

CHAPTER 3

Our kitchen lights were still on even though it was well after two in the morning as I pedaled into our driveway. After locking my bike inside our garage alongside the old trailer, I opened the backdoor and was surprised to see my mother talking to someone at the kitchen table.

"Hello Andy."

"Hanna!" My tiredness disappeared instantly as I walked over and hugged her. It had only been a couple of days since I'd last seen her but she was my girlfriend and she definitely liked to be hugged.

"Your mom called earlier to borrow some headache pills and once we started talking we kind of lost track of the time."

"Hanna tells me she's got a new science blog now at a university on the east coast," my mother said. "And yes, she had to explain to me what a blog is."

"I'm really pumped," Hanna said. "It's a great way for the university to keep its students and faculty in contact with the scientific community, and it's also part of a big campaign aimed at encouraging women to choose science as a career. The new blog, which will be much more sophisticated than the one I've been running for the last year or so, is part of a very innovative website they've built to act as sort of a clearing house for all the latest developments that have anything to do with science. So we're cutting edge right now, sort of a Drudge Report for science geeks."

"And they picked Hanna as one of their lead student bloggers. Shows they recognize her potential," my mother said proudly.

It took a few moments for me to figure out that this meant Hanna wouldn't be going to our local university, as we'd planned, which also meant she'd be leaving town. This was news to me but I couldn't react in front of mom because I knew she'd get upset. I grinned at mom to acknowledge her use of this exotic word because I was certain she'd never heard of bloggers before. She smiled momentarily at both of us even as she pressed her fingers against her right temple as if she was trying to squeeze the migraine out of her skull.

"Millie, remind me to let you create my resume when I start job-hunting after university," Hanna said, sneaking me a side glance which I knew meant we'd talk about this later. "Truth is, I often lurked on this particular site as it evolved into its present form. I eventually connected with the right people there and convinced them to temporarily link to my old blog. That's the only reason I got the assignment even though some of the other student candidates for the job were far more experienced. It comes with a hefty scholarship as well."

"Such modesty," my mother said, laughing. "I always knew you'd be a success, ever since you were a little girl. Your mother would have been very proud of you."

I thought I saw Hanna brush away a tear as she excused herself and walked towards the bathroom. I waited until she'd left the kitchen, then got

up and approached mom so I could whisper in her ear.

"Something very strange happened with Hugo tonight. I had to rescue him when the professor started abusing him, and in the process saw some things that don't make any sense. I know how weird that sounds, but it sure seemed real at the time."

"And you think you're going crazy, right? Did this have anything to do with your synesthesia?"

"Yes, weird sounds and colors and even more bizarre stuff that's difficult to describe."

She sighed. "Well, I guess I always knew this day would finally come. Believe me, you aren't going insane. I have so much that I need to tell you, and it's going to blow your mind, but you have a right to know what's going on."

"Blow my mind?"

"Better that Hanna doesn't know about this, at least not yet. As soon as she leaves I promise I'll tell you all about it."

She was excited but nervous at the same time, and it reminded me of when the two of us had conspired to keep my first schoolteacher in the dark about the fact that I'd never in my life been to see a doctor, and thus had never had any immunization shots. We'd pulled it off, thanks in part to a doctor's note she forged while working as a receptionist in a family physician's office. Despite my young age at the time I'd never forgotten the incident.

I couldn't ask any more questions because Hanna had returned to her seat at the kitchen table and pulled a notebook computer out of her packsack. It was the size of a hardcover book and it looked expensive.

"You'll both have to excuse the occasional interruption but I've got to keep in relatively constant contact from now on with the blog. Rude of me, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid we still have an ancient dial-up ISP here so you'll have to blog in slow-mo," I said.

"Thanks, but I don't need it."

"This is new technology then," I said as I examined her computer.

"State of the art. It's provided by the university; otherwise I'd never be able to afford it. It's got its own high-speed wireless broadband Internet connection so I can go online virtually anywhere in the city. The downside is that they expect me to be accessible 24/7."

She hesitated a second, then looked me in the eye. "It'll be just what I need for first year university as well. They really seem to want me there as a student, thanks to this blog business."

We'd been going out for the last couple of years but it seemed that our relationship was doomed because there was no way we'd be able to make it work if we weren't together in the same city. I wondered why she hadn't at least warned me that she was considering another university. I knew she'd applied all over the country but I'd just assumed she would be staying here. With me.

"As soon as I win the lottery," my mother said, laughing, "I plan to buy one of these portable computers for Andy so he can keep in touch with

me by e-mail. Honestly, I practically have to hire a private eye to find out where he is these days, what with him being so busy with his elephant and his other part-time jobs. Sometimes the only way I know he's still alive is because the food in the fridge keeps disappearing."

"Andy the elephant whisperer," Hanna said mockingly.

My mother laughed again. "It's really been good to have you hanging around our house all these years, Hanna, and I'm going to miss you when you leave for university. You two are more grownup than most of the adults I encounter every day, and I sometimes think of you more as friends and equals than high school students. Why don't the two of you talk for a while? I've got some things I have to do."

Hanna turned to me as my mother slowly maneuvered her way out of the room. "You must be beat. Have you told your mom about that problem with Keith yet?"

"So I called him a name. No big deal. The teachers can't touch me now."

"I hope not." She sounded skeptical. "Maybe I could drop by in the morning to discuss our plans for the prom if you'd rather get some sleep."

As I was about to reply, I heard a thump from the hallway followed by my mother's muffled cry. We both ran toward her. Hanna reached her first and knelt down beside her. My mother seemed to be having a seizure. She thrashed around for a few seconds and then stopped moving altogether."

"Oh God, is she, uh, dead?"

Hanna checked her pulse, and then lifted her eyelids to look at her eyes. After a few seconds she shook her head.

"Andy, call 911! She's alive, but tell them I think she's had a stroke or something so they'd better hurry."

I froze, too distraught at what I was witnessing to move.

"Do it now!" she ordered. "Don't worry, I'll take care of her while you call."

The next few minutes were a whirlwind of flashing lights, sirens and strangers running into our house. The fire department arrived first, followed closely by ambulance paramedics. Hanna guided me away from the action. I could see from my vantage point that everyone around my mother seemed very concerned so I didn't need to interpret the colors of her aura to confirm that she was seriously ill. I made a feeble attempt to duplicate the efforts I'd made to revive Hugo but gave up abruptly when it became clear that I was having no effect. Besides, because this involved my mother it felt like I was dabbling in black magic, and that thought totally creeped me out.

If only there was something I could do to help her.

Hanna stood with me throughout the ordeal, holding my hand. She used my key to lock the kitchen door behind us as everybody paraded out of the house toward the ambulance. Hanna's father was outside in his dressing gown because they live right next door to us, but she refused his offer to drive us to the hospital. Instead, she sat beside me in the ambulance as the paramedics stabilized their patient for the trip to the emergency room and then sped off. The sound and colors of the siren overhead overloaded my senses completely, so by the time we arrived at the hospital I was feeling

faint. Hanna kept me on my feet until she finally located a quiet waiting room well away from the emergency department and allowed me to collapse into an overstuffed couch. Even though I usually don't need more than a couple of hours sleep each night, I couldn't keep my eyes open.

When I awoke Hanna was sitting across the room from me, working on her computer. She glanced in my direction, saw that I was up and put the computer away. "You've been out cold for three hours, pal."

"Any news?"

"They took her in for an MRI while you were asleep so we won't know anything for awhile yet. Dad's gone home to get a couple of hours of sleep but he'll be back here soon."

She looked me straight in the eye. "Andy, it wasn't a stroke, but I don't think you should get your hopes up. They don't know anything for sure yet, although I overheard some of the conversation in the emergency room as the doctors were stabilizing her and they were speculating about stuff like brain tumors. It sounds serious. Very serious. I'm really sorry."

I desperately wanted to change the subject, but there just wasn't anything cheerful in my mind now. "So you're leaving town?"

"I didn't make the final decision until tonight. I wanted to tell you in private, but..."

I was about to say something I would have regretted when a young woman wearing a red-and-white striped jumper walked into the room and approached me. "You're Andrew Hastings, right?"

"Yes. Can you tell me how my mother is please?"

She seemed very nervous, and her voice was quivering slightly. "Oh, I'm sorry, but it's too soon to tell. I'm sure she'll be okay, though. I just dropped by to confirm that you'll be waiting here for another hour or so. The doctor will want to talk to you then about her prognosis."

Even though I was concentrating on her words, I couldn't help but contrast her clean, wholesome appearance with Hanna's Goth look. World's apart.

"We'll be here," said Hanna tersely.

As the young woman left the room, Hanna turned to me and grimaced. "She shouldn't have said that. You know, like about your mom being okay. Remember, she's just a candystriper, so she doesn't know what she's talking about."

"It's worse than that," I said. "She's lying. She does know."

"Look, nobody here is supposed to say anything until all the test results are in. We just have to wait. They'll tell us as soon as they can."

"No, I understand that. What I'm saying is that she already knows more than we do. She was definitely lying when she said she didn't know anything. I guess she probably overheard the doctors talking about mom's case. Truth is, she doesn't believe mom will survive this."

Hanna studied me for almost a minute without speaking, then walked over to the couch and sat down beside me. "Are you talking about those colors you used to see sometimes?"

My shock must have registered on my face because she immediately put her hand on my arm as if to reassure me. "Don't forget, we grew up

together from kindergarten to high school. Back when we were just kids in Grade five or six, you told me about those colors you used to experience and what they meant to you and then swore me to secrecy. I never forgot it, even though you never mentioned it again after that. I understand now that you were talking about synesthesia, but of course we had no way of knowing what it was back in those days. Remember?"

"I do now. Those were confusing times for me."

"No kidding. You told me that you could see whether someone was lying just by the color of their words, and I believed you. Remember when you called our Grade six teacher a liar in class?"

"I'd forgotten that, thankfully. Kids, eh?"

"Yeah, we sure had some funny ideas. You know, for a minute there I thought maybe you still believed you could use the synesthesia to determine whether or not somebody was telling the truth."

"I guess I did sound a little too sure of myself, didn't I?"

"Maybe it was the look on your face when you said it that triggered that memory. You know, I always thought your ability to read people was almost uncanny; enough that I bet you could make a living playing professional poker. You'd be a natural, but not because you could read minds like some kind of human polygraph."

"I figured it would be like cheating, so I didn't bother," I said, then laughed nervously. "Actually I still see sounds and hear colors, but now that I've finally started to grow up I've learned to live with the fact that I wasn't born with superpowers. It was a nice childhood fantasy, that's all."

Hanna's was testing me, I knew, and I wasn't very happy that she had chosen this moment, when I was feeling particularly vulnerable, to do it. I was even less happy that she'd backed me into a corner and forced me to lie to her in order to pass what was probably her version of an insanity test. She would really think I was nuts if I told her how this ability of mine had evolved over the years since then.

She looked relieved. "You are one weird dude, you know. And just so you understand where I'm coming from on this, I've never mentioned your synesthesia to anybody, not even my dad."

"I'd forgotten that I told you, to be honest. Thanks for not looking at me like I'm a freak or something."

"Weird, yes, but you're no freak. There are quite a few people like you out there. Even the famous blogger Instapundit, a law professor who does some sound engineering in his spare time, has synesthesia. He mentioned on his blog once that he suspects that many of the people who work with sound and music are synesthetes."

"So, yet another illustrious member of your geekish online community that I've never heard of before. You Cybergoths should really try to experience reality from time to time, you know!"

"You should talk. Such a sheltered existence you lead. Tell me, has your synesthesia actually been diagnosed by a doctor?"

"Nope. Never been to one in my life."

"What? Your mom never took you to a doctor? Did she say why?"

For a moment I actually managed to forget the reason we were at the hospital as I considered my reply to her question. It wasn't unusual for people with synesthesia to see spoken words and noises in color, but I'd had no way of knowing that when I first discovered that most people weren't the same as me. I was old enough by then to understand that I shouldn't tell anybody, yet too young to consider the possibility that it might become a useful skill and not a handicap. I couldn't remember ever telling Hanna about it, but that made sense because there was no one else in my life I'd have trusted with a secret like this, aside from my mother. I couldn't ask a doctor about it because my mother never allowed me to visit a doctor's office. Consequently, for many years I'd felt like a freak.

I had eventually confided in my mother, who had reassured me that every child was different and unique in some way, and that she understood what I was going through because she, too, had synesthesia. She had cautioned me not to tell anyone else about our little secret, and encouraged me to do some research at the library as soon as I was old enough. I eventually discovered that synesthesia was surprisingly common, and that perhaps one in 25,000 people experienced this breakdown of the customary boundaries between the senses. A synesthete might see or taste sounds, or hear colors, so what might have seemed almost hallucinogenic to a normal person was just another everyday experience for us synesthetes.

I also learned that my synesthesia was generations more advanced than any case I was able to find in the library, and discovered that many of the colors I saw were nothing like those of the visible light spectrum. As I grew older I was gradually able to distinguish qualities and emotions such as happiness and sadness, truthfulness and deception, love and hate as well as good and evil, solely by observing the color and qualities of people's speech. Although of course I couldn't read minds, my skill eventually evolved to the point where I could often guess what was going on inside people's heads by analyzing the color of their thoughts whenever I could see them.

It was almost as if I was able to analyze their aura, although my understanding of how the process actually worked was very limited. I'd read stories about genuine psychics and thought for a while that perhaps my unique gift might somehow be related to some kind of psychic phenomenon, but in the end concluded that there was probably no connection.

Fortunately, when I wanted to, I was usually able to put the synesthesia thing off to one side and ignore it, because otherwise I would soon have been distracted, perhaps even overwhelmed by the constant kaleidoscope of colors. It was the kind of thing that could quickly drive you crazy if you let it.

I trusted Hanna, and would love to have shared with her the knowledge I'd accumulated about how this ability worked, but I couldn't overcome my fear of being regarded as some kind of an oddity. I shook my head vehemently from side to side.

"You don't want to talk about this, do you?" she said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"At least you never lied to me," I grinned.

"Good thing, I guess," she said returning the smile. "You'd have

known, right?"

"That was very important to me, you understand, having somebody I could trust when I was growing up. You were always a good friend." Now I felt even worse about lying to her.

"AFFA, as they used to write on envelopes," she said. "You know, a friend for always. Maybe even almost as good a friend as your elephant buddy, perhaps?"

"But better looking! And better smelling!"

"Why thank you very much for that compliment!"

"By the way, did mom mention anything unusual to you last night? You know, before I arrived home."

"Unusual?"

"After you left the room to go to the bathroom she said she had something important to tell me later. I'm assuming it was related to an incident that happened last night with Hugo, but I wish I could confirm that somehow."

"Can't help you there. She obviously had something on her mind while she was talking to me, but I'm guessing she was probably distracted by her symptoms. I assume she must have been feeling ill already, even though she probably didn't know how serious it was."

"I guess I'll probably never know now what she meant, will I?"

"I know we shouldn't jump to conclusions, Andy," she said. "Your mom's health problems have got to be priority number one, but you also have to give some thought to what you're going to do if, you know..."

"I wish I had a plan. As far as work goes, I'm expecting a phone call from the university any time now, and the more I think about it, the more worried I am that they're going to fire me. That sucks, but the worst part is that I don't know what I can do to keep in touch with Hugo if I'm no longer part of the project."

"That's the least of your concerns right now. We've got to figure out a way to get you through university."

I decided it was best not to tell her that Professor Blenheim might have already scuttled my chances of a university education because that would have meant explaining in depth what she had done to Hugo. Hanna loves animals as much as I do, and I knew she'd go off like a rocket if I told her the details now. I'd have to save that for later, when we were both a little calmer.

With nothing more to talk about at the moment, she pulled her computer out of the backpack again. "There's still a lot happening on the primary university science blog, even at this hour of the night, because people all over the world visit us."

I watched her eyes moving rapidly in all directions as she scrolled through dozens of different websites, pausing from time to time to add something to her blog.

"Now here's an interesting development that I'm going to have to do a follow up on soon. You want to hear about some of the kind of stuff I eventually plan to do for a living?"

"Sure. Anything to keep from thinking about mom right now."

"It's a neat story. You've heard that the SETI institute has been searching for signs that there might be extraterrestrial life attempting to communicate with us, right?"

"Of course. I loved Jodie Foster in Contact."

"Me too. Well, SETI just announced that they've intercepted some kind of a signal that probably originated outside our solar system. It's all very preliminary at the moment but some of their people have posted on our forums, unofficially of course, that they're very excited about this one. Seems they've finally located a signal that might just be the real thing."

"Wow!"

"Wow is right. If the story checks out, this is huge news. Of course, we've had false alarms in the past, so it's a little early to break out the champagne, but still..."

"How is she?" Hanna's father said as he walked into the waiting room abruptly and sat down.

"All we know so far is that she's in bad shape," Hanna said. "We're still waiting for word from the doctor about just how sick she is, but it's not looking very good so far."

"I'm really sorry, Andy," was all he said. He even sounded sincere, which was unusual because it was no secret that he didn't like me very much, and didn't approve of his daughter dating me. He was, however, a good friend to my mother, and she didn't have many good friends.

The three of us sat quietly in the waiting room for over an hour, with Hanna blogging and her dad and I reading old magazines. When the doctor arrived he looked tired, although he attempted a smile as he walked into the waiting room. We introduced ourselves, and he made a point of sitting directly opposite me, presumably because I was family.

"My name is Doctor Dean. I'm handling your mother's case, at least for the moment," he said, and then hesitated for several seconds as if rallying his debating points.

"Andy, the MRI test indicates that she has a very serious brain tumor. We will be doing further testing but I don't anticipate that they will show anything different. She's in a coma now, and I have to tell you quite frankly that there's very little possibility that she'll ever come out of it. I'm sorry – I know how difficult this must be for you to accept, but, barring a miracle, your mother has virtually no chance of surviving this."

He paused again. "I use the word 'miracle' advisedly, because I'm sure you've heard stories about patients coming out of a coma after ten or twenty years and resuming their lives. Yes, that does happen from time to time, but you have to understand, in this case it's about as likely as winning the lottery on the same day you're struck by lightning. The bottom line? I'm afraid you'll have to learn to accept that the woman you knew is now gone forever."

He reached over and patted me reassuringly on the arm. "I've got time to answer a few questions, if you or your friends have any."

Hanna was crying and her father was choking back tears as he tried to comfort her. I tried desperately to think of an intelligent question, if only to prolong the doctor's stay so that I wouldn't have to confront the terrible news I'd just received, but my mind had gone blank.

"Thank you, doctor," Hanna said. "I know you did your best for her."

"There was nothing we could do, I'm afraid. Andy, you'll have more questions later, after the reality of what I just told you begins to sink in, so please feel free to call me if I'm on duty here at Emerg, or just call the desk and they'll find you somebody who knows what they're talking about."

"Can I see her?" I asked.

"It would be better if you came back later, when all the tests have been completed." He looked at his watch as if he was trying to remember what day it was. "Sometime later this afternoon would be best, actually."

As he got up to leave the room, the doctor paused at the doorway. "I always feel so inadequate when I have to inform family and friends that someone they love is in one of our wards, suspended between life and death. I wish I could come up with words that would help you folks handle the ordeal of coping with what's happened to her, but I've been in this business for many years and I have yet to find them. I didn't know Millie, but I suspect she would have wanted you all to look after yourselves, and each other, as this unfolds, rather than dwelling on the circumstances of her illness. You can't change what happened, but you do have the power not to allow a tragedy like this to drag you down. It's a cliché but it is true – life goes on. I wish you all the best."

Immediately after the doctor left, Professor Howard got up and gestured for the two of us to follow him. "I have to get out of this place. I'm sorry, but there's nothing more we can do here at the moment."

Nobody said a word during the drive home. Hanna cried softly in the front beside her father as I sat in the rear seat trying to make sense of what had just happened. After a while she slid her arm awkwardly behind the seat and we held hands silently.

What on earth had my mother wanted to tell me that was so important?

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