keep driving. It’s not my blood anyway.”

They drive away from Fremantle safely. Midnight arrives.

The police are finishing up at PsiCom. Doctor Tampalini is having a conversation with the chief officer. A car drives up slowly behind them and stops. A man steps out of the car and walks up to Doctor Tampalini and the chief police officer.

“Excuse me,” says the man.

“Yes, what?” Tampalini asks, annoyed at the interruption.

“I think I know who is responsible for this inconvenience,” says the man.

“Oh, really, and who might that be?” asks Tampalini.

“Why don’t we have a chat first, and I’ll tell you what I know,” says the man.

“Very well,” says Tampalini, “and who might you be, sir?”

“Doctor Francis Campbell, at your service.”

Chapter 9

Fremantle, Western Australia
6th December 2011

“What happened?” booms Campbell, as he comes barging into Curtis’s apartment. Campbell looks down at Patrick’s body on the floor; his blood is soaking into the carpet in a slowly spreading, circular stain.

“What the fuck is this?” shouts Campbell, pointing to Patrick.

Curtis attempts to explain, but Campbell storms forward and grabs him by the shirt and presses him hard up against the wall.

“No one else was supposed to be involved. Who the fuck is this anyway?” says Campbell, in a rage.

“He’s just a guy from university,” says Curtis.

“Oh, great,” sighs Campbell, letting go of Curtis.

“I didn’t think it would come to this, but I had no other choice,” explains Curtis.

“Oh, shut up,” snaps Campbell, taking a seat at the table and looking over at the wall.

“And what are all these holes? Doing a little redecorating are we?” asks Campbell, sarcastically.

“I was trying to stop Ryan from leaving,” replies Curtis, waving the gun in the air.

“I told you that wouldn’t work,” says Campbell. “Don’t you know he’s figured out his parability? He could mindwack you into next week if he wanted to. Did you even think about all the attention you might attract, playing cowboys in here?”

“No one gives a shit what happens around here,” says Curtis. “Last week, some guy was found dead in the corridor on the second floor, he’d been there for a few days before anyone

took any notice. So I don't think a few gun shots will raise the alarm just yet."

There is a short pause between them. Campbell thinks to himself while he calms himself down.

"How did this happen?" asks Campbell.

"One minute Ryan was at PsiCom and the next minute he is running along the street," says Curtis, "and the cops were chasin' him."

"So why did you let him in? He was suppose to be framed," says Campbell, frustrated again.

"I didn't let him in, this dickhead did," says Curtis, pointing to Patrick.

"Why didn't you stop him?" asks Campbell.

"Look at the size of him. He pushed me back with the strength of an ox," says Curtis.

Campbell shakes his head in disappointment.

"How did he get out of PsiCom?" asks Campbell. "You were supposed to lock the place when you left."

"He must have used his parability to get out. I heard a loud explosion—it couldn't have been anything else. He would definitely have been trapped in there otherwise," says Curtis.

Campbell curses under his breath and leans back into the chair. "Where the hell is he now?"

"How should I know? Someone picked him up out on the street real quick after he left," says Curtis.

"Hannah," says Campbell. "It was his bloody girlfriend, Hannah."

"I thought you could parasense him anyway?" says Curtis, weary of Campbell's mood.

"I usually can," says Campbell, defensively, "but for some reason I can't at the moment. He can't be that far away anyway, and I bet he's with her."

"Do you think she is helping him?" asks Curtis.

"Most likely," replies Campbell. "We might have two paraheads on our plate now. I'm surprised I can't parasense her either. Strange."

"Will he go to the cops?" asks Curtis.

“No, not after tonight. I spoke with the chief of police and the director of PsiCom,” says Campbell, “Ryan won’t be able to step foot in this city for long before he is spotted and arrested. However, we must still be on the lookout, and in the meantime keep our own butts clean.”

“What are we going to do?” asks Curtis.

“We’ll just have to wait and see what our friend, Master Falconer does next,” says Campbell. “If I parasense him, I’ll let you know, but for now just stay low.”

Campbell gets up and starts for the door. He stops and turns to Curtis.

“And get rid of the body, Curtis, it’ll start to smell soon,” says Campbell, leaving the apartment and closing the door behind him.

Curtis looks down at Patrick’s dead body and sighs.

“Great,” says Curtis, sarcastically, now regretting the situation.

A small piece of the wall breaks off where a bullet has entered and crumbles to the floor.

Ryan and Hannah arrive at the Quins Rock caravan park around two o’clock in the morning; there is little conversation between the two of them on the drive up, but a general understanding that they will discuss things later.

Ryan unlocks his family’s caravan and Hannah follows him inside. As soon as the bed comes into his sight, Ryan collapses and sleeps. He sleeps all through the night and into the next day. Hannah removes his shoes and puts a warm rug over him and goes to sleep on another bed.

Hannah wakes early and sits patiently beside Ryan, allowing him to rest. She can tell that something has made him utterly exhausted. She brings him a wet towel for his forehead and a glass of water should he wake.

In the late afternoon while Hannah is out buying some food and drinks, Ryan finally opens his eyes. He looks around for a moment to orientate himself and shortly remembers where he is; ‘Where is Hannah?’ he thinks, but he is still recovering, and finds it hard to get out of bed and look around for her just yet.

He tries to sit up. The blood rushes through his body and he puts his hand to his forehead as he experiences a swelling head spin. He lets out a small groan of discomfort and aborts the attempt to sit up, satisfying himself within the comforts of the pillow. Ryan's parashield has drained his energy levels significantly and it will be a while before he is fully recovered and ready to use it again.

The previous night's memories play over in his mind. He questions what happened exactly, unable to convince himself that it did not occur, he closes his eyes again and rests some more.

'But it happened. Curtis killed Patrick and also tried to kill me. Why?' The more Ryan thinks about it, the more confused and exasperated he gets. 'Why would Curtis do that?' Ryan grits his teeth and his eyes become teary. 'Patrick!'

Not long after, Hannah enters the caravan and places some bags of food onto the table. Ryan attempts to sit up again and Hannah notices he is awake. She greets him with a smile, then realizes that he is trying to sit up and goes to support him.

"There you go, champ," she says, placing one hand behind his back and another over his chest. They stare at each other for a moment. Ryan smiles back at Hannah.

"Thanks," he says, and gets comfortable. Hannah places a pillow behind his back and passes him the glass of water.

"God, what time is it?" asks Ryan, proceeding to scull the glass of water.

"Just after five," replies Hannah, filling the glass with more water and passing it back to Ryan. She opens a couple of windows to let some fresh air in. The golden afternoon sun enters the caravan, and Ryan shields his eyes until they adjust to the light.

Hannah sits on the bed next to Ryan and looks at him compassionately.

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

"Starving."

“Why don’t I make some dinner and then, if you feel up to it we can get you some fresh air. Maybe go for a walk along the beach?” suggests Hannah.

“I’d like that,” replies Ryan, smiling.

The afternoon turns to dusk and the caravan still smells of the delicious meal that Hannah cooked for them an hour ago. After a short time to digest and relax, Ryan feels his energy levels increase and feels like going for a walk. Hannah stands close by him as they mosey on down to the shore in bare feet and walk along the beach. Ryan holds onto Hannah’s arm for support, and for another reason, which they both secretly acknowledge with a smile. It is warm and they are both wearing casual summer clothes. Ryan is wearing gray trousers and a Hawaiian patterned shirt, and Hannah is wearing a short denim skirt and a white singlet. Her hair is tied back into a ponytail.

The sky is golden yellow and light blue; the sun’s glow domes over the horizon. The wind is gentle and warm, and the sand is soft and white except for large clumps of dried out seaweed washed up upon the beach. The lights from inside the other caravans lining the beachfront provide a sense of safety for the two young parapersons. They feel far away and hidden from the hustle and bustle of the city. Only a few other people are out this evening walking along the beach or bringing in the clean washing from the clothesline in the caravan park. A man stands further up the beach. He reels in his fishing line from the waters and leaves the beach with his freshly caught dinner.

The stars begin to appear and the night becomes quiet; the waves crash rhythmically in the background. Just down the beach from the caravan park, Ryan and Hannah find a spot under a rock face that lines the shore and protects them from the wind. They start to collect some wood from the nearby dunes; there are plenty of small branches from the saltbushes and other scrub plants in the area and soon they have enough to last for many hours.

Hannah prepares the fire and Ryan sits close by, keeping warm beneath a thick rug that he has brought along. The flames are quick to ignite the dry branches and once the fire is blazing

Hannah joins Ryan under the rug. They squash up next to each other and stare into the fire, neither of them saying a word, but they understand each other in another way. The color of the horizon now merges with the liquid indigo sky above and the stars begin to appear.

"It's a really nice place," comments Hannah, to break to silence.

"My family used to come up here a lot when I was young," explains Ryan, "but we hardly do that anymore. My dad loved it up here."

"He's not around anymore?" asks Hannah, cautiously.

"He died in my early teens; heart attack."

"Are you OK about it now?" asks Hannah.

"Yeah, I suppose so," he pauses, "he was always so careful with me. He didn't really let me out of his sight."

"Sounds like he really loved you," says Hannah.

"I'm sure he did, but I remember it being a little too much to take," says Ryan. "Anyway... I come up here every now and then just to get away from stuff. Give myself time to think."

Another silence rises between them.

Hannah's hand rests next to Ryan's and their fingers slowly twitch and creep toward each other for what seems an eternity. Their eyes focus in on the space where it is obvious that their hands will meet; it is the only thing that exists for them in this moment. The tips of their pinky fingers meet ever so softly and skip and jump over the surface of the other. Then Ryan slides his hand more smoothly over the back of Hannah's. Their eyes look up and meet. Hannah's mouth opens slightly and she bites her bottom lip nervously. Ryan moves his other hand over her exposed thigh and up over her skirt to her waist. He pulls her in closer by the hand and their lips meet, touching delicately at first and then stopping briefly; their eyes pass eager looks between each other, their lips finally touch passionately. Hannah's hands move over Ryan's jaw line and run down his neck to his chest where she grabs sensually at his clothes. She places her hand back onto his chest and begins to push him down onto his back. Ryan moves with her suggestion; his hands brush past her breasts while he guides her down over him. They

continue to kiss, their craving for each other increasing by the moment.

The unhurried writhing of their bodies moulds into the sand beneath them while the fire plays upon their skin with oranges and reds. The light of the fire creates instinctive shadow movements upon the screen of the sand dunes behind them. Hannah takes Ryan's hand and leads it under her skirt, placing it on her young, firm buttocks. She helps him remove her black cotton underwear, sliding them down her smooth legs and below her knees where she uses her foot to completely take them off. It is awkward at first, but she eventually succeeds and returns her attention to Ryan's belt. She peels it back from the buckle and continues with the button and fly of his trousers.

Both of them are now naked from the waist down. Hannah straddles over Ryan, removes her top and unties her hair, then pulls the rug up over their bodies. Hannah lays on Ryan and kisses his neck, while he runs his hands freely over the smooth skin of her back and through her long wavy brunette hair.

Ryan carefully rolls over, taking Hannah with him so that she is now lying on her back and he is above her.

"Why have you stopped?" asks Hannah, breathing heavily after kissing him passionately. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, not at all," says Ryan, placing a few more thick branches on the flames. "That's better."

The wood is quick to burn and the flames shine brightly as Ryan sinks closer to Hannah again. His hand runs down the front of her body, over her perky breasts and flat stomach, all the way down between her legs where he moves his hand up and down her inner thighs, gradually arousing her with every touch between the most inner part of her legs.

Hannah releases a quiet, breathy sound of pleasure as Ryan's finger softly strokes her most sensitive spots with his wetted finger. After a little while, Hannah pulls Ryan over her squarely and grinds her mound against his. She guides him into her, allowing the end of his hardened genitals to tease the entrance of her own. At first, they laugh because it is not happening smoothly, but soon he slips past the drier skin and deep into her moist insides. They vocalize a sigh of affection as

they begin to experience the full sensations of moving together as one.

When they start to kiss again, Ryan becomes aware of another feeling occurring within his body. It is different to the pleasure he is experiencing with Hannah. It fades and then comes back, a little stronger.

Within Hannah's mind she can see Ryan surrounded in light. A bright sphere shines all around his body in blues and indigos with flashes of pure white. The field begins to grow outward and move around her. It adds to the heat in her body that is already rising because of Ryan's sexual caresses.

Ryan can feel the parashield's energy, but he cannot *see* it like he usually can. In fact, he senses that it is expanding, but is not having its normal effect; instead, it seems to be pulling him in closer to Hannah. He wonders, 'Is she feeling this too?'

The intensity of the moment lifts as they both become very aroused. Ryan sits up and begins to circle his finger around Hannah's clitoris. He holds off from orgasm and waits for her to be ready too. The force of the parashield is now taking effect on the sand around them, flattening it out perfectly and drawing the flames of the fire into its sphere of influence, causing them to dissipate within the field in an electrical upsurge.

Their eyes lock onto each other as they both climb closer to the threshold. Hannah can see in her mind that Ryan's energy has encompassed her, *she can feel its power*. It merges with her mind and begins to have an effect on her own parability. Ryan can sense the strong parability within Hannah too, and tries to reach out even further with the newly discovered function of his parashield. She can feel the changes occurring within her as she reaches orgasm, reaching a peak as Ryan finally comes inside her moments later.

He calls out her name, but his mouth does not move; she hears it within her mind, and responds, calling his name telepathically. Ryan smiles in acknowledgement. They both experience a feeling of great pleasure and power, and soon it begins to fade rapidly but gently, and they come to rest beside each other. The fire continues to burn and the night breeze blows the flames around erratically. Ryan's parashield contracts

again and Hannah feels that her parability has been modified and its power increased significantly.

Ryan lies on his back staring into the fire. He rests his head on Hannah's stomach; she runs her fingers through his hair. Hannah also clings to the rug to stop the sea breeze from chilling her too much; goosebumps sprout all over her body. Ryan and Hannah both stare up at the stars, satisfied and content within each other. The moon rises above the eastern horizon, all orange and wide. It lifts fast into the sky, shrinking in size and turning white as it ascends.

"I suppose it's time to explain why I made you drive us up here?" says Ryan, looking at Hannah and then back into the fire.

"Look Ryan, you don't have to, I think I already—"

"No I want to," he says, sitting up and facing her. "I feel you and I are close enough now that I can tell you."

"You don't have to tell me anything if you are not ready to," says Hannah, hinting that she understands.

"Hannah," starts Ryan, "tonight I felt something with you that I have not felt with anyone else before, and I'm not talking about your average everyday feelings from... you know."

Hannah smiles.

"I know, I felt them too," Hannah replies.

Ryan pauses before he speaks again.

"You did?" he asks, excitedly.

Hannah nods her head and smiles. "I might not be totally clear on what it was that I was feeling, but if my intuition is correct, then I think I already know what it was," says Hannah, "but I would still like you to explain it to me in your own words, because your energy is different to mine."

"You can tell that I am..."

Hannah nods her head again. "I think so."

"What is it you can do exactly?" asks Ryan.

"Well, let's just say it brought me to you," replies Hannah, "but not in a mushy romantic kind of way."

"Amazing," says Ryan, suddenly thinking back to something. "Can you explain it a bit more? I'm really relieved to know I'm not the only one with a... mind power, or whatever it's called. Please show me how yours works."

“Not until you show me yours,” Hannah says cheekily.

“OK. Try and hit me,” says Ryan.

Hannah gives him a strange look.

“What?”

“Trust me,” says Ryan, rolling his eyes. “You wanna see how mine works, try and hit me or throw something at me.”

“Oh goodie, this is going to be fun,” she says.

Hannah’s hand winds up behind her and then comes through the air and slaps Ryan right on the cheek. Her mouth drops open in shock, and she covers it with her hand, trying to stop herself from laughing.

Ryan lets out a cry of pain as the sting sets in. He holds his hand to his cheek and rubs it until the pain subsides.

“You asked me to,” says Hannah, now laughing out loud.

“It doesn’t usually work like that,” says Ryan, a little annoyed, but having only himself to blame.

“All right, I’ll show you another way, but you’ll need to stand back and give me some room,” says Ryan, standing up and walking to the other side of the fire.

Hannah gets up a little, but remains on the rug. She watches in anticipation.

“Ready?” he asks.

Hannah nods her head gleefully and waits. Ryan takes a deep breath in and closes his eyes.

Within Ryan’s mind, he stills his thoughts and calms his body. As he breathes out he feels the surface of his skin heating comfortably; the hairs on his arms rise up and sway like marine plant life moving back and forth on a reef. An electric-blue coating appears millimeters above his whole body. Ryan opens his eyes and stares into the dark distance of the land; he concentrates further, and the parashield begins to grow outwards around him. It continues to expand, encompassing the fire; its flames flicker and then become as still as a candle’s flame in a quiet room.

The energy field expands, now beginning to pass over Hannah who is sitting on the ground. Hannah stares up at Ryan, intrigued by the vibrations building up around her. She feels a strange sensation over her body; at first she is nervous, but soon

she feels safe and protected as the parashield folds completely around her. The breeze dies down and her goose bumps dissolve. Hannah reaches out her hand to touch the transparent blue lights drifting through the air around her. They flash and sparkle for a moment as her fingers make contact with the parashield's inner sphere, and then return to their normal blue state.

"How are you doing this?" whispers Hannah.

"With my mind," replies Ryan.

The parashield contracts rapidly, the breeze passes over the two of them and the flames of the fire twitch and jump all over the place once again. Ryan comes and sits next to Hannah, and she throws the rug around his shoulders and leans her head against him.

"That was really impressive," says Hannah. "Did you learn to do it over time, or were you born with it? Can you teach me how to do it? Does it protect you from everything?"

"Slow down, turbo," says Ryan. "Let me explain."

"OK, sorry. I just got excited, that's all," apologizes Hannah.

"The first thing I remember was some childhood experiences when it happened, but they are still vague. I've only really started to understand how it works recently. I'm not even sure how I do it. I just think it, and it happens," explains Ryan, "and I don't know how to teach it to someone else."

"Sounds similar to my experiences," says Hannah.

Ryan looks across at Hannah, who lifts her head from his shoulder.

"Tell me about yours," says Ryan.

"OK. All through my teenage years I started to have these weird experiences where I could tell what my friends were going to say next. I could also feel when other people were hurting emotionally too. I would feel it in my stomach and sometimes in my chest. But recently, I have been receiving these images and feelings whenever I was around you. I could even find you in a crowd or over long distances without ever knowing your exact location," explains Hannah. "I could see the sphere around you."

“Sounds like you’re a parasensor,” says Ryan.

“A what,” asks Hannah.

“A parasensor: someone who can sense the location of people who have a strong psychic vibe,” says Ryan. “I met a man recently who could do the same thing. Well... he found me.”

“There’s others like me and you?” asks Hannah.

“I think so, but not many. There may be heaps of people all over the world who have some degree of psychic ability, but nothing significant. But I reckon there are people out there with parabilities just like you and me,” says Ryan. “*Really* good ones.”

“Tell me about this man you met,” asks Hannah. “You said he found you?”

“Yeah, I was at the Conscious Living Expo this year and he just appeared. He said he could see what I saw, and some other stuff which freaked me out a little, but I still sort of knew what he was talking about,” says Ryan. “His name was Francis Campbell.”

Ryan frowns and looks away from Hannah.

“What’s the matter?” asks Hannah, sensing Ryan’s sudden change of mood. She turns his head around to face her again. He has tears in his eyes.

“Hey, come on, talk to me, tell me what’s wrong,” says Hannah, sympathetically.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Ryan, covering his feelings, but knowing that Hannah will see through his false expression. “I was just remembering something. It’s not important.”

“No, please, tell me, that’s what I’m here for,” says Hannah, rubbing her hand along Ryan’s back. “If you don’t share your feelings, you’ll just make yourself feel worse.”

Ryan’s sad eyes look up at Hannah; she smiles warmly.

“Campbell said he could help me develop my parability. At first I was cautious, and I should have trusted my intuition. He invited me to stay with him at his country retreat, down south, half way to Esperance. He treated me really well, was helpful and supportive, and I really needed someone then; I was prepared to trust him,” explains Ryan.

“He hurt you, didn’t he?” says Hannah.

Ryan nods his head silently.

“So that’s where you went that weekend I couldn’t find you,” says Hannah.

“Yeah,” replies Ryan, “I suppose you suspected I was hiding something all that time?”

“I was just worried,” says Hannah. “I wanted to know you were OK. We were meant to be friends, and friends tell each other the things that are troubling them. I could... parasense you from Perth.”

“From Perth!” asks Ryan. “You can parasense that far?”

Hannah says nothing and just looks back into the flames.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I didn’t know how you would react. How was I supposed to know that you would understand me,” says Ryan. “How could I know that you were a parasensor?”

“You could have asked?” says Hannah, dryly.

Ryan smiles, showing that he does not find Hannah’s joke funny. “Yeah right: Oh Hannah, I can make a psychic bubble around my whole body, what can you do? Doesn’t really have that gentle approach now, does it?” says Ryan.

“Well not like that, stupid,” says Hannah. “Anyone would have been freaked out.”

“Well it doesn’t matter now anyway, we both know each other’s secret and everything seems to be OK between us,” says Ryan.

Hannah raises a little smile and flicks one of her eyes brows up, then she looks down to the fire. “Yes, it does,” she says, cheekily.

Ryan tackles Hannah playfully to the ground and she laughs in surprise. Ryan tickles her a little and they roll around for a while. They soon stop and Hannah is lying over Ryan. She leans in and kisses him.

“Thanks,” says Ryan, when their lips finally part, “thanks for understanding, it means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome, Ryan Falconer,” says Hannah. “So, what will you do from here?”

"I don't know really. I can't think of anyone who could help us," says Ryan, "except maybe... Cameron?"

"Cameron?" asks Hannah. "Your friend from uni?"

"Yeah, he knows about it too, though he is not like us. But he understands. I told him a while ago and he was helping me get a grip on things. He says he knows some people who could help me if I really wanted it," says Ryan. "Looks like I might have to take a chance."

"Oh, so you can tell him but not me?" asks Hannah.

"Don't be like that, Hannah," pleads Ryan. "I went to him because he works at PsiCom and—"

Hannah chuckles lightly, which throws Ryan off.

"I'm only joking, silly," says Hannah.

Ryan stops and thinks for a moment. Whatever did happen to Cameron? He told Ryan to wait while he went out to get pizza. He said it was OK for Ryan to wait, and that no one ever came to PsiCom at night...

"Listen, I want to help you too," offers Hannah. "I could be helpful, with my... para...bility?"

Ryan refocuses on the conversation with Hannah, but is still contemplating his memories of Saturday night.

"Um... yeah. I'd really like that," replies Ryan.

Hannah moves closer to Ryan and they begin kissing passionately again.

A while later, they start to ease off as they become tired and ready for sleep. They pull the rug over them so that it is warm and snug. The fire continues to burn quietly beside them in the sand. The night sky is filled with millions of stars, and the moon glows brightly overhead. Ryan and Hannah become comfortable next to each other. Hannah lies on her side, spooning Ryan from behind. They both stare into the fire and allow the flames to draw them in. Within moments, Ryan is sound asleep.

"Hey Ryan..." says Hannah.

But Ryan does not reply.

"You mean a lot to me too."

She strokes his hair gently a few times and then closes her eyes and goes to sleep.

Campbell comes rushing out of the back room at his house in Lake Grace, the electrodes still stuck to his forehead and their wires dangling in his face.

"I've found them," exclaims Campbell.

"How?" asks Curtis. "I thought you couldn't parasense them this far out?"

"I couldn't, but I've been working with the machine. It gave me that extra little boost I needed, but I still had to catch her out," says Campbell, making a point with his finger.

"What do you mean?" asks Curtis.

"They must have fallen asleep..." Campbell says, almost to himself. "Perhaps that young girl has a few more tricks up her sleeves than I thought."

Curtis looks at Campbell, unsure of what he means. "Shall we go and get them now?"

"No, they are going to find Cameron," says Campbell.

"The machine gave you a little super hearing power too, huh?" asks Curtis.

Campbell smiles and nods his head. "Just for a moment—it must be one of the side effects this machine produces every now and then. Now get on the phone to Cameron."

Curtis picks up the phone and dials.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Cameron, it's Curtis," he says cheerfully. "How would you like to receive a visit from some very important people, say a couple of paraheads?"

"Ahh, that would be wonderful," replies Cameron, understanding the hinting in Curtis's voice. "Will you and the good Doctor be joining us?"

Curtis looks across to Campbell, who is now gazing out of the window and across the wheat fields. Campbell says nothing. His face lifts into a softened smile.

"Yes," replies Curtis, "I think we will."

The sounds of the waves wake Hannah from a peaceful sleep. The sun's light now warms the sand on the beach. The fire is well and truly out and the bird life of the area flies

through the morning air. Hannah stirs some more upon the rug and realizes that Ryan is already up; where he is though, she cannot tell.

The currents gurgle past him and his memories come flooding back. He has done this kind of swimming before. He remembers how it scared his father years ago at Cottesloe Beach. Ryan's feet droop down toward the sea floor. His parashield is at full size and covering his entire body in luminescent blue. The schools of herring and other white fish dart by him, creating spectacular underwater dance choreography. Some of the smaller fish follow in the wake of the parashield as if it is a larger marine creature. Ryan floats through the water calmly, the glassy surface of the ocean rippling a couple of meters above him, and the sand stirring as he passes.

After Ryan finishes having his fun, he targets in on a healthy looking catch and remains still, waiting for it to approach through the misty water. The parashield suddenly explodes open and engulfs the large fish; Ryan grasps it in his hands and slowly wills the parashield back in. The fish wriggles madly in his hands. Ryan heads back toward the surface.

Hannah is sitting on the rug and watching the fire, which she has fueled with more wood and lighted again. She looks up and focuses upon the crashing waves on the shore. A large rounded object rises from beneath the water. The water falls off, exposing Ryan's head and face. Hannah stands up and starts walking toward him.

Ryan continues to wade through the shallows, his body completely dry, and the fish still in his hand. As he steps out of the water, the parashield fades and the waves run past his feet.

Hannah greets him with a kiss. "Good morning. Been for a swim have you?"

"And I got breakfast," continues Ryan, holding up the fish.

"Great, I'm starving," says Hannah, taking Ryan by his free hand.

He stops her and pulls her back to him. She turns and looks up at him, smiling. He leans in and kisses her. The waves flow around their feet and cause them to sink into the sand a little way.

“Come on, you big, salty sea monster,” says Hannah, stepping down from her tiptoes. “Let’s cook this fish up, the fire is going again.”

Ryan and Hannah both walk back over to their camping site.

Chapter 10

Perth, Western Australia
8th December 2011

The speedometer sits steadily on ninety kilometers per hour. Hannah checks the rear view mirror for the nth time and settles her eyes back on the road before her. Ryan stares out of the passenger window. A song on the radio finishes and the news breaks for the hour. The presenter introduces the headlines, one of which mentions the incident at PsiCom on Saturday night. Ryan sits up attentively in the seat and increases the volume of the radio.

“...detectives believe they may have a strong lead, which was given to them by a member of the public.”

Ryan switches the radio off and sits back into his seat. He sighs anxiously.

“Don’t worry, Ryan,” says Hannah. “We’ll sort everything out when we find Cameron.”

“Yeah, that is if the cops don’t find me first.”

Hannah pauses; she thinks hard to find some comforting words. “Look on the bright side. Even if the cops do find you, I can speak in your favor. So can Cam and—”

“Who?” asks Ryan, quickly.

“and whoever was with you on Saturday night,” continues Hannah. “What about Curtis and Patrick?”

Ryan shakes his head sadly. “Somehow I don’t think Curtis will speak in favor of me. And Patrick... well...”

Hannah glances over at Ryan. “Mmm? Well what?”

“I haven’t told you everything yet, Hannah,” says Ryan, looking at her quickly and then back out of the window. “I’ve only told you about Campbell. There’s more.”

“Well, don’t leave me in the dark, tell me,” insists Hannah.

Ryan takes a deep breath. "Well, I'm not exactly one hundred percent sure, but my intuition is telling me it might be true."

"Mmm, go on."

"I think Curtis is somehow involved with Campbell."

"What!" Hannah bursts out. "Are you fucking kidding me? What makes you think that?"

"Um... this might not be a good time to tell you, seeing that you're driving and all. Plus it's not the happiest thing," explains Ryan.

Hannah applies the brakes firmly and moves onto the shoulder of the road. The car comes to a halt. Hannah looks at Ryan in anticipation. Ryan licks his lips once and starts to speak. Several cars whip past on the road from both directions.

"Patrick is dead, Hannah," he says quietly. "I was standing right there when Curtis pulled the trigger."

Hannah's eyes swell with tears and her lower lip begins to quiver.

"What?" says Hannah in disbelief. "Are you kidding me?"

Ryan shakes his head gently, his eyes locked onto Hannah's. "He tried to kill me too, but my parashield saved me. It was only after he realised he couldn't shoot me that he aimed the gun at Patrick."

Hannah looks away slowly and down into her lap. Ryan places his hand carefully onto her shoulder. She makes no immediate response to his touch, but then turns to face him again.

"When you found me running from the apartment block, that's when—"

"No, I know," interrupts Hannah. "I sensed it... I think. I could see it happening, almost like a dream."

Ryan's eyes squint slightly.

"Why did he want to kill you? Why did he kill Patrick?"

"I don't know for sure," replies Ryan, shrugging, "but I remember Curtis saying something like, 'I'm finished,' but, at the time, I didn't know what he meant. I can only guess that Curtis is involved with Campbell. He's the only other person who knows about my parability, and why else would someone

want to kill me? I know Campbell must be after me; he's not stupid, he must have fooled Curtis into helping him somehow, but how did he team up with him?

"Patrick was innocent," continues Ryan. "He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I suppose Curtis didn't want any witnesses."

Hannah looks through the front windscreen, scratches her cheekbone lightly, and continues staring into the distance.

"But when he shot Patrick—" Ryan pauses, and a few tears drop from his eyes onto his shirt. "I tried to save him, Hannah, but I was just so scared. I was so scared—"

"Shhh." Hannah places her finger over his lips and rubs her other hand over his shoulder. "It's not your fault. You had no way of knowing."

Ryan slumps and weeps into his hands. "I hate this gift. Sometimes I wish I never had it. It's given me so many problems."

"Hey," Hannah lifts his face up to look at her, "that's no way for a super hero to talk."

Ryan breaks into a small laugh, and Hannah smiles reassuringly at him. His smile fades again. "I'm no super hero, Hannah. I'm just a guy who happens to have the ability to blow big bubbles with my mind. What's the big deal about that?"

"It's a big enough deal for Campbell and Curtis, if they're serious enough to want you dead. Maybe you should start making it a big deal for you too?"

Ryan looks down at his feet miserably.

"I don't want this kind of life, Hannah," says Ryan, looking back up at her. "It's too hard. I just want a normal life. I'm not ready to take responsibility for all this power."

"What? And you think I don't know what you're going through too? I know my parability is nowhere near as powerful as yours, but I still have to deal with it."

"I suppose you're right," says Ryan.

"And besides, we still live pretty normal lives don't we? I mean, we go to university, we socialize with other people, and we don't break the law—"

Ryan looks at Hannah ironically.

“Well, nothing has been proven yet,” Hannah continues, “and we both know you haven’t done anything wrong, so cheer up, *you are normal*, even if you can blow bubbles with your mind.”

They both smile.

“Thanks,” says Ryan, “but I might not have the chance to prove myself not guilty. You heard the news; the cops are looking for me. They think I was the one who stole the stuff from PsiCom. No doubt Campbell tipped them off. But how did he know?”

“He probably parasensed you,” says Hannah. “He was probably waiting for the right moment, and he just happened to find an opportunity and then he took it when you were at PsiCom.”

“It’s seems a little too convenient to me,” says Ryan.

“You said he was a clever man,” says Hannah.

“Mmm. I just don’t know. Turning myself in is starting to look like a much better idea,” says Ryan. “At least that way I’ll get Campbell off my back.”

“No way! That’s exactly what he wants,” says Hannah. “He knows you’re a threat to him.”

“He wants to control me at any cost,” says Ryan.

“And if he can’t have that... dead,” ends Hannah.

“But you don’t know what it’s like to have someone always knowing where you are. There’s no way I can stop him finding me, it’s just a matter of time,” says Ryan.

“Don’t give up yet. We’ll find someone who will believe us. I know it’s a pretty far fetched idea, but someone has to believe it.”

“I know. It’s just that I’m getting weary of all this shit, Hannah.”

“We can still clear things up with Cameron,” says Hannah. “That’s a good start.”

“Yes, Cameron,” echoes Ryan. “Let’s go see him. Things might take a turn in my favor once we find him.”

“And Ryan,” says Hannah, touching his face softly, “I believe you.”

Ryan takes her hand and kisses it. He smiles thankfully. Hannah puts the car into drive and checks the mirrors before driving off down the highway again.

A police vehicle pulls up outside the Falconer home and two officers step out of the car and onto the street. They check the address and open the gate leading into the front yard. The first officer reaches the verandah and presses the doorbell; he waits. The second officer stands behind and to the side of the first; he looks over the courtyard.

"Nice place."

The first officer nods, and turns back to the front door as it opens. Isabelle stands inside the doorway.

"Good morning, Mrs. Falconer," says the first officer. "I'm Sergeant Constable James, and this is my partner, Constable Clifford. I was hoping your son, Ryan, might be home?"

"Ah... no he's not. I'm sorry," replies Isabelle. "Is there something wrong? He's not hurt is he?"

"Not that we know of Mrs. Falconer," says Const. Clifford.

"We just wanted to ask him a few questions, but since he is not here, maybe we could talk with you?" says Sgt. Const. James.

"Um... sure, what's this all about?" asks Isabelle.

"Do you mind if we come in, Mrs. Falconer?" asks Sgt. Const. James, already stepping forward into the house. "We won't take too much of your time, we just want to help your son."

"Why... of course, please come in," says Isabelle.

The two officers walk into the house and the door closes.

Hundreds of travelers scurry about the lobby of the Perth International Airport. The check-in lines are full, passengers appear at the arrival gates, and the baggage collection area is a swarm of people collecting their suitcases and other pieces of luggage. The travelers stand by waiting for their personal items to appear on the black conveyor belt. At their feet a young girl drops her toy and squats to pick it up while adults walk by

without noticing her. A man and a woman stand together at the front of the collection area.

A female's voice comes over the sound system. "Passengers flying to New Zealand on flight 353, your plane is now boarding through gate five."

The man looks up and listens to the announcement. "What do you think? Do we get on that plane and go home now? Marcus and Maria won't mind," says the German man in jest.

"Very funny, but we just got here," says the woman, "and you know they were very persistent about you coming to Australia. You don't want to just waste the opportunity to have a look around do you?"

"I suppose not," says the man. "We can go back to New Zealand next week, and who knows, we might get lucky while we're here?"

The man and woman stand in silence for a moment.

"Look, here comes my bag."

A suitcase rolls around the corner and the man picks it up.

"Make sure it's yours. You don't want grab the wrong one," says the woman.

The man checks the tag. *K. Baumgartner*.

"Yes, Sandra, it's mine."

"I've been trying for the last ten minutes," says Ryan.

"Keep trying," insists Hannah.

They approach the city in Hannah's car, traveling along the Mitchell Freeway and soon pass over the Narrows Bridge and enter the southern side of the Swan River.

Ryan looks out of the window at the Exhibition Center. 'That's where this all started,' he thinks to himself. He hits redial on his phone and receives the same recorded message.

"The mobile phone you are calling is either off or not in a receivable location. Please try again later."

"No, same thing," says Ryan.

"Maybe we should swing by his apartment?" asks Hannah.

"I don't know where he lives. We're just going have to go back to my place in the meantime and wait for him to answer his phone," says Ryan.

"Is that safe?" asks Hannah.

"What? Waiting for Cam to answer his phone?"

"No stupid, going to your house," says Hannah.

"Oh, you're right, can we go to your house instead? Will anyone be home?"

"We can go there, it should be OK, my room mates will be at work or at uni," replies Hannah.

Ryan dials Cameron's number again and places the phone to his ear.

"It's ringing!" exclaims Ryan, excitedly.

"Finally," says Hannah, rolling her eyes.

Ryan waits for Cameron to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Cameron!"

"Who's this?"

"It's Ryan. Oh, am I relieved to finally get a hold of you."

"Ryan? Where have you been? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine, I've been out of the city for the weekend."

"You know the police are looking for us?" says Cameron.

"Us?" says Ryan. "They're looking for you too?"

"Hell yeah. Did you think I would get off easily? They know I was there—they checked the access code logs. The cops want me for questioning too. They think I stole the equipment from PsiCom and that I was involved in Saturday night's supposed 'break-in'."

"But couldn't you just tell them what happened?" asks Ryan.

"Not that simple, mate. They need someone to put the blame on at this place and I just happen to be a perfect candidate," explains Cameron.

"Where have you been?" asks Ryan.

"I've been hiding too. That's why I wasn't answering my phone. I just turned it on to check the messages—lucky you called when you did."

"Cam, this is pretty scary. Can we meet up somewhere?" asks Ryan.

“Yes, but not just yet, in a couple of hours. I’ve got to get home first and make sure everything feels safe enough,” explains Cameron.

“You’re not at home?”

“No, I went to a friend’s house after I knew the cops were after us. I tried contacting you, but I couldn’t find you after Saturday night. What happened anyway? One moment I’m walking down the street with a couple of pizzas and there are cops everywhere, then BOOM! I see the side of PsiCom explode into the street. I tried looking for you, but it got a little sticky when the cops started searching the streets and asking bystanders questions, so I had to get out of there. When I saw the news report I decided my place was not the best spot to hang out at. And where the hell is Curtis and Patrick?”

“I don’t know where Curtis is—but Patrick’s dead, Cameron.”

“What?”

“Curtis shot him on Saturday night after we were been at PsiCom.”

“I don’t understand. Why did he—”

“I don’t know why either, but I know Curtis tried to kill me too. I believe it has something to do with—” Ryan looks across to Hannah “—my parability.”

Hannah glances quickly at Ryan, “Does he know about Campbell?” she mouths silently.

Ryan shakes his head back at Hannah.

“How the hell does Curtis know about that?” asks Cameron.

“How should I know?” says Ryan, “I can only think that he and—”

“Don’t tell him, he doesn’t know yet,” interrupts Hannah.

“I have to sooner or later,” says Ryan.

“What? Is someone there with you, Ryan?”

“Ah, yeah, Hannah is,” says Ryan. “She came with me while I was hiding.”

“Does she know about all this?” asks Cameron.

“Yeah, she knows,” says Ryan. “She knows what you know, Cam. She’s a little like me, if you know what I mean?”

“All right. This is getting weird. First the police want us, second Curtis has shot Patrick and nearly you, and third, Hannah is a paraperson as well?” says Cameron. “What is going on?”

“I don’t know,” says Ryan, “but hopefully if we get together, we can work something out. I thought I could go to the police and you would back my story up, get me off the hook, but that plan is hopeless now that they want you too. What are we going to do?”

“I’ll tell you what, Ryan, meet me at my apartment at one o’clock this afternoon and we’ll figure out our next move.” He pauses. “Oh, and bring Hannah too, we might need her.”

Ryan jots down the address while Cameron gives him the details over the phone.

“All right, see you then,” says Ryan.

The call ends sharply, surprising Ryan a little.

Sgt. Const. James steps out onto the verandah with Const. Clifford following behind. Isabelle remains in the entry and leans against the doorframe.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Falconer,” says Sgt. Const. James. “We appreciate it very much.”

“You’re welcome, officers,” replies Isabelle, staring out into the courtyard.

“Will you be all right,” asks Const. Clifford.

“What?” asks Isabelle, snapping out of the stare. “Oh, yes, I’ll be fine. It’s just a little all too much to take in at once.”

“We understand,” says Sgt. Const. James, “and if you have any questions or if you need to talk, don’t hesitate to call us. I’m sure Ryan will turn up eventually.”

“Yes, all right, thank you,” replies Isabelle, making an effort to smile.

“Good day, ma’am,” say the officers, and exit the front yard through the gate.

Isabelle watches from a small gap in the doorway as the officers leave, and then she closes the door shut.

The officers get back in their car.

"How did it go," asks Tampalini, sitting in the back.

"Fine, she was quite helpful."

"She didn't seem as surprised as I thought she would."

"It doesn't matter," says Campbell. "We only needed to check in, and we've done that."

"Do you think he'll come home?" asks Tampalini.

"Not likely. He's probably hiding somewhere, trying to figure out what to do next," says Campbell. "Ah, thank you Sergeant, you can return us to the station now if you like."

The car starts and begins to move off down the road. A cell phone rings in the back seat.

"Hello? Oh wonderful. Yes, yes, I'll be there. I look forward to it. Thank you, Curtis, good bye." Campbell ends the call. "Well Dr. Tampalini, it looks like our luck has changed. Our friend Master Falconer has shown up. We will be meeting him later today."

"How fortunate for us," says Dr. Tampalini. "Shall I invite our kind friends to come with us, yes?"

"Please do," says Campbell, looking at the officers in the front. "We don't want any more unwanted explosions now, do we?"

The officers in the front chuckle at the joke.

"You just make sure he can't use his special little gift on us, and I'll make sure you get all the laboratory privacy you want," says Tampalini.

"Understood, Doctor. It's going to be a fine afternoon after all. Don't you think so Sergeant?"

The police vehicle turns the corner of the street and heads back toward the city.

The day reaches its highest temperature. The air is dry and warm and the sea breeze dies down. In the city, the sun reflects off the concrete buildings and the glass windows. A mirage of water drifts up off the black bitumen road on the horizon. People walk the sidewalks with sedated strides and wipe the sweat from their brows. Cars on the freeway passing by add to the heat wave. A few cars have blown head gaskets and

passengers are sitting idly on fences, waiting for the Royal Automobile Club service car to arrive.

Klaus and Sandra eat some sandwiches in the Harold Boas Gardens in West Perth, a very luscious park with artificial ponds and waterfalls, soft green grasses, and tall trees.

"It's beautiful here," comments Sandra, sitting back on the park bench.

Klaus munches away on his food while inspecting the view. "Yes, but I don't understand how these people can live here with all these flies." He swats his hand around his face every few seconds.

"Just be grateful that we found somewhere in the shade," says Sandra.

A car approaches on the street next to the gardens; it races up to the front of an apartment building and stops with a small skid of its wheels.

The car momentarily distracts Sandra; she takes another bite from her sandwich and stares at the young man and woman inside the car. She starts to chew her food much slower and her stare increases in focus. She swallows.

"Klaus," Sandra whispers, still caught in her stare and placing her hand onto Klaus' leg. "Look over there..."

"I don't see anything," he replies, continuing with his food.

"With your mind, stupid."

Klaus frowns at Sandra, but takes another look across the street. His eyes gently squint as he concentrates upon the young man and woman as they get out of the car and walk across the road.

"Oh my god!"

Ryan and Hannah walk carefully toward the entrance of the apartment, a little exhausted and trying to remain unnoticed. Ryan presses the doorbell for Cameron's unit: *Fifty-six*. They wait in what little shade is provided by the entrance porch. Hannah drinks from her bottle of water and passes it to Ryan, who finishes the rest off. The speaker box in the wall crackles lightly.

“Hello?” says Cameron.

“Cam, it’s us, Ryan and Hannah.”

“Oh good. Hang on, I’ll let you in.”

The door buzzes and Ryan pushes it open. Hannah follows him into the apartment lobby. The security door clicks shut. Ryan presses the elevator button and waits. Hannah looks back out through the glass entrance doors.

“What’s the matter,” asks Ryan.

Hannah jolts lightly as her awareness returns back into the room.

“I don’t know. Probably just a bit nervous.”

The elevator arrives and they both step inside. Ryan presses for the eighth floor and the doors close smoothly. The small screen on the interior wall shows the red floor number increasing slowly.

Hannah shuts her eyes and then tightens them. An image flashes in her mind. It comes again in breaks. “Ryan, I think I’m... parasensing someone, they’re close. I’ve never seen this kind of signature before.”

“Can you make out who it is?” asks Ryan.

“No. It’s gone,” says Hannah, shaking her head.

The doors of the elevator open onto the eighth floor.

“Come on, let’s go see Cameron. We don’t have much time to waste,” says Ryan, taking Hannah by the arm, who is still in a slight daze.

“But there’s—”

Ryan approaches Cameron’s apartment door and knocks. The door opens without delay.

“Come in—quick. Did anyone see you?” asks Cameron.

“No,” replies Ryan. “No one was around.”

“Good. Hannah how are you?” asks Cameron, as Ryan and Hannah step into the main room.

“Good thanks, Cam. Thank you for helping us,” replies Hannah.

“Please sit down. Can I get you a drink of cold water,” asks Cameron. “It’s a bloody hot day.”

Ryan says yes for himself and for Hannah, who seems distracted and goes to look at the street below.

“We know, we’ve been driving around in it for most of today,” says Ryan, who sits on the couch and looks out through the sliding doors leading onto the balcony. But I’d much rather the heat than this trouble we’ve got ourselves into.”

“Yes,” replies Cameron, going into the kitchen, “it is a bit tricky, but I think I have found a way to clear our names.”

“Phew, let’s hear it then,” calls Ryan, who notices Hannah is standing at the sliding doors with her hand on the glass.

“Hannah, you all right?” Ryan whispers.

“Shhh,” replies Hannah, “I’m getting something.”

Hannah relaxes her mind until her thoughts become less distracted. Her head turns slowly to the side, as if she is listening for a far away and faint sound. She breathes in softly and her face shows signs of searching and a heightened level of concentration.

“What do you see?” asks Ryan, quietly.

“Shhh... I can see them,” she says. “I think they’re... looking for us.”

“Who?” asks Ryan.

“I don’t know who they are, but they’re friendly,” replies Hannah.

“How do you know that,” asks Ryan.

“I just do, but there is something else, something... is stopping me from getting through. There’s someone else too,” she says, her head swaying in thought. She looks up at Ryan eagerly.

“Ryan, my parability is starting to—”

“Here’s your drinks,” blurts Cameron, returning from the kitchen holding two glasses of water with ice. He hands one to Ryan, who indicates discretely not to interrupt Hannah. Cameron sets the other glass on the coffee table and stands back.

“Sorry,” whispers Cameron. “What’s up with her?”

Ryan holds his index finger to his lips and makes a gesture to Cameron to wait a moment. Ryan looks back over to Hannah.

“Well, I’m really sorry” Cameron says, “but we don’t have time to diddle dally around all day.”

Hannah's eyes open, fully aware. "Campbell," she mouths to herself, her eyes widening in surprise and then horror.

"What's your plan, Cameron?" asks Ryan, a little exasperated, but understanding the situation.

"Well, I'm glad you asked, Ryan," starts Cameron. "If we are going to get out of this one, there is just a little something that we are going to have to do first. As you know, I have mentioned I have friends who could help us—or rather you—with your special situation."

Ryan looks at Cameron in anticipation, waiting for him to continue.

"Ryan, we have to go, now," Hannah suddenly interrupts.

Ryan's attention switches across to Hannah quickly. She glares back at him, ignoring Cameron who is standing across the room. Ryan mumbles some words while trying to comprehend Hannah's change of attitude. He starts to rise from the couch.

"Are you sure?" asks Ryan, trying to fathom Hannah's thoughts. "We only just got here, and we've got no where else to go. I thought we agreed that Cameron was going to help us."

"I realize all that," says Hannah, gritting her teeth, "but—"

"What could be more important than—"

"Hannah," starts Cameron, his hand extending sympathetically, "why don't you just sit down and—"

Hannah grabs Ryan by the arm forcefully.

"Campbell's coming!" she shouts.

"In a rush to be somewhere, Ryan?" says a familiar voice, cutting through the intensity of the room.

Ryan's eyes look up at Hannah and his head slowly turns around. His face fills with shock when he sees Curtis walking into the main room from the back of the apartment.

"You!" Ryan shouts scornfully. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to help," replies Curtis.

Hannah freezes behind Ryan, still holding his arm firmly.

"Don't try and get all friendly now," snaps Ryan. "You stay the fuck away from me, I don't trust you at all. Cam, what the hell is he doing here?" he says, continuing to direct his beaming stare at Curtis.

“Ryan, I know this is going to be difficult,” says Cameron, in a calming tone, “but you have to see—”

“You’re lucky it’s me the cops are after,” interrupts Ryan, angrily, “otherwise I’d—”

“You’d what?” Curtis provokes, pulling a handgun out from behind his back and pointing it at Ryan.

“Don’t try to scare me with that,” says Ryan, changing his tone. “We both know what I can do.”

“Yes, I remember,” says Curtis, mockingly, and points the gun aim at Hannah, “but I wonder if she has that same ability too? Or if you’ll be able to protect her in time?”

Hannah cowers behind Ryan.

“No, I didn’t think so,” finishes Curtis.

Ryan pleads, “Cameron, aren’t you going to do something? He’s dangerous. He killed Patrick!”

“Ah... yes, about that,” starts Cameron. “Well, there has been some confusion, mostly on your part, but I don’t think I’m the best person to explain everything to you.”

“I don’t catch your meaning,” says Ryan. “I thought we were coming here to figure out this situation with the police?”

“Well, we are, in a way,” says Cameron, “but before we do that, I think there are some other issues we need to clear up first, but I’ll leave that up to—”

“Me.”

The sound of the apartment door shutting registers inside Ryan’s brain, but it is the voice that sends an acidic feeling through his nerves. His face goes white and his body breaks into a cold sweat; his feet stick to the floor. He does not need to turn his head to see who it is; he knows that voice.

‘Campbell,’ Hannah recognizes, now staring at the man standing in the room.

“Good afternoon all, what a bothersome day it’s turned out to be,” says Campbell, quite cheerily, “and even more so for some, by the looks of it.”

He goes and sits at the table across from the couches where Ryan is still standing, his eyes following Campbell across the

room with intense trepidation. Campbell takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his brow. He does not look at Ryan.

"And how are you Master Falconer? Still trying to live a *normal* life?" asks Campbell. "I know it can be a bit difficult at times, especially with your... special situation."

Cameron and Curtis snicker. Ryan's eyes flick across to Cameron, who looks at him inquisitively.

"Hannah, we're going," says Ryan. "Keep behind me."

Ryan starts to move toward the door, still facing the room, his eyes darting between Campbell, Curtis, and Cameron. Hannah holds onto Ryan's shirt from behind, making sure she does not expose herself to Curtis' gun. Ryan looks at Cameron again with a glare almost forming in his eyes. He shakes his head slowly from side to side, then turns and goes to open the apartment door.

"Don't you want to know why I'm here, Ryan?" asks Campbell, looking out the window casually.

Ryan's hand stops inches from the door handle.

"You can't run forever you know," continues Campbell. "How long could you deny yourself answers? At what point would logic override your need to complete your search, and force you to return here and demand an explanation?"

"An explanation of what?" asks Ryan, turning round and facing Campbell, and trying to retain his fury.

"Of this," replies Campbell, gesturing to Curtis and Cameron.

Ryan looks at his two friends from university.

Curtis is standing against the wall with the gun at his side, and Cameron is sitting on the arm of the couch, his true character now showing on his face.

"Please, hear what I have to say," starts Campbell. "I need to feel complete within myself too, and after I have finished you can walk right out of here and you'll never have to see me again."

"Like I'm going to believe that coming from you," says Ryan.

"I promise," states Campbell.

"Your word is worthless to me," says Ryan.

“Then I demand that you sit down and listen,” says Campbell, raising his voice and looking at Curtis, who moves away from the wall and takes aim with the gun again. Campbell then looks at Cameron, who also stands and retrieves a handgun from the back of his waist and steps around to flank Ryan and Hannah.

“I know you can repel a few bullets, but you can’t keep it up for long,” says Campbell.

Ryan dips his head in surrender and is about to take his first step toward the table where Campbell is sitting. Hannah quickly grabs him and pulls him back.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I’ve got to do this, Hannah. We’ve no other choice,” whispers Ryan. “Plus he’s right—I don’t think I could stop them both.”

Hannah begins to let him go, dropping her arm to her side. “All right. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Ryan moves across the room, with Hannah close behind. He passes Curtis with caution. Curtis points his gun at Hannah.

“Uh-uh,” says Curtis, indicating for her to stop. Ryan pauses at the table and looks back at Hannah.

“She won’t get hurt,” says Campbell. “I assure you I just want to make this a man to man talk. Cameron will take care of her.”

Cameron smiles sleazily at Hannah, who looks back at him in disgust.

Ryan finally sits down slowly in a seat opposite Campbell, aware of Hannah’s vulnerability.

Ryan takes a deep breath. Campbell looks directly at Ryan for the first time since he entered the room, and a weak smile crosses his face. The room falls quiet, allowing the soft hissing of the cooling system to be heard in the background. Ryan swallows, waiting for Campbell to begin.

“Perhaps I should start at the beginning?” says Campbell, “but I’ll leave out the parts about Laetitia; you already know about her. There are more important aspects to this story.”

“I’m listening,” says Ryan, placing his hands on the table and relaxing back into the seat.

"You have your father's hair," states Campbell.

"What has that got to do with anything," asks Ryan, hiding his hatred.

"Nothing much actually," returns Campbell. "I just thought it would be a good place to start."

"What do you mean by that?" asks Ryan.

"Ryan, I know more about you than you would care to admit."

"Enlighten me."

Campbell pauses before continuing. "Do you know how I found you?"

"Yes, it was at the Conscious Living Expo."

"Wrong. I've known about you for much longer than that. And I didn't find you like I did Laetitia. I came across you in a way that any non-parapsychic could; in other words, I didn't parasense you. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and I also had the advantage of being able to see an opportunity that others couldn't, but that was because of my parability." Then he said, "Did your parents ever tell you about your birth?"

"They said it was complicated, but that there were never any repercussions," replies Ryan. "So?"

"They were right, but you almost didn't make it."

"How did *you* come to be so informed about my birth?" asks Ryan.

"I'm glad you asked. You see, before my interest in parapsychology, I was a practicing doctor at a hospital here in Perth. And would you believe it? That is where I first found you, on the day of your birth. Of course you couldn't have known, and you couldn't have known about all the other times I was present in your life. I didn't want to make my presence felt, not then anyway."

Outside on the street, two unmarked police cars arrive at the apartment building. Two officers in uniform remain at the cars and five plain-clothes men enter through the lobby doors. Klaus and Sandra take up a closer position, but remain unnoticed.

"What's going on?" whispers Sandra.

"I don't know," replies Klaus, "but what about those two kids. Did you feel their parabilities?"

"Shhh, the police will see us. I did, and what about the older man."

"Yes, he was a paraperson for sure, but not as strong as most. Let's wait here until they come out and then we'll approach them," says Klaus.

"It's strange," says Sandra.

"What is," asks Klaus.

"The kids are trying to get away from the police for something they didn't do," says Sandra. "The boy's head was filled with concern about it. And the older man wants to—"

They watch as the men enter the building and Sandra attempts to read the officers still standing outside.

"Oh no," says Sandra, quietly. "Klaus, they're being set up!"

Cameron walks over to the balcony windows and looks down onto the street, then returns to his place near Campbell.

"But yes, I know about your birth, I was the assistant doctor in the delivery room. It was really quite amazing watching from a parasensor's point of view. It was the start of my own conviction regarding my own parability. And I became more and more convinced as I watched you growing up that there were others like me. Your accident at the beach when you were five, and defeating the school bully in the locker room during your teens—I saw it all from a distance. I saw other little things that you don't remember, things that the mind has an unfortunate tendency to deny; all these events spurred me on.

"I thought I could weave myself into your life with the aim of understanding your parability and my own. But I had to be careful; I didn't want to expose myself, in case, for some reason, I was just plain wrong about you, and I didn't to frighten you off. And that is where these two come into the picture," says Campbell, lifting his finger and indicating behind him.

"By now you must have an idea of what I had planned for you? However, things change and so do people. I underestimated you. And how could I predict this little

princess?" says Campbell, turning to Hannah. "I don't suppose I could interest you in a partnership?"

"Not on your life," says Hannah, giving Campbell an evil look.

"I didn't think so; no doubt Ryan has told you all about me. No matter."

Cameron gives Campbell a discrete nod.

"I'll finish this up quickly, and then... you can go," says Campbell.

Down on the ground floor the Director of PsiCom, Dr. Tampalini enters the elevator, followed by four police officers. The doors of the elevator close and it begins to ascend.

"I found my opportunity when you enrolled at university. I already had Cameron under my wing for a couple of years by then. We had met at a meeting for the Psychic Development Association and he was very enthusiastic about getting involved."

"Cameron, how could you? I trusted you."

Cameron simply looks away.

"It was later that Curtis would prove helpful, and being in the same course at university was not coincidental. I paid for his admission and offered him, as I had offered Cameron, a chance to develop his own parability."

"But you don't know for sure that it can be done," says Ryan. "Did you tell them that?"

Cameron and Curtis exchange a look between each other.

"I was going to make it possible, with your help," says Campbell.

"But I won't co-operate with you and you can't hold me down either," says Ryan, acknowledging a small victory in the conversation.

"The equipment from PsiCom and my own parability will suffice," says Campbell.

"He's lying to you both, it can't be done," says Ryan. "Parapersons aren't made, they're very rare; don't be fooled by him."

“Don’t listen to him, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” says Campbell, passing Ryan’s comments off as nonsense.

“Cameron, if you were ever my friend, please listen to me now. I know what I’m talking about—”

“Well, that’s just it,” says Cameron. “I never was your friend. I’m only in this for myself. Sorry.”

Any remaining hope in Ryan’s face melts away and his chin sinks toward the table.

“You can’t stop us,” says Hannah, all of a sudden. “Come on, Ryan, this time we are going.”

Hannah pushes past Curtis, who stares blankly down at the floor and strangely fails to respond to her sudden movement.

Hannah picks Ryan up from the chair and pulls him away from the table. Cameron jumps into action, holding his gun directly at Hannah and Ryan. Campbell reaches out and pushes Cameron’s arm back down, shaking his head. Cameron relaxes.

“Well! That’s where you are quite wrong,” says Campbell. “I’ve been waiting a long time to get you, and I am not going to give up so easily. Did you think I wouldn’t come prepared for this?”

Footsteps approach in the hallway and become louder as they head toward the door to Cameron’s apartment.

Ryan and Hannah stop at the door and listen. There is much scuffling on the other side as the lock is tampered with. They step away and move closer to the balcony doors.

Seconds later four police officers come through the door and spread out into the apartment’s main room. Ryan and Hannah creep further back. The police draw their firearms. Dr. Tampalini enters the room and stands next to Campbell.

“Good work, you’re right on time. Our friends were about to leave,” says Campbell.

“All right, arrest those two,” says Tampalini, pointing to Ryan and Hannah.

Two of the officers approach while the others remain at a distance with their guns aimed at the ready. Ryan pulls Hannah close to him. The couch and coffee table suddenly start sliding back across the floor and the two officers with handcuffs ready

are pushed back by an invisible force. Ryan's parashield fills the space around him and Hannah; it continues to grow outward to the walls, pushing over lamps and chairs.

Seeing this, Campbell commands for the police officers to open fire, but the bullets do not come anywhere near to Ryan or Hannah, protected behind the parashield.

"Cameron, Curtis, you too!" directs Campbell.

Cameron starts pulling the trigger, but Curtis is slower, shaking off a small daze of confusion.

"Curtis, what's the matter?" asks Campbell, holding his hands to his ears while the gunshots fill the apartment with deafening blasts.

"I don't know," Curtis replies, aiming his gun and firing away.

Ryan holds the attacks off with all his strength, but he can feel himself weakening already. He knows the parashield will not hold up for much longer.

"We've got to get out of here, Ryan," says Hannah, within the parashield, which also acts as a buffer against the loud gunshots.

"Um, yes that's a very good idea, but how do you propose we do that?" replies Ryan, watching Campbell at the back of the room as the police, Cameron, and Curtis unload round after round onto the sphere of the parashield.

"I think I might know how," says Hannah, looking at the men before them.

From the room's end, Tampalini observes Ryan with a careful eye, trying to concentrate past the officers and gunfire. He then communicates something to Campbell, who nods agreeably.

"Cease fire," shouts Campbell. "Cease your fire."

Smoke drifts up from the guns still aimed at Ryan and Hannah. The floor is littered with shells and bullets. The officers look at Ryan with puzzled eyes, but hold their ground obediently.

"Well, Master Falconer, that's very impressive," says Tampalini, "How would you like to come and work for me at

PsiCom? It might be a very interesting project for both of us. You could live a normal life and develop your parability. How does that sit with you?"

The room is silent for a moment as Ryan ponders over the offer.

"Your name would be cleared," Tampalini continues, "and these officers wouldn't bother you anymore."

"And what about these three? That one's a murderer; he's tried to manipulate me already, and the other one is a liar. They're the ones that should be arrested."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. We already have a deal," replies Tampalini, glancing at Campbell.

"Then we have no deal either," says Ryan.

"Ryan, there's no way out of this building except through us or the authorities," says Campbell.

Ryan turns to Hannah, but her eyes are closed.

"Hannah, what's wrong?"

Hannah raises her hand to Ryan's lips, trying to maintain her concentration.

Ryan addresses Tampalini and Campbell again, but hesitates. "I—"

"Still not sure?" says Campbell. "Fine, I can decide for you. Officers, if you would..."

The four officers approach Ryan and Hannah, their guns in the holster, but this time they are going to attempt a body tackle to bring Ryan down.

"No wait!" cries Ryan.

"Don't worry, Ryan, soon we will be working together," says Campbell. "You just have to realize your limitations, and now just happens to be one of those times."

The officers move in closer and closer, their arms preparing to latch onto Ryan whose parability is now drained and unable to protect him.

Back up officers arrive into the apartment and stand guard.

"Oh, officers," calls Campbell, to the new arrivals, "arrest these two young men."

Cameron and Curtis look at Campbell in complete surprise.

"What?" says Cameron.

The police unarm and handcuff Cameron and Curtis.

“What are you doing Francis?” demands Curtis.

“These two were also involved in the PsiCom robberies, Doctor,” states Campbell.

Cameron and Curtis scoff and complain as they are pushed to the ground and handcuffed. Cameron looks across at Ryan, but Ryan shows no sympathy.

“But I thought you were going to include us?” says Cameron.

“You thought wrong, Master First,” says Campbell. “You still have a lot to learn—maybe you can include that in your Ph.D.”

“Very good. Thank you Dr. Campbell, I’m sure the chief of police will be happy to have that sorted out,” replies Tampalini.

“And now for these two,” says Campbell, glaring across at Ryan and Hannah.

“No,” whispers Hannah.

Inside her mind she can see the mental images of everyone in the room. They emit a low luminosity of electric light, Campbell’s is slightly brighter, and Ryan’s is brighter still. Her parability reaches out and touches the outer core of their psychophysical generators. When her focus becomes stronger, she extends her influence deeper into them, creating a temporary paralyzing effect, a kind of mind strangle over everyone in the room. Her yet to be tamed parapsychological maneuver almost enters Ryan’s mind, but fortunately gains control and withdraws. She holds the officers, Tampalini, Cameron, and Curtis in her mind grasp, but Campbell is harder to invade. She opens her eyes again.

All but Campbell stand like zombies staring into space.

“How did you do that?” asks Ryan.

“I’ve been trying to tell you, my parability has been changing ever since we... were at the caravan park,” replies Hannah, smiling sweetly.

“Oh,” says Ryan, understanding her meaning.

Campbell peers around the room in wonder.

“Arrest them!” he shouts, the panic already evident in his voice.

“Come on, they won’t stay like that for long,” says Hannah, taking Ryan’s hand and heading for the door.

“I said arrest them!”

Campbell tries to shake up a couple of the officers, but they do not respond. Tampalini also has a vacant expression on his face and lacks animation in his body.

Ryan gives Campbell one last look before exiting the apartment with Hannah, who is already at the elevator doors.

“Come on, Ryan,” she calls.

Campbell looks at Ryan with defeated anger.

“So long Francis,” says Ryan, who exits into the hallway and closes the door behind him.

Chapter 11

Harold Boas Gardens, West Perth

8th December 2011

“Klaus, what was that sound?” says Sandra.

Klaus listens carefully.

A triplet of ducks glide down through the summer air and land in the large pond, where an assortment of birds gather. They watch another day pass into afternoon; their feet paddle through the water and they occasionally plonk their heads into the water to catch food.

Sandra looks up at the apartment building across the road. A woman on the top floor takes a cheese platter and a half empty bottle of red wine back inside and closes the balcony doors; the heat is getting too much for her. A group of young nurses from the nearby hospital arrive in another part of the garden for their break.

Klaus and Sandra are watching from behind a large tree. Klaus takes a quick peek to see whether the two young adults are out on one of the balconies; they are not. Unfortunately his parascouting abilities only work when he can see the person he is trying to parasense.

The street is quiet and only a few people are out walking. An elderly couple who have just come from the local shopping center are eating ice creams. Another man is walking his dog, and a small group of teenage boys are riding their skateboards through the garden pathways, attempting various manoeuvres and tricks over stair railings and street curbs.

The afternoon breeze is starting to rush in from the east. The smell of a pizza drifts along the street. Klaus takes in a long sniff. Sandra sits back on a park bench, reading the officers with her parability.

“You hear anything?” asks Sandra, giving up on the officers.

Klaus tightens his face a little bit.

“No,” replies Klaus, dismissing Sandra’s suspicions. He sits down next to her, saying, “It’s really strange, I’ve never parasensed someone before and felt like this. I’m really interested in meeting this guy, whoever he is.”

“And his girlfriend,” continues Sandra, relaxing again. “She successfully blocked all my attempts to read her after my initial attempt, and that’s never happened to me before.”

“She must have a parability which can hide her from parapersons,” comments Klaus. “Keep an eye out, they might step out onto one of these balconies. You might be able to get some more information from his mind.”

Sandra and Klaus watch in silence.

“They’re young, I’d say about twenty years old,” says Sandra, “and they’ve got good intentions, both of them.”

Sandra reaches out with her paraempathic feelers, which spread down the street at the speed of thought. It doesn’t take her long to hone in on some passers by, but she senses only trivial thoughts; there is no one else close by who might be involved with the parapersons inside the apartment building.

“Well, I might not be able to read them now,” says Sandra, “but I’m still getting some weird feelings.”

Klaus ponders over this for a while.

“Just relax, let’s see what happens.”

“I don’t like it, Klaus,” says Sandra. “Something bad is about to happen, even a non-paraperson could feel it. I think those two kids are in danger—we have to do something.”

“I think you’re right. But we can’t just walk inside and announce ourselves. We don’t even know who these people are. Why haven’t we known about them before? I mean, there’s three of them, and for all we know there could be more.”

“Maybe that’s why Marcus and Maria wanted us to come to Australia?” replies Sandra. “Is it possible that he has secret parapersons working for him, who go around finding potential SR members and then sends us in to recruit?”

"I don't think so, Sandra. I mean, we're doing both of those jobs anyway," says Klaus, standing up again and leaning against the tree.

Sandra stands too, and they both look up at the apartment building again.

"They were definitely very afraid of something," replies Sandra. "I just wish we could get another glimpse at them."

"His body," starts Klaus, catching Sandra off guard.

"Well, yes, how else can we parasense him?"

"No, not that, there was something about his body. It was like his parability was connected to it."

"I don't follow," says Sandra.

"It's like I could sense the electromagnetic charge surrounding his body like I can sense a person with a parability, but I'm not so sure. There could be all kinds of parabilities out there which we have not come across yet," explains Klaus.

Sandra sighs and sits down again, obviously getting impatient. "Well we may never know. We just have to wait until they come out. If they ever do come out."

Klaus goes and sits next to Sandra.

"Of course they'll come out," says Klaus, taking Sandra by the hand. "Look I can see you're worried, but I'll tell you what—once we've introduced ourselves to those two kids, and see how they like the idea of coming to SR, then you and me can spend some time at a hotel on the beach. We could do with a break."

"Thanks," says Sandra, "it's just that this is a very demanding job we have. It drains a lot out of me, especially being able to do what I can do."

"OK, but we've done all we can for now. There's no point in kicking ourselves when things are out of our control," says Klaus. "We'll only exhaust ourselves."

Klaus kisses Sandra on the forehead and he returns to the tree and takes another peek at the apartments.

Sandra turns her head and watches the ducks in the pond. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath to relax then lifts her head into the cool breeze. After a short moment her eyes open. She is about to get something from her bag, but she is suddenly distracted.

“Klaus!”

“What is it?” he asks, still looking upwards.

“Look, they’re coming out! Let’s approach them.”

The two young adults walk through the lobby and toward the entrance doors.

“No, wait. Let’s see what these police do. They’re on guard for a reason,” says Klaus.

Ryan and Hannah exit the apartment building in a hurry, and when the two police officers waiting at the street entrance see them, they jump into action; they shout at Ryan and Hannah to stop and place their hands on they’re heads.

“We don’t have time for this,” says Ryan, projecting his parashield around Hannah and himself while continuing to charge at the officers.

“Hannah, can you take these two out?” asks Ryan.

“Yeah, I suppose so, but I’m starting to feel pretty drained from those other guys.”

Ryan’s parashield enables him to knock the officers back through the air and out of his way. He continues to run across the road to Hannah’s car, with his head still turned back to watch the police falling into a garden bed.

“Well, I’d say you have a few seconds before those two get up and start chasing us and our escape ends.”

Ryan and Hannah stand behind the car; the police officers climb to their feet and stumble across the road. They remove bits of flowers and leaves as they approach and then take out their firearms.

Hannah raises her head from behind the car and sends out a quick surge of para-lyzing thoughts into the minds of the two officers. Within seconds the two officers stumble over themselves and land face first onto the hot road. Consequently, Hannah uses up a lot of mental energy to complete the para-lyze and starts to feint.

“Hannah!”

Ryan catches her as she falls to the ground.

“Come on, we gotta get in the car and go,” says Ryan, slapping Hannah on the cheek lightly.

He finds her car keys in one of her pockets and unlocks car, then helps Hannah into the passenger seat. She holds a hand to her forehead and slumps in the seat. Ryan quickly walks round to the driver's side and gets in the car. He starts the car and accelerates down the street.

Klaus and Sandra stand flabbergasted behind the tree, their jaws dropping and eyes wide open. Klaus drops the car keys and Sandra leans on him for support.

"Did you see that?" asks Klaus.

Sandra nods her head.

"OK, quick, let's follow them," says Klaus.

"No wait, the other man might come out," says Sandra. "They are running from him and they expect he will follow."

"But I thought you wanted to help them?"

"I do, but we might need to parasense this man that occupies their thoughts so much to know what they are up against," says Sandra, "or what *we* might be up against."

"You feeling OK?" asks Ryan, turning his head back and forth between Hannah and the road ahead.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just not used to the after effects of... whatever it was I just did," replies Hannah, wearily.

"You were damn helpful back in the apartment," says Ryan. "I didn't know what we were going to do once my parashield was down."

Ryan drives the car through the streets of West Perth at just over the speed limit so as not to attract attention, but still fast enough to ensure a clean get away.

Hannah sits up in the seat. She is starting to look less pale. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere but here," says Ryan.

"But Campbell and the police will be after us soon. We can't just keep running," says Hannah.

"Well I am open to any suggestions you might have," says Ryan, sarcastically.

Hannah looks out the window, engaged in thought.

"Do you think you could knock out Campbell like you did the others?" asks Ryan.

"If my strength returns," replies Hannah, "but I couldn't do it the first time—maybe because he has a parability too."

"Probably," says Ryan.

"Wait. I have an idea," she says, confidently.

Hannah sends her thoughts out over the city, parascouting for the two anonymous persons she sensed earlier. She is about to make a contact, but is suddenly interrupted and cuts her parasensing off.

"A mind block. Clever little princess," hisses Campbell.

In Cameron's apartment, everyone except Campbell is lying on the floor as if waking from a deep coma; they are still unable to comprehend the situation and are slow to regain their strength and awareness.

"You're pathetic," spits Campbell, kicking Curtis in the stomach and stepping over Cameron. Campbell heads to the door, "I'll have to do this myself."

Campbell walks from the apartment building and out onto the street. He stops and looks down at the two police officers. They pick themselves up off the road and shake off the effects of the temporary paralysis. Their faces show looks of unawareness and grogginess.

Campbell ignores the officers and looks up both ends of the street, scanning the area with his parasense.

He walks to his car parked behind the police vehicles.

"But I know where you're heading," says Campbell to himself, "and it won't be long before I catch up with you either. You can't keep hiding forever."

Campbell starts his car and drives off down the street—in the same direction that Ryan went minutes earlier.

"OK, now we follow," says Sandra, "to the freeway."

Klaus and Sandra run back to their car in the parking lot, aware that they might lose the others if they don't hurry. Soon enough, they are speeding through the city to catch up.

"Turn left here!" says Sandra.

Klaus steers the small hire car around the corner at more than a safe speed.

"You keep a look out for those kids, I'll worry about the driving," replies Klaus, agitated.

The car zooms through the intersection, just passing through the amber light before it changes to red; fortunately there are no speed cameras around.

"I think that's the man's car up ahead," says Sandra. "I think he is aware of us too; he must have parasensed us."

Klaus thinks for moment.

"If we can't locate the two young ones, let's follow him instead. He should take us to them," says Klaus.

"But what if he gets to them before us?" asks Sandra, worried.

"We'll just have to hope that they can use their mind tricks until we get there," says Klaus, "but we shouldn't underestimate these two. He looked especially crafty using his parability; you saw him."

Klaus and Sandra exchange looks. Their car turns onto the freeway and increases speed.

The three vehicles weave through the afternoon traffic: Hannah's little yellow car is driving down the Kwinana Freeway, Campbell's four-wheel drive is closing a kilometer behind, and Klaus and Sandra are trailing behind him.

The tide of the Swan River is out, exposing sand banks where squadrons of pelicans stand in militant poses. They observe the rippling water around them with keen eyes, unfazed by the nearby traffic and boats.

Ryan checks the rear view mirror.

"Can you see him?" asks Hannah.

"Not yet."

"He's close," says Hannah, her eyes closed in concentration.

"Have you found those other people yet?" asks Ryan.

“Yes, but they can’t see us. I don’t know why—maybe they have different parabilities? Anyway, I had to mind cloak us from all parasensing, or Campbell would have found us.”

“Do you think they know what’s going on?” asks Ryan.

“I think they’re following Campbell; they know he is after us.”

“Just out of curiosity, how do you know all this?” asks Ryan.

“My parability keeps modifying and allows me to do different things. I can parasense and pick up the emotional intention of the other two, but I think that’s only because that is their specific parability. I don’t know how it’s happening. It doesn’t last very long though, and I get tired very quickly.”

“OK. Try and hold Campbell off as long as you can then, and if he finds us, I’ll start using my parashield.”

Ryan looks in the mirror again; he can see Campbell’s four-wheel drive in the distance. “Let’s hope those other paraheads catch up soon.”

Campbell curses at the other drivers around him. Hooting his horn, he swerves and cuts in front of any vehicle in his way.

“Come on, come on, get out of the way!”

He glances in the rear view mirror, and sees a white car about three hundred meters back just as it slips behind a bus.

‘Who are those two?’ he thinks. ‘Is there such a thing as the parapsychic police? No, couldn’t be.’

Campbell abandons his parasearch on Ryan and Hannah for the moment and allows his mind to zone in on his pursuers. He is aware of a man and a woman; they both have stronger parabilities than his. A drop of sweat runs down his forehead.

‘Your skills might be more proficient than mine, but I’m still going to reach the boy before you do.’

Campbell projects his mind forwards to Ryan and Hannah again, this time catching Hannah off guard.

“Aha! Got ya.”

“Ryan, he’s found us, and he’s only a few cars back now,” cries Hannah, turning anxiously in her seat and looking

through the car's back window. "Sorry—I couldn't hold him off any longer."

"It's OK," he reassures her, "we still have a chance to..."

Ryan's skin starts to tingle, causing him to cut his words short. His breath begins to deepen too. Inside the car, tiny specks of coloured light appear and swirl around Ryan's body. Hannah sees them too and stares in awe.

"Wow, is that what your parashield looks like?"

"Yes, but it hasn't done this for a while," replies Ryan. "I think my body's reaction contributes to how it works. Sometimes it responds involuntarily; that's how it originally worked when I didn't know I had it. It's the only explanation I can think of."

"What's it doing now?" asks Hannah, reaching out to touch the points of light as they change colours.

"I think it works off the adrenaline levels too," replies Ryan, obviously feeling the effects within himself, "or when I'm nervous. I feel it in my stomach, it's like an energy getting ready to be expelled."

"I hope you'll be ready soon, because we might need to use it in a moment," says Hannah, watching in anticipation as Campbell's car gains on them from behind.

Ryan increases the car's speed. He whips past the other drivers, taking the far left lane, but Campbell follows ferociously in his four-wheeler, only meters behind now. Hannah and Ryan begin to feel his overbearing aggression even more.

"Ryan! He's gonna ram us!"

Ryan looks in the mirror and sees the front of Campbell's car rushing in from behind like an angry bull; he tries to project his parashield, but he doesn't have enough energy to stop Campbell's attack. The coloured lights of his parashield vanish; he is still too tired from over using it before.

"Ryan!" shrieks Hannah.

The car is suddenly thumped forward in a horrendous crash. Hannah and Ryan are thrown around in their seats, but they do not receive any injuries.

"He's coming again!"

Hannah can see Campbell's menacing eyes as he approaches for another impact. She stares back at him fearfully, but also with great anger.

Again the car makes a loud crashing sound and parts of the tail-guard fall off and smash on the road, only to be crushed under the wheels of Campbell's car.

"Ryan, my little car isn't used to this kind of treatment," says Hannah.

"Maybe you would like me to pull over and check that everything is all right?" replies Ryan, sarcastically.

Hannah is unimpressed with his comments, but she sits quietly and pouts in her seat. Ryan steps on the accelerator again and passes into a gap between two other cars in the middle lane, but not before Campbell is able to scrape the rear lights of Hannah's car.

But Hannah is right: the car only has a small engine and can't handle this kind of driving. It will overheat soon or its engine will be permanently damaged.

Planing another line of attack, Campbell falls back behind a couple of cars to get into position.

"Where's he gone?" asks Ryan, unable to see Campbell in his mirrors.

"I can't see him, he's dropped back," replies Hannah, "but I can sense that he is there."

"What about the other two?" asks Ryan.

"Um..." Hannah tilts her head up and looks further with her parasense. "There they are! They're not far behind now."

Ryan takes a deep breath to relax. "I hope they can get us out of—"

"There he is!" screeches Hannah.

Campbell's car lunges in from the right lane and slams into the side of Hannah's car; Ryan tries to keep control of the steering wheel. The driver's side window smashes, spraying the interior of the car with glass.

Campbell gets back into the right lane, his eyes fixed on Ryan like a hawk. Again, He steers hard and fast toward Hannah's car. Seconds before impact, Ryan is able to find the

strength to cast his parashield to the side of the car and stall the collision with Campbell.

The fury is evident in Campbell's face; he prepares to cut Ryan off and wedge him into the oncoming wall railing of Mount Henry Bridge; the Canning River flows some thirty meters below.

The onslaught does not end. Campbell rams again and again, and though he is repelled each time, he can sense that Ryan's parashield is weakening. Campbell drives up next to Hannah's car and attempts to use his vehicle's sheer size and power to force Ryan over into the left lane. Ryan has no choice but to yield to Campbell's pressure; a slower car in front blocks his passage into safer territory. Fortunately a truck also occupies the middle lane further up and Campbell is forced to choose another avenue, dropping back into the right lane and accelerating to get the advantage over Ryan. Hannah and Ryan are relieved for the moment.

Campbell appears from behind the truck, he is a few meters in front now. There is a clear gap between him and Ryan and he does not hesitate to take the opportunity. His car is upon Ryan in a split second, crushing Hannah's car into the bridge railing causing sparks to fly. Campbell does not let up, but steers away only for a moment to build some more momentum before side bumping Hannah and Ryan again. Ryan is having difficulty controlling the car and looks at Hannah with concern.

"Use your parashield, Ryan," shouts Hannah. "It's up to you to get us out of this one."

Ryan knows what he has to do; he looks deep within himself and starts to gather all of his strength. He focuses his energy into forming his parashield around the whole car. There is a flash of electric-blue light as the parashield is fixed in place. Ryan does not have to wait for long; Campbell is already making multiple attempts to destroy Hannah's car.

Suddenly, the sphere of psychic energy pushes Campbell's car back across two lanes, throwing it against the freeway barrier, and causing Campbell to knock his head badly on the steering wheel and the driver's window.

This gives Ryan and Hannah some encouragement, but they know they are not out of danger yet. Campbell shakes off the pain in his head and steers his car at a forty-five degree angle toward Hannah's car. Ryan is unable to hold the parashield in place and braces for impact.

Campbell's car crashes into the side of Hannah's car, causing the bridge's railings to bend and forcing the front corner of Hannah's car off the road. The two cars spin into a squeal of wheels and glass shattering blasts. Campbell's car spins and faces the wrong direction, but continues to move down the freeway in reverse.

When Hannah's car stops, it has broken through the bridge's railing and hangs halfway over the drop. Blood drips from Ryan's nose and Hannah's head is bruised badly. They turn to each other slowly. The car rocks gently back and forth on the edge of the bridge. Ryan looks down at the river below. Neither of them say a word, and the only sound is the passage of traffic behind them on the freeway.

"Don't move an inch," says Ryan, quietly.

Hannah's breath is breaking up in fright.

"What are we going to do?" asks Hannah, the tears now swelling in her eyes.

Ryan looks back onto the freeway—the traffic is slowing down to observe the situation, and some cars have even stopped and the drivers are getting out to have a look. One such vehicle is a white hire car: it is Klaus and Sandra's. They get out and start heading quickly toward Hannah's car.

Up ahead is Campbell's four-wheeler, which is also now stationary. Campbell stands next to his car behind the open door and sneers in anticipation at what will happen next. Then he sees Klaus and Sandra approaching and senses they are the two parapersons that have been following him the whole time. He watches them carefully, then ducks down behind the car door.

"They're going to fall, and they know it too," says Sandra, reading Hannah and Ryan's emotions.

“Hurry, we might still be able to help them out,” replies Klaus.

Klaus and Sandra reach the car; it is all scraped and dented. They cannot find a safe way of rescuing Ryan and Hannah without jeopardising the car’s balance: the doors are blocked by the railing.

“What about the windows?” says Sandra. “Could they fit through them?”

“I don’t want to risk it,” replies Klaus. “We might all end up in the river.”

Sandra reads Hannah’s emotions. Hannah turns her head slowly around and her eyes make contact with Sandra for the first time.

“They’re here, Ryan: the other parapersons. They *are* here to help us.”

Hannah and Sandra exchange a look of familiarity between them; Sandra offers a light smile of hope, and Hannah returns it, but soon her face drops back again into distress.

“Can they get us out?” asks Ryan.

“They are trying to figure out a way.”

The car is still rocking over the edge and the afternoon breeze is causing it to slip inch by inch. Ryan and Hannah let out a little gasp of shock at each tiny movement and hold each other’s hand tighter.

“We have to do something quickly,” says Sandra, who looks up to see Klaus standing a small way up the freeway. He is staring at Campbell, who scrutinises Klaus in return.

“Klaus, we don’t have time for him; these two need our help.”

“All right,” says Klaus, taking his attention off of Campbell and going as close as he can to the driver’s side of Hannah’s car.

“We’re going to help you,” Klaus reassures Ryan.

Ryan lifts his head around and sees Klaus, but there is doubt in both of their eyes.

The wind suddenly picks up and the car screeches painfully against the metal railing. Klaus and Sandra try with all their

might to hold the back of the car down, but the wind proves to be too strong. Inside the car Hannah and Ryan shout in fear, but it is too late—the car finally loses balance and falls over the edge. Klaus and Sandra rush to the railing to watch the car drop toward the river.

Ryan and Hannah hold hands as they plunge down; the car flips slowly in the air so that the roof will be the first to hit the surface of the water.

“I love you, Ryan.”

Ryan squeezes Hannah’s hand.

“We’re not finished yet,” says Ryan, with deep conviction.

At the center of his body, Ryan feels a ball of power growing like he has never felt before. It is warm and heavy. He nurtures the feeling; his whole body is suddenly filled with strength and his skin glows an unusually bright yellow. He wastes no time; he directs his parability to expand into a thick wall around the car; it passes through Hannah and the car’s metal structure without causing any harm.

The car hits the surface of the river like a perfectly spherical meteorite, sending an eruptive wave of water high into the air, which falls down like a fountain all around the river’s surface.

From above, Klaus and Sandra continue to observe as the splash of water settles and the river is imprinted with small waves and ripples in all directions. They focused their parabilities down into the water.

“Come on, we’ve got to get down there and help, there might still be time,” says Sandra.

“OK, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to jump down. Let’s take the car,” says Klaus, looking for a vantage point. “Over there.”

“I’ll drive,” says Sandra, running back to the car.

The traffic is now banking up in three of the four lanes and a small crowd has formed around the site of the accident. Klaus starts for the car, but stops after a few paces, he turns around and finds Campbell in his mind and then they make eye contact again. They glare at each other for a long moment.

“My work is done here,” says Campbell. “Good luck trying to save them.”

Campbell jumps back into his car and drives off in a hurry.

“Come on, Klaus!” shouts Sandra.

Klaus watches Campbell drive away down the freeway.

“He thinks they’re drowning,” continues Sandra, watching Campbell take off. “He won’t bother them, or us again.”

Sandra drives the hire car up next to Klaus and he gets in the passenger side. Sandra accelerates, the tyres spin, and smoke comes out the back of the car. The tyres finally find some traction and the car shoots off down the freeway and turns off at the exit up ahead. A few people walk over hesitantly to the railing edge and try to fathom what has just happened.

The car floats upside down beneath the river’s surface, but it isn’t filled with water yet. Ryan is maintaining his parashield around the car’s exterior, and he is sweating profusely. Ryan looks at Hannah: she is knocked out cold and a small streak of blood lines her forehead. Both of their heads press uncomfortably onto the roof of the car beneath them.

“Hannah,” whispers Ryan, in the quiet of the car. “Hannah?”

He shakes her arm lightly, but she does not respond. Ryan looks out the car window, the water is right there, ready to fill the cabin and drown them should he lose his strength to hold the parashield in place.

He goes back to his childhood memory of falling into the ocean. He remembers that he could move within the parashield underwater.

‘Was I able to use telekinesis in conjunction with my parashield too?’ Ryan wonders to himself. ‘Maybe I can get us out of here... I have to... I choose to take responsibility for my gift.’

Hannah coughs and splutters, breaking Ryan’s inner dialogue.

“Hannah!”

She groans as she regains awareness.

“Are we still alive?” she mutters.

“Yeah,” replies Ryan, smiling at Hannah, glad that she is awake again. “Are you OK?”

“Mmm,” says Hannah, now looking around outside the car where the colours of Ryan’s parashield illuminate the water like electrically glowing seaweed sweeping back and forth in the under currents. “It’s so beautiful, Ryan. Oh, if only we knew... We could have—”

“Shhh, it doesn’t matter now, we just have to get out of here. I *am* gonna get us out of here. I promise.”

She turns back to him and smiles; slowly her eyes close and her head drops back into unconsciousness.

“Hannah! Oh, Hannah, please wake up.”

Ryan strokes her face and he starts to cry.

“Please, Hannah... Don’t go.”

Ryan starts to lose his hold on the parashield and the invisible wall holding back the water closes in. The water enters through the broken windows and fills the corners of the car with water. Ryan sees this and starts to panic. He tries desperately to exert more energy into the parashield, but he is failing more and more by the moment.

The car turns upright and air bubbles exit the car, filling the car with more water. However, the parashield keeps the car from sinking immediately, but it won’t be long before it reaches the riverbed. The colours in Ryan’s parashield are fading as he loses focus and strength. The tears run from his eyes and hope dissolves from his face completely. The water continues to move closer inside the car, but a small space still protects Hannah and Ryan, but even that is decreasing in size.

A new thought passes through Ryan’s mind. He turns to Hannah, he looks at her sitting there.

“No. I won’t let this happen,” he says, gritting his teeth and wiping the tears from his eyes. He takes a deep breath and holds it in.

There is a sudden gush of water into the cabin as the parashield fails completely, but Ryan quickly projects his parability around Hannah and successfully produces the parashield around her body and not himself. He wriggles

through the car, undoing his seat belt and freeing Hannah. His hands pass through the parashield, yet it holds the water back. The car is now totally filled with water and falls faster toward the bottom of the river. Ryan climbs through the broken window to the outside of the car and begins pulling Hannah out of the car too. He places his head into the sphere around Hannah and takes a breath of air, then pulls his head out again. He looks up at the surface and starts swimming, still holding onto Hannah, but also using a small amount of telekinesis to support them both.

Klaus and Sandra arrive at the river's esplanade; Sandra brakes quickly and they both get out and rush to the water's edge. The area is one of Perth's more prestigious residential suburbs; the houses all have views of the river and are at least two stories each. Trees and shrubs line the riverbank and there are reeds in the shallows. There are very few people around, and the streets are quiet and peaceful.

Klaus judges where the car has fallen by the smashed railing of the bridge above.

"We have to get out there somehow," says Klaus.

Sandra looks around and quickly spots a small wooden dinghy hidden under some trees by the bank, a common enough sight in the area around Canning River.

"Klaus, help me with this," says Sandra, running over to the dinghy and untying some ropes from around a tree trunk.

Klaus follows her and they both climb aboard. There is a pair of oars inside the boat; Sandra starts rowing out into the river while Klaus keeps a look out for Ryan and Hannah, both with his eyes and his parascouting skills.

The dinghy reaches the general area where the car fell into the water. Sandra stops rowing and joins Klaus in the search. The water washes gently against the hull of the boat, a pair of Ibis' fly over and land in the river upstream, and the sound of the traffic on the bridge above is muffled. Klaus and Sandra wait and watch in silence.

Barely ten seconds passes before Klaus notices a dim light some five meters down in the water. The light increases, it's colours becoming more evident and soon he can see two human figures swirling through the shadowy depths. Moments later the water is pushed up by a small spherical shape; the water runs off its sides to expose a young woman's head, brunette hair completely dry, though she is still unconscious.

Then a young man's head appears out of the water just next to the young woman. He gasps for breath and wipes his eyes. Sandra and Klaus begin to pull the young woman onto the dinghy, while the young man pushes from beneath; he stays there, treading water until the young woman is safely on the boat.

Klaus reaches out his hand to Ryan, who stares back at him.

"We're here to help, I promise," says Klaus.

Ryan grabs Klaus' hand, and Sandra helps pull Ryan on board too. Ryan goes to Hannah and makes sure she is comfortable.

"She's only got a few bumps, but she is mainly just mentally exhausted; she will be OK," says Sandra.

"We should get her to a hospital just to make sure," says Klaus.

"Thank you, whoever you are," says Ryan. "I—"

"We can talk once we are somewhere safer than here," says Klaus, pointing up, "and your girlfriend is better cared for."

Ryan shakes his head, liking the sound of that idea, and liking the feel of Klaus. Sandra grabs hold of the oars and begins rowing back to the shore.

The dinghy returns to the riverbank and its passengers soon depart the area in the hire car. Moments later, the police arrive at the bridge and begin administrating the situation. Dr. Tampalini steps out of one of the police cars, his shoe landing in a pile of shattered glass. He walks slowly over to the broken railing and looks down into the river; he scratches his head.

He examines the freeway traffic, now being directed by police officers. Shortly after he returns to the vehicle, but before he gets inside, he stops and looks back over the area. He thinks,

then sighs, shaking his head in disappointment and confusion. Moments later he is chauffeured away with a police escort.

Chapter 12

St. John of God Hospital, Murdoch
December 9th 2011

A door opens at the far end of the ward corridor and fluorescent light floods onto the polished linoleum floor. A nurse walks from the room and into the next. A large clock above the corridor archway clicks to eighteen minutes past four. Klaus and Sandra enter the corridor and walk toward the end.

Hannah lies on a bed inside one of the single rooms. The curtains are closed and only the lights of the monitoring equipment illuminate the room. Hannah has a small bandage on her forehead and some bruising on her body. Her eyes haven't opened since yesterday; however, her breathing is regular and calm.

Ryan sleeps upright in a lounge chair in the corner of the room, his head tilting off to the side; he is still in his clothes from the previous day. The door to the hospital room opens and a line of vertical light falls onto Ryan's face; he stirs in his sleep. He attempts to open his eyes and see what disturbed him.

Sandra and Klaus enter the room and approach Ryan. The door closes quietly. Ryan recognizes his visitors and sits up.

"Sorry to wake you," says Sandra.

"That's OK," says Ryan, clearing his throat, "this chair isn't the easiest to sleep in anyway."

He looks over to Hannah, his own body still showing obvious signs of exhaustion.

"How does she look to you?" he asks.

Klaus and Sandra check over Hannah.

"She'll be fine with some rest," reassures Sandra, who then parasenses Hannah's emotions. "She's happy enough."

“You’re both lucky to still be here,” says Klaus, “and she has you to thank for saving her life.”

“If it wasn’t for your parability, you’d both be... well, you know,” says Sandra.

Ryan drops his head and forms an appreciative smile, which fades away shortly.

“If it wasn’t for my parability, none of this would have happened,” says Ryan, sadly, “but then again, Hannah might have never parasensed me and we would never have met in the first place. Funny how things can be deemed good or bad, depending on the way you see it in the long term. In the long run I suppose it doesn’t really matter anyway.”

Klaus sits on the other chair next to Ryan, and Sandra sits on the end of the bed, making sure not to disturb Hannah.

Klaus senses an appropriate moment to change the topic. “We would like to talk with you, Ryan, but I guess you already know what about.”

Ryan nods his head, still looking down.

“You two are like me and Hannah,” says Ryan.

Klaus then looks at Sandra for an unspoken approval to continue.

“I can tell you are comfortable speaking to us about this,” says Sandra.

Ryan looks up at Sandra and nods.

“Maybe you have some questions for us?” asks Klaus.

“I’m not sure what to ask you,” replies Ryan.

“Why don’t we tell you about ourselves first and then you can tell us about yourself, OK?”

“All right,” replies Ryan.

Without too much of a pause, Klaus begins:

“I’m not going to ‘beat around the bush’ as you Aussie’s say, so I’ll just be as direct as I can. I have a unique ability that allows me to detect persons who have a parability; are you familiar with the term?”

Ryan nods his head.

“I can sense people like you and Hannah,” continues Klaus, “but only when I can see them physically. Sandra?”

Sandra smiles at Ryan before she starts:

“And I can feel people’s emotions much the same as Klaus can detect parapersons; my parability is restricted by distance also, and physical presence is essential too.”

“Are we going too fast for you, Ryan?” asks Klaus.

“Um... no. This is easy to take considering what I have been experiencing lately. But I am surprised at how relaxed I have become about it all in such a short time,” explains Ryan.

“You must be a stable person then,” compliments Sandra.

Ryan smiles modestly.

“Our parabilities help us in everyday situations, that’s how we found you both. We don’t always use them to *save the world*,” says Klaus.

Sandra smiles discretely at Klaus.

“However, it was coincidence that we found you at all,” says Sandra. “We just happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

“Yes, we had just got off the plane from Melbourne... I’ll tell you where we’re from and what we do in a moment,” says Klaus. “So we got off the plane and went to look for accommodation. After that we decided to have a look around the city and have lunch, that’s when we saw you arrive at the apartment building.”

“We wanted to introduce ourselves straight away. We were both impressed with your parapotential, but then another man arrived and soon after him, the authorities,” says Sandra.

“The man was Dr. Francis Campbell,” says Ryan. “I’ll tell you about him in a moment.”

“That would be good,” says Klaus, encouragingly.

“We suspected that something was afoot, so we decided to watch for a while,” says Sandra, “and another thing: when I read your girlfriend’s emotions, I found I couldn’t do it after I had read you and gone back to her for a second attempt. She seemed to have put up some sort of mental barrier that prevented me from reading her again. Perhaps she, or you, can explain that later? But one thing at a time.”

“While we were hiding in the garden opposite the apartments, Sandra thought she heard something,” says Klaus.

“Gun shots perhaps, but they seemed too—”

"They were gun shots," interrupts Ryan. "The police were firing at Hannah and me, but I used my parability to shield us. You wouldn't have been able to hear it clearly because those apartments are fairly sound proof."

"I'm very excited to hear your story, Ryan," says Klaus, "but let me finish our little introduction quickly and then we'll get right onto you."

"Please do," says Ryan.

"You and Hannah appeared again shortly after, but Sandra was able to perceive in your emotions that you expected Doctor Campbell to follow you, so we waited to check him out," says Klaus.

"We knew where you were going anyway," says Sandra, tapping her temple with her index finger.

"I'm just glad that you didn't perish in the car accident on the bridge, but somehow I knew you would be capable of looking after yourself in that situation—Parapersons are full of surprises," says Klaus, with a clever smile.

"Thanks. It was still very scary," says Ryan.

"Well, that's one thing we have learned regardless of the fact that we have these rare talents—" says Sandra, "we still get scared sometimes."

"That's right, we're just as human as everyone else," says Klaus, "with some additional features of course. But to sum up, Sandra and I are on holiday and we were recommended to stop in Perth and check it out; the four hours in the plane turned out to be well worth it. But that's enough for now, I want to hear you speak."

"Um, all right," says Ryan, rubbing his face and trying to wake up a little more. "I'm just trying to take that all in, but I'll manage. Where would you like me to start?"

"Tell us about your parability," says Sandra. "When did you first notice you could use it?"

"I've been calling it a parashield. I've been aware of it for a few months now, but before that it was so rare and out of the ordinary that I didn't believe I could do such a thing. It allows me to make a protective force field around my body. It's like a

big ball of energy surrounding me, and gets quite warm and tingly. I thought it was a kind of telekinesis at first.”

“So did we,” says Klaus.

“But it doesn’t work like that; it only works around my body, and I can’t move external objects. I think it has something to do with the aura, but recently I found out I could project it around another person,” says Ryan, looking over to Hannah.

“That’s incredible,” says Klaus, “anything else?”

“So far I have been able to go underwater and not get even slightly wet; I can also dry myself out completely even when I’m soaked through. I have buffered falls from dangerous heights, knocked over an old house, and erected protective fields around Hannah and myself during the car accident on the bridge. I also projected an entirely separate parashield around Hannah when we were inside the car under the water, but that was because it was more convenient for me to move and also because I didn’t have enough energy left to maintain the parashield around both of us. I’ve also stopped bullets and thrown people across rooms when they came too close. The list really does go on,” explains Ryan.

Klaus is almost wide-eyed and gob smacked.

“What can you tell us about Campbell?” asks Sandra.

“Oh god, that is where everything went to shit—” says Ryan, “however, if it wasn’t for Campbell, my parability might not have developed as quickly as it did. He tried to help me at first; that’s what he made me believe, but he really wanted to use me. He parasensed me when I was born for god’s sake, and he went on to set up a whole bunch of plans aimed at controlling me one day. Luckily I escaped him each time he tried to capture me, but then he got other people on his side—the authorities and another man who is interested in parapsychological research. I don’t know much about him—supposedly he has a legitimate company, but I don’t think he’s such a big player in all this anyway.”

Klaus and Sandra exchange a glance of interest; they might follow this up later.

“So when Campbell realized I was too strong for him, he wanted me out of the picture. That’s why the police were trying

to shoot us. He knew if I used my parashield too much I would get tired and wouldn't be able to use it until I regained my strength."

"We noticed he had a parasensing ability, but it was different to ours. Can you explain it to us?" asks Sandra.

"Campbell can parasense people with parabilities over long distances," Ryan continues. "He doesn't have to see them like you two, but he is not very strong; he can't just do it when he wants, and it only works sometimes."

"Sounds like a paralocator and a parascout in one," says Klaus.

"Pity he's twisted," says Sandra. "We don't want more people like the Brodlyn twins on our hands."

Ryan doesn't register the names.

"He also said to me once, he could see what I saw... I guess he meant the colors of my parashield," explains Ryan.

"That's very interesting," says Klaus.

"It was Hannah who saved us in the end," says Ryan.

"Really, how?" asks Sandra.

"It's quite strange how she actually did it because I thought she was only a parascout like you, Klaus, but something started happening to her ever since we..." Ryan stops and smiles.

Sandra feels his playful embarrassment.

"It's OK, Ryan, I know what you mean."

"I don't," interjects Klaus. "Explain it to me please."

"Oh shut up, Klaus," snaps Sandra, "I'll explain it to you later."

Klaus perks himself up; he's a little shocked and feeling a bit stupid that he is being left out of the joke, but does his best to pretend otherwise.

"I was getting really weak because I had been holding my parashield up against the bullets, and we would have been killed or badly injured if I'd got much weaker. Then all of a sudden, just before I lost my strength to hold the parashield up, the bullets stopped and everyone in the room except Campbell and us were caught in a complete and utter daze. They just stood there, staring blankly into space and swaying a little, almost like they were asleep. It was kind of freaky. I found out soon enough

that Hannah's parability had somehow changed, allowing her to temporarily mind zap non-parapersons."

"So that's how the two police officers standing at the front of the apartments were repelled," says Klaus.

"Actually, that was a combination of both Hannah and my own parabilities. While I protected us in the parashield, we charged at the police and knocked them over. Then Hannah followed up by mind zapping them, giving us time to get away in the car," says Ryan, excitedly.

"You work well as a team," says Sandra, smiling.

"Thanks," says Ryan, "but you two still arrived at a critical point, and I wonder what would have happened to Hannah and myself if you hadn't arrived when you did—at the river I mean. We couldn't have kept on using our parabilities to save ourselves, nor could we keep running."

"It's something we're getting used to—saving people, I mean," says Sandra.

"You've done this before I take it?" asks Ryan. "You find people like me and Hannah, and help them out somehow?"

"Yeah something like that. Ryan, I think this is a good time to let you know about a group we work with," says Klaus, looking at Sandra for approval again.

Sandra scans Ryan's emotions and detects that he trusts Klaus and herself, but he is secretly struggling a little to accept the reality of the situation.

"What do you mean? Are you a secret government agency who goes around recruiting psychics for military purposes?" asks Ryan, a little on the offensive.

"It is true that we go around looking for people like you, but we don't have anything to do with any world government," explains Klaus, "we're entirely independent."

"We're members of a company called Salvage and Rescue Incorporated," starts Sandra. "We specialize in rescuing people from high threat situations. We have a good success rate because most members of the group have a parability of some kind, and that gives us an edge over other rescue companies and any government."

"We think..." adds Klaus.

“And yes we are going to ask you to consider working with SR, but we’ll get to that soon,” finishes Sandra.

“SR isn’t known for it’s parapsychic members, Ryan. We have employees who develop cutting edge computer technologies which compliment and enhance our parabilities,” says Klaus. “We allow the public to think that we have some special technology that gives us the advantage in rescue operations; that way no one asks too many questions.”

“So it’s like a front?” asks Ryan.

“Pretty much,” replies Klaus.

“Sounds pretty full on to me. So where’s your *secret head quarters*?” says Ryan, almost mocking.

“Great Barrier Island,” says Klaus, with a slight smile as he remembers the many times he and Sandra spent there together when they first fell in love.

“Where the hell is that?” asks Ryan.

“It’s off the coast of Auckland, New Zealand. You can only get there by air or sea. Members of SR Inc. have the special luxury of going by air,” says Klaus, winking at Sandra.

“So, what’s it like there?” asks Ryan, becoming more interested.

“The island has a sub-tropical climate; there are very few people living there besides SR Inc. members, there is hardly any infrastructure, and the roads are still not paved. Mind you, the beaches and nature reserves match, if not exceed the ones you have here in the south west of Western Australia,” explains Klaus.

“Tell me more,” requests Ryan, imagining every detail.

“Weather-wise, there is a bit of wind and rain everyday, but also enough sunshine to permit visits to the beach. We live in a community estate built especially for SR by the founder, a man named Marcus Wallner, also a paratalented person like us.”

“I suppose he’s the one who runs the show, right? What can he do?” asks Ryan.

“We all have a pretty equal say in what goes on; it’s much better than previous groups I’ve been associated with,” says Klaus. “Marcus is a telekinetic: he can move objects with his mind as if he were touching them with his physical hands.”

“How did you find this guy, or did he find you?” asks Ryan.

Klaus says, “That’s a long and rather complicated story. Parapersons seem to attract each other. We bump into each other by chance sooner or later like we did with you. That’s just how it seems to happen, but we go looking for other gifted people too. That’s another one of SR’s objectives: to build up our numbers.”

“Tell him about the others too,” says Sandra, pre-empting Ryan’s emotions; she can sense he is a little hesitant about asking.

“Oh yes, it’s been a supportive environment to have others like us around and still able to work in the world without the attention of the public,” says Klaus. “We have about half a dozen parapersons, each with a special parability. Some can see through walls, talk to animals and get them to respond to commands, read emotions, project a physical double into another location, and more. Whether we are using our own skills or the skills of new people, we are always finding new applications.”

“Wow, you guys are really professional about the whole thing. What kind of rescue jobs have you been involved in?” asks Ryan.

“All kinds: anything from explosions to storms, kidnapping, and stolen goods. They are always different, and each operation requires its own unique strategy and applications of our parafunctions,” explains Klaus. “I usually have the role of coordinator while the others fulfill opportunities as they arrive. We also usually find that our initial plans can change without any notification, and we have to think on our feet.”

“Have you run into any problems along the way?” asks Ryan.

“All the time,” says Sandra, with a small laugh.

“Besides keeping our company in a low profile status, we still have to make out that our success is not due to our parabilities. Sometimes we are faced with the decision to use them at the risk of being seen by the public, or unfortunately... we sometimes have to let people die, and that is hard to do,” says Klaus, sadly.

“Especially when you know you could have done something to help, but the risk of being found out as a group of parapersons is a greater risk, and one we cannot afford to take at the moment. The human race is not ready for people like us, Ryan. They would be very afraid of us, and no doubt want us under control... or dead,” adds Sandra.

Ryan sits silently, pondering the conversation, his head drooping.

“I guess we’ve put you off joining us now?” asks Klaus.

Sandra discretely shakes her head at Klaus. Klaus is surprised that Ryan is still considering SR Inc. but Sandra reads Ryan’s emotions and knows what his true feelings are.

“What would I be doing if I joined you?” asks Ryan, his head still lowered.

Klaus swallows and quickly recovers the conversation again. “Ah, that would all depend on how your parability would be able to help us as well as how much you are willing to do.”

Ryan looks over to Hannah, sleeping peacefully on the hospital bed.

“What if Hannah does not want to come? I will find it hard to leave her now. And what about Campbell? He might come back and she will have no one to help her.”

“We will inform the other members of SR about him and organize some sort of emergency support for Hannah if she needs it,” says Sandra.

“And we would take care of your passports to get you out of the country without attracting the attention of the authorities,” adds Klaus, “should you decide to come with us.”

Ryan takes a deep breath in and exhales slowly.

“I would like some time to consider all this, but for now I just want to be with Hannah.”

“Take your time. We realize the importance of this kind of decision,” says Klaus, rising to his feet and preparing to leave. “We all had to make the same choice at some point. Do I accept my parability and use it constructively, or do I bottle it up and use it for my own good, if at all?”

“And we’ll talk to Hannah when she’s up to it,” says Sandra, also standing up. “There’s no need to rush any of this.”

“But for now we’ll get out of your hair so you can rest,” says Klaus. “Take it easy OK, and don’t worry about the police either. We put her under a different name. And I’ll make some phone calls to a journalist friend of ours. We will make the public believe that you died in the car accident. That will give you some breathing space.”

“You can do that?” asks Ryan.

Sandra nods her head and smiles.

“Done it a few times before actually. It’s amazing how easily people believe what they read in the paper,” says Sandra smiling at Klaus.

“Oh, ha ha!” responds Klaus, sarcastically.

Ryan ignores their little in-joke.

“I’m probably going to stay here a while, but I’ll have to go home at some point,” says Ryan, bringing up the subject again. “I’ll have to tell my Mum *something* if I decide to move to Great Barrier Island. That’s all right isn’t it?”

“We trust you will say the right thing to your Mother. If you need any help, just call us, I’ve left my number on the table,” says Sandra, opening the door.

“OK, thanks. Bye Klaus, bye Sandra.”

They exit the hospital room and Ryan is alone with Hannah once again. He gets off the chair and goes to sit on the bed beside her. He looks at her for a moment and strokes her cheek once with the back of his index finger before leaning over and resting his head on her stomach.

Ryan falls into a deep sleep and dreams. It is not long before he realises he is in a dream, yet he does not seem to have any influence over what he is experiencing, as in a lucid dream. Everything appears extremely real. He stands in a thick forest consisting predominantly of karri trees and a soft ground layer of moist, decomposing organic material. The wind blows through the canopy and soon he feels it upon his face: it is cool and soft. The morning sun sifts through the leaves, and a kookaburra bird flies through the air, its laughing call echoing through the forest.

From Ryan's position, the forest seems to have no end. He begins to walk toward the rising sun and soon finds that the forest is situated on a raised plateau overlooking a vast valley of green grass. A small stream passes through the land, exiting into the ocean further east. In the distance, upon a mound, stands a magnificent stone tower; Ryan is pulled toward it.

It does not take him long to cross the field to stand before the tower's moat; here a drawbridge allows entry into the tower's courtyard. Two columns stand either side of the tower; a red flag flaps on top of the left one, and a white flag flaps on top of the right. The sun now shines directly over head; Ryan pushes the large doors open and enters the tower. He is met by silence and darkness. He stands there for what seems a very long time.

A point of golden light appears out of the void a thousand miles away. Ryan watches as it slowly moves toward him. A strong wind picks up around him; Ryan looks around to see the door has vanished behind him and now he stands in a completely black space without an exit.

His body starts to display an electrical blue light which Ryan knows is associated with his parashield; he simply watches. However, this time the colors are brighter than he has ever seen before, and he also notices that there is a faint stream of light connecting him to the golden light, now a large sphere rising above him. He can feel the strong power emitting within him, and it increases with each moment. At first Ryan thinks of running, but then overcomes his fear, and instead experiences the moment and accepts the power running through him and the void around him as some part of himself. Everything seems to dissolve, only to bind together over and over again.

The sensations become very intense, but Ryan holds his ground. He wants to see where this feeling is taking him, he knows there is a meaning to what he is seeing, some message of importance.

The golden light expands like a super giant, passing into Ryan's body, causing him to become transparent and luminous. His aura weaves into the space, filling it with all the colors of the rainbow; Ryan can feel the void merging with his mind. His

parashield explodes outwards in a spherical shockwave; it seems to go on forever. 'This is what it feels like to use my parability to its highest potential,' thinks Ryan. 'I can protect myself against other parapersons too!' Though it will be some time before Ryan learns how to do this.

The sphere begins to retract at an enormous speed, returning to Ryan's body with the strength of the ocean's waves.

Ryan suddenly finds himself standing outside the tower's main gate, facing west across the valley. He starts his return to the forest, passing again over the valley of grass, and this time it takes much longer to cross. When he finally climbs up onto the raised plateau, he turns around and observes the tower, now made of crystal: it reflects the sun in every direction. He smiles and turns back into the forest.

Ryan wakes from his sleep peacefully. A nurse of Malaysian nationality enters the room and opens the curtains. The room is filled with daylight. Ryan looks up at the clock on the wall: 8:47 AM. He looks at Hannah, who is still sleeping.

"Good morning," greets the nurse, taking the clipboard from the end of the bed. "Can I get you anything?"

"Um... no, I'm fine thanks," replies Ryan. "How long do you think she'll sleep for?"

The nurse returns the clipboard after making some routine checks and smiles at Ryan. "She will wake soon I think."

Ryan smiles gratefully, and the nurse leaves the room. Ryan watches Hannah for a little longer and then remembers the previous few days. He frowns, but then he recalls his dream and he ponders over its meaning—it lifts his spirits.

Ryan writes a note for Hannah, leaving it on the side table and leaves the hospital. He arrives home and goes straight in the front entrance and into the main living area, where his mother is sitting in the backyard on a swing chair. She is looking down at the ground, the sadness evident in her face. Ryan opens the back sliding door and Isabelle looks up. She is surprised to see Ryan, but goes to him with open arms and holds him tightly.

"Hi, Mum."

“Oh, Ryan, where have you been? I was worried sick about you. I haven’t slept a wink.”

“Mum, calm down, I’m all right.”

“The police were looking for you and I got so scared when you didn’t call. What’s been going on?” Tears start to fall down Isabelle’s face and she holds Ryan at arms length to check him over. “Ryan, tell me what has been going on. Why do you do this to your mother? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you, but I have been on the go all week.”

“Should we tell the police that you’re home again?” asks Isabelle.

“No, that’s... not needed, I’ve already talked to them. I sorted things out,” replies Ryan.

“What was it all about anyway?” asks Isabelle, starting to lose some of her tension. “They were concerned about your safety, but they didn’t say very much.”

Ryan gestures for his mother to stop and he guides her to sit down with him on the swing chair. He holds her hand and looks into her eyes sincerely while he considers his words. A wind chime hanging from the verandah jingles non-intrusively in the breeze, while suburban bird life chirps pleasantly in the garden.

“Mum, can you tell me about my birth again?”

Isabelle gives Ryan a strange look. “Why, you already know what happened. Why do you ask this now?”

“Just tell me, please,” says Ryan.

“You nearly stopped breathing,” says Isabelle. “The cord was tangled around your neck.”

“Was there anything else that was different? Any confusion or strangeness?”

“No, not that I remember. Ryan, I don’t follow what you’re trying to get at.”

“What about Dad? Can you tell me about him? How did he respond to it all?”

“He was beside himself for days, but we were so lucky that you survived and were so healthy. He was always so careful with you too, unlike Jacob; he seemed more relaxed about him.”

Ryan stares off into the garden.

“Ryan,” whispers Isabelle, “tell me what’s on your mind. Please.”

He takes a deep breath and exhales.

“Mum, I need you to know something about me, but I’m not sure how you’re going to take it,” says Ryan, still looking into the garden.

“I’m your mother, you don’t have to hide anything from me. I hope it’s nothing bad... you’re not selling drugs are you?”

Ryan shakes his head and smiles. “No, Mum, I’ve done nothing to break the law.”

Ryan pauses and closes his eyes gently. He takes in a long, deep breath. The hairs on his arms start to lift, followed shortly by tiny glimmerings of light in each pore on his skin. The space above the surface of his body shimmers electrically, then everywhere around and in front of him is slowly filled with tiny blue specks of light; they float through the air like pieces of dust in an unused room. Isabelle watches with perplexed eyes.

The parashield solidifies into a distinct sphere around Ryan, then passes through Isabelle and surrounds both of them. She reaches her hand out, moving it through the thin wall of light. She looks at her hand and then at Ryan.

“This is what I wanted to show you, Mum,” replies Ryan.

Isabelle continues to observe the parashield; she tries to mutter some words, but they fail to come out; instead, laughter begins to take its place.

“I hope that’s happy laughter,” asks Ryan.

“Oh, Ryan, this is... I’m finding it hard to believe,” says Isabelle. “How did you learn to do whatever... you call that?”

Ryan smiles, relieved that his mother is not panicking or unable to cope.

“I think I was born with it... but I’ve been practicing lots.”

Isabelle hugs Ryan from the side and lets out some more tears combined with laughter. The parashield fades from visibility. Ryan hugs his mother back, anticipating what she will think of him.

“It looks like an aura, I’ve heard about them before. Oh, Ryan, oh, Ryan, will you ever not surprise me?” asks Isabelle, with laughter in her voice.

Ryan smiles sheepishly and shrugs.

"So you are OK with this?" asks Ryan, cautiously.

Isabelle catches her breath back and simply smiles.

"You're taking this so much better than I thought you would. I thought you would freak out," says Ryan.

"Well, I am a little freaked out. How do you do it? And what on earth do you use it for?"

"I just think and it happens. I have a psychic ability that enables me to form a dense wall of energy around my body for protection. I've even learned to protect others with it too," says Ryan, thinking of Hannah.

"Oh, if only your father could see this," says Isabelle. "He was right all along."

"What!" reacts Ryan.

"There is one thing I never told you, Ryan, but I think since you've blown me away with this, I should get my turn too."

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Ryan, your father always thought you were unique, and that is why he was always so careful with you. He once said to me, weeks before he killed himself, 'that boy is going to be something amazing one day.' When I asked him what he meant, all he said was he could see something in you that was special. It scared him. At first I thought he was going crazy, but then he convinced me one night. We were standing in the kitchen and you were sitting in front of the television. You were about nine then. He held me from behind and told me to look carefully at you. After a short while I started to see what he had meant all along. I saw your aura. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Then your father let me go and I never saw it again, until today, but it looks different now... more *real*"

After a pause Ryan returns from his memories of his father.

"He *was* like me then," says Ryan, insightfully.

"What do you mean?" asks Isabelle.

"I think Dad had a parability."

"What's that?"

"It's what we call these special mind functions," says Ryan.

"We?" asks Isabelle.

“Oh, um... let me explain something else and I’ll tell you why the police were looking for me. Basically, ever since I have been able to do this with my mind, a man by the name of Francis Campbell has been trying to get me to help him with his research. He has a parability too, but it’s different again: he can find people like me across long distances using just his mind. However, he’s a crook, and I had to get away from him. Would you believe me if I told you Hannah was involved too?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” replies Isabelle, trying to keep up, “but go on.”

“So anyway, some friends from uni were secretly working for Campbell too; together they tried to set me up and get me arrested because they realized I wouldn’t cooperate. That’s how the police got involved; I suspect that Campbell, the man whose been chasing me, gave them my details. He tried to kill me, Mum, but my parability saved me. Then Hannah saved us with her ability to put people in a short state of paralysis—and we got away, but Campbell kept chasing us until we ended up falling off Mount Henry Bridge when he rammed us with his car.”

“That was you?” asks Isabelle, shocked. “Oh god, were you hurt?”

“No. And luckily this German man and English woman, who also have parabilities, found us in time and saved us from getting caught. And now Hannah is in hospital, but she’ll be OK, just a few bumps on the head, and this man and woman... well... they have asked me to go to New Zealand with them to work with their company who employ people with my... qualifications. They’re really nice, Mum, you’d like them.”

Ryan pauses and waits for a response from his mother, then says, “So what do you think? Will you and Jacob be all right if I go?”

“Huh?” Isabelle stares at Ryan and blinks.

“Mum?”

“Who are you? What have you done with my son?” asks Isabelle, mocking him.

“Very funny, Mum. I’m sorry I dumped all this on you without warning, but I guess you’re just going to have to—”

“Have to what?” asks Isabelle. “Accept that my son is a freak and now he’s going off to live in another country with people he hardly knows. Well, I’m glad you’re sorry—it *is* hard to take all in one hit.”

Isabelle storms inside, crying.

“Mum.” Ryan follows after her and meets her in the kitchen.

“Look, I realize that you have something that not many other people have and you need to follow your own path, but I’m just afraid of losing you like your Dad,” says Isabelle with more tears streaming down her cheeks.

Ryan goes and gives his mum a hug. “I’m sorry, Mum.”

“You’re serious about this. You’re really going, aren’t you?” asks Isabelle.

Ryan nods his head.

“I don’t know what’s harder to accept, you going or your strange gift,” says Isabelle. “When will you go?”

“In a few days. They’re waiting for me to get back to them with a decision,” replies Ryan.

“Will you come back to see me?” asks Isabelle.

“Of course I will. I don’t think this company is like most companies, but I know I will be helping others. These two people I’ve met, Klaus and Sandra, say they travel a lot with their work, so I’ll probably be able to make short trips every now and then, but I don’t want to promise anything. I don’t know exactly what I’ll be doing yet,” explains Ryan.

“So that’s it? You’re just going?”

“Pretty much.”

“What about university?”

“Well, I figure I was going to uni to get qualified so I could do something to make the world a better place to live. Well that *something* has come up, so I’m really just taking a short cut,” says Ryan.

“You’re sure about all this?” asks Isabelle.

“Yes, Mum, I am,” replies Ryan. “It’s time for me to take responsibility for my life, and this gift of mine.”

“I understand. So what are you doing until you go?”

“I’m going back to the hospital now to see Hannah, and then I will meet up with Klaus and Sandra, but I’ll come and say

goodbye before I go—I'm not that bad of a son," says Ryan, trying to cheer his mother up.

Isabelle cracks a smile.

"Oh, *little man*. Give your mother a hug."

Ryan returns to the hospital around midday. He enters Hannah's room; she is eating lunch and watching daytime television.

"Hannah!" calls Ryan.

Hannah tries to say an excited hello, but her mouth is full of food and she quickly chews and swallows. Ryan gives her a hug and kisses her on the lips.

"Ouch, ouch, be careful," warns Hannah. "I'm still bruised, stupid."

"I'm sorry, I'm just so happy to see you awake and looking so well," says Ryan, taking Hannah's hand.

"I'm happy to see you too," says Hannah, smiling.

They stare into each other's eyes for a long moment, only to be interrupted when the doctor comes into the room.

"Good afternoon. Everything seems to be a lot better in here today. I'm impressed with your recovery, Michelle," says the doctor.

"Michelle?" says Hannah.

"All that sleeping has made her forget her own name," says Ryan, faking a laugh.

Hannah looks at Ryan strangely while the doctor fills in the clipboard form.

"She's doing really well, doctor, thanks for all your help," says Ryan, hinting discretely at Hannah with his eyes to go along with the fake name that Klaus and Sandra put her under.

"Good. Then can I expect you to be out tomorrow or the day after if you feel up to it," says the doctor.

"Thank you," replies Hannah.

"But I'll let you finish your lunch, it looks good. See you tomorrow when you check out perhaps?"

"Good bye doctor," says Hannah.

Ryan and Hannah share a laugh together, which they have been holding in while the doctor was in the room. Ryan closes the room's door and returns to Hannah's side.

"Ryan, what is going on?"

"What do you remember last?" ask Ryan.

"Going for a swim in Canning River," Hannah jokes. "Oh, and those two other parapersons; where are they? How long have I been here?"

"You've been in a coma for the last day and a half. Those other two were Klaus and Sandra: they are the ones who brought you here, they pulled us out of the river. I've since talked with them, but we'll see them again soon. Then I went home to tell my mum where I've been," explains Ryan.

"And what about Campbell?"

"Vanished. After we went in the drink, Klaus and Sandra parasensed him. They say he thinks we're dead," says Ryan.

"Lucky us. And the police don't know we're here either, right?"

"Yeah, that's why you're *Michelle* for now," says Ryan, winking. "How is your parability going?"

"It's stopped changing. Ryan. I couldn't parasense you as you arrived here, and usually I can; however, I can still paralyze people for short times, usually for a minute, but not longer than that. I already used it on a child in the next room who wouldn't stop crying earlier on. I used it until she fell asleep."

"Ha! That's not very nice," says Ryan, "but do you know what it is you're doing exactly?"

"I'm not sure if it's the mind or the body that I am affecting, maybe both. I'll have to look into it when I'm out of here. And I think I could still block parapersons if I needed to, but I haven't tried that out yet. And how's yours?"

"Fine. I showed my mum."

Hannah bursts out with a blast of laughter, but attempts to quiet herself.

"What did she do?" asks Hannah.

"She took it pretty well. It's possible that my dad was a parasensor: he could tell I had a parability, but I don't think he knew what he was seeing. Once he helped my Mum see what he

could see by holding her close, so that must have helped lessen the shock when I showed her.”

“It must run in the family,” says Hannah. “I wonder if anyone in my family has latent parabilities?”

“I wonder if everyone has them, but has just never learned to use them. Maybe it’s a case of the old saying, ‘use it or lose it’” states Ryan.

“Mmm, so what are these other two like?” asks Hannah.

“Well, there’s Klaus and Sandra, and they are over from Melbourne on holiday, and they said they were lucky to find us. He is a parascout, and she is an empath, meaning she can read people’s emotions, so there’s no point trying to lie to her. They work for a special company which employs people with parabilities, and they want us to go to New Zealand to meet the others.”

Hannah’s mouth drops. “You’re fucking kidding me!”

“No, they want to meet up with us soon and talk. I’ve already chatted with them a bit,” says Ryan, “but I’ve not told them my decision yet.”

Hannah looks out the window.

“What? You don’t like the sound of it?” asks Ryan.

“What is your decision, Ryan?”

Ryan pauses. “I’m going to go with them.”

There is a longer pause between them.

“It sounds like a great idea, but I can’t just leave Perth,” replies Hannah. “I’ve got my family here and my studies to complete.”

“But you’ve got such a fantastic opportunity being handed to you on a plate!” says Ryan, enthusiastically, “And plus, I’m going. Don’t you want be with me too?”

“Yes I do. But this is a big step and I can’t just make a decision straight away.”

“You don’t have to make it right now,” says Ryan, “but trust me, it would be better to meet and work with others like us.”

Ryan lifts Hannah’s chin up with his finger.

“I love you, Hannah.”

He kisses her lips.

"I love you too," Hannah whispers.

"Look, I'll call Klaus and Sandra and tell them to meet us at a café in the next couple of days. You can talk to them yourself, you'll like them, they saved your life for Christ's sake," says Ryan, taking his phone from his pocket.

"All right, do it, but I'm still undecided."

"Fine," says Ryan, not wanting to push the matter further. He dials the number:

"Hi, Klaus, it's Ryan... yeah she's up and at 'em today... I'm fine too... yes we can meet you there, I know where that is... OK, thanks Klaus, see you then."

"Thank you for coming, Dr. Tampalini," says the head official.

He escorts Tampalini down the main corridor of Graylands Hospital for the Mentally Ill.

"It's no problem at all," replies Tampalini. "I realise how sensitive these matters can be."

"Just down here," indicates the official.

Tampalini and the official turn down the corridor, the soles of their shoes squeak over the linoleum floor.

"And it's the third door on the right."

They arrive at the door and slide open the small hatch enabling them to see into the room. Curtis lies on the bed looking at the ceiling. He notices he has visitors and approaches the door quickly.

"I know you," says Curtis. "You're working with Francis. Have you come to get me out? What's happened to Ryan?"

Tampalini gives Curtis a quick look over, but says nothing and his face remains emotionless.

Tampalini steps away from the door and the official slides the hatch shut. "Hey!" calls Curtis. "Answer me. Come back!"

The official opens another sliding hatch on the cell door on the opposite side of the corridor. Cameron stands facing the far wall; he turns and looks at Tampalini.

"Get us out of here!" says Cameron, aggressively. "I can't believe we've been submitted to this. I've worked for your company for god's sake."

Again, Tampalini shows a neutral face.

"I've never seen either of these two in my life," he says to the official.

"Didn't think so," replies the official, who closes the hatch again and escorts Tampalini back through the facility. Cameron and Curtis shout out obscenities from their cells, but it does nothing to change Tampalini's mind. He exits the hospital and enters a Mercedes Benz parked out the front. Inside the car sits the police Commissioner.

"Make sure they stay there indefinitely; this matter must stay hidden, I don't want anyone to know about it," says Tampalini.

"The girl and the boy are at the bottom of Canning River. We found the car, but I reckon the fish will finish them off. And Campbell... well we don't know where he is. It doesn't matter. I don't think he'll be back in a hurry," says the Commissioner, "...thank you driver."

"Good," ends Tampalini, watching the hospital as the two men are chauffeured away.

Two days later and after Hannah has become well enough to leave hospital, Ryan and her meet Sandra and Klaus at the Left Bank Hotel in Fremantle. The day is hot like most of the days Perth has to offer in December, regularly reaching temperatures in the high thirties. The group sit at a table on the balcony overlooking the Swan River; several small recreational boats cruise up and down the blue waters, followed occasionally by larger ferry boats transporting tourists to Rottnest Island (a popular tourist destination off the coast of Perth, ideal for inexpensive summer holidays in a very laid back atmosphere of beach cabins and cycling paths.) After Klaus and Sandra formally greet Hannah for the first time, Sandra orders some drinks from the waitress and the four of them sit easily in silence for a moment.

"Shall we get down to business then?" says Ryan, turning to Hannah. "I've always wanted to say that."

Klaus and Sandra laugh.

“See what I have to put up with,” says Hannah across the table to Sandra.

“Don’t worry dear, he’s the same,” says Sandra.

Klaus gives Sandra a gentle but loving glare.

“OK, moving right along,” says Sandra, “Hannah, would you mind telling us about your parability?”

“Yeah sure, I can do that.”

The drinks arrive, and Hannah stalls the conversation by smiling at the waitress and waits for her to leave again.

“I haven’t told anyone beside Ryan about it before, so you’ll have to excuse me because I haven’t even got a clear explanation in my own mind yet.”

“Take your time. We do not want to put any pressure on you,” says Klaus. “Just explain it to us in your own words.”

“OK, at first I started getting strange feelings around Ryan.”

Ryan’s face goes red as he tries to hide a smile, as do Klaus and Sandra. Then Hannah cracks up laughing.

Recovering herself, she says, “That didn’t come out right, maybe I should start again.”

The others compose themselves; Ryan takes a sip of his drink and then holds Hannah’s hand in support.

“I knew there was something different about Ryan from the very first time I met him. Whenever I saw him I would get images in my mind, usually a face or outline of a body, surrounded by glowing lights. I came to know where to find him over short distances, without prior knowledge of his location. I could also sense when Campbell was close too... and then the both of you. I accepted that I had some heightened sense of intuition or something like it.”

“You are what we call a paralocator and parasensor. That’s two in one city. You and Campbell,” inserts Klaus.

“After Ryan and I spent a night together, I noticed that my parability started to change. It was growing stronger but also growing into something different.”

Klaus looks off to the side, suddenly understanding an earlier thought, then giving Sandra a quick look.

“It was when we were trapped in Cameron’s apartment that I realised what my new parability could allow me to do. I

reached out with my thoughts, and, strengthened by fear and anger, I latched onto every mind in the room except Ryan and Campbell's, and thought 'Stop!' Next, the bullets ceased, Ryan and I are running down the street to the car, taking out another couple of cops along the way, and before I know it I am trying to mind block Campbell's attempts to paralocate us as we raced down the freeway; That's another parafunction I only realised I had when the situation presented itself. I have thought about this, and came to the conclusion that since I could not para-lyze Campbell, I just thought 'block Campbell' and received a definite feeling that he could no longer paralocate me *or Ryan!* I was able to hide Ryan and myself from Campbell's parasearching, with what I suppose was my own version of Ryan's parashield which I developed as a result of our... merging."

"We are not new to the idea of merging parabilities between two people in order to work as a team, and that's what it sounds like you two have done, but with some lasting permanency. What's more, you developed your own form of each other's parability," says Klaus, astounded.

"Ryan, have you noticed anything different with yours?" asks Sandra.

"No, but I did have a vivid dream recently where I realised my parability had more potential than I was currently aware of; it was not lucid, I couldn't influence the dream."

"Can you give us any details?" asks Sandra.

"Just that I would learn how to shield my mind in the same way that I can my physical body, and now that I think about it, I reckon I might be able to draw on the same parabilities as Hannah, minus the mind stun."

"Sounds something like what we can do with the anti-parability shields we have developed back on Great Barrier Island," says Klaus, "but it would be good to have someone who could do these kinds of things without the aid of artificial enhancements and large equipment."

In the years that follow, Ryan will learn to use his parashield for the purpose of psychically electrocuting objects

that come into contact with his body and mind! For example, if a paralocator person or device detects Ryan, he will be able to send a destructive current back along the connecting psychic lines, causing serious injuries to someone's mind or damage to electrical equipment. It is an additional feature of his matured parability that resulted from merging with Hannah years before.

Klaus and Sandra spend the rest of the time explaining to Hannah the full details about SR Inc. and its members, what they are involved with, and their objectives. At the end of the conversation, Hannah has listened carefully, as has Ryan, but Hannah asks if she can sleep on it. Klaus and Sandra go out on the town for the night, visiting the Burswood Casino and excellent nightlife in the Perth CBD.

Ryan and Hannah on the other hand return to Ryan's house. They do not speak very much to each other all afternoon. When night comes, the silence is finally broken when Hannah starts to cry while she sits on Ryan's bed. He goes to comfort her, putting his arm around her.

"I don't want to be without you," she says, looking up at him with tears welling in her beautiful eyes.

"Neither do I," replies Ryan, a few tears also falling down his cheeks.

They hug and fall onto the bed; they lie on their sides facing each other. More tears fall and they hold each other until they fall asleep. They wake in the early morning around 4 a.m. (the bedside lamp is still on).

"I'm going to miss you so much," says Hannah.

"Me too," replies Ryan, who begins to stroke Hannah's face.

Hannah moves closer to Ryan and they both start kissing softly. It becomes quite passionate and soon their bodies are rocking against each other in a slow rhythmic pace. Their lips part briefly as they gasp for air. Over the course of the next hour, each piece of clothing is removed slowly with all the care in the world. There is no rush; they want to savour this moment as much as they can.

After much energetic and ravenous sex, Hannah comes closer to climaxing, and cries out, "I love you, Ryan, I love you." Ryan responds by slowing the motions of his body, but increasing the depth of his pelvic thrusting. Hannah cries out in ecstasy as she comes. Their bodies are coated with sweat; the hot night adds to the humidity between their bodies. Shortly after Ryan brings himself to a peak experience and fills the house with sounds of moaning satisfaction and delight, forgetting that his Mother and younger brother are asleep just down the hall.

Hannah and Ryan slow right down and soon stop. They lie next to each other and stare into each other's eyes for a while before resuming their embrace and falling back to sleep. The mysterious phenomena that occurred between them the first time they had sex is not repeated this time, but this does not enter Ryan's or Hannah's mind tonight.

A few days later Klaus and Sandra, accompanied by Hannah and Ryan, stand at the busy Perth International Airport. All except Hannah have a carry bag.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind?" asks Ryan, standing at the departure gate with Klaus and Sandra.

Hannah nods her head at Ryan.

"You understand don't you Klaus and Sandra?"

"Yes we do," replies Sandra.

"But you have our number if you get second thoughts," adds Klaus.

"Thank you, you will hear from me nevertheless."

"Oh, Hannah, I'm gonna miss you so much. We've only just become friends... maybe more. It's gonna be hard being in another country without any friends and especially without you, doubly so because we're both..." Ryan looks around at the people passing by, "...you know... parapeople."

"I know, but we all have to go our own path, even if it means leaving those we love most. Let's hope our paths cross again. Now get on the plane, everyone else is on board."

Ryan and Hannah hug once more and then kiss each other for a long time. Ryan picks up his onboard luggage bag and

heads down the gateway. Sandra and Klaus follow him. Ryan stops and turns around to face Hannah, some tears are in his eyes. He mouths, "I love you," and she blows him a kiss goodbye in return. Ryan knows that he will return to Australia to be with Hannah one day, but it will not be for about eight years.

The news report comes on the radio as Hannah drives away from the International Airport in her new car, which Klaus has bought for her as a going away present and registering under her new identity: Michelle.

"...police investigators believe two young adults were involved with the fatal car accident on Mount Henry Bridge last Thursday, the identities of the victims have yet to be confirmed. The police Commissioner said he did not like the chances of finding the bodies and has decided to cancel the search... and in Sydney this morning, bush fires are sweeping..."

Hannah stops at the red light and puts a memory stick into the music player. An uplifting, hard electronic dance track starts to play. From inside the glove box Hannah pulls out a piece of paper, it reads:

*Dr. F. Campbell,
Southern Cross Road, Lake Grace,
Western Australia.*

A Boeing 777 touches down in Auckland later that evening. Klaus and Sandra escort Ryan to a private hanger where a strange aircraft waits.

"It's a Moller 600⁶," says Klaus, seeing Ryan's reaction. "It was built by a group in California. This one's owned by SR Inc. It's how we get to and from the island. Quite convenient actually."

"I'm impressed," claims Ryan.

⁶ See www.moller.com

The three of them board the small aircraft and begin the ascent into the sky.

When they arrive at Great Barrier Island, the night has arrived and Ryan cannot see very much of the terrain below. After landing, Klaus and Sandra take Ryan to the main hall of the community estate of SR Inc. They place their luggage down on the floor; no one else is around at the moment, everything seems quiet except the wind and gentle rain now falling sideways onto the windows. Klaus and Sandra leave the room momentarily. When they come back, Ryan is facing the opposite way, trying to observe the darkened view out the window.

“Ryan, I’d like you to meet someone,” says Klaus.

Ryan turns around; before him stands a well presented man. Standing next to him is another woman and two young children. The girl smiles at Ryan, then she whispers something to the man.

“Yes Lena, we know,” says the man (with an Austrian accent) to the young girl, then returns his attention back to Ryan.

“Hello Ryan, it’s an honor to meet you. This is my wife Maria and my two children, Lena and Stephan.”

Maria and the children show small waves of greeting.

“And my name is Marcus Waller. Welcome to Salvage and Rescue.”

Information on Books in the XPERTS Collection

All books are available in German from Freya Pub.Co., see www.freya.at and can be ordered via all good bookstores, but most easily via www.iicm.edu/Xperts . All English versions can be ordered through www.booklocker.com . However, due to the high shipping costs, international customers outside the US and within the European Union can order “The Paradoppelganger” and “The Paranet” at lower cost through www.iicm.edu/Xperts . Within the US, Booklocker is the best source. Outside the US readers are encouraged to either neglect the high postage ☺ or to buy the e-book versions from www.booklocker.com : No delay, no postage, lower price, and you just download the file, and print it out locally.

Here is a summary of the books in the Xperts Series currently or soon available. The series is growing rapidly. All books, where no author is mentioned I have written myself. For the others I have written a ‘script’ and edited the resulting book. If you have any questions, suggestions, or are interested in becoming one of the authors of a book in the Xperts Series, contact me at hmaurer@iicm.edu . If you want to find out more about me than you ever cared to read, consult www.iicm.edu/maurer . I will answer all emails (nothing worse than being ignored) except if I am really down ☺ .

Note that although there is a thread through the books (some persons appear in each book) the novels are completely self-contained and can be read independently of each other in any order. Those marked bold are available as of 2004. I have arranged the book in more or less chronological order (according when they take place),

so this might be an obvious order to read them. But, feel free to start with anyone that tickles you!

“Xperts: The Telekinetic”: In a way, this is the first book in the collection. The student of physics, Marcus, discovers that he has telekinetic and timewarping powers, and uses them to seduce girls, to make money, and to help people. He is also very much aware how dangerous this ‘parability’ can be for him. He is eventually captured by a para-military group of the European Union with dubious motives, and manages to escape only with the help of his girl friend Maria, who will be his big love for life. They flee to New Zealand to start a new existence. Marcus and Maria (and other persons) are the thread that holds the Xperts Series together....

“Xperts: The Paradoppelganger”: This is another novel involving Marcus and Maria. Their daughter Lena discovers a strange para-gifted person. In the process of trying to make him join the group the reader visits Brazil and Europe, and is drawn into historic mysteries, extending back in history even to the Egyptian pyramids. This novel also gives a glance at what future PCs and the Net might look like... a tribute to the fact that the Editor (and author of this book) is a computer science professor. However, don’t get turned off: this is a novel not a scientific book!

“Xperts: The Paracommunicator” (by Jennifer Lennon): Aroha, a young Maori woman, finds half of an ancient device in the hills near Auckland, New Zealand. Herb, also of Maori origin, independently finds the other half. Their function, and that of the mysterious black ‘stones’, cannot be fully understood. However, on a dangerous mission in Africa (Namibia), given to them by Marcus, it is clear that neither Aroha nor Herb would have survived without the help of the strange artifact.

“Xperts: The Parashield” (by Sam Osborne): The West-Australian Ryan finds out, as he grows up, that he can shield himself and other persons nearby, by creating through mental powers an impenetrable shield of energy. If not for his girlfriend Hannah who has some awesome ‘parabilities’ his enemies would eliminate him before the team of Marcus can intervene. This novel is written with a South-Western Australian background and the suspense and complexity increases as it develops.

“Xperts: E-Smog!” (by Ann Backhaus): An Australian researcher, Mandi, discovers by a fluke the dangerous side-effect of elector magnetic fields, as emitted by just about any electric device. With the background of an authentic description of the Australian West, of Malaysia and Singapore, Mandi tries to put up an impossible fight against huge international companies, and succeeds to some extent, due to Marcus’ group and her brilliant negotiating skills (release planned for 2005)

“Xperts: The Parawarriors”: We are in the year 2019. A nuclear war between Pakistan and India seems to be unavoidable. Marcus and his team try to avoid the worst, at horrific costs. All efforts seem to be in vain. Yet, after interludes in India, Bali and La Reunion some form of normality returns, only to be disturbed (or helped?) by super-computers from an ancient civilization millions of years ago, and a strange intelligent animal “The They” that remains a mystery for a long time.

“Xperts: The Param@ils” (by Peter Lechner): This novel gives a different twist to the Xperts Series: the economy is all that matters! A story of intrigues, human emotion and some strange emails capture the attention of the readers, with Marcus’ group again playing a pivotal role in solving a complex scheme. (In preparation)

“Xperts: The Paranet”: In 2080 the then existing network of computers breaks down completely, throwing

the world into total chaos. This novel shows how dependent we are going to be on computers and computer networks, and how civilization will virtually cease to exist if such a total breakdown ever happens at a stage when mankind is 'Sufficiently networked'. Billions of people are about to die, is there any hope for them? Yes, by mounting a terrorist attack in the past!

“Xperts: Supervision”: Big brother with cameras, flying cameras, intelligent databanks and total security is catching up on us. This is a chilling novel, with a bright line of hope shown on the horizon, if we just decide to act NOW. (In preparation)

Check the Website www.iicm.edu/Xperts to stay up-to-date on all developments concerning books in the XPERTS Collection.

About the Author

Samuel Osborne has been a writer since he was in primary school; his first short story 'Death Rocket' was written when he was six. Parashield is his first novel. His most influential authors include Julian May and David Zindell. Samuel wrote and directed his first play 'Debater's Destruction' when he was twelve for his primary school skit show which included seven cast members. He also produced short videos throughout high school and university. He has been playing the piano since he was sixteen and has recently started composing original pieces. Samuel received the Dux Award for Art and Design. He has been involved in theatre productions including Shakespeare and also several locally produced original shows since he was seventeen. Samuel completed a Bachelor of Art double majoring in Philosophy and English recently, at Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia. He is currently working on a television series in Perth and a university production for school children.

Printed in the United Kingdom by
Lightning Source UK Ltd., Milton Keynes
140226UK00001B/29/A





*Hermann Maurer, Coordinator
of The XPERTS Collection*



Samuel Osborne

The West-Australian Ryan finds out, as he grows up, that he can shield himself and other persons nearby, by creating through mental powers an impenetrable shield of energy. If not for his girlfriend Hannah who has some awesome 'parabilities' his enemies would eliminate him before the team of Marcus can intervene. This novel is written with a South-Western Australian background and the suspense and complexity increases as it unfolds.

"The Xperts series from Austria rides the Zeitgeist in delivering fiction that explores the consequences of taking seriously the potential of the human mind. First time author Samuel Osborne contributes his considerable talents as a storyteller to this series with 'Parashield'."

(Grant Stone,
Faster Than Light - Australian weekly National Radio Show on SF & F)

"I really enjoyed reading this novel: the plot rolls along at a growing pace. We are very quickly taken into Ryan's world and learn how he copes with his strange powers. The description of Perth places is very good and will appeal to locals or foreigners alike."

(Dr. Van Ikin, Perth)

ISBN 1-59113-604-0



90000>



9 781591 136040